

CHAPTER 164: HONOR IN SMITHING

A number of notifications awaited Sam once everybody was safely back at the settlement.

Skyshard Milestones Accomplished:

Transform a Tile with Magma mana (Uncommon).

Defend against and defeat an Elite Copper-rank monster within your territory (Uncommon).

Discover an underground Tile within your territory (Uncommon).

Your Skyshard gains greater Experience!

Your Skyshard Levels Up!

While the increases to the Skyshard were nice, what Sam found most illuminating were the milestones.

They hinted at things that could be done to not only achieve more of them, but what sorts of things could happen to his home.

He had always planned on mining down into the depths of the Skyshard for the simple reason that they were huge chunks of floating rock.

Even if there was nothing magical inside making it all work, there was a lot of room inside that stone and dirt. It would be easy to make housing and living quarters inside, rather than taking up valuable Tile space on top.

Like an iceberg, the Skyshards only had a tiny fraction of their total area on the top. He had been hoping that Blacksmith would give him some sort of mining skill sphere or other ability that would allow him to leverage his massive Strength and his Breaker bloodline to burrow deep into the Skyshard.

Sitting on the new bench around the outdoor cookfire—which, not to throw any shade at Kai, was little more than a log that had been cut in half and braced with stout sticks to form a seat and back—Sam pondered the crystalline creature the mandragoras had found.

The little guy was sitting on the opposite bench. The flames created dazzling displays of light across the creature's faceted body.

He had never seen anything like it, and though it resembled a mandragora faintly, it was clearly made out of precious gems and other rare minerals.

More important than the Skyshard's level ups, however, was the pending quest he had.

New Smithing Quest: Iron Giants

Though you saved your dullahans' lives, the damage they sustained through the protracted battle is crippling. Repair, improve, or otherwise maintain your dullahans into a functional or better condition to be rewarded with Smithing Experience and Honor.

It did his heart good to see Honor mentioned more commonly with anything to do with the settlement. He hadn't expected the Shard to take the idea they had for Honor and Merits to the degree that it did, yet he was happy all the same.

And a touch proud, if he was being honest.

Sure, the system would need its kinks worked out over time, but it was a good starting point.

Not that Sam needed a quest to fix up the loyal attendants. The dullahans were duty made material.

He owed them a lot more than he could repay with his paltry skills. Thinking about how to mend the living armors, Sam wondered about his [Basic Maintenance] skill.

Considering he now had a Profession that could do a lot more than that rudimentary skill ever could, what would he be getting Experience from if he worked on the dullahan?

Typically, it would be Swordsman Experience, since his Job inherited [Basic Maintenance] from the First Order Job, Fighter. However, the Quest plainly stated he would gain Smithing Experience for employing maintenance. That might just be the reward from the Quest, but he wasn't so sure about that.

Was it possible he would gain both Swordsman and Smithing Experience, or would something else happen to his skill now that he had said Profession?

Sam was eager to find out.

The little he knew about the way the Shard's various systems worked was from Volquist. The systems worked hard to fulfill a given person's desires.

Up to a point, at least.

If something was possible, and you tried hard enough, the Shard usually gave you a reward for it. Sam had changed his [Power Stance] and all subsequent stances to work differently.

That was just a minor alteration in the grand scheme of what could be done. Did it mean he could somehow combine his Blacksmithing Profession with the [Basic Maintenance] skill and manage to gain both Job and Profession Experience whenever he fixed something?

Or would it change into an entirely different sort of skill as a result of the overlap?

Only one way to find out.

Sam looked over at the new creature. It was kind of cute. But in the bright sun, it would be impossible to look at directly.

Even with the dappled light filtering in from the tree canopy overhead, the creature was sparkling like a tray of diamonds.

Being a cat, Komachi was naturally drawn to shiny things. So of course, she slinked over to the crystalline creature and meowed in greeting.

Even those same militia mandragoras went over and took up official-looking posts.

Apparently, they fashioned themselves as the new guy's guard. Sam supposed they were, after everything they survived.

Nearby, Raiko and Lenal talked about the [Spirit Lantern]. He heard snippets of conversation about how to care for it, and generally not to take it anywhere dangerous if it could be helped.

That seemed reasonable enough to him. As far as he understood, the Professors and students from the Aker Academy were bound to it, and therefore relied on it to stay tethered to Sil'mara.

He hoped it eased Lenal's grief some. He wished they could have saved at least somebody from the Aker Academy—their settlement did need more people badly—but some of them staying on as ghosts was a close second.

Apparently, the lantern was in Lenal's care now, which was a bit surprising.

Raiko usually tried to take up responsibility for everything around her.

Though it was difficult to think of her like that, she was a queen that saw it as her duty to look after others.

Sam pulled up the settlement menu to look over the new levels of Sil'mara. There didn't appear to be any new abilities to choose from, but there were more Tile slots available.

And Sam had quite a few different Tiles already, but more importantly he had [Dungeon Ingresses] that they could use. They required a Tile he already owned to be deployed, so that meant they didn't take up the Tile itself as far as he understood... but that wasn't his concern.

What if the [Dungeon Ingress] changed the Tile it was deployed upon?

It was possible the [Dungeon Ingresses] functioned like a Dark Vault, in that he could gain more time while inside rather than outside. He was starting to realize just how incredibly useful that would be in their current predicament.

Which made them even more valuable, especially with the Black City now in a stalemate. It wasn't gaining on them anymore, but the damned thing had gotten uncomfortably close.

It was a constant fixture in the sky, following them relentlessly. Yet another benefit to the canopy of leaves overhead. You couldn't see the Black City from the settlement, and Sam was more than happy about that.

He had enough problems to deal with.

Lenal had judged that the distance was still great between the two. If, for some reason, the Mana Engine died, or they were unable to propel themselves anymore, it would take at least a day for the Black City to reach them.

That wasn't a great comfort, but it was better than nothing.

However, since *every* Skyshard moved on the mana currents naturally, that would never truly happen.

At worst, they'd drift on a lazy current of mana, extending the time that the Black City could snatch them up to double her original estimate.

For some reason, Sam couldn't help but think of it like a game he played as a kid, Majora's Mask. Where there was a constant ticking clock and you had to do everything you could before that terrifying, grinning moon destroyed the world.

Only, Sam didn't have any sort of magic to turn back the clock at the last second.

If the Black City caught them, Volquist had made it abundantly clear that they were goners and there was nothing even the gods could do.

Not that they would. The various Pantheons were keeping a hands-off approach toward the two Incarnates for now, courtesy of Sumet's demise.

Any help they might get would be under the table, as it were. And even then, the gods were likely to deny it after the fact.

He wasn't sure how to deal with the Black City. Somebody in the group might have an idea, but there was a fundamental truth to it all.

If Sam's kingdom fought the Black City on the First Layer, they would all perish.

So, gaining strength wasn't useless. In fact, it was absolutely crucial. Becoming stronger, reaching higher levels, was integral to climbing to the Second Layer.

It wasn't just his Legend, Job, Path, and Profession. It was the Skyshard's too, and maybe more than just him.

His friends Kale, Kylie, and Chris were out there too. They might not be directly threatened by the Black City at present, but they would be eventually.

The Black City, after all, was a danger to *everyone*.

This came about because we were targeted by one god, Sam reminded himself. Just one. And now we're being chased by... what, eldritch creatures hellbent on vengeance?

No. That wasn't it. Sam was sure it was something more sinister. This had the feeling of a personal grudge to it, though he couldn't put his finger on the why of it.

He gently touched his breastplate over his heart. Sam and Raiko had yet to activate their Divine Conduit that they gained from their part in slaying the god Sumet.

It didn't seem Copper Rank was enough to tap into the Divine Conduit.

Which made some level of sense, really. Copper was the first Rank, and therefore the lowest officially recognized bracket of power. Of course, a *god's* power wouldn't be able to be used by somebody like that.

Still, he had hoped.

Sam felt certain *that* was what the Black City was after. He shivered, recalling what Volquist said about those who coveted bloodlines and wondered how much worse it would be if people like that found out about this godly—though annoyingly inert—power rested within them.

He was still Copper, and therefore easy pickings to most anybody outside of the First Layer. Cultists and their masters, however, would be much more extreme in their treatment of Sam and Raiko.

He worried what would happen if somebody captured Raiko. There was a grim side to immortality.

Just one glance at her practically screamed unique magic user here. She could terraform land and directly restore the mana of others without needing potions. Those two things alone would be enough to incentive even somebody from Earth to take her.

This wasn't some hideous obsession that caused hatred and jealousy to run rampant because somebody had been genetically gifted.

No, this was *divine* power.

Who wouldn't want the power of a god? And here Sam was, unable to use it to defend himself. It said it needed a higher Rank, but clearly Copper wasn't enough.

Sam drummed his fingertips on the bench as he twisted his thoughts this way and that, trying to figure out just what it was he should do.

There was the Ascension quest still, and from Volquist he learned that they would need to find and kill a powerful monster to unlock the Tower and then venture inside alone to challenge the Tower's guardian for that Layer.

The first group to do so would gain something unique from the guardian's demise, something that only occurred once every universal initiation.

Each Shard that was initialized received their own variant of the Tower. Volquist had tried to explain the fractal reality of the Tower and given up when Sam struggled with four-dimensions, let alone the five or six-dimensions that the Tower operated in.

The only relief he had gotten from the explanation was that he would only be competing with other people from Earth and Islegard for what he was thinking of as "World First" achievements.

Technically, because Earth and Islegard were both initialized at the same time, there were at least twice as many people vying for the same prize.

But the real question was: how many of them knew about it?