

CHAPTER 2:

THE LEGENDARY SWORD

“What the hell is going on!?” Sam bellowed, getting shakily to his feet.

“Proving your strength,” the samurai explained simply, smirking. “Look closely at your weapon.”

Sam glanced at the oversized weapon. It looked like something out of a video game. No way anybody in real life could swing something like that without it being made of foam.

And yet... Sam realized with a start that it was light as a feather despite being nearly seven feet long and over two feet wide.

The blade was marred with sharp crystalline growths that resembled one of those brutal ancient macahuitls with obsidian shards.

“I *am* looking at it,” Sam said. “Aside from looking *sick as fuck*, what exactly am I—” Then he saw it.

[Shatterblade]

(Colossal Weapon) (S-Class)

(Masterwork) (★★★★ Legendary)

Enhancements

[Level Sync]

A massive weapon once wielded by an Incarnate of War to end countless bloody conflicts. Long years of dormancy have done little to weaken its strength. Few can lift it, and those that do are largely unable to tap into its substantial power without being chosen by the blade itself.

[Raze]: An unconventional aura that allows the wielder to activate the Shatterblade's unique mana signature, significantly enhancing its ability to deal damage to (Unlife) creatures and inanimate structures alike at the cost of dealing less damage to living creatures.

Requirement: Soul Affinity: War (F-Class) or higher.

[Soulrend]: You do not possess the required Soul Affinity to view this ability.

Requirement: Soul Affinity: War (E-Class) or higher.

[Endcaller]: You do not possess the required Soul Affinity to view this ability.

Requirement: Soul Affinity: War (D-Class) or higher.

You do not possess the required Soul Affinity to view further abilities.

Sam's head hurt from more than just smacking it into the ground. He didn't do anything so idiotic as swiping at the text or trying to make it disappear.

He accepted it like every other insane and weird thing that had happened. What other choice was there? Denial was useless, and if he truly doubted his senses, then he might as well be locked up in an asylum.

Swinging the blade around, Sam's headache subsided, and he found out something... interesting.

He *knew* the [Shatterblade], understood it in a way that was alarmingly similar to his own hand. He flexed his arm and focused on the herculean blade in his hand.

The fact that he was holding the massive thing in just one hand was beyond belief. Focusing on the [Shatterblade] once more, Sam brought up the description again.

[Raze], huh? Let's just see what you do, Sam thought, triggering the ability.

It was quite a lot like lifting his hand. He just *knew* how it worked and, amazingly enough, it did.

A flaring ruby-red aura of jagged lightning surged all around him, lifting his hair and drying it almost instantly as sheet lightning created a blinding glare around Sam.

He felt the [Shatterblade] change. The crystalline growths turned red as frozen blood and he knew that he was using [Raze] at the moment.

Sam didn't bother to ask, "how did I do that?"

He *knew*.

The madwoman smiled sharply at him. "So my last gambit has indeed panned out. This won't be easy, but there are no gods willing to protect our worlds. Just us."

Pointing with the wide tip of the [Shatterblade], Sam nodded at the images of his home. Of Hawai'i. He didn't like what he saw. More purple-green cracks appeared in the sky. Creatures straight out of nightmare were surging out of the boiling ocean. "Take me back there."

He didn't know if he could do anything, but he knew that his friends, his *family*, were in trouble.

"You can fight them at their source," she told him. "The battle of Shard's End is raging within the core of Islegard. If we're victorious, we'll not just survive, but Ascend. And so will those you care about. That's a lot to trust on words alone, but Quests don't lie."

New Quest: Battle of Shard's End

While undergoing Ascension, Islegard has been assaulted by otherworldly creatures bent on its destruction during the Shard's weakest moment. Defend Islegard's Shard long enough for its Ascension to complete and your Worldshard of Earth-17 will be uplifted as well. Should Islegard fall, so too will your home.

Sam stared at the words that burned in the air like golden lines of light. "You've got to be kidding me. What does it mean by uplift? I'm just going to straight-up ignore that Earth-17 bit."

"Ascend into a system of stats, levels, and mana. To live without magic is a pitiful existence, and you would usher in a new age of evolution for your kind. One where immortality is achievable, and powers are endless."

She unsheathed a katana in a flash, ran a hand covered in glowing blue liquid across the blade, and carved a portal to another plane into the air.

Within the portal's glowing light, Sam saw elves, dwarves, and fantasy races of all kinds fighting monsters across a ruined landscape.

"You can either turn your back on Islegard and join the futile fight against the Empty monsters on Earth. Or fight the Empty at their source," she glanced at him sharply. "They are spreading to Earth to stop your kind from interfering and consuming your world at the

same time. If you turn your back on Islegard and let it fall, your home will soon follow. Either we stand together or fall separately. The choice is yours, Sam.”

Sam stared at the chaos breaking out over his home. The aloha spirit couldn't stand up to those things. There was no peace or understanding to be had.

How well would those things stand up against missiles? They were tearing through cars like they were tissue paper. The streets were being plowed with a swipe of some crazed monster's claws.

When the police arrived, would they even be able to do anything?

With one last glance at the [Shatterblade], Sam turned to the woman. “These Empty, they're not alive, I'm assuming?”

“It's a relief you're not a gibbering idiot,” she said frankly.

“Mahalo,” Sam said sarcastically. “I'll take that as a 'yes' then. So that's why you needed me, for this.” He hefted up the [Shatterblade]. Red lightning sliced off into the darkness.

“War is... uniquely tuned to fighting them,” she admitted, bowing her head. The straw hat shadowed her face. “Wielding an Incarnate artifact, you are immensely empowered. But it is a temporary thing, bolstered by this Ascension rite. And while I am of a vastly higher level than you, there are only so many artifacts I can steal from the gods and wield myself. One Incarnate isn't enough. We need two to draw their fire. This isn't all on your shoulders, but all the same, you're the key.”

Sam chuckled and ground the tip of the [Shatterblade] into the ground. “No pressure, hey?”

“Once this is done, if we're successful, you'll be thrown into an entirely new world. Both of us will start from Level One. In fact, so will anyone you know from Earth.” Pausing, she gave him a contemplating look. “Perhaps the two of us will adventure together.

From all that I have seen, and I do not mean to speak out of turn, your life will finally be your own to live. Your progression and your levels will be your own doing.”

Sam’s eyes lit up. He could think of quite a few people from Earth that needed a hard reset. How different would life be if his ability to progress and survive wasn’t based on which country he was born in or how much money his family had?

“So what you’re saying is,” Sam said, “everybody I ever met will be reduced to the same level and they’ll have to level up on their own?”

After a moment of thinking, Sam added, “Even Steve from Jamba Juice, who made fun of me when I was 14 and didn’t have the money for a smoothie I thought he was offering for free?”

“Most certainly, yes,” she confirmed with dark satisfaction and an even more ominous grin. “Nothing will hold an Incarnate like you back any longer.”

It sounded... fair. Everybody will start from a level playing field.

You couldn’t ask for more than that.

His cat meowed.

“Her... too,” she said reluctantly.

Sam pointed at Komachi. “Don’t think I’ve forgotten about you speaking, young lady,” he said sternly. “We’re going to *talk* once this is over.” To the woman he said, “First, I’ll need a name out of you. I can’t keep calling you ‘madwoman’ or ‘miss needs to touch grass cosplay nerd’ in my head. Besides, you already know mine.”

“I touched plenty of grass outside your domicile at night. My name is Raiko.”

Sam stared. “That’s what we call an ‘inside thought’,” he told her. “We keep those inside our heads.”

“Is it? The face you’re making is funny.”

“Well, I’d say it was nice to meet you, but really, it’s not. I would have been a lot happier in my old life... but then again, I guess I would have been down there and probably running for my life about now.” Sam hiked a thumb toward the portal. “This the way to the battle?”

He couldn’t explain it, but he felt almost... eager to try out this new toy sword of his. Sam couldn’t make heads nor tails of what was truly going on, and in the grand scheme of things, it didn’t matter.

Focus on what’s right in front of you, he told himself. The rest will sort itself out.

“Happier?” She shook her head, kneeling and handing magical supplies to, of all things, his cat. “You’re meant for this path and more.”

“So you say.” Sam gave another test swing of the [Shatterblade] and tried out a basic two-handed stance that would have made his HEMA couch swell with pride.

[Raiko (LVL199 Sage)] invites you to her Party.

Do you accept? Yes / No

Sam blinked at the glowing text. “Yes?”

The [Shatterblade] flashed with light and the next thing Sam knew, he was on his knees, clinging desperately to the blade, his heart making a valiant attempt to beat its way out of his chest.

You are now under the effect of [Level Sync (Shatterblade)].

Your Level has been temporarily adjusted to the highest of member of your party (LVL199).

“Survive this,” Raiko pleaded, watching him intently. “More than just me needs you.”

The ground beneath Sam's feet cracked and cratered as if he suddenly weighed so much that he affected the local gravity. Everything burned like magma surged in his veins.

And yet it was intoxicating. He found himself pushing through the pain, thriving off the agony as his body was remade. Muscles that were only there out of the grace of genetics were suddenly comically large.

Had he been wearing anything other than a pair of colorful, and thankfully *loose*, board shorts, he would have ripped through them like a tanned version of the Hulk.

His heartbeat came under control with a force of will, but he couldn't seem to get a handle on his body. His fingers moved so fast as he wriggled them that the air crackled.

Sam intended to simply rise to his feet, but his legs acted like rockets and instead he surged through the air high above the tiny crystalline island. "*Whoa—oh shit!*"

Flailing his arms to stay upright, Sam was surprised when the shocked madwoman—Raiko—just started to laugh instead of moving to help him.

"Oh good, you didn't die from the strain," Raiko said, completely lit up. "Now you're fit to battle the end of worlds! Strength, Vigor, Insight, all the many stats leveled temporarily to 199. Though none of the Skills. Little wonder the gods wanted to keep that treasure sealed away."

He landed in the crater, deepening it and sending several thick cracks out into the platform, with no feeling of pain or even discomfort.

It was like his body was made of steel.

Curious, Sam grabbed a chunk of crystal and squeezed. His sapphire-blue eyes lit up with childish delight.

“Now I could get used to *this*,” he said with a grin as the grains of sparkling sand trickled out of his fist.

Stretching and moving as slowly as he could, Sam tried to get used to this new beefy body. He felt like a literal tank turned into a man of flesh and blood.

Komachi scrambled up his back and leapt atop his head, bandoliers lined with colorful potions strapped to her furry body.

“Are you sure it’s safe for her to come with?” Sam asked, reaching up with exceptional care to pet Komachi’s furry head. The last thing he wanted to do was accidentally hurt her.

“If she’s not safe with us, then she’s not safe anywhere. Our odds are better with your...” Raiko quirked a dark brow as if a common house cat was an oddity. “Your spirit beast.”

“My what?”

“We’re out of time,” Raiko said, motioning to the portal. “I’ll answer all your burning questions after the Ascension.”

Unwilling to allow any possibility of leaving him behind, she grabbed his arm and leapt through, pulling them both into the portal.

As the portal snapped shut, the cracks that spidered out from the crater began to widen with the sound of a calving iceberg. A moment later, the entire platform shattered, leaving a wash of sparkling motes in its wake.

High above, concealed in a cloak of stardust and darkness, a figure revealed itself. It hung in the air, lounging with fingers laced behind its head.

Red gleaming eyes shone fiercely behind its mask of calm repose. “I thought they’d never leave,” Apostos said with a shake of his head.

For just a moment, he thought the new Incarnate would notice him, but he was just as blind as that thief.

“Two Incarnates on one Shard?” mused the descending man. He floated through the nebulae of sparkling motes that used to be the platform the two occupied. “The Triumvirate won’t like *that*. Maybe I should tell them?” He seemed to truly give this some thought before saying, “Nah. It’ll be much more *fun* this way.”

It only took Apostos a few minutes to locate his prize. A crystalline fragment filled with roiling darkness.

Apostos held it in his claw-gauntlet and beheld the tremendous power that had been left behind. The [Shatterblade] was more than a weapon of tremendous power.

Its primary purpose had been to seal away something that even the Triumvirate would rather keep buried and hidden.

Cackling to himself, Apostos cradled his greatest prize of all. When the giddiness had faded, and his precious trinket secured on his person, he turned to leave.

The gateway he had conjured hung a few feet away from him, looking out onto his throne room where he could properly watch the festivities of a Shard’s end.

But he couldn’t step through. “Blast and bother!” he growled. “This is going to give me indigestion for a *month*.”

With a wave of his hand, the gateway shut, and another appeared. The sounds of thousands of heroes dying echoed out of the gateway.

Even though the two Incarnates had no idea what they had done, they had, nevertheless, aided him. Apostos was therefore compelled to return the favor.

A tiny black bolt of Netherene shot from his finger, followed promptly by another. He blew on his fingertip as if it was a gun, mock-holstered it, and grumbled behind his mask, “Don’t say I didn’t ever give ya anything.”

With a snap of his fingers, Apostos vanished once more.