

# Chapter 6

Aside from his Dragonfire, there was only one other thing Hal did not train openly. And that was his Flight skill.

Truthfully, he sucked at it. Not only because it was impossible to do until recently when he had regained all of his essences and was able splice them to his heart's content, but because it was just plain hard.

There was no getting around the difficulty of learning new limbs and how to balance himself midair. With so many other things on his plate, his Flight skill always suffered.

Clearly the Shard agreed, because despite relearning how to fly once more, he had yet to get past Level 9. However, he did learn one trick that was immensely useful.

One that he planned on using exclusively for his trip into the Abyss.

Hal ranged around the ruins of Cirta, keeping a close eye on the creatures that slinked in and out of the shadows. Monsters by the score were zeroing in on his position, but he was an oddity to them.

Something different to observe, perhaps to fight, but only if they were assured victory.

With every passing second, their numbers grew and eventually one of them would feel their numbers sufficient to challenge him.

Hal swept his senses through them, something he hadn't remembered being able to do nearly so easily before. It was all thanks to his Monster Core, which steeped him deeply into all facets of monsterkind.

Something was off about them, but Hal couldn't put his finger on it. There was a sameness to them. Maybe the same race?

*No, it's something else*, Hal thought to himself.

Try as he might, he couldn't figure out what.

It was odd to be utterly alone, and in what was effectively a graveyard, too. He was used to people being constantly around in Brightsong, or whenever he ventured off somewhere else, he had Besal in his head to keep him company.

Now there was nothing but silence. He tried not to worry about his friend, but it crept through anyway.

*Ah, there it is*, Hal thought, recognizing the structure he had entered the last time he was here. It brought him down in some sort of elevator from hell, a round platform where he had faced off against Renthor, a low-ranking Balesian mage.

Hal flexed his left arm. The Copper Kol'thil was now joined to his Gold Kol'thil, enhancing it and granting him far more power than he could have ever dreamed of.

But it had come at a terrible cost.

Now, however, he was finally freed of his debilitating *Kol'thil Bleed* and could use his Kol'thil to his heart's content without wounding himself. And thanks to the instruction by Trystal, the Founder with a Silver Kol'thil, Hal had learned how to properly harness magicite to fuel his Kol'thil sigils instead of relying on his own Experience points.

He shivered at the thought of so many Levels now lost because of his failure to understand there was a better way.

Unfortunately, the only magicite he now possessed was in the form of that small bracelet. Still, having to sacrifice the bigger chunk to take out Hirash was more than worth it.

Hal placed a hand over the Archmage's tower necklace. He could stop for the night, put up the tower and rest in relative comfort... but the thought brought him no relief.

He wanted this done as fast as possible. He could not wait any longer for answers.

Worse, he lacked the time to explore the tower. He did not know what awaited him inside its walls. Val and Trystal had told him that the tower was his in truth now, and that he was the proper owner.

But Hal did not think a man like Hirash would leave such a treasure unguarded. Even if he was dead, he seemed the sort of petty evil man that would make sure people were finding booby traps for years to come.

*How could I sleep in a place like that?* Hal thought to himself. *That'd just be asking to die.* Likely, Noth had only suggested doing so because she did not fully know the extent of Hirash's horrible magic.

*That, or she thinks that highly of me.* It was hard for him to wrap his head around that. Noth believed in him a bit too much, but he begrudgingly admitted to himself it was possible.

Splicing Dragon and Arcana essences, Hal formed translucent wings that emerged from his back. Unlike the fleshy variants he had used before, these were pure energy, giving him greater degrees of control at the cost of higher Spirit and mana drain.

Hal grinned to himself. Beastborne didn't have to be all about manifestations of twisted, corrupted powers.

Flexing his translucent wings temporarily, Hal stepped into the ruined church-like building from so long ago. His Darkvision skill allowed him to see plenty well in the gloom of the building.

There was a large circular depression at the far end where he had gone into the Abyss fighting Renthor. Now, of course, the platform was gone.

But he could glide down easily enough.

Even with his meager control over his wings, Hal was able to step off the edge and float like thistledown into the yawning darkness all around.

A typical man might hesitate before venturing into a bottomless pit. Hal harbored no such reservations. He had fought an artificial drake that revived no matter how many times he killed it and still won. He had gone to the moon and survived those high Level alien creatures. And he had been to the Abyss before. He would return again.

*I will have my answers*, he promised himself.

The sound of rushing water filled the cavern. Hal's Darkvision failed to illuminate much. The place was so massive there was no way his Darkvision was good enough to see into the depths.

It was significantly more boring than last time, but before long, he landed gently on a shattered pile of rubble. He looked around for Renthor's body, wondering if there would be any trace of it... but no.

There was nothing.

In fact, he felt a distinct *lack* of... anything.

Over the next few hours, Hal scoured the massive underground cavern. A few monsters crawled out, a creature with three giraffe-like heads that spat fire, and another slimy thing that oozed acid.

All were easily defeated with a few spells at range. Leaping into the air and using his Arcana and Dragon wings made dealing with monsters a relative breeze.

He just had to be sure he wasn't leaping too far out of his detection range. Relying on his monster senses was all well and fine, but they were not precise, like his eyes were.

Finally, Hal had to admit the truth of the matter. The Abyss was gone. This was just a vast, dark cavern, and nothing more.

It made zero sense. It had been *right here* not even a few months ago. And now it was utterly gone.

“Perhaps breaking the barrier allowed it to escape?” Hal mumbled to himself, kicking over a dark pile of rubble. “Now what do I do?”

Going back didn't seem like a good idea, but this place wouldn't be any brighter come day. He was deep underground, deep enough that flying out would be a massive pain. He had banked on leaving the Abyss with the aid of a Balesian's guidance, like before.

Only now was he realizing just how foolish he had been in thinking that he could waltz right back into the Abyss, get his answers, then walk out as if it was a CVS.

Hal pulled out the tower's chain and looked at the icon of the Archmage's tower in his hand. “Maybe it's not a bad idea to take a day to rest. Perhaps I could find something useful in you to help me search.”

Now that there was nothing to fight, and no dangers that Hal could sense, he felt bone tired. The weariness of being out in the cold for so long, and then the relative warmth of this deep cavern, was making him drowsy. The fatigue kept his frustration and anger over his setback at bay.

He could scout out the inside of the tower, check it for traps, and then rest.

“Seems as good an idea as any,” he said aloud.

All it took to summon the tower was to envision where it should go, and then apply a little mental shove while holding the charm. The underground space was certainly big enough to accommodate the structure.

There was a faint *plink*, then an ear-popping *whoosh* as the tower displaced hundreds of cubic feet of air in an eyeblink.

The tower, it seemed, glowed at night. Even without his Darkvision, it would have been easy to spot. A crystal scone flanked each side of the arched wooden door, beckoning Hal forward.

It spoke volumes of Hirash's pigheaded character. It practically begged to be attacked.

Dismissing his wings, Hal gingerly pressed a hand to the door handle. Nothing shocked, bit, or burned him, which was a good sign.

The next few minutes were a tense affair of Hal checking as thoroughly as his senses allowed for any traps. The door itself posed none that he could find. But there were quite a few just inside the entryway.

His investigation skill was showing its merits.

*Your Investigation Skill has risen to Level 19.*

*+1% Investigation speed.*

*+2% Investigation success.*

Hal's eyes popped open at that. He hadn't received an Investigation skill increase in... well, a very long time.

"I've been cooped up too long," he thought, feeling the tingling thrill of excitement that always came with another Skill Level.

One trap was designed to spray acid on its victim, presumably melting them, but Hal's defenses were high enough that it wouldn't have done much more than annoy him.

In fact, many of the traps seemed designed for people who were in their 30s or lower. Almost as if Hirash had designed them a long time ago and decided they were good enough.

Another hour or two yielded only one more trap, a fire trap tied to a tantalizing book on the third row of a bookshelf.

It wasn't titled salaciously, nothing like *Hirash's Diary*, or anything like that. But to the keen-eyed observer, it looked like it had been used more recently than anything else and then hastily stuffed back into place.

Of course, that was the point.

After disarming the trap, Hal did one more sweep but found nothing else. He breathed a sigh of relief.

The first floor of the tower was less cozy than he would have liked, but it was comfortable. Far more comfortable than being out in that wide open cavern. While he could camp out there, it wouldn't be relatively safe like inside this tower.

Crystal lanterns dotted the walls, which were not remotely curved as Hal would have expected from a circular tower.

He had expected it to be significantly larger inside, however. It was a *magic* tower. Anything else would just be disappointing. Still, he didn't expect the interior to be more than twice the external size.

It was far, far vaster than that.

Its exterior was perhaps twenty feet in diameter, but the interior was... sprawling was the only word that came to mind.

The first floor itself had seven different rooms, all of them rather spartan and designed for entertainment or entry purposes. There were rooms for jackets and coats, thankfully a bathroom with *real running hot and cold water*, as well as a host of other amenities that Hal had nearly forgotten about.

No bedrooms, though Hal wasn't surprised about that. There was a large sofa he could curl up on. Unlike a normal tower where people respected the laws of physics, there were no stairs in Hirash's tower.

There was a circular platform engraved with so many golden sigils that they danced and hurt Hal's head whenever he stared at them too long. They looked faintly like Kol'thil Sigils, but none that he recognized.

And no matter how long he stared at them, he couldn't tease out their meaning or—and he knew this was a long shot—learn any new Sigils from them.

The only thing he knew about them, without a shadow of a doubt, was that they were to go up and down the floors of the tower.

Sequestered in a side room with the door shut and braced, Hal curled up on the sofa and drifted off to sleep. In the morning, he would have to head back to Brightsong, having wasted his time on a wild goose chase.