

# Chapter 37

Noth made sure to keep Hermes on her shoulder, nestled up against the warmth of her neck, the whole way to Rondo's warehouse.

Outside of the cottage, the oppa went quiet, watching the snow blanket the world.

After trudging through the hip-high snow, Noth learned something new. Not quite a skill, or even a traditional ability.

*You learn soul aeder equip.*

*+10% Movement Speed.*

She had heard Hal talk about this before with Komachi, though she had rarely seen it in practice. Somehow, she knew without a shadow of a doubt, that if she suddenly did a handspring and flipped through the air, Hermes would stay right where he was.

As if he was equipped.

Because he was.

Noth grinned to herself, her step lighter than it had been, thanks in part to the enhanced movement speed.

Clearly, Hermes wanted her to hurry up through the frigid cold.

Rondo was there with his cadre of helpers, mostly karaks who were surprisingly fastidious and liked everything in its own special place. They could lift far more than most people and were significantly faster. They could even momentarily fly if their hearts were in it.

Just enough for Noth to witness the creatures with gorgeous plumage flutter up to the third or fourth floor of the building, where they handed off the packages on their backs to another attendant.

“Busy day?” Noth asked Rondo, who turned with a shocked yelp.

“Yes! No! I mean, not really, your er...”

“Just Noth, Rondo. Always just Noth.”

“As you say, Lady Noth.”

Hermes snorted. He gave Noth a curious look, but she rolled her eyes as if to say, *what can you do?*

“What can we do for you?” Rondo asked, doing his best not to bow. He was absolutely smitten with the idea of Noth being some sort of Queen or royalty and wouldn’t hear anything to the contrary.

Even if Hal decided to establish a monarchy—not likely considering the way those went on his home world—it would not be up to Noth to make herself Queen.

*Why not?* a small voice said inside. *Why shouldn't you be a Queen? Or an Empress? You've seen countless worlds who had no such things before, and yet a person of power and influence changed the rules. Why do you have to follow the rules set forth by those lesser than yourself? How many dying suns have they seen? How many civilizations did they witness rise and fall? You could guide this Shard to a new—*

Hermes sniffed Noth’s pointed ear, going so far as to stick his nose inside and sniff even more intently.

It was quite loud.

Noth’s thoughts were interrupted by the constant snuffling sound in her ear. “What’re you doing, Hermes?”

“Smellin’ those think-thonks goin’ around,” he said, then went on sniffing.

Rondo watched the two curiously, pencil poised on his pad. “Erm, Lady Noth? What can I get you?”

Distractedly, Noth rattled off a list of materials. The adventurers under Mira's tutelage often worked with gatherers under Myla or the Rangers under Yesel and Angram. Together, they found unique materials out in the Shiverglades that were useful for various potions or crafts.

Things that didn't require massive quantities, the likes of which was needed for construction.

In short order, Rondo had several bundles ready and packaged up for Noth with his personal thanks. On the way out the door, they came upon Ashera coming in for her own ingredients.

Noth smiled at her and stood to the side. Kow was nowhere to be seen on the quiet lamora, but that didn't mean he wasn't around.

Ashera put in her own request, and as a member of the Council, she was treated to nearly the same respect and speed at Noth. Ashera smiled, thanked Rondo, and turned around with a start to find Noth still there.

"Why, hello Noth. I see you are up and about, feeling much better?"

Noth inclined her head in greeting. "Much. As I am sure you are, would you mind walking with me a little?"

"Certainly, Noth."

Together they went out into the blinding cold whiteout, their cloaks rippling like banners behind them despite their desperate attempts to keep them sealed shut against the bitter chill.

Noth had to work to keep herself from outpacing Ashera, but finally, she found the proper gait and led the lamora away from the settlement and into the hills and forests to the north.

Ashera grinned, knowing where they were going. A shaggy head with black spots poked out from her coat, then immediately slipped back inside with a faint, "*Ma'am!*" that was lost to the wind.

Once they entered the Manatree's Glade, Hermes' eyes nearly popped out of his tiny oppa head. While it was far colder than Noth remembered, there was a trace of warmth to the soil and the air.

A smell like autumn on the wind filled the glade, but it was still warm enough that no snow gathered, and the water in the river was clear, without ice.

Hermes leaped from Noth's shoulders, scampering to the grass and hurrying towards the various guardians surrounding the Manatree.

Seeing Hermes, a new oppa to the settlement, Ashera gasped with surprise.

There were far more pale wortlings than before. They came out to investigate their new arrivals, bearing wooden bowls of fruit and nuts.

*Of course, Noth thought, leave it to the Manatree to know I'm coming. I often forget we're connected.*

She did her best to send a friendly greeting to the Manatree, but unlike Hal, her connection to the Manatree was weaker. She could feel a distant sense of the creature, but she was not nearly as close to it as Hal.

Hermes grew increasingly excited. His rushing paws led him to the foot of the Manatree itself. He sat on his haunches, looking up with wonder at the Manatree. "Just like the legend of Yggdrasil!"

Now in the much warmer glade, Kow slipped out of Ashera's coat and began to frolic and gambol about just like an oppa. "Watch me bust a move, ma'am!" Kow told her.

He kicked his long hind legs and rolled around like he was a horse that could suddenly do somersaults. Noth and Ashera watched as he ran deeper into the glade, where the temperature steadily rose until they were in the depth of spring.

Not hot, not cold, just comfortable.

That was the power the Manatree had. Or at least, this was the power *Hal's Manatree* possessed. Noth was beginning to think that the seed he had procured was very different from normal Manatrees.

She had seldom crossed paths with a Manatree before, though she did know of them. Across many other Worldshards, they had a variety of names, none of them the same, but their purpose remained unchanged throughout their iterations.

They were sources of stability. They tethered power to the Shard, feeding it back into itself in a great cycle.

The largest Manatree of all, Yggdrasil, was older than some Shards were. Noth doubted Hal knew any of that, and in truth it didn't matter. Their history, while colorful and full of heroes the likes of which were immortalized in song and story, was a moot point.

Though she had yet to admit that to Hal, it felt like a sham that a Reaper like herself was supposed to be connected to a Manatree. She had spent lifetimes wandering through reality, witnessing terrestrial events taking place but never partaking in anything other than the final call.

Having become tethered to this world, and to Hal, she understood that things were not as they once were. Still, Noth struggled to push aside her feeling of being somehow distant to the Manatree.

"That was a pleasant walk," Ashera told Noth, watching the oppas meet for the first time in the distance.

Like two skittish animals, they hadn't noticed each other until they both approached the Manatree. Neither Noth nor Ashera could hear what they were saying, but they circled each other slowly.

Noth wondered if they were having a competition to see who could sniff the others' butt first.

"Hard to talk with all that wind," Noth told her. "I was hoping to get some advice on alchemy, if you have the time. I figured we could

set up a little place here to do a little one-on-one tutelage. I know we could use more potions, and I see you have much of the same concern as me, judging by what items you procured.”

Ashera gave her a tight smile, worry clear and plain on her face. “That obvious?”

“Just a little.”

“Oh well,” Ashera said, brushing the melting snowflakes off her bundled up package. “I believe we are in agreement. The more potions we can make, the better. And with the both of us working, we can get it done in half the time.”

Noth hadn’t been sure Ashera would agree.

While they weren’t chilly with one another, they each had different roles. Noth was considerably closer to Elora, of all people, than she was to Ashera.

Part of that, she felt, had to do with the tangled web of relationships between them.

Ashera was incredibly close to Hal, and for some reason Noth couldn’t articulate, she did not like them hanging out. She tried her best never to say anything out loud. It wasn’t Hal’s fault, nor was it Ashera’s, but she somehow felt left out when they were together.

Even when the two of them were in her company, it was like they spoke another language. They understood one another in a way that Noth feared she never could.

It unnerved Noth, no matter how many times she tried to let it go.

She loved Hal dearly, and she tried hard to extend that same love to Ashera, but she always found an excuse to not be around her for any length of time.

That needed to change.

Kow, the affable oppa, had been able to smooth some things over. And now, with Hermes, perhaps rebuilding that connection with

Ashera had a real chance. Certainly better than Noth and the Manatree, at least.

In fact, the more she thought about it as they set up a pair of folding tables designed by the dwarves, Noth realized that the relationship Hal shared with the Manatree was a lot like his relationship with Ashera.

Perhaps that was why she was jealous.

Smiling to Ashera, she set out her own beakers of elder glass, and took out a second package. One she had been saving for just such an occasion.

Ashera looked on hungrily. Hal hadn't made much elder glass. It was difficult and what he could make was usually specially ordered by somebody who needed them.

Most often in bottles and vials that could store highly reactive ingredients that would spoil by the time they were gathered and brought back to town.

However, Noth had gotten to use one of her perks to not only get him to make her an alchemy set of elder glass, but to make another too so she could gift it to Ashera and perhaps, grow a little closer to her.

Ashera gasped when she realized the gift was meant for her. "Are you sure? This must have been very difficult to get Hal to do. You know how stubborn he is about his bonecrafting!"

Noth snickered. "Yeah, trust me. I know. Some days I would wake up picking pieces of bone fragments out of my hair that had blasted halfway across the cottage!"

Ashera covered her mouth and giggled. She reached forward and took the present, carefully opening it. "You are sure?"

"Absolutely."

Noth watched Ashera unwrap her present. She looked just like a little girl with her first Winterlight present.

She walked her through the various alterations Hal had made. Perhaps Ashera already knew, but she was attentive and asked questions whenever Noth brought up a different use that even Hal hadn't planned for.

Having impossibly strong glass that was non-reactive would be worth its weight in platinum to any Alchemist. With just these items alone, Hal could have made a name for himself.

*Not that he would, he sees his crafting as the least of his abilities. If only he could see as I do.*

Unsurprisingly, Kow made the first momentous gesture towards Hermes. The bigger shaggy oppa held out a bundle of candied jerky.

And then a jug of blue juice. Then a loaf of spiced bread.

Then more.

Colossally misunderstanding this gesture, the much smaller Hermes fought Kow for the food.

Lacking a shred of aggression towards most creatures, Kow didn't even know to fight back. The result was less of a brawl and more mugging a donation straight from the oppa's paws.

Hermes took off like a bandit, disappearing around the Manatree with his not-so-stolen bundle.

Noth and Ashera started to laugh at the little soul aeders' antics.