

CHAPTER 15

Besal flung himself to the side of the chamber as the oily tentacle cracked the stone floor where he had been.

Ralst shouted encouragement, “This is your time to shine, Khaeros!” Though she did make sure to keep her eyes closed.

“Easy for you to say!” Besal shouted back. “You want to come up here and do this?”

The drow smirked at him but didn’t move a muscle from the lower chamber to come help him.

Not that she could.

Eldritch monstrosities were *his* forte after all. Most of the debilitating effects they produced were utterly useless on a Khaeros. Like most eldritch creatures, he had a natural resistances to madness and morphological infection.

Not immunity, however. A strong enough eldritch creature, say a Great One or even a sufficiently powerful Old One could do substantial harm.

But if Aldim had either of *those*, then the Worldshard was screwed no matter what they did. And for Hal’s sake, he refused to believe that things were beyond hope.

No matter what that girl showed me.

Besal surged to his feet and lunged for the central mass of eyes that had exposed themselves when the creature, a Medusa, attacked. Throughout the ages various civilizations had gotten it quite wrong about the Medusa creature.

They weren’t some buxom, scantily clad woman with snakes for hair that petrified you with a look.

Well, okay, the look part was correct. The rest was just humanity being stupid. Humans were well known for their inability to comprehend eldritch creatures, it was practically their only saving grace.

Where other creatures would often go mad just as the sight of an Elder One, humans would naturally—and quite without realizing—invent some new and wild monstrous creature in its place.

A cluster of goat-like eyes at the center of a mass of oily tendrils became a beautiful woman with a head of snakes that could petrify you with a look.

Besal shook his head at the shield of madness—inadvertent or not!—that humanity as a whole possessed. It was almost impressive.

“I, however, am not a human,” Besal said, clawing through the gooey mass of eyes. “You’ll my morphological matrix significantly harder to convince than a human!”

His claws rent the soft squishy innards of the Medusa, nearly killing it in a few blows. Nearly, being the operative word. It needed to be blinded, to protect the others, but it still had to be alive for the ritual to succeed.

Dragging the creature’s suckers off the wall with a series of squelching pops, Besal carted his recent catch through a pair of rooms into Ralst’s little saferoom.

With a wet *plop* he set the creature on one of the altars beside the impossibly bright glowing chunk of [Nonarine]. Something so hilariously rare that Besal wondered if Ralst somehow managed to steal this piece from Hal.

When he had found it, the entire Shiverglades was notified of the momentous event.

But it had been necessary for the ritual they wanted to perform. For Besal to become whole.

He could hear Hal quip about him becoming a “real boy” even though they had been severed. Besal could still sense where Hal was. He could tell something was wrong, and it took more willpower than he would ever dare admit to stay where he was instead of running to Hal’s side.

Even knowing that what he was doing was for the best.

Assuming, of course, that he wasn’t being manipulated and lied to. A distant possibility, but not entirely out of the question.

Luda didn’t seem to have an insincere bone in her body, but if she was able to keep all of this from Hal, then what could she be keeping from him?

None of this sat right with Besal, but what did, really? He wasn't exactly *happy* with the way things had been. He had butted heads with Hal more often than not, but that was just in good fun. Still, he would be lying to himself if he didn't admit there was some friction between them.

They would never see eye-to-eye. Not exactly. And two people who could not reconcile one another, sharing the same body seemed a recipe for disaster.

There was a reason most Beastbornes and their Khaeros had an antagonistic relationship. Master and slave, until the day the Beastborne slipped up. Hal had flipped the script, had tried to make things better.

But was he satisfied with the way things were turning out if it meant he lost Besal's powers? No more extra MP, nobody else to take over when he was consumed by Strain. He had inadvertently given Besal the key to his own freedom, but would he turn out to be like every other Beastborne when Besal came back a free man?

I hope not. He is better than that.

"You're getting faster," Ralst said, eyeing the still twitching Medusa. "You disabled it?"

"You won't be turning into a stone anytime soon," Besal promised.

"Very well, Luda?"

The young girl unwrapped the glowing bar of [Nonarine], she looked uncertainly at Besal. "Are you sure you wish to go through with this?"

"Need I remind you, that *you* were the one that convinced me this was the right course of action?" Besal snarled. "And now you're asking me? If I knew, I'd already be doing it my damn self!"

Luda shared a look with Ralst who shrugged and said, "You heard the man."

"Not a man," Besal corrected.

"Don't care," Ralst countered, "you're male enough to grate my nerves, that's proof enough for me."

"Can we get on with this?"

Luda set the bar down, its glowing aura of magic burned Besal's eyes and unlike creatures made of flesh and blood he lacked eyelids to shut it out. Even if he had, he doubted it would have done anything.

"I'm ready," he told Luda, if only to keep her from worrying.

Why he wanted to stop her from worrying... well that was a bit more complicated. He didn't really *care*, and yet he felt the urge to assuage her guilt over her role in all this subterfuge.

It was all above Besal's head.

He understood fighting, control, domination, blood and guts, that sort of thing. But once you got to espionage, he was out of his element. Clearly Ralst and Luda were, despite the ebony and ivory difference between them, cut from the same cloth.

They both lied as if it was as easy as breathing, and they would look you straight in the eye without flinching while telling you whatever you wanted to hear.

Still, Besal had to admit that their plan had a particular allure to it.

"Now that you know all that you do," Ralst said, raising the wicked obsidian dagger above the Medusa's squirming body. "Are you sure you wish to go through with this?"

"Are you giving me back my freedom?" he asked.

"You could say that *this* is giving you back your freedom," Ralst argued. "But... yes, Besal. I am offering you a way out. You can go back to Hal, try to change things if you like. You can be part of him again, though how you will manage it I cannot say."

Besal looked at Luda, who very gently shook her head. She had not seen a way for him to peacefully bond once more with Hal. Maybe it was possible, but would he always want to stay in a man's head forever? Only able to come out when things were truly dire?

What kind of life was that?

If he took Ralst on her offer, he would not only be his own person, but he could help Hal directly. They would be partners.

Or so he hoped.

Hal might not welcome you back in your new form. After all, how many Khaeros have done as you have? How many wished to be free of their masters only to turn around and slaughter them? Hal might fear you.

No, Besal shook his head, *Hal knows me.*

And yet, he still was unsure.

Uncertainty was not a welcome or familiar sensation for Besal. Kill or be killed was more than the rule of the wilds, it was at the very core of who he was. At what he knew of the world.

“I’m ready,” Besal said, holding out his hand over the Medusa.

“For what it’s worth,” Ralst said raising the curved dagger higher as she placed one hand on the [Nonarine], fueling the ritual’s sigils etched into the altar, “you’re making the right decision.”

The strange shifting colors of the [Nonarine] inverted the world as its potent magic was used up just as Ralst’s arm fell. The dagger, laced with the crackling reality-warping energy of [Nonarine] impaled his palm and pinned it to the Medusa below.

Sensing its end, the Medusa desperately tried to wriggle away but as their blood and the [Nonarine] mixed, Besal wrenched away what pitiful control it had over its corporeal body.

Its very essence—a soul was too pure a thing for an eldritch abomination like this—was consumed by Besal. As it mixed with the [Nonarine], Besal felt the final threads of potentiality connecting him to Hal fray and snap.

In that moment, he saw the man’s shocked expression as he too felt the finality of what had just happened.

Besal doubted he would ever forget the look of his face illuminated by moonlight as the sapphire fire in his eyes winked out and was replaced by the rare dark brown that he had been born with.

It was Besal’s final gift to Hal, to rid him of all his Strain and corruption. It would not prevent future instances, but he could reset Hal back to his normal self for now.

He needn’t look like a monster.

Thank you, brother, he sent back to Hal, hoping he could hear him.

And then the world turned to a sheet of white-hot pain that stretched for an eternity. Time lost meaning. Reality spun out into threads of potentiality and thought unraveled before Besal's view of the cosmos.

Stars wheeled overhead as Besal was reformed, made whole.

When sensation and reality came crashing back, he was curled up on the floor in a tight ball of agony. He had no idea how long the pain, the anguish, and the nothingness lasted. It could have been years. Or seconds.

"...coming around," Luda said gently, resting a hand against him.

Her touch was warm, and it alarmed him that he could feel her far better than before.

Just as awareness surfaced once more, Besal was inundated with prompts from the Shard. They were so overwhelming that he could hardly read one before another replaced it.

"What's happening?" Besal wheezed, startled that he *could* wheeze. He blinked and struggled to his hands and knees until a pair of coal-black hands pulled him up and set him against the bottom of the altar.

"You've been reborn," Ralst said softly. "The [Nonarine] would have killed a lesser creature, but it infused you with, dare I say, quite a few Levels. You're probably still getting prompts for them, right? Thought so. Just ride it out, and we'll talk when you're better. For now, drink this."

Besal's dark hand, full of starlight and nebulae instead of boring skin thankfully, reached out and took the cup. He didn't even think of how odd it was that he could drink until he felt the cold water sloshing down the back of his throat.

He had remembered the sensation—second hand of course—from Hal, and part of his body acted on borrowed instinct. He had been immaterial for what felt like ages, and now he finally had a body.

Your synchronization with Starscourage reaches 50%.

Your synchronization with Starscourage reaches 60%.

Your synchronization with Starscourage reaches 80%.

Your synchronization with Starscourage reaches 90%.

Your synchronization with Starscourage reaches 100%.

You unlock Starscourge.

Spoken of within the Vast Empty of the cosmos, the creature that should not be, is one of the few things that terrifies the eldritch abominations that cling to the dark lifeless edges of the Shadrune Realms. Whispered like a nightmare, the Starscourge is said to be of the Great Ones, and yet uses its power to destroy them.

Through means that most would consider impossible to fulfill, you have taken the first step toward being that whispered, most hated enemy of the Great Ones. Choosing this Class comes with several unique bonuses, but with one drawback. You will be unable to take another Class if you choose to align yourself to the path of the Starscourge.

There is only room for one in your fledgling soul. To push for anything more would obliterate the spark of light within yourself and extinguish all that you are.

Fabled Class Trait: Starborne

+50% HP, SP, and MP Regeneration.

+50% Maximum HP, SP, and MP.

+50% Experience Gain.

Besal stared at the final prompt in the slog of nearly undecipherable mess. But one thought kept pushing through to the forefront of his mind.

He had a Class all his own.

One that even Hal couldn't get.

"I accept," Besal said solemnly. It was a heavy burden to be a traitor to your own kind, but he would gladly take the sword to each and every one of his brethren if it meant he could keep Aldim safe.

As the power of the Starscourge infused his being, Besal's vision flashed with several Level Ups cascading across his vision.

I have stats!

Starscourge reaches Level 1.

You have 5 attribute points awaiting distribution.

Starscourge reaches Level 2.

You have 10 attribute points awaiting distribution.

Starscourge reaches Level 3.

You have 15 attribute points awaiting distribution.

Starscourge reaches Level 4.

You have 20 attribute points awaiting distribution.

...

Starscourge reaches Level 10.

You have 50 attribute points awaiting distribution.

Excitedly, Besal opened his Status.

[Status]

Besal

Level: 10

Classes

Starscourge: 10

Resources

HP: 195

SP: 142

MP: 142

Attributes

STR: 5

VIT: 5

DEX: 5

AGI: 5

INT: 5

MND: 5

CHR: 5

Regeneration

HP/hr: 22.4

SP/hr: 24.9

MP/hr: 24.9

Resistances

Fire: 0

Ice: 0

Wind: 0

Earth: 0

Lightning: 0

Water: 0

Light: 0

Dark: 0

Defensive Properties

DEF: 0

MDEF: 0

Insulation: 0

He could practically hear Hal's voice calling him a real boy, and despite the weight of sorrow at their departure, Besal's laugh was hearty and true. He had done what no other Khaeros could ever do.

He had been made whole.

Besal had never been much of one for picking Attributes before, but now that they were *his*, he understood Hal's bizarre fascination with them.

With 50 points to spend, he would need to maximize his returns in order to be strong enough that he could fight and gain more EXP.

Considering his current lack of spells or magic, though he was keenly aware that his body was magic made material thanks to the [Nonarine], Besal opted to bring all of his Attributes up to 10.

He seemed to recall a memory from Hal, showing how important it was to have at least 10 in each Attribute if only for a baseline. And though Besal's own Attributes seemed higher than Hal's where when he first came to Aldim, they were still weak.

Bringing each of his Attributes up to 10 took the majority of his Attribute points, leaving him with 15. But the upside was huge. His HP, SP, and MP all increased dramatically.

Without having a portion of Hal's Attributes, he would be entirely on his own now. The only help he might look forward to getting was from Ralst and Luda, and he didn't know how much they could provide without hampering his Leveling.

DEX and INT then, would be his primary offensive Attributes. Speed, precise strikes, and magic.

It was an odd thought. Besal had always prized himself on raw power. Overwhelming strength seemed the way to go, but now that his life was his own... he felt compelled to do things differently.

If only to be different from the creature he once was.

Critical magic was the way he wanted to carry himself forward.

He put 5 points into DEX, 5 into INT, and the final 5 into MND since his MP was already quite a lot lower than his HP.

Besal pulled up his Status again and couldn't help but admire what he saw. He had really done it. He was his own, for lack of a better word, man. And

he could not wait to return to Brightsong to help Hal as an equal rather than a hindrance.

[Status]

Besal

Level: 10

Classes

Starscourge: 10

Resources

HP: 232

SP: 180

MP: 217

Attributes

STR: 10

VIT: 10

DEX: 15

AGI: 10

INT: 15

MND: 15

CHR: 10

Regeneration

HP/hr: 29.0

SP/hr: 36.5

MP/hr: 45.9

Besal wasn't very good at math, but even he could see that his MP regenerated slow. Not even a quarter of it each hour. And despite the 50% increase of MND over VIT, his MP was still less than his HP.

Regardless, things were looking up for him. This was just the first step on the road to being a Starscourage, though he was concerned that he didn't have any abilities, spells, or... anything from the Class itself.

That surely wasn't normal.

Hal didn't seem to get a new toy *every* Level, but it was often enough that the man seemed to constantly have a new set of tools to deal with each new threat that came his way.

I need a weapon, he thought, and armor since I'm mortal now.

There was no telling what would happen to him if his HP dropped to 0 and Besal had no intention of finding out. He wasn't going to play it safe, but he would be a bigger fool than Hal playing with Strain if he didn't at least get some Level-appropriate armaments.

Besal would gladly use his claws, which he was happy to see he still had, but a weapon would work better. The question was what sort of weapon did he prefer? He knew of swords from Hal and had a lingering fondness for them because of the man, but now that he was free to choose his own fate, maybe he was an axe person?

Or a halberd type of fighter? Oh! Maybe he could make an entirely new weapon like the one... that Hal was always thinking of in the back of his mind....

No. I need to do what I want. Let Hal make a Breakblade.

Perhaps a sword, but one that he could swap between one or two-handed forms as he pleased? It'd need a longer reach than normal, but not be so big as to be unwieldy considering his relatively low Attributes.

He was still far, far below Hal's strength. And that, in turn, was below Ralst's.

To be useful, to have *worth*, he would need to grind like his life depended on it.

Because it did.