

Nine people sat around a large and lavish table, but none of them seemed particularly interested in the fruits and wines and cheeses set on platters. Instead, they sat frowning at a circle of runes that projected the faces of five dead mage-kings. Most of them looked uncomfortable, as if they didn't want to be there, or at least less than happy. Of all the people at the table, only two looked completely relaxed — the familiar pair of Yit Nev and Tor Kot.

"We have lost six cores to the self-proclaimed Power, Blue," said the one at the head of the table, one Rol Siw.

"What a stupid name," Mil Tek muttered, and Rol Siw's eyes pinned him in place before he went on speaking.

"He seems to be solely responsible both for the failure of our westward expansion and the destruction or seizure of six years worth of production." He continued. "Tor Kot did, fortunately, salvage four wide-foundation cores before Blue could seize them as well."

"He fled like a coward!" Mil Tek spoke again, and Rol Siw lifted a finger.

"Councilman Mil, remain civil and silent until the floor is open or you will lose your speaking privileges altogether." Rol Siw aimed his deathly stare at Mil Tek, making no other sound or motion until he finally got a nod. Rol Siw dismissed the mage-king and went on, pale grey eyes flicking to each of the people around the table.

"With the loss of four war cores and fewer gains than expected from the Westward Project, our projections are that we will lose one hundred fifty miles of rift containment in the next five years. Already we have had three breaches due to redeployment." Rol Siw's voice was cold and hard. "Three. In centuries past that may not have been an issue but as it stands now, ladies and gentlemen, this is not acceptable." Silence reigned for a moment, and several people shifted uncomfortably.

He turned to look at Tor Kot, his eyes holding no more warmth than when they did for Mil. "The Westward Project was championed by the Dedicateds. Now that it has failed, does your faction have any way to offset our losses?"

"A point first, Council Head Rol," Tor Kot said, clearing his throat. Apparently even he was somewhat intimidated by Rol Siw. "I objected to Vok Lim's coalition attacking Blue, an objection that was filed with his council before they left. I recognized the danger of using further force in the lands of Tarnil, so the war core losses were due to action against the advice and wishes of the Dedicateds." That got a minute inclination of the head. "That said, we have some small reserves to dedicate to the defense, but we would suggest trying to open diplomatic relations with Blue."

"That suggestion seems inappropriate considering what has just happened," Rol Siw said, as disapproving of Tor Kot as he had been of Mil Tek.

*"I submitted my report to the council, but I suppose subsequent events meant it did not get much credence." Tor Kot looked around at the others. "Blue's agent showed significant Depletion resistance, if not outright immunity. It was difficult to scry the attack Vok Lim made but there are hints of the same. That is **not** something any of us can ignore. Even with our history we need to try! Furthermore, I have found he is recently in diplomatic talks with the rest of the continent and not many Powers negotiate."*

Mil Tek opened his mouth to say something in reply to that but a flicker of Rol Siw's cold grey eyes stopped him.

"If the Dedicateds wish to sponsor such a movement they may of course submit it to the Council. I will give it proper attention." Though he put no emphasis on any word in particular, it was obvious he actually meant it. "In the meantime, we must decide how to allocate resources to prevent the loss of any more land."

It seemed that the mage-kings hadn't forgotten me totally. I repeated everything to Iniri for Cheya's later delectation, but even I could see that there was a lot going on over there. At least nobody was talking about attacking me again, though it did amuse me that apparently Tor Kot was being blamed for Vok Lim's idiocy, at least by some. Even I could have seen that one coming.

I would really have to think about whether I should entertain any diplomacy with the mage-kings. The idea of more warfare, let alone invading the mage-kings, didn't appeal to me. Unfortunately, if I was going to deal with Depletion I'd have to go over there eventually. If I had support from the local government that would probably make things easier, but I'd seen what the mage-kings did and it was horrendous, so I wasn't comfortable playing nice with them either.

That was a worry for the future, and my current political issues seemed to be working out pretty well. Aside from Orrelin, which was isolationist anyway, everyone stayed and gathered together to sign the agreement that was the point of the summit in the first place. In a sense I no longer needed the protection as much, since I had the capability to defend myself – not to mention an additional flight of dragons to crispify anyone who wanted to annoy me – but it would still save an enormous amount of future annoyance. Of course, since I was my own nation now, I couldn't just take over other territories willy-nilly, but it wasn't like I was lacking space.

The signatures on the pages were done in a special ink that could be imbued with the magical signature of the writer. It was the same sort of thing that was used in Iniri's signet ring – and presumably everyone else's – and the ink itself changed color and character for each signature. Iniri's actually glowed, Wright's looked like it was made from mercury dribbled onto the page, and Elder Wren's looked pre-faded, as if it had been there for years instead of days.

When it came to my signature, of course Shayma had to sign. Instead of pushing her mana into it, she pushed my Presence into it, which was enough to stagger everyone around while she wrote my name. I wasn't sure exactly how the magic worked, but my name came out in enormous, printed block letters, shimmering the same colors as my core crystal and bearing weight, to judge by the way people squinted at it. There was no mistaking it was mine.

After that came a celebratory meal, which was one of the last that the Village would be providing. I was sure they were tired of all the work after five days of it, though I noticed that a lot of people had picked up extra levels in the process of preparing it all. Probably due to a combination of the hard work and the exotic ingredients supplied by Taelah and the Piping Hot Pies, but for all I knew simply preparing food for high-status people contributed. It wasn't like they hadn't benefitted, but enough was enough.

After the signing I asked Shayma to go down to tell the Scalemind about the changes I'd made to their little cavern. They weren't ready to integrate with the Village – actually, they outnumbered the Village in terms of raw numbers – so I wasn't going to transport them all up there, but I did my best to mimic

some of what the Village had. I needed to go deeper and see if I could pick up some Underneath Climates to properly house them. Their existing cavern was a little underwhelming and could use some flavor.

For the moment I just turned one wall into a quarry, with a nice flat face for blue-white marble, and stuck a Conservatory Field on it so I didn't have to worry about them digging it out. That would do for stone, and for wood I just reused one of the toughest normal trees I had, some kind of oak looking thing. They wouldn't know how to properly season it or anything, but it was a start. They got a grove of that off to the side, also under a Conservatory Field.

The total effect wasn't anything like natural, which I didn't like and which [Blue's Sagacity] suggested wasn't the best idea for making them less monstrous, but it was a temporary solution. It was obvious that trying to just shove monsters into the Akasha wasn't going anywhere. If I was going to do things, I was going to have to do them as Blue the Power, and one of the things that made me that was my non-magical knowledge. Generally I tried to avoid too much bleedover, but things were long past that being an issue.

[Blue's Sagacity] increases to 8.

I was definitely right about that. Even if I wasn't sure what exactly was going to send them over the threshold from monster to not, I found it interesting that everyone who wasn't one of mine instantly knew the Scaleminds were monsters and the Stoneborn weren't. I'd heard it described as a feeling of mana, but I had to wonder if it was a direct akashic thing, since even Classes without any explicit mana senses could tell. Then again, it seemed that at higher levels everyone could sense mana to some extent.

Actually, the most interesting thing in my pondering is that none of my people – Iniri, Shayma, or anyone from the Village – seemed to have the same issue. I was pretty sure that was due to me in some way, since I'd accepted the Scalemind as inhabitants, so something about that choice had affected mana or the akasha or something. My people were also immune to Ansa's flattening Presence, but whether that was born from the same effect or not I couldn't say. I wasn't quite sure how to experiment either, since I still didn't have the best control of my own Presence. Not compared to Shayma's invocation of it from Promise.

I had the feeling I was pushing at the actual logic – if it could be called that – underpinning the structures of the world. Obviously having a system that quantified everything, even in abstract ways, was artificial and all that data had to be assigned and generated somewhere. That somewhere seemed to be dungeons and the architects seemed to be the gods, but I couldn't access any of that even though I was a dungeon. I wasn't even sure there was much value to figuring out more than that, but it never hurt to know things.

Even if I couldn't do much with the knowledge, I had the feeling Ansa could. She'd been around a lot longer than I, and had already made a habit of digging into the universe's building blocks. Her specialty was magic rather than science but that was frankly even more impressive. Science didn't change when someone looked at it funny, and magic did.

Speaking of Ansa, she seemed to be having issues getting the other dragons to be able to see my basically-invisible mana flows. They could all see the [Contained Star], and I could tell she'd already

knocked some heads over it, but everything else was below their normal senses. That would be a problem, if I wanted them to actually earn their keep and monitor the Caldera.

“Hey Ansaë, maybe I can provide something that will help? Possibly the Phantasmal field? Or how about I link some core lattice gems and bundle them up with Primals? That might, I dunno, slow it down or something for them. Or even show them one of the Anvils. I’m sure they’ll notice that if nothing else.” For some reason Ansaë seemed surprised when I offered to help, but that was quickly replaced by a toothy smile.

“Excellent ideas, all.” She flared her Presence to get the attention of her students and wagged a claw at them. “Blue has some things that will help you acclimate to his mana,” she told them. “One of them will be unpleasant, but if you watch carefully you will learn quite a lot. The inner workings of a Power are not to be taken lightly.”

“I’ll need you to touch the core gems to one of my cores so I can link them,” I told her. *“I’ll put the stellar core in your room for the moment.”* Ansaë nodded serenely, and teleport-stepped to the top of the tower, or however that movement worked. I couldn’t quite follow it, and had to guess it was something of her own invention.

I shaped ten core lattice crystals and ten appropriate Sources into interlocking discs and attached them to chains sized for dragon necks. Some of the dragons had horn or tail or claw ornaments that would probably serve to carry them later, but for the moment pendants would have to do. Ansaë tapped each of the pendant to the core crystal to link them, then returned to the practice floor with another step.

“Take note. In thirty seconds, Blue created these pendants for you. They each hold an appropriate Primal Source, which will bind to you permanently, as well as a link to Blue’s own mana. Valuable as they are, they are not a reward. They are a tool to ensure you will *earn* favor in the future.” Ansaë flicked her claws, and the necklaces sped out to loop themselves over the proper necks. I was glad I did have Sources for everyone, though from what I knew of dragon biology it was extraordinarily unlikely I’d run into a dragon that used something like gravity or space or time Affinity.

“Thank you, Great Lady,” Syrinu and Akanesh said, almost in harmony with each other. The rest were somewhat more ragged about it. “Thank you, Blue,” they added, after Ansaë flicked the tip of her tail just once. I was pretty sure there was a great deal of dragon body language I was missing, since she seemed to be able to convey a lot with just minute movements of her head and tail.

Though the obeisance was obviously rote, after a few moments they seemed to realize the virtues of the Primal Sources. Teekenu, the glacial Affinity one, jerked as if the glacial medallion had bit him and lifted it up to stare at it. Ansaë gave them a smug look. In the meantime, I hastily raised the ceilings on the anvil area I’d made so it would fit dragon-sized people. I already had a fairly large complex for my anvils, since I had put everything in the same room to save on shielding costs, which meant I could actually fit them in with only moderate adjustments.

“Okay, ready,” I told her, and opened a portal next to them. Ansaë ushered the dragons through but didn’t follow herself. Considering how unpleasant it had been for her last time she ran into an unshielded anvil I didn’t blame her. For a moment I thought the portal itself would still be a problem but she flicked a claw, accessed her hoard, and pulled out a personal mana cage. It was made of gold

and glass and actually wasn't as well made as one I could put together. Thinking about it, I probably *should* put one together.

"*Hang on, let me make you a better one,*" I told Ansaë. Thin wires, space-filling curves, and actually mixing gold and glass in my Infusion Crystal meant that a few moments later I had a parabolic shield big enough for Ansaë to hide behind. Between the gold wiring and the gold-doped glass, which had come out a nice red color, it definitely would protect her. I popped it out in front of hers, and she snorted as she stowed the old one away.

"Showoff," she accused me.

"*Look who's talking.*" Ansaë snorted again and shifted the shield to just in front of the portal. On the other side, the dragons were gawking at the absurdity of my [Mana Diamond Anvils], dripping mana and all. It was really a great feeling to see them as slack-jawed as any yokel.

"You do not need to know what these do," Ansaë said, voice carrying through the portal. "All you need to know is that they can emit strong mana waves." Some of the dragons glanced back, then did a doubletake when they saw Ansaë behind a shield. Lorzent glanced around at the room, spotting the gold woven into the walls, and eyes his widened in horror.

"What—" he started, but Ansaë interrupted him.

"Go ahead, Blue," she said, and I triggered one of the anvils. I knew it wouldn't really injure them, and since it seemed to be more unpleasant the higher the tier, it probably wouldn't be nearly as bad for them as it had been for Ansaë. So far as I could see, she hadn't even lost a single health point to it, so it was more like getting flashbanged than anything. Not that anyone sane would volunteer to be flashbanged.

The mana ripple smashed into them, and the third-tiers cringed while the fourth-tiers staggered. The shield I made for Ansaë stopped it cold. Actually, it was more effective than the latticework that I'd run along the inside of the anvil room, though that might simply have been due to a greater concentration of gold.

"I'm going to be sick," Kesteni muttered, pressing her paw to her muzzle. I didn't even think that was possible for thaumivores. Did dragons vomit mana?

"Did any of you get an idea of how to attune your senses?" Ansaë asked, completely ignoring the dazed and nauseous looks she was getting.

"Yes, Great Lady," said Hemaryl, one of the earth Affinity dragons. Ansaë cocked her head and beckoned to him with a claw, and he gratefully left the anvil room. It was clear nobody really *wanted* to stay but it was equally clear none of them were willing to go against her wishes. Fortunately for them, she only made them stay for two more anvil cycles. Three more dragons, including Kesteni, managed to get the hang of it in that time, which seemed to me to be pretty impressive. But given that dragons were more in tune with mana than anyone else, plus they had Ansaë coaching them, maybe that was only to be expected.

After they all filed out of the anvil room, I set up a big Phantasmal Field for them to play with. I might have gone overboard on the size of it, but I was really starting to warm to the idea of having a bunch of

dragon guardians hanging around the Caldera. Even if they weren't monsters that did make me rather more typically dungeon-ish than I had been before, and part of me saw the appeal. Not that I would ever consider trading my Companions for monsters.

I left them to it while I watched the various delegations start to pack up. I was a little surprised nobody had petitioned either me or Ansaë directly, since they all knew both I and the Silver Woe were Powers, but maybe none of them had anything they thought was important enough for our direct attention. Considering that Iniri and Shayma had almost total authority to trade my stuff and if either of them had questions they could just ask me, there just wasn't anything aside from Bargains that would need my direct attention. The Silver Woe was, of course, The Silver Woe, and nobody wanted to bother her with petty concerns.

In truth I didn't even know what the end result was in terms of trade agreements. I wasn't too worried, since if the amounts people wanted got anywhere near what I could generate I could always expand, or spend more time trying to figure out conversion methods. Besides, I figured that between them, Shayma, Iniri, and Taelah would get me stuff that was interesting and useful in return. More importantly, stuff that my Companions and villagers could use.

"So, did you get any knowledge from Wright?" I asked Shayma, watching the Emperor pack up. Trying to herd a flying lion onto a giant boat proved to be amusingly involved.

"I did. Some of it is way beyond me, but other things..." Shayma shook her head. *"He put runes in the grain patterns of the metal. I never would have even thought about that. I'd have to practice to figure out how to do it, but with my [Abstract Mana Geometries] I think I have a chance at it. Other techniques just require direct metal manipulation, and I don't have that."*

"Yet! Never know what you'll get from Transcription. Speaking of, swing by once everyone's gone and I'll see if your tier-up will get me anything." I had been moderately intelligent and decided against doing a Transcription while people were still around, just on the off chance it changed something and I had to scramble to deal with it. Partly because I didn't want to accidentally hurt any diplomats and partly because I didn't want to look the fool in front of all the gathered nobility.

Iniri herself gave each of the delegations parting gifts. For Wright, it was a dozen ingots of [Sunmetal], which he took with grave thanks and a beaming smile. Nivir received some sort of voucher for a lodge in Wildwood, Kinul received some Status Sigils, made from my [Adamant Stone], and the Haerlish royal family got a breeding pair of some fox-dog thing that I'd seen a few people keep as pets. I assumed they had a pedigree.

I opened portals to get everyone home, or at least some people home. Ir and Haerlish had both come by ship, so they just sailed back out, Haerlish heading north and Ir heading south. Kinul had come along with Nivir, since the only way to get from Tarnil to Kinul was through the central country, and they got put right next to the mountain pass.

In truth I owned enough of the mountain range dividing the two countries that I was almost in Nivir anyway, and with a little bit of effort I could get all the way through. Just because I *could* didn't mean I *should*, though. Randomly opening a highway between the countries would result in all kinds of disruption and was the kind of thing that ought to be discussed first. In fact, I should have brought it up

at the summit instead of just realizing it when everything was over, but there was still time for that. Especially since Nivir and Tarnil were on far better terms now.

Uilei-nktik was the last to leave, swimming back down the canal. Of all of them, he was the one I expected to see back soon, though it was for Ansa's business and not mine. In fact, I might get a whole set of leviathans, and if I got *them* as inhabitants that would be fascinating. So far none of the inhabitant traits had unlocked anything for me *per se*, so I wasn't expecting to suddenly get a bunch of leviathan-friendly Climates, but anything that made my lakes more lively would be welcome.

Once the final guests were gone, the Village more or less came to a halt as everyone took a break. Iniri used her teleport to go soak in the hot springs. Even Shayma seemed a little fatigued. I felt bad that I hadn't realized how much work everyone was putting in. For me, fixing up the summit area and providing the sample materials had been fun and barely any work at all, plus I didn't fatigue and hadn't been worried about the actual outcome of the summit. For everyone else, even with the benefits of kinetic Affinity, it had been a long and draining week.

Shayma brought Annit and Keri to the beach house, since they had their own worries to try and escape, and while the other two swam in the lake Shayma flopped down on her bed and reached out her hand to touch my Companion Core. I triggered the Transcription process, though I wasn't expecting much considering that most of her abilities were just merged versions of things she already had.

Transcribing Companion abilities:

Transcribing [Quest]...Skill absorbed by [Tree of Eschaton].

Transcribing [Dungeon Crafting]...Skill merge with Smithery, Alchemy. New Companion Linked Area: [Companion Craft Hall]. All dungeon and manual crafting stations may be linked to the Craft Hall.

Transcribing [Form of Thought, Shape of Will]...skill merge with [Customization]. Breadth of [Customization] increased.

I stared at the transcription. The tree ate my Skill! Though maybe that wasn't true — not everything transcribed anyway, so perhaps without the tree nothing would have happened with [Quest]. The way that line was phrased, though, made it sound like the tree got the Quest ability. I looked at the plant and I could *swear* it looked smug somehow, even if it was just a tree.

"Um, Shayma? The [Tree of Eschaton] got your [Quest] Skill."

"What."

"Yeah that was my reaction too. I'm not sure what it's planning to do with it, or even if that's the right word for a tree, but there's not much I can do about it. It's probably fine?"

"I don't..." Shayma shook her head. *"I guess there's nothing we can really do about it anyway. Maybe Taelah can figure it out."* She touched the core again scanned over what she saw there. *"[Craft Hall, huh?"*

"Yeah! I'm glad that I have it all in one area."

Now that I was thinking about it, it made no sense to keep the various crafting areas separate. Alchemy would help any other type of crafting, and Shayma could forge stuff for any other type of crafting. I had

a loom to start some sort of cloth section, and I was sure it would be easy enough to get other forms of crafting in. I'd need more Companions to make full use of it, something I was loath to contemplate, but Shayma was planning on interviewing the dungeon-wives over the next few days so it wasn't totally out of the question.

"Oh, good! It'll give me an excuse to try and branch out a bit with this new Skill." Shayma waved a lazy hand in the direction of my core. "Also give you an excuse to try and make more crafting stations. You've been shirking."

"Yeah, yeah. You build an entire conference area and forge stars but it's what have you done for me lately, Blue."

"Well, what *have* you done for me lately?" Shayma grinned, and since Annit and Keri were off having fun a ways down the beach I figured I'd take advantage of it. Which meant that Shayma was rather red-faced and shaky-legged by the time she joined them an hour and a bit later, but certainly far more relaxed.

In all, I thought things had gone very well. Orrelin was the only country that had refused to play, and they weren't really any threat. I'd gotten recognition and a bunch of trade deals, and best of all I acquired a bunch of dragons who only needed a minor attitude readjustment.