

Chapter 36

Noth petted the grumpy oppa, Hermes, feeding him treats even though he professed he did not like them.

Every now and then, he would squirm and try to slip out of her lap, proclaiming he was some prisoner of war or something silly like that, but he never got very far.

His oppa nature betrayed him when she used her fingernails to scratch just behind his ears. He rumbled quietly, similar to a cat's purr but with a deeper timbre.

While Noth wasn't as practiced with soul aeder as many of her sisters, she knew enough about them to keep them safe and comfortable.

Much of which she had shared with both Elora and Ashera. The latter was quicker to ask for help by far, although Elora had come a very long way with Komachi.

Which was saying something, because Komachi was a handful even if she proclaimed she was "training wheels" for Elora.

Noth could imagine the pobul thought she was. And now that Brightsong was improving daily, despite the snowy weather, Komachi's demands grew and grew.

For a wonder, Elora was rising to meet those demands. She truly loved Komachi. That much was obvious.

There weren't many people in Brightsong who didn't.

The Brewmaster pobul was riotously popular with the dwarves—no surprise there—but she was also well-loved by all the Rangers and karaks too.

Noth looked around the cottage she shared with Hal, her eyes resting on a small mound of dirt at the center of the room. Hermes looked away, as all soul aeder did when they were guilty of something. He wouldn't meet her eyes or look at the hole, as if it didn't exist.

I'm not sure if he's acting out because he misses Hal, Noth thought, or because he's an oppa and oppas like to dig tunnels. Kow seems to be an exception to that rule, but I wouldn't put it past him to have secret tunnels all around and within that inn of his.

It came as quite a surprise that the two oppas were so distinctly different from one another. Kow was sweet, compassionate, and calm, whereas Hermes acted like a tough guy with a guarded exterior that had a penchant for getting into things. He was insatiably curious, too.

Hermes looked at her, caught her eye, then looked away again, grooming his paws.

A day after Hal dropped off Hermes and made his introductions, Noth was on her feet and feeling fine again. Her steri slimes were worked miracles on the others, and soon the entire alliance would be ready to go into the Tower once more.

And yet, Hal still hadn't returned.

She tried to remember that time didn't work quite right between the Tower and the outside world. It seemed to move slower within, so maybe he was only clearing the first few rooms now.

Still... after seeing so much bloodshed, Noth was afraid of Hal going in with just a single party.

It wasn't as if he had much choice, but she would have felt infinitely better if he had gone in with at least two parties.

There was even talk of people entering in to go look for him once at least a full party was assembled. They lacked Hal's Oathforger trait

that granted him the ability to form an alliance, but another party searching couldn't go amiss, right?

“Is... is he coming back?” Hermes asked Noth quietly. His voice broke, betraying his fear. “The warden, I mean. Did he... leave me? Us?”

She smiled, putting all of her confidence in the man she loved into her words, “Hal *always* comes back.”

Maybe not when you would hope or like him to... but he always comes back, Noth thought to herself. A warmth spread from her chest into her limbs, banishing the meager cold that managed to slip into her home despite the fire.

Hermes looked up at her with such hope. “He does?”

She pinched his paw gently. “Always. You can count on that. So you have nothing to fear, my dear Hermes. He'll be back, likely with something monumental to tell us, maybe some new gift.” She laughed. “He probably found another Manatree seed or something ridiculous.”

“Bet he's bringin' back a sweet haul of goodies!” The oppa grinned toothily. One of the few times Noth had seen ever since she met the little snowy-furred soul aeder.

A slime poked its head out from her bag and blinked at Hermes. It squeezed out, rolling and bouncing toward the two. Aside from the faint *plop, plop* it made, it was utterly silent as the slime nuzzled up against them.

“Hello, George,” Noth said with a pet for the slime.

“His name is really George?” Hermes asked her flatly, with an especially judgmental squint.

“It is a very normal, very mundane name, don't you agree?” She gently squished George affectionately.

“Sure is, mate. Sure is.”

“He doesn’t want to specialize. He wants to stay normal. A normal pink slime with no special powers. And who am I to say no to that?”

“Does that mean he can’t do anything at all?” Hermes said. This time there was no judgment, but plain, honest curiosity.

George looked up at Hermes with a strained expression.

“He can make jelloq faster than any other of his family,” Noth told him as a small crystalline secretion formed in the middle of the slime’s tiny translucent body and then was squeezed out.

The [Jelloq] looked like a tiny three-dimensional diamond. Hal had often remarked that they looked like something he called a “Sim’s Plumbob”, whatever that was.

“[Jelloq], huh?” Hermes said, then gave a thumbs up to George. “That’s real cool, mate. Chilly-chilly, as I heard some of those koblins say.”

The oppa looked around, then cleared his tiny throat. “What’s that thing do, though? Eat ‘em maybe, mash ‘em up into a tasty stew?”

“No, Hermes, they aren’t potatoes.” She lifted the faintly glowing jewel up. “You can grind them down into a powder, use them to enhance equipment. The specialty ones, elemental, rock, dragon, and the like, impart particular strengths to a recipe or to just about anything. Unfortunately, we have no Enchanters here. They would be able to get the most out of these things. Back in the cities, they probably are worth more than silver. Maybe even gold.”

Hermes’ eyes glittered mischievously. “Ya can enhance equipment with one of those? I might like to do that. Enchanting, I mean.”

Noth was about to tuck away the small jewel when she looked over at Hermes. “Here, why don’t you try working with this, then? I don’t know how you might be able to attain an Enchanter Class out here, but stranger things have happened.”

“Is it useful?” Hermes took the jewel in his paws carefully.

“An Enchanter?”

“Ya.”

“Probably one of the most useful crafting Classes I can think of,” Noth told him. “While a lot of people might think Weavers or Blacksmiths are where it’s at, being able to improve any piece of equipment or structure is wildly underrated. Take that fireplace, for example. It’s made well. Good quality. But an Enchanter could add magical properties to it without needing to rebuild it. Even the weakest, most useless items could become great treasures with an Enchanter’s touch.”

His ears wiggled excitedly. She could practically see the aspiration to become an Enchanter taking hold in his heart. “I’ll do it then. I like crafting. Making things with my stash. Some reason, whenever I mess with somethin’, I see all these possibilities that...well, nobody else picks up that easily. So far, I got some kind of Class Affinity with Tinkerer.”

Noth’s eyes lit up with interest. “Do you now? Hm... then you’re not making a random hole in the middle of my floor, are you?”

“What if I was!?” he said, bristling with defiance. He shook his head, beginning to calm down. “Ya, mate, I’m goin’ somewhere with that hole. Tons of stuff I can do down there that won’t bother ya and the warden none.”

“That’s better than what I thought,” Noth confessed. “We don’t have much. I don’t know all of what Hal told you, but Brightsong is not some shining metropolis full of money and treasures. We get by. It’s rather fascinating how much better we are doing than before, but we’re still alone in the wilderness. However, if there’s anything you need—within reason—you can let me or Rondo know and we’ll see if we can’t scrounge up something for you.”

“I want to pitch in,” he admitted. “Feels like I can make a difference. The warden fed me, gave me a place to stay for a bit. I

can feel a ripe opportunity for a challenge in my whiskers! Wait, Rondo? Who's that?"

"He's the quartermaster," Noth told Hermes, gently setting him on her shoulder and walking over to Hal's worktable. "Oversees all the items and keeps stock of what we have in the warehouses. If you want anything without having to gather it yourself, Rondo is your gnome. I'll make sure to tell him to make exceptions for you."

"Exceptions... Why exceptions?"

"Because usually Rondo wants an item replaced with another. Say you want a bundle of stone, he'll give it to you if you fetch him a bundle of wood, or something else that we're short on. It's sort of like a bartering system, I guess, but a lot less refined. We don't exactly have a functioning economy yet."

Hermes rubbed his paws together at the thought of getting in on the ground floor of a burgeoning economy. He didn't know much about money, but he knew he wanted *a lot of it*. And that the best way to do that, is to be one of the first to the market.

That was the secret to any great mercantile empire. You didn't have to be the best if you were first.

"With what you might be able to make, you could probably be one rich oppa," Noth told him, setting him down on her side of the worktable. There was a strip of metal that divided the table into two parts.

One for Hal's experiments, and the other for Noth's. She was glad to see that his recent mishaps didn't damage her delicate vials and glass instruments.

Not that they were likely to.

Hal had made these things out of his [Elder Glass] which was incredibly resilient. Noth could have climbed the remains of Frostmourn and dropped them off the edge of the mountain, and they would still survive.

The rocks they encountered might not though.

Hermes dooked rapidly at the prospect of becoming a rich oppa. His fur fluffed up. It almost looked like he had the beginnings of a scraggly mane around his tiny neck.

“I study alchemy,” Noth said, getting out a book Ashera had loaned her. “There is some overlap between Alchemists and Enchanters. Perhaps you would like to assist me in my work? You can go back to digging your hole, of course, but I would appreciate the help.”

“Yes, miss! I would love that.”

George was set down on the table. He always liked to watch her work, and he was an excellent recycling bin. She could feed him her discarded potions and the little slime would produce [Jelloq].

At first, she had been afraid that the potions would hurt him, but slimes were among the most resilient creatures—to non-combat damage, at least—she had ever seen.

A child could probably destroy a slime if they really tried, but a vial of poison that could kill an entire town if dumped into their water supply? A slime could guzzle it down like a beer and probably burp and ask for more.

For an aspiring Alchemist like Noth, slimes were her most valuable assets and her staunchest allies. It didn't hurt that trying to learn alchemy while using her slimes helped both her *Alchemy Skill* and her *Monster Tamer Class* to gain Levels.

Cracking open the tome to a bookmarked page, Noth set it down on its stand. “Okay, I need some shavings of [Pearl Tree] wood, a drop of [Disara Venom], and... let's see, I can probably substitute these enhancers here with some [Pink Jelloq].”

Noth looked down at the studious oppa, realizing she was about to ask him to go ask Rondo for the ingredients. *He must be so lonely*, she thought.

“How about the two of us make a trip to Rondo and see if we can’t scare up some supplies for the both of us?”

Hermes’ little ferrety face lit up like a child’s at Christmas.