

# CHAPTER 55

Hal expected Athagan to complain. The dwarf had asked to speak to him a day or two after they started working on the monster farms.

He had been expecting the dwarf to get antsy over the fact that he was the last one to get his soul fragment back. Admittedly, Hal felt more than a little guilty, leaving him twisting in the wind about it.

The dwarf had plenty to work on, but it was clear that Hal had a new pet project that was consuming more than just his time and energy. Everybody from the lowliest worker to those on the Council wanted to take a turn on the monster farms.

It was a bit of safe fun that anybody could engage in, provided they knew how to swing a weapon. The [Mana Anchors] that Hal made had been a stroke of genius and worked incredibly well to effectively concentrate the mana put through the repurposed mimic wire, deep into the ground.

The upside was that the plants around the area grew even faster, and when the monster it spawned was slain, they were triple the size of the initial baseline crops.

Bardan had jumped on it, immediately setting up another farm beside the first two with a different design. This one had smaller fields segmented by stout stone fences, and at the center of each small field was one of Hal's [Mana Anchors].

The latest prototype looked like smooth wood banded in iron, roughly 15 feet tall and half a foot wide. They could harness an immense amount of mana, dropping the time to spawn from an hour down to 30 minutes.

The seeds only needed to be planted. The watering would happen when the monster spawned and was slain. Killing multiple monsters without harvesting the crops, unfortunately, had ugly side effects.

As was his custom of late, Hal was watching one of the dwarves feeding the anchor with mana while a pair of steely-eyed adventurers from Mira's group were watching hungrily.

Everybody wanted a turn on the monster farm.

Buffrix was standing by, since it was his turn next. And if there wasn't so much to do still, Hal could imagine there would be a line of people waiting their turn, wrapping around the farm and toward Brightsong proper.

Eventually, the novelty would wear off, but it was a two-for-one event that you couldn't beat. You didn't need to leave the safety of the valley. You gained Experience and [Sparks]—though nobody seemed to have gotten any other loot yet—and most of all, you were doing a great service to Brightsong.

They already had a frightening amount of food, to the point that they were going to need to do something with it soon. Perhaps a feast would be in order.

And anybody who wanted to be a farmer could sign up for a day of work planting seeds and fighting monsters that spawned. The downside was that you needed to plant seeds, feed the anchor, slay the monster, *then* harvest the crops.

On this particular day, Hal decided to try skipping the harvesting altogether. They were up to the third monster spawn now and the cabbages were like something out of a fairy tale.

Each one was the size of a small child and must have weighed hundreds of pounds. A single cabbage could probably keep Brightsong fed for a few days at least, and there were nearly two dozen of the things.

It was to the point that when the third monster spawned, the adventurers didn't see it at first because of the massive cabbages.

When it came barreling at them, all knotted roots and snapping vegetable jaws, the pair dispatched it with a little difficulty. Not only was the field harder to fight in, as they were effectively hemmed in by massive cabbages and shoulder-high stone fences, but the monster seemed stronger as well.

As soon as the creature exploded and its remains splattered over the cabbages, Hal knew something was wrong.

He spun up his Monster Core, tapped *Convergence* and sent all of his Strength into his coiled legs. He shot through the air to get a good bird's-eye view just as the cabbages—like large alien eggs—broke open to reveal far more monsters than the two adventurers could have dealt with.

Hal rained down *Anvil Lightning* laced with Goldflame Dragonfire. The golden lightning split and split again, shattering the bodies of the creatures. With his other hand, Hal used *Warding* on the two adventurers to safeguard them from the horde of creatures.

He fell to the ground amid the adventurers who had the sense to go back-to-back in a defensive formation. They weren't weak, but the monsters were well over Level 25, far stronger than what they were used to.

Hand pressed to the soft churned-up earth, Hal used *Bloodrake*. Dozens of spiked and sharpened chains sprang from the ground to ensnare and hold the aberrations. As he tightened his grasp on them, the chains blended the creatures into a fine paste that pattered to the ground and left a green mist hanging over the field.

It was over in a matter of seconds.

"Thank you, Founder!" one of the men said, bowing low and shaking Hal's hand enthusiastically.

"That was more than we could have handled," said the other. "I didn't know they could do that."

Hal wiped off some of the green sap from his face and said, "Well, we know now. One monster spawn, two at the most before harvest."

*You defeat the [Accelerated Aberrant Monster / Lv.26]*

*You gain 890 Experience Points.*

*You earn 89 Sparks.*

*You defeat the [Accelerated Aberrant Monster / Lv.25]*

*You gain 870 Experience Points.*

*You earn 87 Sparks.*

...

*You defeat the [Accelerated Aberrant Monster / Lv.27]*

*You gain 900 Experience Points.*

*You earn 90 Sparks.*

Hal hadn't expected that much Experience. Even though none of them broke a thousand, there was more than enough to bring him to the next Level of Beastborne. And since he had been helping out the adventurers, he saw the look of shock and surprise as the Experience rolled in for them as well.

*Beastborne reaches Level 39.*

*You have 5 unspent Attribute Points awaiting distribution.*

*Your HP, SP, and MP are fully restored.*

Despite his earlier plans to bring his stamina to 1,000, Hal pushed his Mind up to 90 instead. He had a strong feeling he was going to need every drop of MP he could get his hands on.

That wasn't the end of the effect, however. The next time they planted seeds, the crops practically sprang out of the soil before they were fully covered as if the monsters had already been slain.

For a full day afterward, the crops were massive and Hamrin was growing increasingly concerned that he was going to run out of seeds as more and more farmers rotated in and out to do round-the-clock harvesting.

"While it's useful," Hal said, leaning on the fence, "we need to make sure that whoever is doing a full culling can handle it. It should be no less than a party of people with at least one person who can—if they need to—handle it on their own. That way we can spread the Experience around and also keep the farms working."

Hamrin was watching Hal with a look of wary apprehension. "That was... Beast Magic?"

"Got it in one," Hal told him.

"It is... very potent."

Hal snorted. His veins were burning from the slight introduction of Strain. It wasn't even very much, not nearly enough for him to get a Strain Affliction, and though it didn't *hurt*, Hal could feel a strange, detached aggression building. The desire to bolt out into the Shiverglades and challenge the nearest nest of monsters was unsettlingly high.

*Because I don't have Besal to filter it anymore? I'll need to be careful about it.*

That was about the time that Athagan had found him, covered in green goo and feeling a little too much like a small-town drunk looking for a fight on Saturday night.

Hal had long ago learned to keep quiet when anybody wanted to talk to him. If you said something like, “I know what you’re going to say” and you’re wrong, you look like a jerk. And if you’re right, well... nobody likes to have the words taken out of their mouth.

Besides, it was all around easier to wait until the person requesting your attention actually told you what they wanted to.

Athagan turned on him and said, “I want to take the lead in the farmin’ I got a ton of ideas drawn up, and there are countless ways we can deal with them beasties without having to draw blades every single time. I seen what ye just did, and it’s braw work, Hal, but it ain’t always going to be sustainable to do it like that.”

Hal was more than a little surprised. “What’re you thinking of?”

The black-bearded dwarf whipped out a scroll and began to unfurl it on the side wall of the farmhouse. “Ye see this here? I’m thinkin’ we don’t bother with the soil at all. Stick them anchors of yours here, here, and here, then when the beasties come and get killed, their goodness drains into these troughs here to get collected.”

“You’re talking about making a monster slaughterhouse.”

“Exactly!”

“I’m not entirely sure that’ll work. The blood and viscera of most monsters seems to vanish pretty quickly, don’t they?” He motioned to himself. Already the blood and gore on him was gone, vanished into tiny puffs of purple smoke.

Athagan tapped the blueprint he had pinned to the wall thoughtfully. “Well, we ain’t gonna know if we don’t try!”

Hal laughed and clapped the dwarf on the shoulder. “You have my permission to do what you wish, though only if it works, okay? I’ll make some more [Mana Anchors] and send them over, but just the one slaughterhouse until we know it works.”

No wonder Athagan was excited. While the Shard didn’t give them anymore schematics for buildings, they were able to free-build a multitude of

production buildings on their own. The downside was that the buildings didn't receive the same bonuses as their more defined versions that were Shard-enhanced.

On the upside, it was freeing to experiment.

Hal doubted that Athagan's slaughterhouse would work. While it would be nice to have monster blood to spray on the crops like some hyper-fertilizer to instantly make them grow, that seemed like it violated some sort of rule or law that the Shard enforced.

A monster farm, however, seemed to fit right in. Killing the monster allowed its essence—not to be confused with monster essence—to flow into the soil and enhance it and any crops therein. It didn't evaporate into clouds of purple smoke because it was already saturated into the earth.

And a couple of days later, when Athagan was trying out his new slaughterhouse, Hal's concerns materialized, though not in quite the same way as he would have expected.

Despite pushing as much mana into the spike as he could—Hal wasn't about to set up multiple wires just yet—nothing happened. The ground was sucking up his mana like a dry sponge, and after an hour, Hal was getting a severe headache like the worst sugar crash in history and there was still no monster.

"I don't get it," Athagan said, scratching his head. "There should be a monster on the stone floor right there!"

Clutching his head, Hal said, "I think it has to do with the surrounding area. If you had soil beneath it and some plant matter around, maybe it would work."

"But then ye couldn't collect the juice," Athagan said.

"And therein lies the problem."

Kicking at the stone wall of the slaughterhouse, Athagan cursed in dwarven and then looked up at Hal. "I'm sorry to have wasted yer time."

Hal waved his concern away. "It was a good try, but I think we'll stick with the monster farms for now. You said you had ideas for doing it without needing to patrol. Why not go talk to Hamrin?"

Behind the spectacles perched on the edge of his nose, the dwarf's eyes twinkled. "Aye, I'll do just that!"