

CHAPTER 144: PROFESSIONS

“The Black City,” Kai began, adopting a reverent tone as he knelt beside Raiko. Sam could hear the capital letters. “We must get away from it. It grows closer by the hour.”

“That living monstrosity that paradoxically reeks of death?” she asked, without adjusting her posture. “I’m sorry Kai, our Skyshard is already riding the mana currents, guided by the tree.”

Even from the steaming waters, Sam could feel the mana-laced wind gust by. It brought the clean scent of nature, a contrast to the death filled halls of the Aker Academy.

He could almost sense their direction, but his grasp on the faint feeling disappeared almost as quickly as it came.

“It is... faster than us?” Kai asked in horrified realization.

“By far. I don’t know what else we can do, other than rely on that Mana Engine. And that, I’m unsure I can operate alone.”

“We must surely try, my Queen.”

“Could you not...? Just, Raiko is fine. Anything without ‘my’ in front of it really.”

Kai cleared his throat. “The Aker Academy Skyshard will stay tethered to us?”

It seemed the big Hawaiian had taken a liking to having royalty around, and preferred to treat them as such. To Kai, he was probably being respectful rather than weird.

“So long as Sam does not disengage the [Source Chain],” Raiko answered reluctantly. “Though, it might actually belong to our faction now. It’s hard to say without Lenal around. Where is she?”

“She... I must go find her.”

“We didn’t leave her behind in the Aker Academy, did we?” Raiko asked, astounded and horrified in equal measure.

Sam opened an eye to see Kai hurrying away, disappearing between the bamboo trees.

“She said she had to go find something,” Sam told her. “That was the last I saw of her.”

“Matt is likely with her,” Raiko said, pinching the bridge of her nose in frustration. “Seeing as he’s not here. Hopefully she’s all right.”

“Yes,” Sam said slowly, “I wonder what they could be doing, alone, with nobody to supervise them.”

The two shared a look.

Sam reached out to Komachi, finding his arms in much better use after his unexpected nap. The sun had shifted position, suggesting he had been out for a long while. Sam scratched beneath Komachi’s chin just like she liked and pulled her bodily into his arms and against his chest.

“Who’s my little creamsicle?” Sam crooned to her. Komachi purred and loafed in his arms. He turned to Raiko. “From what I can tell, the Aker Academy’s entire Skyshard is now under my control, and by extension, ours. I haven’t looked at the [Settlement] menu yet though, but that’s how it feels. I don’t think I need the [Source Chain] to hold the Skyshard in place anymore.”

“That’s a relief,” Raiko admitted. “Though, I never expected to gain the Aker Academy’s Skyshard. It’s massive and crowded with magical turrets.”

“The Academy is nearly as big as your Skyshard,” Sam said. “And it’s got buildings. It’s quite a steal, if only it didn’t have to cost so damn much.”

“I suppose it is, isn’t it?” Raiko looked over at the tree in thought. “And yet, it’s glaringly conspicuous. Completely at odds with our strategy to blend in with the environment to make our Skyshard resemble an uncivilized one. There’s not much we can do about it now, though.”

Sam shrugged and winced. “As you say, not much we can do. It’s not worth going unnoticed if we lose the Academy. Besides, we also have our Professions now. I can’t be the only one who was offered one after the whole possession debacle. When we start creating things, this place is going to change very rapidly.”

“It was bound to happen, anyway. I just wanted to shelter us while we were weak.” Raiko removed her wide-brimmed hat, a rare occasion. Her purple-black hair tumbled around her shoulders.

“And that was a good plan,” Sam told her, “but things change. Not to mention, I’m not sure that Black City was ever fooled. I get the feeling it’s been after us for a while. Then again, I guess it could have come for the Aker Academy and we took it with us... but somehow I doubt it. It feels oddly *familiar*.”

Raiko snorted. “You get chased by half-alive floating cities often, do you?”

“You know what I mean. Doesn’t it feel familiar to you? Like something we’ve seen or encountered before, if only in passing. It chills my bones.”

“It does,” she said quietly. “Uncomfortably so. It’s an almost greasy feeling. Like an enemy better off left behind.”

“While I’d love to have plenty of free time to sit around and try out my Profession, I think we may need to focus our efforts before that thing catches up with us.”

“I did get offered a Profession as well.” Raiko glanced at his hands, then looked away. “The thing is, we might need your Profession to get the Mana Engine up and running. It could still be fully functional, or it might need adjustments after transportation.”

“As far as Nihl said, it was operational and completed. He didn’t sound like that was the final say in the matter, but that it seemed ‘good enough for now’ if you catch my drift.”

“Will it be fast enough to escape the Black City?”

“Only one way to find out.” Sam leaned his head back and looked up at the leaves of the tree glowing golden in the sunset.

“How are you...” She seemed to lose her nerve.

Sam looked over at her curiously. “I’m doing better. Not... great, but I could probably walk on my own two feet. Seems a good deal better than I was before being brought here.”

Raiko rubbed her eyes. “No lingering issues with keeping your soul attached to your body? Hypothetically, of course. Probably. Maybe.”

“Should... I have been having those issues?”

“I may have seen something. And I may have scared it off. Not completely sure.”

“You been peepin’ on my soul, Raiko?”

For some reason, Raiko blushed at that. Komachi snickering didn’t help things any.

Sam moved Komachi away from his chest, revealing the large dark scar that lingered there. “My Void wounds are all sealed up,” Sam told her. “They gave some pretty badass scars though, if I do say so myself.” He touched it tenderly and winced. “Okay, maybe not.”

Still, they're closed and definitely healing. Even if it isn't as fast as I'd like."

"So the Sacred Tree wasn't strong enough after all," Raiko said, deflating.

Sam gently put two hands over Komachi's ears. "If Kai and Komachi together couldn't close the wounds up, I wouldn't fret too much, Raiko. I was bleeding for a *long time*. Trust me, this is an improvement. And besides, I haven't had any scars yet from this place."

"Not too long ago, the tree could heal death itself," Raiko whispered.

"Well, when it does," Sam said gently, "then I'll take another dip." He removed his hands from Komachi's ears and pet along her head. She remained ignorantly focused on the petting she received.

"Besides, all's well that ends well, right? Look at what we've gotten in the bargain: Another Skyshard with who knows what kind of useful stuff, tons of levels, *Professions*, and unless I was hallucinating pretty heavily back there, ghosts that are sticking around."

"Yes, I managed that with the [Spirit Lantern]." Raiko brightened considerably. "The Academy has old treasures lying around. There might be more things like that."

"You know, I was actually going to see if I should take up the Blacksmith Profession, but one of the rewards I got was 3 [Wildcard Ascension Gems (Profession)] and I was curious what they did. I could get an even cooler Profession... but it's really hard to beat accelerated Experience gain... and more stats."

"More stats?" That caught her interest. Just the same as it would anyone.

Sam nodded. “One of the achievements I got gave me a whole bunch of shit. Faster Experience gain and more stats per level. The catch is, the Profession has to be Smithing related.”

“That’s nothing less than incredible.”

“I can’t be the only one,” Sam said. “I was possessed the least out of all of you.”

“You’re right, though... mine is not to my preference,” Raiko said. “I need to speak with the spirit that possessed me. She might have greater insight.”

“Komachi gonna be Merchant,” his cat declared. “Big strong lady is my mentor!”

With a warm smile, Raiko removed some treats from her up-ended hat and handed them over to Sam. Komachi only seemed willing to eat from Sam’s hands.

“Smithing suits you truthfully,” Raiko told him. “Though, what else is out there, we don’t know. Perhaps that scholar-like oni might know more, or those of the Academy.”

While he fed her, Sam continued, “I do like Smithing. But there’s also that greed of ‘what if I got something cooler’? The question is... what the hell would that be? And how could it *ever* beat the bonuses I now have to Smithing-based Professions? That sounds idiotic to consider anything else, so maybe I have a concussion.”

“It’s possible you might gain the same bonuses, if not better, later. And yet, in the meantime, you’d be passing up on all those stats and the ability to, well, craft.”

“My sword is in rough shape. The dullahans could use some upgrades, and all of that I could do as a Blacksmith. Everybody needs armor, too. Especially if we’re going to avoid being curb stomped by those Black City things.”

“We need a Smith badly,” Raiko admitted. “Even someone well versed in arcane constructs wouldn’t serve as well. If my memory holds, dullahans were never single crafter creations. Their bodies, that is.”

“I’m not sure how we could have builders without nails and screws and what nots. All the bits that hold the *other* bits together,” Sam said.

“There’s only so much Sculpting does, and it’s extremely costly at that.”

It was only due to Raiko’s [Glyph: Sculpt] magic that their settlement had a home at all. The dome sitting just outside the Sacred Tree’s ring of bamboo-filled hills was molded and shaped by Sculpting.

Since then, the [Archflame] had been moved out of the dome quarters and into the communal area between the Sourcestone and the Sacred Tree, beneath the canopy’s safety and behind the hastily constructed [Ironwood] wall.

“Plus, it’d give some good Legend levels, with the added bonus of maybe hitting a Perfect Ascension later on,” Sam said. And the more he talked, the more he thought he was convincing himself that being a Blacksmith was not just all right, but it would be amazing.

“Sam would make a great Smith!” Komachi proclaimed, which just made Sam feel even better about the decision.

“Thanks, Komachi,” he said. “Would you like to be my little Merchant? You can sell me ore and coal and... whatever stuff that a Blacksmith needs, and then I’ll give you all my products to sell...” Sam paused and looked around. “Where the hell would you sell the stuff? Well, never mind that. You’ll be able to sell my stuff exclusively.”

His cat nodded eagerly. He could practically see dollar signs in her eyes. Though he supposed civilization's currency was real now. "Don't ya worry, Machi won't need to trade with other merchants to make monies."

Sam still wondered how the hell an economy could function given the distance between people and the relative scarcity of, well... everything.

That perked Sam up. "Are you saying you can make money without needing to sell it to another person?"

I had to have heard that wrong.

"Think so," she said, sounding confident. "It's not super, super easy, but bear in mind, I haven't unlocked the Profession yet. Machi is going to though."

"Well, how about you unlock yours, and I'll unlock mine?" Sam told her. He looked over at Raiko. "And what about you? We could make this a threesome." Sam laughed.

She stared, cheeks burning red. "I... Oh, all right!"

How long had he wanted a Profession? Nobody seemed to have any, and now it was not only dropped into his lap, but it was enhanced as well. He'd have to be mentally deficient to say no to that! And best of all, he wasn't the only one.

What could they create if they all worked together on something? Sam was immensely eager to find out.

"Perfect," Sam said, focusing on his notifications.

Where was it... ah! There it is.

Sam's eyes lit up at the notification of his first Profession.