

# CHAPTER 2

A dream came to Hal that night, and though he struggled to remember the whole thing in the morning, one scene stood out clearly. It had started like most of his dreams often did ever since childhood: as a nightmare. But whether it was the Kindred Dream's doing or not, it soon changed into something more.

He normally wouldn't have thought much of a nightmare where two dragons, suspiciously alike to Orrittam and Naitese, seared his bones with twin jets of Dragonfire.

Dreams had a way of working like that, and after all, they were just dreams. Frightening, disturbing, oddly topical in some ways, but still nothing more than random neurons firing.

Except, the fire didn't kill him.

When the flames had died down, he was still standing. And even stranger, each forearm now bore a new mark. On his left was a golden dragon tattoo that glittered even more fiercely than his Kol'thil. His right arm beheld a white dragon that coiled from his elbow to the back of his hand with its jaws open, mirroring the golden dragon on his left.

As he slowly got out of bed and stretched his sore muscles, Hal looked at his forearms just to make sure they were normal. Aside from the rapidly healing scratches and his Gold Kol'thil on his left forearm... nothing was different.

But it gave him an idea for the Oath. Hal turned to his waiting prompts, letting his mind turn over the idea in the background. Movement drew his attention over to Noth's sleeping form. He pulled up the heavy covers around her before focusing his attention on the prompts from yesterday.

*You Forge the Whitegold Oath.*

*Through technical means, you have managed to defeat both dragons in Draconic Discourse. As a result, you are now considered the undisputed victor and the strength of your Oath has been adjusted.*

*Due to the sheer impossibility of this task, you have been awarded the following Skill Levels:*

*Leadership +10*

*Intimidation +10*

Hal blinked. He had never been awarded Skill Levels like that before. The wording didn't seem to imply it was attached to the Oath. Not like his Oath of the Brightking.

He felt more than a little guilty about getting such a massive boon from putting the dragons in such a sorry state of affairs. He would make things right. Hal continued to scroll through, his eyes going wider as he continued to read.

*Your Leadership has risen to Level 41(46).*

...

*Your Leadership has risen to Level 55(60).*

*+1% Party damage (+60%).*

*+2% Leadership efficacy (+120%).*

*Your Leadership is eligible for Advancement.*

### *Advancement*

*Upon reaching Level 50 in most Skills and Classes, Advancement becomes possible. Advancement enhances the current Skill and, in some cases, changes it entirely based upon the eligible Advancements available. Advancements must be selected within 24 hours of reviewing the notification or the opportunity is lost.*

*The eligibility for unique Advancements is based upon your current Skills, Classes, and experiences.*

### *Leadership Advancements*

## *[Warmonger]*

*Through your bloodlust and proficiency with successfully waging war and defending yourself from would-be usurpers, you have gained the Warmonger Advancement.*

*You know what it means to be on the frontlines, fighting shoulder-to-shoulder with those under your command and you wouldn't have it any other way.*

*Your Leadership Skill increases at a faster pace while in combat with those under your command and increases even faster during active war phases and skirmishes.*

*Your ability to declare war is easier with fewer penalties for your Settlements and your conditions for the end of warfare naturally trend toward destruction and battle.*

### *Warmonger Perks*

#### *(Strength of Arms)*

*Each time your Leadership Skill increases, one of your Combat Skills (chosen at random) also increases.*

#### *(Hold the Line)*

*Whenever you join the battlefield, all units under your control on the field gain +25% Morale and your enemies suffer a -25% Morale affliction.*

#### *(Declaration of War)*

*You gain the ability to declare war on any neighboring groups, expanding your territory and the range of your Core Settlement. During this time, Morale for your Settlement cannot go below 0% and all production intended for war is enhanced by 10%.*

While he wasn't much enthused by the fact that the System seemed to deem him a literal warmonger, Hal had to admit that the benefits were pretty good. Though the RNG Skill up was not to his tastes.

Worse, he did not want to be known as a warmonger. Any attempt at diplomacy would likely be off the table the moment he took that Advancement.

*Let's see what else I've got.*

*[Elected Official]*

*You have managed to garner overwhelming support for your position and the office of which you hold. Not only do people respect and desire you to lead, but they gladly would choose your leadership even if given other alternatives.*

*Elected Officials are placed in a precarious position at the best of times. Always beholden to the Will of the People, they can lose their position if voted out and must regularly hold elections to provide a platform for change.*

*Your Leadership Skill increases much faster while you follow the Will of the People, and you can enter into trade agreements and pacts with other leaderships you meet, strengthening your Settlement and position further.*

*Elected Official Perks*

*(Doublespeak)*

*You've learned to say one thing and mean another. Whenever you are caught going against the Will of the People, you can claim you meant something else. This can only be done once until the next Leadership Skill increase.*

*(Vote For Me)*

*While campaigning during an election cycle, all of your Leadership traits and bonuses are temporarily halted. However, your Charisma and Persuasion Skill are significantly enhanced based on your Leadership Skill Level.*

*(Rally the Base)*

*Should you lose office, most of your Leadership bonuses will remain inactive until you can secure it again. In the meantime, you can stir up your supporters and gain a portion of your Leadership bonuses based on the number of your active supporters.*

*Ugh. I feel gross just reading that. Hal shook his head. Who in their right mind would want to be a politician, when you could literally be a fireball throwing wizard? It made no sense.*

*Not to mention, he hardly had time to do everything that needed doing now. If he had to make sure he was always following what people wanted and worse, campaigning, he would never get anything done.*

*Next.*

*[Tyrant]*

*Though you may have been reluctant to take the reins, they were yours to grab, and you did so without seeking out another potential leader in your stead. Your claim is undeniable, and you will not relinquish your leadership without a fight.*

*Tyrants excel at seeing their will executed, whatever it is. People who would grumble and challenge you are welcome to spend their days working hard under the pitiless sun or spending their time in the cold darkness of your dungeons.*

*There are only two ways a Tyrant relinquishes power: they are overthrown, or they are killed. You cannot willingly relinquish your status as a Tyrant.*

*Tyrants can control the entire Settlement as they see fit. Morale is no longer a factor, and instead the people under you work as you desire them to without regard for general wellbeing or happiness. This doesn't mean that you must torture your subjects (but it often goes with the territory) with cruel practices, only that Morale no longer provides any impact on the status of your Settlements.*

### *Tyrant Perks*

*(Minions)*

*A Tyrant is nothing without their Minions. You can select willing (or unwilling) people to become your Minions, allowing you to dictate where and what they do. In return, your Minions become more powerful and, so long as you do not die, can return from the dead under most circumstances.*

*(Overtime)*

*You can extend the typical 8-hour workday until it is as long as you like. Be aware that without proper “motivation,” most Workers will produce diminished results for every additional 4-hour block you force them to work.*

*(Unyielding Borders)*

*Control and domination are your bread and butter. Your borders are always moving even when your Settlement is not growing. Upon meeting with another Settlement’s borders, you are immediately thrown into conflict.*

Hal had to admit, those were some fairly useful Perks. If only because they allowed him to take the reins of development away from Morale. Instead, it was similar to a typical city-builder game where you didn’t have the complex interplay of people actually *living their lives*.

Though he had no intention of taking Tyrant, he mentally ear-marked it so he could come back to reread it again. Not because he intended on taking it—so far none of the Advancements were entirely what he wanted—but because he might be able to find some scrap or hint about Rinbast.

*Of course, that’s a massive assumption. The System literally said it takes experiences into account. Even if Rinbast was offered Tyrant, who could say if his Perks would be remotely the same?*

*[Founder]*

*While your Kol’tuil marks you as a Founder, you are different. There are few of your kind on Aldim. Your right to rule is naturally considered a given by most inhabitants, but you know it takes more than a pretty tattoo to make a Founder.*

*Leadership isn’t for everybody and as a Founder you have strived to be better than your predecessors. In so doing, you have aligned yourself with the ancient purpose of the Founders: to provide shelter and safety from the dangers of the world.*

*While many confuse Founders with Tyrants, the core of a Founder’s strength revolves around their Manatree and the Sanctums of safety and refuge they create for the people of Aldim. While a Founder works for the stabilization of Aldim and against the foul Manastorms that plague it, a Tyrant serves only themselves.*

## Founder Perks

### *(Manatree Bond)*

*For every even Skill Level gained from Leadership, your Manatree Skill raises one Level and for every odd Skill Level gained, an amount of EXP based on your Leadership is awarded to all Manatrees associated with you.*

### *(Dominance)*

*Manatrees stabilize Aldim's chaotic Worldshard Core. They provide a means of safely grounding the chaotic mana that, if left unchecked, allows the breaches known as Manastorms to form. Your Manatree's Influence is increased proportionally to your Leadership Skill Level.*

### *(Rooted Leylines)*

*Possessing two or more Manatrees under your control allows you to connect the complicated root systems together, creating leylines of power between the Manatrees. This provides a stacking buff for all connected Manatrees. The strength of the buff is based on the number of connected Manatrees.*

### *(Unyielding)*

*As a Founder, your people look up to you and are emboldened by your presence. Whenever you join the battlefield or negotiations, you provide a temporary buff to any citizen of any controlled territory nearby.*

If the System was trying to guide him to an Advancement, it was anything but subtle.

Hal rubbed his chin thoughtfully, looking up at the somber colors of the yurt's roof, its thick wooden poles holding up panels of dark cloth. How that kept the yurt warmer than the caravan had, Hal didn't know.

Magic, probably.

That always seemed to be the answer around here.

Hal went through the list of Advancements again. There were four in all, and each was markedly different than the last.

Warmonger, Elected Official, and Tyrant all had three Perks while Founder had a whopping four Perks. Of course, it lacked the enhanced Skill increase of Elected Official or Warmonger and didn't introduce any method of making ruling easier like Tyrant.

With the tribes of the Shiverglades meeting soon and likely heading toward a conflict with the Bravers Guild, Warmonger—as much as he disliked the random Skill Ups—would prove invaluable to not only defend what they've managed to earn but to expand.

Then there were the two Kinslayers lurking out there somewhere. Not to mention the countless others. Did he really have to defeat them all just to fill the pages of the [Beastborne Chronicles]?

The two nearby already attacked while he was fighting Orrittam and Naitese. How soon until they made another attempt? Only through some strange circumstances did they fail.

Hal had expected a second assault to come already. He was starting to wonder if his threat to hunt them down and kill them had actually given them pause.

And then there was the case of the mysterious woman who came to his aid—though Hal couldn't fathom how or why—when he needed it most. True, whatever she did still left the bulk of the fighting to himself and Besal, but without their help even that narrow victory would have been impossible.

Gaining Combat Skill for every Leadership Skill Level might not be as bad as he thought, but the randomness was a damper. If it only chose from the Skills he currently had, it wasn't so bad, but he'd played enough games to know how horrifically fickle random chance—or as was the case with games, RNG—could be.

But not knowing was the real issue. Like many things, if he knew how they worked before walking down their path, he could make better decisions.

*Wishes and hopes have never done me much good*, Hal thought with a wry twist of his lips.

Hold the Line would be useful, as he wouldn't dare miss out on defending or bolstering his people already involved in combat. Being able to increase their Morale while simultaneously decreasing the enemies would no



doubt be extremely helpful, but what about the long-term ramifications of being a Warmonger?

There had to be some social cost to that, right? Of each Advancement, Warmonger alone had the ability to declare war easily and with fewer penalties for doing so.

Besides, even if his Settlement grew extensively, he didn't want to be known as somebody who subjugated all those in his path.

He would be no better than Rinbast.

*We would succeed where Rinbast failed, a dark thought crept into his mind. He thought too small. Too narrow. We could take Fallmark and press on to new lands. New resources, new monsters to drain of essence and spells.*

It was more than a little tempting.

Hal shook his head. *No, that's not looking at the big picture. Being Rinbast but better isn't a goal to strive for. If being a Warmonger limits the loss of Morale, then that means on some level I'm changing the fabric of my Settlement and its people.*

And that was something he didn't want to do. Brightsong was meant to be a bastion of safety for all types of people. If he promised them safe harbor and then conscripted them all, how did that make him any better from any other run-of-the-mill despot?

So that meant Warmonger was out.

Noth turned over in her sleep and placed a hand where Hal had slept beside her. She mumbled something in her sleep, her raven-black hair spread out like coiling tendrils of darkness on the pillow-covered floor of the yurt.

He needed to do better—to *be* better—for her. For all the people who had placed their lives and hopes in his hands.

Hal smiled at Noth and turned toward Elected Official. Right off the bat, he knew there was no way he would take it. Not only because he could lose his own Settlement, or at the very least his rule of it, but because he had no need for the Perks.

And then there was the stomach-curdling thought of being a *politician*. Regardless of how the System proposed the Advancement, that is what he would be.

*No thanks.*

Tyrant, despite the dark leanings of the Advancement, looked pretty useful. He wondered if that was what Rinbast was. If he even had a Leadership Advancement.

Judging from the prompt, it seemed as if Level 50 was the trigger. That, coupled with whatever unique events that a person managed to accumulate would give them a variety of potential Advancements.

Though he knew, deep down, that he would ultimately choose Founder, he found himself looking closely at Tyrant for hints at what sort of powers Rinbast might have. No matter how unlikely it was, any glimpse might be useful.

If Rinbast really was the same person as him but from a different reality, then it stood to reason that he would have similar Advancements. Even if their experiences were vastly different, they were still the same man at their core.

*As much as I want to deny it.*

Hal had more in common with Rinbast than Thirty-six. He was beginning to think he might be the closest to Rinbast out of all of them. The thought chilled him to the bone.

He would have preferred to be like Thirty-six with his honorable ways. *He* was a true leader, not without fault, but he *tried*. He was not a monster like Rinbast. Wishing, however, did nothing to change the facts.

What would it have been like if he had more in common with the heroic side of himself than the villain?

*Focus.* Hal turned his attention back to the... what was it Midarian called it? Shardscript? Yes, that was it. He still thought of it as a System Prompt. It was hard to reconcile the “proper” name with what he had been using from day one.

Warmonger was too common, and there was no way that Rinbast would willingly give up control or let commoners choose who ruled them.

No, it would be between Tyrant and Founder. Assuming they had the same possible options. Which, Hal admitted again, was a rather large leap in logic to take. Regardless, it remained the best way to see into Rinbast's potential powers.

He would need every advantage he could get in their Primacy Trials.

Tyrants eschewed Morale, which not only stopped them from having a negative hit to production and general capability, but also stopped any potential positive benefits.

Then again, it would be pretty hard to beat 16-hour workdays for Workers. That would—as far as Hal understood Morale—require 100% Morale or higher.

And even then, the very act of pushing people that hard would lower the Morale rather quickly. He didn't hear much from Durvin about Rinbast's relationship with the dwarves; it seemed he tolerated them at best.

The Anvil appeared to have free rein, despite being within Fallmark's borders. Then again, Durvin's people had been smugglers. Perhaps Rinbast did not have the best relationship with them.

Hal doubted that Rinbast was on good enough terms with them to have the Workers that were of dwarven heritage work 12-hour days. But even among the dwarves, 12-hour days took a hit to their Morale over long periods of time.

They enjoyed working, but even they couldn't do it forever.

If Rinbast did have the Tyrant Advancement, that also meant that he couldn't willingly abdicate. Not likely that he would be open to the option, in any case. But it meant that he would have to be beaten or otherwise die in order to give up his claim to Fallmark.

While good to know, it didn't change anything for Hal. He doubted that there was anything that could be said to change Rinbast's mind. No matter what the outcome of the Primacy Trials, there was only ever one way this would end.

One of them would have to die.

With their Manatrees, that would be far from simply killing each other. Though Hal only had one, Rinbast appeared to have many. His main was clearly in Sanctum Fallwreath, but what about the others?

As much as he hated to think of it, the only way he could think of being rid of Rinbast for good was to sever the Founder's connection to his Manatrees. All of them.

And the only way that seemed possible was to destroy the Manatrees. A vile act that he wasn't sure he could do. The Manatrees were blameless. They only sought to protect.

Destroying them, even to immediately replace them with his own, seemed the sort of thing that would stain his soul. And yet... what other option was there? So long as his own Manatree existed, he could die and be reborn again and again.

*Not that I've ever tested it.* He was far from eager to verify it, despite what his reckless behavior would suggest.

Hal stood up, stretched out his sore and aching muscles once more for good measure, and went to prepare some tea. Normally, that would require fetching some water, heating it up over a fire, and then pouring it out.

But the kobblins had been working on a means of expediting the whole process after finding out how much he enjoyed the drink. The contraption took up a full quarter of the yurt and looked like one of those old windows screensavers that rendered those 3D-colored pipes.

Hal approached it cautiously. He had promised Lootlox that he would give it a try when he had the chance, and he was nothing if not a man of his word. So, with one arm outstretched to the red-painted handle, Hal pulled down on the lever.

The whole thing clanked softly to itself as if deep in thought before a faint hissing sound filled the yurt. It reminded Hal unpleasantly of the Dungeon below the Settlement and the creepy snake things that had crawled out from one of the trapped rooms.

After a few moments of this, Hal tentatively opened one eye and stared at the shifting series of pipes that whirred, clanked, and hissed. A glance behind him showed that, despite the noise, Noth remained fast asleep.

That woman could sleep like the dead. Given her past occupation as a Reaper, perhaps he shouldn't be surprised.

All sorts of ramshackle tubes and pipes shivered and thumped until, finally, the noise subsided entirely. Hal looked for the red knob Lootlox said he needed turn. There was already a mug thoughtfully placed beneath it. Hal smiled and gave the knob a good twist.

*This looks oddly familiar. Did they take one of the knobs from my Caravan and paint it red? Where did they even get red paint?*

A few droplets of super-heated water stung as they splashed out and hit his hand. Hal quickly turned the knob the other way with a hiss of pain to control the sudden burst of scalding hot water that hit the bottom of the mug and jumped out in a circular spray.

The mug filled quickly, and Hal inspected his hand. The red marks from the water were already fading. Considering how hot that water seemed to be, he should have had at least minor burns on his hand.

There was nothing.

*For all its problems, I love Aldim.* Or at least, he loved the RPG-like magical elements.

That he could increase his Vitality to the point that scalding hot water stung but didn't cause any true harm was just one of the amazing facets of the world that he enjoyed on a daily basis.

Hot water attained, Hal rummaged around for some tea before focusing his attention back on the Founder Advancement. An ominous clanking reminded him to turn the red lever on the koblin contraption off again.

That was important. Lootlox had told him he needed to turn it off unless he wanted "airy-holes" in his tent from the metal bits and bobs exploding out from the boiler contraption.

While they would likely survive the resulting boiler explosion, the yurt most definitely would not. And as much as Hal liked the people of Brightsong, he didn't really want to sleep in a Longhouse with twenty others.

Not only would that make it hard to have any measure of privacy with Noth (or in general), but it wouldn't look right. Rondo and Durvin had agreed on that matter. Even Elaise, the rightful owner of the yurt, had thought it

would look bad if the leader of the Settlement slept in the same place as everybody else.

That suited Hal just fine. Though once it would not have. He didn't used to want his own personal home while everybody else was forced to sleep together. Now though, he relished the quiet. He would have preferred something nicer, but for now the yurt would do.

Hal settled down beside Noth's sleeping form, cupping his mug of hot tea. He went over the Founder Advancement once more while the warmth of the mug seeped into his bones.

*I was always going to pick this, wasn't I?*

Even taking out the fact that the Founder Advancement had more Perks, each of those Perks was way better than anything the others offered. Especially when he considered that there were countless drawbacks to the way the other Advancements suggested he should guide his Settlement.

Instead of a random Skill Up as with Warmonger, Manatree Bond allowed him to gain a Skill Up to Manatree every even Level of Leadership. As if that wasn't good enough, he could Level Up his Manatrees faster with each odd Level.

It did not matter how little EXP it was, *any* free EXP was a great thing.

And while Rooted Leylines and Unyielding were definitely game-changing, Dominance stood out as something Hal felt was important. It suggested something about Aldim, about the very nature of the Worldshard itself.

If Manatrees stabilized the Worldshard's Core... why weren't there more? Why were there Manastorms at all if it was as simple as planting and growing multiple Manatrees?

*What am I missing?*

The mages within the Abyss had mentioned something about fixing the Worldshard before. Were the Manastorms the cause of some imperfect solution that saved the world but left it irreparably broken?

Hal shook his head and took a sip of tea. He would need to ask them, and he had no desire to go back *there* again to do so. Not unless there was no other

choice, and with the tribes coming, the Primacy Trials, and two Kinslayers practically on his doorstep, Hal had his hands full for the moment.

*And that's not even mentioning the Whitegold Oath and where the souls of Durvin and Athagan are. What a mess.*

There were a million things that needed doing, and even with his Council to help him, there just were not enough hours in the day to get everything done. Even with a city the size of Sanctum Fallwreath—which Hal only glimpsed from the rooftops so long ago—he doubted he could get everything done that he needed to.

*Is this what being a Leader feels like, always needing to do more than you could ever feasible accomplish?*

Hal shook his head. What did it matter? In the end, he could only do what he was able. Anything else was immaterial. Want and desire all he might, but unless he could make those things reality, it was useless to worry about what might be otherwise.

No sooner did he select his Advancement, than his Kol'thil started to glow and pulse with golden light. It felt warm beneath his skin. Soothing. The silvery moonlight shape of the Manatree within the Mark glowed even brighter, as if to tell him that he made the right choice.

The Kol'thil was not alive, but he was not so sure about the Manatree's Mark within it. Seeing it react so gave him a semblance of comfort.

A quick check on his Perks showed that rather than unlocking a Perk tree of sorts that would allow him to Level Up Rooted Leylines and the like, the Advancement gave him the Perks.

*That's a big improvement for just hitting Level 50, Hal thought. And makes getting Level 50 all the more important. For most of my Skills that's equivalent to nearly the same number of Levels it took to hit 50.*

Drinking his tea in relative peace, Hal went through the rest of his System Prompts. In a way, it was cathartic to see the outcome of his battle with not only Naitese and Orrittam, but the unnamed Khaeros.

*Your Intimidation has risen to Level 17.*

...

*Your Intimidation has risen to Level 30.*

*+1% Intimidation success (+30%).*

*+1.25% Pacification chance (+37.50%).*

*You have 2 Intimidation Perk points awaiting assignment.*

It was hard not to laugh at that. He could see where it would have come from too. Naitese, for sure, but Orrittam as well, and likely even the Beastborne that had attacked him and Besal.

The thought of Besal twisted Hal's stomach. He mentally called out to his Khaeros, but only silence answered him. Again.

Hal stuffed down his anxiety and fear for the moment. There had to be something he could do for Besal. It could not end like this. Not after everything they had been together.

He would not allow it.

With a mental swipe, his Intimidation Perks appeared before him.

*Frightening Presence (1/1)*

*Your very visage unnerves people. They'll do anything, go along with any plan, just so long as you don't hurt them. Significantly increases your chance of Intimidation if you are disfigured or "abnormal" looking in any way.*

*Fearmonger (0/1)*

*You've taken the skill of bending a person's fear until it's near the breaking point to an art form. With a frightful visage, you can strike fear into the heart's of even the bravest, the more abnormal you make yourself the more effective you will be at all Intimidation actions.*

*Domineering (0/1)*

*Through force of will you can take control of any situation that has gotten out of hand. Be it through physical displays or a commanding voice, you've tapped into a primal part of people's brains that gets them to pay attention to you.*



Hal frowned. He always wondered what it was that made the Perks move along a path. Could he manipulate it by ignoring Fearmonger—the progression past Frightening Presence—and getting Domineering instead? Would something different pop up, or was Fearmonger the next step regardless of what he chose before?

*No time like the presence to find out.*

Hal picked up Domineering, feeling the Perk writhe inside of him like a living thing. *That's new.* A moment later his mind and body stilled. He had never experienced a Perk that did *that*.

A quick check on his Perks showed him that, yes, there was a new Perk there. Perhaps another path of progression? Now Hal had a choice between Fearmonger and his new Perk option, Dread Gaze.

*Dread Gaze (0/1)*

*By combining primal fear and an innate ability to ensnare a person's attention, you are now able to paralyze those whose Level is weaker than your Intimidation. The chance for success scales with your Intimidation's Level and is modified by your Charisma.*

*Now that's more like it,* he thought. While he had preferred not to use Intimidation, now the Skill provided something truly useful. At Level 30, it wasn't going to be immensely useful in combat, but just the fact that he *could* paralyze somebody with a look was an amazingly useful skill.

Not everybody was very high Level, however. There were plenty of people back in Murkmire that he could use this on, and likely there were others as well. And while it might not be super useful to use on somebody who was higher than Level 30, it still had a chance to work.

He couldn't ask for much more than that.

*Your Sword Skill has risen to Level 38.*

...

*Your Sword Skill has risen to Level 43.*

*+1% Sword damage (+43%).*

*-0.25% Sword durability loss (-10.75%).*

*+5% Armor penetration (+20%).*

You have 1 Sword Skill Perk point awaiting assignment.

### Mastery 0/5

By gaining mastery over your weapon, you increase your damage and unlock more damaging weapon skills. Most of which require a level of mastery to attain.

Lv1: +5% Sword Damage | -1% Stamina Drain

Lv2: +7.5% Sword Damage | -1.5% Stamina Drain

Lv3: +10% Sword Damage | -2% Stamina Drain | -10% Weapon Skill  
Stamina Cost.

Lv4: +15% Sword Damage | -3% Stamina Drain | -12% Weapon Skill  
Stamina Cost.

Lv5: +25% Sword Damage | -5% Stamina Drain | -15% Weapon Skill  
Stamina Cost.

### Cruel Blade 3/5

You learn how to better bleed out an enemy, forcing them to take extra damage. Each strike you land has a higher chance to inflict the bleed status affliction. An enemy under Cruel Blade's bleed affliction takes standard bleed damage for the duration of the effect. Upon the end of the affliction, the enemy takes additional damage equal to a portion of the bleed damage suffered.

Lv1: +20% Bleed Chance (10s) | 15% of total Bleed damage once the effect ends.

Lv2: +30% Bleed Chance (15s) | 20% of total Bleed damage once the effect ends.

Lv3: +40% Bleed Chance (20s) | 25% of total Bleed damage once the effect ends.

Lv4: +55% Bleed Chance (25s) | 35% of total Bleed damage once the effect ends.

*Lv5: +75% Bleed Chance (30s) | 50% of total Bleed damage once the effect ends.*

*Blood of My Enemies 0/5*

*Each successful kill grants a temporary 5% Damage Boost for the next 10 seconds. Effect stacks.*

*Lv1: +5% Damage (10s).*

*Lv2: +7.5% Damage (10s).*

*Lv3: +7.5% Damage (15s).*

*Lv4: +10% Damage (15s).*

*Lv5: +10% Damage (20s).*

He was already knee-deep in Cruel Blade. While Hal didn't make much use of his Sword Skill as he once did, the effects are incredibly useful. He wondered how many others had something like Cruel Blade.

As it was, he had a 40% Bleed proc chance. He took the fourth Level of Cruel Blade, bumping that up to 55% and enhancing the additional damage burst when the Bleed affliction finished from 25% to 35%. A much higher gain than the previous Levels.

Once he managed to get Sword Skill to Level 50, he could finally finish Cruel Blade and get the largest boost of all. He wondered if there would be a Sword Advancement to go with it.

All of a sudden training his Sword Skill suddenly seemed more interesting now that he knew about Advancements.

The rest of the System Prompts relating to his Skills were quickly skimmed over. He didn't have any Perks for Parry, Evasion, or even Beast Magic, so there was not much for him to mull over.

*Your Parry Skill has risen to Level 16.*

*Your Parry Skill has risen to Level 17.*

*+17% Parry success*

*-17% Stamina cost*

*Your Evasion Skill has risen to Level 32.*

...

*Your Evasion Skill has risen to Level 38.*

*+1% Evasion speed (+38%).*

*-1% Stamina cost (-38%).*

*+2% Time decay (+14%).*

*Your Beast Magic Skill has risen to Level 46.*

...

*Your Beast Magic Skill has risen to Level 49.*

*+5% Beast Magic potency (+245%).*

*+2% Beast Magic spell casting speed (+98%).*

Though he was a bit surprised at how much his Evasion went up. Though he must have been bobbing, ducking, dodging, and weaving like a madman while fighting the father-daughter duo.

*So close to another Beast Magic Perk!* If only he could get one more Level. Well, it was one of his highest and most used Skill. He would get there sooner than later.

As much as a Sword Advancement might have interested him, Beast Magic Advancement snared his imagination and desire all in one go. Idle speculation was useless, however.

Normally, this was where he would stop. With any Leveling usually taken care of, Skills reviewed, and Perks chosen, he should have had nothing more to do.

But now he had a Monster Core.

*Your Monster Core has increased to Copper Tier IV.*

*Your Spirit Capacity has graduated to Tin Rank.*

*Your Spirit Capacity has increased to Tin II.*

*Your Essence Splicing has graduated to Tin Rank.*

*Your Beast Magic Scaling has increased to Copper IV.*

*You have gained a new Mutagen: Deathbreaker.*

*You are developing Mutagen: Dragon Force*

*Monster Core (Copper IV)*

*The nascent black-gold spirit of a Beastborne that defied death thrice,  
reforged with the indelible mark of Dream.*

*Evolutions*

*Spirit Capacity (Tin II) | Essence Splicing (Tin I)*

*Beast Magic Scaling (Copper IV) | Bonecrafting Synergy (Copper II)*

*Aetherochemical Apotheosis (Copper II)*

*Progress*

*Next Tier: 93%*

*Mutagen: 2%*

*Rank: 95%*

*Mutagens*

*Deathbreaker (Copper I): After death, your Spirit Capacity is considered one Rank higher than your actual.*

*Dragon Force (25%): Gain the ability to manipulate the primal force of dragons while Splicing Dragon Family Essence.*

*Your Eldritch Essence (Outsider Family) has graduated to Copper Rank.*

*Your Eldritch Essence (Outsider Family) has increased to Copper II.*

*Outsider Family: Eldritch (Copper II) [620%]*

*Increased essence absorption (Minor).*

*Increased essence wieldance (Major).*

*Reduced Spirit consumption (Minor).*

*Your Noble Gold Dragon Essence (Dragon Family) has graduated to Copper Rank.*

*Your Noble Gold Dragon Essence (Dragon Family) has increased to Copper II.*

*Dragon Family: Noble Gold Dragon (Copper II) [125%]*

*Enhanced Noble Gold Dragon Spells (Minor).*

*Increased Dragon Standing (Superior).*

*Reduced Spirit consumption (Minor).*

*Your Tyrant White Dragon Essence has increased to Copper III.*

*Dragon Family: Tyrant White Dragon (Copper III) [500%]*

*Reduced Spirit consumption (Minor).*

*Increased essence wieldance (Greater).*

*Ice Affinity (Minor).*

That was... a lot.

Hal frowned and reread some of the lines. A great many of the prompts didn't make much sense to him. He tried to bring up any information, but like usual, the System—or rather, the Shard—did not feel very forthcoming.

Unlike Skills or Levels, there was not anything for him to *do* exactly about his Core. It was more informative than action oriented.

The most important take away, aside from completing the Deathbreaker mutagen, was that he was on the cusp of a new Rank. Considering his Essence Splicing Advanced to Tin, that must be the Rank following Copper.

*I still haven't the faintest idea what strength Copper is compared to Tin, or Tin to... whatever comes next. Or even how they compare to Levels.* Though he was strongly beginning to suspect that they did not, at least not a direct one-to-one.

With Beast Magic *and* his Monster Core so close to their next Level and Rank respectively, Hal knew what his next task needed to be: using his newfound Dragon Family Beast Magic to push both Core and Skill to their next breakpoint.

Draining the last of his tea, Hal got up and readied himself for the day. He looked at the state of his borrowed armor and sighed. *Yet another thing I'll add to the list.*

With a kiss on Noth's sleeping cheek, Hal ventured out into Brightsong. It was time to deal with dragons.