

Chapter 14: Day 233 – Blue

“That is a big city.”

“Mhm,” Shayma agreed, standing on the bottom facet and looking down at the thriving port that Anell called home. Hundreds of ships crowded the harbor, and the city itself sprawled along a river, white worked stone with green tile roofs. The Anell compound, which I’d seen when they’d talked about me, was part of an opulent complex of estates that raised themselves above the city proper by virtue of sheer scale.

“So how did you want to play this?” It was really her choice to make, even though it was my Fortress and the Anells had managed to offend pretty much everyone over on Orn. Demands and destruction were fairly easy, but rescuing the Ells from Anell control took finesse. Besides, it’d be easier to make demands *after* Shayma had taken away their favorite toys.

“Well, you’re not exactly hidden, so they know we’re here. I’m assuming that they know what the Fortress is.”

“I don’t know that they do yet. It’s not like they have any agents in the Caldera or even Tarnil.” I hadn’t gotten any visions of the Anell council panicking, at least, which was a shame. It would have been fun to watch.

“They’ll figure it out eventually,” Shayma judged. “While they’re focused on you, I’d like to spirit away as many Ells as possible.”

“Yeah, but where are the Ells? I don’t imagine they just have a bunch of barely controlled void agents all together.”

“Of course not,” Shayma agreed. “But they’re often sent out with the ships, so the high-security areas by the docks would be a good place to start. Mom also mentioned she remembered being near that big compound, so there’s probably an Ell wing there. Plus I can always rifle through people’s heads when I find something important. I’ll start by teleporting around and you tell me if an Ell or Anell pops up.”

“I suppose that works.” It was a rather brute-force way of doing it, but since we lacked a handy Ell tracker it would have to do. Besides, with Shayma’s ability to turn into a Scalemind and lack of compunctions about using it to rip information out of Anell or even Ell heads, I was pretty sure it wouldn’t take very long to zero in on our targets. In the meantime, the Fortress would loom menacingly.

There was already some visible panic in the scurrying about below, but ships were still being loaded and unloaded, so not everyone was so bothered. It would be interesting to see how long it took for someone to come up and see what the Fortress was about. Actually, taking away their void tools before then would be a good idea, because that was what the Anells would naturally turn to. I was pretty sure that the Fortress could withstand them by virtue of sheer mass, but it was better to take away that choice to begin with.

Shayma vanished into the Phantasmal Realm and dropped down to street level, making herself anonymous with her Domain. Not that she needed to, since the bulk of the population was fox-kin, with

a scattering of other human-kin and some ordinary humans. Other than her good looks, there was nothing that would make my fox-girl stand out in the crowd. Even her clothes wouldn't draw any comment, considering the variety of people who were wandering about.

Of course, in Scalemind form she'd be a bit more noticeable.

I kept part of my attention on the bustle of the city and another on the overlay as Shayma flashed through warehouses and dwellings. I knew she'd taken an interest in wards over the last few days and it seemed she learned quickly, because she was managing to slip past some of the wards that had been laid down to protect the goods.

Some still tripped her up, but as fast as she was going, and with the disturbance of the Fortress above, they didn't matter. She scanned through the warehouses in less than a minute and was onto the next before anyone could respond to a broken ward. There was an awful lot of harbor-front to search, but she was moving fast. It only took fifteen minutes before she stumbled across the first actual Anell; despite the name of the city, they didn't seem to be particularly numerous.

"There! Him, in the office." Shayma paused at my words and shifted herself to Scalemind form to rifle through the man's mind. He didn't even seem to notice, simply working away at some logbook or something, only pausing once to stare off into the middle distance. When he resumed, Shayma shifted back.

"I started on the wrong side of the harbor," she said, disgruntled. "On the other hand I know exactly where at least one Ell agent is, and where more are quartered, at least in general."

"You didn't lose that much time," I told her.

"True, but the Anells aren't going to be content to let the Fortress loom menacingly all day." She vanished into the phantasmal realm again, making for her target.

"What if it's from Blue?" Molen Anell suggested, staring up at the black dodecahedron floating above Port Anell. *"That's the only real blind spot we have. Anyone else, we would have heard about something of this scale before it arrived."*

"It could be the mage-kings," Toreq said. *"We know they have flying fortresses."*

"Not like that," Molen disagreed. *"That is not something a person would make. It doesn't even look like anything."*

"If it is from Blue, we're properly fucked," Risu said bluntly. *"Even if we can destroy it, can we do so without wrecking the city?"*

"What I'm wondering is why we haven't heard anything from whoever controls that thing. It hasn't attacked, there haven't been any announcements, it hasn't even come down from where it put itself. It's just hanging there." Toreq frowned and consulted his notepad. *"We have a few Classers who can fly but I don't think they have the power to threaten this thing — assuming we even want to threaten it."*

"It's over our city. Don't tell me you've sudden lost your backbone because something is here instead of across the sea," Molen sneered. *"If we let someone beard us in our own home, we'll have no end of fires to put out further afield."*

"My best tools are bribery, distraction, and sabotage." Risu pointed her kiseru at Molen. "I can't distract or bribe that and I don't know how to sabotage it. I need more information to do that, which means talking. Once we know who it is, what they want, and why, then I can start pulling strings."

"So are we going to approach it or not?" Toreq asked mildly. "Whether it's Blue or not, it doesn't seem to be in any hurry to communicate."

"We'll discuss it," Risu said. "It might do something before we're done, but we'll discuss it."

I wasn't too impressed with their reasoning, but I really shouldn't have expected them to be humbled. Until they knew what the Fortress was and why it was there, it was actually quite reasonable for them to treat it as a random hostile force and not karmic retribution. Or some kind of retribution, anyway.

"Looks like they're considering that the Fortress might be mine, mostly by process of elimination," I told Shayma.

"Hopefully they stay confused until after I grab a bunch of Ells. It's going to be a lot harder to deal with them when they're actively fighting me." Shayma masked herself again and phased into something like an apartment above one of the warehouses. There was only one inhabitant, a woman named Chesu Ell, who didn't look like she was in any way related to Shayma or Sienne. If anything, she looked like she might be related to Risu, with the same severe features, not to mention her use of a kiseru.

Shayma didn't even bother to say anything to Chesu, who was only level 37 and so completely defenseless against Shayma's Scalemind form. If she ran across anyone in the third tier, she would have to pull on my mana pretty heavily to get anywhere, but below that it was easy enough for her to put them to sleep. Chesu crumpled slowly in her chair and Shayma caught her, teleporting over to ease her onto her own bed.

"You know, I was originally thinking of just taking the Ells and nothing else, but this is all her stuff." She waved around at the apartment, which was furnished and decorated with artwork and pottery figurines. Most of it was even tasteful. *"We could teleport these four rooms, and everything in it, right?"*

"We absolutely could! I can just imagine them coming to check and it's just a big empty shell." The Palace trick had worked out well, so pulling it off on a smaller scale was no problem. I'd need to rearrange the mountain interior in the Caldera to hold everything we were taking, but that was fine. It was a big mountain.

Shayma teleported just outside the apartment and put her hands on the walls, letting me reach out through her and encapsulate the apartment, which was just bathroom, bedroom, smoking den and kitchen. Some of it was structural with the adjoining warehouse, so I reinforced the outside with [Stonesteel] before I teleported the entire thing into a slot inside the mountain.

"Hey, Iniri, could you send a note to Sienne and Giorn for me? We're starting to send some Ells their way, and I'm going to be moving whole living areas." The general idea of kidnapping Ells en masse had already been discussed, but the extra wrinkle was something I probably needed to pass on. To make it easier on Shayma's parents, I stripped the apartment of drugs, arms, and armor, dumping it all in a holding area for later sorting. That room was probably going to get very full before we were done.

“Certainly,” Iniri replied. “I can even spare some of my Queensguard to help for a bit, though it can’t be for long. I’m still fairly short-handed.”

“Thank you! I’ll have Taelah find One-Eye-Green and get some more Scalemind to help.” There were actually relatively few Scalemind outside of Dreams-Ahead and Cuts-Like-Cold who were any good at dealing with mind surgery. There was a reason those two were the tribal leaders. Still, the amount they were helping meant I was going to have to make sure they were pointed toward metal veins or something. Or I’d have to figure out mind Affinity Sources.

“Taelah, can I get you to pass on something to One-Eye-Green?” My wife was with some of the Kinul youth, overseeing their rotation helping different people in the Village, but she excused herself to respond to me.

“Of course, husband. What do you need?”

“Just that we’ve got more Ells incoming, so we’re going to need some handlers to keep them from getting violent right off.”

“I have been continually impressed by Dreams-Ahead’s abilities in that realm,” Taelah said. “I will make sure they know.”

“Thank you!” I said to her, then focused back on Shayma. *“So you have more targets?”*

“Anyone that’s home in this area,” she said, taking her hands away as I finished pulling myself out of the structures. I left the thin shell of [Stonesteel] behind. “They go out with certain high-profile ships, or at least, important ships. Some of them are deployed but we’ll see how many I can find.”

“Makes sense.” Anell wouldn’t have void agents for every ship, nor would they all be deployed to potentially assassinate troublemakers. The flashiest ones would be on the most famous ships, and the really competent ones would be on ships that were going places there might be real trouble.

Shayma jumped to another building on the waterfront, her Domain revealing magical tapestries and expensive rugs, but no people.

“I’m almost tempted to take these,” she said, momentarily admiring the goods. “It’s not like anyone would know.”

“They are pretty nice,” I agreed. *“But maybe not befitting a Power to just take random stuff that catches your eye.”*

“We’re taking Ells,” she pointed out.

“That’s hardly random!”

“Fine,” she said with mock hurt before grinning and continuing onward. Shayma disappeared from the warehouse and reappeared in the small block of dwellings bracketing a dockside dive. There were actually three Ells there, two in the tavern actively drinking and the third sunk in a drunken stupor in one of the rooms above.

“Hm,” Shayma said thoughtfully, teleporting up to the insensate Ell and kicking at one of the empty bottles on the floor. “Maybe take this entire complex? I suppose you shouldn’t teleport them right out of the tavern. I’ll have to get them out myself.”

“Er? Won’t you be spotted?”

“Do you think anyone is going to really remark on someone dragging a couple drunkards out for being supposedly late to something?” Shayma smiled winningly. “Watch this, it’ll be fun!”

She covered her form with a subtle illusion, altering herself to be dressed somewhat more ostentatiously and have a face closer to Risu’s than her own. Then she jumped down to an alley, stepping out into the harborfront and marching straight to the tavern. She banged through the front door, making the tavernkeeper and some of the less-inebriated patrons jump, and strode directly toward the Ells.

“What are you two doing here?” She demanded of the bewildered fox-kin. “You’re late, and I’ve got about ten people who want my head because of it! Come on!” Ignoring their protests, she hauled them up, one in each hand, and started to propel them toward the door. Even if she was smaller than them, between her [Form of Thought, Shape of Will] and [Domain of the Trickster], she was able to push them around like they were small children. The small crowd watched with either bemusement or amusement as Shayma shoved the two Ells out the door.

“Hey, this isn’t—” One of them began to speak as Shayma pushed them through the open door of the apartment next door, but she cut him off by teleporting all of them up next to the sleeping Ell. A quick shift to Scalemind form dropped the other two into slumber next to him.

“Ugh, these three need to bathe.” Shayma wrinkled her nose. “But wow, that was actually easier than I thought it would be.”

“Yeah, it worked well.” It had also given her Trickster experience. Though it was really just a drop in the bucket considering the level she was at, but things like stealing entire apartment blocks with no one the wiser added up quickly. Once again she took up station outside the building and infiltrated it. Nobody in the tavern was any the wiser as she stole away everything but the tavernkeeper’s own home and put it inside the mountain. Like before she left a thin shell of stone behind, holding up the framework of the roofs and outer walls, so there wasn’t any immediate effect to pilfering entire rooms.

Overall it was perhaps five to ten minutes’ work to teleport one of Shayma’s targets, which meant that while the Anells deliberated and waited to see if the Fortress was doing anything, they were losing their agents, one after another. There weren’t that many to begin with, though. So far as Shayma could determine there were thirty, maybe forty total Ells publicly assigned to protect vessels. Forty individuals at the second and third tiers of such a fraught Affinity was actually an enormous force, and even though half of them were out on deployment Shayma still found seventeen total Ells to transport back to the mountain. Sienne and Giorn were going to need staff.

The odd thing about the Ells is that they were all living by themselves, if one didn’t count their handlers. They didn’t have family or friends with them. She had to guess they were kept deliberately isolated, but if this had been going on for generations then new Ells had to come from somewhere. There had to be full families or clans or something somewhere, especially since it wasn’t like every Ell got void Affinity.

“Yes, I think they must be in that inner compound,” Shayma said when I shared my musings. “I’m glad that mom got out when she was so young, but I wish she’d been able to tell me at least a little bit more about how things were done here.”

“Probably part of how they control them. It’s a lot easier to keep a leash on someone when you decide who they talk to and when.”

“I almost felt bad about taking them away from their lives here,” Shayma said, her face dark. “But now I don’t.”

“Yeah, some of them aren’t going to be too happy but that’s just tough.”

Shayma left the waterfront behind, moving inward toward the Anell compound. She stayed out of sight, bouncing from alley to alley and keeping herself shrouded in her Domain, until she was stopped by a much heavier set of wards than those protecting the warehouses. I could see that the wards provided full protection in the form of nested boxes and spheres around the entire place, faint but perceptible. It made sense the wards weren’t simply on the walls; with all the Classers about there would certainly be people capable of arriving by air or underground.

The way in was clearly a well-trafficked area, but with the Fortress hanging there, the big gates were closed. Since the wards weren’t really to keep people out, merely to sound an alarm, it wasn’t like they would actually stop Shayma, but it’d ruin the attempt to steal their void slaves out from under their noses. From the way she was scowling, Shayma didn’t have enough ward experience to slip through those, and aside from performing another Palace heist, I didn’t know that I could contribute much. Unless the Fortress very obviously messed with not only the compound wards, but everyone’s.

“Hey Shayma, I have an idea. How about I put a bunch of [Mana Diamond Anvils] on the Fortress and set them off? Considering what I saw down in Ir, that sort of disturbance would definitely set most of the wards off. Plus, since it came from the Fortress, it still leaves you hidden.”

“Ooh, I like it. Just get me one of those shields, because it’s really not comfortable to be around.”

“Yeah you’re all high level and stuff now.” I actually liked the idea the more I looked at it, since most of the people were low-level and wouldn’t be overly bothered, but the top Anells were all third tier and ought to be quite annoyed.

Since I’d already made a shield for Ansaë, making another one for Shayma was the work of a moment. I sent her the gold-laced and infused glass dome through inventory and transferred twenty [Mana Diamond Anvils] over. Obviously I didn’t want to ruin my *own* wards, so the Fortress grew a small bulb off the bottom face temporarily to hold them, along with a bunch of gold plating to keep the mana wave pointed downward.

It always felt odd to me that there wasn’t any sound accompanying an anvil going off, let alone twenty at once, but that same silence meant there was nothing to warn Port Anell. Shayma hunkered down under the dome and the intense mana wave rolled over the city. Wards snapped and popped, and high-level people suddenly cried out in pain and contorted themselves away from the hammer-blow of mana flux.

“What in all the abyss was that?” Molen scowled thunderously, holding his head in his hands.

"I do not know. Not a weapon, or else it would have actually done damage." Toreq moved gingerly, while Risu finished her coughing fit from choking on her own smoke.

"Has to be Blue," she managed before gagging and coughing again before continuing. "We know he has a lot of mana," she added, taking a long breath and shaking her head. "That's basically all we know, but that was thousands of mana. Who else could it be?"

"So is that a threat or a warning or what?" Molen asked.

"It wasn't friendly, regardless," Toreq said, as if imagining that friendly relations were even possible. "Raise the alert one stage. We'll use the main courtyard."

It was pretty satisfying to see the mana wave affected them so severely, even if it wasn't more than a temporary annoyance. Unfortunately, I was pretty sure that some of their Classers would be the nearby Ells, so Shayma would have to move fast. If it came down to it, I wasn't sure if she'd abandon the stealthy approach or what.

"I think they're forming up their Classers in the main courtyard," I told her. "Better hurry."

She was already across the wards, her mana shield stashed in her own inventory, flickering in and out of the real world as she rapidly teleported with [Wake of the Phantasmal]. It was an inefficient use of the Skill, but I needed her to be out of the Phantasmal Realm in order to see anyone's identity on my overlay and point out Ells to her.

"I'm going, I'm going," she muttered distractedly, flashing past third-tier Classers making their way toward the big open space in front of the gate. It was odd to think that Shayma was generally higher level than them, though I was sure the Anells had a fourth-tier around somewhere. Though that somewhere might be elsewhere on the continent, in which case they might as well not exist.

"There's one!" I spotted a woman named [Liani Ell], who looked more put together than the examples I'd seen before. She was older, smartly dressed, and in a proper Anell uniform. Not only that, but she had a sword belted at her side, though it was more of a longsword than a rapier. At level 65, not only was she the highest level Ell I'd seen, she was the highest level person, aside from the trio making decisions further in the compound.

"She might be a problem, I can't Scalemind her," Shayma muttered, before flashing over next to the woman. My fox-girl gave herself a uniform like the other Ell and assumed her false Anell face, reaching out to tap Liani's arm. "Excuse me a moment," she said. Liani paused and glanced at Shayma, then frowned.

"Who are you?" She stopped and peered at Shayma, her eyes widening, then narrowing. "Wait — who in the abyss are you?" I could practically see Shayma thinking furiously, deciding on her approach.

"A friend of the Ells," she told Liani after a moment. Liani frowned at her, then suddenly glanced upward toward the Fortress and raised her eyebrows at Shayma.

"This will have to be quick, they'll notice if I'm missing for long," Liana said, turning to the nearest building.

“Come on,” Shayma replied, taking her arm and hauling her through [Wake of the Phantasmal] to teleport inside in a moment, landing in a small sitting room with nobody else around. She turned to Liani, dropping her illusions to appear as herself again.

“*This looks really good, but be careful,*” I said. Liani seemed to be several magnitudes more intelligent than any of the addicts we’d seen so far, plus she seemed to instantly jump to the appropriate conclusions from Shayma’s reply. That was all to the good, but she was also a void Affinity Classer that was almost as high a level as Shayma, and I had seen how dangerous even second-tier void Affinity people could be.

“...Sienne?” Liani asked, staring at Shayma.

“*Well, I’ll be damned.*” Though in hindsight maybe it wasn’t too improbable at that. If Liani’s weapon was the sword, she probably came out of the same general branch as Sienne, and she was certainly old enough to remember Sienne as a child. Though with [Quest] tilting the scales, maybe it was inevitable that we would have run into her.

“Sienne’s my mother,” Shayma said. “Full explanations would take too long, but I’m here to get *all* the Ells out from under the Anell thumb. Which means evacuating as many as I can right now. Where are they?”

“How— no, if you’re with that—” Liani pressed her lips together. “The core Ell void agents are housed behind the Anell palace, in that direction.” She pointed, and Shayma nodded. “But the families; the children and the Ells who don’t have void Affinity are kept elsewhere. I’m not sure where. You’d have to ask one of the top Anells.”

“Then I will,” Shayma said grimly. “I was planning on confronting them anyway. For now, let me get you out of here, and go find the other Anells. How many of them would be willing to help me like you are?”

“Not Gennat or Tolkan,” Liani said immediately. “The rest would be happy enough to leave if you can promise to find the others.”

“Which I can,” Shayma said. “I am backed by a Power.” She pulled out a small sheaf of paper from her own inventory and scribbled a note before handing it to Liani. “Give this to Sienne when you see her. If you would, Blue?” She put her hand on the wall, so I took it over and opened a portal for Liani, who flinched away from the sudden opening.

“Spatial Affinity?” Liani asked, eyeing it. “So you’re not just spiring people up to that thing, you’re bringing them elsewhere?”

“Yes,” Shayma said. “Please, go through, we’re on a time limit here. As you said, they’ll miss you sooner or later.”

“Of course,” Liani said, stepping through gingerly and looking around at the complex. Considering that she hadn’t been knocked out and shipped there by force, I had put her right by the outside, common room. It wouldn’t be too hard to find Sienne or Giorn.

“I’ll have to ambush or avoid Gennat and Tolkan,” Shayma said as I closed the portal and pulled myself out of the wall. “Keep an eye out for me, please.”

“Absolutely,” I said. “If they’re high level I can hit anvils again and you can grab them while they’re insensate.”

“Perfect,” she agreed, and made a line in the direction Liani had pointed her. The inner core of Ells were obviously treated far better than the more expendable agents and addicts that they used to protect their ships or assassinate others. It made sense; someone like Girul Ell could never manage to break through to third tier, let alone be trusted with the security of the Anell family itself. At the same time, they clearly were not as leashed and, if Liani were to be believed, had no real love for the Anell family.

There were eight of them, making their way toward the Anell complex itself. It wasn’t clear to me what they intended to do, but the best time to accost them was before they got inside and spread out. Unfortunately, the two loyalists were among them.

“Hit the anvils again,” Shayma said, pulling up the glass dome. I had to cycle in new Anvils to do so, but I had plenty, and another wave of mana distortion hammered the city. All the Ells were in the third tier, if barely, and they staggered drunkenly. Shayma immediately shifted to Scalemind form and pulled on my mana to target Gennat and Tolkan. I expected them to drop pretty much instantly, considering mind magic backed by extra mana, but it actually took Shayma about ten seconds to make Gennat crumple, by which point they were recovering from the mana wave.

“Gennat?” One of the Ells bent down to try and help him to his feet, the others pausing to ensure he was okay. That gave Shayma enough time to take down Tolkan as well, after which she appeared in her own form at the end of the corridor.

“My name is Shayma Ell, daughter of Sienne Ell,” she told them, getting their attention. “I am getting the entire Ell family away from the Anells.” She accompanied those words with a trace of Presence. Not enough to floor them, but enough to make it clear she was far more than the third-tier she appeared to be.

“That explains that,” said Timor Ell, who seemed to be of an age with Liani, looking at the unconscious bodies of Gennat and Tolkan. “But the others—”

“I already took Liani and everyone down by the docks, and I will go wring the location of the families out of the Anells myself,” Shayma said. “I need you out of here to deprive them of their tools.”

“How would you get us out of here?” Another asked, and Shayma just smiled.

“Blue will do it,” she said, and I took the cue to [Assimilate] the wall from her hand and open another portal. “This will take you to Orn. Liani is already there.”

“What about—” Timor started, and Shayma silenced him with a pulse of Presence.

“I’m trying to do this without having to kill people,” she said. “If you just leave, there’s nothing they can do. The longer we delay, the more likely it is there will be real combat.”

Timor glanced around, then one of the others picked up the unconscious Gennat and slung him over her shoulders. That seemed to be enough, and someone else picked up Tolkan and they trooped through. I released the portal and Shayma let out a breath.

“Keep an eye on them, just so they don’t decide to try and revolt against mom and dad while they’re over there,” Shayma said.

“*Will do,*” I told her.

“Now, it’s time for the Voice of Blue to make her appearance.” Shayma ran her hands over her tunic, making sure it wasn’t ruffled, and vanished into the Phantasmal Realm.