

CHAPTER 37

Hal listened to Trystal's offer while he expended the last of his flagging strength to reshape the stone arms that created the Gap, the entrance to Brightsong's bowl-shaped valley at the foot of the erstwhile lair of Naitese the Tyrant White dragon.

All too soon, Hal's power was exhausted. He managed to stop the drain before it took more than a thousand Experience, but it was a near thing. Copper Kol'thils didn't seem to drain him the same way that the Gold ones did, or perhaps it was just the Sigil, [Carve].

He had to admit, it was an amazingly simple yet effective Sigil. And he was also forced to admit, despite his misgivings, that Trystal's offer was a good one.

Though he wasn't the best with people, Hal had learned enough about how to push and pull to get the right answers. He reminded himself to thank Mira and, oddly enough, Naitese. The latter's involuntary instruction had been invaluable. It wasn't outright manipulation, more like using his Intimidation and Persuasion skills.

Something that, given the levels he received in both, suggested that he was using them to good effect. Undoubtedly, his high Charisma had a substantial effect as well.

There were also a few levels gained to his Leadership Skill, which was odd. That usually only happened when he did something noteworthy of a leader and that required somebody to see him as one.

That either meant that Trystal saw him as a leader, or one of the dragons might have overheard him and thought better of him. Which naturally meant Naitese.

It was still a shock to him that the dragons had played the role of subservient allies so well. He wandered back to the town hall with his Council flanking him, deep in thought, and didn't realize he had passed by it until Noth gently tugged at his elbow.

He looked around curiously.

“There,” she said with a smile on her lips.

At the time, Hal had been overwhelmed with the effects of his Copper Kol'thil and the [Kol'thil Surge] that, while gone, left a tingling in his veins.

This was not something he was aware he had done. The Town Hall looked... spectacular. Everything was polished with ivory inlaid upon polished ebony boards. Gold fixtures here and there brought a brightness to what would otherwise be dreary and dark.

“You did a good job here,” she whispered to him. “Very stately. Though I must say, the carving you did was excellent. The mountains hardly look like mountains anymore!”

A glance back at the Gap showed him the sheer vertical walls with mountains of stone rubble at their feet. Once it was removed, it would be a perfect killing field. Or a stately and awe-inspiring walk between sheer walls of stone rising hundreds of feet, depending on whether the visitors were invaders or not.

He gave her a faint smile, his mind still going over everything he had spoken to Trystal about. There was a twinge of guilt for the way he had treated her, but he hadn't been lying.

There was no way he would ever let another person control him ever again.

I won't be shackled! It was as simple as that.

Once inside, everybody from Brightsong's Council sat at a large round table with an intricate design of inlaid ivory and gold trimmings. It looked like a diamond with several lines crossing it at 90-degree angles and a sigil inside that looked quite like a dragon's head.

Did I make a mark for myself without realizing it? Hal wondered as he stared at it. He noticed that the barrels, now officially in proper racks and fermenting with a faint distant gurgle, had three golden dragon heads stamped on the side with a curl of flame at the center.

“I'm sure a lot of you are wondering what happened, and I figure it was owed to give you a full accounting,” Hal began.” He folded his hands atop the table, surprised at how smooth and polished it was. “When I finally was able to rid myself of my [Kol'thil Bleed], I could absorb the Copper Kol'thil I've had for quite some time.”

Hal held up his arm and showed the copper symbol to them. “Most people call these Founder Marks, but they have deeper ties to the very beginnings of Aldim and the Balesian Mages. The Sigils I gained from the Copper Kol’thil were what let me... remodel. I suppose you could call it that.”

“That’d be puttin’ it pretty lightly, lad!” Durvin said with a bushy grin.

“It also gave me a brief window in which I could use them for free, something that is normally very costly for me to do. There’s a reason I haven’t been able to use what most people consider my ‘Founder abilities’ for a while. Thankfully, that’s done now and one less thing on my plate.”

And then there were the Kinslayers and Trystal to discuss, not to mention the young Poisonheart who had sworn fealty to him and seemed quite hurt when he asked him to stay put while he discussed things with his Council.

The man had sworn, right then and there, and his Oathforger Class supplied the Shard-backed Oath for the both of them. The Poisonheart took it without blinking once.

It was, Hal realized, remarkably one-sided.

Unlike his Pact with the Ebon Star, this was an Oath, something he created—in a manner of speaking—and therefore something the Shard also enforced. It allowed him to call upon the Poisonhearts at will, something he didn’t think Elaise was going to like very much.

From what little he remembered from their lessons on the twelve tribes of the Shiverglades, they were the most reviled.

Just my luck.

But it also seemed as if they were feared.

There was a reason for the hatred. Something Hal was beginning to realize was a rarity on Aldim as much as back on Earth.

The Poisonhearts believed all the tribes had committed some nameless sin. In fact, he had more than an inkling what it was ever since he’d gone into the Ancient Dungeon below Brightsong.

Elaise avoided him whenever she could, and she perpetually had a hunted look, as if she expected him to pop up at any moment to ask her about what she saw down there.

He probably should do it one of these days.

“We’re wondering about our guests,” Elora said, hefting Komachi into her lap. The pobul scrambled under her jacket and poked her head out from just beneath the half-elf’s neck.

Hal wasn’t sure, but he swore she winked at him. So, naturally, he winked back. Which only served to make Komachi unnaturally bashful as she slipped deeper into Elora’s jacket.

Where to begin?

They had seen him fight Hirash, though only at a distance. It was over so fast that they likely hadn’t fully understood what was going on.

He still had what items he could salvage from the Archmage in his Inventory, there wasn’t much room left and he was once again reminded of all the dozens of tasks he had to do.

One at a time, Hal. One at a time.

And so, Hal told them about Trystal, the Kinslayers, the Poisonheart, and even his brief tussle with the Archmage.

There was a great deal of arguing back and forth between the different groups who thought that the Kinslayers should be immediately put to the sword and those that thought they should be given sanctuary.

Unsurprisingly, Noth thought they should all be killed. She was fiercely protective of Hal, and no few people backed her on this. While others, like Ashera, thought that Hal should take the high road.

He was, as they put it, the one they were hunting. If he took two off the playing field, then that was two less who could hurt him.

However, if he offered them sanctuary, that would be two more allies that they were sorely in need of.

Brightsong was doing far better than anybody had hoped, especially with winter coming soon, but they were still in rough shape. Four additional and powerful members would go quite far, especially since one of them was a Founder and the other a Beastborne.

The arguing went back and forth as they were served drinks and food. The day grew long and eventually, night started to fall. A choice had to be made.

It was all well and good to deliberate over it, but there was a point when keeping them standing in the cold was needlessly cruel.

It took a while for Hal to realize Komachi, their pobul Brewmaster, did not weigh in once. When he started to watch for her feelings on the matter, he noticed that she appeared uneasy and disgruntled when killing the newcomers was argued for. It was difficult to tell, what with her being an otter-like creature and frequently hiding in Elora's jacket, but it was there if he paid attention.

Ashera's familiar, Kow, was on her side entirely. Komachi was more independent than the loyal oppa, at least when it came to opinions.

In the end, he was unsurprised when it came down to a split in the group. Half wanted to kick them out, the other half wanted to induct them, but every single person was uneasy about the whole situation.

Which is fair, Hal thought. They presented a major security risk, one that they couldn't even begin to fathom.

In the end, as it always would, Hal made the decision.

"They stay," he told them, raising a hand to quell the discourse that sprang up. "I'm not without my reservations. I still remember fighting the last Kinslayer up on those very mountain tops. I'd rather not do that again and if I can turn two against Rinbast, then that's good enough for me."

Komachi wiggled her ears and squeaked affectionately at Hal before sliding across the table and hugging his arm with her stubby arms.

At least Komachi seemed to approve.

However, many in attendance shot him envious looks, including Elora.

He hadn't told them that they, or at least the woman, were responsible for the latest attack on Brightsong, the battle between himself and the dragons. Most of them didn't know the specifics of that battle and, truthfully, didn't need to.

It was personal.

There was no telling how the other Beastborne would fare over the long term. He was still connected to her via [Dominate] but he couldn't keep her on a leash forever.

That would not only be cruel, but it would be a waste of time. If he couldn't learn to trust her somehow, then she would have to go. There was no room for those of uncertain allegiances here.

"They will be watched," he told them. "By myself, nobody else."

Noth looked up sharply.

He gave her a sympathetic smile. "I'm sorry, but this is the way it will be until I am certain of their loyalties." He turned to the rest. "I thank you for helping to make me a home with Noth, but this comes first. The good of Brightsong *must* come first before any one person, even myself."

The look Noth shot him promised that they would have *words* later. But he was okay with that. He was sure of himself.

Brightsong needed to last and if that was going to happen, he had to stop worrying about what would happen if he was gone. He needed to be able to trust the people who were left behind when he went out to face the tribes, a Dungeon, or even duel Rinbast in a Primacy Trial.

It was time that Brightsong learned to stand on its own.

They talked a little bit about the new Gourmage from the Tower and the inventions he was coming up with. Freed from the oppressive nature of the Tower, the man was proving to be quite brilliant.

Their food problems, it seemed, were largely at an end, provided they could put in the time and energy to construct the buildings the mage was requesting.

Hal green-lit the projects, though he was hardly needed for that, and quickly left the town hall. Hashing out the details was something the Council could do on their own.

That was, after all, their main function.

They would lift the load off Hal, giving him time to deal with... well, himself, in a manner of speaking.

Noth hurried out after him, catching up to him halfway to the gates that were still crystallized from the Battle of Brightsong. "Are you sure this is wise? What if they tell people what they are... what *you* are?"

Hal nodded. It was a concern, especially considering the great big secret lurking just beneath the surface. He was, technically speaking, the same

person as Rinbast. Two versions of the same man from different alternate realities of Earth.

All the Kinslayers were like that.

It was how Rinbast gained and retained his power. Only a twist of fate had allowed Hal to escape that grisly end. He tried very hard to keep that in mind when he made his decision to let them stay.

Despite what they had done, that could have just as easily been him.

Instead, he was dropped near the outskirts of Fallwreath and met up with Elora and her group of rebels.

Such a small thing. A distance of only a few miles at best, and he would have been in Rinbast's clutches.

The Kinslayers, those that could be saved, deserved a chance at happiness, didn't they?