

Chapter 1A: Day 204 – Flight-Alpha Tlulipechua

Calamity had come to Chiuxatlan. It had come from beneath the tall stone spires, where the Chiuxatli had lived and worked from time immemorial, inundating the land and rising upward. Monsters had poured out from the ancient gates to the Underneath where roaming caravans of Unake and Leyn and Stoneborn still appeared, swarming in the thousands and tens of thousands and souring the magic of the land from the bottom up. Depletion rotted the great workings that spanned Chiuxatlan, the wards and runes and windroads, the floating greenhouses and eyrie ranches. Tens of thousands of people were depleted to nothing and dead, plummeting from the air and slumping to the ground to be torn apart by the ravaging horde.

Tlulipechua had not been caught completely off-guard. It was not by chance that he had encouraged the proliferation of long-flight platforms, or the expansion of the fleet of sky-ships. Wind mana had been weakening for a long time, depletion had always been an issue, and the mage-kings had been a growing threat for his entire rule. He knew they couldn't fight them directly, but neither could they survive without taking some action, else their lands and futures would diminish and dwindle into ashes.

Yet it was one thing to prepare for disaster, and another to find that disaster visited upon them. He never wanted to preside over his ancestral home crumbling into a toxic pit, in some places literally as complex magic failed from the polluted mana the monsters brought with them. It had been a heart-rending task to uproot his people, even free-flying as they were, and pull them away from everything they had built.

There were those who thought it would be better to simply take over a nearby country, invading some neighboring part of Nicehapoca, but Tlulipechua was not a conqueror. More, that was a move of suicidal and genocidal recklessness. He had an entire civilian population with him, not just an army. To invade would be to risk everyone under his care, and destroy the opposition utterly, for he would be *replacing* their population was his.

In truth, such a victory would destroy them as surely as any defeat. The Chiuxatli were a proud people, but an honorable and righteous one. There was little point to such virtues if they led only to destruction, but at the same time, the Chiuxatli without such an identity would not be the same. Conquest and permanent exodus both were lesser paths, ones that would lead to slow destruction.

If he wanted to keep his people intact in both body and spirit, he would have to take a chance. He would have to pay a price. His grand-nephew had sent word of a Power, already rare enough, but one that was even opposed to the mage-kings. One that could, in a very limited way, purge depletion. One that was an ocean away, true, and they would have to swing wide around the mage-king archipelago, but the Chiuxatli were fliers. They owned the sky. It was in the beating heart of their race, and if all it took to save themselves was to stretch their wings, then to the abyss with any who feared the trip.

Unfortunately, some of those he dragged along were less sure of the winds than others. It wasn't like he could rule millions of oft-fractional Chiuxatli by himself, so he had a number of feathers for each wing, helping him keep warriors and adventurers and craftsman and laborers all in the same flock. Most of them had only the scope of vision they needed to guide their own people, not quite able to reach lofty enough heights to see how everyone and everything fit together. Some of them were less happy about Tlulipechua's decisions than others.

Despite the enormous task of packing up everything not already soured by depletion and securing his people on board the ships and platforms, he still had to fight four duels with those who challenged his fitness and order seventeen executions of nobles who sought to profit by the evacuation. Good riddance to them, though they were merely drops in an ocean of outrages that would have to be accounted for eventually.

Short as it was, the crossing was tense and terrible, dominated by [Cloud-Skimmers] herding weather toward their group so they could siphon off the water and the mana, replenishing people and device if not actual supplies. The greatest frustration was that there was no way to get word ahead. They were moving so quickly that scouts had little forward range, and the land that Blue called home had powerful protections against divination. Without the magic items and frameworks they'd had to leave behind, it was impossible for any of his messengers to punch through it. It wasn't until they were only a few hours away that one of his scouts made contact with his grand-nephew, and the news was not pleasant.

"I have never felt such a thing before, Flight-Alpha," Huipocal Three-Sky flashed, edged with the deep maroon of remembered terror. "It was as if the wind itself had turned on me and found me wanting."

"But this Blue did not harm you, Scout Huipocal?" He pressed. A Power simply terrifying someone with their presence was ordinary and natural. They were not part of the mortal realm; they were above and beyond it. They were the ones who made the impossible real. If he were to meet one for a friendly chat, it would only mean they were playing some subtle and dangerous game.

"No, Flight-Alpha. His Voice made it clear he was displeased, but he did not attempt any harm. I do not think I would be standing here if he wished otherwise." Huipocal kept himself credibly under control, plumage shading back toward neutral, but the azure of conviction was impossible to hide. It only made sense. If even half of what Huyaceotl had conveyed through the distance link was true, Blue could destroy someone of third tier or lower with as little effort as swallowing a fish. That he chose not to exercise such power was a good sign.

"Surely you do not intend to go meet this Blue yourself, Flight-Alpha," War-Minister Unekintle half-suggested, half-asked in crimson-tinged flashes. "We can't risk any danger to you, not now." Tlulipechua didn't bother with a full reply, simply flashing a domineering violet to silence his advisor. Unekintle was proud of the Chiuxatli and their accomplishments, perhaps too much so. Pride had its place, and that was to defend against any erosion by the subtle and insidious weaknesses that every being was heir to. Unfortunately, it could also render people inflexible at the worst times.

"Assemble the other Ministers," he ordered instead, violet-edged and precise. "We will *all* go. Simply by encroaching on Blue's territory we are in danger. Hiding away in our ships will do nothing but gain us contempt. If we are to plead our case with Blue, we should at least show him the courage of our convictions." Unekintle couldn't find any reply to that, and rippled green with acceptance before turning to go.

"Tell me exactly how to approach an audience with Blue," Tlulipechua ordered Huipocal. There surely had to be other ways to talk to the Power without irritating the local Queen. The talk of being teleported directly there was alarming, but when Huipocal revealed there was a permanent portal that alarm transmuted to something more fundamental. Awe. The Chiuxatli were hardly masters of spatial magic, but neither were they uneducated in the intricacies of spell weaving. A permanent portal was a

precious strategic resource, not something that should be wasted on merely making an entrance more impressive.

“Blue is decadent and wasteful, Flight-Alpha,” Goods-Minister Tonpichu judged in yellow-gold. “We must ensure we are not cheated.”

“Cheated of what?” Labor-Minister Heitulpa demanded in yellow-green. “We have already lost more than could be repaid in any of our lifetimes. There is no price that could be demanded for saving us that would not destroy us instead.” The Flight-Mother gave one soft, slow ripple of deep blue agreement, and Tonpichu signaled nothing more. Tlulipechua was glad the Flight-Mother understood, at least, or the arguments might have become tedious. Not that, in the end, they would do anything but what he said.

His ministers were not, generally, idiots, but perhaps they were too complacent and too sure of their place in the world. Most of them had not traveled beyond the bounds of Chiuxatlan, had not spoken with Leviathans in the crushing, lightless depths beyond the shores, nor dueled with dragons above the icy slopes of Citlaltépetl. But some knew better.

The towers that dotted the coast of Tarnil were heart-wrenchingly like the spires of Chiuxatlan, now left behind and lost. Tlulipechua could feel how they pulled air Affinity mana to them, and sent it out again, mixing it with storm Affinity in pleasing ratios to form clouds and fog and gentle breezes. Or snow, in this case, as they approached the turn of the year.

Huyaceotl had mentioned living in a proper spire, but had not mentioned that it was such a locus of wind mana. He had not mentioned that the weather in Tarnil was so thoroughly controlled. Not tamed, that was obvious, for there was still a wildness upon the scent of the mana, but it still was restricted to the spires. Or, perhaps, upon closer examination, *supported*. There were echoes of something terrible in the wind, hints and traces of a cataclysm that might have brought down the sky. Whatever Blue had done to drive off the mage-kings must have been desperate, indeed.

Tarnil’s sky was manifestly still in place, but it was not quite the same. Not only were the winds borne aloft on the great pillars, whispering as they flew from place to place, but there was another flavor to it. Despite the winter there was something bright and burning that flavored the air, as if summer still resided somewhere deep in the distant mountains.

“Great and terrible things have happened here,” Tlulipechua informed them, keeping his colors edged in violet but letting them play otherwise in the reds and greens so they would know that he was serious. He knew that Blue was a Power, but there were layers of profound knowledge and action here he could not begin to puzzle out. It was almost enough to give him hope. “Ensure that nobody aside from us crosses into Tarnil’s territory,” he told the Flight-Mother. “To do so could mean disaster for us all.”

The Flight-Mother signaled agreement without words, and Tlulipechua gathered his ministers to him. He left the deck of the Alpha’s Wings, feeling the colors of his people behind him as they swept toward the pair of towers that guarded a straight-cut canal heading deep into Tarnil. He could taste something on the wind, but it wasn’t until they reached the canal that he realized it was some massive magical working. The scale of it was humbling, and Spell-Minister Haelescue seemed to agree by the pale pink rippling of shock.

They entered the bounds of the spatial working, the terrain whipping by on left and right at speeds that beggared belief and transmuting into a quiet murmur of color flashes. It turned what might have been another hour of flight into minutes at most, and led them to an impressive lake city. Here the echoes of cataclysm fairly shrieked, to the point that he wondered how anyone could stand to live in such a place, and yet at the same time Tlulipechua could feel that soothing summer wind burning from the palace. It was a mystery that would have to wait until later. His target was the bare portal standing proud upon its own stone spire, whispering of exotic life.

"I will be *speaking* instead of flashing," he warned them as they dove through and flared wings to land. "Blue's Voice does not use colortongue." Or perhaps she did, but preferred to keep things based in sound. Either way, this was not a conversation to be held through an interpreter. He certainly had enough mastery of the wind to make it speak for him.

The audience hall itself was a miracle of color and mana, the air fairly humming with life and bright flowers shouting from every corner. He ignored the startled shifting of his ministers behind him, ignored the bright spots on either side and the heavy, lush mana that demanded his attention. Appreciating the insane richness of the audience chamber was something for another time. His attention was instead focused on the unimpressed blue glow ahead and the fox-girl that stood there. Tlulipechua had given thought to what he might say, but when the moment came the only thing left was a simple plea.

"*Oh, great one,*" Tlulipechua knelt and *spoke*, wind magic forming the worlds. "*Please, save my people.*" He ignored the affronted flashing from some of his ministers, shocked that their Flight-Alpha would prostrate himself before anyone. Especially someone who seemed to be only in the third tier, nothing special in any way. But Tlulipechua was no fool and stayed kneeling as silence stretched out.

"*You have come to make a Bargain,*" she said at length, not precisely asking a question. He shuddered slightly, the weight of the term physically pressing him down further against the ground. Even though it was only sound, it *felt* like searing violet pressing down on his plumage.

"*Yes,*" he admitted, and felt the eye of the Power upon him. Despite all his levels, despite his fifth-tier Class, he was nothing next to the immense and terrible presence of the ancient being. Something vast and timeless, judging him with an indifferent gaze.

"*What do you offer?*" The words were cold and hard, blue-white and pitiless.

"*Anything but the integrity of our people itself. I cannot sacrifice that which needs to be saved.*" Silence rang once again, and War-Minister Unekintle tried to stir, spinning his own magic to speak before Blue's mere gaze smashed him flat upon the stone, dispersing the mana into nothing.

"*The Bargain is this,*" Blue's Voice said at last. "*Blue will house and protect your people until you can retake your lands. In return, you will give freely your work, your effort, your knowledge, and your expertise.*" Tlulipechua considered this, feeling the great weight of history revolving around him, winds whistling about the eye of a hurricane, but his introspection was interrupted by a flare of magic from Goods-Minister Tonpichu.

"*That is slavery!*" Tonpichu *said*, though the sound was muffled by the blanket of the Power's presence. "*We will never submit to—*" Tonpichu simply vanished mid-word, without so much as a flash to mark his

passing. Tlulipechua was almost relieved that was all that happened, because such disrespect could easily have stirred the Power's wrath.

"You set your terms. The Bargain itself would not allow Blue to demand anything that would break you."

The words were still cold and hard, but there was a hint of something underneath that made him think Blue was hurt someone would accuse him of enslaving an entire race. The words, though, eased something within him. He'd already made his plea and set his limits, and Blue had accepted them. The Power always got the better end of a Bargain, but Tlulipechua was content with that. Blue would do nothing that threatened the safety or integrity of his people.

"I accept," Tlulipechua said.

"It is done," Blue's Voice replied, and a great roaring hurricane of power blasted through Tlulipechua. He could feel it reach out through him to his ministers, then to others, granting him a moment of utter clarity. For an instant he could feel the ties that bound him to every single one of the millions of people that he led, all the fragile lives he was responsible for, all leading up to him. To him, and from him to Blue, winding something small but immensely complex around every single one of them before the hurricane vanished. They were all bound to the Bargain, now.

The immense pressure of Blue's attention eased, or rather, instead of having to fight a headwind it was like a thermal lifting him up. He was inside the Power's demesne. Something that was equal parts reassuring and worrying.

"Come, I will show you where your people will stay," the fox-girl said, and Tlulipechua found he could rise to his feet. His ministers were babbling in colortongue, but a single ripple of violet hushed them. The arguments could come later, out of Blue's sight. He did share one of their worries, and decided to ask it before any further distractions.

"My Goods-Minister, may I ask...?"

"With your ambassadors." Blue's Voice told him indifferently, and Tlulipechua allowed a ripple of pale peach relief. There would still be consequences for Tonpichu, as speaking out at such a delicate moment was an unconscionable violation of his authority. But Tonpichu was also exceedingly competent within his role, and Tlulipechua would hate to lose him.

"Thank you for your mercy," he said, and the fox-girl inclined her head. She flickered and was next to them, then turned as another portal opened, this one looking out over sky and greenery.

"This way," she said, and stepped through. He followed, finding himself at the edge a cliff that beggared belief. Thirty miles down and thirty miles up, taller than the tallest mountains. Indeed, in the far, far distance he could see mountains themselves dwarfed by the immensity of the surrounding cliff walls, spreading out and away in a massive bowl.

"The cliffs of the Caldera will be your home," the fox-girl said, gesturing around at the terraced, lush greenery, the cloud and mist that covered the towering walls of rock. *"You can bring your people through any time,"* she added, and turned around to point at the portal.

It had grown, going from something merely large enough to step through to an enormous window large enough to accommodate his flagship. Obviously so, for the *Alpha's Wings* was visible just on the other

side, close enough that he could make out the crew's gawping flashes at the sight of the portal. Then the wind whispered to him of other portals, equally as large. Not just two or three, but *hundreds*, stretching all around the perimeter of the Caldera, enough for all his millions of refugees to come through at once.

Truly, Blue was a great Power.