

CHAPTER 180 – HOPE OF HAMAN

Komachi collapsed and curled up, breathing labored.

Confused, Chompers opened his lid to howl and began to attack the cart's side.

Boxes rained down around the mimic.

“Ran. Out. Of. Inventory... Couldn't stop!” Komachi wheezed.

Chaos reigned until Kai and Sam were able to simultaneously calm the mimic, pick Komachi up, and haul what remained of her cart away to the workshop where they had two locations for storage.

The mimic still tried to take a bite out of Komachi's merchant cart whenever he thought nobody was looking, but he settled down enough when it seemed Komachi just needed some rest and food.

Sam held her in his arms as Kai unloaded her cart. “What were you doing out there by yourself?” Sam asked.

He tried not to be mad even though it had been his first sensation upon seeing Komachi hurt and tired. Why wasn't anybody watching over her?

You mean, like you? he thought to himself bitterly.

The dullahans were wounded and though Sam was trying to work on them, it was slow going. Bronze was not the best material to patch them with. He had gotten one of the two downed dullahans up and walking about, but it was clear it would not be fighting anytime soon.

“Machi wasn't.” His cat gulped down some cold water Kai offered her. “Look at the cart.”

Sam's thoughts stopped cold. "Where...?" He looked at the unveiled body of Raiko. She had been buried under the boxes like another package. "Where is Lenal?" Sam asked, scooping her up.

"Explorin' the cave," Komachi said weakly. "Raiko passed out on the way back."

Matt had chosen that moment to wake up from his brief sleep—the lucky bastard—and he helped Kai unload the rest of the stuff while Sam took Raiko back to her bed.

This time, however, he didn't summon a mandragora to keep watch. It was nearly useless anyway. Raiko would do whatever she wanted, and he wasn't able to stop her short of physically restraining her.

And aside from that being a rather horrible look, he didn't have the time.

He surely had the Strength though.

Sam scooped Komachi up from his shoulder and shoved her into Raiko's face. Komachi's black toe beans gently pressed and kneaded against her face.

Raiko woke up with a sharp intake of breath. For a moment, her eyes were black rather than white, until the darkness washed away like paint.

Who, naturally, started coughing. "Why?" she cried. "Why a second time?"

Komachi gave Sam a sheepish look. "I'm kinda dirty again."

"I'll give you a bath in the river," Sam offered. He peeked out around Komachi to get a look at Raiko. "This is what happens if you keep pushing yourself too hard. You want to be woken up like this *everytime*?"

“No! Who in their right mind would? And that’s the problem, I’m not. Not anymore.” Raiko rubbed her face with the back of her hands. “It was so much worse,” she whispered hoarsely. “After I promised I’m coming for him, I fell off their tiny Skyshard. The clouds were endless.”

“Fell off the Academy’s Skyshard?”

“No. When I’m... I don’t know, losing consciousness, I go somewhere else. I’m not sure how much is real, but it’s always...” She couldn’t manage to say more.

“Haman?” Komachi asked.

Raiko didn’t respond.

“Where are they? Have you been able to see that?” Komachi asked, this time more urgently.

“There are fragments of Skyshards around them. Hardly anything but rock. And yet, there’s a storm, slowly but surely pulling it all in. Like a singularity blotting out the horizon.”

Sam frowned, suddenly feeling the very heavy weight of the [Seeker Stone] in his pocket. He wasn’t sure it was working since they hadn’t seen any sign of Raiko’s pobul, but would it hurt to give her some hope? To know that he was doing *something* about it?

And what if it turns out to be wrong? Sam thought. *What if you tell you we’re nearing where he is, and we follow the trail but we never see him?*

Sam wondered what he would want in her position and finally came to a decision.

“That’s somethin’ to go on! It’ll be okay, Raiko. You’ll be okay,” Komachi said, trying to muster up hope when there was precious little to go around. Despite how scant Raiko’s description was to go

on, maybe if they spotted something like that nearby, they could keep an eye out for Haman.

The storm, more than anything, was a big enough landmark to look for.

Sam was pretty sure they'd see a storm of that magnitude if they were close by. It broke his heart to see Raiko so distraught and even more to see Komachi trying so fiercely to offer some sort of comfort to her.

"I'll be fine," Raiko said. Even Sam could hear the lie. "Don't worry about me."

He pulled out the [Seeker Stone]. "I didn't want to say anything earlier but... well, this is something I got from Volquist. It can supposedly track things or people that are important to you or another person you're close to. Ever since I got it, I've been using it to chart our course through the mana currents to get to where Haman is."

Raiko's eyes shined with unshed tears. "Oh, Sam," she whispered, then reached out and squeezed his hand tightly. "You've found a way to Haman. Thank you."

Then her gaze fell upon the [Seeker Stone]. Her brows drew together in confusion. "But how could you possibly? The tree listens to you?"

Sam gave her a sheepish shrug. "I asked it and it agreed to help me. I didn't want to give you any false hope in case it didn't work, but then you got worse. I need you to know that I haven't forgotten about Haman."

"She what?" Raiko asked, bewildered, then shook herself out of it and continued in higher spirits. She already seemed more like herself. "That means a lot though, truly. I only wish you told me sooner. I would take even the smallest chance to find my pobul."

“She?” Komachi asked, squinting. That wasn’t typical to refer to the tree as a woman.

“I thought I heard the tree talk once, but I was so tired and hadn’t heard it since that I thought I was hearing things.” Sam looked sharply at Raiko. “The tree is more than just a magical tree, isn’t it?”

She stared, then couldn’t come up with a better answer than, “Maybe.”

Even Komachi groaned.

“Well, of course, the Sacred Tree is!” Raiko admitted, relenting. “And no, I don’t fully understand it. It, or rather she, was never my creation, but I was given all the credit and then the responsibility because I was all that was left. Sages are few in number.”

With a wince, Raiko sat up and looked at Sam with such hope it made his heart ache. “You are already using this [Seeker Stone], if I heard you right?”

Sam nodded. “Ever since I got it. I’m planning on using it to find Kale and the others afterwards. Far as I can tell, we’re still on track. The tree has been adjusting our course to stay in line with its readings.”

Komachi looked excited. “That must mean we’re close!”

“I haven’t seen anything that resembles a storm,” Sam told her. “I think we’d see it well before reaching it if it’s as big as Raiko says.”

And it’s real, he added in the privacy of his own thoughts.

Not that he doubted Raiko, but there was no way to tell for certain exactly what was going on. There might not *be* a storm, and Sam didn’t want to pin all their hopes on looking for something that might not exist.

“It is not a simple storm,” she said quietly. “Who’s to say it can be ordinarily seen in plain sight? There is something significant beyond it. Like a Lair of sleeping dragons.”

“Storm... wait, do you mean the *Maelstrom*?”

“Perhaps? I don’t know the name of it.”

Why didn’t he connect the dots sooner?

That had to be it. Maybe the smithing fumes were actually getting to him after all. “Volquist mentioned something about a Maelstrom. He suggested it was something of a test or an obstacle. I’m not quite sure what he meant by it. It was one of the things that he couldn’t talk much about.”

“You talked with him?” She seemed surprised at that.

“It was when he gave me the [Seeker Stone],” Sam explained, putting it back into his Inventory after checking that they were still on the right track.

“So he didn’t abandon us.”

Wishing he could pull up a chair—or that they had chairs in their rooms—Sam told her everything that he could remember about his conversation with Volquist.

A lot of it, he excluded simply for the fact that it wasn’t important. The bits about their lives, that was a conversation between friends and in confidence.

He wasn’t going to betray that, especially when there was no useful information to share.

Throughout it all, Raiko and Komachi were watching him with keen interest. Komachi, partly through, fell asleep and began purring contentedly while Raiko seemed to get more alert and awake with each sentence.

Especially if it had anything to do with the Tower.

“Haman and that samurai,” she began, “their Skyshard, if what I see is real, will be destroyed by the Maelstrom. It isn’t strong enough to survive.”

Sam gently stroked Komachi’s soft and plush fur. “I’m not sure what we can do about it, Raiko.” He raised a hand to forestall an outburst. “I’m not saying we *can’t* do anything. Only that I’m not sure what. We’re already going faster than most Skyshards on this Layer can. The Black City is still the exact same distance away, and we don’t have a key to the Tower.

“The only way we’ll be able to deal with the Black City at all is if we keep running and Ascend through the Layers, but we can’t even do that right now. I’m not sure what more can be done.”

It was the closest he came to feeling hopeless and lost since the apocalypse. He had felt it often enough on Earth that it was like a punch to the gut to feel it again here, on a world where he had more power than he ever had before.

And yet, he still couldn’t use that power to stop a threat chasing them down, or to save Haman.

For a rare moment, Sam didn’t know what to do. They were already going as fast as they could. The [Seeker Stone] was pointing in the right direction, and they were headed straight for it... so what *could* they do?

Raiko appeared deep in thought. Despite how he felt, she wasn’t crushed by hopelessness. “I think there’s a way...”

Matt rushed into the room, opening the door rather roughly and panting, said, “You guys have got to see this!” He looked at the two of them, then at Komachi, then back to Raiko in bed. “You good, Raiko?”

“No, Matt, I’m not taking a dump for the seventh time,” she said with wry amusement. “You’re not going to find the secret bathroom here.”

“Be weird if you were. Also, that implies *that there is one.*”

“What’s up, Matt?” Sam asked.

“There’s some wicked-nasty storm below us and we’re heading straight for it. I thought you might want to... y’know, steer us away? I get it if you want to scare the Black City, but I doubt they give two fucks about some inclement weather. We, on the other hand, only recently acquired *doors.*”

Raiko surged to her feet, then froze. “Our Skyshard might not survive the Maelstrom at its current level either. Not unless it grows stronger.”

“The thought did cross my mind,” Matt told her. “Thus my alacrity in informing you.”

Sam turned and motioned to Matt. “Let’s go take a look from the Academy. It will give us the best vantage point to view what we’ll be dealing with. If it’s like a hurricane, we can just come in from above and dive into the eye, can’t we?”

“Don’t forget about Komachi’s commission,” his cat whispered. She reached up and gently touched his face with the soft pads of her paw. “Machi want that loot.”

Hurrying out of the sculpted dome, Sam handed Komachi to Raiko. “Go, I’ll catch up. I need to talk to Bal’daz. If we’re going to be entering a deadly storm, we should probably get a move on with the [Workshop] and he might have an idea about how we could better protect the Skyshard.”