

CHAPTER 52

From the way Hamrin talked to Hal and looked at him, you would have thought he had just created a hydrogen bomb from scrap metal. The Gourmage rattled off more theories and names for things that Hal mostly didn't even bother to think of.

It was all instinctual for Hal. Bonecrafting was in his blood as it were, and he could easily understand some of the phrases and strange names so long as Hamrin explained what they were.

The processes, it turned out, were quite similar to other magical systems within Aldim. In fact, this was all covered under one big umbrella of "Magical Theory" that every Tower trained mage had to pass.

Something Hal very clearly hadn't done.

And so, as Noth came back with more food and drink, they ate and talked, with Noth chiming in here and there with her own addition to spur the direction of the talks into helping Hal develop his Bonecrafting further.

With the plates cleared away and the town hall beginning to fill up, Hamrin leaned back and shook his head. "Mister — Hal, I'm honestly very impressed with what you've managed to do. You have an almost instinctual grasp on the mechanics and theory without ever having been taught them."

"I didn't have much option," Hal said, fiddling with his latest creation. His mind was abuzz with all the information that Hamrin had laid on him. He wanted to make another this moment, but even after eating and resting, his MP wasn't high enough yet.

He couldn't ask somebody else to charge the [Shard of Density II] with their MP, because then he couldn't craft with it. It had to be *his* mana, which made things a little complicated.

"Well, my proverbial hat is off to you, sir. You've managed to reinvent something that you didn't even know existed. Luckily for you, there have been generational improvements to the iteration of mana batteries for quite a long time now, however most of them aren't practical and therefore never truly used."

“Why is that?”

Hamrin scratched at his bare chin thoughtfully. Despite several days roughing it, the man seemed incapable of growing a beard. “Well, you generally need a crystalline substrate, right? Something with plenty of empty space between stable cell walls in order to hold all that mana. It also must be strong enough to stay put while the mana within is charged and discharged, if not and the substrate destabilizes at the wrong moment—”

“Kaboom,” Hal supplied.

“Very much so!” Hamrin grinned. Hal caught Noth grinning as well, as if she knew they would hit it off. “Metal is conductive, but it’s not neutral enough. It discharges, sometimes randomly, at the slightest thing and so crystal is generally used. [Shardite] is the main material used, but it’s rare and difficult to harvest owing to its odd and unreliable propagation method.”

“Manastorms, right?” Hal asked, vaguely remembering.

Hamrin shrewdly looked at him. “Are you *sure* you didn’t train at the Tower?”

“I would be locked in a cell if I did,” Hal told him. “Trust me. Rinbast has no love for me and wouldn’t allow me under his nose like that.”

“Well, then you’re just an uncannily brilliant man.”

“If you’re trying to butter him up,” Noth said with a wink at Hal, “it doesn’t work. He’s largely immune to flattery. But *I*, on the other hand, like to hear all the nice things people say about him.”

Hal coughed nervously as she put a hand under the table onto his thigh and squeezed affectionately.

“Shard’s truth!” Hamrin said, putting a hand over his heart. “I am being utterly honest, really. Most people don’t understand what goes into these great works and only think about what disasters they have caused. As I was saying, [Shardite] is used and the rarer yellowish [Empyrean Shardite] is even better, but both have the same weakness.”

There was a clear space for Hal to answer, and he wasn’t about to leave the mage hanging. So he said, “Structural weakness. Crystal is stable, but only if you don’t manhandle it. Bringing it into battle is like taking a bomb into a forest fire. It might go off at any moment, releasing all that stored up energy.”

“Exactly!” Hamrin was enthusiastically nodding along. “So you can see why there has been a lot of development, but not much in the wearable kind. However, a lot of places use massive mana batteries for all sorts of services around the city or Sanctum. They provide much needed utility for everyday life and that’s where they truly shine.”

Hal could see it. Provided the crystal was shielded and protected properly, the downside of its brittleness and low durability meant that you could build a very large mana battery indeed and use it for all sorts of things.

It was the equivalent of building a power plant, though how to generate the mana in the first place was something he’d very much like to know.

“But what you’ve made here,” Hamrin tapped the [Shard of Density II], “is something unlike anything I’ve ever seen. There’s clearly crystal as part of its general makeup, but it feels like....”

“Bone.”

“Really?” Hamrin’s eyes lit up. “How did you manage that?”

Hal couldn’t stop himself. Despite the waste of mana, he lifted one hand up with the palm facing the ceiling and conjured a small bar of [Doll Bone] from his Golem essence. It looked like a finger-thick bar of dark-brown ceramic was sliding out of his skin with a faint glow of light where skin and ceramic met.

When it came out completely, he handed it to Hamrin.

To his credit, the Gourmage didn’t hold back, cringe, or otherwise show any sort of fear of seeing a man creating an item out of his own body. It was rather refreshing.

“This is... this is incredible!” he said, eyes bright with amazement. “If I had something like this on the farm, I could double—no, *triple*—the yields easily!”

“Really?” Hal asked. “What sort of bone do you need?”

“Anything that can function as an efficient mana conduit, and ideally a mana battery as well. I could help guide you through some of the basic theories on how to make them. I don’t have the most advanced methods known by heart, but I would be more than happy to help if you would let me.”

Hal looked at Noth, who gave him a slight nod of approval.

“If you’re sure,” Hal told him. “But let’s do it in the cottage. The town hall is filling up, and I’d rather we had a little privacy for this.”

Hamrin stood, the bench scraping against the wood in his haste to get up. “Lead the way.”

An hour or so later in the cottage, Noth got up, planted a kiss on Hal’s cheek and said, “I need to go check on the progress of the first tower.” She laughed at the surprise on Hal’s face. “Your towers are the talk of every dwarf in the settlement, Hal. As if you didn’t do enough single-handedly making enough iron for the smithy or smelting mythril—a famous dwarven metal, by the way—in front of them!”

Noth shook her head. “Sometimes I wonder if you realize what you’re doing. You’re too clever by half, Hal Williams.”

Hal chuckled and smiled at her. “Honestly, I just wanted to help out. Now that the smithy is up and operational alongside the sawmill, we should be able to expand to cottages very soon.”

“The longhouses are nice,” Hamrin said gently. “But it would be nice not to be so crammed together.” He raised his hands defensively when they both turned to look at him. The man seemed to wilt under their gaze. “Not that I would expect any special treatment or that I would get a cottage ahead of anybody else with greater seniority!”

“Don’t worry, Hamrin,” Hal told him. “With the rate the new production buildings can output, we should be able to get some actual comfort here relatively soon. I can’t say for certain when, but I’ll have a word with Bardan and Athagan when I can.”

“Every dwarf wants to see those towers completed, Hal,” Noth said. “I’m not sure how much more they can be split, so try not to get your hopes too high. Seeing the half-made towers that’ll be the gateway to Brightsong is like seeing a painting only partially done. It’s driving them mad. They want permission to complete the interiors and link up with tunnels and stairs into the settlement. I told them I’d help oversee it with Elora.”

One of Noth’s slimes poked out of her satchel. “Pyuu?” it asked inquisitively.

“Not now,” she muttered, gently guiding it back into the satchel. “I figured I could get some work done for the rock slimes I’ve been cultivating. They can chew through stone like it’s butter, though some of the rock around

here is unnaturally hard. The new tools the smithy is putting out seem to be working though.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Hal told her. He watched her leave then turned back to Hamrin. “Let’s get back to it. Now, tell me about these conduit channels within the battery. How many do I need to place in sequence?”

As Hamrin rattled off the requisite numbers, part of Hal’s thoughts went back to the dwarves. The smithy had provided new tools for the dwarves to use. The new tools, in turn, allowed them to cut and carve through the hardened stone around Brightsong with greater ease.

This allowed them to get access to ore veins that were otherwise inaccessible, opening up greater pockets of materials that they could extract and use.

Something, something dwarves delving too greedily, Hal mused to himself.

With new tools in hand, the dwarves were itching to get at the towers he had created—very roughly—at the southern edge of the Gap where it met the greater Shiverglades.

They were easily seen and both Naitese and Orrittam had taken to nesting nearby. They were more than large enough to house each dragon, but their interiors were non-existent. Hal wasn’t skilled enough yet to use *Carve* to create their interiors. Not even with the *Kol’thil Surge* aiding him, which appeared to give a large skill boost as well as power for its duration.

He was lucky to get as far as he did, truth be told. The greater part of his work with *Carve* was to create a sheer wall around the main areas of ingress. Places where it previously would have been easy to scale the exterior of the mountains that ringed Brightsong.

These places he had altered so heavily that the walls bowed outwards slightly, making it all but impossible for people to climb and clearly announcing their presence at the same time.

The dwarves wanted to make little murder holes, hidden chambers, and even carve the stone face of the mountain’s sheer side into a semblance of bricks and pillars. There was even some talk about making decorative friezes!

With the iron Hal managed to make, the tools created with the Dragonfire-enhanced ingots were significantly better than their standard iron

cousins. Before long, Athagan promised Hal that they would have not just steel tools, but [High Steel] as well.

It was just a matter of time.

Turning his attention back to the conversation at hand, Hal began to go over the essences that would be best used for this project.

He was well versed in Bonecrafting at this point to know what essences would prove best. Arcana Family essences were perfect for mana conduction, and he knew that his Mimic essence was the best he had at present.

While Hamrin was still talking, Hal drew out a small mimic essence blank. It looked like a wooden beam three fingers across and girded with what appeared to be iron riveted banding. It was still mimic essence, not actually metal, but it did give it a certain flair that Hal appreciated.

Hamrin examined the item with great interest and handed it back. "I cannot wait," he said with barely checked enthusiasm.