

CHAPTER 140: SOMETHING WICKED THIS WAY COMES

Sam had seen many wondrous and horrible things since coming to Il'dran, but this took the cake. He blinked and tried to rub his eyes, but his arms didn't want to move. At least he could blink without *much* pain.

“Uh, are either of you guys seeing this?” Sam asked.

Kai looked over at where Sam was looking, but since the object of Sam's distress was very high in the sky, even Kai kneeling beside Sam couldn't get the angle quite right.

“Lower,” Sam told him. “It's very high up.”

Kai, muscled, tanned, and looking like a Hawaiian king of old, lowered himself to his stomach and gasped. “That is... probably not good.”

“You think?”

“What're you two blathering on about?” Matt asked, watching them both. “And why are you on the ground? Sam, I understand, but Kai, you weren't that badly hurt.”

“Thank you for reminding me,” Kai said, dusting himself off and standing. He went to the window in question and knelt in front of it. “You can see it from this angle as well. Lenal, have you seen anything like this?”

The others gathered at the window while Sam stared fixedly at the Black City. Its name simply appeared in his head. Not very original,

but Sam had a sneaking suspicion that he hadn't come up with that name.

Its towers and turrets glittered in the fading sunset light, indicating that they must be made of polished stone. And yet whenever he glanced away, the buildings swayed and writhed like living things out of a nightmare.

Whenever he looked again, they were nothing but menacing architecture.

It was truly unsettling.

And if it was like every other floating island in the shattered realm, then that Black City was coming after them.

Enemies didn't need to send their armies roaming out into the world after Sam and his fledgling kingdom if they just sent their whole base after him instead.

With the army waiting inside, rested, and ready to go.

"Yep, that's a cosmic horror all right," Matt said, getting to his feet. He clapped his hands together and rubbed them briskly. "We need to get the *fuck* out of here."

"Aren't we already moving?" Sam asked. "I mean, once we took the Aker Academy with the [Source Chain], Raiko would not have stopped the Skyshard from moving, would she?"

"She did," Lenal told him. She sounded nervous. "Nobody knew what was going to happen, so it seemed best to anchor us for the moment. I need to go find something. Excuse me."

Raiko rested in the same room, recovering from the battle against the Aker Academy's Dungeon and its onslaught of monsters. Unlike Sam, she still hadn't woken up yet from her injuries. It seemed that needed to be hurried along.

“Clearly Lenal didn’t know what the hell was going on either,” Matt said. “I’ve always loved cosmic horror, you know, but from a *distance*, preferably a universe or two away. As a buffer. I never wanted to be *in* a cosmic horror!”

“Maybe it’s coming for the Academy,” Kai said, rubbing his deeply tanned chin. It was a chin that you could have broken rocks with. “We could cut it loose and leave. It would presumably be easier for the Sacred Tree to get us farther away.”

A ghostly voice cleared its throat and, to Sam’s complete surprise, Professor Nihl stood there in all his academic ghostly splendor. “As a matter of fact, it would be a waste to leave us. Of course, you may think of my argument as self-serving, but there is not much self in which to serve, if you get my meaning.”

Sam often forgot that he was looked to as a leader, and it was now that he had lapsed once more. Likely due to the concussion and severe beating his body had taken both inside and out after that last battle.

His brain caught up eventually. “I’m sorry,” he said to Nihl. “I’m sure nobody intended to suggest that you would be left behind.” Sam glared at Kai and Matt. “But if there was anything you or your fellow professors could do to help us put some distance between ourselves and that *thing*, I think we’d be all be better off.”

The professor folded his hands in front of himself like he was about to give a great lecture, puffed out his chest and said, “As you may—or, perhaps, may not—be aware, the Mana Engine is completed. Thanks to your timely defense and the assistance of your fellows, it is operational at long last. If we were to move it near one of the Settlement Cores on your island, its power would be greatly magnified.

“If your Sacred Tree is able to create propulsion from the mana currents that surround these shattered lands, then we could

conceivably amplify the mana it uses dramatically. That is to say, we could increase the speed at which your Skyshard is able to travel and, more importantly, provide a barrier to buffet against more substantial storms and currents that no doubt afflict this new world of ours.”

Sam looked out the window again and shivered. It must be his imagination, but the *thing* looked closer than just a moment before. Nothing moved that fast, right?

I sure as hell hope not.

“Okay,” Sam said slowly, “how long will that take?”

The professor shrugged. “About as long as it would take somebody to carry it to the proper location, I should think. It is completed. There is not much else to do besides placing it appropriately and tapping into the leylines to feed it.” He gestured to the cables strewn about. “Most of these were in lieu of leylines, and even then, the outcome was beyond our wildest dreams! To push back the very barrier of a Dungeon Core is an immense accomplishment.”

“That sounds promising,” Sam told him. “Unfortunately—”

“I will do it,” Kai said. “My wounds are mostly superficial, and with some help, I could get it down to the settlement in short order, provided the monsters are all gone.” He looked at the professor.

“I would assume they are,” he told Kai. “After all, the Dungeon Core was destroyed and with it, all tethered monsters. Anything you may find would be... standard wandering creatures, as it were. Be that as it may, it would be best if I went with you to... dissuade any of the Academy’s more zealous guardians to permit you passage.”

“We destroyed a few handfuls of your walking armors,” Matt said, walking a circuit around the Mana Engine. “Are there more?”

“Quite a few, yes,” Nihl answered, watching Matt like a mother hen watches a fox outside its coop. “Pleased do not touch that! Ahem.

Yes, as it was, the first thing the Dungeon Core did was knock out most of our automated defenses and magical automatons. The farther from its field of influence, the weaker its dampening field became, and without the Dungeon Core, you will need a... chaperone.”

At the mention of walking armor, Sam immediately thought of the burly dullahans—the giant animated suits—that were guarding their settlement. There were so few of them and they were left behind when they ventured into the Aker Academy.

Of course, at the time, nobody knew it had been turned into a Dungeon.

“I’m not leaving,” Matt said, at a look from Kai and the professor. “Somebody has to protect our King and Queen, yeah? I mean, what else would a *loyal* and *trustworthy* potential *Duke* do in my position?”

“Nope,” Sam said. “Do you have any idea how high up a Duke is, anyway? That’s like next to princes or something for inheriting the throne. Not going to happen.”

Komachi woke up and meowed feebly at Matt. It seemed like she was trying to be tough, but it came out as cute and adorable with just a pinch of patheticness rather than mean and spicy.

Sam smiled down at his cat. “I’d pet you, Komachi, but my arms are a bit useless right now. So just imagine I’m petting you, okay?”

She nodded slowly. Did she look... thin? He hoped it was just his concussed imagination.

Matt hunkered down beside the two recumbent Incarnates. “Well, I’m staying anyway. If I ain’t going to get brownie points for it, I’ll settle for not losing the two big hitters we have. And in the meantime, I’ll sort out my *massive* levels. Thank you very much for that, by the way.”

“We have all gained quite a large amount of strength,” Kai agreed. “It does seem to be a bit of a running theme with you Incarnates, does it not? Large battles, high stakes, and even higher rewards. To think that a month ago I was sitting on my family’s porch without a care in the world.”

Matt chortled. “Yeah, and a week ago we were both so weak and pathetic that Sam here hauled us up on his burly shoulders and saved our hides only to then include us in so many battles and near-death scrapes that we leveled up beyond our wildest dreams.” He turned back to Sam. “You missed my Copper Ascension, by the way. It was pretty wild.”

Kai shook his head. “It would seem we are now—aside from Lenal—on the same Rank as it were. Things do feel.. quite different, I will admit.” He flexed his hand as if doing so for the first time.

Sam remembered the feeling. Like his entire body was remade in an instant, everything felt new and brimming with power. No wonder the pair weren’t showing any signs of injury. Hitting Copper did what Sam had always hoped leveling up would do: restoring HP and MP.

Some energy finally flowed into Komachi. She jumped onto his face and rubbed her furry cheeks all over him, meowing excitedly. Tail whipping about, whole body trembling, she reminded Sam of one of those dogs that finally gets to see their owner come home after they’ve been away for a long while.

Except unlike all those animals, Komachi wrapped her paws around him in a hug. “I missed you, Sam!”

“I missed you too, you little troublemaker.”

Even Chompers got into it. Scampering over with his dozens of fluffy corgi paws, the dog-like mimic licked Sam with his reddish mahogany wooden tongue.

“Splinters!” Sam cried out. “Watch the splinters, Chompers!”

The mimic panted, seeming quite content.

You would expect a mimic’s breath to smell horrible. In fact, it smelled quite nice, like a very fancy bank. There were hints of floor polish, metal, and oh, so much money.

How money had a smell, Sam couldn’t begin to explain, but it was there. A richness to the air. A sophistication that suggested you were somehow lucky to be in its presence for the moment.

“Where am I?” a familiar voice said beside Sam.

All eyes turned to Raiko as she gently propped herself up on her elbows. Her violet gaze fell upon Sam with a look of mixed relief and... fear? It was gone the next moment, so Sam wasn’t sure he had seen it.

In any case, Raiko investigated each of the assembled people’s faces. Sam could see all eyes except Raiko’s slowly pivot to Matt as if his prophetic joke had somehow caused Raiko to lose her memory.

Again.

Before anybody could say anything, Raiko got shakily to her feet and brushed her clothing and armor off. “The lack of explanation is a tad frustrating, I’ll have you know. Usually, proper decorum dictates that when a person asks where they are, somebody tells them.”

“Komachi!” his cat cried out, as if that cleared things up.

It did not.

“You don’t remember?” Matt asked slowly, as if hoping this would somehow jog her memory.

“Of course I bloody well remember, Matt! The question is, why weren’t we moved to the healing springs? Are you all idiots or just

dim?” She motioned sharply to Sam. “The poor man can’t even pet his cat, he’s so wounded, and you’re all just sitting around and gossiping like a bunch of a construction workers!”

It seemed even that held true on old Islegard, and probably all worlds. Sam had never known a more gossipy bunch in all his life.

“I’ll take him down first,” Kai said as he hefted Sam up into his large arms.

As big as Sam was, Kai was even larger. To Sam, he looked to have gained an inch or two from his Copper transformation. It made him wonder if he had grown or changed.

Raiko watched him. “You better.”