

# CHAPTER 3:

## SHARD'S END

**Welcome to [Worldshard: Islegard]!**

**Status: Undergoing Ascension**

A rising tide of dragonfire surged towards Sam and the marshaling line of mages, archers, and knights around him. It consumed everything in its path, melting rock into magma before the wave even touched it.

Magical barriers flew up, conjured by dozens of mages working in tandem. Knights bunkered down beneath tower shields that locked together to form a solid wall.

The barriers shattered just as soon as they went up. Shields melting, the knights cried out in agony even as healing circles lit up beneath their boots.

Crazy as ever, Raiko dove into the dragonfire, apparently more a ninja than a samurai. It all happened so fast, but somehow Sam found he could track the sheer speed at which she cleaved the coming wall of dragonfire apart.

Only, the inferno didn't rush past them. The dragonfire rushed into Raiko's dual katanas, having absorbed the power. A burning, red-white aura enveloped her.

**[Raiko (Sage LVL 199)] casts [Glyph Infusion: Dragonfire] on you.**

**You gain [Dragonfire Resistance X].**

Most of the fighting had been like this. Sam, still in just his Hawaiian print board shorts, surrounded by countless knights, mages, and uncountable heroes.

He had all the time in the world to wonder at what he was seeing. The elves and dwarves worked together to fight these horrifying Empty creatures that took strange and unsettling forms.

Another Empty reared up to Sam's right, pressing on the already thinned battle lines there. He had expected the Empty to look... well, monstrous. But he didn't expect the strange husk-like shells they slithered, crawled, or flew around in.

They resembled dust given a nightmarish form, each possessing some sort of magical sphere inside that, once damaged, dissolved the whole monster.

The problem was it took a group of people to bring a single one of the Empty down.

Despite the clear danger all around him, Sam itched to contribute beyond being bait.

The Empty clearly didn't possess much in the way of higher faculties, because they kept flinging themselves en masse against the ranks of heroes protecting him and Raiko.

While Raiko went out to battle against some higher-level monster or other, Sam was told to stay back and do his part by baiting the worst of the creatures.

So, Sam had waited, and waited, and *waited some more* while people around him fought, bled, and died protecting him.

He couldn't stand it anymore.

*What good is power if I don't use it?* he thought sourly. He glanced back at Raiko to make sure she wouldn't interfere. *Good.*

Turning to Komachi, the chubby gold-shaded British shorthair beside him, he said, “I want you to stay nearby, somewhere you can chuck a potion at me, okay?” He knelt beside her and petted her head, then looked at the little otter dressed in fine robes. “Haman, can you make me a portal over there where that big Empty is thrashing about?”

Haman pulled out a small silver key from his robes and thrust it into the air without another word. Sam didn’t know how magic worked, but this little otter sure knew his business.

With a twist of the key, a doorway appeared overlooking the sharp and jagged cliffs where the fighting was worst. “Thanks,” Sam said, shouldering the [Shatterblade] and leaping through.

Sam landed heavily next to a hulking knight in shining golden plate armor. The man looked surprised behind the visor of his helm, but said nothing as Sam charged forward, summoning the strange [Raze] power once more.

Scarlet lightning lanced up and down the [Shatterblade] and crackled in the air.

He was still unused to the strength and speed he had, so he found himself before the monstrous Empty in an eyeblink. Skidding to a halt, Sam barely had enough time to dive to the right to avoid a scything mantis-like limb that pierced deeply into the craggy ground.

Getting to his feet quickly, Sam fell into his HEMA training by default. He shifted his stance and adopted the Ox Guard to defend against another overhead blow.

What would have taken him several seconds to accomplish back on Earth took a fraction of a single second. While Sam was getting into position, the world around him barely seemed to move.

Realizing that the Empty's insectile leg was still stuck into the ground, Sam stepped forward and swung with a hewing strike to the limb.

The [Shatterblade] passed through the dust-caked creature like it wasn't even there. Sam felt the slight tug that told him he had hit anything at all.

Living up to its name, the [Shatterblade] sent splintering cracks all along the Empty's limb. It rose skyward into its school bus-sized body and the creature gave an unsettling, layered trumpet of pain.

Long ropes and grapnels were thrown up to the creature's large body. Various fighters climbed with speed to reach its balloon-sized core, now exposed as its outer husk had broken into motes of dust.

Remembering his earlier accidental leap, Sam crouched down and focused on the creature's core. He sent everything he had into his legs and leapt.

The results were terrifyingly effective.

Struggling to get his weapon in line, Sam barely managed to swipe the sword through the Empty's core before he was rising well above it like a catapulted projectile.

Below him, the army of people cheered and shouted as the creature fell.

With Raiko talking about levels and stats, he had expected to see an EXP notification or level up or... something.

Instead, the shattered core of the Empty turned into shimmering motes and floated away. They joined the thin streams of light that flowed like rivers through the sky into the massive glowing Shard at the center of everything.

**Islegard Ascension: 37%**

From his higher vantage point, Sam realized that despite their plan to draw attention to themselves, the rest of the Empty were decimating the forces of the Shard's protectors.

Worse, if the Shard's Ascension *required* the destruction of the Empty to help fuel it, they needed all hands on deck to slaughter as many as possible.

There was no mistaking that the Shard's gathering streams of power received a surge whenever a particularly large Empty was killed.

With the red light of [Raze] wrapped around him, Sam braced himself for the fall. This, more than anything, was the worst part of having superhuman levels of strength.

He could fight against all sorts of physics, but falling? He had no way to speed that up. Not like Raiko, who could zip around like gravity was a mere suggestion.

He was pretty sure he saw her quadruple jump in the air, and in opposing directions, too.

Which was just plain unfair.

While it had taken only a matter of seconds to reach this dizzying height, where Sam could see disjointed islands floating around a central glowing crystal the size of a skyscraper, it would take him several times that just to land again.

So long, in fact, that another Empty monster filled in the vacant spot Sam had just cleared.

Despite his wishes, Sam's cat hitched a ride by leaping through a newly created portal and attaching to his back.

Yowling with glee, Komachi hit him with a potion bottle that transformed from a yellow liquid into coarse sand.

The gritty potion flowed over him and clung to his limbs, weighing him down.

**You gain the effect of [Quickfall Potion X].**

He plummeted fast, more than sheer weight should allow. Despite the magical weight, he was able to move his limbs freely.

Seeing little recourse except to roll with the strangeness, Sam reversed his grip and plunged the [Shatterblade] into the new threat below.

Any idle fantasies of landing on the hulking thing's back while hacking away at it evaporated the moment the blade made contact.

With his supernatural falling speed, he struck the Empty with the force of a crashing meteor.

The crater that formed from his impact threw up dust, obscuring what was left of the dissolving creature. It hadn't known what hit it before it died.

Rising to his feet, Sam shouldered the blade, resting the flat of it against his shoulder and scanning for any further threats. "You got any more of those potions, Komachi?"

"Komachi gotchu." Her claws must have been digging into his skin, but he couldn't feel it at all.

*I could really get used to this power.*

Komachi dumped potion after potion onto Sam, flooding his vision with effects and covering his body in a messy splatter of colors. Healing, warding, multi-attack, haste; he got hit by so many buffs he couldn't keep track of them all.

Setting his sights on a bending line of warriors, Sam grinned, despite the danger all around him. Several nearby people backed away at his manic expression. After all, he looked like a nearly naked man fresh from a Hawai'i color festival.

Few people smiled when a battle was going this poorly.

One foot pressed into the stone, Sam raised one hand to cup his mouth and shouted, "CLEAR THE WAY!"

His voice boomed, clearly magically enhanced by one of the countless potions Komachi had dumped on him. He noticed a strange [Toxicity] symbol pop up but felt fine, so he ignored it for the time being.

*This new body seems more than capable of handling itself.*

The people ahead split like the red sea and Sam wasted no time bursting through the broken line and into the swarm of Empty beyond.

At first, he tried to adopt the HEMA techniques he learned with the longsword. A large hulking sword like the one he now employed was clearly different, but the proper way to hold both was roughly the same. Besides, it felt just as light as one of the feders he used for tournaments.

Sam flowed from the High Ox Guard to the more defensive Longpoint Guard, keeping the blade low and ready to intercept any scything limbs and spear-like appendages.

Unfortunately, his enemies didn't understand tactics. The use of stances and guard positions were entirely lost on them. Sam, quick to adapt, abandoned the lessons he had been taught.

Wild chopping swings like he was aiming for a home run lopped off countless limbs from various Empty creatures.

The proximity of an Incarnate drove them wild with hunger, and Sam soon found himself able to slash, chop, and hew with wild abandon.

**Islegard Ascension: 39%**

What protectors were still nearby were just as wary of him as they were the Empty, and instead of inhibiting his unconventional fighting style, they encircled the creatures and attacked from the outside.

To an outside observer, it looked like Sam was fighting both the Empty and the Shard's protectors, and against all odds, he was *winning*.

Iron-hard skin sparked as a diving spear-appendage struck Sam across the shoulders. He twisted and hewed the limb clean off, burst forward, and knocked the creature the size of a small sedan onto its side.

An overhand chop with the [Shatterblade] ended its struggle, but there were always three or four Empty to replace the one he had just killed.

Despite the overwhelming odds, Sam laughed and hollered with sheer barbaric joy. This was *fun*. All his life, he had felt stifled by the shitty reality he had been saddled with. And now, for the first time since he could remember, he was *free*.

He didn't need to worry about hurting somebody in a tournament if he attacked too brashly. There were no points. No referees watching to see if you put a foot out of line.

### **Islegard Ascension: 43%**

Laughing with reckless abandonment, Sam felt like a blender blade. No matter how or where he struck, there was an Empty that died. He felt completely, utterly uninhibited.

And it was the most fun he had ever experienced in his entire life.

The rush of catching that perfect wave paled in comparison to this. Sam's body was in perfect concert with his mind. He didn't even need to think before he attacked.

And as he fought on, the frantic seconds turning to minutes, he began to feel... *something*. He wasn't sure what it was, but he felt connected to his enemies in a way that made him aware of them without looking at them.

An Empty, in the shape of a twisted rhino, threw aside its companions in a mad charge toward him. Sam shouted in alarm as he saw the creature surge forward, juke to the left, and then gore him through the side.

Frantic, he twisted about and put the [Shatterblade] in line only to find... nothing there.

*What the—?*

The Empty arrived a fraction of a moment later, pitting its horn against the red-sparking blade and shattering on impact. They had no face to display surprise, but nevertheless, Sam could have sworn the creature was.

Sam had no time to wonder about what happened as the rest of the Empty rushed through the clear space to get at him.

Black lightning lanced across the battlefield, passing mere inches from Sam's left ear. He blocked a strike from a scything Empty, but found his eye oddly drawn to the black lightning as it zigged and zagged through the morass of enemies without ever touching one.

He lost its trail for a second before it rose into the sky, backlit by the glowing skyscraper-sized Shard and striking a miasma swirling around the lower reaches of the crystal.

In a flash, the miasma burned away, revealing something overwhelming in scale. It was like a small moon, its surface pocked and pitted with a section of it missing where countless slithering tentacles lashed out.

**Islegard Ascension: 59%**

The moon-sized creature moved like a nautilus, scooting through the glittering space toward the Shard. Sam didn't need to see the nameplate that popped up over its massive body to know this was bad.

**[Shard Gorger LVL???)**

Despite its size, the creature was still dwarfed by the Shard itself. The light of the Shard bathed the creature, bright lines of embers rolled across its moon-like surface.

If it harmed it, Sam couldn't tell. A moment later, the gorger collided with the Shard, sending spidery cracks across the massive glowing symbol of hope and light.

Streamers of blue filtered light surged from the damaged Shard, and a heart-rending sound of pain echoed for all to hear. The protectors cried out in despair at the same time as the Empty howled with glee.

The tide was turning against them.