

Chapter 7

While Hal slept with a level of peace that only one marked by the Kindred of Dreams could ever achieve, a dark and foul miasma seeped up through the ruined stones of the cavern, seeking any sign of life.

Bereft of the few monsters that once inhabited the cave, the fumes were drawn to the beacon of magical potential sitting in their midst.

The Shadesblight had not held much sway in these stones for an age. With the disappearance of the dreaded Abyss, a force so all-consuming that even the Shadesblight steered clear of it, the foul miasma had begun to reclaim its territory.

The Shadesblight hungered to take, consume and twist.

It had sensed Hal's presence the moment he set foot upon the ruined streets of Cirta. It knew much about this creature that had not only defied it on many occasions, but was blessed by the Shard itself to repel its corruption.

To say the Shadesblight conspired to destroy Hal would be to provide too much personality to a force of nature that seeks only to corrupt and destroy.

It did not have feelings or thoughts in the same way most creatures would understand them. It held impressions of its victims, a pantomime of life at best.

And right now, it saw a hated enemy, completely devoid of his normal defenses, and surrounded by the Shadesblight.

The Shadesblight, which had tentatively crept back into the ruins of Cirta, now bent all its considerable will to attacking this lone beacon of light and hope.

Unfortunately, the Archmage's tower was strong. Its defensive wards made it difficult to find a gap large enough to corrupt.

But eventually, no matter how secure the walls, or how stout the doors, there was always a way in. All through the long night, the Shadesblight searched and searched with its questing tendrils and seeping miasma.

The Shadesblight found a crack so small that it would have utterly gone undetected if it had not covered the structure in a thick purple-black killing miasma.

Had Hal, the creature of hideously blessed light, emerged from the tower at that moment, the greater whole of the Shadesblight in the area might have been defeated.

But the young man slept on, given a small comfort with a pleasant dream, unaware of the Shadesblight's intrusion. The way it seeped into the very stones of the tower, twisting it and corrupting its wards to its own nefarious ends.

Unfortunately, the Archmage had been thorough in his defenses. He was used to being assailed on all sides by creatures both within and without. He knew how to build a properly defended magical artifact, the likes of which few people on Aldim could replicate.

What should have taken a few hours at best was still not completed by the time the tower's sole living occupant woke up. Much of the Shadesblight had infiltrated the tower, but not enough to seal in the young man and end him.

It had to make a choice. Sever the portion of itself anchored to this place and allow Hal to get away or put the very heart of the Shadesblight into the tower itself. It might just be enough to kill him.

Due to the benefits of sleeping in the tower, Hal gained a substantial resting buff, despite the danger.

You gain the effect of Well Rested.

+25% Experience Points gained.

+25% Skill Experience Points gained.

+10% HP / +10% SP / +10% MP.

+10% HP Regeneration.

+10% SP Regeneration.

+10% MP Regeneration.

“What the—?” Hal said, trying and failing to open the door to the exterior of the tower. Unlike before, the door seemed stuck, as if it was nailed shut.

Using *Convergence* to enhance his Strength, Hal wrenched on the door. With a mighty ear-splitting squeal of protest, the door opened into utter noisome darkness.

A bubble of light burst forth from Hal’s Manatree marked Kol’thil, shining like a beacon. There was a faint hissing, and then the light vanished just as fast as it had come.

Hal was still bleary-eyed from sleeping, but he was surprised at how rested he felt. Obviously the *Well Rested* buff was working in his favor. It came as a surprise that Hirash’s tower—though he supposed he should stop thinking of it as anything but *his* tower—offered such a potent buff.

Then again, if I were an Archmage, I would make damn sure that my resting was as beneficial as possible.

A lingering smell like raw burning sewage twisted Hal’s stomach, but it was gone a moment later. He stepped fully out of the tower, sweeping his senses around for any threats, but found none.

Just to be sure, Hal did a perimeter around the tower after closing the door. It locked with a simple wave of his hand, preventing anybody but himself from entering until he unlocked it.

There was nothing. No bodies of monsters... just... nothing.

Then why do I feel like something is dreadfully wrong? Hal thought to himself, looking at the tower as if expecting an answer from it.

The tower yielded no answers. It looked no different from the night before, so Hal shrugged and recalled it to his necklace, where it seemed to sit a little colder against his skin than he remembered.

“Time to head back,” Hal said aloud to the emptiness of the cavern. He summoned his wings once more.

Unlike physical wings that moved currents of air with mechanical force, these did not flap or beat as might be expected. Instead, they stayed stock still, illuminating his cloak in faint golden-gray light.

Despite the odd mechanism, it was easier to fly with these instead of physical eldritch wings.

It took considerably more effort to fly than it did to drift down, and the going was rather slower than Hal would have liked. He rose up at a glacial pace, keeping a keen eye on his MP and his Spirit to make sure he wasn't burning through either too fast.

While he probably would survive a fall from that height, it wouldn't be a pleasant experience. *I like my blood staying on the inside. Thank you very much.*

He couldn't necessarily say that about his bones, considering that was how he crafted armor and weapons.

A few minutes later, Hal alighted on the lip of the hole he had dropped down the night before. The Level Up he had long waited for finally materialized.

Your Flight Skill has risen to Level 10.

+0.35% Speed while flying.

+0.35% Control while flying.

-0.25% Stamina cost.

Hal frowned. No Perk? That was odd. Nearly every skill gave him a Perk at either Level 5 or 10. If there was ever a skill to benefit from a Perk, it would be his Flight.

Perhaps Flight was different. It didn't seem like the sort of skill you would normally get, and it only seemed possible because of his Beastborne essences.

Though he knew it was a waste of resources, he did not dismiss his spliced wings of Dragon and Arcana. If he could squeeze out a few more skill Levels on his way home, then at least his trip out here would have been *marginally* useful.

Calling on Naitese or Orrittam was out of the question. He wasn't sure they would hear him or see his sign, especially since he had told them not to look for one.

Hal looked up at the cold sunlight filtering through the clouds. "I really thought I would be here longer," Hal said to the ghosts of the past.

He was still sure he could return to the Abyss.

All it took was to find another way in. Somehow.

New Quest: Answers in the Dark

Having visited the Abyss from the Ruins of Cirta's gate before, you have discovered you can no longer tread back down the path you once took. In order to find your answers about the history of Aldim's calamities, Manastorms, and your title as Brightking, you must instead search elsewhere for another Abyss Gate located somewhere within the Fallmark region.

Objectives

- *Gain entry to the Abyss.*
- *Seek out the Balesian Mages.*

Rewards

- *Variable Experience and Sparks.*
- *Epoch Lore.*

Hal grinned at the Quest. “Well... I guess that settles that.”

It was a good sign when the Shard itself was giving him a nudge in the right direction. So he *was* on to something. The location had been wrong, but that meant there was somewhere else that he could use to reach the Abyss.

The question was: where?

Other than somewhere within the Fallmark region, Hal didn't know. And for the time being, that was fine with him.

It meant returning to Brightsong empty-handed, but at least he had a thread to follow and a new Quest. It wasn't much to go on, true, but it was better than flailing around in the dark.

If it wasn't for the hollow feeling in his gut when he thought about the Abyss, Hal would have started to wonder if it had even happened.

Besal hadn't known what to think of it when Hal explained the Abyss to him. According to the Khaeros, Hal should not have been able to survive such an environment. And in fact, any memories Hal tried to show to Besal failed to materialize.

Besal simply could not see them, as if they did not exist.

In the end, Hal believed the Khaeros humored him rather than believed him.

But I know it happened, Hal thought to himself as he used *Convergence* to leap forward and then his *Flight* skill to glide down safely.

It dramatically sped up his ability to traverse the rocky and often shattered terrain of the ruined city. Leaping high and then gliding down gently felt like he was playing a game with cheats enabled.

Of course, any monster eager to ambush him would have an easy trajectory to follow, but for some reason, Hal felt a distinct lack of life in the region.

What he had first felt was an unsettling presence watching him on the way in was entirely gone.

The dozens of monsters that had lurked on the edges of his senses were nowhere to be found. He even went hunting for them a few times. A little *Experience* and some monster essence wouldn't have gone amiss, but when he came across a clear monster lair he was met with a rather grim sight.

Dead bodies.

Hal stared, curious, at the desiccated husks piled up like old, discarded laundry. He was sure these had been some of the monsters that had watched him last night.

Only... they looked like they had been dead for *years*, not hours.

No, Hal thought to himself, a chill running down his spine. He turned away and leaped with all his might. He burned through his *mana* and *Spirit* to rush away from the ruins as fast as possible.

Once he was out of the ruins and away from the corruption, he closed his eyes and focused on the *Memoria Crystal*. It was still too far for him to teleport to the crystal.

The fear of what might have happened twisted his guts. The last time he was down in that hole, days had slipped by without him realizing it. He had thought it was a factor of the *Abyss*, but what if it wasn't?

What if some fragment of magic from the ruins warped time?

Frantic that he might have somehow lost weeks or more, Hal poured on the speed and rushed through monster infested lands. The ice and snow were no barrier to Hal's speed.

The dark waters that had once held horrors beyond reckoning were iced over, easing his passage as he leaped again and again as fast as he could.

Despite his *Well Rested* buff enhancing his SP regeneration, and his armor granting him insulation, it wasn't enough to combat the cold's detrimental effect on his resources.

Once he was within range of the Dungeon's Memoria Crystal, Hal recalled himself to it.

The Dungeon Core was no help. It was a Dungeon. Time was measured on the scale of decades, at the very least. Try as it might, it could not understand what Hal wanted from it, and so in frustration, Hal fled the entrance and rushed back to Brightsong.

Please, let me be wrong!