

## Chapter 42

It felt good to be back home. But throughout the rest of the day, Hal struggled to pay attention to the home he loved so dearly. His thoughts were drawn like iron filings to a magnet back to the Tower and its hideous corruption.

Hermes showed him his half-finished workshop beneath Hal's cottage, and Noth showed off her latest concoctions. Hal did his best to make sure they didn't feel like he wasn't paying attention, but it was a struggle to stay focused.

It would have seemed as if he needed sleep, but Hal had already enjoyed a nice long sleep in the simulated hills of California. A pleasure he doubted he would ever get to experience again.

For once in his recent life, he wasn't constantly battling the cold. It had been warm and comfortable even when the sun dipped down and it began to get cold.

Cold for California, perhaps, but it felt like a hot summer day to Hal's Shiverglades-tuned senses.

His oppa seemed happy and passionate about his steampunk-like devices that pumped heat up into the cottage. Hal struggled to get used to that way of thinking, that he had a soul aeder of his own, and wasn't just borrowing Komachi from Elora.

He was accustomed to getting his turn skipped for good things happening.

Though Hal offered to help dig out the rest, the oppa insisted it was something he wanted to do. Hal didn't blame him. With the schematics that Giel and Hal had retrieved from the Tower, not to mention the Dawn Citadel Quest, the dwarves were going to be incredibly busy.

“It’s great Skill Ups digging for an oppa like me!” Hermes said, his tail wagging.

Hal petted his long, noodly body. “Then this will be solely your creation and all the credit will go to you,” he told him.

Hermes beamed with pride at that.

If only Hermes could get the heat from his device to output steadily.

It banished the cold that seeped in through the windows, door, and various other seams in the cottage. The building’s base insulation and fireplace weren’t enough against the blizzard, but when Hermes’ device was working, it was quite comfortable.

A part of him wondered where the power for the machine was coming from. However, Hal had enough hands-on experience with Komachi that perhaps poking into the logic and magical inner workings of a soul aeder creation might cause the whole thing to fall apart.

He wasn’t about to look a gift horse—or oppa, as was the case—in the mouth.

Brightsong had been busy in Hal’s absence.

There were more cottages going up, the longhouses were being converted into guest lodges for people who might want to visit but for whatever reason wouldn’t be staying at Kow’s Inn.

Hal approved of it, mostly because it would provide a cozy but not overly familiar place for the various tribes of the Shiverglades to rest in. It didn’t escape Hal’s notice that there were now 12 longhouses arranged in a large horseshoe shape with what looked like the beginnings of a courtyard between them.

Almost like a cul-de-sac, but far more rustic and covered in feet of snow.

There was plenty to look at, always a person who wanted a word with him, but despite having slept only recently, Hal felt *sure* days had passed between then and now.

There was a deep fatigue that burrowed into his bones. Try as he might to banish it, he couldn't completely get it to go the flork away.

Noth eventually pulled Hal aside around dinnertime at Kow's Inn. There was a large plate of roasted vegetables in a thick savory sauce that looked divine. They didn't have much meat, but what they did have Hal received.

He gratefully ate it despite feeling guilty about it, and Kow practically glowed with pride when he gave his compliments to the chef.

"Hal, what's wrong?" Noth asked. "And don't you dare tell me it's nothing or so help me, I will drag you out of this inn and strap you into bed so you can't get out."

The impish grin that slid onto Hal's face made Noth blush, but she held her ground.

Finally, Hal sighed, "It's too much," he confessed. "All this work, a week has passed while we cleared barely two floors, Noth. How many more are there? Ten? Twenty? A hundred? Nobody knows. Every floor is slightly different. And I'm one of the only people who can go in each and every time. It is my responsibility. I caused this."

Noth watched him with her beautiful golden eyes, so full of sympathy and love for him. She did not interrupt or tell him he was stupid for thinking ill of himself.

She reached out and cupped his cheek in the palm of her hand. The warmth comforted him.

"This is a shared responsibility among all of us. You cannot shoulder this burden alone, Hal. I thought you would have figured that out by now."

“I’m not–”

“You’re improving, but you are still trying to take everything as if it were a personal failing. As if you and you alone are the only person who can enter the Tower.”

Hal was about to tell her again that was indeed the case when he caught the warning gleam in her eyes and wisely decided to keep his mouth shut.

“Why don’t you try a different approach this time?” Noth said.

Hal frowned. “As in?”

“Stay out here. Let another group go in. Maybe you can do something to bolster the Manatree. Trust in your people, and maybe you’ll see that there’s nothing to worry about after all.”

“If I don’t go, then there can’t be an alliance,” Hal pointed out.

“Is that so bad? From what you’ve told us, it sounds like a single party works better, anyway. Why not let people go in shifts? You were able to clear two floors in less time than it took us to clear one. I don’t think that’s necessarily because your group was stronger than 12 others, do you?”

As much as Val’s assistance was helpful, Hal had to admit that the dragons were far stronger, and Durvin was a powerhouse unto himself. Without Hal’s monster powers, Durvin would easily beat him in a one-on-one fight.

Of course, having two Beastbornes made things otherwise impossible nearly trivial. And yet... the battles they undertook were not significantly harder than anything he faced with the alliance.

Perhaps there was something to that. Maybe some sort of resistance by the Tower to stop huge armies from rolling in and destroying everything.

“Have you tried taking multiple parties in?” Hal asked.

Noth looked away.

“Noth!” Hal hissed.

“We were worried,” she said sheepishly. “Nobody could gain entry while a group was inside. It seems by design, and so I’m saying let us take shifts. Your connection to the Manatree is without equal, Hal. If there’s anybody who can find a means to empower it, to give it the strength to push back against the corruption of the Tower, it’s you.”

Hal hated it when Noth was right, especially when it flew in the face of what he thought he should be doing.

“I’ll... think on it,” Hal told her.

“Better think fast,” Noth said, her gaze sliding to a group of people walking over to the table. “I don’t think you’ll have long to decide.”

A familiar group was approaching the table. Hal noted there were only five members. Either they were expecting him to go along, or they wanted to give him the option.

It wasn’t like it would be hard to fill that last slot without him.

Hal put his hand over Noth’s. He saw the way her eyes tightened.

She knew what his answer would be.

“Then let *me* go,” she said, her voice breaking. “Let me be there with you.”

Hal nodded. He turned to the new group. “I’m going,” he told them. Despite their obvious concern, he saw more than one face break out into a relieved grin. “But we’ll need to make room for Noth as well.”

“I can step aside,” Dale told him. “I will make sure Brightsong is safe in your absence, Founder.” He pressed his fists together, imitating the bow of respect Hal used between himself and the dragons.

Naitese caught the display standing right next to him. Her eye twitched, but she didn’t say anything.

*Probably doesn't want to ruin her chances of going back into the Tower,* Hal thought with a wry smile. *No doubt she's seen how much she can grow under the strain of the Tower.*

“Hey, ice queen, where’s muh [Frozen Dragonsteel Ingot]?!” Komachi demanded, scampering over.

Hermes gasped, paws going to his muzzle. He was star-struck. Hal heard him whisper, *“It’s Komachi!”*

Naitese grumbled and looked at the small pobul, her hands on her hips. “Yeah? Have you got the high quality steel for me then?”

Komachi stared. “You know I don’t. Where Machi get that then, so I can see you do your awesome magic?”

“Then I can’t very well materialize one out of the air, can I?” Naitese said with a smug grin. “How and where you procure the materials is of no consequence to me, pobul. I will honor my agreement. Once you have the *requisite goods.*”

Komachi squinted, her face scrunching up. “Guess you don’t wanna pet my glorious fur, huh?”

Naitese moved so fast she was a pale blur. In a moment Komachi was in her arms, cradled and being petted. “You were saying?” she purred to Komachi.

The pobul shut her eyes in contentment, rumbling. Forgetting all about her deal.

Elora looked on with horror.

Hal stood up, ready to go, but Noth put a hand on his wrist. “An hour of sleep, Hal. At least lay down for an hour.”

He wanted to argue that he had just slept, but the look of pained worry in her eyes nearly broke his heart.

“All right,” Hal told her. He looked at the assembled group. “In an hour’s time, I’m taking a single group in. Be by the barrier to the Tower.”

Trying very hard not to feel like he was a naughty little boy who just got sent to take a nap because he was cranky, Hal trudged through the snow and ice to his cottage.

He lay on his bed, tossing and turning. Sleep wouldn't come, not with his worries and fears gnawing at the edges of his sanity. Vorax tried to soothe him with mental images of streams, winding rivers, warm sunlight on his skin. In essence, all the sensory images he had picked up from their trip to Califauxnia.

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While Hal was taking his nap, Hermes was properly meeting Komachi for the first time. Elora was watching the pair with widened eyes, trembling in her seat.

She found the two soul aeder unexpectedly adorable. Though, beneath that fuzzy blanket of affection and fondness, the proud Wildsmaster was also facing an overwhelming existential crisis at the prospect of having not just Komachi to take care of, but another oppa.

He was so small. He would need to be protected, more than even Komachi. Though Elora didn't like to admit to herself, it was often Komachi protecting *her*, not the other way around.

As Elora began to wonder how much another oppa would need to eat, considering both Komachi and Kow seemed to have a larger appetite than three dwarves put together, she began to feel overwhelmed by her harrowing predicament.

It wasn't exactly a well-kept secret that Elora sometimes adopted a thousand-yard stare when Komachi told her a little too much about events, history, and places beyond Aldim.

It was one thing to know that the Worldshard she lived on wasn't supposed to be plagued by Manastorms because something was wrong with the land, and another entirely to find out there was one Worldshard shattered to pieces that fused with another then somehow *kept on going* and—

Elora took a deep, shaky breath.

The oppa danced, jumping back and forth while thrashing his head. It struck Elora as something only an incredibly excited oppa could do. Even Komachi threw her rump around in a sort of silly looping dance.

Dwarves, elves, kobblins and many others leaned over in their chairs and turned away from their plates to get a glimpse of the heartwarming display.

Finally, Hermes got control over himself, and mustered up the nerve to ask Komachi for an autograph.

The pobul chirped and put her paw not on a paper, but on one of her Brewmaster's kegs. Her paw print emblazoned upon the side, and she handed the thing over.

Hermes looked like he might swoon.