

## Chapter 25A: Year 1, Day 259 - Blue

*"Blue's Fortress is still in Nicehapoca?"*

*"No movement that we've been able to see."*

*"I admit I am relieved."*

*"You would be."*

*"It's not cowardice to beware a weapon that destroys cities in an instant."*

*"That may be, but I still doubt he can do something like that more than once."*

*"That weapon was supposedly how Blue killed the war cores."*

*"I'd claim that too, but we all know Vok Lim wasn't the best tactician. Blue probably just destroyed them the old-fashioned way. Nothing that powerful can be easy to make."*

*"He's a Power. That part isn't under discussion. I can well believe a Power can scorch the land that way."*

*A group of mage-kings reclined together on the deck of an airship, flying high above the waves and gossiping about what was going on. A smudge on the horizon was all that was visible of the northeast coast of Einteril, the target of the armada of airships floating nearby. Each of them had a pair of monsters nearby, ranging from fiery birds to watery snakes to red-stone statues with white eyes.*

*They weren't using war cores, with their attendant fortresses and enormous, slow islands, but there were scores of troop ships filled with and crewed by monsters, representing thousands or even tens of thousands of troops. Despite that, the deck of the ship the mage-kings congregated on was as opulent as they might have wished, with plenty of food and an enormous swath of magical items to mimic the displays the war cores had.*

*"Attention, everyone," Sek Til said, activating the illusionary glyphs. "I'm sure you have all seen the plans, but I'll be going over it now to make sure nobody goes to the wrong city. Or gets lost." Some of the mage-kings shifted uncomfortably as he glared at the audience. "This should be quick, just a few months at most. We aren't here to seize territory but to grow our secondary cores."*

I was going to kill them. Genuinely, I was going to kill them. Or rather, Shayma was going to have to, because I was stuck in Chiuxatlan. Even if I started pulling out immediately it'd take a bit of time to abandon all the land I'd taken over. The [Burrowing Wyrms] were a big help in letting me expand, though I had to fill in the holes they made in terrain, but having to seize volume and not just the surface crust made expansion a pain.

Even sending Shayma would have to wait until she finished sterilizing the outposts that Tzicue had described. More like small towns, each of which was crawling with blightbeasts, not to mention long tunnels the Xicoati had bored out underneath Chixuatlan.

*"Iniri? It looks like Tor Kot didn't get through. The mage-kings are going to attack Einteril anyway. A lot of mage-kings. I'm going to have to send Shayma over there."*

"I was worried about that." Iniri's mouth was set in a grim line. "I sent a warning but I don't know if anyone over there has any way to do anything. You're still the only way anyone can deal with depletion."

*"I know, I know! I'm going to be sending Shayma, since the Fortress isn't particularly mobile at the moment, but I was kind of hoping you'd have some advice. Maybe I should have sent Shayma earlier but I didn't know they'd already gone all the way across the ocean or that there were so many and I probably missed it because I was busy here but it still feels like I fell down on the job."*

"Blue..." Iniri paused, and then smiled. "If you'd suggested sending Shayma to see the mage-kings, even just Tor Kot, I would have told you not to. They still have dungeon-bane weaponry, and we have no idea what that would do to her. Not to mention they really are fifth-tier equivalents, and even with [Unbreakable Promise] I wouldn't advise taking them on together. You can't do everything at once, not yet anyway."

*"I suppose not, but they're going to attack Einteril and it's going to be really messy. Is there anything we can do? They're only a few miles offshore."*

"We've communicated the threat. I don't know if they've heeded the warning or what they might have done to prepare, but the mage-kings aren't completely invulnerable. If anyone took us seriously they may have prepared enough defenses to slow them down."

*"Okay, so I guess it's up to Shayma."* I switched focus to my fox-girl. *"You're going to have to hurry it up, the mage-kings decided to go and attack Einteril."*

"What?" Shayma slapped the head off of a centipede-snake looking hybrid and paused in the wholesale slaughter. "How long do we have?"

*"Not long. I didn't notice it until they were about ready to start actually invading. And they're hitting most of the coast at once, it sounds like. So they aren't going to be grouped up, which is good, but that means we can't just Starlance them all in one go."*

"Then I'll take a shortcut here," Shayma said, and blew out a breath. "I wouldn't wish a mage-king invasion on anyone, but it's going to be so much more satisfying to take them down than just clean more blightbeasts out, you know?"

*"Yeah, playing janitor is not fun, just necessary."* Shayma nodded and then held out her hands.

"Sungun, please," she requested. The Sungun was far too powerful for her to store in her pocket dimension, the sheer amount and density of the mana defying the Skill's ability to transport it. It was difficult even for my dungeon inventory, but if I could transport around [Unbreakable Promise], there probably weren't any actual upper limits.

The Sungun appeared in Shayma's hands with a black pop. She lifted it to her shoulder, braced herself, then proceeded to bathe the entire place in solar fire. It punched through tunnels and chambers the Xicoatl had made, vaporizing stone and turning the complex geometry of the outpost into a hole in the ground. It took less than thirty seconds to slag everything, leaving scoured stone glowing with remnant stellar mana.

“One more and I’ll head to Einteril.” She flicked her tail thoughtfully. “Anything more precise than the continent?”

*“It looked to be the northeast coast. Of course, they’re splitting up so it could be anywhere.”*

“Hmm. I’ll have to stop by and get a map from Iniri.”

*“Yeah, actually, it’s a little bit of an emergency but we should probably have a war council of some sort before you go over there. I don’t know where any likely cities are or who the defenders are or anything like that. I’m pretty sure you’re powerful enough that you can deal with things but I don’t want to go off half-cocked. Hell, I don’t even know what our approach should be, whether you should try to negotiate with the mage-kings or not. You can probably talk them down but it would be really nice to get ahold of more cores...”*

“I’m tempted to try and bring Iniri with me for the negotiations,” Shayma said, shaking her head.

“Thankfully we can cheat with [Companion Concord]. This might be tricky.”

*“Isn’t that your specialty?”*

“And hero-ing,” Shayma reminded me with a grin. “Next outpost.” I took back the Sungun and she backtracked along the tunnel to the intersection, teleporting in quick bursts. The trek to the last portion of Tzicue’s indiscretion took a little bit longer, since there were blightbeasts along the way, but not *that* much longer. She was pretty practiced in disposing of the actual beasts, and she used a combination of [Hungering Dark] and [Panopticon] to purge depletion.

The last outpost was dispatched in the same way, simply vaporized with the Sungun rather than purged more meticulously, and the tunnel leading toward the Underneath sealed with a combination of [Starlance] to collapse the ceiling and [Earthslide] to merge the debris into a thick wall. She’d gotten the latter skill from one of Wright’s fourth-tiers, the rude short one, and combined with [Customization] it did a pretty good job of allowing her to alter small sections of dirt and stone.

As soon as that was done, and I took back the Sungun, Shayma asked for a recall. I brought her back to the Fortress core, and she started to pull on the teleport Fields before stopping and taking out the obsidian rod. Flames appeared as Shayma channeled fire Affinity mana into it, and she smiled at the Xicoatl who appeared at the other end.

“Tell Tzicue that I have taken care of the breach he was worried about,” she told the Xicoatl receptionist.

“Of course, Shayma of the Blue,” the Xicoatl replied, and Shayma let the flames die.

*“I’m sure he’ll be relieved,”* I told her. *“But I have to say I kind of hope Tlulipechua finds out somehow, even if we don’t tell him.”*

“He’s polite enough, but you’re right. I like Tlulipechua more.” Shayma shrugged, changing to the topic at hand. “Anyway, time to talk to Iniri.” She pulled on the teleport and transported herself back to Tarnil, appearing in my tower and heading out into the Palace proper on two feet.

Apparently she’d been chatting with Iniri through [Companion Concord] because she went directly to one of the larger meeting rooms and settled in. A few minutes later Iniri joined her, along with Cheya

and two other Classers, Basil Furst and Ina Leim, that she'd made her war minister and head diplomat, respectively.

It was interesting to note that they gave Shayma the exact same courtesies they gave Iniri, even if they didn't afford her the same title. At some point Iniri had made good on her threat to recognize Shayma as the equivalent to a queen, at least within the borders of Tarnil. Once every one was settled in, Basil spread out a big map of Einteril and started pointing out targets.

"Port Liskel, Port Hureot, and Port Tisine would be the most likely initial targets," he said. "They're all dense, right on the coast, and close in relative terms."

"The problem is that they're all under the control of different factions," Ina said. "Ones that are currently in all-out economic warfare, so we can't expect them to be capable of cooperating, let alone fending off the mage-kings. Frankly, I doubt that you'll be welcomed, but people are also likely to show you respect. Especially if you're taking care of an invasion for them."

It occurred to me that I probably seemed like some capricious god to the people on Einteril. Destroying one city, then coming over to save others, without any regard for their local politics or affiliations. Not that I didn't have my reasons, but it wasn't likely they'd appreciate them. Though hopefully they *would* appreciate being saved.

*"There were at least ten mage-kings, so they'll be going to more than three cities."*

"These five would be the next probable targets," Ina said after Shayma had translated that. "Though after that it's less clear where they would go. Whether they head inland or along the coast makes a big difference."

"Unfortunately, they're practically immune to scrying. Once they causing trouble it will be obvious, but it will also be too late." Basil said, frowning mightily. "I would say it was too late already were it not for Lady Shayma's movement Skill."

"We can start with the ports and go from there," Shayma decided. "The question is how we approach the mage-kings."

*"They're definitely wary of me, and you might be able to warn them off that way. Is there a downside to trying to negotiate first?"*

"I don't think so," Iniri said thoughtfully. "If they're already wary they likely won't attack on sight."

*"Yeah, but I'm thinking that Shayma could easily hijack their core out from under them if they don't know she's coming. If they do, it might be a lot harder. Or they could threaten to kill off civilians if she doesn't go away, or whatever."*

"That is a concern." Iniri frowned thoughtfully. "But the possibility of warning them off the whole invasion is far too tempting."

*"Yeah. We'll try that first. I'd really like to just kill them but containment will have to do for the moment."* If they regrouped before heading back across the ocean, I might have the opportunity to intercept them and burn them all with [Starlance]. Or maybe I wouldn't. For the moment, the mage-kings keeping things contained was in my interests too.

“Do you have any way of warning them faster than I’d get there?” Shayma asked, and Iniri shook her head.

“I can’t be certain my first message has gotten to everyone,” she admitted. “I actually sent it through Wright, since he has contacts there, but he doesn’t have a direct line to every country in Einteril.”

“For what it’s worth, I don’t think anyone will doubt who you are,” Ina told her. “That aura you have is...” She shrugged uncomfortably. “It’s very unique.”

“It’s meant to be.” Shayma studied the map. “Can I take this with me?”

“Certainly,” Iniri said. “That one’s a copy anyway.” Basil took the cue and rolled the map up into one overlong cylinder, which Shayma made disappear into her pocket space.

“Anything else before I leave?” She asked, looking around at Iniri’s advisors.

“If we think of something, we can always reach you,” Iniri told her. “Good luck. I don’t want what happened to Tarnil happening to anyone else.”

“I’ll make sure it doesn’t,” Shayma said grimly. “In fact, I will make it my next [Quest] to push the mage-kings off of Einteril.”

*“Just make sure that this one doesn’t end with you dying again,”* I told her. The use of [Quest] actually made me a little worried, since I wasn’t sure that she could back out once she’d decided.

“No,” she said. “No more of that. Besides, when it comes to the mage-kings I don’t need to worry about family. They are definitely the enemy.”