

# CHAPTER 11

Hal groaned as he struggled to the surface of consciousness.

*This is almost nostalgic, isn't it, Besal? Constantly passing out, or getting knocked out, it reminds me of the... the...*

The first few days he was on Aldim.

And now, with the silence screaming in his head, Hal realized just how much he was reminded of that time.

Alone, scared, bewildered, and utterly defenseless.

At least one or two of those had changed, but being alone with his own thoughts was, quite frankly, unsettling.

He had never liked his thoughts at the best of times back on Earth, and now that he had gotten used to a friend to speak to during his darker moments... that connection was severed.

It felt like a phantom limb. He could *swear* that Besal was still there.

*Where are you?*

The answering silence nearly broke his heart, but Hal reminded himself that Besal would snarl and laugh at him—often at the same time—to see the way he was mourning his Khaeros.

*Wherever you are, I'll find you, Hal vowed. I don't know how long it'll take, but we'll see each other again.*

Even if it was just to say goodbye.

“Oh look,” Naitese said, lifting her head and rising to all fours. “The human has awakened from his nap. Are you feeling better? Perhaps you would like a teddy bear to hold?”

Hal noticed, belatedly, that his head was cradled by a lumpy pillow, and he was covered by a thick blanket. *What the—?*

As Naitese teased him, her form shrank down to that of a young woman's with silvery-white hair and chips of ice for eyes. "My father has taken up enough of your time, and clearly you are lacking in the most basic of respects. You have seen the failings of using Goldflame, yes?"

"Goldflame?" Hal said, standing. "The Dragonfire?"

Looking over her shoulder, Naitese straightened her loose-fitted kimono with one shoulder left bare. Her pale skin almost glowed in the moonlight, which was the first that Hal realized the daylight was gone. "Perhaps you are right, father. Maybe I can teach him the ways of the Whiteflame."

*I really am out of it.* To Naitese, he said, "I am eager to learn," while he bowed stiffly.

Placing a fist on her hip, Naitese looked him up and down. "If only you managed to show that respect the first time we met, perhaps we would be on better terms."

Hal lifted his head and smiled. "Each day is a new day."

"Not new enough," she said with a snort. "Very well, this is how we will do things. I will tell you what to do, and you will do it. I will walk you through the difficult things and knowing your... limitations—" Which was code for not being a dragon. "—I will walk you through nearly everything unless you perform admirably. Unlike my father, I will not allow you to run before you can walk. Whiteflame is more sinister than Goldflame by a large margin."

Hal mirrored Naitese's posture as she adopted a standing cycling position with the knuckles of one fist interlocked with the other. "Noble Gold Dragonfire and Tyrant White Dragonfire?"

"Precisely," she said, watching him critically. "Goldflame while powerful, is wild and aggressive. Whiteflame, however, is patient. It will bide its time, attacking you when you are—"

Hal heard the inflection in her voice and set his feet wider apart as she rushed forward mid-sentence. She lashed out with two quick punches. Hal swiped one out of the way and leaned aside away from the other.

Naitese danced away just as Hal's reaction turned the lean to an uppercut that narrowly missed her chin. "—least expecting it," she continued. "Very good. You must be ready to wrest control back at a moment's notice. You cannot keep your guard up as you would with Goldflame."

“Why are they so different?” Hal wondered aloud.

“Why are the sun and moon different?” She put up a long finger-nailed hand that resembled talons of ice. “I did not ask you to answer the question!”

Hal begrudgingly clamped his mouth shut.

Once it was obvious he wasn't going to talk, Naitese continued, resuming her previous pose with a sharp glance at Hal. “I have been informed that you are aware of the general Predator and Prey relationship between monsters and greater creatures, yes?”

She waited just long enough for Hal to nod before continuing, “Then you will not be surprised to learn that dragons are far more complex than that. For instance, Goldflame is considered Stellar alignment. It is a rising sort of power.”

“Rising?”

Naitese rolled her eyes. “You know, enhancing. Stellar alignment magicks are like that, they are flashy and wild. Not at all a poor choice for Dragonfire.” She gave a slight nod toward her slumbering father. “Noble Golds have one of the strongest Stellar alignments. Consequently, Tyrant Whites have one of the stronger Temporal alignments.”

“I didn't notice any time-shifting abilities when we fought,” Hal pointed out with a grin. *I'm pretty sure I would have noticed* that.

Naitese frowned. “I... was not able to use the full breadth of my abilities at the time. You were lucky to face me when I was so weakened. I am more than willing to tolerate a rematch when we are both at sufficient strength.”

Hal congratulated himself on keeping a straight face as he said, “I would consider it an excellent teaching moment.”

Although, how many teaching moments he could provide Naitese before she actually took to the lesson was anybody's guess.

Naitese leveled a look at him, but she was clearly no expert on human emotions. She nodded, as if that was an acceptable answer.

“That being said,” Naitese continued. “Take note of how I cycle. Feel the way the Whiteflame centers itself in my core and condenses the surrounding ambient life of the world into my core. Temporal powers such as Whiteflame are capable of coalescing to a far greater extent than any other. You can use

this in a variety of ways, from enhancing your cycling, to slowing the loss of blood or minimizing an injury for a time.”

“I can actually slow my own death?” Hal asked, incredulous.

“I will gladly show you how to do this later.” She gave him a vicious, shark-like smile, or was it dragon-like? Whatever it was, it was full of malice. “And I will relish that day. For now, however, we will focus purely on the lowest of uses for Whiteflame, and that is cycling.”

As much as Hal just wanted her to attack him and get it over with so he could throw her to the ground, he realized that she was actually trying to teach him.

Sure, it was in her particular way that was as grating as nails on a chalkboard at times, but she was making an effort.

He could do the same.

*Match her energy, Hal thought. If she gives us positivity, we'll give it back. And when she decides to bully us, we'll dish it right back.*

Surprisingly, Naitese decided that moment to take her mentorship seriously. She rattled off a series of commands that had to be explained in a way that Hal could understand.

He was not born with a core, and his understanding of cycling was, apparently, laughable. Even with help from Komachi, he barely understood what he had been doing.

“I pull it from the *air*?”

Naitese sighed, clearly regretting having to explain. “Yes, Hal. Where do you think Spirit comes from? Or mana for that matter! It all comes from the *Shard*. You are connected to it, as all of us are. Therefore, you pull it from nature.”

“You’re telling me Spirit is basically The Force.”

“I don’t know what that is,” Naitese said.

In the distance, Orrittam cracked open an eye and snickered. It sounded like a minivan revving its engine.

Hal, it appeared, was the worst sort of student. He understood several of the more advanced concepts, but the most basic and fundamental were

completely lost on him. She had to explain things that, to a dragon, was like explaining that the sun rises in the west and sets in the east.

Something completely, *painfully*, obvious. And yet things like cycling power to a specific limb to empower it or add an effect needed zero explanation.

Yet she had to explain the difference between Spirit, mana, and aether more than once until he understood it. Despite that, he didn't fully grasp the nuances until much later.

Once the core—no pun intended—of cycling was explained in-depth to Hal, he realized how stupid he must have seemed before. With his enhanced understanding, he could subtly prod the ambient mana around him to test its concentration and alignment.

Unsurprisingly, the Shiverglades was awash with ice aether, but a great deal of life aether as well. Most importantly, however, was the *concentration* of aether.

It was startlingly massive.

*If only I had the Aetherochemistry cauldron down here,* Hal thought to himself. *I remember making Breath of Life Aether and Soul Bind Aether on Hemel to recreate those stones of air.*

In the Shiverglades, he would have access to concentrations of aether that were staggering compared to what he had on Hemel, but the crafting station as it were, was up on a *friggin' moon*.

So the choice was between an absolutely amazing crafting station that exponentially amplified his new Aetherochemistry crafting Skill, but the ambient aether was thinner than a narcissist's skin, and an area that was absolutely *dripping* with aether but had no crafting station.

Though Hal had not been able to sense—or even known how, really—back on Hemel, he imagined that a desolate moon probably didn't have much in the way of aether density.

It certainly lacked oxygen density.

While it had taken him a considerable amount of time to get the basics down, when Naitese finally started with the practical aspect of cycling with Whiteflame, Hal was ready to leap into it.

He could tell she was taking this seriously because she hadn't bothered to sucker punch him for the last hour.

Hal visualized pulling the streaking pale Dragonfire into his core. Unlike Goldflame, Whiteflame felt cold and... *sparkly* within his core. It was like dancing ice, and when he opened himself up to the rich ambient aether of the Shiverglades, Hal didn't need Naitese's instructions anymore.

Whether it was instinct, intuition, or sheer brazen idiocy, Hal shaped the Whiteflame... though he couldn't say how he did it. It was like extending his hand and grabbing something while blind. He was doing everything by feel... but it seemed right.

Naitese surely wasn't berating him, which was a good sign.

As Hal *pulled* on the ambient aether, the Whiteflame coalesced the energy into his core and filtered it into Spirit. How aether and Spirit were connected continued to be a source of confusion for Hal.

Naitese, being... well, *Naitese*, had struggled to explain it to his satisfaction. Eventually she had told him, "If you were to think of it like... blood you can take from another, you would not be too stupid or far off. Spirit is unique to you like blood, you cannot put water into your veins and call it blood. It is, in a sense, tied to you. Your Spirit is yours."

"So nobody can drain my Spirit and use it?" Hal asked while coalescing aether into his core. While his Monster Core was far from full, his rest had recovered more than half. The remaining filled up swiftly as Hal focused on the process while trying to grapple with Naitese's poor explanation.

"Of course, they can! There are even Spirit vamp—" Naitese shook her head. "For the purposes of our training, let us simply say that it is like blood, yes? I put blood into you from another human, and you will use it, subtly changing it so that you can subsist off of it, yes?"

Hal stared at her. He was far from brilliant, but even he knew that was not how blood transfusions worked and he said as much.

Naitese looked as if he was being intentionally difficult. "It is energy you use, understand? Aether is *wild* energy. It has types and alignments, but it belongs to nobody. Mana is *organized* energy. It is generally transferrable and many people across the Shards use mana as a primary magical catalyst. Spirit is *personal* energy. It is aether that has been tied to you."

“So... it’s like Hal aether,” he said. “Similar to how there’s ice aether, life aether, etcetera?”

Naitese started and looked skeptically at him as if he had been gently winding her up this entire time. “Yes... yes. I would say that is an apt analogy.”

“I told you he was quick,” Orrittam said behind them.

Still in the form of a young woman, Naitese stiffened but refused to turn around to address her father. “Very well, Hal,” she said. “You seem to have grasped the basic concept. Now, we will work on emptying your core so you can do it again.”

“Wouldn’t it make more sense for me to keep cycling even while full to... I don’t know, get used to it? It’s not exactly *easy*.”

Naitese shrugged. “I did not realize you wanted to have your hand held the entire way. You can cycle in this manner whenever you choose, you do not need me to guide you through it. What you *do* need, however, is a crash course in selective triage. Cycling while you are injured or drained is very different, and you must learn where to direct your Spirit first.

“Any idiot can cycle into their core and allow the natural motion of the core and their channels to spread out the energy from there. That is not worth my time. And if we are to fulfill this silly Oath of yours, then I will at least make sure you are a pupil that I am not ashamed of, are we understood?”

Naitese grinned and attacked.

Hal was ready for it, but his core was not. He had only just learned how to use Whiteflame, turning it off was... not part of the curriculum. As he flailed about trying to get his core sorted, Naitese snapped up the distance between them in an eye blink.

The last thing Hal saw before his vision washed with white was a dainty fist swinging through the air at eye-level.