

## Chapter 39: Year 2, Day 50 - Blue

With the encirclement complete, I had an embarrassment of riches. Tons of cores, enough trait points to buy practically everything on my list, and thousands of miles of mana-rich stone. I also had an immense amount of pressure straining against both my mana and my very presence, trying to break free.

It made me wonder if the containment cores had been under the same pressure, or if red cores had actually been better suited to holding back the rift. They did cycle cores through the containment fortresses, but neither Tor Kot nor I were clear on whether that was just to level up the cores in question or whether they needed time out to recover. I knew from experience cores could be damaged and be repaired, so if there were long-term consequences that would be a worry for me. Unlike the mage-kings, though, I could actually deal with the source, so I didn't intend to find out.

I went to buy [Antithesis] when [Blue's Sagacity] gave me a bit of a warning and I stopped to think it over. It was powerful, no doubt, but it also didn't have any setting lower than *total annihilation*. I couldn't have Shayma change my ANATHEMA to something like the Orrelin Inquisition without them all getting vaporized or whatever. For some people and things it wouldn't matter, but now that I actually had the chance to buy it, limiting my options to complete eradication seemed a poor idea.

Instead, I bought the other thing that might be useful on the eve of our delve into the rift: [Manifest]. Given how expensive it was, I was hoping it would be somewhat more dramatic than what it sounded like, but such was not to be. All it gave me was a new Skill, though when I invoked it, I couldn't say I was completely displeased with the results.

Thousands of my mana poured out into a free-form, pseudo-crystalline substance, looking almost exactly like my corestuff. It wasn't a part of my dungeon body like cores or flowers, though, it was simply a material. A material that was pure, solidified mana, with all the properties of my mana such as the lack of Affinity and the Bane. I could still manipulate it, because it was mine, but it was an actual tangible object. Considering that mana warped reality a little bit, *solid* mana, without any real preexisting properties or intent or anything, probably could be used to warp reality a *lot*.

*"Hey Shayma, what do you think you could do with this? Ansaë too, I suppose, I know you're not a crafter but it might be interesting."* I created two ingots of a hundred thousand mana each, which created maybe enough metal for a small sword or something.

*"This is weird,"* Shayma said, picking up the ingot and focusing on it with her Skills. *"I feel like it should be bleeding into the environment, or that the environment should be bleeding into it. It's just so pure."*

*"Hm. Interesting."* Ansaë, predictably, broke off a chunk and chewed on it like it was toffee. *"Unusual for its purity and density, but the very lack of intent or Affinity makes it difficult to work with. For most people."* She smiled wickedly. *"As an anti-depletion weapon, it would be excellent. Before we go inside, might I prevail upon you and Shayma to make me some claw sheaths?"*

*"I don't mind. Shayma?"*

*"Sure,"* Shayma agreed. *"I'd need more time to really think about what else to do with it, but I suppose it's not necessary when I can just channel your mana directly."*

*"Yeah, you can kinda cheat that way."*

"Everything is cheating when it comes to you, I think," Shayma said with a grin, and picked up the extra ingots I manifested. It didn't take her long to make the claw sheaths for Ansaë, since they just fit over her paws, and while it was nice I could provide something for her it seemed a bit odd. She was so focused on spellcasting I'd never seen her actually use her physical weaponry. Her Skills showed that she was quite capable of it, though.

While she was working I explained my reasoning behind *not* taking [Antithesis]. Normally I ran decisions past my council anyway, and it wasn't like the option was going away. Surprisingly, it was Ansaë that most approved.

"While I like scorched-earth tactics, having no other choice would turn you into something a lot more aggressive than you are now. Pragmatically, I would have to think about ways to constrain your influence if you had that sort of thing." She'd put it as politely as she was liable to, but being put on Ansaë's shitlist in addition to the other downsides was enough to make me park that option way in the back.

Once Shayma was done, there was nothing left to dither over. It was time.

"Good luck, husband," Taelah told me.

"Keep me informed, Blue," Iniri said.

"What are we waiting for?" Shayma asked.

"Me," Ansaë replied. I could feel her will flex outward and suddenly her moon appeared in the sky, glaring down at the swirling storm of the rift as the silver light of an eclipse shadowed the rain. Then the mana *stopped*.

The entire, enormous whirl of magically laden cloud froze in place, even lightning bolts and raindrops simply hanging in the air as Ansaë's crushing intent took control. She didn't even use her own mana; the world just obeyed her. Then she flicked a claw and the massive storm simply vanished as if it had never been.

The eclipsed sun shone on a massive, shallow bowl of blank stone, clear now of anything that might have obscured it, plant or animal or weather or mana. Depletion mana billowed out of a massive crack in the center, at least fifty kilometers long and ten kilometers wide. I started my free seed-ship toward it, with Shayma balanced atop, before Ansaë took another *step* and we were above it.

"This is larger than when I was here last," Ansaë said, looking down at the ragged chasm, through which large swaths of strange-looking greenery were visible. Already, more blightbeasts were starting to emerge, some of them flying but most on foot, straggling out of the ends of the crack where the subterranean world joined the surface. "That could actually be my fault, though," she admitted. "I *did* try to destroy it."

*"We'll finish the job this time. Though if it's actually underground, I'm surprised it hasn't spread out through the Underneath more."*

"That containment circle," Ansaë said. "You said that it was exerting pressure on you?"

*"Yeah, which I thought was weird when I can just purge depletion no problem otherwise."*

"Well, I suspect that might be why it's so intense. You're containing a *lot* more than just the surface storm."

*"Yeah."* Now that she mentioned it, the strain hadn't gone away even after Ansaë had nullified the massive amount of mana and depletion hovering over the rift. It hadn't even been affected. For all that Ansaë's display of control and power had been impressive, it hadn't made any noticeable difference.

*"Well, I guess it's time to see what's underneath."*

I could have sent a [Starlance] down, and in fact, I had enough material to make a *bunch* of [Starlances] for when we inevitably needed them, but at the moment we had something more powerful than nuclear weaponry. Or rather, someone, and I was more than willing to let The Silver Woe do the heavy lifting.

Ansaë raised her right paw, then brought it down with a noise like the end of the world. The entire surface of the bowl around the rift shattered, pulverized into gravel that seemed to simply evaporate into the air. It revealed more of the depletion-laden underground ecosystem, but more importantly, it revealed that the crack from the rift was just the result of a rupture from a deeper level of rock, some ten kilometers below the surface. One that looked quite familiar.

*"Well, I'll be damned. It's a dungeon."*

I had a lot of questions, like how the hell the mage-kings had problems with a dungeon when they very specifically had anti-dungeon weapons. Or how nobody had known that it *was* a dungeon. Or rather, a Great Dungeon, because I hadn't seen the practically [Firmament] level impervious rock anywhere else. I couldn't make it, and red cores couldn't seem to make it, but after running into it at Nivir's Great Dungeon, there was no mistaking it for anything else.

*"How did anyone miss this?"*

"Who could get close enough with the depletion?" Ansaë asked absently, staring down at the riven top of the Dungeon. "Even I didn't get further than the storm last time."

*"You'd think the mage-kings would know! Plus, they could kill it with dungeon-bane weaponry, right?"*

"Possibly. But with the size of a Great Dungeon..." Ansaë shook her head. "A dragonbane toothpick might hurt, but in the end it's still a toothpick."

*"I mean, that's true enough."* I might be big, but I was practically a flyspeck compared to the Great Dungeons. For all I knew they had millions of core health or something.

"Besides, I don't think that part of the dungeon *is* alive," Ansaë said with a frown. "Look closer."

"Oh, that is a bit creepy," Shayma said. I dived down toward it with my seed-ship and when I got closer I could see that the impervious stone around the breach was cracked and crumbling. Some of it was even floating like the islands surrounding the rift, so completely saturated with air Affinity mana that it stopped behaving like rock. I knew from my own experience that such disconnected pieces were emphatically *not* part of the dungeon, not unless there were hundreds of dungeon seeds being wasted on little fragments of bare rock.

Plants and vines and trees spilled out and over the damaged dungeon wall, subsisting on the sheer mana flow. The depletion didn't matter to blightbeasts or, apparently, blightplants, and they thrived despite the fact that the enormous number of monsters and animals should have scoured the area clean. Even as I watched some of it started creeping outward onto the bare expanse Ansaë had revealed. It wasn't as fast as my Climates, but significantly quicker than anything the red cores could manage.

"So if this is the source of depletion, maybe it *is* dead," Shayma suggested. "If dungeons are responsible for mana Affinities, what happens if one dies?"

"We won't know until we dig deeper," Ansaë said. "I've always wanted to see what was at the bottom of one of these."

Once I started thinking about it, the fact that a dungeon was the source made sense. I still didn't know what depletion was, exactly, but if I could manipulate souls, so could other dungeons. The unending waves of blightbeasts seemed about right for Great Dungeon sizes and, presumably, spawning ability, while their blind aggression fit with ANATHEMA.

I was a little hesitant to get too close, because I wasn't sure what would happen if I really got inside the territory of a Great Dungeon, but Ansaë and Shayma had no such compunctions. Both of them descended toward the open wound, where blightbeasts were already crawling from the exposed layers of dungeon floor. Through Shayma's perception I could get a better angle than just a sprawl of green, and the exposed piece of dungeon I could see looked remarkably like my Caldera.

Aside from the absolutely formidable numbers of blightbeasts streaming from places out of sight, it looked like an ordinary expanse of wilderness, complete with a sort of false sky. Not as good as *my* false sky, more like a bland haze of illumination that was based on light Affinity, but something to give the illusion of one nonetheless. It was also something like half a kilometer tall, or deep, or whatever, but there were walls crossing all over it, probably subdividing it into discrete "floors" or whatever.

There was very clearly some massive spatial expansion going on. It was obvious just from looking at it, but as Shayma passed through the outer layers of mana the warped view shifted just like it did when entering the Caldera, making it clear that things weren't as far away as they seemed. If I had to guess, the stretching was closer to one thousand to one, a full order of magnitude more than what I could manage. When I realized that, I did some mental math.

"Uh. *With that much spatial expansion, if Great Dungeons are as large as I think, they're bigger than hundreds of planets on the inside.*" Taking surface area into account, I was probably underselling it by a couple orders of magnitude.

"Yes, it's going to make finding the core area difficult," Ansaë agreed. "As I'm assuming you don't want to try and take this over from the outside."

"God, no. *I don't know if I really want to from the inside! We'll have to see what's down there.*"

"Yes," Ansaë said, and the eye in the sky seemed to blink. If I'd thought the power to disintegrate the rock covering the rift entrance was impressive, the sudden bolt from above was indescribable. I couldn't even grasp how the mana worked, just that a silver flash at least ten kilometers in diameter slammed down and through everything in its path. Blightbeast, vegetation, dungeon stone, air, whatever had been there, just *wasn't*.

It was like a void bolt, but before I could do more than recognize the similarity a return blast of mana rose from the depths and streamed away into the sky. For a moment I thought it was a counterattack, but no, it was still Ansaë's mana. It was like she'd just converted matter to mana and siphoned it off to her moon, which was bizarre to even articulate.

Yet for all that, the hole she made was only a hundred kilometers or so deep. Which was a hell of a way, for sure, but just the smallest fraction of a percent toward where we *needed* to go. Ansaë was crazy impressive, but the sheer scale of everything meant that such an approach wasn't sustainable.

*"So is it safe for me to go down there?"* It probably was, as Shayma was inside the Great Dungeon's mana field and not seeing any ill effects, but I had some rather poor experiences with dungeon-to-dungeon contact. The Nivir Great Dungeon might have been quiescent, but that was no guarantee this blighted one was.

"I think you'd better," Shayma said, hovering in dragon form. "There's a *lot* of depletion mana coming out."

I dropped the seedship down, extending a [Greater Light] field out, but it didn't really make a dent in the energy venting from the newly-created borehole. When that hit the containment circle, it was going to make the strain there much worse, and I wasn't sure how long it'd hold anyway. Ansaë's spellswarm had erased a lot of magical infrastructure, and my mana didn't have intent, so the containment was really relying on my anti-depletion properties and some kind of ontological inertia.

*"I don't think we have time to deal with the outflow. I'll try growing out from the ringwall but it might be faster to get to the source. Assuming we have a way to track down the dungeon core. Ansaë?"*

"Unlike you, Great Dungeons have a definite mana flow and increasing mana density. Normally going deep enough to properly track down a core is not feasible, but in this case, we'll have to." Ansaë frowned down at the dungeon levels she'd drilled out.

From my seed-ship, they looked very similar to the topmost layer: enormous lit caverns of greenery, with insane numbers of blightbeasts swarming through. Admittedly, since the lowest ones were nigh-on a hundred kilometers away I could only guess by the smears of color and vague motion. Ansaë could see, and I wouldn't be surprised if Shayma could, but my sensory abilities were fairly limited.

"Let's go," Shayma said, flipping her wings and diving downward.

*"Okay okay,"* I said, sending the seed-ship after her. *"But remember, multiple planets. You're going to need to go into Phantasmal Space to get anywhere. Or Ansaë will have to teleport us around."*

"I would not trust either Skill when diving into a mana density like what's down there," Ansaë opined. "Better to bore our way through and have a physical trail. With Blue we don't have to worry about our path of retreat, but flitting about without leaving any trace of a path is just asking to get lost. Even my senses aren't enough to encompass a whole Great Dungeon."

*"Can you do that giant hole thing consistently? I guess you can make it smaller, but still."*

"To some extent. Boring a thousand miles is one thing, a *million* miles is something else." Ansaë scowled as she looked down at the hole, ignoring the winged things taking flight and climbing upward.

Without some kind of travel Skill it would take them literal *days* to get to the top. Just as it would take time for us to get to the bottom, even with gravity on our side.

“Well, I did promise you a [Contained Star] a while ago. Would that help?”

“You know, it would,” Ansaë said, a slow smile spreading across her muzzle. I went back and forged a new one, the mountaintop where I made the stars looking ever more unusual, then extended a bracket from the surface of my seed-ship. The newly created star blazed as I spent nearly a hundred thousand mana to teleport it over.

Ansaë reached over and plucked the star from its resting place, though I could see her magic surge to combat the massive amount of heat and mana pouring from the thing. Then she opened her jaws and swallowed the thing whole. It was a little bit predictable, considering that she tended to at least *taste* anything interesting, and considering the whole dragons being thaumivores thing, but it was still just baffling to watch.

Shayma giggled at Ansaë’s expression as the star visibly slid down Ansaë’s throat, because she made a face like someone who’d bitten into an extra-spicy pepper. I was beginning to question whether it was a good idea even for Ansaë when the glow inside her scales vanished. Her eyes flashed briefly and her horns suddenly became limned with fire, plasma crackling from the tips before the [Contained Star], or whatever it had become after Ansaë had eaten it, manifested just above her horns as a sort of blazing halo.

“Oh my, this is interesting.” She sounded delighted, as well she might. Even without whatever power she’d gotten from *eating* an Origin Relic that was also a contained fusion source, the addition to her already imposing look was impressive. She glanced up at her moon and another orbital beam appeared, this one with solar fire laced into the silver light.

Unlike the last one, the combined lance *sizzled*, almost a growl as it threw harsh illumination over the rift. When it vanished, there was a tremendous thunderclap as air rushed into the vacuum, and wind rushed past us from the shockwave. I couldn’t tell how deep the hole she’d bored with that one was, due to atmospheric haze, but she flicked her wings and headed downward, the crown flickering out as she did so.

Shayma and I followed, but I had to wonder if she’d really taken the time to consider the distances involved. Even if we exceeded the speed of sound, it could take entire *months* to reach the center of something the size of the Great Dungeon. The scales were quite literally astronomical.

But as we went down, Ansaë’s magic rippled out and we accelerated quite a bit faster than we should have been able to. The three of us could probably handle supersonic or even hypersonic velocities, them due to magical biology and my seed-ship just because it was rock and stone, but the wind whipping around us didn’t get much beyond a swift breeze despite the walls blurring past. The dungeon’s floors were big enough that even at that speed we had plenty of time to see the big caves and their false skies, lakes and rivers draining off the edges Ansaë had made.

“And I thought Blue was big. I knew nobody ever got to the bottom of Great Dungeons, but *this...*” she trailed off, words failing her as she took in caverns that very quickly started to rival the Caldera itself in size. They looked to be even bigger as we went deeper, if that could be believed, and I was glad that we

had some way to follow a trail to the core. Manually searching for the thing would be the work of lifetimes.

The enormous hole Ansaë had drilled into the dungeon got more of a reaction than just creatures spilling out into the open. I wasn't sure if Great Dungeons were sentient, let alone sapient, but even the most base creature would act to defend itself. Or at the very least, respond when it was poked. I wasn't sure whether the great outpouring of air and storm Affinity mana into the borehole was response or defense, but either way the sheer amount and motion of the mana instantaneously condensed into a great roaring vortex of a storm that blasted up toward us.

It wasn't something as harmless as a hurricane or even a tornado. It was more like something from an overheated superjovian, with hypersonic winds and lightning bolts a full kilometer thick, and electricity played over hailstones the size of houses, making them glow from within. It boiled up toward us, the cloud front a dark wall, but Shayma just flexed her Domain and all that weather just did not exist around us. She did need to pull on my mana to do it, but all the extra regeneration I'd packed on for the purposes of dealing with the rift, it was barely noticeable.

"So is this normal?" Shayma asked conversationally, clearly very smug about being able to nullify the weather.

"For this much mana in motion? It's not unreasonable, though I must say I hardly ever see so much at once." Ansaë frowned at the clouds about us. "It's not as clear of intent as Blue's, either, even if it is diffuse. I'd say it's just a natural phenomenon rather than a directed one."

*"Makes sense. From what we know the dungeon shouldn't be able to throw stuff at us of its own accord. It'd have to use Fields or traps or whatever."* Even if I said that, it *felt* like the weather was a personal attack. Despite the ban on communication and intent, the dungeon tools could at least let me stomp on threats. No matter how big the dungeon was, what Ansaë had just done was *definitely* a threat.

I couldn't see a damn thing outside of Shayma's clear Domain as we continued downward. It was all dark fog shot through with lightning and the occasional silhouette of something really big coming our way. I had assumed all those shapes were hailstones or the like, from my initial glimpse, but suddenly Ansaë turned her head and spat a jet of silver fire. A pained screech came in reply, loud enough to blast apart the clouds around us and revealing a serrated mouth big enough to eat even Ansaë whole. It wasn't quite to the size of the Beast of Tarkelion, but it was getting there.

Ansaë's spit of flame had half-severed the top part of its jaw, and entire rivers of blood poured out as it clawed its way toward us before a renewed blast of cloud obscured the view. Our group was moving fast enough that it vanished above us, the last glimpse being that of a chitinous tailtip the size of a tree thrashing back and forth. I hadn't even realized that there was anything alive by us, let alone a monstrosity like that.

*"Was that an airborne Leviathan?"*

"Something like," Ansaë agreed.

"I couldn't sense it at all," Shayma complained. "How was something that big so stealthy?"

"I did try going through a Great Dungeon once before, and while I didn't get this deep, there were some extraordinarily large and high-level creatures far down, past the areas where most people can delve."

"Which is where we are." I didn't know how far down most people went in a dungeon, or how levels were counted, but some fifty or sixty kilometers deep was probably beyond the scope of most delves. Or maybe it wasn't; people *did* have some crazy Skills after all. The giant air beast might have come from further down.

"I think mom and dad said they got twenty miles deep one time. They were in the dungeon for an entire *month*, there and back. That was Ir's though. I don't think this one has a normal monster density."

"Yeah, true." Though there was no way a massive beast like that thing could make its way through all the caverns I saw. With the upper part of the dungeon crumbling away, though, at some point there might have been a path and a swarm of behemoths like that could have gotten out. Frankly, we were lucky that the rift had been as small as it was.

It wasn't like the dungeon was going to run out of monsters, either. I wasn't sure if they could live purely off mana like dragons did, but I'd seen that blightbeasts were extremely efficient, not fighting among themselves and seeming to need very little sustenance until they settled in and started properly reproducing, whereupon they did start acting more normal. With the scope of what we were seeing, it was not an overestimate to think there were still hundreds of *billions* of blightbeasts waiting to escape.

Suddenly we broke through the bottom of the vertical storm, though the deluge of rain meant the visibility wasn't much better, with practically an entire lake pouring down around us. Or rather, an actual lake, since I saw fish falling here and there. Though with whatever magical speed Ansa had piled on, even falling things went upward, creating the illusion that it was all floating. Which might not have been too much of an illusion, considering how much wind Affinity mana was about.

Even through the deluge I could make out we were passing an uncounted number of floors, vague colors and shapes half-glimpsed through the curtain of water. As the rain cleared out we could see the underpinning stone between the various cavern layers, no more than a kilometer thick and flashing by in a blink. Then we emerged into an incredible open space, where the borehole was barely visible in the far-away floor.

We were so far away it felt like coming in from orbit, but instead of a big empty atmosphere there were massive floating chunks of rock and vegetation hovering above a complex tapestry of land. From the vantage we had it was obvious that Climates were at play, given the unnatural borders between different regions. I didn't have much time to look, though, since we were moving so fast that we zipped through that entire area in seconds.

We came up on the bottom so fast it almost inspired a panic reflex, the bottom of the cavern layer seeming to rise up to smash us. But the scale was deceptive, and by the time we were actually close the tiny hole that was our passage deeper into the dungeon was enormous and impossible to miss. It really felt like I was going forward instead of down, with how fast we were travelling and the lack of real sensation, driving ahead into some weird tilted landscape.

We plunged into the second borehole at speed, a kaleidoscopic flash of colors streaking past as we went through smaller caverns, with smaller life. The big cavern was probably the source of the huge



Leviathan sky-beast, in hindsight, though I hadn't seen any as we'd flashed through. With each layer, the density of the mana continued to rise, quickly surpassing mine and of course all laden with depletion. It was enough to kill pretty much anyone who wasn't immune instantly.

Since I didn't need to do anything but go along for the ride, I took advantage of the long plunge to add more to the containment circle far above. I certainly didn't have time to cap it completely, but I could grow a thin lattice to project mana and hopefully filter out the worst of what was bubbling up from the rift. It was obvious that if we *weren't* able to address the source of all this, we *were* going to make things worse. I could hold back only so much, and the mana coming out of the rift might well escape into the atmosphere like some kind of radioactive fallout, poisoning a far greater area than it really should.

I had only just gotten that latticework started when we emerged into another mind-boggling cavern, one that was bigger than anything before. So large that I couldn't see the sides or the bottom, everything diffusing into a blue haze. Immense shadows drifted within it, heavily wrinkled and corrugated rock describing shapes the size of continents, long and oddly shaped.

One of the continents blinked at us.