

CHAPTER 10

“Ho there! Good one, lad!” Orrittam cheered as a golden streaking comet of Dragonfire scorched the side of his face.

Hal, breathing hard and cycling Dragonfire for all he was worth, struggled to keep his knees from knocking together.

This was *nothing* like using Beast Magic or, really, any magic at all. He had to hold onto the feeling of hope to drive him on, to guide the Dragonfire along the pathways within his soul until he could extract it.

A blast of Dragonfire launched from Orrittam’s opened maw and Hal had just enough time to hold the hope-infused image of Brightsong as a thriving metropolis, a mecca of learning and partnership, as he spread Dragonfire into both arms and fanned out his hands to create a shield.

The rudimentary flare of golden light broke against the onslaught of Orrittam’s Dragonfire, but it was enough to blunt the attack. Hal was thrown from his feet, rolled like a tumbleweed across the ground, and fetched up painfully against the base of a massive tree.

Ugh. This would be a lot easier if I could use my Beast Magic as well, he thought bitterly. But Orrittam had been strict on that measure.

“You are forbidden from using any other magic or powers you have at your disposal while we train, young Hal,” Orrittam had told him. “I impose this, not because I wish to see harm come to you, but to teach you to rely on pure Dragonfire. If you use it only sparingly, you will never master it. I am very much afraid this is a matter of ‘sink or swim’ as they say. Have no fear, I will also use nothing but Dragonfire.”

The Noble Gold had been true to his word, he only used Dragonfire to attack Hal. Neither wing, nor claw, nor fang touched him. Even Orrittam’s rather powerful magicks were held in abeyance for the benefit of their training.

Orrittam landed gently a dozen or so yards off, craning his golden neck this way and that to get a better look into the shadowed recesses where Hal was struggling to his feet.

You've had worse, Hal reminded himself. You've been dead before. You were brought back from the brink more times than you could count. A little Dragonfire isn't going to be the end of you. You have nearly rid yourself of that dreaded Kol'thil Bleed, you can cope with his!

But he couldn't.

Hal was all for pushing his limits. He had gotten rather good at it as a matter of fact, but the cold hard truth was that his Dragonfire was weak. Worse, it relied upon his Spirit rather than mana or even Strain. He could feed it only from his Monster Core... which was far from powerful.

My Class might be fixed, but it's almost like starting over again, he mused. I know I should thank the Kindred—and Midarian for that matter—but it's hard to feel happy about being downgraded. Even if it is for my benefit.

Hal held up a hand to catch his breath.

There was nothing for it. His Monster Core was still partially locked down, and even if it wasn't it, was still Copper Rank. Hal didn't know how that equated directly to Levels. He doubted it was a one-to-one. But he did know one iron-certain truth.

No clever shortcuts would Advance his Monster Core.

It took dedication and use. Kind of like his *Kol'thil*, now that he thought about it. There was no EXP he could throw at either to enhance them, and with Beastborne getting up there in Levels, the amount of EXP he needed to make any appreciable impact on his Class was scarce.

Orrittam settled in to wait with his chin resting on his forepaws. "You are not utilizing your Dragonfire."

Sweat slicking his hair to his face, Hal looked up from the doubled-up position he found himself in all-too-often. "Please... enlighten me," he said between gulps of air.

Breathing was important, it did something with his core to revitalize it, but Hal was still a complete and utter novice at this. He could move his essences around inside of himself, but that was just to direct their strength. Measured breaths helped to recover his core's Spirit, but it was slow-going.

It was like learning how to breathe all over again. Doing so subconsciously hardly worked, his core would fill up in time but it would take *hours*.

At least this way, gulping down air like an idiot, he could actually speed it along so it only took minutes.

He had learned somewhat how to do it with Komachi on Hemel, the strange third moon of Aldim, in that little room that was the only safe haven in the whole blasted place.

But that had been with a steady supply of [Pobul Water], which Hal had rapidly exhausted.

“Your Dragonfire,” Orrittam said, breaking through his thoughts, “it orbits your core, yes? Why do you not try to pull it into your core?”

Hal looked at Orrittam. “That’s it? Just... pull it in?”

“It may be worth a shot, I dare say.”

More than willing to try anything once, Hal focused his mind and dropped into a proper cycling pose. Hands folded in his lap over crossed legs, Hal breathed deeply and focused on the swirling comet of Dragonfire orbiting his core.

With glacial slowness, it pulled toward the wan swirling star that represented his nearly depleted Monster Core. By inches, the Dragonfire coasted along the very terminus of his core until, quite suddenly, it disappeared into the core entirely.

Hal had used Dragonfire, though “flailing around” was a more apt descriptor, before but this was entirely different.

As soon as the golden flame was nestled into his Monster Core it rapidly burned his Spirit as fuel.

Reacting purely on instinct, Hal freaked out and ejected the Dragonfire, his core now dangerously depleted. Sweat poured down his body. It felt as if he had just run ten miles uphill.

Hal opened his eyes just in time to see the air faintly warp and vanish around him.

Surging to his feet, in retrospect, had been a poor decision. Black and silver flecks danced in his vision. The light tunneled and winked out as the world went black.

Orrittam watched, unmoving from the position with his chin atop his paws. “Well then, *isn't that interesting?*”

From the Noble Gold's point of view, he watched as Hal began to pull his nascent Goldflame into his core. The aura of shining gold that sprang up around the lad was... alarming, to say the least.

But that alarm was nothing compared to the sheer *power* that he felt radiating off the boy for those scant few seconds. He had truly felt like a threat. Not a Beastborne, not a monster, but a *Dragon* in every way that mattered.

It burned through the boy's reserves like... well, a fire through dry brush.

There was no way he could sustain the effect, that much was clear. Even had his core not been so low, he would have seconds of an altered state before he was forced to revert.

I had not seen such an Awakening in a long time, Orrittam thought.

Naturally, it was of little surprise when Naitese circled overhead, her snowy scales glinting off the fading sun as she craned her neck to look for the threat.

When she finally landed, her eyes locked onto Hal's collapsed—though no longer naked—form.

She looked incredulously at Orrittam. “*Him?*”

“Indeed, daughter.”

“But humans cannot gain Awakenings!”

Orrittam mused on that for a while before saying, “There used to be this popular story on Earth called Dragon Ball—”

“This is not an Earth story, nor is this Earth, father!”

“Very well. Then let us approach this from a different angle, hm?” He unfurled one long claw and pointed it at the prone figure. “He now has not one, but two different types of Dragonfire in him. Have you ever known any dragon to achieve such a feat?”

“Hydras—”

“Are abominations,” Orrittam said severely. “Hal is many things, and goodness knows that Beastborne is like unto an abomination at times, but he is never *fully* a Beastborne.”

“So what?”

Sometimes, in the depths of Orrittam’s private vault of thoughts, he wondered if his precious jewel, his wondrously powerful daughter, was intentionally thick when it came to humans or if it was just a grudge for Hal.

To the flame of his heart, however, he said, “Does that seem like the sort of thing a standard human could do, let alone stay alive while doing so?” He could see the argument forming on her lips and decided to head it off. “The answer is: no. He is as much a human as you or I. We might take on the *appearance* of a human from time to time, but we are not the same.”

Naitese gently nudged Hal’s body, flipping him over onto his back where he snored gently, fast asleep. A few Pale Wortlings shuffled out with a pillow and blanket for the sleeping Beastborne.

They left without a glance at the dragons. The Manatree trusted them absolutely.

“Perhaps you have a point,” Naitese conceded.

“That is very magnanimous of you, daughter.”

“I am not utterly blind, father,” Naitese snapped. “Things are... different than I thought they would be. It has been an adjustment. Knowing I cannot go forth and ice my enemies, it rankles.”

Orrittam chuckled. “Might I remind you that you would be icing their long-lost descendants, if that? People move around quite a lot, you know. The people whose great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfather tried to plunder your nest are just as likely to be across the treacherous seas than still living where you last remembered.”

“If you had let me out sooner—!”

There was no fatherly chuckle this time. His piercing yellow eyes fixed on his daughter and pinned her to the spot.

The Tyrant White had the good graces to look abashed and lower her head. She was weaker by a fair margin than Orrittam, and furthermore he was her sire. She owed much to his largesse, even if she did not want to acknowledge it.

Blowing out a snort of golden flame, Orrittam turned his attention back to Hal. "I would ask that you stay a while."

Naitese gave him a curious look, though she kept the eye-contact to a minimum.

She's learning at least. Orrittam glanced at Hal. "He tried to use Goldflame to speed up his cycling. It did not work the way, I believe, either of us expected. I would request that you teach him to utilize your Whiteflame instead. He may find it more suitable for the purpose."

Naitese curled up and covered herself with one of her large wings. "Oh, very well. It's not as if I have a nest to return to. Do you know how long it'll take me to reacquire a suitable hoard?"

"I very much expect it will take much less time than you think," Orrittam said with a sly grin. "Especially if you stay true to your word and stick near the boy. He has a talent for getting into places he shouldn't, and I can sense a fair number of Dungeons near us. With the proper utilization, Brightsong will be a very rich place indeed."

With dreams of riches lingering in their heads, the dragons settled in to wait.