

It came as a surprise to Besal that his eyes opened after... well, everything that had just happened. Besal tried to piece together exactly what had happened, failed, grasped at the fragmented brilliant splinters of memory, then ultimately gave up.

He was, somehow, still alive. *Though fiendishly weak*, he added mentally. His body was more substantial than it had been as well. With claw-like hands he reached into his now half-formed body and felt a smattering of shard-like bits.

Sharp memory cut into him. *The rune marked stones... they shattered.*

Where the [Immature Shoggoth] had been was a greasy black smear. They would not disappear without leaving a stain on the world, that much Besal knew for sure. They were a sickness that—and he felt abnormally strong emotions about this—needed to be expunged.

“He’s awake,” said a soft, familiar voice.

“*You.*” Besal turned and lunged in one predatory motion.

A coal-black hand snaked out and pressed on his chest. It was the only thing keeping him from tearing out Luda’s throat with his teeth.

Confusion settled in. If Ralst was here... and so was Luda then... then what did that mean?

Luda looked down with a slight frown. Her child-like form turned the frown into a bit of a pout. The crystalline eye in the middle of her forehead gleamed in the ruddy light of the Fathomways. “He has a right to be angry, Ralst.”

“Oh, he can be angry all he wants,” the drow said, easily keeping Besal in place with one hand on his chest. “But we are all working together, see? I can’t have you attacking allies, that would set a bad precedent. You might get *ideas*. You don’t want to get ideas now, do you, Besal?”

He gave her a quizzical glance.

Ralst rolled her ruby-red eyes and decided to go for simple, “If I let you attack Luda—who, by the by, saved your life and very likely Hal’s by extension—then you might think to strike at me again. And do you remember what I said if you did that?”

“That you would kill me,” Besal said. He remembered it quite clearly. You could not have branded it onto his memory any clearer. As a Khaeros he

intrinsically respected shows of strength. It was practically built in. Though there was enough of Hal's human rebelliousness that he chafed all the same.

"Too right," Ralst said with a flash of white teeth. "And I would hate to have to do that because..." She looked at Luda.

The red-head looked up and shrugged apologetically setting her curls bouncing. "Because you would doom all of Aldim."

Ralst turned back to Besal. "And, I happen to have it on very good authority, that Hal is on Aldim. Therefore, using the transitive properties of blah-blah-blah, you will not attack anybody in our little group. And they, in turn, will not attack you. Which means I don't have to kill the whole bloody lot of you."

Luda looked anywhere but at Besal's face. "I told you he will not kill me," Luda said.

"Yes," Ralst said, over her shoulder, "because I stopped him."

To this, Luda lifted her palms toward the ceiling in a gesture that seemed to say 'you do not understand.' She didn't seem particularly bothered by it, so Besal guessed that Luda got this a lot.

Hal didn't have much in the way of memories with Luda, not any that were bright or important enough that they remained with Besal in any case. Their initial meeting was fuzzed by time and the lack of consciousness Besal possessed at the time.

"What happened to me?" he asked.

Ralst lifted her hand from Besal's chest as he straightened. "You tell me. One moment you were dying, I was literally holding the last of those rune stones together with my hand... and the next you changed. Became more solid. You've been out a solid day, so I brought you to... well, think of it as a sort of rendezvous point."

"It looks like the Fathomways," Besal said.

"Does it *feel* like the Fathomways?"

Besal took this into consideration. "No. It feels like a Dungeon."

How he could tell that... he was uncertain. But it was as obvious to him as the limbs on his body.

It just *was*.

“What kind of Dungeon?” Ralst asked, glancing back at Luda.

Besal wanted to say, “What sort of stupid question is that?” But what he *actually* said was, “Brass Ranked Great Dungeon of the Ruins variant.”

Ralst gave Besal an appraising look. “Very good.”

That, however, was not at all helpful. “What do you mean ‘very good’? *How did I know that?*”

“Something happened to you,” Ralst explained, motioning to his middle. “Whatever it was has something to do with the Fathomways. And, as the Fathomways are connected to most of the Ancient Dungeons that exist on Aldim, thanks to the Balesian Mages, you now appear connected to *them*.”

Besal shook his head emphatically and even extended his hands as if he could ward off the knowledge. “Oh no,” he said. “Hal already dabbled with Dungeon Essence. I want no part of that. I know better.”

“You are not partaking of Dungeon Essence,” Luda said softly. “In fact... I rather think that you are will not be partaking of *any* essence any time soon.”

The soft way she said it seemed to bore through Besal’s defenses in a way that a shout never could have. She was *so damn sure*.

It was maddening.

He was a Khaeros! His very purpose was manipulating monster essences and using them to create Beast Magic... right? Without Beast Magic *what was the point* of a Khaeros?

They were one in the same.

Luda’s brilliantly sharp gaze pierced him through the heart, and he found himself searching for any sign or hint of essences, Beastborne, Beast Magic or... anything.

There can’t just be nothing!

No, wait. There.

Besal dug deeper. Incomprehensible text greeted his vision. He swiped at the half-familiar prompts. There was something... something about the [Immature Shoggoth] that had to do with this sort of Shardscript.

A prompt popped up across Besal's vision. Though not the first of its kind, it was unique in that he could neither read nor understand it no matter how hard he tried.

"May I?" Luda asked demurely.

Besal glanced from Ralst to her and then back again. "What is it you will do?"

"Allow you to see that which is hidden from you." When Besal did not respond, she added, "It is nothing that would not happen on its own, but as I am wont to say, 'time is of the essence' if we wish to keep Aldim whole."

Besal gently lowered himself to one knee so that he was no longer towering over her. She took his head in her gentle pale hands and a warm flood of light filled his vision.

When Besal blinked, he was in a very different room. And he knew, instinctively, that it was a different Dungeon. This one was... *let's see, yes, there it is. An Iron Ranked Grand Dungeon.* Though he could not tell what type it was, somehow that bothered him.

Why had they moved?

More importantly, *how* had they moved so quickly?

"You passed out," Luda said from beside him.

And only then did Besal realize that they were in a small side room filled with motes of blue and white light drifting from a series of flowering vines in the ceiling.

With just as much of a surprise, Besal understood he was lying on his back. Next to a young girl who had just rendered him unconscious, and whom he had, prior to that, tried to kill.

Wasting little time, Besal hopped up and put the small altar between the two of them. *No harm in being safe,* he thought. *Ralst isn't around, and I don't like my odds right now.*

Again, a healthy dose of respect welled up in him at what Luda had done. Granted, he had *allowed* it to happen, but it was still an unsettling sign of where he might just lie on the spectrum of power among the three.

“You need rest, Besal,” Luda said gently, not bothering to move from where she had watched over him as he slept.

“I do believe I have had enough,” he replied.

Luda looked at him, and he could tell she knew he was lying. By the red stars of the void, he was *exhausted*.

The door to the room opened and then slammed shut. A swirling pattern of infinitely complex runes cascaded like a spiderweb across the door and then faded.

Ralst appeared from the cloud of gloom that had gushed into the room like ink dropped into water. She was tightly cinching a bandage across her arm.

Luda immediately went to her and began to fuss over the wound. The white linen stood out against her dark skin and even darker armor.

For some reason that Besal could not place, he felt surprised to see the crimson stain on the bandage. Not because Ralst was wounded, but he expected her to bleed ichor or at the very least something suitably *icy*.

That she was wounded came as little surprise. That same knowledge that imparted awareness of this Dungeon being Iron was a bit fuzzy on how that equated to what he and Hal understood as Levels, but Iron was decidedly up there in terms of danger.

Well beyond what Hal would have ever been capable of at his current—no, scratch that, at his *last known* strength.

Despite the distance between them and the unfortunate severing, if he knew one thing it was that Hal would be growing by leaps and bounds. Some new power would waltz right across his vision and he'd snatch it up like... like....

Frustration welled up in Besal. When he and Hal were of one body, he could have finished that thought. He would have had the requisite knowledge to draw from.

Now there was... just an echo of the man he had loved as a brother. A kindred soul.

But you are also free, said a voice in the back of his mind.

“You look dead on your feet,” Ralst said, looking Besal up and down. She had approached without a whisper of sound, leaving Luda near the warded door. “Rest. You are just as important as little-miss-sunshine over there, and I do not have time to be babysitting either of you right now.”

“Then why?” Besal asked. He felt as if it was the same question he kept asking again and again.

“Because somebody has to do what needs to be done!”

Besal was taken aback by the fury of her words.

“I can’t just sit back and watch as the Shard goes to ruin again and again and *again!*” Ralst threw up her hands with a wince that barely slowed her. “We keep playing this same game over and over. Do you know how many times I’ve seen the Shard destroyed? How many times Rinbast has brought it back from the brink, *only to be powerless to stop it the next time?*”

“The Balesians. They did... *something* to the Shard. Put it back together, somehow, after it broke. But it was like gluing together a shattered vase. It wasn’t *fixed*. Whatever they did was meant to buy time, only they—like so many light-cursed others—never did anything with the time afforded them.”

Besal found himself backed into the far corner as Ralst advanced on him during her tirade. He wracked his thoughts for any reference to that word. He was *sure* he remembered it from something Hal had said.

He was reminded of one of the first times that he and Hal had been separated. *I nearly died waiting for him... sticking to the shadows to preserve myself. It was the first time I clearly remember wishing he would actually persevere.*

Hal had told him of what he experienced, though Besal wasn’t sure how much of it was true. The man certainly had *thought* it was true, but Besal had never heard of any creature ever making it back from the Abyss.

Much less unscathed as he was.

The Abyss! That’s where Hal said he met a group of Balesian Mages.

It was more than Besal could wrap his mind around. He knew about Beast Magic, about the Predator and Prey relationships between monsters... not about *magical markings* that invoked strange magic.

He never did like it when Hal used that mark of his, regardless of it causing him pain.

To Ralst and Luda, however, Besal said nothing about Hal and his trials within the Abyss. That was his story to tell, not Besal's.

I also don't entirely trust them, he thought. What would they do if they knew that Hal worried he carried a piece of the Abyss within himself? Do they even know that he has access to the Fathomways?

And then Besal had to question just how much *he* had already given away about his knowledge of the Fathomways. Did he tell Ralst anything that would link Hal to the underground labyrinth?

He couldn't remember and instead resolved to keep a closer eye on his words.

"The Shard is breaking apart again, isn't it?" Besal said calmly.

Ralst paused mid-rant and looked at him sharply with those blood-red eyes of hers. "Yes," she spat. "Though I assume you've already guessed as much from what I've said. The truth of the matter, Besal, is that Aldim has been through this before. Many times, in a much shorter time than you would believe possible. Only, this time, our options seem between a man who is unwilling to do what needs to be done, and a group of *rebels*."

Besal had to admit he was impressed. The drow managed to inject the maximum amount of venom in just two syllables.

"So," he said, "you're going to do what... exactly?"

Ralst straightened the belts of weapons about her person and stepped back with a glance at Luda. "I'll leave that up to you. I'm going to go back and look for our *friend*."

The wards were unwoven with record speed, and before Besal could think of anything to say, the drow was gone leaving him with the... Luda.

He didn't know what she was, precisely. She called herself an Oracle, but that meant nothing to a creature that thought in the context of fangs and claws.

"You may wish to sit," Luda said, hopping up on a separate altar in the small room. "This is going to take some time to explain. I know you have many questions, but I cannot answer all of them. My goal, Besal, is the same as before."

“Meaning?” He did not bother to sit, though he did lean forward onto the altar between them and place his shadowy hands atop the surface. They certainly looked far more corporeal than they had before.

“My goal was, and always has been, to preserve Balance.” Luda folded her hands across the skirt fanning out and spilling down her makeshift seat. “It is only through this preservation that I believe Aldim can be saved. Without it, we are doomed.”

Besal’s claws scratched tiny grooves in the stone. “That is why you betrayed Hal? Why you allowed us to be split apart? He trusted you, Luda. He treated you like *family*! He saved you, gave you shelter, and this is how you repay him?” Besal’s voice rang in the small room, and it was only after the last of his shouts died away that he realized he had been so filled with rage.

Luda shrunk down upon herself, but she did not hide away from the shouting. Besal took a few calming breaths, but they did little to soothe the inferno scouring his insides.

Not too long ago I would have thought Hal an idiot for trusting somebody—anybody, really—like Luda. Now I’m mad at her for tricking him?

“You have every right to be upset,” Luda said with a fair amount of generosity. “But... yes. I do not believe I *betrayed*, Hal.”

Besal sneered. “I do not believe Hal would see it that way.”

“Believe it or not,” Luda continued, “that is the truth.” She opened her mouth to continue, then shut it and tilted her head to the side. That crystalline diamond-shaped thing in her forehead glinted slightly in the dull light. “Shall I tell you what would have happened if I had not interceded?”

Besal, unlike Hal, was not nearly so trusting. “There is nothing you could say that would convince me. Anything you might say—”

Luda shut her eyes and interjected with, “—would just as likely be a lie.’ Yes?” She opened her eyes. “That is what you were about to say.”

“Cheap parlor tricks.” But he had to admit, that was uncanny, even if he only admitted it to himself.

“Then how about if I show you what I saw? Surely you are strong and wise enough to see through such simple hallucinations, yes?”

Besal looked at her skeptically. He knew she was manipulating him. But he was a Khaeros, wasn’t he?

Strong. Capable. Powerful beyond all reckoning.

Only his enlightenment stopped him from overcoming Hal. A feat he could have done many times since their... reconciliation.

“Very well,” he said. “But I want the truth, Luda. I do not trust you, and you would be wise not to trust me either. Ralst is not here, and no matter how you incapacitated me before, I will not be so easily subdued again.”

Hal’s voice seemed to filter through the recesses of his memories, *That’s quite a lot of bark for what we both know is little bite.*

Luda, however, took the threat seriously enough that she seemed to mull over her options before she slipped down from her seat, straightened her skirts and walked up to the altar.

Rather than place her hands on his head, she put them atop the stone top with her palms up. “Place your hands over mine and I will show you what it is I saw. Know that this is not the *whole* truth, or even a *certainty*, merely shades of what could have come to pass. The future, Besal, is constantly in flux. Constantly tessellating. Everything we do changes it like ripples in an ocean of unbelievable size. But this is what I glimpsed.”

Clawed hands gently laid atop hers, Besal was surprised to find how warm her small hands were compared to his. As much as he wanted to feel repulsed by her, an odd sense of peace washed over him.

And then a blast of light and sound knocked him into the wall.