

Chapter 43B: Year 2, Day 53 - Shayma

The problem was the dungeon was doing what it was supposed to.

It had taken her a while but she understood what had been lost when that great central core had ruptured. The terrible emptiness behind its actions was a loss of connection, to the gods, to other dungeons, and to the rest of the world. The Great Dungeon was missing one very important piece of what made dungeons run.

The Akasha.

She hadn't even considered something could be *outside* it before, not really. But Blue's knowledge was clearly outside it, if he'd made stellar Affinity. In truth she hadn't even really known of the Akasha's *existence* prior to Ansaе bringing it up, but in knowing, everything became clear.

Dungeons managed the Affinities, so they had some special connection to the Akasha. Divination primarily got its information *from* the Akasha, so of course the great dungeon couldn't recognize anything and found it all alien. Blue's descriptions were minimalistic, but they were *always* there, as if he had a constant divination effect active, even though there was no magic at all.

If Blue took over the dungeon, that would fix everything, since Blue wasn't damaged. Odd, a little bit scatterbrained, and with a questionable sense of humor, but not damaged. All the objections to that still applied, however, so what she needed to do was somehow bring the Great Dungeon back into the Akasha. Which was something even the gods had been unable to do, as evidenced by the fact that the dungeon was still broken.

She knew she only had a limited time to figure it out. Every moment was another one that Blue might sustain more damage, that Ansaе had to shoulder an increasingly heavy burden and defend them from an almost inexhaustible supply of blightbeasts. It was not, could not be, something easy, but even so she had no idea where to start.

「I need to try and fix this Great Dungeon,」 Shayma said to Iniri and Taelah. She'd kept them apprised at least in general terms of what was going on, even though there was nothing they could do to help aside from cheer her on. Neither Taelah nor Iniri had any expertise with anything she was dealing with, nor were they there to help. She didn't even *want* them there to help; it was absurdly, mind-bogglingly dangerous and only Ansaе's presence kept her and Blue safe.

「You've already tamed one dungeon,」 Taelah replied with both amusement and encouragement. 「I'm sure you can manage another.」

「You've always been the bridge between Blue and the rest of us,」 Iniri told her. 「This can't be too far different.」

「You're right,」 Shayma said, feeling the words of her fellow Companions resonate with her, ideas percolating while she grappled with the Great Dungeon. She appraised the almost-hunger of the Great Dungeon as it tried to pull things into its own Akasha, destroying the connections they had with the real one. So, depletion. So, blightbeasts. There was no real malice there, just a blind thing lashing out.

She had to make it see.

Now that she stood in the center of the fortress, in front of the nexus at the heart of it, she could reach out and touch it. She didn't want to convert it, and had to quash the little bit of her that could pull directly on Blue's mana to do so. It was just such a reflex that it was harder *not* to just shove Blue's massive reserves at the thing. Instead, she focused on her connection with Blue, and reflecting on that feeling tried to find where the Great Dungeon was missing the same, the profound link it had once had with the others.

"Shayma!" Blue jolted her from her reverie. *"We're running out of time!"*

"Working on it!" She called back, getting an impression of the current state of affairs from the impressions Blue pushed at her. The failing containment outside, the mounting pressure inside. Part of her wondered if this part of the connection would stay after they were done, now that it had been revealed.

As she reached back to Blue, and reached forward to the Great Dungeon, she had a thought, a feeling. She wasn't sure if it was her Skills or Class, or just fundamental intuition, but she suddenly knew how to connect them. It was still so half-formed she wasn't sure how to explain it, but she probably didn't need to.

"Blue, do you trust me?"

"Of course!"

"This may be a little weird," she warned him, and hauled on her link. Not the mana, not the Skills like [Companion Concord], but the integral connection that made Blue and her one. It was like she was trying to move the entire world on her back, but Blue went along with it, and let her gather it up and find that part of it that went out beyond either of them.

Then she took hold of the Great Dungeon. Instead of shoving Blue's mana into it, she hauled on it the same way, though it was not nearly as cooperative. She grit her teeth, both figurative and literal, head aching as she strained and tugged. She could feel her own reserves dipping, filled up by Blue and then bottoming out again as she fought against the monstrous inertia of the millennia-old dungeon. Her soul strained under the load, only the absolute nature of [Unbreakable Promise] keep it intact.

With one dungeon in each hand, she made herself the bridge.

The mage-kings had joined the severed dungeon and the rest of the world in a form of opposition, subjugating the red cores and forcing them to conform to controllers. Yet they had kept the depletion taint, because they couldn't affect the Great Dungeon, only feed it. It was the worst of both worlds.

Shayma could touch the heart of it, and what was more, could touch what a dungeon was *supposed* to have. She *was* what a dungeon was supposed to have, by virtue of her Bargain with Blue. The terrible emptiness of the damaged dungeon resonated with her link to Blue, and so she extended that link to it.

There was a whirling, falling sensation as all the strands of magic and the essence of the dungeon core wound itself around her, and with it came a question. A question not posed by the dungeon, but by reality itself, a choice of paths. No dungeon was meant to operate by itself, and as long-dormant parts of the severed dungeon woke, connected once again, Shayma had the chance to take control herself.

She didn't want to be in control. The Great Dungeons were too big and too important for her to run, be she ever so much a [Hero], and besides Blue was her first priority. Yet, she had to be *something*, because it was her very self that was restoring what had been lost. What she could be, then, was a guide. The occasional nudge here and there was not outrageous, aside from which the Great Dungeon could operate as intended, whether the gods were directly involved or not.

Link after link of something deeper than magic clicked home around her. For a moment she had a glimpse of how she thought Ansaë saw the world, with all its secrets revealed and every veil pulled back. She could sense the Great Dungeons, heavy anchors strewn about the world, as well as other things connected to the Akasha and the framework of magic. Here, bright spinning sparks deep within the planet, a crystalline core at its heart. There, a brilliant network that existed not so much in a *place* as in an *idea*, something perilously close to the Phantasmal Realm and another demonstration of the strange profundity of Blue's knowledge.

"*What the hell?*" Blue said, confused, as the link to the Great Dungeon – the Air Dungeon, she supposed – settled in alongside Blue's, and the two meshed. "*Shayma, you just got a second Status.*"

"I think I just redeemed the dungeon," she said, and paused as the Air Dungeon stopped attacking, the liminal combat space fading away. Yet even now that she'd brought it back to the fold, stopped it from creating depletion, its creatures were still lost. The Akasha those creatures had been linked to, the crippled and incomplete one that the Air Dungeon had tried to make, was gone. The thing their soul structures was tied to, the reason depletion existed, had vanished. She'd fixed the source, but she hadn't yet won.

"Ansaë, can you come here for a moment?" Shayma called out in the real world, prodding her connection to the Air Dungeon and getting the sensation of uncountable numbers of blightbeasts falling into the mindless rage that came of their dungeon core vanishing. It was something like the inverse of what happened with full depletion, the sudden shock of a sundered soul driving them berserk.

The Air Dungeon was still around of course, but it was no longer rogue, and living beings couldn't be altered as easily as artifacts. The dungeon itself would kill all its inhabitants, or they'd kill each other, unless she could intercede. "I think this might be the only safe area for what comes next."

Ansaë came swooping in, leaving behind a blazing wall silver and fire to block the blightbeasts, and halted precisely in front of the enormous cracked central core. Shayma took that as her cue, so she invoked the most unusual of Blue's fields. [Of Light and Fire Born] crackled outward as she pushed it into the Air Dungeon's link. Though her tie to the Great Dungeon wasn't like her tie to Blue's, there were some similarities and enough hints from the feel of the interaction itself that she knew she could give it the absolute best tool she had to save what could be saved.

Blinding light covered the dead core and the ancient rock that had killed it, both of them seeming to melt and vaporized, sinking and condensing into itself as it shed dross as burning vapor. In a matter of seconds it became something much smaller, only the size of a building and no larger than the secondary core she was perched on, but with the familiar star-spangled surface of a stellar core. Shayma blinked at it. She hadn't thought the Field would do *that*.

"*Isn't that...?*" Blue started.

"It is!" Shayma replied, and the core gleamed as the mana around them sparked and ignited. It started just outside the cores themselves, yards away from where Ansaë's wings beat, and then raced outward. A Field of cleansing fire expanded over the whole great volume of the Air Dungeon, every part of it burning at once.

"Now *that* is my favorite kind of sight," Ansaë said approvingly, as entire planets went to the torch. The blightbeasts went with them, but as the enormous Field continued its magic, the cleansing flames gave way again to reformed flesh and blood and bone, to bark and foliage and vine, to clean water and gleaming stone. That which was reborn shimmered and glimmered with flames and void, made into stuff of the stellar Affinity.

A bloom of solar wind restarted the great mana heart of the dungeon, in places decaying from stellar to ordinary wind as the natural Affinity of the dungeon asserted itself, but in other places whipping around newly transformed creatures and landscapes. It was Blue's own Affinity, but since Shayma had pushed the Air Dungeon into making a Stellar core and, in a way, had even given it permission to use the stuff, the new mana settled easily into the yoke. Shayma smiled as her [Skill] shivered in happy feedback.

[Quest] complete.