

## CHAPTER 163 – DULLAHAN DOWN

Judging by the acrid scent on the wind, Sam guessed that the fire hadn't died down. In fact, from the broken hillside, he could see several columns of thick black smoke billowing and trailing behind the Skyshard.

It was an odd experience.

Normally, if there was a fire burning somewhere, it was beholden to the wind and its choice of fuel to burn.

The Skyshard, however, was moving, and so the smoke trailed at an odd angle and shifted side to side occasionally as the winds took it.

At least it hadn't gotten very far.

Sam patted the dullahan thankfully on the side. "Thanks for coming for us."

The dullahan made a gesture with its oversized gauntlets.

Sam looked at Raiko for a translation.

"Roughly means: always, family. Such as, always will be here for you," she said gently.

Almost on instinct, Sam made a fist, extended thumb and pinky, and made the iconic shaka sign. He was about to have Raiko explain it to the dullahan when the big guy made another gesture, followed by the same gesture repeated.

Raiko's expression darkened.

Sam looked curiously at her.

"He is asking for help. He's... scared."

“Don’t worry,” Sam told him. “Take us to the others. We’ll sort this out.”

Inwardly, Sam wondered what fresh hell awaited them. A glance skyward told him that the Black City was no farther away than before. Perhaps even a little closer, he wasn’t sure.

*What’s taking so long to get that Mana Engine up and running?*  
They had the [Spirit Lantern] and, by extension, the expertise and knowledge of all the professors that had created the damned thing. How were they still being hounded?

The dullahan made a bodily motion almost like a blend between bowing and nodding. The dullahan stiffly turned and limped towards the burning [Forest Tile]. Sparks flashed off one of his knees as the metal in the joint clashed.

Through the screen of smoke, Sam saw that the [Forest Tile] soon gave way to an interior [Cinderwood Tile]. “Oh, that’s not good.”

“The Tile transformed? That’s interesting,” Raiko admitted, watching the [Cinderblood Treants] wander aimlessly about the place.

None of them were aggressive to Sam and his company. In fact, the monsters kept their space. He actually saw a regular Treant encroach upon their territory, and a duo of Cinderbloods mercilessly beat it down with flaming branches.

Struggling for an idea of what to do next, Sam watched with idle curiosity as the beaten Treant arose as a Cinderblood Treant.

“It’s like a really awesome kind of zombification,” Sam said, enthralled by the sight.

The burning perimeter of the [Cinderwood Tile] expanded just a little bit more, the edge shifting in color and style.

“The dullahans might melt!” Komachi wailed and tucked herself deeper into Sam’s armor. He, however, took her out and handed her to Raiko to put into her hat where it was safer.

“No, they won’t,” Sam consoled her. “Wood fires burn less than 2,000 degrees Fahrenheit. Iron melts much higher than that. They are at least iron, that much I’m sure of.”

What Sam didn’t say is that he had no idea how he knew that, and furthermore didn’t know if [Ironwood] burned the same as normal wood fires did.

He decided to keep that to himself for now.

For a moment, Raiko’s hat turned transparent. Komachi was gloomily curled up amongst pillows, carpets, and treats.

Her hat was tricked out specifically for a soul aeder.

A pang of guilt snuck through. He had entirely forgotten about Haman, yet again. Admittedly, so much had been going on. He didn’t have much time to talk to Raiko about the [Seeker Stone].

As usual, things seemed to trip along merrily from one crisis to the next. And now wasn’t the best time to bring it up.

“Raiko, could you take Komachi somewhere safe? I’ll see to the dullahans.”

“Are you sure?” She glanced at the dullahan with concern. “This hat is much like my scarf. Extremely durable against damage.”

*And the mandys. Man, I hope they aren’t burning. And whatever that crystalline thing was.*

Sam looked over at her. “If you think she’ll be okay. I’m more concerned with the smoke than the heat at the moment.”

“That’s a good point.”

For some reason, the smoke hardly bothered Sam. Whether it was his high Vigor or the fact he had Fire affinity, he didn't know, but he was glad for it all the same. "Seriously," Sam told her, "I can put this out easily."

Sam extended a hand where the fires were creeping toward the rest of the [Forest Tile] and reached into the flames themselves. He closed his fist and a line of flames suddenly winked out.

"Alright Sam," she said. "I'm confident in your abilities to rescue them."

Raiko quickly reassured the dullahan and left with Komachi. He heard their dwindling conversation and Raiko's voice turned soothing. She seemed to be comforting Komachi, and that made him feel rather good.

The Cinderbloods looked over at him curiously. He had no idea if they understood him, but he spoke to them, anyway. "Do not let it spread. Keep the flames here. This is your home, you should protect it but do not spread the flames." And then, because Sam had grown up to value politeness—since he received so little of it—he felt compelled to add, "Please."

They stared for a while, and then abruptly went into motion, as if they had to take some time to process what he communicated to them. So many of them moving at once, the Cinderbloods caused the ground to quake.

With that settled, Sam dove into the flames alongside the dullahan stomping ahead at his side.

*What have I just done?* The idle thought bounced around his head, but he didn't give it much attention. He had to make sure the mandragoras were safe, and Chompers.

Sam had no idea what temperature a mimic burned, but if it was really made out of wood, it would need to be protected from the flames.

What opposition remained was either actively fleeing, being converted, or in the process of burning to death, so Sam left them to it and picked up the pace. They headed toward the pit where the dullahans had gathered earlier.

With a swipe of his hand, and a little Void mana, the flames were snuffed out. The Cinderbloods looked mildly annoyed at this, but seeing who the culprit was, they decided to let it pass.

Sam still didn't know what to make of the creatures, but there was a sort of kinship between them that was vaguely reminiscent of his connection to Komachi.

It seemed, amongst the Cinderbloods, Sam was the boss here.

Dutiful as always, the dullahans had remained right where he left them. With no further enemies to face, they didn't look any worse off, but those that remained had been in rough shape to begin with.

Sam sighed at the sight of them, but a tiny kernel of hope bloomed in his heart because he knew he could repair them. Not just maintain them, but actually forge new arms and limbs for those missing them.

Maybe, with Raiko's help, he could reforge the dullahans anew, or even create new ones. At the very least, he hoped to revive the ones that had fallen. Not just here—though he hoped they had not been too badly damaged—but before he arrived.

The demon armies had done a number on the dullahans, and their shattered armor still littered parts of the Skyshard.

Sam hurried to the most severely wounded, trying to ease their concerns, and hoping there was something left to ease.

Two weren't moving, and the one left standing lost his arm. He couldn't see his face, considering the armor was headless, but for some reason Sam could sense overwhelming determination in that dullahan.

He refused to go down, no matter what. He still held his greatsword ready, with the one arm he had left.

At the dullahan's feet was Chompers, idly licking a burning flower. Not a flower that was on fire, but a *burning flower*. Its petals were made of flame, and it seemed quite content to continue burning.

Chompers, meanwhile, looked up expectantly at Sam. Insofar as a mimic can look without eyes. Regardless, Sam could feel the creature's stare coming from the vicinity of its brass keyhole.

As it turned out, mimics were relatively immune to fire. And Chompers had clearly taken a liking to this one dullahan.

Sam patted its lid affectionately, noting just how hot it was. "Good boy, Chompers. Keep close."

The mimic raised up on dozens of chonky corgi paws. Doing a complicated little dance, the mimic managed to turn about to watch Sam as he went deeper into the pit.

Pressing a hand gently to each of the dullahans in turn, he found that he could tell they were all alive. The two unmoving ones were... the closest approximation was unconscious that Sam could think of. It was closer to a state of suspension, but his human dictionary struggled to provide a proper word for what they truly were.

"All right," Sam said with forced bravado, at the heartbreaking sight. "You." He pointed at the only whole dullahan. "Help the other two out of here. I'll clear a path." He turned to the one-armed dullahan. "And you, I want you guarding the mandragoras, okay? They'll need to climb onto you and inside your armor to stay safe from the heat."

The dullahans responded to his commands promptly.

The mandys were huddled beneath the unconscious dullahans and they themselves were protecting the new crystalline creature that looked around with bewildered gem-bright eyes.

Sam had no idea what to make of it, but he gave it orders all the same. "You're to stay with the mandys, mind them and you'll be okay. Go on now."

The one-armed dullahan knelt, and the mandys bounded up the armor with their charge. One of the mandys resembled a watermelon, and his little sword was enveloped in a bubbly aura of Water mana. He seemed quite a bit stronger than his fellow, who was still an ordinary carrot mandy.

The crystalline creature scurried, sending fractured light every which way as he climbed rather noisily into the dullahans armor with the help of the mandragoras.

During the commotion, Sam noticed a fragment of the brain-boulder from that Elite Treant sitting off to the side. He wasn't sure how he felt about taking it. It actually seemed vaguely brain-shaped, but it *was* covered in ore.

Sam grimaced. He didn't have any Inventory space for it.

One by one, the unconscious dullahan were carried out of the pit. The one-armed dullahan was the last one out. It shoved its greatsword into the ground and reached out for the brain-boulder.

Sam couldn't help but continue to think of it like that, despite how gross it was.

He wanted to tell the dullahan to leave it, that it didn't matter, but Sam *really* wanted the ore. Besides, he knew he could return and pick up the dullahan's greatsword.

Sam still needed to look for the one he'd thrown like an idiot.

The dullahan's shoulder opened up, and within was a wondrous swirling space of stardust.

It was an Inventory. The dullahan had an Inventory.

It struggled to put the boulder into the Inventory with its one arm, but the dullahan refused to give up even in its injured state and managed to put away the item.

Dumbfounded by what he saw, he watched with great interest.

*Huh... why did I think they didn't have Inventories? Wait, does that mean monsters might have Inventories too?*

Sam doubted it. At least from the more animalistic ones.

With everyone moving, Sam got to the head of the dullahans and, using both Fire affinity and Void mana, cleared a path through the flames and smoke.

It was surprisingly easy, almost naturally so. Void mana flowed out and smothered the flames where they were, snuffing them out at their source. Fire mana commanded the flames to stay put so that even though there was a fire burning right next to a charred leaf, the leaf never reignited.

Sam took note of the interesting reactions. In truth, he enjoyed the practice. There were precious few instances in which he could use his Void mana outside of combat.

Whenever he saw a Cinderblood, he gave the same order as the first group and told them to spread it to the others.

The amount of the burning Treants that he saw was uncomfortably high. Were there that many Treants normally? How come they didn't charge out like the horde they were?

That line of thought led to a startling theory. When they cut trees down in the [Forest Tile] before, eventually they regrew, far faster than trees ever should.



He wondered if the same held true for anything else on a Tile.

Did that mean that Treants were able to regularly spawn from a [Forest Tile], and would continue to respawn?

Perhaps they could farm some of the wilder Tiles. If the creatures respawned frequently, it would be worth looking into. He had no idea how monsters reproduced, but if you didn't have to wait for the entire life cycle to play out... maybe they could use that to their advantage.

Of course, a darker thought trailed along behind that one like a specter. If the monsters didn't have any sort of "normal" life cycle, then... they would eventually respawn to the point that you could never truly kill them out.

They would always be a problem. An ever-present threat.

Sam's thoughts continued down that unsettling line as they broke free of the forest and out into the clean air. It was hardly a surprise when he saw Raiko and Komachi waiting for him.