

# CHAPTER 133: THE TOWER OF ART

Raiko took the lead, venturing deeper into the Aker Academy. Though close enough that Sam would still gain the stat boost from the frontal position of [Tactic: Delving].

Injured from his clash with the Void Scion, Sam got extra benefit from the added Vigor. No one knew to the extent how low his HP currently was, except from Komachi.

He would have rather hid it from her, but there was no way to do it.

His cat refused to go back to Raiko and the safety of her hat. Komachi stayed perched on Sam's shoulder, as if being separated caused his current condition.

In fact, two out of their group could tell just by their [Wound Sense] that he was badly hurt and even resting and eating didn't bring his HP up much. It *was* recovering, but so slow that it would be days, maybe even a week, until Sam was back at full strength.

His MP had recovered far better, outpacing his HP's recovery dramatically. He was now at a little over a third of his max HP, with 312 MP at his disposal.

Sam had wanted to try out his new [Escha Essence], but he barely could keep up with Raiko in his current state. He was strong enough to fight, and still could likely fight better than anybody besides the Sage, but he was all-too-aware how badly he was wounded.

*Who knew that apocalyptic mana is hard on the body,* Sam thought sarcastically.

Fortunately, Raiko was able to cast [Glyph: Refresh] on herself, replenishing significant amounts of MP over time to maintain that new kind of rift.

Additional casts were spread mostly evenly throughout the group. They made it through the undercroft, taking out a few [Ridewords] along the way with some well-timed attacks from the whole group. There wasn't much room for a [Rideword] to copy or attack if it was killed in the first volley.

Lenal's giggles were just a *touch* unhinged as she gained a handful of Mage level ups just from the little bit of fighting she participated in.

"We're power leveling her," Matt said aloud. "You know, we could charge people for this sort of thing. Not you though, Lenal. You're part of the group now, but others. I'd have *killed* for all the Experience she must be getting, and you know there have got to be people some suckers with more cash than levels. I should know, I was one."

In the middle of fighting more monsters, a lancing pillar of fire poured out of Raiko's katana. [Rift: Ancient Magic] tore through the air.

The charged spell crashed through flying book after flying book until it smashed into a [Elder Rideword] high in the rafters.

It left a streaky afterimage in Sam's eyes that didn't go away, no matter how much he rubbed them. Eventually it went away, but Sam still saw something odd whenever he blinked from time to time.

*Is that a... rune?*

If he ever tried to focus on it, the image vanished. Only when he wasn't paying attention, would it appear again. As if it was always there, just out of view somehow.

*Weird.*

**You defeat the [Rideword (Level 24)].**

**You gain substantial Experience for slaying an Even Match monster!**

**You defeat the [Rideword (Level 23)].**

**You gain substantial Experience for slaying an Even Match monster!**

**You defeat the [Rideword (Level 24)].**

**You gain substantial Experience for slaying an Even Match monster!**

**You defeat the [Elder Rideword (Level 28 – Copper)].**

**You gain immense Experience for slaying a Tough monster!**

Somehow, Sam gained full participation for the [Ridewords], even the strongest of the bunch that were obliterated by Raiko's charged up magic. It took a while to build, but when it went off, it was devastating.

"It costs *so much* MP," she wheezed.

Matt was getting more and more stingy with his poison daggers. He couldn't recover all of them, and he was quickly running out of demon teeth. He griped and grouched about it all throughout the fighting.

That in itself was something of an improvement, if only because it meant Matt was getting increasingly more comfortable with combat. Something that most people—Sam and Raiko excluded, it seemed—struggled with.

As they were forced to fight more and more, both Kai and Matt had grown accustomed to it. In Sam's mind, relaxed fighters were far

better than high-strung ones who could—and likely would—jump at the slightest thing.

It was hard to admit, but the pair had come an incredibly long way in just a short period of time. Their progress, while still a ways away from Copper, was nothing short of miraculous.

Raiko came upon the ladder first that led up into the Tower of Art.

There was a faint, distant humming sound that reverberated through the stones of the tower itself. She motioned and Sam nodded to her as she climbed the rungs so swiftly that it looked like she glided on rails.

When Raiko hit the top, Sam could barely see her at the edge of his Dark Vision. He could certainly hear her cursing and swearing.

Sam wanted to call up, but even Raiko's cursing had a muted, muffled quality, as if she wasn't trying to be loud. The last thing he wanted to do was shout up at her, but it seemed there was a problem.

A lump of dark metal fell to the ground and clattered across the stonework. Sam stepped back, but it was just a broken lock.

Raiko smoothly slid down the ladder and turned to face them.

“There's a trapdoor locked and barricaded, or rather something heavy is atop it. I could bust it open with magic, but that'd be loud and—quite frankly—a waste of limited MP.”

“Your Strength not high enough?” Matt asked.

“It is my absolutely lowest stat,” she admitted plainly with a shrug.

“Perhaps Sam or Kai could push it open?”

Kai looked at her. “How high do you think my Strength is?”

She paused, then motioned at his bulky frame. “Well, you have the look of high Strength?”

“I am not sure if I should take that as a compliment or not.”

“Do you though?” Raiko asked, squinting.

“What about me?” Matt said. “Do I look—why are you laughing? Rude!”

Sam shrugged. “My Strength is well over 200 now. It should be pretty easy for me to lift it slowly.”

“My Strength isn’t even half of that,” Kai pointed out.

“Better than me,” Raiko said lightly, eyes wide.

Komachi hustled up the ladder, followed by Chompers.

Sam swore and hurried after them.

He grabbed Chompers by the handle and held him in one hand as he used the other along the vertical rail of the ladder and practically ran up the damn thing after Komachi.

“Komachi!” he hissed. “What’re you doing?”

There was some filtered conversation from below as people compared stats to one another. Even Lenal seemed to join in on the hushed conversation now that she was raking in the stat points from her Job leveling up so much.

She noticeably appeared less emaciated, and quite a bit healthier.

Komachi glanced back. He could practically see her suppressing that cat-like urge to bolt off. “I got it. I just need Chompers. Remember, Machi has [Stealth]. And non-dumpster stats.”

Sam lifted the mimic who kicked his little corgi paws frantically. If there were just four of them, it’d be more manageable, but there were so many paws. “He’s right here.”

Over a dozen corgi paws pattered against the air. Then the mimic twisted in Sam’s grip, and all those white-booted paws pattered against his armor as if the thing was trying to climb up him with its paws and nothing else.

“Do you have enough Strength to lift the hatch?” Sam was rather glad that the mimic couldn’t bark yet, because it was getting so excited now that if it were truly a corgi, it’d be howling and barking like mad with excitement.

“Dunno, maybe. Don’t worry ‘bout it.” Komachi didn’t seem to particularly care about the requirements. She had her mind set, or some trick up her furry sleeve.

There was no arguing with her when she got like this, so he let it go. He couldn’t see how Chompers would be able to get through the door with *less* noise than him pushing on it, but he was willing to have front row seats to the spectacle in any case.

Once Sam caught up to the surprisingly speedy cat, he levered Chompers up onto his shoulders and then onto the rung above him. “Have at it,” Sam whispered.

Komachi spoke quietly with the mimic, pawing at a certain section of the trapdoor. The mimic’s lid-like maw opened wide, wooden teeth bared.

It bit just a *tinypiece* out of the trapdoor.

Sam watched, utterly transfixed, as the wood turned soft as a noodle where the mimic bit into the wood.

It gently, far quieter and more reserved than Sam would have ever thought possible, slurped the rest of the wood into its body and then waited patiently while Komachi scrambled her fluffy butt through the gap, her black hind legs kicking frantically as only a cat could.

After some gentle scraping up above, the mimic pushed experimentally on the trapdoor. It opened a crack, revealing Komachi’s beaming round face.

“Good job, Komachi!” Sam congratulated her quietly. He helped the mimic get up into the Tower of Art, then hauled himself up after it.

The room they were in looked much like the one they had used to enter the undercroft, a storeroom of sorts.

One by one, the rest of the group came up while Sam waited by the dimly lit stairwell.

Unlike the other storeroom, there were no bodies. Glowing crystals stuffed into iron sconces along the wall gave off a pale blue light.

The first thing that Sam noticed, as he and Raiko took the lead up the narrow winding staircase, was just how cold it was.

The farther they climbed, the colder it got.

Every floor they passed, they took a quick peek, finding nothing, then went up. More and more devastation and signs of fighting accompanied the frigid cold.

“I hope you’ve got some Fire mana coming up again,” Sam said, referring to Raiko’s cyclical Chaos mana. “I think if we’re going to be up against anything, it’ll be ice monsters. That Ancient Magic of yours was impressive, by the way.”

Raiko raised her eyebrow at him with a slight smirk. “Rare praise indeed, coming from you.” She peeked into the next floor, but only found more of the same; trashed rooms, broken pieces of armor, and dead monsters.

They finally reached the end of the stairs. It was barred by a relatively simple, if sturdy looking door.

Raiko held up a hand, and they all stopped.

Sam could hear a subtle rustling and scraping noise, as if somebody was moving something heavy and metallic.

Counting to three silently, Sam shouldered the door open, accidentally blowing the whole thing off its hinges and taking it with him like some sort of great big shield.

Raiko hurried into the room after him, but what they expected to find—survivors hiding and barricading the windows—was instead two hulking brutish looking Gargoyles, the very same ones that Sam and Raiko had seen from the Great Hall.

“How the hell did they get inside?” Sam asked.

Raiko drew her katana. The two creatures turned from the large broken window, answering Sam’s question.

The room was a great deal larger than the outside of the Tower of Art would have suggested. Sam expected the room inside to be barely 20 feet in diameter, but it was closer to 70. Something that shouldn’t have been possible until he remembered that he now lived in a world where magic was real.

On the other side of the room was another set of curving stairs that went up even higher. By Sam’s reckoning, they should be on the uppermost floor, but clearly, that was not the case.

Voices and the sound of machinery echoed from above.

*Survivors!*

He could hardly believe anybody was alive. As injured as he was, there was no way Sam would back down now. Not when they were so close to rescuing what remained of the Aker Academy.

Placing his hand on the [Dullahan Greatsword’s] hilt more sluggishly than he would have liked, Sam stood beside Raiko and readied both [Heavy Blade] and [Essence of Escha].

Immediately, the silver-black flames that seemed to come off him whenever he touched Void mana shifted to purple-black.

The twin hulking Gargoyles screeched in an otherworldly voice, and charged them, their gargantuan three-toed feet chewing up the stone like soft dirt.