

CHAPTER 14

Orrittam made a delicate cough into his tanned hand. “If I may be so bold, Hal...?” When Hal nodded at him, he continued, “I believe you could do with some rest. It takes a great deal to spar and train with one dragon, but two? I have never heard its like before.”

“Getting tired of me already, huh?” Hal said with a chuckle.

“Against my better judgement... I must agree that you are an *interesting* student,” Naitese muttered, just loud enough for Hal to hear. “That does not make us *friends*,” she added, noticing his sly grin. “But you show respect, if begrudgingly, and you learn quickly when shown properly.”

“She is right.” Orrittam put a companionable hand on Hal’s shoulder, and another on his daughter’s. “If only you were not already smitten with Noth, I would think you two would make a wonderful pair!”

His booming laughter filled the grand, cosmic gulf of silence that radiated from both Hal and Naitese.

“Er, thanks,” Hal managed.

“What I mean,” the Noble Gold added, “is that if I didn’t know better, I would say you were a dragon at heart.” Hal heard Naitese gasp softly. “That is a grand compliment, make no mistake! But the truth is, you have been running on fumes for days. Your training is like to suffer if you do not give yourself a break.”

“I can keep going,” Hal protested weakly. He knew the score, and unfortunately Orrittam was right.

“I know *why* you are doing this,” Orrittam added softly. “You have told us what awaits you out there. What has been taken from you. But you cannot train your life away. The body needs rest, and I am not quite as young as either of you, so if you will not do it for yourself, do it for me.”

He was right. Besides, the day was getting late, and Hal was looking forward to something to eat and a warm place in which to do it.

Hal said his goodbyes and took the long way round to the Hall.

Spending copious amounts of time with the dragons was all well and good, but he needed some rest. In a real bed.

The Rangers hadn't been able to find any hint of the Kinslayers, so either they were much farther out than anybody suspected, or the Kinslayers were having difficulties of their own.

He hoped the Shiverglades swallowed them up and every trace of them was wiped from the face of Aldim, but he doubted he was that lucky.

Sooner or later, you'll have to face them.

Yes, Hal thought, once more feeling the keen loss of Besal, but training against Orrittam and Naitese will help for when they finally do ambush me.

There was a keen benefit to fighting multiple opponents, even if it meant that he ended each day bruised from head-to-toe and so sore that it hurt to breathe.

He knew, in no uncertain terms, that the Kinslayers would not risk an outright assault on Brightsong. The dragons were looking for new nests and associated lairs near Brightsong.

Over the last couple of days, they had let slip that they intended to look at the Gloamgate pass for a suitable location.

Why they would abandon Frostheart, the massive mountain that seemed to hold up the heavens at the north of Brightsong's circular valley, was anybody's guess.

The best Hal could understand was that it had been a site of some significance that neither father nor daughter seemed to want to dwell upon.

Of course, the dwarves were positively thrilled at the prospect of being able to delve into such a massive mountain without worrying about the resident dragon.

And I can't lie, he thought on his way back to the Town Hall, it would look incredibly imposing to have not one, but two dragons perched on either side of the entrance to Brightsong.

Hal felt Vorax's presence before he saw the mimic sidle up alongside him at the entrance to the Hall. The little mimic saluted with a purple pseudopod and opened the door for him with a surprising amount of respect.

"Even you?" Hal sent to the creature through their bond.

Though Beastborne's Heartsblood Path allowed him to commune with monsters, it still took a few moments to kick in as the omnigorger mimic sent a slew of images and impressions that was Vorax's version of speech.

Eventually Hal's tired mind ironed out the wrinkles of the mimic's impressions.

"Are you sure?" he asked, dumbfounded. Hal didn't know what else to say. What Vorax suggested was unconventional to say the least.

"Shashsah," Vorax said enthusiastically.

"Very well," he said, walking into the Hall. "Who am I to deny such a helpful request?"

When he had found the tiny mimic mourning the loss of his dead mother deep below in the hidden reaches of Murkmire, Hal had not thought much of the future they would have together.

Now, the mimic was the size of a large steamer trunk and bedecked in gilt and precious metals galore, with wood grain so fine that any carpenter would go green with envy looking at him.

And he says he has a way he could help me, Hal thought as he took a table far out of the way and in a corner where he could see everybody else.

Even if he managed to slip into some non-existent shadow, the rest of Brightsong would have still sought him out. He wasn't precisely needed for every little thing, but everybody had some news to report, subtly worded questions, or something they felt he needed to know even if all he did was nod and agree with their original assessment.

And so it was that Hal ate while a queue of people seeking an audience with the Founder of Brightsong shuffled past his table.

No few gazes caught the recent additions to the backs of his hands. His forearms were well-wrapped in the new training robes, but his hands remained bare. The golden dragon's head on the back of his right hand, and the white dragon's head roaring on the left.

He hadn't used any Kol'thil magic yet, but he imagined it would look quite a lot like the dragon was trying to eat the Manatree-marked *Gold Kol'thil* when it appeared on his hand.

Then again, considering that his Kol'thil would slide from his forearm to the back of his hand, maybe it'd look as if the dragon was vomiting up the

sigil. *That must be offensive to the Balesians*, Hal thought with a wry shake of his head, *not as if any remain alive to be offended in the first place.*

For now, the mark was safely tucked away on his forearm where it belonged, out of sight.

A purple pseudopod slithered up onto the table and took a wooden jug of spiced cider, depositing the whole thing into the mimic's mouth and crunching softly from his chair beside Hal.

"Are you finally done then?" Noth asked from the shadows to his left.

I thought they looked a little darker than usual... She's getting good at that. Apparently, I'm not the only one training.

"I wish," Hal said, wiping his mouth with a napkin. "Please, sit."

Noth settled into a chair beside him, placing a hand on his thigh beneath the table. "You are pushing yourself too hard."

Setting his hand atop hers he said, "I know. Trust me, Noth. I know. I'm going to take a break for a couple of days. Probably get caught up on some Bonecrafting, I could really use some new tools and I'm... well I'm curious to try some new things out."

The raven-haired beauty regarded him suspiciously.

It was clear from her reaction that she had arrived expecting a battle of sorts and was very off put by his reaction. She tried again, "You are... going to take time off of training?"

"For a day or two."

"And then what will you do?"

"Weeeellll," Hal said, leaning back in his chair and thinking to himself. "From what Orrittam could tell me, a Copper core is equivalent to 'oh dear, somewhere in the range of a Level 10 to Level 20, yes, I think that's correct,' which means I've got a lot of work to do on my Monster Core."

Hal began ticking off things on his fingers. "Then I've got the future of Brightsong's development to consider. The Kinslayers are still out there and who knows when *that* will come to a head. Then there's Besal's disappearance and not only finding a way to save him, but also discovering what that means for my Class. It would be quite the thing if I fix my Class, just to break it in the

next moment. After that, there's the mysterious mage Leis brought that hasn't woken up yet, the Dungeons all around us—”

As he began to run out of fingers, Noth put her hand over his. “I think I get it, Hal. Remember, however, that you put people in charge for a reason. Perhaps, instead of tackling all those things yourself, we convene a meeting of the Council and divvy up responsibilities appropriately?”

Hal grinned, then leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. “That was precisely what I was hoping to do after having something to eat. They are still things that, ultimately, are my responsibility. But I agree, it does not need to be *me* that investigates each of those things.”

“Just the majority of them,” Noth said with a quirked eyebrow and a faint blush on her cheek where he had kissed her.

“Since most of them pertain to me, I should hope so!”

“Shuushashi?” Vorax asked.

“Yes, yes,” Hal said. “You're right. Would you mind if we waited until after the meeting? You're on the Council after all too.”

With a purple tentacle tapping his lid thoughtfully, the mimic begrudgingly agreed. He was anxious about his proposal but would not elaborate on precisely what it was until they were somewhere alone.

He trusted the mimic with his life. More than once the little boxy creature had risked its own hide to protect Hal's.

The only person he trusted equally as much, with the exception of Noth, was Besal. And now Besal was gone.

Hal had to believe that Besal would come back one day. He would find a way. He just hoped that Vorax wasn't planning on filling Besal's shoes.

Not that he wouldn't cherish the company, but the little mimic was... well, *a mimic*. Besal had shared the deepest fears and secrets in Hal's soul. He had stared into the darkness within him and shook hands with it.

Hell, the Khaeros usually cheered when Hal allowed that part of himself to come to the fore.

Squeezing Hal's hand, Noth stood up. “I'll go assemble them then, shall I?”

“Meet in the Manatree Glade,” Hal said.

It was one of the more secure places what with the Pale Wortlings and Pale Treants, ambling about the place, tending to the Manasapling. More importantly, it was far enough that it would be hard to eavesdrop without being spotted out in the open and it wouldn't take up a valuable spot in the Town Hall.

We really need to make some sort of official building for these meetings, Hal thought as he followed Noth out of the Town Hall and into the biting cold. A thin despairing wind whipped up and stung his face with ice crystals.

The sun had well and truly set. The stars twinkled like the cold hard points of countless spear tips poised at his home.

Oh yeah, and the tribes of the Shiverglades are coming too. Mustn't forget that!

With so much on his mind Hal let his feet take over. They automatically took the now-familiar path to the Manatree Glade while he thought over the countless things that needed doing.

Vorax ambled along at his side, more than happy to stay silent. Mimics were excellent at silence. They often stood in the same spot without moving a muscle for weeks on end.

And somewhere out there, Hal knew that Lurklox was... well, *lurking*. She had given him plenty of space to train with the dragons, leaving little care packages here and there, but ultimately staying out of the way.

It was a wonder he didn't forget about some deadly looming danger to his home or friends, considering all of the threats that were just waiting for him to make a move. If it wasn't Rinbast, it was the Kinslayers, and if not them then the various monsters that took offense to Brightsong's intrusion, any one of the countless tribes, or even the Shiverglades itself.

There was the Beastborne Chronicles, the Whitegold Oath, and the list rambled on and on. The only silver lining was that he *did* have the Council to lean on.

The things that he simply had no time for (though he dearly wished he did) like the construction and planning of new buildings, were blessedly taken over by Athagan and Bardan.

Silvery moonlight filtered through the dappled shadows that draped across his shoulders as he made his way to the glade.

I used to always wonder how governments could get so bloated and large. But there's nothing like being a leader to realize just how little you can actually do! I could spend all my time making decisions, but never get stronger or train. I could train, but then have no time for leading.

There was nothing more elusive than balance. Hal clasped his hands behind his back, mourning the silence of Besal, as he stepped into the moonlit glade.