

CHAPTER 106: MANDRAGORA

MAYHEM

Mandragoras popped up from the ground beneath the Sourcestone, investigating their new environment with great surprise and interest.

As much as those seed-like eyes could convey to Sam, anyway. He hadn't even noticed they were there. The creatures were so easy to miss when they were buried.

Their militia flanked the rest of what were practically civilian mandragoras, readying wedge-like wooden swords. It didn't escape Sam's notice that the basic weaponry resembled a child's attempt at his [Charred Claymore's] likeness.

And there seemed to be quite a bit more than he remembered. There had been only 6 before, right? So why did he now count at least a dozen?

I guess they are plants.

The rest of the mandragoras weren't having it. They scattered and took off in every direction like a bunch of startled cats.

The few militia members of the mandys looked to Sam for permission, and he gave them a curt nod. They about-faced, fell over each other, then charged after the greater whole of their new brothers and sisters.

Raiko stared after the mandys helplessly, then put her face in her hands.

“Well, they’re not coming back,” Matt said. “Think we’ll come back one day to a Skyshard with a thousand mandragoras?”

“Could be worse,” Sam said, turning his attention back to the Faction notification.

Faction Selection

There are countless types of Factions you may create. To finalize the bonding of your Skyshards and that of your Sourcestone to the Sacred Tree, both Skyshard owners must agree upon a Faction identity. These range from tyrannical dictatorships to direct democracy, anarchy, hibbelism, tornquistics, and everything in between.

“What the hell is hibbelism?” Sam said aloud.

“Doesn’t sound natchi,” Komachi said. He figured that meant some variant of natural.

Nobody seemed to know what hibbelism was, though Lenal looked a little green, as if he had just said a very filthy word.

Whatever it was, Sam didn’t want that to be their mode of governance. He looked over at Raiko. “Sidebar?”

“Sure. Yeah.” She turned away from the fleeing mandys, and the various fruits and vegetables they left in their wake around the Sourcestone.

The pair walked a bit away, coincidentally up a nearby hill, to get a better view of the dust trails the mandys left behind.

Sam whistled. “They really did split up in every direction possible, huh?” He put his hands on his hips and smiled like a proud parent. “The extra room’ll do them good. It’s not like we were using it, anyway.”

“They’ll do better here,” Raiko agreed. “I just hope they don’t get caught up in the streams or moat. I’m not completely sure nothing spills off the edge.”

With a motion that encompassed the entire Skyshard, Sam turned to Raiko. “I assume you’ve got the same notification as I did. I figured, since these Skyshards are essentially ours, we might want to discuss their future together. Not that I don’t trust the others, but well... they don’t have a Sourcestone or Sacred Tree.”

Raiko nodded. “They are ours by right, yes. I don’t want to disparage your fellows, but it typically falls to Incarnates for leadership.”

“Still feels a little shitty, though. Not just being thrust into the role of leadership, but at the same time dictating what other people do on what is also their home.” Sam raised a hand to forestall her. “I know. It’s ours by right and we’re graciously letting them live here and all that. And I also know that these Skyshards wouldn’t exist in their present state without us, doesn’t make it feel any better.”

“To be honest, Sam, I don’t like it either.” Raiko looked down, the brim of her hat shadowing her violet eyes. “I don’t want to lead, but things turn out better when I’m in charge. And in this case, you as well. All your decisions and actions have led to our survival and safety.”

He nodded, though he didn’t want to. “I can’t imagine how many people I’ve grown up with that said, ‘I could do that jackass’ job better than they ever could!’ when looking at a politician or governor.” Sam looked at his hands. “I never did. Hardly cared, to be honest. Never thought I’d get into a position like this.”

“A benevolent, unwilling tyrant is better by far than a host of representatives that all have their little agendas apart from helping their constituents,” Raiko told him. “I have seen it play out countless times. The corruption. The greed. The backroom deals.”

Sam laughed. “Yeah, but you can’t just put any idiot on a throne and give him all that power. Even if they were a decent person before, all that power with limited oversight? It messes with a person in ways I can’t begin to fathom.”

That gave her pause. “Well, we’re not forging an Empire, with millions depending on us.”

“Aren’t we?”

“Maybe one day?”

“Where do we draw the line, Raiko?” Sam asked. “Do we turn away another group of refugees just because we’ve hit our magical number that we don’t want to deal with anymore? How many would that be? A dozen? A hundred?”

Sam shook his head. “I don’t mean to be pessimistic. Something Matt said has been nagging me, mostly because he was right. Once we do this, Raiko, we’re all in. We can’t turn around without destroying everything we’ve built. Even if we did, people would still come. You’ve said it yourself, Incarnates attract people.”

“What do you have in mind, then?” Raiko said. “A kingdom with nobles to keep the leadership in check? Something else perhaps?”

The blue morning sky seemed so free and inviting. Sam wished he could fly up into it and just... explore forever. He turned his attention back to the present and the green rolling hills of the Skyshard.

“I don’t know,” he told her truthfully. “Americans don’t get the best education on politics. Mine was better than most, I guess, but still all I really know is communism sounds great on paper but is messed up in person without insane oversight. Then you’ve got capitalism that motivates people to work and improve, but that inevitably leads to a clusterfuck in and of its own making as late

stage capitalism rears its ugly head and becomes a monster to deal with.”

Sam shook his head. “And all I know about kingdoms are from books and stories. Didn’t turn out too well for most on Earth, but then again, what other form really has? What did people on Islegard gravitate toward? They had magic, monsters, and a wildly different upbringing than humans.”

“Clans, sects, kingdoms, magocracies, theocracies, feudalism. There was that one Empire that blew up, and of course my homeland that did just about the same....”

“I guess that makes sense,” Sam said. “Sounds a bit like technocracies that never kicked off on my world. But doesn’t that just attract people who are power hungry and either skilled in shady deals or just... skilled in creatively blowing people up with magic?”

“It wasn’t as extravagant as you’d think, although there was a high frequency of exploding people. They mostly kept to themselves, including their squabbling. For some reason, they kept assassinating one another. The thing is, I was more the problem solver and mediator. Not the politician.”

“So either we install ourselves as lifelong leaders—” Sam paused. Was an Incarnate different from a normal human? He gave Raiko a curious look. “Just how long does an Incarnate live, anyway?”

“Do you really want to know that?” Raiko stared at him.

“Natural lifespan,” Sam elaborated. “You know, assuming nobody ganks us or whatever.”

“It’s more likely somebody is going to, as you say, ‘gank’ us, than for us to—”

Sam rolled his wrist at her, making the universal “hurry up” gesture.

“Thousands of years? It really depends.”

“Oh. That’s... a lot more than I thought.” Sam had to take a moment.

“Age doesn’t hit us all the same. I’m not sure how much I can age? Besides, it’s not like we’re the only ones that can grasp immortality. That’s part of the point of Ascension.”

“That is, rather a wide margin, however. That’s kind of like saying ‘oh, you’ll live over 30 years’ without any sort of end-date in mind. There’s got to be some sort of... I don’t know, cap or at least a point when Incarnates get too—” Then Sam realized it.

She seemed uncomfortable. “You can reincarnate, you know.”

“Nobody’s lived long enough to die of old age,” Sam said, remembering what Volquist said. “Either they live a really long time and eventually turn into... what was it that Volquist said? Emperors? Something like that. Or they are killed, right? No in-between.”

“Empyreans,” Raiko corrected.

“Yeah, that.” Sam laced his hands behind his head and looked up at the sky, his dark brown hair fluttering in the breeze reminded him that he’d need to get it cut at some point which presented a whole *other* set of problems he didn’t want to think about.

“Okay,” he said, “So whatever ruling system we make... we’ll likely be around to see it fall and get destroyed, or else live so long that we’ll enshrine it as a permanent fixture in this new place. So the question becomes, what helps us get to that point fastest, and what won’t be total ass to manager in a few hundred years’ time.”

Raiko folded her arms. “Even if it does get destroyed eventually, that civilization would have thrived all those years. Founded lands, protected its people. The journey, rather than the destination. Most things die. Of course, except us.”

Sam realized he had been asking the wrong sorts of questions.

It wasn't about what was "right" or "wrong". Those things were, unfortunately, rather subjective.

What he should have been asking is what would allow him—and Raiko, of course—to create the sort of future for their respective peoples without people like Darren getting their greasy little fingers all over everything and sullyng it.

At the same time, having *all* of the power meant that every decision, ultimately, would have to be made by one of them.

"There's a reason that Dream and War aren't viewed with as much... warmth as Ardor and Wisdom," Raiko said.

"I don't even know who or what those are."

"Just other Kindred, usually seen in a benevolent light."

"I'd expect War not to be liked, but Dream? Sounds like the sort of person you pray to for good, sexy dreams." Sam thought about this.

"Then again, I think I see it now. You might pray for sexy dreams, but get that one dream where you're in a post-apocalyptic zombie hellscape running for your life and terrified out of your mind. That sort of thing probably doesn't engender much goodwill."

Blushing, Raiko appeared flustered by that. "That's not what...."

"The question still stands," he added. "What sort of faction do we want to make? We could make an alliance and each person runs their own thing. Unless you had another idea?"

She cleared her throat. "You're the only other person I can trust to be as incorruptible as me. I want more than an alliance."

He leveled a look at her. "A partnership?" he hazarded.

"She want yo babies!" Komachi butted in, riding up on CC like a gallant steed.

Mortified, Raiko turned bright red, then pulled down her hat to hide her face.

“Glad to see you, Komachi,” Sam said, patting her head and ignoring Raiko’s embarrassment. “So now that you’re here, you can help me decide too because entrusting the fate of potentially future millions to a two brain cell cat seems about right for my decision-making process. What sort of government do you think we should form?”

“You’re a King dude.”

“I am most certainly not.”

“Nah, you are. Pretty sure Raiko is royalty, but she not sayin’.”

Sam looked over at Raiko then. “Were you some sort of princess or something? We could be co-monarchs but that seems like a sticky situation to be in.”

Despite her embarrassment, Raiko rallied quite well. “I am going to ignore your question, and just point out that typically—”

“She wants to be in your sticky situation!” Komachi proclaimed shamelessly.

Sam clamped a hand over the cat’s mouth while aggressively petting her head. The mimic angled its lock up to—and here Sam had to guess—look at him.

“Oh look,” Raiko said breathlessly. “There’s the edge of the island just over there. See you never.”

“Raiko, you can’t run away from this!” Sam sighed, watching her disappearing dust trail. “Komachi, I love you, but sometimes you’re a little stinker.” He removed his hand and booped her nose.

“Komachi!” she cried happily.