

Chapter 11A: Day 226 – Shayma

“It’s actually my private retreat,” Wright told Shayma, the magitek train carrying them from Invernir toward the Great Dungeon on the coast. “Well, my grandfather’s. I don’t use it much myself, not since I stopped adventuring and started emperoring.” Shayma’s lips quirked at the non-word, reminding her as it did of Blue’s occasional mangling of the language.

The actual meeting wasn’t scheduled for another two days but she’d come ahead early. In part just so everyone could arrive and be ready, and part so she could sweep the area with her and Blue’s superior senses. In times past it would have taken several days for a Classer or a mana-empowered boat to transport Iniri to Ir, but since Shayma could just make a portal, all the logistics were much easier.

“I find it hard to believe you don’t feel the need for a retreat,” Shayma said. “You’ve got a lot going on with Ir.”

“Oh, there’s a reason I have a personal forge attached to my palace,” Wright said, smiling broadly. “There’s even a portable one somewhere in these cars if I really get the itch while I’m in transit.” Shayma laughed.

“I like making stuff at my own forge, but I don’t think I’ve got it quite that bad,” she admitted.

“I wouldn’t have made fifth tier if I didn’t,” Wright admitted cheerfully. “Even now I have four or five projects I’m thinking about. It’s a lot more exciting now that I can get Sources and some of those weird metals. I’d love to try out [Firmament]...” He trailed off, looking at Shayma expectantly.

“We have very little of it,” Shayma demurred, smothering a laugh. Wright looked fifty years younger at that moment, more like a mischievous child than an elder statesman.

“Alas,” he sighed.

“Maybe someday we’ll have enough supermaterial that we can see what Wright can do with the stuff. Unfortunately, not now. I tried to see how much it’d take to get Wright a [Soul Prosthesis] and it’s something like a month straight of anvil time.” Shayma nodded as Blue muttered in her ear, though it was a shame. It would have been nice to offer Wright something to protect him from depletion, even though while she was there he probably didn’t have anything to worry about.

“Should we ever get some for trade, you’ll be the first to know,” Shayma assured him. “For the moment you’ll have to be satisfied with other things that you can’t find anywhere else in the world.” That just made him laugh.

“You have to be greedy to get to the top,” he told her cheerfully. She gave him a skeptical look, though the truth was that she was paying close attention. Her lessons from Iniri told her that managing to be so agreeable, but still exercise control over so many powerful people, was a lot more difficult than it seemed.

“You should try to restrain yourself at least a little bit when it comes to Blue,” Shayma told him. “He’s generous enough, but he wouldn’t like it if you tried to take advantage of him.”

"Oh, I think we've all heard about the palace incident," Wright said. "I don't have any desire to find my home or something bigger suddenly gone. For all I know, Blue has figured out how to relocate Great Dungeons."

"*Not likely,*" Blue murmured. "*They're way too big for that.*"

"I don't think that will be necessary. Especially since you've been so good as to host this meeting for us. Neutral ground is hard to come by, especially since so far as I understand you don't have any reason to tolerate the mage-kings yourself."

"I do not." Wright grimaced. "They don't have anything to offer diplomatically, in trade or alliances, but if it came to war it'd be a mess. I expect Tarnil would be fine, since Blue repulsed them once, but the rest of us would have issues. Preventing any future invasions is *my* stake in this meeting."

"Nobody wants future invasions," Shayma agreed. "Tor Kot himself is coming, and I think he's actually the one who planned it. He's also the only one who wants to be diplomatic, so I'm not really sure what he's thinking."

"I wish I had your information sources!" Wright shook his head. "Assuming that's accurate, it sounds like he's pursuing the art of war by other means. They failed to get what they wanted with war, so now they bargain. The question is what, exactly, they want."

"*Tor Kot seems to actually want to deal with the depletion properly, he just doesn't know how. He also doesn't seem to much care what happens to people in his way, so he's a true fanatic.*" Shayma nodded at Blue's commentary and rephrased it for Wright.

"This is not the mage-kings as a whole, just Tor Kot's faction, and he seems to be interested in the depletion problem. He's cruel and terrible but not intrinsically a conqueror."

"That's not reassuring. Conquerors can be dissuaded, but men with other missions are harder to tackle." Wright pressed his lips together, the train swaying as it took a turn and started to slow down. "It doesn't help that House Anell is planning something. Hanzell is beside himself that he hasn't found anyone."

"Iniri's spymaster says that it's almost impossible to find people who don't do anything until the very moment they're told to. No matter what Skills are used."

"It's true, there really isn't any Skill to test loyalty. Even people who think they're good and faithful citizens might find themselves swayed by money or blackmail."

"I always knew House Anell wasn't *good*, from what my mother said, but I didn't realize they were so pervasive."

"They're the biggest trading house in the world. I think. The biggest one that deals with human-kin, anyway." Wright shrugged. "I've heard that some of the Underneath companies are larger, but they don't really count. We don't even get caravans from them anymore. Not for decades. I suppose after seeing those blightbeasts we know why."

“The world is so much bigger than I thought it was when I was young,” Shayma confessed. “I didn’t know such places even existed. Now, I live inside a magical land hidden away from the world and controlled by a Power.”

“I’d like to hear that story someday,” Wright told her, an inquisitive glint in his eye. “I’m still not clear how The Silver Woe and Blue and Tarnil all got put together.”

“Maybe someday,” Shayma agreed. Eventually they’d want to craft a story that was mostly true but was still vague enough to protect Blue’s secrets. At the moment, it was far better to keep Blue’s origins and growth mysterious, and let people think he’d been around for centuries. Even people in Tarnil didn’t *really* know the truth, outside of Iniri’s inner circle. Most of them didn’t even realize Blue existed prior to the Bargain.

“I suppose I’ll have to wheedle it out of you some other time,” Wright said, standing. “We’re here.”

She’d already seen that they had arrived, with her Domain extending past the walls of the train, but that was something else she was keeping quiet about. It wasn’t like she could hide it completely, since anyone with sufficient sensitivity to mana would notice the way her Domain affected things, but that wasn’t the same as advertising what she could do with it.

The station was at the end of the line, a large roof of steel and glass sheltering the raised metal strip the train rode upon. It was at the bottom of a large hill, upon which was set a sprawling estate, with a number of green stone buildings on and in the hillside. It was almost a small town rather than a single resort, albeit one with immaculately groomed greenery and perfectly-swept paths connecting every building.

She followed Wright out the door and down the short steps to the landing, not at all bothered by the frigid air. Wright didn’t seem to notice it either, though considering he radiated heat like a forge-fire that wasn’t surprising. From there she could see more of the surroundings, and the retreat really was isolated. There were some signs of civilization miles in the distance, but they were screened by thick forests in every direction, the branches bare considering the season. The only obvious path through was the silver ribbon of the train track.

“I decided it would be for the best if you and the mage-king delegation weren’t in the same building,” Wright said, bounding up the steps ten at a time with Classer speed. Shayma had no issues following, though she leaned on [Wake of the Phantasmal] rather than pure muscle. “You’ll be staying in the Prince’s Villa, since Queen Iniri needs to meet my son, Gavin, not to mention my daughter-in-law! I do hope Denise gets along with Iniri.” Wright looked pensive for a moment, then shrugged.

“Well, that’s up to them. Come on, I’ll introduce you.”

[I’m going to meet your future in-laws,] Shayma sent to Iniri, somewhat amused that she’d be meeting them first. Though considering Blue’s stake in things, it wasn’t entirely inappropriate.

[They’re there already? We’re ready to head over any time, just give me a few minutes of warning.] Iniri had her Queensguard, Cheya, and a small domestic staff packed and ready to go through a portal.

[I will. I promise not to make a bad impression.] She would have to tamp down on some of her more mischievous impulses, but that was fine. Her experience being Blue’s Voice was slowly getting her

used to actual politics, though for the most part she had a massive advantage: Blue was the most terrifying thing in the room. Even when she was being diplomatic, she didn't have to cede anything to anyone.

Wright's fourth-tier guard, just the one on this trip, trailed behind them, staying politely away from their conversation as Wright opened the door to the outer courtyard of the sprawling Prince's Villa. Despite the fairly rustic look, her Domain caught defensive enchantments and runescrypt worked into the walls and the foundation. The place was well enough defended, perhaps even more so than the Palace in Tarnil.

"Gavin! Denise!" Wright bellowed good-naturedly as he strode across toward the inner courtyard. "Don't just hide inside, I'm sure you're feeling cooped up in there."

"We aren't all immune to the cold like you are, father." Gavin's voice floated back from somewhere deeper in the villa, and he appeared with his wife in tow a moment later. He looked remarkably like Wright, the same square face and square jaw, but where Wright's hair was salt-and-pepper, Gavin's was fiery red. Presumably from the mother Shayma *still* hadn't met.

While Gavin was in a sleeveless shirt, despite his protests, Denise was bundled up against the cold, with just a little oval face and a few wisps of black hair peeking out. There was something about her eyes that made Shayma think of Iniri, which gave her hope the two of them would get along. Denise was very close to a princess herself, being in line to rule of one of Ir's core provinces.

"You're earlier than I expected," Gavin said, exchanging a bone-creaking hug with his father. Adrian merely bowed over Denise's hand.

"This is Shayma Ell, the Voice of Blue," Adrian said, introducing her to the pair. "Shayma, this is my son Gavin Wright, and his wife, Denise Wright."

"Charmed," Gavin said, taking her hand. "I hope it wasn't too long a trip from Tarnil." Wright just smirked at that, and Shayma chuckled.

"No, my movement Skill let me get here in less than an hour." Shayma smiled, and Gavin's eyebrows lifted before he stepped aside to let Denise take Shayma's hand.

"Pleased to meet you," Denise said. "I suppose meeting you is as close as it comes to meeting the father of my daughter's betrothed."

"In a way," Shayma agreed. "Blue is not exactly a father in the same way your husband is. I'm sure Iniri's son will have an Aunt Shayma but Blue will always be distant." Denise nodded at that, either in satisfaction or just understanding.

"I confess it's actually reassuring. I find it a trifle disconcerting to be related to a Power, by blood or by law. Admittedly, the only Power I have personally seen is the Forest of Silence."

"Ooh? *What's the Forest of Silence?*" She could feel Blue's attention focus down at that. In fact, everyone did. While she never felt anything overwhelming, according to others it was something rather like when she used his Presence through [Promise]. The sensation of something great and terrible passing nearby.

Gavin shifted uncomfortably and Denise looked a little alarmed, but Wright just chuckled.

"That got his attention," he remarked, and Shayma raised her hand to forestall any questions from the couple.

"I have met Blue, of course, and The Silver Woe, and I can assure you that one does not prepare you for the other," she told Denise. "We have yet to encounter The Forest of Silence, though. Blue wishes to know about it, which is why you can feel his interest."

"Ah..." Denise took a moment to recover, as Blue's attention became somewhat less sharp, giving the Wrights more room to think. "It is exactly what it sounds like," she said at last. "It's a large forest where there is no sound. I've only been near the outskirts. Nobody goes any deeper than that."

"Huh. I wonder if the Tree of Eschaton is related somehow. It doesn't have the sound thing, but it's definitely a lot different than any of my other flora." That sounded more like private musing than anything she needed to relay to the Wrights.

"It has an agreement with it," Adrian added. "We keep people from annoying it and it answers questions every once in a while."

"I kind of want to meet it, but it also sounds like it doesn't really want to see anyone, so it's probably better not to." Blue sighed in the back of her mind, and the weight of his attention vanished.

"And that's why Powers are disconcerting," Denise muttered quietly, which Shayma pretended not to hear. "Well, let me not be rude and welcome you to the villa," she said, this time speaking directly to Shayma. "We set aside a wing for the Tarnil delegation, though it wasn't clear whether you would be staying with them or not?" The tone of her voice made it a question, and Shayma nodded understanding.

"I will. Tarnil effectively represents Blue in these matters, even if Blue and Tarnil *are* separate. Speaking of, I'll be bringing the rest of the Tarnil delegation over by portal once things are settled."

"By portal?" Gavin snorted. "Certainly, why not. We'll have the servants show you to the guest wing, and then perhaps you will join us for lunch?"

"Ready when you are," Shayma sent. "That sounds good to me," she agreed, and after a few more polite words followed a servant into the villa. Nothing suspicious passed through her Domain, though she wasn't expecting anything from the Wrights. It was when Tor Kot arrived that she'd have to be really on guard, both against him and against anything the Anells might be up to.