

# Chapter 31

“Clearly you have found something interesting,” Elaise told him. Everyone else nodded. Except Giel, of course. “You have included us in the discussion so far. It would be rude to exclude us now that you have made your choice.”

*How does she do that?*

Shaking his head, Hal told them about his Sword Advancement, Beastblade.

“If you don’t take it, can I have it?” Val asked hungrily, leaning forward. “Wait. Wait. Does it say *your* beast magic, or *all* beast magic? That’s an incredibly important distinction, Hal!”

Hal gave Beastblade another look, just to be sure. “Sorry to disappoint, Val, but it does say ‘your beast magic’ in the description. However...”

“However, what?”

Hal smirked. “I get the impression that Reap, the Perk in question, will grow as my Monster Core’s Rank improves. Reap literally has a ‘Copper effect’ note on it saying that I can also shred a monster’s resistance to a given essence. That, specifically, does not say *my essence*.”

Eagerness seemed to drain out of Val. Looking down, she frowned, but nodded all the same. Monster Cores were a sore subject for her.

Unlike Hal, she didn’t have one.

Whether it was a result of Rinbast’s doing, or just the way their Class was now, Hal didn’t know for sure. But he felt genuinely sorry for her. The difference between having a Monster Core and not was... monstrous. It was a completely different Class. One that

lacked the enhancing properties of Spirit. He wasn't entirely sure, but it almost felt like Spirit magnified his stats a little bit.

He remembered the pain merely casting Beast Magic before his Monster Core.

Now that Hal had full access to all of his essences again, as well as being able to splice two essences together, he was finally able to explore the full depth of the Monster Core.

*I'll find a way to make you one,* Hal promised Val.

He didn't dare say it aloud, despite how much he wanted to. It would be cruel to get her hopes up.

Hal didn't even know how the Kindred of Dreams did it for him. And though he had a form of the Aetherochemistry that she used to create his Monster Core, he had no clue how to recreate her recipe.

Aetherochemistry required unusual ingredients for its creations. Aether and aspects from eclectic sources. Rare ingredients that were time-consuming and difficult to acquire.

If anything, finding those ingredients would require a trip back to Hemel, Aldim's third and smallest moon, which was anything but.

A part of him wondered if one of the reasons why he was granted Aetherochemistry was to restore Monster Cores to other Beastbornes he determined to be redeemable.

*How many ripple effects has that one act caused?* Hal thought, growing suspicious. *Or am I just looking into it too much?*

It was very likely that the secret to the recipe was on Hemel, but Hal hadn't dared venture back there. He could teleport directly using the Memoria Crystal, but there was no air except what he could make for himself with an [Air Stone], and the monsters were far, far too strong.

He paused.

Or were they?

Hal was pushing Level 78 now with all the creatures he'd killed on the second floor plus his Levels in Osseochemistry.

He had tried to switch his focused Class to Osseochemist or Oathforger but found that he couldn't. Osseochemist could only Level Up by doing Quests or crafting.

Even if he tried to use his Discordant Stone to apportion it EXP, it wouldn't work.

Likewise, it seemed Oathforger had taken a stance on how he could Level Up as well. For some reason, he felt sure it was because he now possessed all three Class slots.

There seemed to be some leeway up until that point. Or, perhaps it was like Durvin said, and the lower Levels were a very different world with the Shard giving you "training wheels" that made everything easier to handle.

Hal was pretty sure if he used the remaining 8,000 EXP in his Discordant Stone, it would vanish.

Now the only way Hal could gain Oathforger Levels was to use its abilities, just like the only way Hal could Level Up Beastborne was by fighting monsters.

Annoying for sure, but there didn't seem to be any way around it.

"So there's a chance if we use the same types of spells, and you pick that Advancement—which you better—then we can both benefit from the shred effect," Val said.

"She raises a good point. None of your other Advancements so far have benefited others," Elaise told him. "This would be a clear winner despite the singular Perk."

"But it's *so much better*," Val said. "You don't get it. Nothing weakens a monster to beast magic! The best we can hope for is a generic magic shred. You have all sorts of abilities for weakening a monster to elemental, enfeebling, necromancy, pretty much *every school of magic except ours*. Until now."

“When you put it like that,” Hal said with a chuckle.

Though he would never bow to peer pressure on something so important, he agreed with them. Beastblade was by far the most compelling Advancement. It directly made the one unique facet about Beastborne even better.

He liked to weave both physical and magical attacks, anyway. This would only enhance it further. He felt absolutely sure that if he could just break through to Tin, Reap would become even more powerful.

*If only all my Skills worked like that,* Hal thought to himself as he selected the Beastblade Advancement.

Hal could feel the change settle on his shoulders like a leaden cloth. He took a deep breath and exhaled, the shifting pieces of Beastblade settling into his mind.

It felt fundamentally different from when his Leadership had Advanced. Hal suspected his Perks would grow very differently from this point on.

As tightly tied as Beastblade Skill was to his Monster Core, Hal made that his next priority. He didn't know how to Advance to Tin, unfortunately. He was nearly there, his status pointing out that he was measly 1% away.

*I have to be missing something.*

The first thing he would do once he was out of the Tower was go visit Orrittam and Naitese. They understood Ranks better than anybody. If they didn't know, then Hal was truly lost.

“Looking good, Beastborne,” Val said with a smirk. “Are you ready to go kill some monsters now?”

Hal nodded.

“I do not wish to be a... how do you put it, *wet blanket*, but... there are no monsters,” Elaise pointed out. “I mentioned this.”

Despite how foolish it was, Hal looked at each of his allies. They had gone in with only six people, but they had cleaned up the entire floor.

Many of them were weaker than those who had gone with him to the first floor.

All that remained was to return to the first room with the teleporter pad that would take them out of the Tower. But what if they stayed?

With low stacks of *Blight*, everybody was doing considerably better, despite their smaller size than the alliance had.

Of course, the alliance had quite a few weaker members in order to accommodate every person who wanted to go. The stronger people in the alliance had more than made up for those who were under Leveled.

This floor had been a marked difference.

Not only because Hal had another Beastborne to work with, moving in and out between their allies and enemies to keep their adversaries constantly on their toes, but because the Ebon Star tribe had experience fighting these creatures.

They wore special body paint that repelled the Shadesblight, further limiting the stacks of the affliction they could get, while also being keenly aware how the Shadesblight would normally spread.

For most people, encountering a single *Blighted* creature was cause to run and inform the tribe so the full might of their force could crush the pitiful creature.

Here, with only a faint echo of the Shadesblight, the Ebon Star tribe seemed hellbent on getting their revenge any way they could.

Where the dwarves had been defensively minded, the Ebon Stars were brutally efficient in their offensive. Coupled with the unreal might of two Beastbornes, and Giel—who seemed functionally immune to the *Blight*—they were a surprisingly effective force.

Hal had pulled the alliance out because everybody had taken far too much damage for his comfort, but glancing at the party menu, Hal saw that everybody was still in the green. That is, over 75% HP.

So why not push it a little longer?

They both had enough blighted essence that they were eligible for monster spells. It had been so long since Hal had learned another monster spell.

He was eager to learn a new one.

“How is everybody feeling?” Hal asked.

He wouldn't push them to another floor if they weren't ready. While Hal didn't feel perfect, he felt better than he had after the first floor. If they could clear two floors before they had to return, they would make some solid progress.

As expected, the responses ranged from grunts to boasts of challenge as to their fitness for battle—that last one came from Elaise.

Nobody wanted to stop. Despite all the monsters being dead, everybody was keen to get to the third floor. There hadn't been much loot so far, and the monsters were a little on the easier side with four heavy hitters in the group.

Elaise was an exceptional combatant. Her Ninja Class allowed her to summon unique spells and even to create shadow copies of herself that could take damage in her stead.

It was the prime reason she was still only at a single stack of *Blight* compared to everybody else but Giel, who seemed unaffected by the affliction in a similar way to Hal.

Whatever had brought the lamora back from the dead was steeped in corruption. That much Hal could feel without studying him.

The corruption that Giel had laced within every limb of his body was managing to hold its own against the *Blight*. While it was

undoubtedly effective, Hal wouldn't have wished that on his worst enemy.

"Then we stay together a little longer," Hal told them, rising to his feet and dusting the remains of his meal off his hands and breastplate.

Val stood up next, followed by Giel. "We're with you, Hal."

*I hope so*, Hal thought to himself.

He trusted Val—and to an extension, Giel—with his life. However, he couldn't stop a small part of himself always watching her. Worried that she might see an opening and think it was worth taking.

He wanted to trust her, but it was difficult to get past that.

Foolish though it was, a part of Besal had stayed behind when the Khaeros had split off from him. That part told him to be wary and vigilant.

Often it was wrong, but the one time he ignored it, he knew he would suffer for it.

Maybe it would be Val, maybe Giel, or somebody entirely else.

Rolling his shoulders, Hal motioned Elaise to lead on. As the Ebon Star's Scout Leader, she would have taken grave offense to Hal taking the lead. It was her duty, as she saw it, and anybody trying to do it instead of her would be a slap in the face.

Elaise nodded with approval, as if she was glad Hal understood the proper way to do things. She slipped down the hall they had come from.

During the entire trip back through the red-soaked light of the winding corridors, they never saw Elaise.

That was the whole point.

She scouted ahead to make sure there were no traps or monsters lingering around. If you didn't see her, or a sign from her, that meant to continue going and all was well.

Once back at the entry hall, Hal's party was greeted with a familiar sight.

Familiar for Hal, at least.

Three chests of age-darkened wood banded in bronze stood before a glowing pad of stone inlaid with complex sigils.

"What is this?" Elaise asked, hiking her thumb at the chests.

Hal motioned to the icons beneath the chests etched into the stone. "Each one gives a different reward based upon the type of chest you choose," Hal explained. "It looks like the same options as before. Schematics for items or buildings, armor and accessories, and weapons." Hal pointed at each in turn.

"Clearly there is one superior choice," Elaise said, kneeling in front of the weaponry chest and nearly stumbling back in surprise when a large item sprang out of the chest.

She managed to catch the large greatsword, gasping with shock and then, later on, awe as she read the Shardscript description. "This is better than my current weapon... that should be impossible."

"Welcome to the wondrous loot of a Tower," Val said, kneeling in front of the same chest. She looked over her shoulder at Hal. "Might as well see what this chest gives me. Any weapon is better than none, and hey, maybe it'll give me something I want to use."

Giel stepped up to the middle chest with the unfurled scroll icon. A small roll of parchment popped out of the chest. He turned without a word and handed it to Hal as the rest of the party queued up to the chest they wanted.

Hal looked down at it as the big guy dropped it into his palm and turned away before Hal could even thank him.



He did anyway, even if it was a little belated due to the shock.

Hal knelt at the schematic chest, and out popped a small stone tablet that looked like it had been through hell and back. It was a [Citadel Quest Tablet].

As soon as Hal examined it, a bright light washed through the room, causing a few weapons to be drawn and a shout of alarm to ring out.