

Chapter 24

Hal worked through the day with Hermes at his side. The little thief was surprisingly insightful about things that Hal would never have thought to try.

Most of the time, Hermes was wrong. However, a few times he had stumbled upon something that Hal would have sworn should not have worked, and yet it did.

Hermes' shining inspiration came when Hal showed him the broken magicite core Hirash had destroyed. Due to the way they were built, they needed to be sealed on all sides, imparting a polished gleam like any cut gemstone might get before being placed in a setting.

However, now that the magicite was shattered, it leaked aether within seconds, making it functionally useless for any use Hal might have for it.

“But what if you took a chunk and polished it again?” Hermes said, inching over and pawing a piece the size of Hal's thumb. It was a smaller piece, but it stood out to Hal because of how oblong it was.

Hermes took the piece and took out a small cloth he had been working on while talking to Hal. The cloth didn't look like anything special, but when he rubbed the magicite with it, the cloudy fractured material took on a strange shine.

The magicite gleamed as the oppa worked himself up into a lather by polishing the fragment of magicite with all his tiny body could bring to bear.

Hal watched him with interest.

From his understanding, the reason the magicite had been so big was because it was lower quality than the one Tristal now loaned to him.

The lower the quality of the magicite, the more physical mass it needed to compensate. A small piece of low-quality magicite wouldn't be very useful for Kol'thil Sigils... but maybe there was something it *could* do that Hal hadn't thought of before.

Hermes rolled the rod of magicite over to Hal.

"That's an impressive cloth you have there," Hal told him. Just a few minutes ago, that piece was so splintery and crazed with cracks that Hal was sure it would have shattered into a million pieces at the slightest touch.

After Hermes had polished it, the magicite looked like a perfectly cylindrical rod with tapered ends.

Hal picked it up as Hermes watched with childlike hope and wonder.

Just to test, Hal spun up his Monster Core and began to coalesce aether into the palm of his hand. He infused the rod with aether, unsurprised when it glowed dimly. However, just as Hal had feared, the rod was internally damaged. Coupled with its lower quality, it could hold a pittance of aether. Hardly enough for even a single weak Copper Sigil.

Reversing the process, Hal drew out the aether, letting the shimmering vaporous energy drift away into an iridescent cloud that caught the oppa's attention.

But maybe... Hal thought, trying something entirely different.

Rather than focus on aether, he focused on a different type of energy. His essences.

It was all energy, wasn't it? Aether, mana, essences, each type of magic was just a sort of energy. And if magicite can store energy, why not essence?

Naturally, Hal chose noble gold essence, since it was the type he was most recently familiar with. Dragonfire being what it was, the rod of magicite lit up like a golden glow stick.

Experimentally, Hal pointed the finger-length rod of magicite and gave it a slight *push*.

A bolt of Dragonfire erupted from the end, blasted through his door, and continued out into the blizzard.

“Shirt,” Hal cursed.

“Crikey!” Hermes said. Hal wasn’t sure that was a curse.

Howling winds filled the cottage from the fist-sized hole, prompting Hal to create a mimic essence blank and mold it into the door to stop the infernal noise and heat loss.

It wasn’t pretty, but it was a quick job that allowed Hal to get back to work. *Okay*, he thought to himself, *not doing that again. Though it is good to know I could effectively make a wand.*

Hal froze at the thought.

He couldn’t remember ever using a magical focus for using spells. Was that... a thing? Nobody had ever told him it was. Hirash had all sorts of magical ingredients and items on his person. Most of them were destroyed, but his tower had surely held quite a treasure trove.

Besides that, Hal distinctly recalled most games required some sort of spellcasting focus. Yet... he couldn’t recall seeing anybody on Aldim using a wand or an item that enhanced their magic.

Granted, he didn’t know many magic users. Ashera’s Sinkeeper and Royal Guard didn’t seem to use anything other than her standard weapons, Val said Beastbornes hardly ever used weapons *at all*, and Hamrin didn’t seem to have a wand or staff.

So why did he get the feeling like he was an idiot for not using a spellcasting focus all along?

Hal set the idea aside for the time being, letting his subconscious nibble at the concept while he focused on the magicite rod in front of him.

The magicite had taken the essence easily enough, but it required a catalyst from him to use it. If he wanted to make something that lasted, he would need to do something more advanced. Some way to draw in ambient aether, perhaps.

Otherwise, he would only ever be able to get out exactly—perhaps a little less with various conversion losses—what he put in and no more.

Useful though it might be to store spells for later use, it still consumed the same amount of mana and Spirit no matter what he did. There had to be a better way to do it.

Hal looked over at Hermes, who was watching him in awe, and dumped out the rest of the magicite shards. “Do you think you could make some more of those rods?”

The oppa didn’t say anything as he leaped into action, digging through the broken pieces to find those that he could work with.

Hermes busted out various knickknacks and tools from his inventory. He shifted through them until he got some higher quality rags and cloths along with a tiny hammer that looked suitable for chiseling.

He put the rest of the junk away, then got to work on one of the broken pieces of magicite.

Hal could feel a faint presence of Spirit radiate off the oppa, jolting the Beastborne with surprise. He wanted to ask if Hermes had access to that magical resource, but he held himself back. Hal didn’t want to interrupt the oppa while he was working on something so delicate.

He turned his attention back to his own creations. A great cage appeared in Hal's mind, something that would be of incredible utility not only for the Tower, but for many excursions beyond.

There was no way to tell if what he was trying to do would work, but Hal reminded himself that he'd done much stranger things with far less at his disposal.

This would need no less than three magicite rods, each one holding a different energy source. One for the essence he wished to imbue, another for Spirit, and a final one for mana.

None of which would ever have been possible without the Contagion property of blighted essence. Using essence motes to create bone blanks, Hal was able to create a cage the size of his hand of blight essence.

Fitted into each slot was a highly polished rod of magicite, each one connected to the other in a tight triangular pattern.

Hal would have liked to spiral the magicite rods around each other, but he lacked the skill and Hermes was even lower Level than he was.

Hermes was essentially just starting out on Aldim. Some of his powers carried over, but many were undergoing a process the oppa explained was "transmigrating".

Hal figured that while Hermes was an inventive oppa with a variety of skills and talents, he wasn't the absolute powerhouse from another Shard that was Komachi.

He suspected they knew each other, but didn't voice this aloud. On the account of that possibility being presumptuous, since they were both soul aeder.

Despite the oppa's ability to craft things that should have been well beyond him, he came through with the three magicite rods, but that was at his very limit. Asking anything more of the oppa would result in failure and Hal didn't want to demotivate the little guy.

With the use of essence motes, the first crafting stage, creation, was a breeze. He hardly had to do much more than give it a form and shape.

Next came refinement, where Hal's own Spirit and mana were used to shape the material into the cage-like form he had envisioned. He added a ring at the top so he could hold it or clip it to a belt if he needed.

As the item took shape, Hal realized he was making something that looked shockingly like an old-fashioned storm lantern made of brass with a heavy patina.

As gross as blighted essence was—considering its source at least—the bone blank had a type of beauty that he was not expecting. It hardly looked like bone at all.

The rest of the process was relatively easy. He selected essence properties from aberration, golem, and blighted to provide stability, conductivity, and the unique Contagion effect that he was relying upon to do most of the heavy lifting.

Sometime past lunchtime, Hal held up the finished product.

Osseochemist reaches Level 7.

You have 10 attribute points awaiting distribution.

Your HP, SP, Spirit, and MP are fully restored.

Your Osseochemistry Skill has increased to Level 48.

+2% Crafting speed.

+2% Spirit efficiency.

+3% Essence dissolution.

Hal tossed the 10 points into Intelligence and then brushed away the prompt with a smile. As happy as he was to get 2 Levels out of a

single craft – and a skill Level to boot! – Hal was focused on the item he had just created.

Monstrous Caged Lantern

Item Level: 99

Monster Essence: Empty

Mana: 0/2,500

Spirit: 0%

Enchantments: Monster Essence Resistance Radiator

A lantern receptacle roughly crafted out of monster essence bones. Once filled with a chosen monster essence type, along with sufficient mana and Spirit fuel, this item grants a non-stacking tier of damage resistance towards one's entire party against that monster family.

Durability: 5,000/5,000

While he couldn't tell how effective it was without testing it out, Hal could already see ways he could improve upon its design. However, if he was honest with himself, he knew he didn't possess the skill necessary to do it.

He needed more Osseochemist Levels to match up better against his Osseochemistry skill. The two were at severe odds with his Levels being so much lower than his skill was.

Intent on grinding out as many Osseochemist Levels as possible, Hal went back to work. Creating a brand-new item awarded the most Experience. The more unique or different, the more Experience gained.

Hal focused on one of the equipment slots he had hardly ever seen. The waist slot.

However, instead of outfitting himself, Hal had a specific person in mind. Somebody who wouldn't be immune to the *Blight* as he would be.

Belts were simple to make. Creating strips of essence bone blanks was straightforward and required nearly no refinement to the process. With a plethora of blight essence motes at his disposal, Hal was able to create the [Blighted Belt].

Osseochemist reaches Level 8.

You have 5 attribute points awaiting distribution.

Once again, Hal put the points into Intelligence and examined his work. He wasn't surprised that the belt didn't award two Levels.

While it was heavily enhanced, it wasn't new or groundbreaking. It was, however, quite powerful. And would fit his intended recipient quite well.

Blighted Belt

(Belt) (Epic)

Item Level: 49

DEF: 10

MDEF: 7

+5 DEX

+10 Evasion Skill

+5% Spirit

Chance to double the effect of a healing potion without additional toxin buildup if the wearer is suffering from an affliction.

2% less magical damage taken for every stack of affliction upon the wearer. Caps out at 26% magical damage taken reduction.

Sockets: 1

DUR: 2,400/2,400

Lv.40 All Classes

Spurred on by his latest creation, Hal went back to his previous concept. With another Level under his belt, he had an inkling about how he could create something like a wand or spellcasting focus. Something that would enhance rather than replace spellcasting.

Hal spent the majority of the day and night working on prototype after prototype, each one getting closer, but never quite living up to his expectations.

Hermes offered what little consolation he could provide, reminded Hal to get food for the both of them, and otherwise slept on the table until finally, late in the night, Hal finally achieved his goal.

His hands were raw and bleeding from several explosions and handling jagged pieces of magicite. Most of the broken magicite had been obliterated in the various prototypes, but Hal had created something truly special.

The Shard agreed with a further 4 Osseochemist Levels gained, 2 from the various prototypes and 2 from completing the item. Hal held up the glorious item to the lamplight, watching the green-tinged magicite jewel at its center gleam like an emerald.