

Chapter 43

Hal was up and out of bed as soon as the mandatory hour was over. He knew that Noth wouldn't bother him. If he slept another eight or more hours, she would make damn sure nobody disturbed him.

He must have fallen asleep at some point because Hermes was nestled in the crook of his arm. *I'm pretty sure I would have remembered that*, Hal thought, looking down at the slumbering oppa.

Nearby, there was a keg of Komachi's brew, signed with an autograph in the form of her paw print.

Hal could piece things together. Hermes had brought back the autograph to show Hal, but he was asleep.

He could just imagine his excited little face and felt a pang of guilt for not being awake for him.

Is this what overworked parents feel like? Hal thought, shaking his head.

Tucking Hermes into his bed, resting him on his pillow and hoping he had good dreams, he wrote out a note for Hermes congratulating him on his autograph and promising him something even better from Komachi when he got back. Hal took Vorax off the back of a chair and slipped out into the night.

He found the others in the shelter of the longhouse near the ring of Shadesblight surrounding the tower. The sun had hidden itself beyond the mountains, dropping the temperature even further.

The look of surprise and annoyance that flashed across Noth's face told him that he had been right. She hoped he'd fall asleep and stay asleep.

“Sorry to disappoint,” he said with a forced grin. He felt so tired, but there was no affliction that he could see that was causing it. No exhaustion had settled in. He slept, but still felt more drained than before. He had full Spirit, HP, MP, and SP. And yet, he couldn’t shake the feeling like he’d been up for a week straight.

Just to be sure, Hal used *Steel Mind*... and nothing happened. So no hidden afflictions were causing this, so what was it?

“I already gave the Citadel Quest to the rest of Brightsong,” Hal told Noth. “There’s nothing much else for me to do except lead another group in. We’ll try to do the same as before. Two floors, then take a rest. How many parties do we have?”

“Four in total,” Mira told him. “If we rotate out, there will always be a party ready to go in.”

Hal nodded. “Let’s go.”

They entered the Tower once more, up on the fourth floor this time. No monsters greeted them, which seemed customary now that they were out of the first floor.

Or perhaps that’s because we’re not an alliance, Hal thought to himself.

The alliance, while a good idea at the time, had seemed to enrage the Tower in a way that Hal couldn’t define. He had the creeping sense that he should not have been able to admit so many people, and the Tower emptied itself to crush them.

Perhaps that was why the later floors were easier. The Tower had used up a lot of its energy to repel the first alliance and was now using what resources it had left to cobble together a defense.

And that was what it was. A defense.

The Tower resisted them at every turn. The fourth floor was devoid of multiple-choice doors, but it was filled with traps that Angram had little trouble disarming. However, the First Bow—as he liked to

call himself—was constantly disarming a new trap every other hallway.

There were saw traps, boiling oil jets, flamethrowers, mana-sapping darts, crushing traps, grinding gears that opened up beneath a false floor. You name it, the Tower had it in spades.

And every time Angram figured out how to disarm one type, the Tower threw another type just to make things interesting.

By the end of the fourth floor, Angram looked ready to pass out. His fingers were bleeding and his eyes were wild as he scanned each and every room.

“I swear it knows what I’m thinking,” Angram said, leaning against the entry to a new hallway, the last one from what Hal could tell. They could all see the room beyond, not more than 30 yards away, with its familiar three chests and portal mechanism.

“If the Tower has a soul, I will reap it,” Noth muttered hazily, swaying on her feet before she shook her head and steadied herself.

“We’re making good time,” Mira said, the only one who had remained upbeat throughout the whole affair. She ate snacks and chattered on as if this was an evening stroll while Angram defused trap after trap.

Apparently, Mira was built differently.

I’m Bill Dipperly, I’m Bill Dipperly, Hal sang woozily to himself in the safety of his own mind.

Though by the looks the others gave him, perhaps he hadn’t been so silent after all.

Angram was three quarters of the way through the hall when something suddenly *shifted*.

Hal was on his feet, moving with all the speed his *Convergence* and essence powers could allow, but he was still too slow. He saw the

mirage of the portal room vanish as a thick-limbed monster dragged itself through the fake image.

The walls slammed shut right in front of Hal's nose, nearly taking it off as they separated him from Angram and the room beyond. He heard the overworked Ranger scream. In surprise or pain, Hal couldn't tell.

A glance at the party menu told Hal that Angram was at least alive, but not for long if the room beyond was a trap.

I should have known this was too easy! I'm so tired, I let my guard down.

Rage like he had never known filled Hal to the brim and boiled over. He spun up his Monster Core and focused, though it was difficult, on the sensation of hope. The fuel for his goldflame Dragonfire.

Never before had he used it in such a way. He didn't care for finesse or even realize how dangerous it might be for his friend on the other side. All he knew was that he needed to get to the other side as quickly as possible.

Hal cocked back his fist, the knuckles shimmering with a heat haze as he concentrated all his Spirit to the spot. Bellowing at the top of his lungs, Hal punched the stone as hard as he could.

The stone cracked and dented around his bleeding knuckles, but it did not give another inch.

That's enough for my purposes.

A roaring gout of golden light spiraled over his shoulder and down his arm until it fountained out from Hal's fist. He strained every drop of Spirit from his channels and his Core, and still continued to push long past the point any sane practitioner would have stopped.

Hal didn't know when the bellow of rage turned to one of pain, but it didn't stop him as a spiraling font of golden fire drilled through the Tower's fleshy inner wall.

Blood and viscera, like the likes of which Hal had never seen before, were cauterized by the golden flames. The Tower shook as if it were a living beast being attacked.

In a way, it was.

Once the flames had burned a hole through the wall and Hal's Monster Core was nearly out, the Beastborne sagged to the side. Through the ragged, charred hole, they could see ten or twenty monsters all rushing into the hallway to get to Angram.

Hardly more than a few seconds had passed since the trap was sprung. Hal held out hope that he was not too late.

Only the fact that he had stayed in the narrow corridor had saved Angram and allowed him to fight one or two enemies at once instead of the whole group.

Hal's Dragonfire had blasted the two creatures Angram was fighting. The Ranger was swift enough to hit the deck as soon as he noticed the bubbling stone and burst of light.

Noth pushed Hal aside, keeping him out of the way as the rest of the party dove into the hole and rallied around Angram.

"Go," Hal told her wearily. He could hardly stand, his legs felt like pulled taffy, but he was fine. Angram needed help, not him.

With a look of deep concern, Noth slipped through the hole he had made and the sound of battle redoubled with her shout.

Prompts of defeated messages rolled in, but Hal was too tired to pay them any attention. Eventually the sounds stopped, and Hal managed to slip through the hole he made. He stopped halfway through, marveling at the destruction.

Nearly ten feet of solid... well, not stone clearly, but flesh and stone in some unholy amalgamation. That was impressive, no matter that he had nearly burned himself to a crisp, as Orrittam had warned him would happen if he pushed too hard countless times before.

And I would do it again, Hal vowed. When it came to helping his friends, he wasn't going to let anything hold him back. It was why he was back in the Tower. They needed him.

When Hal finally made it into the hallway, Angram helped him to his feet and embraced him tighter than he had ever experienced before. Angram kissed him on the forehead.

"You have my eternal thanks, Hal," he said breathlessly. "I would have been dead if not for you. Thank you."

Struggling to believe what just happened, Hal blinked slowly and said, "Did you just kiss me?"

"Do not be a prude," Angram said, but there was no heat to his words. He brushed some charred goo off Hal's shoulder and grinned at him. "It is a deep elven tradition, a greeting among the closest of brothers. I may be the black sheep of my House, but you are welcome at my door no matter the hour."

Hal nodded. "I'm just glad you're safe, Angram."

The next few rooms were very different. The walls were mottled and the tiles of stone were sloughing off to expose grotesque masses that resembled tumors crossed with mushrooms.

The halls of the Tower canted sharply to the side as if the whole building were about to fall over. It quivered like a living thing repeatedly, then stilled.

No more monsters appeared, and when they found the portal room, they all went as one group just in case something tried to separate them.

Nothing did.

The Tower seemed defeated. Wounded. And as tired as Hal felt, even after using *Core Tap* to restore his Spirit from the [Lesser Monster Cores] they found, he was determined to take advantage of it.

“Everybody pick the central chest,” Noth told them. “We need materials for the Dawn Citadel, and we’re going to wring every last rare drop from this damnable Tower or else!”

Nobody argued with her. They all queued up to receive either a schematic—which was met with a collective groan—or a rare material.

Hal looked at Noth and mouthed, *thank you* to her. She looked more than a little worried, but managed a smile for his sake all the same.

Where Hal struggled to tell people what to do, especially when it came to something hard won like their personal loot, Noth didn’t bat an eye.

She was really coming into her own as a leader.

Far better than me, Hal thought. Can’t even destroy a single Tower. Can’t get into the Abyss. Every choice I’ve made has felt like the wrong one.

They entered the portal to the next floor, and Hal checked his Dawn Citadel Quest progress.

Unfortunately, the materials they received were not all for a single stage. The first, third, fourth, and seventh stages of construction were nearly finished, but they were all missing a few vital ingredients.

Since the Citadel had to be built in order, with the first stage completed before the second could begin, it meant that despite having a great deal of the required materials, they were still effectively at square one.

And I have no florking clue what the additional objectives might be. I get that they’re secret for a reason, but seriously. No hints at all?

Mira clapped Hal on the back, yet managed to disguise the fact she was holding onto his shoulder and lending him her strength with the companionable gesture.

Hal looked at her gratefully, but now that he had some time to recover, he was feeling better. Still drained. That never went away.

It felt like he was suddenly in his late 40s. Everything hurt. He *felt* like he had no energy for anything, but whenever he checked his vital resources, there was plenty for the task ahead.

By some grace of the gods, the Tower's fifth floor seemed injured. Pieces of the walls convulsed and shifted, trying to do... *something*, but failing.

"Creepy," Mira said, putting her hand on a stony vein that ran along the room.

No monsters bothered them, no traps, nothing. The Tower occasionally let out a wail of pain or a distant shriek, but no harm came to the group as they collected their easily gained loot and progressed to the next floor.