

Besal roared and lunged for Luda... but she was gone.

The room was... what was the opposite of pitch black? Supernova white? Besal struggled for a metaphor that fit and gave up.

Shaking his head, Besal lowered himself into a crouch and looked around for any sign of attack, though the brightness hurt his eyes.

“Please excuse the discomfort,” Luda’s voice said as if over a static-filled radio. “Sending you here is no small task and there is a bit of... an adjustment to be done.” A crackling snap filtered through the air. “Ah, there we are. Better?”

The light dimmed to just below blinding. Tiny cubes flowed into the world to build up a scene devoid of color. Everything was in shades of gray and every few moments there was a faint *fuzzing* to the air like an old TV station with a weak signal.

Besal watched as a reconstructed version of himself and Luda sat in the forest near Brightsong as Hal fought against the dragons.

“This,” Luda said, “is what would have happened had I chose to help Hal wholesale. Watch.”

The runes she painted on Besal’s river stones were entirely different. Angular. Harsh. Almost alive.

When they were placed within Besal, he was empowered.

“This next bit... I cannot see what goes on inside your head,” Luda admitted. “But I know the outcome. You fight the invader that attempts to take you over. The power I granted to you allows you to fight them and assist Hal at the same time.”

Though the Luda-of-now was nowhere to be seen, the past-version of Luda turned to watch as the reconstructed Besal strode out to the site of Hal’s showdown with Naitese and Orrittam.

Besal watched this strange other version of himself with curiosity.

Once joined, Hal and Besal wreaked merry hell upon the two dragons.

They didn’t win the battle *easily* by any stretch, but they emerged as the victor. And the menacing Khaeros that attempted to invade Besal was utterly rebuffed.

At least as far as Besal could tell. Without seeing the internal struggle, he couldn't know for certain. "Why can't I see the fight between us? That was where much of the fight took place, between myself, Hal, and the interloper."

"I cannot see events that exist within another person," Luda said, her voice crackling from a far-off distance. "It would be like seeing or hearing another's thoughts. I do not possess such power." Here, she paused and seemed to be thinking to herself.

When she spoke again, she sounded amused. "Some would think that the ability to Far See is enough, you know. That seeing other timelines and possibilities is more than enough to understand the outcomes, even if I cannot see the thoughts that were the catalyst of the action."

Besal thought about this for a moment then dismissed it. "Color me disappointed. It was a glorious battle even with the odds stacked against us thanks to you. I salivate to see what could have been with you helping rather than hindering us."

"You think I sabotaged you?"

"What else would you call it?"

"Very well," Luda said icily. "Let us continue along this thread for a spell. The time will come when I show you *another alternative*. But now is not the time."

With a shrug, Besal watched as Hal collapsed beside Orrittam's downed form. Some sort of magic was happening between them, though he could not guess as to what. "I take it I can't see the Shardscript either that he receives?"

"Correct."

Besal grumbled but kept his thoughts to himself. As an Outsider himself, his powers were antithesis to those of a Dragon—and the feeling was mutual—but he still yearned to know what sort of powers could be wrung out of not one, but two dragons.

Hal, of course, would have exploited the situation to maximum profit. The man was single-minded as a blade at times, try as he might to deny it.

"The battle would have ended much in the same way as it had," Luda's voice rang out. "You both would have prospered from it, but the Oath Hal takes with the dragons would be different. You see, the Shard is aware of my

aid, and canceled out many of the benefits Hal now reaps as a result of winning a lopsided—or, as you might say *rigged*—competition.”

“So what?” Besal said to the gray-scale sky. Silver clouds scudded through a dreary backdrop. “He would have me! That alone would be enough to outweigh the differences.”

“He would never gain access to Dragonfire,” Luda put simply.

That shut Besal up.

Dragonfire was not something that could be taken, it had to be *given*. Even Hal would not be able to convince the kindest of dragons to just hand it over.

“Okay, fine,” Besal grouched. “But that still pales in comparison to having a literal mana battery and ally that can not only defend from mental incursions, but also helps to manage the corruption of Strain. You do realize that without me, Hal’s ability to withstand Strain pretty much goes out the window, right? It will kill him. I was the buffer, and now that’s gone.”

“I know.”

There was something about her voice that set Besal’s fangs on edge. It was the complete assurance. She *truly did know*. It was as if she had already seen what Besal only felt in his bones would happen. But it was not the same.

“Now what happens?” Besal asked.

“The dragons agree to act as defenders of Brightsong,” Luda’s sky-voice boomed.

The scene changed to an overhead shot somewhere high above on a mountain ridge bordering the massive circular valley so that Brightsong’s puny buildings seemed a tiny blip against shades of gray Besal took to be forests, lakes, grasslands, and rivers.

At the forefront of the Settlement where two arms of the mountains extended out into the Shiverglades like a natural funnel, the dragons perched and made their nests.

“For a time, there was peace,” Luda said. “Hal, knowing that there were two Kinslayers after him would strike out for them rather than waiting to be ambushed. You, I believe, had a strong part to play in this decision.”

“Naturally,” Besal said. “You choose the battleground, that is basic warfare that even Hal would understand.”

“Yes,” Luda said somberly, “I am very much afraid it is. But you see, with Hal turning his attention away from Brightsong, those who needed his guidance are instead, bereft of it. Enraged at nearly losing you, he seeks out ever-more-powerful monsters to enhance himself further.”

Besal folded his arms as an icy wind knifed through the ridge near Orrittam’s nest. “I see nothing wrong with that.”

Luda’s voice sighed from the heavens, and she materialized alongside him. “You will see.” Her voice was now crystal-clear.

The gray-scale image that fuzzed slightly at the edges became full color once more as she swept her hand from left to right and ushered them to an icy, swampy location that Besal remembered well.

“Setting an ambush with his newfound strength was much easier,” Luda said from atop a log. Hal’s crouched and cloaked form was just visible in the fork of a tree high above the swamp with its highly inflammable and poisonous pits littered about.

A group of people came into the clearing, one seemed cautious, but the rest strolled in as if they were on their holiday. Besal immediately marked out the Kinslayers. Though, to his surprise, only one of them set off alarm bells in his head.

Fire and explosions rang out, throwing the group to the ground. The entire forest seemed to be made of up light and heat, though it did not hurt Besal or Luda in the slightest as the flames roared through them.

“His ambush is regarded quite successful,” Luda admits. “The attackers are not only routed, but they are killed to the last.”

The scene flickered back and forth as Hal takes out one of their number, the slight Kinslayer that Besal immediately recognizes as a Beastborne. The others scatter, but he tracks them down without mercy.

Besal couldn’t help but smile.

It very nearly brought a tear to his eye, if such a thing was anatomically possible. “Hal is not a man prone to rage, but attacking his home or threatening them is a surefire way to turn him into a proper beast,” Besal said approvingly.

“At least one of them,” Luda pointed out, “could have been a valuable ally. She dies, of course. In this instance, she did not help you or Hal to defeat the dragons nor to fend off the interloper. She has nothing to offer Hal as proof of her intentions, and she is forced to defend herself.”

“Not well enough, apparently.”

“Indeed. She is slain, and a much-needed ally is lost forever. Worse, Rinbast finds her.”

That set off a growl in the back of Besal’s throat. What he wouldn’t do to feel that man’s blood on his claws.

*He thought he could control us? That we’d be just another lapdog? Hah!*

And somewhere in the back of his mind, Besal shuddered because, if this future could have come to pass... perhaps there was one where he and Hal both were collared like animals.

It did not due to dwell on such thoughts.

“So he loses out on an ally,” Besal said. “That happens. But he defended himself and his home. And I have it on very good authority that the last time he fought a Kinslayer, he gained some pretty nifty tricks.”

“He does grow stronger,” Luda agreed. “If that’s what you’re suggesting. However, there is only so much strength any single man can wield. Even Hal. Still, you are mostly right. I do not know what goes on inside his head, but I can piece together a little from your comments here.”

The scene vanished again and returned to Brightsong, now fully smothered under a blanket of white. Little curls of smoke rose from a few chimneys here and there, few people braved the cold outside of the warm Longhouses.

“With your winning streak still fresh in memory,” Luda said, appearing beside Besal at the steps to the Town Hall. A narrow channel cut in the shoulder-high snow snaked away out of sight. “I take it that you manage to convince him that focusing on himself and gaining strength is the one true way to defending Brightsong.”

Besal snorted and folded his arms. “Please tell me you are not about to suggest that is wrong somehow. Even his own council told him that he needed to spend more time on his own strength. He’s not just a Beastborne, he is also a Founder.”

Small pale hands smoothing her thick woolen skirts, Luda glanced at him, then put up her fur-lined hood. “He also, unknown at the time, slew an influential member of the *Aza’dun*, the Poisonhearts. This loses him valuable support when the tribes gather to see what they should make of this new tribe, the Bravers.”

“They should not have been helping an enemy then,” Besal rationalized.

“It does not help that the Poisonhearts are ill-liked among the tribes,” Luda said, watching as a delegation of various tribes came traipsing up the path.

“That hardly seems like a problem,” Besal said, eyeing the newcomers critically. He had to admit that the tribes seemed to understand power far better than the people Hal hung out with. These were warriors through and through.

“So one would think,” Luda said, a little smugness leaking into her airy voice. “You will note that I said *valuable*, but did not say in what way. Winning support of the tribes is useful, but it is not the only way to a brighter future.”

“But you said the Poisonhearts were not liked,” Besal countered. “Surely their support would harm the Bravers.”

“Indeed, in another Thread it does. Witness.” Luda made a complicated motion with her fingers and the scene *blurred*. In its place were different people, a different, haggard-looking Hal, and shouting tribesmen of the Shiverglades. “In this alternative Thread, however, without the death of the Poisonheart, the Bravers end up with the Poisonhearts as staunch supporters. Their vocal support causes the other tribes to view the Bravers quite negatively.”

“So killing that one tribesman was good.”

“Not quite,” Luda pointed out. “Because what might come to be known as the Winter War proves to be a pivotal moment in Aldim for Hal, the Bravers, and Brightsong. Indeed, many of the events leading out from this point pivot on this secondary event, upon which itself pivots from my intervention against the dragons and the interloper Kinslayer.”

“Okay so, with the Poisonheart tribesman dead, they don’t support Hal?”

“Correct,” Luda said, making another motion to bring them back to the Thread they were already viewing. The tribesmen look pleased and just a

touch pompous. “They greet Hal and the Bravers as... not exactly equals, but amiable newcomers. Hal, and much of Brightsong changes dramatically with their help and intervention.”

“Sounds good so far.”

“However, when the Sundering begins once more, the tribes are split on how to deal with the problem. Initially, they blame each other, and eventually blame the Bravers as the newest and strangest member of the Shiverglades.”

Luda gave Besal a piercing look. “You can see where this is going, yes? Xenophobia sets in. *Us versus them*. They speak of wiping out the thirteenth tribe once more as they had in ancient times. Everything comes full circle, Besal.”

“We’ll defeat them,” Besal said confidently. “You already said along another Thread that there was a battle, what did you call it, the Winter War? So, we just have it a little later.”

Luda shook her head and whisked them away to somewhere high, though Besal hardly recognized where they were. It looked like an angry god had thrown down all his blocks and kicked them over on the grass. “Once the Sundering begins, the greatest defense of Brightsong is wiped away.”

“*That’s* Brightsong?” Besal stared at the tiny cluster of buildings and streets. It was far larger than it had been... but the mountains were reduced to rubble. Dark inky blots like ants surged through the countless gaps in the mountains like a stain spreading out on a map from a spilled inkwell.

“Without their defenses, Brightsong’s central location works against it. As you can see, with enemies on all sides, Brightsong cannot stand. It is wiped out.”

“But the Manatree—”

“—is cut and burned,” Luda interjected.

Even as the fire began, Besal could swear he heard the childlike scream of the tree. He turned away and steeled his soul against the sorrowful mourning cry.

“So then what happens to—” Besal gritted his teeth against the horror before him. The mournful cry. “Please take us *away*.”

Luda pulled them away, back to the location that they started at. The gray-scale image of Luda and Besal in the forest. “I do not intend to harm you

with these images,” she said. “They are merely shadows of things that are likely to come to pass.”

Besal said nothing as he fought against the strange welling-up of emotion. He was not Hal. He did not have a bond to the Manatree... but even he was not immune to such unfathomable depths of pain and sorrow.

Gasping for breath, Besal looked over at Luda.

There was no trace of the smugness from earlier. She had adopted a suitably somber mood that fit the images.

Hal was immortal with the Manatree intact... the tribes somehow knew that, or they didn't care and wanted to eradicate all evidence of the Bravers.

When Besal had regained a measure of composure, he straightened and looked at the two copies of himself and Luda. “What happens to Hal after... that?”

Wrapping her frail arms around herself, Luda shivered. “It only gets worse from there. Though, as I have stated before, this is not certain. The farther out events are, the more likely I have followed the wrong Thread. Perhaps, together, you could have saved the Manatree.”

Besal didn't know how that would be possible. Even with the dragons helping, the *entire* Shiverglades had emptied of its warriors to usher the Bravers to the grave. What could be done in the face of that? Even if Hal had the power of a god, all that meant was that they would be left standing in the ashes.

Alone.

“Tell me anyway,” Besal said.

Luda refused to meet his eyes. Not out of fear or subterfuge, but because tears were trickling down her cheeks in twin tracks of silver.

“The Manatree burns,” Luda said softly. “That... almost entirely is certain, given the Thread I showed you. There are... countless others. From that specific point, nearly eight-hundred. I counted them. I... rarely do that.”

“Why not?”

“Because it is *exhausting*, Besal. Because it gives me temporal whiplash when I return to the present after such a viewing.” She shook her head, gray-scale curls flowing back and forth. “Because, Besal, there is only so much



sorrow any single soul can bear to witness. What else happens from there only gets worse. The Shard... Besal, it *breaks*. Do you understand? As sad as it is, what does it matter that a hopeful young man with great promise has his life snuffed out?"

"I would wager it matters a great deal to that man."

Luda gave him a sharp look through glistening lashes. "On that, we can agree. But my purpose is to avoid the worst calamity to befall this star since its inception. In some Threads, you both live despite the Manatree's death. In others you die, or just one of you dies. Those..." She shivered. "Those are the darkest."

Besal couldn't help but lean forward as her voice dropped into the depths of icy horror, quiet and severe. "Usually," she began again after a swallow past the lump in her throat, "it's the death of a loved one. Most of the time it's Noth, others it is one of the koblins, Ashera, even Mira, sometimes it's a child..."

"He breaks," Besal said with a nod, finally catching on. "Everybody has their limit. Even him."

"Yes."

"But the world is already ending, yes?"

"It is, but he fills the hearts of the world to bursting with despair!" Luda wailed. "Do you understand?! He *knows* it will do no good to fight against the Sundering, so what does he do? Hal unleashes everything he has on the people that survive.

"They will die anyway, but he only thinks of the private abyss of pain that has become his heart. I have seen no villain more... heinous, more heart-wrenchingly piteous than him in those final moments where he welcomes his final end with open arms."

*I understand, Besal thought, more than you could ever know. I have seen the dark heart that beats inside that man. I know how far he could go if he was really pushed to the brink. Even I feared his wrath at times.*

"Why are we here again?" Besal asked, warily. He was not keen on another trip to an end so... horrific.

Luda sniffed sharply and scrubbed at her face with the back of her hand to dry her tears. "The original purpose. You claimed I sabotaged you and Hal."

She motioned to Luda and Besal in gray. “This is the thread of what would have happened if I truly meant malice behind my actions.

“At the best of times, Besal, I must walk the razor’s edge between too much interference and too little. Every action has consequences and changes what I have seen. If I change everything, then I can never see farther than a few events ahead.

“If I change nothing... then I see the end before others and can only despair. It has taken me a long time, a *very* long time, Besal, to get that right. And even now, I am always learning. I may look young, but I have walked the Threads of a thousand lifetimes. I have been loved, betrayed, killed, and seen the same of countless others. Most only think I get the occasional glimpse, this is a purpose.”

“I wouldn’t want anybody to know if I could see the future,” Besal agreed.

“Yes, I suppose most would not when you really get down to it. But this, is me proving a point. Watch.”

Folding her hands in front of herself, Luda turned to watch the events unfold. The markings were, once again, different than what Besal remembered. They were neither angular, nor the soft flowing symbols he recalled, these were fragmented and strange.

He watched as his body jerked as a bolt of black lightning speared him after he took a few steps forward. Besal did not need to see inside himself to know that the Khaeros had invaded him.

Farther away, Hal was struggling with the dragons.

“The woman, Tristal, tries to intervene, but due to the grip that the Khaeros has on you, they see the ruse she plans. The Kinslayers, miles away, kill her where she stands. Hal never learns of her attempt to help.”

As Besal joins the fight, the dragons are at first confused, but when Besal’s body turns on Hal, they join to stop him. But Hal, already weakened by fighting both dragons, goes down swiftly after the first unguarded attacks.

“He does not defend against you, nor can he get through to help you. The wounds he suffers in the process are, ultimately, fatal,” Luda intones sadly. “He survives, however, because the Manatree survives. But now the Kinslayers are aware there was a traitor in their midst.”

The scene shifts and colors, revealing the Kinslayers standing on a rocky outcrop overlooking a young girl's broken and twisted body. Three others are with them, a large, hooded figure, a mage of some kind by the cut of his clothes, and a tribesman that Besal guesses is the Poisonheart.

Luda looks down with a frown at the woman's body. "In most threads, you sacrifice yourself to stop the killing, but not before dozens fall. Some are dear friends and leaders. Brightsong is in disarray, Hal is dead, and it takes him valuable time to be revived."

Besal shakes his head. "So I die anyway?"

"Most of the time."

"And the others?"

Luda looked up at him. "You become that one's plaything." She pointed at the mage. "Twisted beyond recognition, sent to hound Brightsong and Hal again and again. Brightsong mistrusts Hal's Beastborne powers now that they've felt the bite of them. They still cherish him, but many talk quietly of leaving. The danger is all too real, and Hal is as much a reminder as the new gravesites."

Colors swirled to reveal Hal on his knees in front of the Manatree, his hand on a freshly made gravestone. "In some threads you kill his love, in others, just friends, but friends all the same. He hates himself and does not understand what he did wrong, because he does not know I betrayed him."

"But this is *your fault*," Besal protested.

"Yes, it is. I do not shy away from the responsibility."

Besal shook his head angrily, pointing at Hal. "You could have stopped this. Show me!"

"No, Besal," Luda said, sadly. "Once some events are set into motion, no amount of influence from me can set them right again. They must play out. Trying to change them is like trying to move the course of a river in full flow with a pebble. Before the events transpire, that pebble can change everything, but during? No."

"Brightsong rebounds though." Besal turned to her. "I know him. He won't be broken, not by this. Not while he can exact revenge."

“In most Threads... you would be correct. In others? Rinbast puts him down to great applause, he does the world a favor. And the world dies anyway.”

“And the other Threads, where he pulls himself together without me?”

Luda leveled a curious gaze his way. “You are quite sure you want to know?”

“I’m already here,” Besal said by way of answering.

“Very well. I’ll keep this brief.” Scenes flashed before them as she spoke. “Much of this you’ve seen before. However, without the Dragon’s aid in any way shape or form, Hal is forced to entirely rely upon his own strength. Naitese flees before she is slain by him, eventually Orrittam follows, leaving Brightsong defenseless.”

“But he kills the Kinslayers?” Besal asked brightly.

Luda winced slightly. “In a way. He uses his Founder’s Mark to control them, then sends them back to wreak havoc on Rinbast’s doorstep. Countless people die, but the Kinslayers practically destroy themselves from within.”

“And then?”

“The Thread unravels far beyond my ability to read it,” she said. “Chaos reigns. It is all I can see. In some threads the Winter War is renamed to the Crimson Snow because of the lives slaughtered on both sides. In others, the tribes of the Shiverglades come to Hal’s aid but immediately break apart once the war is over, leaving Brightsong to bleed out and eventually vanish. But each Thread spawns a thousand permutations until it is incomprehensible, even to me.”

“But some Threads have the tribes fighting against Hal because he failed to kill that Poisonheart?” Besal said.

Luda made a grasping motion and pushed with her hand, shoving them back to the here-and-now. Steadying herself against the altar, Luda looked wan and waxy. “Yes, and, rare as it may be, that kicks off the Winter War between the tribes.”

Besal leaned against the stonework of the wall. “But you can’t see what happens beyond that.” He wasn’t convinced.

“I never said that. But only one-in-ten Threads are capable of being followed, and all of them end worse than if I helped Hal wholesale. Most

Threads... if followed long enough, end in blood and tears. Especially when it involves one or more Founders.”

It took Besal a considerable amount of time to work through everything he had just witnessed. A faint voice in the back of his mind wondered if it was all falsified, but it had *felt* so damn real.

It would have been the work of a master to trick every sense, and when it could have been used to maximum effect, Luda seemed disinclined to press the point home.

On the whole, Besal found that he believed her.

Every word of it.

And that left only one question. “Then what happens now that you only gave a nudge to Hal, rather than a shove?”

Luda’s weak grin looked oddly congratulatory. “You’re not so myopic as I had been led to believe. Unfortunately, I cannot tell you. Doing so would change the events that must transpire.”

“Won’t my constant wondering about what you’re manipulating change things anyway?”

“So long as you do not *know*,” Luda said, “then there is not much you can do to change things. Regardless of whether you mean to do so, you will change things if you know what is going to happen too far from its... event horizon, as it were. In one way or another, Besal, every person believes somebody is manipulating things. You simply have a greater reason to believe so, but until you know *exactly* what that is, you cannot alter events beyond repair.”

Besal frowned and thought back to the flashes of chaos and horror. The Sundering, she had called it. The breaking of the very Worldshard. It had only been a moment, a glimpse of a glimpse, but Besal knew what he saw. He could feel it vibrate in every corrupted inch of his being.

And slowly, as he worked back through everything she had shared, Besal understood why they were in the Fathomways, even if he didn’t know what they could do about it.

As he opened his mouth to voice this, Ralst returned holding a heavily wrapped burden in one arm and sporting more wounds than he thought possible on the lithe and nimble drow.

Luda looked at him, a guilty look on her face as she said, “Even if you guessed right, I could not tell you.”

Ralst didn't even bother to glance at either of them. She gently deposited the wrapped item onto the altar nearest Luda, as the younger woman looked over the thing. A virulent mixture of colors, here magenta, there blue-green, constantly shifting as the senses fought to define them, washed over the pair as the last layer of cloth was removed.

Despite his desires, Besal wanted to see what was worth risking all of their lives—though most notably, Ralst's—to get. When he came around Luda's side, he gasped at the sight before him.

“Please tell me we aren't going to *use* that,” Besal managed to choke out.

Ralst draped the cloth back over the item, cutting off the light. “You agreed to do what I said, when I said it,” she reminded him.

Besal shivered. He had thought he understood what he was doing in the Fathomways... but now he was no longer sure. He had only seen that color once before, and it was a tiny fraction compared to what Ralst has unearthed.

He could not think of what purpose such a... thing could have in relation to anything Luda had imparted to him. Perhaps they weren't connected, but he very much doubted—and feared—that was not so.