

# CHAPTER 4:

## WAR

Sam found himself irrationally angry. Something attacking a Shard seemed profane. Utterly wrong. It was like watching somebody kick a puppy.

He had no idea where the feeling came from, but it boiled his blood and lent him new strength to scour the surrounding Empty. Ruby lightning arced out from the wild sweeping swings of the [Shatterblade] obliterating any Empty that dared get close.

**Islegard Ascension: 64%**

The Shard Gorger shuddered from the impact. With tentacles the size and length of subway trains, it reached back toward the Shard. From Sam's vantage point, he could see the horror within the broken moon-like shell staring right at him.

A single baleful, squid-like eye opened, regarding Sam and all others like the lowly insects they must have appeared to be.

Sam took that personally.

Exposed to the light of the Shard, the tentacles burned and sizzled, emitting a noisome black smoke with glittering embers.

Streamers of silver and black, eye-wrenching purple, and golden energy roiled across the gorger's surface, pushing back the blue light of the Shard like a protective veil.

*I know a boss monster when I see one*, he thought, twisting and launching himself without another thought at the creature.

He soared through the darkness. Even though he had put everything into that leap, he was surprised at the distance he got. And yet, he knew it still wouldn't be enough.

The edge of the floating islands of stone that surrounded the Shard suddenly ran out, and he was reminded of the old adage "look before you leap" and realized that, quite literally, he had ignored it.

"Got any more potions for me?" Sam asked without much hope.

Komachi, on his back, fiddled around and tossed the empty sack away. "Used 'em all," she grumbled.

"Thought so."

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The flow of combat immediately shifted as Raiko felt the spiritual pressure of the [Shard Gorgers'] appearance and the painful cry of the Shard.

After wandering across realms for so long, Islegard was the one place she called home. She didn't like to get tethered to any one place, and yet Islegard was the exception. This was a world that could grow stronger alongside Raiko.

Willing to meet any challenge, she risked otherworldly reprisal to fight for its survival, even if that meant needing unfamiliar allies. Solo leveling had been more Raiko's forte.

A typhoon ripped into the Empty, Raiko's katanas brutally carved a mana rift through every monster in her way. That line of light formed one long glyph, which then shattered and erupted into exploding glyphs that cascaded through the monsters.

What more could she have done if her ninjutsu was specialized for enhancement rather than destruction?

Dozens upon dozens of the horrendous things that defied life and sanity were erased from existence. With the nearby area clear, she searched for that shockingly strong human.

Never in her wildest dreams had she thought she would find another Incarnate like herself, much less that he would not only match but exceed her ferocity.

He lacked the refinement, skill, and more importantly, the style she possessed, but Raiko could not help but feel a spike of curiosity and concern for what his future held.

If they survived.

### **Islegard Ascension: 68%**

Sam had turned out to be a far greater ally than she ever hoped for. When he broke out of “containment” to go fight, she had told her closest allies to do their best to support him but not to get in his way.

They could have dragged him back to safety, but what would be the point? That would only hamstring one of two of their most powerful allies. And considering his severe lack of experience with a high-level body, Raiko was impressed with the progress he was making.

*A few years of training and you might actually be a threat,* she mused to herself before drawing her katana and etching a sigil on the ground.

Her Soul Companion, Hama, dropped a key into her waiting hand and then hid back beneath her hat. She knew he didn't like being out of the battle, but with Komachi gone and Sam no longer needing any looking after, she wanted him rested up for when things went bad.

And by the looks of things... they were heading from bad to worse.

“Raiko!” Elsin cried, pushing through the ring of protective knights. “That crazed man you brought just *jumped* toward the Shard’s heart! I know you didn’t want us to interfere, but he’ll never make that distance. And with the Apocalypse mana rolling off the [Shard Gorger], anybody who tries to help him will be dead before they can do any good.”

Raiko stopped the creation of the glyph by sheathing her glowing katana. She pinched the bridge of her nose in frustration, and thought about what to do.

The key rose and fell as she tossed, palmed it, then tossed it again. Her thoughts rising and falling with the key.

No matter what, Raiko wanted to level up with Sam in the new world. She kept circling back to that surprising desire.

“Thank you, Lord Elsin.” Raiko stiffly bowed. “I intended to fight alongside you and the Phoenix Knights until the end, but it would seem the Shard has other plans.”

Elsin waved away her formality. “We will hold the line here,” he said. “You have done enough for my family, Sage Raiko. If I do not see you again before we are reborn, know that it was my honor to fight alongside you this day. Bright days, Raiko.”

“Bright days,” she replied in turn.

Lord Elsin spun about rattling off commands to form up new battle lines now that Raiko could not anchor them.

“Well, Haman, looks like our fates might be more intertwined than I thought.”

The pobul chirruped softly beneath her hat.

Tossing the key into the air, Raiko sliced it in half with a flick of her katana. The latent energies within ballooned out.

Left unchecked, they would create spatial anomalies, but Raiko had no intention of allowing that. Drawing a complex glyph, she speared the blossoming energy and, even to the advanced perception of those over level 100, disappeared.

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Just as Sam's forward momentum began to shift downward, something snared his wrist and dragged him away from the icy dark fate below.

Following the hand gripping him, Sam was surprised to see Raiko rolling her eyes at him. They were flying so fast that a faint blue haze surrounded them. Looking back, Sam noticed the fighting and surrounding islands had taken on a red hue.

Within moments they landed on the [Shard Gorger's] back. The aura of powerful mana assaulted the both of them and met resistance in the form of a stream of blue energy streaking off of the great Shard itself.

So close to the Shard, Sam felt an overwhelming presence of peace and tranquility. But he didn't have long to enjoy it. The Gorger's tentacles wrapped around the Shard, cracking it further.

At this distance, the sound was deafening. And the cries of pain from the Shard itself drowned out all thought.

Sam and Raiko staggered on the strangely sterile surface of the gorger. A black, inky tentacle lashed across its surface, cracking the exterior of the small moon's surface like an egg.

It was impossible to hear anything, but Raiko made a few motions and Sam got the gist of her plan.

Once more, they divided their forces with Raiko moving to the nearest tentacle and Sam looking for a weak spot that didn't involve him going toward that baleful eye and the countless tentacles where the creature's mouth was.

Finding a sizeable crack wasn't difficult.

What *was* difficult was the constant assault by the strangely colored energy. Sam could only guess it was some sort of mana, the same sort that Raiko had spoken about.

It blackened his skin wherever it touched him, seared his eyes and lungs, and generally felt like his body was rotting away.

Only by fully opening himself could he manage to push it back.

Sam didn't know how he did it. But it felt like he was mixing his own mana with the overwhelming strength of the Shard's and using that to dilute the wild necrotic energy of the Gorger.

*Still hurts like a bitch though*, Sam thought, gritting his teeth, and raising his [Shatterblade] high.

Activating [Raze] once more since the trip over seemed to deactivate it, Sam slammed the blade into the ground between his feet with all his Level 199 might.

The crack widened into a fissure. The ground shuddered violently beneath him.

More of that noisome mana leaked out of the wound, but Sam didn't let that stop him. He raised the blade high again and brought it down with all the fury he could bring to bear.

**Islegard Ascension: 74%**

A tentacle slammed down beside him, but before its oily and barbed surface could sweep toward him, Raiko was there severing the minivan-thick appendage.

Her little helper appeared beside her, opening a door with one of those magical keys of his, and let loose a torrent of lava across the bleeding stump.

Sam fell into a rhythm, like when he was stocking cans and boxes late at night and the assistant manager left him to do his work in peace instead of micromanaging.

Though in this situation, more than Sam's measly paycheck was in the balance. Countless lives were at stake, and Sam was fairly sure there were many more people who weren't strong enough to fight that were hiding somewhere else.

Were they praying that their home would survive, or were they oblivious to the danger?

### Islegard Ascension: 79%

Hacking and hewing, Sam managed to carve a hole deep enough to drive a car through. Every bone-like piece of the creature's shell he broke off evaporated into tiny motes that filtered away toward the Shard.

Considering how few of those pieces he broke off, he could only imagine that Raiko was carving up the gorger's infinite tentacles, fueling the Shard's Ascension, while Sam was stuck in a hole that he was no longer sure he could climb out of.

The Shard was just visible at the top of the hole, and the state of it filled Sam with dread.

The thing didn't so much as leak that blue energy, but stream it out in great gouts of cosmic wind. Pieces the size of continents were missing, and wild energy struck out like azure lightning.

*We're so close!* Sam thought. *Don't let it end like this.*

The deeper he went into the creature's shell, the more powerful its corrupting energy became, which put more strain on Sam to resist it. More than half of his attention had to be on keeping the corruption at bay, but he could already see black veins standing out on his forearms.

## Islegard Ascension: 81%

Komachi was doing what she could, erecting a small bubble around them that filtered out the worst, but she was clearly struggling to maintain even that meager defense.

Then Sam saw it.

Within the crack below, something was glowing a fierce ruby-red. It pulsed with a nauseatingly wet sound. He had finally broken through the shell.

*One more crack should do it*, he thought, raising his worn [Shatterblade] high.

And just as he snapped the blade down, all of his tired and aching muscles working in concert, a streak of black lightning struck the tip of the [Shatterblade].

Sam had a moment of precognitive clarity. The [Shatterblade's] crystalline protrusions had turned black as obsidian and the entire thing was about to violently explode.

He still had time to throw down the weapon and leap out of the hole, at least far enough away from the blast radius to escape immediate death... but what would be the point?

Stubborn to the end, Sam refused to let it end like that.

Hardly aware of what he was doing, Sam funneled every last drop of his mana into the [Shatterblade], fighting with the destructive black lightning that surged and overloaded it.

*Just a few seconds, that's all I need!*

Diverting so much mana, however, had dire consequences for the corruption assaulting him.

Even as Sam drew his weapon down, reversed his grip, and stabbed into the fissure at his feet, he saw his arms withering away by layers.



It didn't even hurt anymore.

Sam sank to his knees, driving the [Shatterblade] up to the hilt into the creature's exposed body. There was a dull, hollow *THUMP*, and everything went dark.

He had just enough awareness to think, *Huh. I guess we lost.*

As last thoughts went, it wasn't great.