

Chapter 9

Noth, it seemed, was well aware of Hal's arrival.

She met him halfway to the town hall where she was usually found poring over one document or another. Her cute monster slimes bounced along after her, forming long tracks in the snow.

One of them looked a little odd. Hal took a more thorough look and realized it wasn't a slime at all, but Vorax mimicking a slime.

"Shashshasha!" Vorax laughed, reverting to his normal form. All around, the slimes let out squeaks of surprise and huddled up to Noth.

Chuckling, Hal patted Vorax's lid. "I see you're getting some practice in."

"That was fast," Noth said when the excitement was over, hooking her arm with his and guiding him to the town hall. "I take it by your dour expression that you didn't get into the Abyss."

Hal knew that Noth was just happy he was safe from harm, but it irked him a little that she seemed so damned *pleased* that he hadn't gone to the Abyss.

"You're still going to find a way in, though, aren't you?" she said once they were inside the warm confines of the town hall.

It had changed a lot since the inn was built. Rather than serving as a tavern and meeting place, it had been restored to its original function as an official building of Brightsong's administration.

Somebody had even changed its designation away from its earlier "recreation" tag to its new "administration" designation. Hal appreciated not having to do it himself.

With the inn providing so much morale and comfort, they didn't need the boost from the recreation modifier. Instead, they were gaining a slight malus to morale, while gaining a larger boost to working efficiency.

That made the entire settlement of Brightsong operate better and smoother than ever before, while the inn kept everybody's spirits up.

Considering the bitter cold of the winter, which had only just begun, the inn couldn't have been built at a better time.

I'll have to make sure to thank Kow, Hal thought.

The inn wasn't the only new building either. There were many more buildings constructed in time for the harsh winter. His people weren't all stuffed into those cramped longhouses, and many of them now had cottages to enjoy, including himself.

Noth and Hal could finally enjoy some privacy together.

Still, the new buildings weren't nearly enough. Not compared to a citadel, a true fortress of protection and safety. If Rinbast was all safe and cozy in his castle beneath that giant Manatree, then Brightsong deserved to be as well.

Hal was growing tired of always being one step behind. A little too late to every problem. For so long, he had been spinning so many plates at once that his only recourse was to be reactive, rather than proactive.

He couldn't help but feel that Brightsong should be bigger and stronger by now. There had been so much holding them back. Holding him back.

It was rough starting out in the monster infested wilderness while on the run from that tyrant.

Fortunately, his citizens' hard work had paid off in another way. From building the cottages and the production buildings, the many

constructors that worked in Brightsong had an even higher Skill Level now.

They could now take on increasingly higher tier projects.

Finishing up the mountain walls to Brightsong would never have been possible before when they were struggling with those wooden palisades to protect against the incoming monster attack.

Hal rubbed his bearded chin, mulling over a decision. He hardly noticed that he had stopped in the middle of the snow. Inches of the stuff formed on his shoulders and hood.

Noth watched him, amusement glittering in her golden eyes.

A slime ate some snow.

And evolved into a snow slime.

Just as she was about to kneel down and congratulate the little guy, the slime let out the tiniest, most pathetic growl Hal had ever heard.

He could hardly hear it above the whistling of the icy wind.

The slime bit him on the ankle, but even without his armor, Hal doubted he would have felt it. In fact, he wouldn't have been aware that the slime was attacking him at all if he hadn't already been watching it.

Noth giggled, gently prying the slime away from Hal and trying to soothe it as she placed it into her satchel of slimes. "Play nice, little one, don't go hurting your Founder. He's the reason you're not being chased by vile monsters all around the place!"

The snow slime didn't seem to care. He formed a tiny little hand, created fingers, then pointed at his own eyes, then at Hal as if to say, *I'm watching you, bub!*

Hal grinned and leaned down to the slime. "Bring it, chump."

The slime's ooh'd and aaah'd at the challenge, but the little snow slime was not deterred. He stared icy daggers at Hal, though the Beastborne could sense no malice in the challenge.

Who knows, maybe it would be fun to have a tiny snow slime, no larger than a typical child's snowball, trying to take him down at every turn. At least it would be more enjoyable than the herculean task of trying to find where in the seven hells the entrance to the Abyss was located.

Once inside, the pair shook out their coats and hung them up. Snow sloughed off and melted into a small grate on the floor to funnel the water away.

Hal had hardly been in the town hall now that it was changed. Rather than a tavern-like atmosphere, it was all business. There was a reception desk manned by the tiny koblin, Lootlox.

She was busy being a harsh taskmistress as Hal arrived, ordering a pair of dwarves around. The dwarves bickered amongst themselves, rather than bark back at the koblin.

Lootlox spun on her stool, immediately stopping when she saw the pair enter. "Havior is here!" she squealed with delight, launching herself like a cannonball over the desk and into his arms.

Clinging ferociously, the small koblin squeaked out a series of demands on his time, which Hal listened to with a paternal ear and gently sat her back on her stool so she could continue her duties.

"Some of the new offices are in the back," Noth told him, leading him deeper into the halls that hadn't been there before. The back half of the town hall now had several doors for each of the council members.

From the front desk, Hal could hear dwarves getting a dressing down from the diminutive koblin.

If not for the opulent dark ebony wood and brass accents, it would look rather shabby. However, the Trinic Call had done more than simply send out a beacon proclaiming where Brightsong was.

It had transformed parts of his settlement, enhancing them more than their original pieces could have ever achieved. Though Hal hadn't intended for that to occur at the time, he was pleased by the result.

It felt good to witness a cascading effect from his actions.

Noth brought him to a large meeting room with an oval table and several comfy chairs to sit in. Maps and documents were strewn across the table. Several cups of tea were left out. Hal touched one and found it was cold.

Not too long ago, they would have rationed every bit of tea Brightsong had. Now, there was enough surplus with that farmer mage to leave some out by accident.

“Been using this room much?” he asked, sitting down.

“Only for larger meetings,” Noth told him. “Things that require more than a few council members.” She sat down on the opposite side of the table from him.

Not a good sign.

“Tell me everything,” Noth said.

Hal nodded. He'd been expecting this but figured it would be done in a more intimate or at least less official capacity. *This is what you've asked of her again and again*, a voice reminded him. *Don't be surprised when she starts to take to the role.*

He told her everything about what he found in the ruins. Which wasn't much, admittedly. From time to time, he scratched at his chest. The Archmage's necklace felt like it weighed far more than it had just a few hours ago, or maybe he hadn't noticed it with all the concern over his Rip Van Winkle fear.

“Something the matter?” Noth asked.

“It’s nothing,” Hal assured her, shifting the necklace to the side. It didn’t want to move, as if it was magnetized to his skin. He managed to wrench it out from beneath his breastplate, but it was surprisingly difficult.

As soon as he saw the charm, he knew something was wrong.

You suffer the effect of Doom.

-10 VIT / -10 STR / -10 MND

+25% Magic Damage Taken.

Doom (status effect): When the counter reaches 0, you will incur magical damage equal to your maximum HP.

Hal stared at the thing in his hand. It was a misshapen lump, like somebody had taken the intricately forged piece of metal and heated it beyond recognition, then dumped acid on it for good measure.

“What’s going on?” Noth asked, leaning forward to get a better look.

Alarm bells started going off in Hal’s head. He could feel an overpowering malicious intent so close that it was almost imperceptible until now.

It didn’t take a genius to figure out that there was something wrong with the necklace. Hal bolted out of the town hall. Every *Convergence* assisted step was harder and heavier than the last.

Whatever magic was leaking out of the tower would not be kept at bay for long. It was a miracle that it hadn’t burst out already.

Once he was outside, Hal summoned gray ethereal wings and leaped as high as he could into the sky, halting himself with a great effort.

Slipping off the necklace, Hal cocked back his arm and launched the necklace and charm as far as he could manage.

It made it several hundred feet before the tower broke out of its confinement and landed with a heavy *THUMP* up in the foothills to the east of the town hall, where the mountains rose to shelter the valley.

Hanging in the air, Hal stared at the change to the tower.

No longer beautiful, it was a gnarled and hideous thing with black streamers of miasma rolling out of it, swirling around trying to leak into the surrounding stones.

A surge of anger and fear from the Manatree told Hal all he needed to know.

It was the Shadesblight.

Somehow, though Hal couldn't figure out how, the Shadesblight had infected the Archmage's tower. If he hadn't thrown it away in time...

Best not to think about that, Hal reminded himself.

The tower rose hundreds of feet into the air. It was far larger than the Archmage's and looked like something out of a horror movie.

The Manatree's moonlit essence swirled around it, keeping the corrupting streamers of Shadesblight from spreading too far, but the tower had a foothold now.

Having separated himself from the necklace, his Doom status effect fell off completely. The countdown foretelling his impending demise reset and then disappeared.

He breathed in sharply, assessing himself. His VIT, STR and MND felt like they returned to normal.

He was no longer moments away from death. *That has to be one of the worst status effects I have ever experienced.*

New Quest: Tower of Blight

Despite your Manatree's protections against this foul force, the Shadesblight has found a way into your home. What was once your mage tower has been corrupted into a malicious and dangerous entity that can only be expelled by fighting the threats within. Should you fail to do so in time, the Shadesblight will overcome the Manatree's blessing entirely and invade the whole of Brightsong.

Objectives:

- *Climb the Tower of Blight.*
- *Clear every floor in the Tower of Blight.*
- *Defeat the Voidwracked Boss.*
- *Protect all of Brightsong from the Shadesblight threat.*

Rewards:

- *Variable Experience and Sparks.*
- *Variable Manatree Experience.*

The Quest confirmed his worst fears. That the Shadesblight had found a way into his settlement. Like a trojan horse, it managed to get inside and establish itself before Hal or the Manatree could push it out.

Now, unless he did something about it, the Shadesblight would spread throughout Brightsong. Destroying everything he had managed to build and dooming the people who had followed him here.

Hal let himself drift to the ground, doing his best not to snarl in rage at the sudden turn of events. He darted to the base of the tower, staring at the clear line between the settlement and the tower's meager claim on the land.

His land.

The Manatree's shimmering barrier rose up, containing it, but it could not expel it. The tower had taken root like a cancer and would have to be excised.