

Chapter 212 – Clean Up

Sam looked up at his new Shardscript. Komachi pawed at the air, seeing it too.

Skyshard Milestones Accomplished:

Successfully defend against a Monster Incursion (Uncommon).

Defeat Maelstrom monsters without a single casualty (Rare).

Prevent your kingdom's settlement cores from receiving any damage during a Monster Incursion (Rare).

Your Skyshard gains greater Experience!

Your Skyshard Levels Up!

The Sourcestone shone brightly as the Skyshard and the settlement cores grew stronger. Even the Sacred Tree's leaves shimmered with a golden luster.

The effect did wonders for morale. It lifted Sam's spirits, even when the effect faded.

After that, people worked together, clearing out and looting the remains of the monsters. There were a lot of valuable crafting materials to be found, particularly in the tunnels.

Though the best haul came from the tunnels. The tunnels Raiko rimed with dark and ice mana, yielded heaps of rare elemental crystals that would help considerably with most Professions.

The second-best was from the meteorites. Though they looked like slag, they only had trace amounts of metal in them.

"I could probably refine it," Sam said, hands on his hips. "But it's going to take a lot of work. I don't know if it's worth it."

“You never know until you try,” Matt said. They had gathered everything at the center of town, separating things into large piles to sort through. He leaned over a chunk of cleaved meteorite. The interior glittered with bits of metal. “You know, I bet I could use some of my poisons on it.”

“Why must it always be poisons with you?” Kai asked.

“Uh, hello? Poisonmind? It’s kind of my thing.”

Ever the enterprising Merchant, Komachi collected her share of the materials and was in the process of stocking her shop with Chomper’s assistance. Lenal waited nearby, anxiously awaiting the opening.

On Earth, Sam could imagine she would be one of those fanatics that camped outside the Apple store to secure her spot in line for the newest release. The sort of thing that Sam never had the money for.

“I could attempt to purify the meteorite,” Kai said. “I believe its rich mana could be used to fertilize the ground. Before long, we will need to be self-sufficient. Having fertile land will go a long way towards that goal.”

“Or,” Matt said, turning to Sam. “I could concoct a poison that melts away all the worthless stuff, leaving you with nuggets of whatever this meteorite ore is. Then you could just melt ‘em down all easy-peasy.”

Sam looked from one to the other. It was a sign that he had gotten used to mediating—especially between Kai and Matt—that he didn’t bother to argue or whine. He just said, “Kai takes half the meteorites, and Matt gets the rest.” He looked to Raiko and Lenal. “Unless either of you have a use for Maelstrom afflicted ore?”

“Since they want it, they can have it,” Raiko said with a shrug. “I don’t have much...energy to experiment right now.” She gave Sam a wan smile and turned her attention back to inspecting an elemental crystal in her hand.

“I would love to [Analyze] a piece of meteorite!” Lenal said, then her enthusiasm faded, and the elf looked away with obvious shame. “Though I would feel far, far less guilty if I bought it from Komachi.”

“Take it as a gift.” Sam offered, rolling one meteorite over to Lenal. She stared wide-eyed at the thing like she didn’t know what to do with it.

“Take your time,” he said with a chuckle.

“I do not need it, but I would like to submit a request,” Bal’daz said sheepishly, holding up a black cloth to his red-skinned face. The smell from the burning monster bodies was offensive to him, though Sam couldn’t smell anything wrong. They barely smelled different from burning grass.

“What is it?” Sam asked.

“This little...ambush has suggested that we are perhaps not as safe as we once thought. I know there has been discussion of excavation and digging down into the Skyshard, but I would like to suggest the opposite: we expand. Our buildings, what little we have, are in a poor state. The wall, though admirable in its construction, is horribly wasteful and moreover, flammable. I have an...ahem, schematic for a stone wall of great strength. Just as importantly, I believe if properly excavated, our resident Nature Mage, Kai, could refine those tree trunks into a more usable form.”

Raiko looked over, sitting by the Archflame’s warmth. “Would these walls be any more resistant to burrowing monsters?”

“Yes, I do believe so!” Bal’daz said, growing increasingly excited. And a bit sweaty again too. “Impervious? Likely not, but far more resistant than what we currently have.”

The demon wrung his hands when Sam gave him a sharp look. Bal’daz cleared his throat nervously and continued, “I dare say, if

the walls were created alongside your terraforming magicks, they would truly be a sight to behold.”

Raiko nodded.

Kai was about to open his mouth, when a thoughtful look swept over his features. “I was far too weak before, but my Profession has leveled up a lot lately. I might be able to do as he says. If so...that is *a lot* of lumber I could make.”

“Enough to fashion many houses, I believe,” Bal’daz said primly. “One for each of you and likely more to spare. Interior paneling. Polished wooden floors. The works!”

Komachi wandered over to the castle again. She was struggling to fit into one of its miniature windows. “Bleh, still not big enough!”

Chompers wasn’t having much luck either. He was attempting to shuffle sideways into one of the small turrets.

Though the strange castle was larger than it had been before the attack, it was still like a 1/16th replica of a real castle. Possibly smaller. Sam wondered if it would ever be large enough to live inside.

“The issue with burrowing is how deep we must set the stone. The deeper, the better, but that ends up being a waste,” Bal’daz explained. “If we could instead infuse the very Skyshard beneath the walls? Then there would be no way anything could burrow through, at least without us knowing it immediately. Such a feat is, regrettably, beyond me, however.”

“There are roots beneath us,” Raiko pointed out. “From the Sourcestone and Sacred Tree. Monsters couldn’t easily get past those, though I suspect they’re much deeper than those sandworms burrowed. As it is, through our [Crystalline Leyline Roots], we might be able to further strengthen the Skyshard.”

“Ah!” Bal’daz said. “Roots that are interconnected with leylines? Interesting, interesting indeed.”

“Maybe the castle will grow tunnels?” Matt asked, eyeing the small thing.

Both Raiko and Bal’daz looked over at the structure thoughtfully.

Sam was listening the entire time, trying to determine what the best use of their resources was. Now that they weren’t going to be ripped apart by the Maelstrom, they had a reprieve.

There was something else, however, that he wanted to do first. “Before we get started on that, I think Komachi might have something to say.”

Komachi had been nearly vibrating with the urge to talk about her special group commission. They had spoken about it earlier and Sam was more than happy to find out the little Merchant had yet another ability she could use to help them all level and double-dip in rewards.

By using her special group commission, she could issue a commission for something that they already wanted done. Everybody who contributed would get rewards, and it would be the same thing they would already be doing.

It was the definition of cheating, and Sam *loved it*.

The smug look on Komachi’s furry face suggested she also loved it. Then again, she was Komachi, *and* she was a cat, both of which tended toward a general air of smugness.

“Machi can do [Special Group Commission], get’cha loads of EXPs and rewards!” she blurted out, perched on Sam’s shoulder. “Just tell Machi what’chu want.”

Sam looked at their thoughtful faces. “We only need to decide on a single project. For now, unless anybody is against it, I would like to suggest that we repair the dullahans. They are in a poor state, and I believe with my new Tin Rank Blacksmith, I can actually repair them to working order again. With all dullahans up and fully

functional, they'll not only be able to help us, but defend our home as well."

Raiko brightened considerably at this. Sam couldn't help but grin.

The mandragoras, obviously, were big fans of Sam's suggestion. They cheered and let out little screeches of joy as they hopped about in place around their dullahan captain.

Sam could just see it now. A dullahan with a squadron of mandragoras, leading them on patrols and clean-up duty, killing monsters that got too close to the walls.

Things that would make most normal people bored to tears, but would be both enriching and rewarding for the weaker creatures. It wasn't like Sil'mara had any people who were low level enough that a simple patrol would significantly affect their levels.

Even Lenal wasn't that low anymore. At least, he seriously hoped so.

Maybe when we get some new people, Sam thought to himself. He looked to the skies, watching a few distant Skyshard streak past and get whipped away into the Maelstrom.

He hoped it was uninhabited, but he knew not all of them would be. With the dullahan's help, maybe he could find a way to save some people. They had to do something.

Sil'mara might be the only Skyshard that could navigate the Maelstrom without being ripped apart.

"This would be an excellent change," Raiko said. "The dullahans are strong and unwaveringly loyal. And if they're repaired...perhaps later we can find more."

Sam's head whipped around. "*Find* more?"

"Excavate might be a better term to use," she admitted. "Those dullahans hail from my homeland, and so does that ruined tower. The one that was originally by Bal'daz's tower. Whenever I've gone

near it, I can feel the presence of more arcane creations. And the quest I received confirms more dullahans await inside.”

“Hold up,” Matt said. “Why haven’t we already gotten in and pulled out more?”

She shrugged. “It’s dangerous. Unsealing it might have unleashed monsters and traps that were more than we could have handled.” She looked down at the Glyphs glowing softly on her arm. “I’m not sure I had enough mana to unseal it before as well.”

Sam didn’t see how they needed to repair the dullahans first, but he wasn’t about to say that aloud. To even suggest that he wasn’t going to repair the dullahans first would be rank heresy. He wasn’t going to let them suffer a moment longer.

“We’ll put that on the back burner for now,” Sam told them. “Our first priority should be to get all the dullahans we have on hand back to their full fighting strength, or near enough as we can manage. If I have sufficient materials...I *am pretty sure* that I can do it. A rank makes a hell of a difference.”

Matt looked Sam up and down. “I’ll say. You know, we all got a bit of that achievement you gained. I didn’t have much time to say anything before, but *damn dude*.”

For some reason, Raiko looked away when the conversation turned to the topic of Sam’s Ascension.

Kai inclined his head. “I am sure it was less than what you gained, but we all were empowered by your Ascension. It was...humbling, to say the least. Receiving something for nothing did not feel right.”

“I’ll take it,” Lenal said with a smile. “What? I can use every little bit of strength I can lay my hands on. If not for you all, I would just be some more bones in a bird’s nest. I don’t want to be weak and a liability. Which reminds me, I could talk to the professors of Aker Academy, see if maybe they have some manuals on dullahans? Our library is likely still sealed, but there has to be information somewhere.”

“Why would your library be sealed?” Matt asked.

“Much of the Academy is still...troubled,” Lenal said softly. “Areas are locked down, under foul influence, or inaccessible due to magicks gone awry.” She looked up at their concerned faces. She took one look at Sam’s dark expression and realized what he was thinking.

“No, no!” She blurted out. “Not like that at all! There are no Dungeons forming, that much I can absolutely assure you. The Academy is finding its footing again after the apocalypse and, well, it only has one living caretaker now. And I am not very strong.”

“Well, do you suppose there’re more supplies in there?” Sam asked. “Like armor and weapons. I know the weapon I have comes from the Aker Academy, and it’s incredibly good at getting the job done.”

Lenal tilted her head to the side in thought. “Hmm. Potentially. I noticed your weapon seems to be a direct result of something I once recall seeing in the Academy. I believe even if the item isn’t within reach, any loot or quests that stem from assisting me in opening up the Academy will provide decent rewards.”

“All of us could use upgrades,” Raiko pointed out. “And if it doesn’t have to be crafted from scratch, or could even be improved with smithing or alchemy...”

Sam nodded eagerly. While he loved creating things, if he could spend more time grinding out levels for Blacksmith instead of having to create weapons, he would be a happy man. Crafting weapons was all well and good, but it took considerably more effort and time than doing things for the sake of Experience.

“I cannot help much with the supplies,” Lenal said, “but I can scour the Academy for any helpful information on dullahan repairs. If somebody would accompany me, there is a chance we might find something of greater worth in the halls surrounding the library. I would not venture into the library itself without a full escort, but the upper levels are likely safe.”

“I will go,” Kai said. “My materials are less than useful compared to the potions these two can make.” He motioned to Raiko and Matt. “Bal’daz, would you care to accompany us?”

The demonly scholar looked surprised at them. He was the weakest of the group and seemed to abhor fighting, but he was a skilled magic user even if he was a touch cowardly. “I...would be honored to accompany you.”