

CHAPTER 12

Hal sailed through the air, pain blinding him for a moment. As so often seemed the case, Hal reacted purely on instinct. He Spliced eldritch essence and... did something with Goldflame to vent a massive amount of blood-red eldritch essence from his back.

Acting like a counterbalance, the burst of essence halted his backward momentum. A flaring burst of Noble Gold Dragonfire erupted to his right. Orrittam rose to his full height, maw still smoldering. “Remember the rules, Hal,” he intoned. “Dragonfire only.”

Hal alighted on the ground so softly that he wondered if he was dreaming. “Right. My mistake.” He released the essence with a forlorn sense of loss.

I need to remember how I did that.

Naitese, however, had broken no rule and was not wont to hold herself back in any case.

She came at him with all the fury of a Tyrant White in the small—compared to a dragon, in any case—compact form of a woman.

Hal fumbled for Goldflame, kindling it with thoughts of hope, but by the time he found something suitable, Naitese had sunk her fist into his gut, destroying any attempts at concentration.

Doubling over, Hal wheezed as the air was thrust from his lungs, but he knew well enough by now not to do what your opponent thought you should. Instead of trying to catch his breath, the Beastborne continued the forward momentum, forcing Naitese to back away or support him with her fist.

That moment of confusion was all Hal needed to drop fully to the ground and twist, sweeping her legs out from under her.

Hal staggered back, one hand to his middle. With just some basic clothing on, he didn't even have the benefit of the weakest armor.

That hurt, he thought, taking a quick look at his HP. Despite her strength, Naitese had barely taken 40 points off his HP. And with roughly 800

HP to his name—minus the various bonuses from Splicing and equipment like his ring—that loss was nothing.

Not so long ago I would have passed out from that single hit. As Naitese rose, kicking her legs like a windmill to spin about and impressively flip to her feet, Hal laughed as he adopted a fighting pose. *This is a lot more fun than I thought it would be.*

Naitese glanced at his sword so close to Hal that he could have easily scooped it up and attacked before she closed the distance. Hal patently ignored [Fetter] nearby on the ground.

Until Naitese used something more than hands and feet, he wasn't going to escalate further.

Hal's experience with bareknuckle brawling was limited, but the basics of battle had been hammered into him, one overwhelming foe at a time.

As Naitese came at him, all icy rage and flying fists, he relied instead on the aspect of Tyrant rage to fuel the icy Whiteflame as he threaded Spirit where it was needed for that extra burst of speed.

The Whiteflame helped him to draw on more of his Spirit, condensing it when and where he needed it. Moving it out of his core, Hal found he could split up the Whiteflame—though once seemed to be his limit—sending it into two different locations to draw Spirit and concentrate it there.

Unfortunately, the unfamiliarity with the added strength made him feel as if he was getting used to [Convergence] for the first time all over again. You would have been forgiven for thinking that the two would work wondrously together.

And perhaps they could, with training and practice, but Hal the first few times Hal tried it, he jerked around the glade like a flea hopping this way and that way.

More times than not he almost fell over. Only the fact that he was so far from Naitese so suddenly saved him from getting pummeled into the ground.

As it was, it was a struggle to control his body, let alone put up any actual resistance. Naitese taunted him, "Running away, are you? I thought you were some big bad Beastborne? A paragon of strength and determination! Where is your bravery now?"

Dropping [Convergence], Hal opted to contend with one body-altering power at a time. Whiteflame crystallizing in his legs, Hal leaped for Naitese. They collided with a bone-rattling *thunk*.

The pair lashed out with legs, knees, fists, elbows, as they fell to the ground and rolled apart, each sporting new bruises.

For some reason Hal didn't understand, he couldn't recall ever getting anything like Hand-to-Hand Skill. With magic, and ample supply of weaponry, it had seemed unnecessary.

After all, what use would you have to use your fists if you had a sword? And if you somehow lost it, well he had magic, didn't he?

No amount of training—limited though it was—ever seemed to grant him the Skill. Which... was odd, wasn't it?

He was used to being guided by the imparted knowledge of a Skill, and in this, he felt completely adrift. Naitese came at him, leaping through the air and cocking back her fist.

Hal tumbled forward, beneath her as she hit the ground, her fist sinking up to the wrist as earth sprayed across the air. Hal twisted about and, with a Whiteflame-empowered kick, sent the lean woman tumbling forward.

I'm starting to get a feel for this.

Which was precisely when Naitese, dirt staining her clothing and face, turned with rage twisting her features as she opened her mouth and let loose a frigid blast of Whiteflame.

Grass crackled and snapped as the stream of cold fire flooded the space between them. The air tinkled with tiny motes of diamond dust.

Hal, caught sight of a dark-haired beauty spying on the match from the edge of the forest. He shouldn't have been able to see her, not unless she wanted him to, and the love-filled image of Noth filled Hal with so much hope for the future that he didn't even realize he had wielded Goldflame until the answering bar of aurum light pierced and split Naitese's Whiteflame in half.

The Whiteflame parted around Hal, though he still felt his clothing crackle and frost over as it passed more than a foot away from him.

Never one to waste time exploiting an opening, Hal surged forward with Goldflame burning his limbs. It was as unlike to Whiteflame as either was to [Convergence].

Unfortunately, his Spirit was still so weak that by the time he reached the smoldering Naitese, icy scales covering her smoking arms crossed in front of herself, Hal's core was nearly tapped.

Still, pushing himself well beyond his limits was something of a staple, and Hal kicked out all the same just as Naitese's head jerked up with a double dose of shock.

Thrust back with comical force, the Tyrant White slammed into a nearby tree on the border of the glade, shaking it with such force that Hal could feel its roots tremble through the ground.

Naitese slumped down, the scales on her arms vanishing as she slid into unconsciousness.

You have defeated [Naitese (Human Form) / Lv.??]

You gain 1,250 Experience Points

You earn 300 Sparks.

Your Goldflame (Noble Gold Dragonfire) has graduated to Copper Rank.

Increased Dragonfire Wieldance (Lesser).

Decreased Dragonfire Spirit Consumption (Minor).

Your Whiteflame (Tyrant White Dragonfire) has graduated to Copper Rank.

Increased Dragonfire Wieldance (Major).

Increased Dragonfire Aether Condensation (Inferior).

Hal staggered over to Naitese, taking personal stock as he grappled with Goldflame burning the last dregs of his Spirit. He tried in vain to swap it with Whiteflame, but the two only produced a painful sensation like the worst sort of heartburn in the world.

Aggressively shunting the Goldflame did nothing as Hal dropped to his knees as the weakness of his draining Monster Core threatened to drag him into the depths of unconsciousness.

No! I can do this. Think! Whiteflame responds to force, but it requires anger to fuel it. Goldflame fights against me....

That was it.

Hal took a deep, shaky breath, and caught himself on his palms as he fell forward. On hands and knees, he stilled his roiling thoughts and emotions, allowing a space for the Goldflame to exit his core without pushing on it.

In the same vein as summoning Dragonfire, the Goldflame exited to once more swirl around his Monster Core. Only then did Hal pull in Whiteflame to furiously condense the thick ambient aether into Spirit and precipitate it into his core.

Though all of this took only a few seconds, it was long enough for Naitese to come back to consciousness. Hal, however, was in no position to put up a fight. He had cashed a check and his body was now paying for it.

With interest.

Excessively draining his Monster Core felt even worse than the [Kol'thil Bleed]. It didn't *hurt* as much, but it was an insidious weakness that left him completely defenseless.

One of these days, Hal thought, slowly getting one foot beneath himself, I'll stop having to learn how to limit myself and just be able to master something for once.

Naitese loomed over him, but surprisingly her normal sneer was nowhere to be seen. Instead, she extended a hand.

Hal clasped it gladly as she pulled him to his feet.

Something had changed after that fight, though Hal couldn't put his finger on what it was exactly.