

# CHAPTER 3

Death. Every religion, every people, no matter the world, seemed to have a different idea about what happens once a person dies. But what if that person doesn't have a soul of their own?

That was the question the creature known as Besal often found himself asking himself in the quiet moments between disasters. Back when he was bound to Hal, he thought that they would be inseparable. He was not his own self, but a part of Hal. Birthed, perhaps, by caustic Outsider means, but a part of him all the same.

They would go to the same destination.

What would happen if he should perish but Hal survived?

It was a question that Besal hated to think about, but one that constantly pressed in on his mind. He was a nascent being, a Khaeros that should never have adopted so much of the man's personality. But there it was. He had become something more than a mere Beast. Even the moniker of Khaeros did not seem appropriate any longer.

He saw how that purple Khaeros fought. That thing was wild, savage, but leashed. Besal had no such leash, not in a long time. Hal trusted him, and that trust created something in Besal that he never thought possible.

Camaraderie.

"Are you just going to pout in there all day?" asked a familiar—and infuriating—voice.

*I'm not dead, Besal thought. At least, I don't think I am. But I can't feel Hal at all....*

"I know you're awake," Luda said. Insistent pressure on Besal told him that she was doing some more of her strange magic.

Besal finally relented and opened his eyes. Though the feeling was wholly unlike anything he had known. He did not have eyelids, nor eyes, not in the traditional sense. And yet... as he somehow managed to "open" them, he felt like awakening for the first time.

Like when he reached a bond with Hal that allowed him to form his own thoughts, free of Hal's memories, yet free from the Great One's influence as well. It was a sense of *self*. He felt that again, stronger.

"There you go," Luda said. There was just the faintest tremor to her voice, as if she wasn't wholly sure whatever she was doing would work. "How do you feel?"

Besal's vision swam before him. He... was alive? That should not have been a question, and yet it was. He felt... thin. Stretched. Like a shadow in twilight. Barely there.

Reaching out an arm, the dark, faint outline resolved in his watery vision. The walls and flooring shimmered into focus. He was in the Fathomways... but that was impossible.

How had Luda taken him here? She had never been here before.

So many questions.

"Why?" Besal rasped. His voice felt different. Thin and barely there, like the rest of his form, but still different in a way he could not put a claw on.

"Why did I save you?" Luda asked, leaning back onto her palms. She was sitting with her legs crossed, her skirts pooled around her. There was something different about her eyes too, wasn't there?

"No," Besal said, resisting the urge to rub at his eyes as he had seen Hal do so often. He had never needed to rub his eyes before. His eyes were made out of an admixture of Strain and mana, they weren't physical things. "Tell me why I shouldn't kill you for what you did."

"So the dog has some bite in him," she said with a wry twist to her lips.

Besal snarled at her, but he also knew there was a new... limitation he had not felt before. He was weak, and an unfamiliar source of power pulsed within him like a heartbeat. He was not used to the odd sensation. Always, there had been a wellspring of dark power to draw from.

He could no longer feel it.

"Calm yourself, Besal," Luda said, holding up one of those river stones she had painted with symbols. "I see you remember this. Good." She twisted it around to show the cracks spreading out. It looked like a windshield somebody had chucked a brick at, cracked all over but somehow still whole.

Besal felt a spike of dread pin him to the spot. That was new as well. He was not afraid of death. Death was something that happened to *other people*. He was not a person, so death itself should hold no dominion over him. Except... that was the very same troubling question he had asked himself.

He never found an answer.

“Good,” Luda said. She set the rock down. “You see the problem then. We need to find you another vessel until you’re whole. You’re weaker than an owlkitten right now, and though I’m sure you’d love nothing more than to tear out my throat, you must believe that I want to help you.”

“I need to do no such thing.” Besal looked around the space. This was not a familiar section of the Fathomways. Even when he was exploring at Hal’s behest, he had not gone this far. “Where are we?”

Luda raised a finger. “I will answer you truthfully, on two conditions.”

“Humans and your compromises. Very well, out with them.”

“First, that you will swear an oath to me—a *binding* oath—that you will not divulge anything of what I am about to share with you until I give you leave to do so.”

“Tall order.”

Luda stood up and smoothed her skirts. “The second, that you will agree to perform a task for me.”

“No.”

“You have not heard what the task is,” Luda pointed out. “You have adopted much of Hal’s stubbornness.”

“A trait we shared long before we made amends. I will not agree to hide your secrets. I could return to Hal in an eyeblink and tell him everything. What would he think of your actions that endangered not only himself, but all of Brightsong? He has a soft place in his heart for you—though I can’t fathom why—but I doubt it is large enough for shelter you from his wrath.”

“Go on then,” Luda said with a smirk. “Try it.”

Besal shut his eyes. *Such a strange sensation*. He willed himself to return to Hal with all of his might.

Nothing happened.

It was not like before where there seemed to be some sort of wall around Hal, a blockage that covered the path toward Hal. Now it felt as if... as if there was no path. Nothing. He was alone.

Repressing a shudder, Besal met Luda's gaze and rose to his own feet, though that didn't quite feel right. As soon as he looked down, he found out why.

The rest of his body was coming out of one of those runic stones like a wisp of smoke that flowed into the air and formed the upper half of a body. "What have you done to me?"

"I *saved you*," Luda said. "I believe we've already been over that. You would kill me for saving you. For giving you the life that no Khaeros has ever known. You want to be shackled to Hal again?" Luda's pale child-like face looked so odd with that wry doubting expression.

Did he want it?

Hal was his other half. In a way, Hal was both father and brother. He loved him, he realized, though he also yearned to be his own person. Could he ever be different while being within Hal?

At different times in their relationship, they had both taken control of that one body. What would it be like if they were truly separate? Would that mean Besal had a soul? Could he die the final death?

Despite his concerns over the question for which he still had no answer, he felt a thrill of possibility.

Hal... he would always love him. How could you not love a part of yourself? But they were different. And always Hal was in control. What would it be like if... Besal had his own agency?

"I see you're finally understanding the gravity of your situation," Luda said. "Of what *I* granted you."

"Perhaps," Besal said guardedly.

"Then maybe you would like to rethink your answer?"

"I will do nothing that will harm Hal or his family," Besal said without thinking. He was still surprised he felt that so strongly.

“Done. I vow that nothing you do will directly endanger Hal, Brightsong, or his family as you have put it.” Luda crossed her arms beneath her small chest. “You could even say that *not* doing what I ask will endanger them.”

Besal did not have the suspicions that Hal did, he knew there was something in the way she spoke the words that might allow her to slip out of their agreement, but he could not see it. “Then I agree.”

Luda snapped her fingers. A swirl of shadowy flame blossomed between them, resolving into a half-curved parchment with a crimson quill floating nearby.

“A contract?” Besal asked. Though it looked nothing like what Hal had seen on Earth. Those were white, usually a stack of pages, and very straight.

“Yes, you may read it,” Luda said. “If you like. It says only what we have already agreed to. This will bind us into an oath—not the sort of Oath an Oathbringer might be able to facilitate, nobody has seen of one of *those* in a long time—that will keep us from betraying the other. All very above-board.”

Besal paused, his wispy hand half outstretched to the parchment. She did not know Hal had the Oathbringer Class? Well, at least the man managed to keep *something* secret. Though shouldn't Luda know it? It was hardly a secret, though Hal did not openly flaunt, didn't he have an Oath with the people of Brightsong or something?

Besal hardly paid any attention to anything Hal did outside of Beastborne. Nothing else mattered. Beastborne was everything. It was all that Besal knew of before becoming... named.

He frowned and took hold of the parchment. It took him three tries before his hands solidified enough for him to grasp it. Reading it over, he saw that she was telling the truth.

Once again, he found himself reaching out to Hal, to his memories, his experiences... and found nothing. Only his own memories of Hal's thoughts and experiences lingered. Like a pale shadow of a shadow.

There was no wellspring of knowledge. No *life* to draw from.

If Luda wanted to betray him by using word trickery, she would have an easy time of it. He made a show of rereading a few sections just to watch her out of the corner of his vision. She never seemed bothered by his delaying.

*What choice do I really have?*

Besides, he could always rip her throat out later. One betrayal deserved another.

Besal grasped the quill. It only took him two tries. He began to scrawl Hal's name before he realized what he was doing. He stopped, shifted the stroke he was making, and made an awkward signature of his name. The name that would set him apart from Hal.

Luda signed with a flourish. Besal watched her with a frown. Or as near as he could make of one. "That's not your name," he pointed out. "I may not be an expert on letters, but I know that does not spell 'Luda.'"

The red-haired child-like girl smiled at him and with another snap of her fingers, the contract rolled up and disappeared into a flare of shadowy flame. She laughed, but it was a full-bodied laugh of somebody else, not a child. "And here I thought I would have to lead you to this by the nose," she said with another peal of laughter.

"What game are you playing, Luda?" Besal snarled.

"No games, Besal," Luda said, making several quick motions with her fingers. Spellcasting? "And my name is not Luda." Her form *shimmered* like a heat haze.

Besal recalled a memory of Hal's. The way the air rippled over the asphalt in the middle of summer. He shoved it aside, balling what remained of his fists.

'Luda' stretched well beyond her diminutive height. Her skin darkened until it resembled coal. Her features stretched and heightened until she towered over her previous form. She was not a girl like Luda, but a full-grown woman with the lean curves of an elf, though her skin was different.

Hal had known a name for this people, though Besal could not remember it himself. He knew the man knew, just like the man knew how to tell when milk was spoiled and other useless trivia like how many seasons of a TV show there were.

Before long, the lean form of a tall elf stood before him, eyes ablaze with mirth. Her dark clothes were wrapped tight to her slender frame, crossing over her ample chest and hugging her waist. He had a vague idea that it resembled some sort of Greek dress, though it ended halfway up her slender thighs.

She wore sandals with straps that crisscrossed up and over her calves, mirroring the straps of dark brown material that covered her hands and up her forearms. “Better, no?” she asked.

“You are not Luda.”

“Of course I am,” the woman said, feigning hurt and putting a hand to her chest. She let another peal of womanly laughter fill the space. “Oh, fine! You’re worse than my brother sometimes. So formal. So *serious*. You may call me—”

“Your *real* name,” Besal said. He could see the lie forming on her lip. “You said you would be truthful with me. I agreed to your terms. I want nothing but the truth from you.”

“My, you are insistent, aren’t you?” The woman made a flourish with her arms and gave a bow with her arms spread wide. “You may call me Ralst.”

Besal nodded. “Have you always been...?” He motioned, though his arm was even thinner and fainter than before.

Ralst wagged her finger admonishingly at him. “Tut-tut! A girl needs to have *some* mystery. Besides, you are not long for this world if we stand here chatting like a pack of mercenaries on late-night guard duty. You want to live?”

“Does that need answering?” Besal asked wryly.

“You would be surprised.” Ralst tapped her foot impatiently. “I don’t usually think these things so far ahead. Let’s see... you’re going to need a sturdier vessel. One that you can grow from but one that you can inhabit without too much trouble.”

“How do you know so much about this?” Besal asked. “I mean... you are not a Beastborne. I sense no corruption in you.”

“Let’s just say I had a good teacher. How I learned it doesn’t matter, yeah?”

Hal would not have agreed to that, but Besal saw the logic in it. Hal would likely question a hand reaching out to haul him out of the freezing sea. That was not Besal. “Very well. Where do we begin?”

Ralst clapped her hands together, showing a surprising amount of girlish excitement. “Oh, this is going to be so much *fun!*”

