

PROLOGUE

Tristal's spell shattered. Her consciousness snapped back to her body before she knew what was going on. Or who she was, for that matter.

A prismatic explosion of mana feedback from the Kinslayer threw Tristal from her hiding spot within the bushes and nearly over the edge of the overhang where Hirash and the Kinslayers had set up a small secondary camp.

By the time the second great answering thunderstroke smote the Kinslayer, Tristal was ready. She weaved several layers of protection and *Transposed*, swapping herself with one of her spectral servants down below, well out of the lethal blast radius.

The others, much closer to the impact, were only just now getting to their feet as Tristal crested the switchback. The smaller Kinslayer wasn't moving at all.

Such savagery! Tristal couldn't help but shudder. The man, Hal, was not just another Beastborne—a terrifying thing unto itself—but he was disturbingly skilled.

A thrill of excitement lit up a nearly forgotten gamer-centric part of her mind. She could not help but wonder what sort of loot a slain Kinslayer would have on them, not to mention Hirash.

He, more than anybody, would have useful trinkets she could use. Though it was best not to get ahead of herself. Hirash would have survived. *I can bide my time*. She would see him dead, if only to wound Rinbast and rid herself of a rival mage.

Even without her intervention, Tristal would not have placed one red cent against that boy. Not that she would ever tell him. He needed to know that she had intervened on his behalf. Had saved him, even if that wasn't quite true.

Her intentions, at least in this, were what mattered.

No doubt Hal's counterstroke doomed the diminutive Kinslayer. That she would bear witness not just to their contest, but to the potential demise of a Kinslayer. Things were certainly not shaping up the way she thought they would be!

Steady on, she chided herself. She needed to appear shaken, but not horrified. She needed to make the others believe she was just now awoken by thunder and disaster.

Tristal counted to herself, ruffled her hair and clothing for good measure with a wave of her hand, and then hurried up into the guttering light of the campfire. “What’s going on?” she asked, pitching her voice just the right distance between fear and idiotic excitement.

Her spectral servants hurried up the path a few moments later, followed by their guide.

Hirash, with his layers of protection, was the first to recover. He brushed himself off and stood up. His illusion wavered for a second like bad reception on an old tube TV.

The larger Kinslayer was trying to rouse the smaller one who still hadn’t moved.

Tristal stared. Did Rinbast’s rival *really* manage to kill the Kinslayer? *All the way out here? The attenuation over such a vast distance should make that nearly impossible.* It was just starting to dawn on her just who—or what—she was dealing with. A spike of fear sent a surge of adrenaline into Tristal, lending greater credibility to her disguise. “I know first aid,” she said helpfully.

From high above, a shadowy form of rage and darkness reached down like a black thunderbolt. A humanoid creature with a grasping clawed hand akin to a dragon’s, with eyes like gold lightning fell upon the smaller Kinslayer and wrapped its draconic claws around their neck.

Hirash snarled and managed to dispel it with a powerfully focused *Unravel* spell. Though he hid it well, for a moment Tristal had not been sure the spell would work.

He brushed off his elaborate robe and glanced disdainfully in Tristal’s direction. “No, Lady Wynn. We do not require your assistance. Thank you.” He turned his attention to the guide. “Nor yours. We have things well in hand.”

Tristal hung around for a moment, the look of frustration plain on her features. Off to the side, her spectral servant entered her previous hiding spot. With a shrug, Tristal headed back down the path. Unsurprisingly, their guide had disappeared.

He had a disturbing tendency to blend into the surrounding foliage. Tristal had a measure of professional envy at his skill. Only her Founder's Mark allowed her to have a similar measure of concealment, and this man was able to do it without using any magic she could detect.

She wondered if he was watching her while she watched Hirash and the Kinslayers. If so, he had not deemed it worth telling his employer.

Maybe I could use that. People like Hirash were too ready to dismiss other cultures and social mores as primitive or "foreign" as if it was a slur. Tristal knew better.

Returning to her bedroll, Tristal shut her eyes and viewed the world through her waiting spectral servant. Hirash was too on-guard to risk *Transposing* again, she would have to settle for Spectral TV.

There was a strained gurgled gasp from the smaller Kinslayer as they came around. They were still on their back, the purple corruption aura that had consumed them was entirely gone.

So not dead after all, Tristal thought. *Though the damage inflicted alone should have been all but impossible. If we were much closer to him, the Kinslayer would not be the only casualty.*

It almost seemed as if the Kinslayer was less substantial than before, with a suspiciously *thin* quality that she couldn't place. The larger Kinslayer lifted his hooded gaze and looked at Hirash who stood above them.

"What happened?" Hirash said petulantly. "You said you had him!"

The Kinslayer on the ground slowly shook their head. Tristal couldn't see well from the servant's position, but even she could see the glint of sweat on bits of the Kinslayer's face as he shook his head.

It was one of the few times Tristal had even seen a glimpse of one of the Kinslayer's skin. Tristal found herself feeling rather disappointed at the pale, almost alabaster flash of skin. She had been expecting something purple and oozing.

You know, something that was suitably monstrous.

The voice from the wounded Kinslayer was raspy and weak. Tristal's own mee-maw, who chain-smoked for nigh-on 50 years, would have been hard-pressed to do better. "He is stronger than you led us to believe," the Kinslayer

said. “You would be wise to turn and flee from his people’s reprisal. Did you know he has a *name*? Hal.” Tristal was shocked by the undercurrent of awe in the Kinslayer’s voice.

Hirash may have missed the awe, but hearing that name seemed to send him into a frenzy. Sparks of prismatic mana flared from the Archmage’s fingertips. “*You will not speak that name!*”

Now that’s mighty interesting, Tristal thought. *Why does his name drive you up the wall like a coal on a cat’s backside?*

“As you wish,” the Kinslayer said impassively. There was an odd timbre to their voice that Tristal could not pin down. “In our battle, he was mortally wounded. If he has not expired already, he will soon. Our task is done. Let us away from this frigid hellhole.”

Interesting piling atop interestin’! Tristal chewed her lip in thought. Now why would a Kinslayer—practically on death’s door from Hal’s doing—be lying? Tristal knew the Kinslayer must have heard Hal’s challenge. He was going to hunt her down.

Nothing would stop him. The hairs on the back of Tristal’s neck stood on end when she remembered the raw unfettered hatred in Hal’s voice.

Hirash, however, shrugged and looked about for another attack. After a moment he glanced at the dying Kinslayer, if Hal’s rage was a roaring bonfire, Hirash’s disdain was cold and uncaring as the distant stars above. “I will erect a more potent barrier to prevent another intrusion than. Just in case you... miscalculated.” With a snap of his fingers, he was gone.

There was a long moment of silence while the two Kinslayers stared at each other. Finally, the larger one spoke, “What truly happened?” His voice was deep and gravelly. It suited him.

The wounded Kinslayer let out a rattling breath that sounded suspiciously like a sigh of longing and... relief to Tristal. How odd. “We are inexorably linked now. We are drawn to each other, come what may. I can feel his rage like a storm building in the sky, glorious and terrible all at once. It won’t be long now.”

The other Kinslayer tilted his head curiously at her. “What isn’t long now?”

Though Tristal couldn't see the Kinslayer's face anymore, there was no mistaking the tone. Against all reason, the Kinslayer appeared to be *smiling*. "He is coming for us."

CHAPTER 1

"Komachi?" squeaked a tiny, worried voice.

Hal tried to open his eyes but couldn't. His nostrils were filled with the scent of blood mixed with soil. He didn't even have the strength to shiver.

A mug of something was pressed to his lips. He couldn't have fought against it, even if he wanted to. A fizzy, bitter-sweet liquid filled his mouth, and it was all he could do to not choke on it as he drank it down slowly.

"Komachi," squeaked the pobul affirmingly. "Special Komachi Brew. TM."

A velvety paw patted his cheek, and then a small furry body snuggled up to him to stay. Darkness folded around Hal shortly after he finished drinking.

The next time consciousness found him, Hal was in the warm confines of his yurt. Somebody had wiped away the crusted blood that had glued his eyes shut.

He squinted at the blurry faces around him.

Despite the leaden pain in his limbs, Hal lifted up his left arm and looked at it. He breathed a sigh of relief when it looked like a normal *human* arm. Perhaps not *entirely* normal. The limb was crisscrossed with red scars, like he had tried to give a cat a bath a few days ago.

Considering the pain he remembered feeling from the khaeros' frantic clawing, he got off lightly. "*Besal?*"

There was no reply.

He didn't know what that meant. He couldn't feel Besal at all. Not somewhere outside, nor within. It would have been more concerning if he could spare the mental processes for it.

His body demanded most of his attention. It was a roadmap of pain. If he had been rolled over with a steamroller and managed to survive, he imagined this was how it would feel.

The faces looking down at him swam into focus. A brown furry face popped up closest among all of them, brandishing a large clay mug overfilled with something foamy. “Drink up!” Komachi squonked.

A pair of hands came down to try to help, but Komachi slapped them away with her tiny paws. Komachi took the privilege of helping Hal drink the fizzy brew with surprising territorialism.

Once he was done, the pobul and the mug vanished from sight. Though he knew she was not gone.

Hal felt Komachi nimbly crawl across him, her tail dragging along behind her. She attached herself to his hip and dutifully used *Soul Aeder Equip* on her own. A gentle warming current eddied through his ruined Spirit channels as the influx of the small Spirit recovery buff hit him.

The pain he was feeling ebbed a little, allowing his mind to finally catch on to the strangeness of the assembled faces. As always, his gaze sought the golden-eyed vision of dark-haired beauty that his heart yearned for.

Nothricient, the ex-Reaper that had once tried to claim and cross over his soul, sat beside him. Her pale, delicate features looked fragile as she held his hand and looked upon him with unmistakable tenderness.

If Noth had claimed a position so close to him, then... *aha*, there she was.

Ashera sat on his other side, but nowhere near as intimately or closely as Noth. She was the opposite of Noth in many ways, least of all being physical.

Whereas Noth was tall and willowy with a pale, almost bluish cast to her complexion, hair black as night, and long tapered ears that would make any elf green with envy, Ashera was not.

With silvery-white hair that shone like spun moonlight, a pair of thick and short ivory cow-like horns, and a pair of sea glass green eyes, Ashera sat beside him, quiet and contemplative.

She was also his Envoy. Hal wasn't quite sure just how much the System recognized it, considering the abilities he was granted. Ashera made it seem like it hardly acknowledged her role.

They only seemed to share two things: a pale complexion and an incomprehensible attachment to Hal.

Thankfully, only one is romantic, he thought. *Though not the one I would have thought once, what feels like so long ago.* Life was funny that way.

Naturally, with both Ashera and Komachi there, Elora wasn't far behind. The normally standoffish Wildsmaster was looking at him with uncharacteristic concern.

By her side was Hal's Shadow, Lurklox the koblin. The small creature was covered head-to-floppy-oversized-feet in special koblin-made leather armor. She typically tasked herself with Hal's safety and she was pacing up and down in her clown shoes she called boots.

It was hard to keep a Founder like Hal safe, especially when he seemed hellbent on running headlong from one unwinnable battle to the next. Still, her presence was comforting.

Despite his closest friends and allies by his side, the banded gold chest with its brightly polished wood was perhaps the greatest comfort of all.

Vorax, his mimic and recently newly minted familiar, was stationed out of the way but obviously within view of Hal. To anybody who didn't know the mimic, he would have appeared to be little more than a richly designed chest that Hal managed to find somewhere.

As a mimic, it was Vorax's tendency to appear utterly inanimate. He only tended to be lively from time to time for everybody else's sake. Hal knew that the mimic would be more than happy to spend weeks in one spot without moving an inch.

There were two people, however, that were out of place. He had never seen them before, but they nevertheless looked unmistakably familiar.

A lean young man with his arm in a sling wearing baggy clothing nodded to Hal. His golden eyes were slitted and despite the state of his dress and the bandages on him, he held himself with a decidedly *regal* bearing.

"Orrittam?" Hal choked out.

"The very same."

Hal's gaze slid to the taller, snow-white haired woman beside him. She shared the same tanned skin as Orrittam and similar bone structure, but their faces couldn't have been more different.

Where Orrittam reminded Hal of a kindly king, regal in bearing, but a man of the people—in short, a fairy tale royal made flesh—Naitese's haughty severity would have had the cruelest queen running in fear.

“Yes, very good,” Naitese snapped, seeing Hal putting the pieces together. “You figured it out. Well, this is what you have done to us. Are you *happy* now? Your stupid Oath has restricted us beyond all comprehension.”

Hal blinked slowly, trying to parse everything she had just said. “Come again?”

Noth placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. “I know you well enough by now not to ask you to strain yourself unduly, but are you sure you wish to talk about this now? You nearly died, Hal.”

Orrittam looked from Noth to Hal. “As I understand it, the Komachi Brew—”

“TM!” Komachi cried out.

“—has worked quite a treat to restore Hal's strength. While I would prefer not to press him further than need be, we rather do need to discuss the Oath, I am afraid.”

Naitese swept her icy glare across the gathered Council members. Luda poked her head out from around a dwarf, her eyes looked bloodshot as if she had been crying.

Hal smiled at her and tried to comfort her but only succeeded in making her flee the yurt. One of the dwarfs went after her. Odd.

“I'm not going to do it while lying on my back,” Hal said, turning his attention to Orrittam and Naitese.

Mira snorted. “Hal, you just beat two dragons *single-handedly*. And you're worried about appearances? With the amount of reputation you must have just gained, you could hold council on the toilet and still be one of the most respected men in all of Fallmark.”

Hal rolled his eyes. “Noted, but I'd still rather be sitting for this.”

Single-handedly? What precisely did they see? It certainly did not seem to be the same thing that Hal witnessed.

Noth was already there, helping Hal up into a sitting position. He gave her a nod of thanks. There was no way he could have done it on his own. Even sitting up with Noth's help, he felt out of breath and weary.

Despite his threat to the nameless Beastborne, he didn't think he could make good on it soon. He would need to tell the Council what happened, so that Brightsong could prepare for another attack by not just one, but two Kinslayers.

"Okay," Hal said. "What about the Oath?"

The two dragons, in human form, exchanged glances. "We would prefer if it could be private."

Naitese's lips twisted as she said, "Please." She looked like somebody had just stuffed her mouth full of lemons.

Hal nodded to those not on the Council. Komachi was entertaining herself by playing with a slime. She got her paw stuck in the slime before Elora had to pull her free. Hal was pretty sure Komachi was doing it for attention.

She often did.

Most of the dwarves left, the elves, even a few odd Ebon Star tribesmen, and a few of Luda's followers who were making tea for everybody else. They set down the tray of freshly poured mugs, bowed, and crawled out of the entrance with as much dignity as one could.

That left the members of his Council, Orrittam, Naitese, along with Kow and Komachi, who were technically familiars of Ashera and Elora, respectively.

Orrittam cleared his throat uncomfortably.

"They stay," Hal said firmly. "Whatever you have to say to me, you can say in front of them."

Both dragons looked skeptically at Komachi but seemed to realize there wasn't anything they could say to change his mind and nodded.

Hal wasn't used to either of them being so accommodating. Especially not Naitese.

“First thing’s first,” Hal said. “Why did Mira say I single-handedly defeated you two?”

“Because you did,” Naitese said through drawn lips.

“You look like you’re about to eat your own lips,” Hal remarked.

“It would appear,” Orrittam began, “that the Shard sees you and your Beastborne powers as one. Therefore, when you used your innate powers to best the both of us, it considered it the same as if you had done so with your own two hands. I... must confess, I did not believe this outcome possible. A dragon has never been utterly beholding to a man before, even a man such as you.”

“What does that mean?”

“He means that we are essentially your slaves,” Naitese said bitterly. “We entered into an Oath, electing to decide it as dragons do. We lost. Utterly.” She took a deep breath to calm herself. “That means you have control of us. You could add us to your clan if you so choose, becoming our patron. I do not know how the Shard could allow it, but it clearly allowed you to chea—” Her face twisted into a rictus of anger as the word caught in her throat. “—claim victory when it was all but impossible.”

Hal furrowed his brow. “That wasn’t my intention.” Now he was beginning to understand.

Orrittam spread his hands out, palms up. “Be that as it may, the Shard does not typically care for intentions. It is a natural force likened more to gravity than ethical considerations. It cares nothing for our intentions or desires. Mostly, at least. You entered into an impossibly stacked bargain and our attempts to... arrive at a more agreeable conclusion for us all were *taken into account* when awarding you the Oath.”

“You *have* looked at the Oath, haven’t you?” Naitese asked. “Who am I kidding? Of course you have not. You just roll into any situation you find yourself in, use brute idiotic force to—” Naitese’s voice grew strangled and tight before she stopped trying to speak.

Her glare of hatred, however, could have drilled a hole straight through a steel beam. Orrittam placed a comforting hand on her shoulder, and a look of apology for Hal.

For a wonder, she didn't shrug it off. Instead, she somehow appeared to draw solace from it.

"The dude's been knocked out cold," Mira said. "Give him a moment to breathe, all right?" She moved closer to Hal in an oddly protective gesture.

"I don't understand though," Hal said. He was still missing something. "Why do we need to talk about the Oath? You must agree to it before it takes effect, surely?" Hal rubbed his temples. His head was pounding. "I don't see why this is a problem, or how I *enslaved* either of you. That's not how Oaths work."

Hal could tell by Naitese's thundercloud expression that he was quite wrong.

Orrittam shook his head. "We already agreed to the outcome before the contest was finished. It was the dragon's way. Whatever way the discourse runs, we honor it. Without our honor, we are but shades of ourselves."

"So that means—"

"Now you see," Orrittam said, folding his hands in front of himself. "We are restricted by the Oath as tightly as a pair of shackles."

Now he understood. "You want me to release you from the Oath."

Whitegold Oath

You have challenged two dragons, both significantly stronger than you, to Draconic Discourse in the hopes of creating an Oath between dragon and man. Your unlikely victory has created a shift in the dragon's dynamic, forcing them to acknowledge your superiority as a dragon of higher standing.

Those bound by this Oath must do as you ask and are unable to stray from your intentions. As you are considered their superior, their Levels and powers have been limited to match yours.

As the creator of this Oath, you are given an opportunity that few humans ever glimpse, and even then, only with a single dragon: you can draw strength from both dragons as if they were extensions of yourself. Utilizing all their knowledge and power for yourself.

[Self]

All Skills enhanced based on the Draconic Strength drawn from each dragon.

Experience and Skill earned is increased for each Level and Skill Level a dragon originally possessed above your own.

[Allies]

Must take human form unless given leave.

Must adhere to summons by the Oathforger.

Cannot be killed unless the Oathforger is killed.

Hal blinked and stared at the Oath, then back at Orrittam and Naitese. He felt a sick, twisting feeling in his gut. “Okay, I think I understand your concerns now.” He looked back at the Oath. “I don’t even see any axioms that would usually prescribe how I can keep the Oath going.”

“That is because Draconic Discourse is no doubt different than your usual sources of creating an Oath,” Orrittam said. He sat down in front of Hal, pulling his long legs beneath him. His daughter sat next to him with a resigned sigh.

“I don’t know what you want me to do,” Hal said. “I don’t see how I can even cancel the Oath.”

Orrittam shook his head. “You cannot cancel it, but I do believe we could *alter* the Oath into something equivalent but less—forgive me for saying so—demeaning.”

Hal opened his mouth to reply, but shut it with an audible click. He couldn’t blame them. Both had just tasted freedom and then were almost immediately turned into—no matter how he looked at it—slaves.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Hal thought about it. He didn’t feel good about turning two—okay, one—friend into a slave. Even enslaving Naitese left him feeling sick to his stomach.

Is this the kind of Founder I want to be?

A darker thought chased the first like a shadow in the water, we would be impossibly strong. The strength of two dragons combined with that of a

Beastborne? There is at least one Beastborne out there coming for us. With their power, we could make good on our threat. For Besal.

Besal. Hal hung his head and sighed.

“We are not asking you to make your decision immediately,” Orrittam said softly. “But I—we—believe you are an honorable man. You could, and would be well within your rights, to hold us to the terms of the Oath. However, I believe you to be a man of upstanding moral fiber. And I think you will agree—”

Hal raised his hand swiftly and wasn't the only person shocked to see Orrittam's mouth click shut. Hal went red with embarrassment. “I didn't mean that.” He took a deep breath. “I apologize, Orrittam. You are absolutely correct, of course. I think the System made a mistake. But I take it that agreeing on that count does nothing for the situation?”

“Correct,” Orrittam said warily. Hal hated the concerned look in his eyes.

“So then, what options do we have?”

They talked for hours. And though Hal had slept long through the night of the battle, the sun was making its lazy descent toward the western jagged peaks by the time they finished talking.

Hal listened to every side that deigned to voice an opinion. While, ultimately, it was his decision to make, he wanted the input of his Council. It was the whole point of having one in the first place.

As it turned out, there were quite a few options. Provided there was a level of equivalence, the System would allow Hal and the dragons to reach a new agreement and essentially reforge the Oath.

Having two dragons as slaves, however, would require many large concessions. That would simply be unavoidable, but Hal couldn't stand the skin-crawling knowledge that he could stop them from speaking with a gesture or force them into their dragon form and to fly away with another.

It made him hate the System, though Orrittam had been quick to remind him that dragons did things differently. Had they not entered into the Oath with the intention of deceiving Hal and weakening him, thus stacking the

odds to an impossible degree, the System would not have skewed the rewards so sharply.

Worse, electing to pursue Draconic Discourse further shifted the rules into a realm that Hal could scarcely comprehend. Dragons were powerfully hierarchical creatures. Even non-magically binding oaths were taken with the utmost sincerity and respect. Held to the letter of the agreement without any interference by the System.

Orrittam laced his hands together. As a human, he always seemed to be moving his hands as if he didn't know what to do with them. "Our defeat—"

"E.Z. Clap," Komachi said, sitting on her tail and clapping both her front and back paws in tune to the three syllables.

Mira burst out laughing and Hal had to struggle to keep a straight face as Orrittam soldiered on through the interruption.

"—regrettably was our doing." Orrittam continued smoothly. He had the unflappable patience of a rock. "You could say we were hoisted on our own petard, as it were."

There were a number of solutions offered, but none of them felt right. They ranged from some sort of timed indentured servitude to sacrificing Levels and Skills to Hal or the Guild in a bid to gain some parity between the new Oath and the old one.

No matter what, the cost to Orrittam and Naitese would be a heavy one.

There was nothing he could do about that. They had made that much clear. Throughout the conversations, Hal investigated the Oath System to see if it would allow him to cancel the Oath or change its conditions at will.

True to their word, the Oath only seemed capable of altering if there was some level of equality. Every time Hal tried to change something, the System required Hal to replace a piece of the Oath with a different requirement.

Hal tried all sorts of things, from mundane options like having them acknowledge he bested them, to a single gold coin from each. Unfortunately, what the System considered equivalent and what most people did, were two very different things.

The most common suggestion: that Hal take years of EXP and Skill Levels from the pair was a non-starter for him. Sure, getting more Levels would be amazing, but the cost was too high.

He would rather have two dragons join the Guild and participate as equal and willing members than to rob them of their hard-earned EXP. Aside from funneling power to the top—something Hal despised the very idea of and was all-too-common back on Earth—it would weaken his potential new allies.

More to the point, if he ever wanted to form anything other than a bitter rivalry with Naitese, stealing her Levels and Skill Levels wouldn't be the way to do it.

And so they talked, and debated, and talked some more.

Food was brought out thanks to Kow, who seemed to relish the task of feeding the group and took it upon himself to whip them up a surprising spread considering the meager supplies they had on hand.

The oppa's fur was particularly shaggy and ruffled from rushing about. The excitement was plain on his ferret-like face, and if Hal didn't know any better, his black spots appeared even more numerous. He actually resembled his namesake a little bit more.

By the third or fourth [Komachi Brew™], Hal was feeling more like himself, and it seemed like they were making some serious headway on some potential options.

Angram returned to the yurt. His ruby eyes found Hal's and gave a subtle shake of the head. Still no sign of the Kinslayers, then. The Ranger gave him a meaningful look and Hal nodded.

The dark-haired elf vanished from the yurt once more to give the go-ahead to the Rangers. They would go even farther afield in the search for the Kinslayers. They *had* to be close, Hal was sure. But even a few miles in the Shiverglades was hard ground to cover, and harder to find somebody that didn't want to be found.

He had been against the proposal at first, unwilling to risk the safety of the Rangers, but to a one they had volunteered for the task and there was nothing Hal could say to dissuade them aside from outrightly forbidding it.

Rubbing his forehead, Hal turned to the rest of the assembled Council. “It’s getting late. Why don’t we sleep on it and resume in the morning? In the Manatree’s Glade.”

Hal caught the jerky motion before Naitese or Orrittam had taken more than a step. He sighed. There must have been too much of a command in the words. The Oath was enforced upon them both, literally controlling the pair to do something stupid and silly, like waiting in the glade all night until he arrived. “Not you two. Do whatever you like.”

The dragons visibly relaxed and Hal could almost imagine the vice-like grip of the Oath releasing them. When he had taken the Class, he never would have thought it could be used for such tyrannical ends.

Once everybody else but Noth had left, Hal allowed himself to sag against the pillows littering the floor and deflate like a week-old birthday balloon. “None of these options seem fair to them, Noth. None.”

Noth sat down next to him, folded her legs beneath her, put her arm around him, and tilted his head onto her shoulder. “It’ll all be clearer in the morning.”

Hal chuckled and relaxed further, letting loose a jaw-creaking yawn. “I’m not so certain. But it’d be nice.”

“It might take some time, but you’ll do what’s right.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because I know your heart, Hal. You may hide it from the others, but you cannot from me. I have seen into the deepest depths of your soul. That you are so bothered by this is proof that you will do what is right.”