

## CHAPTER 151 – POBUL POSITION

“We’re getting off track,” Sam said. “I’ll make sure everybody knows to run from the big bad Black City. But I came here to ask you about Haman.”

“Right, right.” Volquist set down his mug and sighed. “This is about Raiko, correct?” For some reason, Volquist pulled out a tiny slip of paper. It looked like a prayer paper Sam had seen at a temple. People would write their prayers and burn them, hoping the gods could hear—and above all, answer—their pleas.

“It’s about all of us, but yes.”

Volquist set something on the table. It clinked solidly. As he removed his hand, Sam saw a small, flat black disc. At its center was a tiny white dot.

“This is a... thing of your past,” Volquist said sheepishly.

“A previous War Incarnate’s?”

“Yes. A man I failed.” Volquist looked away. “It is a [Seeker Stone]. It’s very old and rare magic. It will find things that are lost. Now, before you think that you can just pretend to ‘lose’ a pile of money, there are certain rules as to how it works.”

“And they are?”

“For you to find out,” Volquist said. “Seriously, I do not know all of them. All I know is that you can’t use it arbitrarily. It must have a *strong* connection.”

“I don’t have a strong connection to Haman,” Sam admitted. “I hardly knew him.”

Volquist closed Sam's hand over the [Seeker Stone]. "Yes, but you *are* close to Raiko, and it is her connection to Haman that you will use."

"It can do that?"

"Yes, provided the connection is strong enough. Either between yourself and the person, or the person and that which is lost."

Sam picked up the stone and turned it over, but before he could gaze into the black surface, Volquist covered his hand over it. "Do not use it here," he told Sam. "Typically it is restricted to a given Layer. We are, in essence, outside the Layers entirely. It will find things you are not ready for."

Frowning, Sam agreed and put it away into his pocket. "You mentioned the Layers before, and they've cropped up now and again... what are they?"

"I wondered when one of you would ask," he said with a grin, feeling much more comfortable with the current line of questioning. "It's a very complex topic. Suffice to say that for now, you are in the lowest reaches of the Shardrune. It might help to call it by another name: the Multiverse."

"Like in comics?" Sam asked.

"Something like that, yes," Volquist said with a wave of his hand as if it didn't matter. "What a lot of your comics on Earth called the Multiverse, we call Shardrunes. There are Lesser Shardrunes, Major Shardrunes, and Greater Shardrunes. At present, Il'dran—that's the name of our Shardrune—is a Lesser Shardrune, the weakest of the bunch."

Suddenly the [Seeker Stone] felt like a hot coal in Sam's hand, and not in a good way like the [Archflame]. If he could actually pull literally anything here, from across what was effectively the

Multiverse, then Sam could draw the attention of something even worse than the Black City.

He needed to be closely connected to whatever that was. And being a War Incarnate, he might just be. Even if he didn't know it.

Sam hastily put it out of his thoughts. If he didn't try, he'd probably be fine.

Probably.

“Shardrunes themselves are composed of several Worldshards, each one above a certain threshold of power. In the case of your Earth, it wasn't strong enough, but it was tethered to another that was undergoing Ascension anyway, and so it was brought along for the ride. If it hadn't been, it would have been destroyed, so it was the best of a bad situation as I understand it.”

Sam remembered the Empty attacking not only Islegard but Earth as well. His people were utterly unprepared for the slaughter.

“I can believe it,” he said.

“Yes, you acquitted yourself quite well I'm told. Quite the hero.” Volquist cleared his throat. “Back to the matter at hand. Here on Il'dran, many of the lowest Realms are shattered. Floating islands and what not. It takes less energy to reassemble Worldshards into this state, and so it's commonly the way you'll find the weakest Realms.”

“And the bottom of that is the First Layer?” Sam asked.

“Yes, very good. There is a Tower that links all the Ascension Layers together. You can't Ascend without going through the Tower. I trust you already have an Ascension Quest? Good, that'll save a lot of trouble later on. You'll want to get to the Tower as fast as possible, the first people who Ascend to the next Layer are richly rewarded for doing so, not to mention the benefit of being in front of the pack.”

Sam frowned. “What do you mean? I haven’t seen hardly anybody here! What pack?”

Volquist smiled. “I can’t tell you too much. There are limits imposed by the Shard, after all. Can’t give you equipment that isn’t proper, or hasn’t been earned, such things like that. Everything is, for the most part, in something akin to balance and has to stay that way for all parties. Or else.”

“Or else?”

“Yes, Sam. Gods are not immune to the rules of the Shard.” Volquist made an expansive gesture. “The point I’m getting at is that the Tower has a Gatekeeper. Each Floor has one. Once inside the Tower—which is an ever-shifting maze unto itself filled with all sorts of nasty things—there is a Gatekeeper.”

“And defeating the Gatekeeper allows us to go up to the next Layer,” Sam guessed. It wasn’t that unlikely, given what he’d heard up to this point. Especially for anybody who played games or read books.

“Correct!” Volquist slapped the table in excitement, rattling the cups. “But, and here’s the kicker. Each time the Gatekeeper is defeated, it respawns weaker. The first people who kill it, effectively open the way for the rest of their peoples and their names are immortalized on a tablet that sits outside the Tower. As you can guess, there are only so many times this can be done and when a new Worldshard is inducted into the Shadrune, it’s a wild time for all.

“Mortals have the highest chance of attaining Empyrean status, allowing them to become gods themselves and even beyond in cases such as yours and Raiko’s. Gods have the most to gain or lose because there are countless new souls to convert to our faiths, and the list goes on. This is a great time and perhaps a horrible time all at once, but it is a time of Change no matter how you look at it.”

“I would have figured gods would be against change,” Sam said, taking a final sip from his latte. “Being gods and all, you’d think most of you lot would be happy without anybody else getting above you, as it were.”

“That’s why it’s so exciting,” Volquist said. Sam could see the gleam in his starlit eyes. “Normally that’s the case. The status quo, but at a time like this, even the Golden Pantheon can be toppled, and they are at the top of the heap, make no mistake. The risk is great, but the rewards more than make up for it.”

“Okay,” Sam said, setting the cup down and leaning back in his chair. “So Islegard and presumably Earth have been turned into fractured floating hunks of land—”

“Almost right. It’s not just Earth and Islegard, but many other lands as well. Everything gets jumbled up when new Worldshards appear, Sam. New Layers are made. Old First Layers become something else, and so on. Everything changes, else the Tower would be easily ascended. Places from Earth and Islegard that meet certain criteria are sent to different Layers. You are presently on the First Layer.”

“The weakest Layer.”

“Yep. And that means it has the weakest people, the weakest monsters, the easiest and least deadly environments, so on and so forth. You’ll find people already on the Second Layer. Some will likely be from other Worldshards that were part of Il’dran before your induction. The higher you climb, the more you’ll be exposed to the other Worldshards that make up the Shardrune of Il’dran. There are whole cities, nations, and populations that number in the *trillions*, in higher Layers, Sam.”

That was a pain to wrap his head around.

Volquist seemed to sense this and tried a different tactic. “Okay, think of it like the ocean. You like the ocean, right?”

Sam just gave him a sour look.

“Think of how big the ocean was on your Worldshard. Now imagine you’re standing in a bucket of water at the edge of the ocean. *That* is the First Layer, Sam. You’re pretty much quarantined from the rest of Il’dran.” Volquist shook his head. “The very universe itself will open up to you in time. The vastness of it I cannot fully impress upon you in your current state. I mean no offense, you simply lack the faculties to fully understand it. But you will. If you survive.”

Sam felt his way forward, trying to keep everything straight. “How many Layers are there?”

“Can’t tell you.”

“All right,” Sam said slowly, “how about this: Can we travel to lower Layers after we’ve climbed to the next?”

“Yes, but it’s ill-advised.”

“Why?”

“It has to do with the mana of that Layer,” Volquist told him.

“There is, unfortunately, no analogy that I can think that does it justice. Right now, your subsisting off First Layer mana, the weakest and undoubtedly least dense of all. You’re Copper now, so you’ll eventually be able to feel the density and realize that it’s almost like air.”

That made sense and aligned with everything Sam had learned so far. “And the Second Layer has denser mana.”

“Right you are, but what do you think happens when you get used to denser mana, and start needing it simply to survive? Take that a step further and imagine what it would be like to then travel to the First Layer, where the mana is thinner and less useful to you.”

“I imagine I’d be weaker,” Sam said.

“Weaker, yes, but also struggling to use your abilities and strengths that you have grown accustomed to. Just like if you went to the Second Layer too soon, where you would feel crushed and burned by the mana there. You would be stronger, temporarily, until the Second Layer mana within your body was expended—and I don’t mean your MP—then you would be even weaker than the denizens of the First Layer.

“Do you have any idea how many would-be warlords have Ascended only to be killed by the peons they thought to rule over like a god? Too many to count. Once you’re used to that Layer’s mana, going below is risky, bordering on suicidal. The people there are already used to it, and you’d have to readjust everything, which is neither pleasant nor fast.”

To Sam, that suggested that there was a window of time after Ascending that it was relatively safe to go below, and he said as much.

“Good eye,” Volquist said with a smirk. “You’ve found a loophole. Granted, it’s one generally only used by those same tyrants that have more brains in them, but the problem would be that you’d never get stronger. Eventually *somebody* would be on the same or similar level of power to you, and then you’ll be dethroned.”

Sam couldn’t see any reason to stay on any one Layer forever, especially if you could keep leveling up and Ascending to higher Layers where, presumably, it was easier to level up due to the stronger monsters and higher mana density.

But there was one thing that was bugging him. The Skyshards.  
“What about our homes?”

“You take them with you.”

Sam laughed. “What? The whole thing?”

Volquist looked confused. “Why not?”

“How could they ever fit inside the Tower?” Sam asked. “And where would the threat be then if you could explore the inside of the Tower with your entire Skyshard and an army at your disposal with all its defenses in place?”

There was a moment of silence before Volquist realized what Sam was getting at. For a moment, Sam swore he looked... concerned. Odd.

All smiles, Volquist tapped the side of his nose conspiratorially and said, “You dock the Skyshard on the outside of the Tower. When you Ascend, the Skyshard and all its inhabitants are brought up with you. Your Kingdom will continue to grow, Sam. From the bottom up, as it were. But you’ll need to tackle the *inside* of the Tower by yourself.”