

CHAPTER 150 – QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Sam opened his eyes to a black void assembling itself around him. He instinctively reached over his shoulder for his weapon and found it gone.

A quick glance found that he was fully clothed, though not in any clothing he remembered putting on. Nothing worked here except his Void mana, which he brought out with surprising haste.

Holding his palm up enshrouded in silver-black flames, Sam called out to the darkness. “Show yourself!”

Volquist hissed and shielded his eyes from the flames as if they were blindingly bright. They didn’t even give off light as you’d expect, but somehow the Hidden One seemed to think otherwise.

“Always with the fucking Void,” Volquist grumbled. The god appeared in front of Sam. “Put that out, would you? I’m not here to harm you. What kind of Shadrune is this that I can’t—oh right, *Apocalypse* mana. Sit, Sam.”

A cushy chair appeared beside Sam and he reluctantly sat, letting go of the Void mana as he did.

Another chair and then a table with some steaming mugs of coffee appeared. “Coffee?” Volquist asked. “Feel free. It’s entirely real. I can see the question on your lips just begging to be asked, and yes, this is all real. You’re here... for a given value of ‘you’ and ‘here’, of course. So, you wanted to talk? I was surprised to get not one, but two prayers from both of you.”

Sam opened his mouth to ask who the other one was, but could take a wild guess that it was Raiko and took the mug of coffee.

He gave it an experimental sip and was pleasantly surprised.

It wasn't just a coffee, but a latte. Thick rich and creamy foam pillowed atop steamed milk and a deeply aromatic coffee with hints of brown sugar and citrus. It was amazing and gone all too soon.

But Sam wasn't here for coffee, as much as he wanted another one. It was the one addiction he'd ever had and never could quite kick, not until he'd been forced to go cold turkey by the apocalypse.

And by that point, it turned out that what he really needed was constant danger and death to serve as a proper stimulant in lieu of the precious bean.

Asking for another might be seen as requesting something simple that Volquist could fulfill and, though their relationship wasn't antagonistic, neither was it entirely friendly.

Sam wasn't sure what to make of the god, and he felt pretty confident that the god felt likewise.

Since he had shown up to help take care of Sumet with a bunch of other gods, Sam had heard nothing from Volquist and assumed he preferred it that way.

Gesturing with his mug, Volquist said, "Now that the niceties have been observed, what is it you need, Sam? I am having a difficult time rejoining my old Pantheon and they are looking for any excuse to cut me out again. That trick with Sumet was a good one, but don't think that you can rely on the gods to help you again if you are in trouble."

Sam frowned but wasn't about to tell him that he had nothing to do with it. Whether Volquist knew the truth or not was, in Sam's opinion, immaterial.

Let him think he owes me if he wants, Sam thought.

It had happened, and a god that wanted to strike at the Incarnates was gone. That was nothing but good news to Sam no matter how it occurred, although he wasn't going to go around correcting people if they thought he had a hand in it.

In a way, he did. He did fight the god after all, but there was no way he could have gotten out of that alive.

"Duly noted," Sam said, setting down his cup. "You're the god of secrets and such, right?"

"Last I checked."

"Then I want to know where Haman is. You know, Raiko's familiar?"

"I believe he's her soul companion," Volquist corrected, "but yes, I see what you mean. You know gods don't normally answer people's prayers, right? Especially when they're, and not to put too fine a point on it, immensely *disrespectful and threatening*."

Sam folded his arms and looked the god in the eye. The dark pits of Volquist's eyes were studded with tiny glittering diamonds of starlight. "Are you going to help or not?"

"You drive a hard bargain, Mister Hunter." Volquist took a sip from the cup and then balanced it on his fingertips. "However, don't you believe you have more, ah, pressing matters to attend to?"

"I'll heal."

"That is not what I meant."

"We're handling it. And besides, you said we can't expect aid from the gods."

"No, no, you are quite right," Volquist said. "However, I can pull some strings, as it were. It is what I am good at."

“And this aid costs what?” Sam asked, skeptical. He had said he would help them, but aside from the issue with Sumet, Sam hadn’t seen much in the way of godly assistance.

Not that he had expected much. Volquist was a god, and here that meant real flesh-and-blood—or at least material—people were in positions of power so grand that they were given the title reserved for mythological figures back home.

Sam had to admit he was interested in all the different Pantheons, but now wasn’t the time. He didn’t want to owe the god any favors if he could avoid it, but some things were too important to pass up.

As it turned out, he was completely wrong about Volquist.

The god sighed and set the mug down, leaning back in his chair and looking Sam up and down with a sad expression. “You do not trust me. I can practically feel it radiating off you, Sam. There is no use in denying it.”

“I’m not.”

“Yes... well. Ahem. Let’s try this again, shall we?” Volquist wriggled his fingers, and the mugs refilled. “I cannot give you everything, Sam,” he said, folding his hands and leaning on the table between them. “But, and this is important: I am your *friend*.”

For a moment there was a silence so complete that Sam felt the moment crystallize. Even Volquist seemed stunned by his admission.

He took a sharp intake of breath and carried on. “Incarnates warp things around them, as you’ve just seen. We’ve spoken about this before, but it does not exclude gods. Especially when they are in close proximity.”

Sam relaxed a little, wondering why he had been so uptight around Volquist to begin with. And then he remembered.

He had shown up once and then was kind of just... gone. Sam had expected him to resume his role as the Hidden One, and then just to leave them alone.

The god had gotten what he wanted—freedom—and the Incarnates were out of his hair, right? So why would he care about them any longer? Sam had thought they were friends or at least allies in some deeper way, but the god going no contact had rubbed him the wrong way.

He figured now that Volquist had gotten what he wanted, he was effectively going to ghost them.

“I may have jumped to conclusions,” Sam said, as if the words were forcibly dragged out of him.

Surprisingly, the Hidden One relaxed a little, as if a weight had been taken off his shoulders. “I’m glad to hear it. Listen, time for gods is... very different. A day or two passing for you is like seconds to us. You know that feeling when you look up and it’s time to go to bed? Imagine that, but now you realize it’s a year later.”

“That must suck.”

Volquist took up his mug, raised a toast to Sam, then sipped. “It is a downside, sure. But as I understand, it is a result of so much knowledge and time spent already alive. It’s the same way that kids feel like a few minutes drags on for *days* and yet adults never notice where all the time has gone. The longer you’re alive, the shorter everything feels. Gods are not immune to this.”

“So for you, we had just parted ways?” Sam asked.

“Something like that. I was working on re-establishing myself so I could help you both from behind-the-scenes as it were. Hidden One, remember? I can’t show my hand too much. The other Pantheons would know what I was up to and away I’d go again into another jail somewhere else. I doubt you’d find me again.”

“I’m sorry,” Sam said sincerely. “I had figured you got what you wanted and then dipped.”

“That could not be farther from the truth, Sam. But I can see how you might have arrived at that conclusion. You’ve been a busy beaver. Taking over a Skyshard, getting your Settlement Cores all cozied up, and then getting another Skyshard as well! Bravo. Shame about the Black City.”

“It’s really called the Black City?”

“It sort of insinuates itself into your mind, doesn’t it? Yes, that is its name. For now, you need to focus on getting away from it. You’re too weak to take it on in a fight, and now that it has your scent, it’ll track you through the Ascension Layers.”

Sam frowned. “That sounds like we should turn around and nip this problem in the bud right now.”

“No!” Volquist cleared his throat and mastered himself. “No. That would be immensely foolish. You’re strong, there’s no doubt about it and you’re getting stronger, but don’t throw your life away. Sumet had some... dealings with Outer Gods, creatures that—”

Sam nodded. “Yeah, cosmic horrors like Dagon and Cthulhu, right? All tentacles and teeth?”

“That’s what you’d see because your mind can’t comprehend their form, but yeah, that’s close enough. Humans are wonderful at dealing with Outer Gods so long as their sanity crumple zones remain intact. The point is, these guys don’t play fair, Sam. You’re restricted—more or less—to First Layer mana density only. They are not.”

“So they’re stronger than anything on this Layer should be,” Sam reasoned.

“Easily. They can’t reveal their true strength, but they can break limits you couldn’t even touch right now. The upside is they have a

set speed due to the mana density of the First Layer. They may be able to break that limit, but their Black City is another matter. Since it's technically a 'Skyshard' and I use that term loosely, it has to obey certain rules. The downside is they're still faster than you."

"We can fix that." At least, Sam hoped. The Mana Engine was supposed to cheat in a way, distilling and condensing the mana of the First Layer into something more potent.

If the Black City was going at the theoretical "speed limit" of the First Layer, then if the Mana Engine worked as Sam hazily remembered it was meant to, they could go just a tiny bit beyond that speed, remaining out of reach.

"I sincerely hope you can. It is paramount you do not face them, Sam. The loss would be too great, and it just might allow them a proper foothold into Il'dran, and that we cannot allow."

"Then why don't the gods stop them?"

"Because doing so would tear open a rift that would allow them *all* to come in. The reason they were able to breach the Shardrune at all was because of our fight with Sumet. If not for that, they would have contented themselves with watching from the outside. But that is just the problem, Sam. They are always watching. Always waiting for the slightest mistake, and then they slip in."

Sam shivered for reasons he couldn't quite put a finger on.

"For now, run, and run fast. Do not fight them. Not ever."

Sam held up his hand to stop Volquist. "You've impressed upon me the need to turn tail and run."

"I do not believe I have, but I hope that you will at least heed my advice and remember when the time comes that you are foolish enough to stand against them. Fighting them is nothing short of suicide. Even the gods fret over them."