

CHAPTER 153 – GODLY GOSSIP

Sam and Volquist talked for a while afterwards. Not all of it was relevant or even important. For once, Sam felt like he was getting to know somebody without all the baggage that this new normal would have.

Anybody he met now would be suspect. At least in the sense that they might want something from him. But Volquist had already made it clear what he wanted: to make amends, and for once be on an Incarnate's good side.

For being a god of secrets and shadows, he was remarkably forthright.

He had made it known upfront that he couldn't tell Sam everything. And that, much of what he could tell him Sam would likely already know, but he entertained Sam's many questions, regardless.

Most of them, he couldn't answer. There were apparently laws and rules that even gods had to abide by, at least according to their Pantheon, and the strength and hierarchy of it.

He did tell Sam about the various other Pantheons, to which Sam—who had been interested in Greek, Roman, Norse, and Egyptian mythos ever since he was a young boy—took great interest in. Much to the surprise of the Hidden One.

A name that Sam disliked using, preferring to use the god's actual name. It was something that Volquist consistently seemed amused and perhaps even a little flattered by.

There were many questions about stats, the best way to improve them, and what they all meant. Most of what Sam asked, Volquist couldn't tell him about. There was no method that a god possessed that would provide guidance, especially at such a low level as Sam.

To which Sam had even more questions.

These, at least, were things that Volquist could answer. Within reason, at least.

“There are a lot of Ranks,” Volquist told him, kicking his feet up on the table. “More than would make sense for me to list out to you right now. Just know that Copper is the lowest of them all, which I take you’ve likely already worked out. You’re still in what’s called the First Echelon.”

“I haven’t seen that anywhere,” Sam told him. “I’ve looked. People don’t even seem to get class ratings.”

“Not as such,” Volquist agreed. “You could think of the Echelons as equivalent to class ratings if you really wanted to.” He lifted an eyebrow, his dark eyes twinkling with starlight and mirth. “You’d be wrong, of course, but you *could* think of it like that. It’s less wrong than some other methods I’ve seen people use.”

“So what’s after Copper?” Sam asked, eager to know.

“Tin, then Zinc, then the capstone of the First Echelon, Topaz.”

“Topaz?” Sam asked. “Weird. You’d think it’d be another metal or something. There was a bit of a motif going.”

“Oh, it’s still going,” Volquist assured him. “Every capstone of an Echelon is a gem. Topaz, Sapphire, Ruby, Emerald, so on and so forth, all the way up to Diamond.”

“I do like the sound of Diamond Rank,” Sam said with a far-away look on his face. He was already imagining how strong he’d be at Tin, but then Diamond insinuated itself into his thoughts. He snapped out of it and looked at Volquist. “What Rank are you?”

The god wagged a finger at him. “There are some things beyond the mortal Ranks. Which, as I’ve told you before, *I cannot talk to you about*. But I was Diamond. Once.”

Despite everything, Sam had to admit he was impressed. That Volquist was already past Diamond Rank, which had to be an *incredibly high level*, was nothing to scoff at.

Sometimes he forgot just how powerful the person sitting across the table from him truly was. And yet... he was concerned with the well-being and affairs of a Copper.

A Copper Incarnate, but still just a Copper.

It illustrated just how far he had to go still.

“Okay so, Ranks aren’t similar to class ratings—”

“I didn’t say that,” Volquist interrupted. “Only that you’d be wrong for thinking they’re the same. They are similar, just not equivalent. Think of them like power bands that overlap. Copper sits within F-Class, but Tin straddles the line between F-Class and E-Class. The class ratings are mostly for inanimate things, Ranks are for living things. Once you think of it like that, it’s a bit easier to wrap your head around.”

That only spurred on even more questions, which Volquist happily answered to the extent of his restrictions. Sam learned more than he ever thought possible, and quite a lot about things he never even considered.

Especially once Volquist got talking about the other gods and Pantheons. It seemed even the gods were not immune to drama. Unsurprising really, they probably invented it.

It was nice—if immensely odd—to hear the things that gods griped about as if they were on the same level of annoyance as a neighbor running their lawnmower early on the weekends.

At the end, however, Volquist was still a god with plenty to do if he was to ever reclaim his position and use the induction of Earth and Islegard to his—and by extension, to Sam’s—benefit.

When Sam awoke, he felt around immediately for the [Seeker Stone] and found it on a nearby narrow shelf within the rejuvenating pool.

He immediately stuffed it into his Inventory.

And only then did he notice the changes around him.

There was an awful lot of. Like somebody had just set off one of those color bombs filled with powdery dye. The grass was blue, the trunk of the Sacred Tree was blue, oddly enough, the water wasn't blue, but that was one of the few things that weren't.

Sam had somehow escaped the blast of blue that seemed to coat most of the area surrounding the spring.

A quick glance at a *very* blue Raiko suggested that she had been at the epicenter of the *bluesplosion*.

He checked his HP, more out of curiosity than real concern and was pleased to see it over 75%. Sleeping apparently had helped him a great deal or perhaps it magnified the Sacred Tree's healing springs?

The runes were all but depleted. He didn't mean to take up all of its power and felt a little bad about it but then remembered that his HP was probably larger than everybody else's combined.

And if not, then it was likely pretty close.

In a way, he was the group's tank. Not that he had intended to be that when he first started, but it seemed fine by him so long as he could dish out punishment at the same time.

He never wanted to be the sort of tank that just stood there and absorbed all the damage, while everybody else had the fun of killing and maiming things.

Alone, a tank like that was little more than a war of attrition, boring and uninspired. He just had a huge Health pool, and that was a very

different thing, especially when he had a new greatsword that literally spat magma at his enemies.

Would it technically become Lava mana once it was released from the sword or wherever it came from? Being a native son of Hawai'i, he knew the difference between the two, but he wondered if the Shard knew or cared, for that matter.

Pulling himself out of the water, Sam went through the rather slow and arduous process of putting his equipment on again. It was interesting to note that his stats hadn't changed when the armor was removed just before he was put into the spring.

Was it the proximity of the equipment that kept the stat bonuses? He doubted the defenses and enhancements would still apply, but it was an interesting question all the same.

So was the one that kept rattling around in his brain. Would he have to sleep more as a person with high Vigor? Was that the trick to recovering HP faster? Or did something else happen while he was asleep that he entirely missed?

Scrolling through his notifications, he didn't see anything.

That left either something that Volquist did, the spring, or sleep.

It was a mystery for another time because Sam had enough of resting and recovery for a lifetime. A full day spent soaking and snoozing was too much for him.

He could already see the sky just beginning to lighten, the distant Tower's shadow making a pillar of darkness across the world.

Though he wasn't fully healed, the spring was all but used up and with just shy of 5,000 HP, Sam wasn't too worried. He felt better than he had in a very, very long time.

One of the perks of high Vigor seemed to be a glowing constitution that would make any thirty-year-old green with envy. Despite

sleeping with his head tilted back and in an upright position, he had no kinks, no tightness, no discomfort whatsoever.

The last time Sam remembered sleeping in odd places and waking up utterly pain free and ready to go was when he was a little brat running around whatever foster home he hadn't been kicked out of yet.

I could get used to this.

It was only once he put on all of his equipment again did he feel whole. It was... strange. That he had felt more complete only once he had his armor on.

Maybe it was an Incarnate of War thing. He didn't feel any compulsion to wear lighter clothing when he was in what was effectively his home.

Back on Earth, he had lounged in a t-shirt and boxers for most of the day if he wasn't going out anywhere. Yet here... he didn't feel the need to have different outfits or wear something more normal.

To him, this *was* normal.

It helped that his equipment didn't seem to get dirty the same way clothes did. After all the fighting, running, sweating, and bleeding he'd done in his gear, they should have reeked.

They didn't smell *great*, which reminded him he needed to put his [Basic Maintenance] to work, but they didn't offend either.

Oh, that gives me an idea. But first...

“Raiko, you good? You're looking a little... *blue*.”

She turned her head slowly and far too controlled to be anything but fuming mad. Her forced smile said a lot more than any words might as she turned back to whatever she'd been doing.

Komachi was doing something with Chompers nearby, both coated in the same blue. They didn't appear to need any help apart from a

good scrub in the spring, so he waved goodbye and headed to the only “building” they had.

It was a large domed thing of stone and earth, beautiful in its simplicity and with a large open floor plan and several rooms. All of which lacked doors currently because apparently Raiko could create a dome from the Skyshard’s matter and make it support itself, but doors were the sticking point.

He checked the rooms, trying not to peek too much, and noticed that they were all empty. Perhaps the others had already slept or they were still busy doing something else.

It didn’t matter to Sam. What was important was that the dome was empty. Sam went out to the Archflame and brought it inside. The Archflame roared away happily in its little designated spot.

Smithing in here would help muffle the sound, which was why he checked to see if anybody was asleep, but it had another benefit he had started to wonder about.

He was tethered to the Archflame. So long as he never let the fire go out, it would grow in strength. Already the flame was larger and stronger than it had ever been. The [Archflame Coal], the beating heart as it were of this magnificent magical flame, was hard to see within the flames themselves, but he could feel its comforting presence.

Sam only had to reach in to pluck it out. The flames wouldn’t harm him. Smithing used fire, and he had a magical flame right here. There had to be a way to combine the two, right?

It was tempting to try it now, but with his Blacksmithing at level 0, he wasn’t foolish enough to try it.

Just being close was comfort enough.

Sam took out the [Mobile Forge], [Simple Anvil], and the rest of his tools, setting them beside the Archflame.

It was time to get some crafting done.