

CHAPTER 19:

ON THE ROAD AGAIN

Darren came over and began kicking dirt and debris into the flames. “Come on, slacker. Every moment we delay is another that the spiders might come back. Besides, you want to rescue Matt, right? Well, get a move on, *hero*.”

The flames roared and spat angry embers, forcing Darren to step away and then hurriedly scurry farther, as if that had been his intention all along.

Sam reached out to the flames as if to soothe them like he would a frightened animal.

He was about to berate himself for being an idiot and thinking that *fire* of all things was something more than just a natural force when the flames reached out to his outstretched hand.

The two met and without any idea of what he was doing, the flames surrounding the First Flame were siphoned into Sam’s palm. They went directly through the leather half-glove and flowed up his arm to nestle warmly in his chest.

The First Flame, still within the campfire, shrank and grew hotter, going from a ruddy glow to bright orange, then into a dazzling white heat that Sam could just barely tolerate. It was like somebody had opened a forge in front of his face.

Through squinted eyes, Sam saw the flames coalesce into a single white-hot glowing coal. The surrounding wood burned to ash in an instant, covering it slightly.

Reaching in without thinking of the danger, Sam plucked the soot-dusted white-hot coal from the ashes. As soon as it touched his fingers, the coal cooled until it resembled obsidian with tiny glowing fissures.

The coal gave off a tremendous heat, yet Sam felt wholly unharmed.

[Coal of the First Flame]

(Living Element) (X-Class)

(Unique)

The First Flame is tied to your very soul. It will persist as long as you do, and as long as you keep it alive, it will provide you with warmth and power. There are countless creatures, many gods among them, across the various Worldshards of this Shadrune Realm that would see its fire snuffed out. Keep it secret. Keep it safe. Grants [Flamekeeper] while you hold it.

Current Heat Level: 88/100

[Flamekeeper]

(Elemental Ability) (X-Class)

(Unique)

As the First Flame's bearer, the fate of the First Flame is entirely in your hands. You can choose to borrow some of the [Coal of the First Flame's] Heat in order to empower yourself temporarily, or use it to bolster your mana. However, overuse will eventually kill the [Coal of the First Flame] and the First Flame will never shed its light again.

Sam stared at the notifications. *What the hell did I just do?*

He hastily sorted through the information.

The coal was X-Class, rather than F-Class like most items and abilities Sam had. Even the [Flamekeeper] elemental ability was X-Class.

The Shatterblade notably had been S-Class, so where exactly did the [Coal of the First Flame] sit in the hierarchy of these classifications?

It also wasn't his first X-Class that he'd seen. His [Call of the Void], which was listed as a Soulbrand was also X-Class and Unique-rarity as well.

Classes were listed higher than rarities— without a sublevel too— so presumably that was a greater indication of power and value.

Considering the coal's rarity was Unique, that had to have something to do with it. Unique-rarity didn't have a sublevel, or level attached either.

Perhaps it was as simple as Unique meant something that was one-of-a-kind and therefore couldn't necessarily fit into the traditional hierarchy.

Of more pressing matters, the coal needed to be kept alive. Not unless he wanted to abandon it, and Sam was not inclined to do so.

It would need fuel of some sort, though at present the coal's heat was almost full. He had time to discern whether that fuel was merely wood, kindling and the like, or something more material or even magical in nature.

Once he figured out how to fuel the coal, Sam would then be able to reliably borrow from its strength to bolster his mana and empower his body. He was curious as to what exactly that entailed.

It was possible the coal empowering him would temporarily raise his stats, or even boost the level of his skills. There was little hint as to what empowering did, so this was all pure conjecture.

But it would be a lie to say that he wasn't looking forward to finding out what he could do with the coal's aid.

Sam would have preferred to do as the Shard asked and keep the coal private. However, with 10 other people around the campfire, it was pretty hard to avoid notice when somebody vacuums up a literal *fire*.

Not to mention that plucking a brightly glowing coal didn't help matters.

The questions poured in like rain.

“What's that?”

“What did he just do?”

“Dude, are you okay?”

“How did he do that?”

The only question he was interested in answering was Komachi's as she sauntered up to him, tail raised high like a flagpole. “Want me to distract 'em?”

“Please.”

Komachi turned around, got up on her hind legs, and began to dance. Not just the awkward sort of dancing you can sometimes train a dog to do, but actual dancing. And better than that earlier flossing, too.

Give her a grass skirt and she'd fit right in at one of those corny tourist lu'aus.

Surprisingly, it actually worked.

While not everybody was focused on Komachi, a fair number of them were. Enough that Sam could pocket the coal. He felt that putting it into his Inventory wouldn't work, and besides, it took him time to access it and would be more noticeable.

A few people watched Sam despite his attempt at stealth, but there was nothing he could do about that. Thankfully, those that had kept a keen eye on him were mostly his friends. Darren and Lisa being the sole exceptions.

Once they were all packed up and ready to go, Darren slinked back to the campfire and, much to Sam's enjoyment, returned a few moments later sporting black burn marks on his gloves.

Sam would have liked to see him burning his hands as he dug through the ashes of the fire, looking for something rare and valuable that Darren assumed Sam had.

He cast several dirty looks at Sam as they proceeded into the forest, green-blue burning torches illuminating their way. Many creatures in the forest seemed to skitter, slink, or slither away from the light.

Nobody spoke about what had happened, mostly because the fear of what they were doing was winning out over their waning adrenaline.

Several people shot looks Darren's way, who gleefully took up the lead like a shepherd herding his lost flock.

Sam was certain that Darren wasn't going the right way. If only because the farther into the forest they went, the fewer signs of spiders they saw.

"Trust me," he said with a surprising amount of sincerity. "I'm curving around where we were, don't want to go straight through where the spiders are retreating, do we?"

It all sounded so *reasonable*. Every time Sam or somebody else asked Darren a question, he always appeared to have just the right answer.

Those that hadn't worked with him bought into it. They were looking for somebody to lead them, and Darren was gladly filling that role.

But for Sam and Kale, they had noticed the change and were cautiously skeptical. Whereas Komachi didn't like anything Darren had to say, but Sam suspected that had more to do with Komachi intensely disliking Darren in general.

Kale dropped to the rear where Sam was keeping watch, mostly to avoid uncomfortable talks with the other survivors about what he had done to the fire, and because if Darren walked them face-first into a spider's nest, he wanted to be as far away from him as possible.

"What's up with Darren?" Kale asked. "That man had all the charisma and social awareness of a dead rat. Now he's suddenly got every answer, like he was reading them off of a card or something."

"I know," Sam said. He gently petted Komachi's head sticking out of the top of his breastplate. "Something's not right. I can't say exactly what, only that—"

"No need to convince me," Kale said. "It's fishy all right." He gave Sam a knowing look. "Just like your fire magic. You wanna talk about *that* yet, or are you going to have Komachi do another dance and distract everybody? You do know we have working memories, right? Everybody will still remember what you did."

Sam felt a stab of panic, and an old and long-buried urge to flee reared its ugly head. But he wasn't the type to run away from a fight anymore. And if he had any say, he would never be that scared little kid again.

"I could tell you," Sam agreed. "If I knew what to say. But the truth is... I don't have any idea about what's going on much more than you do. I'm still piecing it together."

Kale nodded solemnly. "I can respect that, brother. You know I won't pry, but watch out for Lisa, yeah?"

Sam blinked, surprised. "*Lisa*? Are you sure?"

“Yeah, I’ve seen her type before,” Kale said. “Something ain’t right about her, s’all I’m saying. She keeps giving you the side-eye when you aren’t looking.”

“I did save her.”

“Yeah, yeah, you’re a hero,” Kale said, waving his hand dismissively. “But we’re not back home. She can’t just file a police report, or go back to her swanky hotel, can she? No, you saved her. You might save her *again*. Know what I’m saying?”

Sam truly didn’t. He wasn’t inept with women, but few women wanted to do more than a one-night-stand. He wasn’t bad looking by any stretch, but a few dates were all he could usually secure until they realized he was one paycheck away from being a beach bum.

Turns out that stocking shelves wasn’t ideal boyfriend material.

Only Raiko cared about him long term, but that was probably due to Sam being War Incarnate rather than a potential romantic partner. She did try to trick him into a blind date once, though he got out of there fast.

Still, Raiko had a fierce way about her that was hard to forget, especially now that he understood magic was real.

Kale frowned at him and squinted at the brilliance of Sam’s torch. “Sometimes I’m not sure if you’re being thick on purpose, or you just don’t give a fuck.”

“Usually the latter.”

“Ha ha, very funny.” Kale pushed some branches out of their way. “What I mean is that you might want to watch what you say around her or else she’ll get the wrong idea. You know, the sort of thing that happens at the end of a book right before the words, ‘Happily Ever After?’”

It clicked into place for Sam. “No way.”

“Yes way.”

They both looked over at Lisa, who, at that moment, had decided to flip her hair over one shoulder and look back. She panicked, nearly fell over some tree roots, and was helped up by Emmitt, who always seemed to be nearby.

The Scout glared at Sam as if he had pushed her and turned his attention to Lisa.

“See what I mean?” Kale said, keeping his voice low. “Can’t blame her. Pretty romantic, really, when you think about it.”

“Oh, shove it,” Sam said with a derisive snort.

“No, really! Think about it. You’re all alone on some fantasy island—”

“That is home to an ogre the size of an apartment complex,” Sam added helpfully.

Kale glared at him, but continued undaunted, “—with a hunky man wielding a massive sword who just happened to save your life not once, but twice.” At Sam’s blank look, he added, “The lizards, remember? You basically saved the whole group from having to go toe-to-toe with them.”

“All right, I’ll give you that. But that hardly means she—”

Kale raised a finger and wagged it admonishingly. “Ah-ah. I’m not done.” He cleared his throat softly. “So, fantasy island, hunky Hawaiian, and before you call yourself a haole, we both know people from outside of Hawai’i don’t know one tanned dude from the other. And you’ve saved her while her hubby-to-be ditched her ass to be eaten by those *things* back on Earth.”

Sam was about to tell Kale how he should take up a Profession as a Romance Writer with that sappy shit when Darren called back, “We’re here. Look for any signs of Matt, but stay quiet!”

Kale and Sam exchanged looks. Sam drew his greatsword and held it at the ready, while Kale pulled one axe from his belt. Together, they waded through the underbrush strewn with silk strands, looking for their lost party member.