

Chapter 44

The Tower took its toll on Hal.

For days on end he went in, cleared floors, and then took another group in. Each time he claimed more rare materials for the Dawn Citadel, more Levels and skill Levels, and each time he felt like a piece of himself was left behind in the Tower.

The ring of corruption spread further. His guess that the Shadesblight was invading rather than converting his settlement turned out to be wrong, however.

The dwarves were able to lift and move the longhouse in its present state so that it was always at the edge of the Shadesblight ring which ballooned each time they went in.

It felt as if they were driving the Shadesblight out of the Tower itself, and into the surrounding area. Hal was sure that was not the case. Even Orrittam confirmed that it did not seem to be so, but that did not stop him worrying.

The Tower grew sparser with its enemies. Traps and mazes became commonplace, anything to slow down their march through the floors. Without as many monsters to slow them down, they were able to clear four or five floors at once, but they also only gained a handful of Levels across the group.

Hal even tried the alliance again, but it went even worse than the first time. The Tower shook so badly that it seemed it might come apart at the seams with them in it. Noxious gas filtered out from fungal tumors growing out of the damaged walls and ceilings.

They had only lasted a single floor with the alliance, and with the gas ramping up their *Blight* stacks, it was decided that only single parties would go in from then on.

It had been a small hope that the Tower would be too damaged to retaliate after the events of the fourth floor. It had seemed wounded, and Hal was tempted to go in simply to use Dragonfire on it, but he couldn't muster more than a flicker of goldflame no matter how hard he tried.

Even with his [Fell Sorcery Chain], every spell he cast was weaker than the last, as if he was scraping the bottom of the barrel.

Something was wrong.

Steel Mind continually reported nothing as wrong, further worrying Hal. If it wasn't an affliction, *what was it?*

The weakest among them were able to catch up to the stronger party members, making it easier for Hal to pick his groups without fear that he needed to balance them out with a lower Leveled person and a higher Leveled person.

Komachi began to show up regularly in every group. Not acting as Elora's familiar, but as the supportive Brewmaster. He never remembered the pobul looking so worried.

Each floor they climbed took less time, both inside the Tower and out. Whatever time dilation effects it possessed were clearly being burned out by their progress, which only spurred Hal on.

Every time he exited the Tower, he felt weaker. Drained. A glance in a mirror told him he looked gaunt and hollow-cheeked, as if he hadn't eaten in weeks or months.

He couldn't remember the last time he slept. Whenever he closed his eyes, he only saw the monsters of the Tower and the creeping fungal wastes of the Shadesblight consuming his home.

Forcing himself to eat despite how it never seemed to fill the gaping hole in his middle that was slowly turning him into a skeletal version of himself was one of the few reprieves he had each day.

Noth tensed beside him. A sharp intake of breath told him she was about to snap. He reached out and put his thin hand on her wrist.

“It’s okay, Noth,” he said with a voice that was far too dry and desiccated for his liking.

Whatever was going on with him was tied to the Tower. He was sure of it.

Just one more floor...

Hermes whimpered, scared and stressed. He couldn’t remember when the oppa started to come with them into the Tower, taking care of Hal’s mounting injuries.

Elora, Ashera, Angram, Durvin, and Naitese approached his table. For a wonder, the person who stepped up to talk to him was Ashera. “Hal, I know you think this is your burden to bear, but we have seen how the corruption has grown, too. We want to go in. *Let us help*. If you–” Her voice cracked. She looked over her shoulder. “I cannot do this... I–”

Durvin growled and shouldered her aside. “Ye durned goat-brained son o’ a troll, let us go in yer stead! Ye been burnin’ the candle at both ends, and I ain’t fer tellin’ yerself how that’ll end. Ye want to make an old dwarf sing a funeral dirge at yer wake? Would ye do that to me, lad? Would ye break me stony heart just to show us all ye got hairs on yer chest?!”

Hal realized, belatedly, that there were tears in the old dwarf’s eyes. Dew sparkled in his red beard.

And he wasn’t the only one.

Several of the people watching were looking at him as if he were already dead, a martyr in their midst.

Each of them tried to speak, to tell Hal he didn’t need to push himself so hard. Suddenly, it seemed as if the whole settlement had turned into Noth, worried about *him* rather than the other way around.

Couldn't they see how far the Shadesblight had traveled? Couldn't they see just how close they were to oblivion? The Tower's corruption had gone *right up to Hal's door*.

The Tower's corruption spread like an ink stain across the valley, stretching out in some places, and held back in others. Hundreds of acres... gone to that foulness.

He couldn't just sit and do nothing. The Tower needed to be put in its place.

Hal needed to do it.

Struggling to his feet, his knees shaking with the effort, Hal braced his hands on the table to stop from falling in front of the gathered people.

Rage and anger stormed through his chest. And for a moment, he felt the desire to strike them down. As if a cruel voice whispered in the back of his mind, reminding him of Besal before he had a name. When he was just a mindless Beast lashing out at everything around him.

For a moment, black streamers of corruption rolled off Hal's frail arms. With a herculean force of will, Hal pulled them back, pushed his anger to the side, and took a deep breath.

Sitting in front of him, Hermes looked up at him with such innocence.

Hal listened.

For the first time in weeks, Hal listened to the words people were telling him, not just how he interpreted them. He tried to see it from their perspective.

Then his gaze fell upon his hands.

"Sir, please don't go," Kow begged him. He blew his nose into a handkerchief, letting out a loud *HONK*.

Hermes continued to tremble, huddling against Hal's skeletal body. He clutched a hammered brass dice in his paw, as if banking on its luck to keep Hal away from the Tower.

Hal's hands looked foreign to him. Like another person's.

He could see every bone, every ligament and vein. His fingers, once strong and lithe, like a concert pianist's, were weak and weathered. They looked like they might snap off at any moment.

They felt like it, too.

"If... that is your wish," Hal finally said. He had difficulty imagining another group clearing a floor without him there.

But that was wrong. While it was true that the Manatree's blessing held great influence over his ability to climb the Tower, not everything was up to Hal to get done.

So long as whoever was going into the Tower was strong enough. He had faith in his own people to man the walls against the Shiverglades' monsters without him.

Why couldn't they climb the Tower too?

As soon as he said the words, it felt like a great weight had been lifted from his chest. As if the world's largest elephant that had been camped out on his ribcage finally got up and left.

The following Quest only served to drive the point home that he had made the right choice.

New Kindred Quest: Go The Flork To Sleep

You were warned once, and now you are warned again. Go to sleep, or you will die from a confluence of events.

Due to the unique method in which you were healed from the brink of death, a portion of your Monster Core is sustained and refreshed by Dream and War's Domains: Aether, Spirit, Cinder, Anima, and the Shardrunes themselves. These offer a portion of their power every time you enter the realm of sleep. By forgoing sleep for

extreme lengths of time while enduring the caustic disease attempting to relentlessly infect you, your Manatree and your Worldshard, you are unraveling the tethers that keep you bound to Aldim and to the mortal realm.

Every man has his limits. You have long since reached yours.

Objectives

- *Sleep for 4 hours or more.*
- *Heal the Manatree.*
- *Don't die from bullheaded recklessness.*
- *Don't abandon your soul aeder, mimic and soulbonded partner.*
- *Don't abandon your self from another reality who is relying on you to heal her Beastborne's Monster Core.*
- *Don't abandon your Worldshard because you "just want one more hour adventuring, Mom!"*

Bonus objectives

- *Sleep for 8 hours or more.*
- *Cycle within the Manatree's Glade.*
- *Teach your Manatree how to channel Spirit.*

Rewards

- *Variable Experience and Sparks.*
- *Monster Core Progression.*
- *Variable Manatree Experience.*

"Okay, okay," he grumbled. Hands helped him to sit down again, though he didn't remember stumbling. "I get it," he muttered to the Shard.

Noth wept and held him close. Even Vorax trembled around his shoulders, squeezing him in a large hug.

Despite his decision, Hal still felt uncertain. Some dark voice murmured in the back of his head that the only way the Tower would be defeated was if he went in personally.

Hal was reminded of all the deaths he had prevented. Angram with the traps, Noth with the room full of acid, Ashera with the spike trap that nearly took her in the throat, and so many more.

All of them *he had been there to prevent.*

Every death would be on his conscience.

Komachi made an aggressive chuffing noise. She aimed her tail at somewhere above Hal's head and shot a high-speed blast of pobul water.

A shadowy presence that, even in the well-lit inn nobody had noticed, suddenly vanished with a stretched-out wail of pain.

Hal's thoughts cleared. He blinked and looked around as if for the first time.

"I got'chu, fam," the pobul told him.

Elora looked down at Komachi. "What was that?"

"Bad jujubes."

Hal felt like his strings were suddenly cut. Without the Tower to look forward to, his body stopped responding to him. He sagged, but Vorax wrapped him in his leathery folders to stop him from falling out of the chair.

Noth took one look and ordered everybody else to go about their business. "Don't worry, you're safe now, Hal."

She helped him to his feet, and with Vorax's assistance, Hal was able to walk out of the inn on his own two feet. An incredibly odd sensation since just moments ago Hal had felt like a puppet with its strings cut and now here he was, being puppeteered by his mimic cloak.

Noth guided him, not to their home with its panoramic view of the corruption, but to the Manatree's Glade. A place Hal hadn't visited in what felt like a lifetime.

When they stepped across the barrier, renewed strength flowed through the withered grass shoots into Hal's legs. He could walk on his own, and Vorax tentatively released his hold.

Even Hermes grew less fearful in the tree's presence.

But things were not as they should be.

The warmth was gone, replaced by a hollow coldness that burrowed right into Hal's bones.

The ring of safety and comfort had shrunk tremendously, and the grass crunched underfoot. One look at the withered Manatree in the distance, and Hal knew he had nearly made an unforgivable mistake.

Hal realized that perhaps that had been the Shadesblight's plot all along. To separate himself from the tree. To corrupt them both to death as he tirelessly climbed the Tower.

And I nearly fell for it. I actively fought against helping the Manatree so I could venture deeper into the Tower..

As tired as Hal was, the Manatree needed him. It was giving him the last of its life, silently pleading for him to save it.

"I'm here now," Hal whispered with tears in his eyes. He could feel the depths of the Manatree's pain deep in his bones. "I'm here."