

Chapter 15

“How didn’t I see them?” Hal wondered aloud.

“Komachi used *Treasure Sniff!*” the pobul explained. “Shoulda waited for ‘Machi.”

Hal grumbled, but otherwise didn’t argue.

She was right. He had totally forgotten that she was a support type familiar. Her goal was to buff and enhance others, including finding valuable loot.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Hal told her.

“Maybe you want this, though?” Komachi asked, holding out a tiny, glittering [Occluded Emerald].

Hal’s mouth went dry. “You’re... giving that to me?”

His reaction made the pobul a little nervous. “Er, yis. You.. don’t want it?”

It felt wrong somehow. As if he was taking from the others, and yet... he really did want it. His [Founder’s Folly] had a total of 4 sockets, only one of which was occupied by a gem of the same sort.

If his guess was right, and his Gem Lore trait was telling him it was, then that would be another 4% added to his attack speed. While not a whole lot, that’d be a total of 8% while still having 2 sockets for other gems.

“Think ya already got one in your sword, so it’d make the gem’s effect even more potent, right?” Komachi said. “Doubling down ish usually a good thing.”

Hal nodded, not trusting himself to speak. Gems were incredibly rare, and finding them in the Tower was an auspicious sign. One

that he hoped would continue, considering this was only the first floor.

What other treasures might they unearth?

Reaching out a hand, Hal didn't take the gem. Instead, he petted Komachi's head gratefully. "Thank you, Komachi."

Shutting her eyes, she chirped happily.

Hal accepted the cloudy green stone and without even needing to remove the sword from its sheath, socketed the gem in place. It gave a bright flare of emerald light, then died down.

Confirming his suspicion, Hal examined his sword.

Founder's Folly

[Sword] (Fabled)

Item Level: 81

Damage: 277

Sword Skill +7 | Copper Kol'thil +2

MND +22 | VIT +22 | CHR +11 | INT +11

Enchantments: Whip-Sword | Draconic Gaze | Siphoning Hook / Soulbound

Durability: 3,940/3,950

Slots: 0/4

Sockets: 2/4

[Occluded Emerald]: +4% Attack Speed

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Lv. 45 Hal Williams (Soulbound)

Perhaps the most interesting part was that its durability was hardly fazed after that entire fight. Hal had blocked gargantuan clubs as well as massive, clawed arms, but it had only lost 10 Durability. He wondered if it was because of the sword's quality and rarity, if it was a benefit of using certain monster essences, or even a mixture of the two possibilities.

Hal looked up at the rest of the group. Like his own party, the rest of the alliance was now focused on splitting up the treasure amongst themselves. Finding the best person for each piece of equipment.

The dragons, despite looking on with great gold lust, didn't want any of the equipment, though Hal could see that they were lying.

Both dragons understood that the others in their respective parties were in greater need of the equipment boosts. Without a proper town nearby or any sort of commerce beyond what they could make themselves, Brightsong was starved for proper equipment.

They had taken all that they could from Murkmire, but it had been a paltry amount and was built for their previously low Levels. After all the battling in the Shiverglades and beyond, the average Level of each person in Brightsong was considerably higher.

That meant every single piece of equipment they found was an upgrade for somebody. The dragons merely wanted the loot for their dragon hoard, and they were civilized enough to know that the best way to get some was to make sure everybody else was as strong as possible.

If there was *this* much loot for only the first floor, they wondered the same as Hal. How much more might they be able to get?

And how much of it is from the Archmage? Hal wondered. He knew the Archmage would have some amazing loot. You didn't become that powerful or famous without effortlessly collecting treasures like a cat owner collects cat hair.

Naitese sauntered over, a hand on her hip, and approached Elora directly. Elora's eyes went wide. Though Naitese wasn't in her dragon form, she still carried an imposing presence.

However, it wasn't Elora that Naitese was interested in talking to.

It was Komachi.

Naitese held out her hand and opened it, revealing pouches of glittering sparks. "Honorable soul aeder," Naitese said in formal tones. "Will you use your wondrous abilities to discover more treasure for my party?" Hal could tell it pained her to be so respectful to Komachi. Likely, all the times the pobul taunted the dragon hadn't exactly made for an easygoing relationship.

"Ehhh," Komachi said, scratching her side.

Hal watched the exchange with barely contained mirth. It was all he could do just to keep his face impassive. Naitese's cold glacial eyes flickered to him, then back to Komachi as if she suspected they were working together.

"I would consider it a personal favor, Komachi," Hal added. He had no idea how Komachi felt about the dragon, but he didn't see any harm in the soul aeder helping another party.

"Hmm, and here Komachi was going to haggle for a [Frozen Dragonsteel Ingot]..."

Naitese's eyes widened. "If you would see fit to bless my treasure pile, I would... gladly lend my breath." She said the words as if they choked her, but she said them all the same. A dragon was as good as their word. They never said anything they weren't willing to bind themselves to.

"Aight, sounds good!" Komachi said with an exuberant chirp. She jumped atop Naitese's shoulder, fully expecting to be ferried over.

Though it took a considerable strain on Komachi, the pobul was able to use her *Treasure Sniff* ability to enhance not only Durvin's party, but also Mira's.

“Komachi is *pooped*,” the soul aeder groaned, as she slipped like an old loaf of slightly squashed bread into Elora’s jacket to recover.

“We should make sure to ration her strength,” Elora told Hal. “She uses a lot of her attributes in order to fight, and though she’s getting a lot... using powers that alter loot takes more than usual from her.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Hal told her. “Just make sure she doesn’t over-extend herself, okay?”

The half-elf smiled at him, a surprisingly warm and genuine expression that he hadn’t seen in quite a long time.

“All right,” Hal announced to the rest after they’d sorted through their increased treasure pile. “We’re going to step onto the platform and see what else awaits us. It looks like it’ll only hold a single party at a time, so don’t crowd it.”

“We could go first,” Naitese told him. “Our party is the most defensively formed. The dwarves are sturdy, and my own powers lie in defense and protection instead of those of either yourself or my father.”

Hal didn’t like it, but he had to agree with them. He and Orrittam shared that similarity. They were both specialized in offensive attacks, not defensive.

If that pad was a teleporter of some sort, they would want the most defensive-oriented party to go through first to anchor the vulnerable location.

It didn’t sit right with him, but he knew it was best. With a nod, Durvin’s party stepped atop the pad and disappeared in a swirling gust of blue light.

Hal’s party stepped up next and appeared in the middle of another battle. By the looks of things, there was a significant time delay.

There was no other way that Hal could imagine each of Durvin's party members were so wounded. Nobody was without blood or significant damage to their equipment.

Shattered pauldrons, broken blades, and splintered handles littered the ground, but the dwarves and dragon still fought on valiantly.

When Hal arrived, there was a ragged cheer of hope. Hal didn't understand, but he didn't need to in order to defend his friends.

Spinning up his Monster Core, he surged Dragonfire into his beast magic spells, lighting up the monsters one after the other.

A great hulking brute in crude plating lumbered toward him, throwing aside tired and drained dwarves like they were children.

Hal met the massive creature with his sword. Letting out a flash of white blinding light with *Draconic Gaze*, he blinded the brute long enough to weave the strands of *Anvil Lightning* back together and reverse direction.

Vorax reached out and sunk his many teeth into the brute, binding the big creature in place and rendering it vulnerable for Hal's coming onslaught. It struggled fiercely, but Vorax's teeth held firm in its armor and flesh.

Using his sword as a lightning rod, Hal thrust the blade into a gap in the brute's armor. His reach was too short to do much more than puncture an inch or two into the creature, but it was enough.

The woven strands of *Anvil Lightning* arced through the back of the armored brute, blasting it apart and spreading a concussive wave of force that flattened everybody surrounding the powerful monster.

Spell Shaping proved its worth as Hal desperately weaved and shifted the flows of magic around each of his friends, but he could not completely spare them. The monumental task was beyond the combined limits of his Beast Magic Skill, his INT, CHR, and MND.

Nobody was left standing.

Hal flipped to his feet, ready for another battle, but the shockwave had done far more damage than he could have imagined. His friends, however, were only dazed.

They got to their feet, but the monsters were not so lucky. Those that were still alive only managed to extend their life a few precious seconds as Hal and Durvin's party took them out before they could defend themselves.

Another ten minutes later, and Mira's party joined them.

Mira's party had their weapons at the ready. The gold elf looked around in shock at the battle's aftermath. Just like Hal, she clearly expected the fighting to just be starting, and not to be already over.

By then, the groups were tired and fatigued, but at least whole. Wounds were mounting. So too were the *Blighted* stacks.

Hal had hoped that would apply on every floor, but it didn't seem to be the case. Everybody in Durvin's group had no less than 3 stacks, while those in Hal's only had 2.

Meanwhile, Mira's group still only had a single stack apiece.

Those who were more wounded than the others had higher stacks. With some of Durvin's tankiest members at an unsettling 5 stacks.

It must be something to do with the more damage you take, Hal thought, mentally working through the problem. The more stacks you have, the easier it would be to take damage, which means you'd perpetually get higher and higher stacks.

Putting Durvin's group in front had been a good thing, but it also deprived them of their heaviest hitters, which were Hal and Orrittam, respectively. The Alliance functioned best as a whole, not divided into their separate parties.

Hal endeavored to keep all of that in mind for later. They rested up. Potions were used by those with the most severe injuries, and they took as short a rest as was possible in the hellish confines of the Tower.

What bothered Hal was that there had been no notification that they had reached the second floor. That could only mean that they were still on the first floor, and already they were beginning to tire.

“Sir,” Kow’s small voice asked. The oppa had snuck close to him and did not seem to want the others to overhear what he had to say.

Hal turned to the oppa. “Yes, Kow?”

“I fear that we may have bitten off more than we can chew, as it were,” Kow said nervously. “There is no easy way out of the Tower. And now, having taken those pads, perhaps... there may not be one at all. At least, without clearing the first floor.”

Though he didn’t want to agree with him, he nodded all the same. Despite gaining yet another Beastborne Level from the battle – which said a lot about how much Experience was flowing – he was one of the few people who remained largely unharmed.

“This may very well have been a trap all along,” Kow told him. His eyes shimmered with unshed tears. “We must be careful going forward.”

Hal gave him an affectionate pat on the head. “Quite right. We’ll need to scout the rooms out from here rather than charging blindly. That last teleporter was obviously trapped with the intention of delaying groups supporting one another.”

It was becoming painfully clear that they couldn’t handle many more battles like that. Hal wondered just how much more the first floor had to throw at them.