

# CHAPTER 53

There was little else better than mimic essence for conducting mana. It worked with low resistance, losing practically none of the mana introduced no matter how far away the source was, and was easy for Hal to produce.

It was a poor building material, despite its appearance, but if Hal could make the bone blanks thin enough, he could effectively create wires with it.

“That should not be possible,” Hamrin told him as he watched the impossible happen before his eyes. “There is usually enough transmission loss that the conduits need to be thick or made entirely out of crystal, which—as you very well know—has a tendency to crack and be very brittle. Not the best when employed on a farm.”

“Why do you need these on a farm, anyway?” Hal asked, working at the second stage of Bonecrafting, refinement. He shaped the mimic bone blank into a series of thin branching wires about as thick as a coaxial cable back home.

“I specialize in advanced growth procedures,” Hamrin told him. “Not that many people in the Tower cared.” He gave Hal a half-shrug. “If I had even half the resources you’ve given me, I could have done so much for the Tower.”

“Don’t beat yourself up,” Hal told him. “You’ll make great things here and the people who come to Brightsong escaping the oppression of Rinbast will have you to thank for their full bellies.”

*Provided this works,* Hal thought to himself.

Hamrin watched with fascination as Hal continued Bonecrafting in front of him. “You see, most everything is made up of mana. It is a part of everything and I started to wonder, well the provinces with the greatest yields are those with high amounts of ambient mana, right? So what would happen if we pumped in mana?”

“And what did happen?”

“The yields exploded!” Hamrin was nearly jumping up and down while seated, which was quite the accomplishment all things considered. “Of course, some spoiled and others mutated into grisly creations that should not be spoken of.”

“What?” Hal looked up, nearly messing up the wire-making process he was designing. He cursed and looked back down.

“You see, some mana types aren’t compatible with others,” Hamrin explained sheepishly, all excitement gone. “We had thought that it was just the amount of mana, but the type matters as well. You have bonuses and maluses based on what mana types the plant has. Get that mixture right, and you triple or quadruple yields with very little overhead. Get it wrong... and you make monsters.”

“Hold on,” Hal said. “Are you saying you can *create monsters* by mixing mana and plants?”

“Something like that, yes. It is a bit... simplified, but that is the broad strokes.”

Hal pushed away the thoughts of a monster farm for a later discussion. Once Hamrin had proved himself at the very least. That could be *incredibly* useful for Brightsong, especially if they could farm specific monsters.

Not that Hal was willing to do so inside the safety of Brightsong’s walls. But there was a limit to how far you could bring up somebody with low levels. Dungeons were good because the risk was minimal. If you were defeated in a Dungeon, you got spat out.

It was still traumatic, but you didn’t *die*.

However, the Shiverglades was a place filled with powerful monsters, and getting the Levels to match up properly was going to be a pain if they ever gained more people. Having something like a monster farm to create weak and mindless creatures to train up on was an excellent idea for later.

For now, Hal said, “And if you have the right amounts, you can make plants grow even in the dead of winter?”

“Oh, that’s easy!” Hamrin folded his hands atop the table, much more comfortable with this line of questioning. “We’ve been able to make plants grow during the coldest weather for decades and decades. It’s a rather simple process, though it does use up a good bit of mana.”

“How much?” Hal asked worriedly. He wasn’t sure how they would recharge the mana batteries yet, but if he could create them to accept anybody’s mana and make it neutral, then anybody could “donate” mana at any time.

“Depends on the size of the field. If you mean a full farm like the ones we have here? Probably about a 100MP a day, give or take a few points.”

“That’s all?”

“It’s a very simple process,” Hamrin told him. “In fact, we could probably drop that by another quarter or so if your... er, material there, is as good as you say. I mean no disrespect, but I need to see this to be certain we can use it.”

“As soon as I’m done here, we’ll give it a trial run at the farm,” Hal told him. “I’ll personally keep it topped up with mana.”

Realizing what he had just signed himself up for, Hamrin nodded mutely. It took him a few moments to find his voice. “I didn’t mean to imply that—”

Hal stopped him with a shake of his head. “I’m not doing anything I don’t want to do, Hamrin. I haven’t been out to see the farms, they’re outside of the walls because of the land they require and I would like to visit them. Which reminds me, why don’t you live at one of them?”

The Gourmage shrugged his shoulders and hunched a little as if trying to appear smaller than he was. It was a hard sell with his gangly frame. “I’m not a farmer,” he said sulkily. “I can’t do all the hard labor that it takes to run a farm. I can optimize it, create new strains, but the actual work of harvesting and planting and watering is beyond me.”

“So you’d manage them.”

“That would be ideal, yes. If I could get a cottage within an easy walk to the farms, I could manage a good ten or twenty I’d say until it became untenable. By that point, you could feed thousands of people easily and I would need assistants to take over in my stead. The work is rather easy to maintain, the setup is what is truly specialized.”

“Like laying all these grids around the farm?”

“Exactly.” Hamrin pointed at the thing Hal was making. “If you can actually make a net out of that, as you suggest, we can suspend it on poles

high above the crops and trickle down mana onto them. Most of the prototypes I've been working with... well, let us say they are not the best.”

“You've been working with scrap and leftovers, I get it,” Hal told him.

It wasn't hard to see why. Rinbast clearly favored the more battle-oriented types of magic while neglecting the domestic uses. Trystal had been a font of information about the man, though what she knew, admittedly, wasn't much more than common knowledge.

Since Hal wasn't a native to Aldim, said common knowledge was incredibly insightful.

Rinbast was an oppressive tyrant. Hal already knew that from Elora and the rest of the rebellious Rangers and their ilk. But it was the way in which he had risen to power and how he kept it that was of most interest to Hal.

With Hamrin's help, they would actually be able to create a foothold out of Brightsong and begin to grow.

People who were fleeing Rinbast would be welcomed here, but the journey would be perilous without a guarded pathway and to do that, they needed the help of the other tribes.

Hal had no idea how he was going to handle that, but for now, it didn't matter. What was most important was keeping his people fed and safe.

It would be easy to lay into Rinbast about how he could let a genius like Hamrin get away. But the truth was, Hal managed a tiny settlement where he knew everybody by name more or less and Rinbast managed what was effectively a kingdom.

And if what Trystal said was correct, then the rest of Aldim was significantly larger than Fallmark was. Which, by itself, was huge. Hal didn't have anything to compare it to, but he wouldn't have been surprised if the whole of Fallmark was equivalent to the United States in terms of square miles.

There were a lot of areas his magical map showed, but he hadn't visited yet. In fact, the whole eastern side of Fallmark, outside of the Shiverglades—an area he might have visited if things in Murkmire had turned out differently—was a decently populated section that was rife for rebellion.

Places like Withermere were hotbeds for rebellious activities, neglected by Rinbast due to the distance from Fallwreath. It was meant to be the first stop after Murkmire way back when.

Instead, they had taken the longer path around through the Glitterwood and Fool's Pass to enter the Shiverglades from the opposite side that Rinbast would expect.

It had worked, and they managed to get into the Shiverglades with minimal bloodshed. And now they were poised to strike out from the Shiverglades into Withermere if they laid the groundwork for it.

Of course, using the Fathomways to pop directly under Murkmire would be far better. He had friends there, contacts who would help him, and people who were already looking for a new home.

Hal's thoughts were interrupted by Hamrin's gasp as the item Hal was Bonecrafting began to glow with an ominous purple light.

"Don't worry about it," Hal told him. "It's a pretty simple imbue that I'm adding to it to give it greater durability and flexibility over time. If it works out, I'll bolster the process further. This is just a prototype."

Hamrin nodded, transfixed. "I must say again that I cannot thank you enough for this opportunity, Hal. Had I know that this was what would come of me trying to help Leis, I would have jumped to it with greater fervor! You mark my words, within a year Brightsong will be the breadbasket of the Shiverglades to rival even the largest farms in the world."

"That's a tall claim," Hal said, layering his mana carefully across the lines of mimic wire he created. They still had the appearance of wood and banded iron, but now they were so thin that it looked incredibly incongruent. "I'll hold you to it, Hamrin."

The Gourmage sat up taller, prouder. "I give you my word, sir. You may be single-handedly responsible for pushing the boundaries of food magic as we speak! I would gladly huddle together with a thousand dwarves for warmth and freeze the tips of my fingers off if it means I get to keep working with the fine folks of Brightsong."

Hal chuckled, finalizing and tying off the stream of mana so it settled onto the layered wires with care. He didn't need a distinctly powerful finalization process here, just enough to keep everything contained.

If this prototype worked out, Hal could empower the next version further, making adjustments as Hamrin needed.

Grabbing the mass of cables, they ventured out to the first farm together.

“For somebody who spends most of their time inventing different types of plants and food, you don’t seem bothered by my Beastborne powers,” Hal told him as they began to string the cabling up onto a post and stretch it out to the next in line.

The man was surprisingly easy to talk to. Hal expected him to shy away from the physical labor, but he took to it with gusto, despite the obvious strain.

When Hamrin had told Hal that he wasn’t able to do the labor, it wasn’t out of some sort of snobbery. The man was *weak*. Clearly, all of his attributes were firmly in Intelligence.

“Food is often gross and weird,” Hamrin pointed out. “Could you hand me that bit? Thank you. You see, when you make self-baking potatoes, you also have to realize that often the initial experiment wasn’t on a *potato* necessarily. Sometimes it comes from a rude prank a student made with some rather foul-smelling excrement.”

Hal paused and stared at him. “Are you saying you got the idea to make a self-heating potato from some kid who... what, created a magical poo bomb?”

Hamrin colored. “He was not a *kid*, and the mess took ages to clean up! I had dozens of samples that were—” He took a deep breath to calm himself. “Inspiration strikes at the most unlikely of times.”

Chuckling, Hal said, “I’ll say.”