

Beast Master 1011

Chapter 1011: Changed

"Hawk, can you head up and go see what is around us?" Karl requested.

They were going to need some information, now that there was a good chance that even the terrain had changed.

[Things are the same, but not. There is still a hill in the same spot, but it's smaller. Then all the low areas are swamps, not desert. Oh, there are Remi people here, too.

In a village, I mean.

I don't see any wandering monsters, just some food. But some of the food has people watching it. I don't see farm houses, though.

Oh, if we go way to the northwest, I can see an anomaly. Maybe eighty kilometres?] Hawk narrated.

"Hawk says there is an anomaly in the distance, but there are Naga villages closer to us, and the low ground is now a swamp, while the high ground is grassland." Karl explained.

The others nodded, and Remi slid over to climb up Karl and stare in his face.

{We're going to visit the Naga, right? I haven't gotten to meet a whole village of my people yet.} She pleaded.

"It's only a few kilometres. I don't see why we can't go visit on our way."

Remi cheered as she launched herself off Karl and transformed back into her Naga form. Then she began changing her outfit and her jewellery, intending to look her best when she reached the village.

Suddenly, Cara paused, then began to clap. [Oh, this will be fun, I just know it.]

[Did your foresight show you something in the near future?] Karl asked.

[Yep, from today.] Cara agreed, but did not elaborate.

The ladies climbed onto Thor for the trip, while Cara nudged Karl's leg.

[Shrink me, so I can sit on your shoulder.] She demanded.

Unlike Remi, who had understood immediately how to use Thor's new skill, none of the others had gotten the hang of the ability so easily.

Karl made her the size of a house cat, and the badger happily settled on his shoulder for the jog.

It was only a few kilometres to the village, a trip that Karl and Thor could make in under ten minutes. But when they got to the edge of the swamp surrounding the village, Remi insisted on getting down to lead them in.

{Thor, please lower the barriers. They will think it's rude if we don't let the swamp touch us.} She explained.

Thor and Karl both lowered their defensive barriers, and then Remi summoned her bodyguards and led them through the swamp, with Rae at her side in spider form.

"The Naga are going to think that we're all lunatics." Nachtia chuckled as she looked over the odd procession.

Dana snorted with restrained laughter. "I would be more concerned that they might be right."

As they approached the village, a group of aging Naga came out to meet them with reverent looks on their faces as they stared at Remi.

{Shaman Queen, it is our honour to welcome you to the village. Are these your friends?} The largest of the Naga asked politely.

{Indeed. We are on an adventure, out to eliminate the excess monsters caused by the Anomalies.} Remi agreed.

The Naga Chieftain smiled at her. {You certainly have interesting friends. And such luxury. A Shaman Queen with her entourage is formidable enough, but to have so many of the Dragon Gods' chosen with you as well.}

The Chief had a point. How many groups were nearly half clerics? In most regions, two thirds of all System activations were for the Warrior Class, and Mages comprised the majority of the rest.

Even in the Naga Village, Karl could only spot one curious shaman, standing on her porch to watch the visitors. The rest were all Naga Warriors and workers.

{Have you had problems with specific monsters from the Anomalies, or an excess of beasts?} Remi asked the Chief.

The Naga shook his head. {Our village has many powerful warriors. But the tribes to the north have had problems with an excessive number of Crocolisk beasts coming from an Anomaly.

We sent them two hundred freshly trained juveniles in the spring, and they're still having trouble.}

Most likely because the Crocolisk was much more powerful than a juvenile Naga Warrior, Karl assumed. But it would be less dangerous to send a batch of hatchlings instead of their own defensive warriors.

Remi nodded and looked to the North. {Perhaps we should go see them. We have plenty of combat power. We might be able to clear out the worst of their problem, and possibly even close the anomaly.}

The Chief looked shocked. {Close the Anomaly? I don't think that is possible.}

Remi shrugged. {All you have to do is kill every monster it spawned, or send a team in to empty the other side of the Anomaly. One or the other usually works.}

The two shook hands, and the Chief gestured into the village.

{Your Highness, would you be interested in staying for a morning meal? Or is your group in a hurry?}

Remi turned to Karl for a decision, and he nodded.

{We will thank you for your hospitality. A morning meal before we go hunt Crocolisks will never go wrong.}

Mostly, Remi was interested in what traditional Naga cooking was like. As a species that had evolved to swallow prey whole before they had become intelligent and civilized, it was likely very different from anyone else's.

Even Remi, who had grown up with Karl and the others, had different preferences, mostly based on texture, as she didn't have as many taste buds as mammals did.

Thor and Rae transformed to humanoids, and the Naga locals gave them suspicious looks.

"It's a bit inconvenient for a Behemoth to stomp through your village. I would make deep spots in the mud." Thor apologized gently.

The villagers smiled at his consideration, and let go of some of the innate suspicion of the two - legged species that they held.

Two legs always meant trouble.

The only mammals that they trusted not to cause real trouble were the followers of the Dragon Gods.

Chapter 1012: Let Remi Lead The Way

Karl motioned for the others to fall back and let Remi and her bodyguard lead the way through the village.

A Naga Queen was much more important to these people than the rest of the group was, and separating themselves from Naga Royalty made them more approachable to the rest of the villagers.

Karl noted that the Naga shivered as they crossed from the muddy streets to the stone floors of the buildings, so that they didn't track mud onto the developed areas. So, as the rest of the group took the final step, he briefly pulsed [Eternal Lightning] over them, knocking the mud off their boots and pants.

The only one he didn't have to compensate for was Dana, who had been using [Swims Through Air] to walk on top of the water instead of standing in the mud.

Even if Remi said that it was better to let the swamp water touch you as a show of courtesy, she wasn't a big fan of walking around for an unknown amount of time with wet feet.

The Chief led Remi into a large building that looked like a Temple, with an enormous carving of a six - armed Naga woman at one end, while a group of servants led Karl and the others to the building next to it.

They weren't really separated, in Karl's mind. They were on separate sections of the stone floor, but the buildings had stone pillars holding up the slate roof, and no walls, so he could see what was going on just fine.

They were even a few steps higher than the spot where Remi and the Elders had gone. It had a thin layer of crystal clear water over the floor, while their spot was dry, with low tables designed either for Naga, or for sitting on the floor to eat.

Possibly both.

{Are any of you familiar with traditional Naga cuisine?} One of the servants asked quietly.

Everyone shook their heads.

"We from Demon lands." Karl offered as an explanation.

The Naga servant smiled and bobbed her head.

{If you like Demon cooking, you should like Naga cuisine. It also tends to be mildly spicy.}

A few seconds later, more servants came with platters of what appeared to be sushi rolls.

Most of them were slices of raw meat on rice, but there were cooked shrimp, vegetable rolls, and a bowl of stew placed in front of everyone.

{That dish is a spice paste. You can add it to your preference. The vegetable rolls cleanse the mouth between flavours. It is recommended to eat all of the one type at a time, then switch, unless you want to try a new flavour combination.} The servant explained quietly.

Karl glanced down at the lower platform, and saw that they all ate with their fingers, so at least he wouldn't have to learn a new type of utensil.

Lotus had other ideas, and brought out chopsticks for everyone, which seemed to confuse the Naga.

"To keep your fingers clean, so you don't move the flavour between bites." Lotus happily informed them.

That made the servants smile.

They rarely got visitors, but visitors who were enthusiastic about trying their food were even more rare. The Dwarves didn't understand the appeal of raw meat and fish, while the Orcs didn't understand the appeal of food served in small bites.

Every roll had two to three different textures, Karl noticed. They were excellent, with vibrant flavours so that the Naga could actually taste them, but he could tell that they were really designed to be swallowed whole, not chewed.

The amount of food was nearly overwhelming, and Karl could see the staff's amusement as the ladies began looking for polite ways to not try the new platter.

{You can just stop. It's fine, as the staff will eat all the leftovers from a formal dinner.} The servant Naga girl whispered.

The servers nodded happily, and Karl saw that they had a whole cart full of platters waiting. That was far more than his group could be expected to eat, so they had definitely prepared enough for themselves after the guests had eaten their fill.

Remi and the Chief's advisors chatted about issues in the swamps and surrounding grasslands. According to them, the largest issue was just the Anomaly to the north that was spawning Crocolisks, but according to Hawk, that one was a small one, with far fewer monsters than the anomaly to the Northwest in the grassland.

But the anomaly to the Northwest was spawning a form of Lion Monster, and those were unlikely to enter the swamps.

Remi and the Elders of the village finished their meal, and Remi passed them a few potions as a first meeting gift, and then motioned for everyone to join her on the walkway in front of the buildings.

{It has been a great pleasure to meet you all today. But as the morning light is burning, we should get going on to help the other villages with their Crocolisk issues.} She was saying as Karl joined them.

{Thank you for dining with us, Your Majesty. We look forward to the day when we see you again, and thank you for assisting with the Crocolisk infestation.}

Thor transformed back as they left the village, and Remi led the group north towards the location where Hawk had found a large group of Overlord Rank Crocolisks.

They were a ten-metre-long six-legged reptile, similar to the common crocodile on a massive scale. Hawk was curious about them, and their powerful water magic mixed with earth magic.

When he hurled fireballs at them, they turned the swamp around themselves into thick mud and simply sank out of sight.

It was infuriating.

Tian thought it was a valid tactic, though. Hiding under the ground when there was a flying, flaming attacker was a good idea. The fact that it was muddy ground was irrelevant to the little Stonefur Divine Fox.

After all, he could just use his [Stone Fur] ability and shake it all off him when he emerged.

Chapter 1013: Crocolisk

As they approached the next village, a beast that could make a run for the title of mother of all Crocolisks emerged from swamp waters that were clearly too shallow to have hidden its body.

Compared to the ten-metre bodies that Hawk reported for the others, this one was easily twice that length, and carried a long lifetime of battle scars on its body. A perfect accompaniment to its Totem Rank status.

Then, dozens of snarling beasts emerged from the swamp to surround Karl's group, and Cara began to cheer from her perch on Karl's shoulder.

He had totally forgotten that she was still there, reduced in size to more easily spectate.

Karl called on the Haint along with his sword, but didn't merge with the weapon yet. Having the Haint and the Epic Guard surround the massive beast would be more effective than adding a bit more damage to himself.

Lotus giggled as the Haint began to splash her feet happily in the water, glad to be out of storage.

The beasts briefly paused as golems and bodyguards were called out, and the enemy numbers increased. But only for a few seconds before they launched their attack.

The Crocolisk Matriarch was surprisingly fast, but physically outmatched.

Its first strike began with its massive maw opened around Karl, who landed a punch on its nose and stopped its forward momentum before aiming a swing at its neck, leaving a shallow gouge across its throat as the creature retreated.

Cunning eyes stared at Karl, assessing his abilities.

If it couldn't simply overpower him, this would not be an easy fight. But not one that it didn't believe there was a chance to win.

A massive Swamp Shambler, a mud and vine construct made of the swamp itself, rose from the shallow water and lashed out at Karl with a club as the Crocolisk Matriarch moved to attack his unarmed side.

Karl sidestepped the attack before being distracted by the sound of a monster to his left howling in pain and frustration.

Cara had her garotte wire out again, but she wasn't using [Void Blast] on it.

She was standing on the back of a Crocolisk, one hand on the thread and riding it like a rodeo bull as the creature thrashed and flailed wildly, trying to dislodge her.

Whatever. She would take care of it when she was done.

The Haint knocked the Crocolisk Matriarch up on its hind legs with [Force Slam], and the Lamia duo attacked its belly, which was much less armoured than its top side.

Karl parried the club of the Swamp Shambler, then hit it with a [Nullify] spell that caused the golem to disintegrate into a pile of mud and vines.

The Matriarch twisted impossibly fast and bit one of the Lamia, nearly biting the unfortunate creature in half, but getting attacked on the inside of its mouth for its trouble.

The pain made it retreat, and the Lamia began to regenerate rapidly. Black mist surrounded its body as Lamia blood stained the murky swamp water deep red.

Only a few seconds later, it was ready to fight again, and the Crocolisk Matriarch still hadn't found another opening to attack past the Haint and the other Lamia.

Karl switched to his bow and put a [Void Blast] arrow into the creature's side, blasting away a half metre divot of flesh and scales.

The Matriarch howled in pain and frustration, then bellowed an order at the other Crocolisks before sinking into the mud.

[It's fifty metres below us. Hiding in the deep earth until we go away.] Tian informed Karl.

[Should we dig it out?] Karl asked.

[That would be hard. Its earth magic is as good as mine, and it will just start running away if we try.] Tian sighed.

Splashing announced the departure of the rest of the Crocolisk tribe, leaving only one defeated looking specimen, with Cara still standing on his back. The creature gave Karl a pleading look, while Cara looked immensely proud of herself.

She had tamed a Crocolisk for riding.

Sort of.

The moment that anything else got near it, the creature attacked. But it had given up on trying to get Cara dislodged, as the Chaos Badger wasn't actually harming it.

"You can't keep it." Karl informed her in a dry tone.

[Fine, fine.] Cara replied, then hopped off the creature and activated [Void Blast], aimed at its backside, to chase the Crocolisk off into the swamp.

They were dangerous monsters, but they were native to the swamps, and nobody saw much of a reason to eliminate them all.

They had taken down more than half of the tribe during this attack, leaving over a dozen bodies in the water in under two minutes. That was enough to appease the Black Dragon's need for balance, and it should reduce the Crocolisk Tribe's need for food, and the resultant attacks on the Naga villages.

"Do those count as beasts for your Golem summoning?" Lotus asked once the fight was definitely over.

Karl checked his summoning options, and then called a pair of Totem Rank Crocolisks out. They were only slightly larger than the Overlords, not nearly as impressive as the Matriarch, which was a higher level magical beast, and not an option for the Golem spell.

Lotus smiled and climbed up the Golem's leg to sit on its back between the ridges.

"Crocolisks are excellent swamp transports. They can walk on soft mud and swim very well." She declared.

Cara took a spot on the other one, sitting upright in the same position that Lotus was, and Karl chuckled in amusement. They had been giving each other strange ideas again.

"Are we ready to move out again?" Tessa asked from Thor's back.

The village was only a kilometre away, and they were watching the group from the walls, ready in case the team of strangers wasn't any more friendly to Naga than they were to the beasts of the swamp.

An enemy of your enemy wasn't always your friend.

"Let Remi lead the group again. They'll likely respond better to her than to anyone else." Karl agreed.

Chapter 1014: Bath Time

They took up the same formation as before, except that Rae was gone. She had retreated into her space and was sorting through her treasures and blood supply.

[Is it time for an advancement bath?] Karl asked the intensely focused spider.

[I think it is. I've got everything that I need. I just need to adjust the balance for my new species so I don't end up with weird abilities.] She agreed.

Remi led the group to the village walls, expecting a warm reception. But they were greeted with a faint sense of hostility and suspicion.

{Strange Shaman, what brings you to our village.} The guard asked.

{The village to your south said that you had a Crocolisk infestation. We came to help you with them. As you can see, we eliminated many of them on our way.} Remi replied.

There was a pause, and then the gates opened.

A deep brown and green Naga Shaman Princess at the Overlord Rank stood in the open gates, glaring at Remi.

[Oh, cat fight!] Cara cheered from the back of her new ride.

Remi gave the Princess a polite nod, then smiled. {Leader Ss'amanth it is a pleasure to meet you.} She began.

The Princess reluctantly gave a small bow, but Karl could still feel the hostility.

{Thank you for your intervention, Your Majesty. I'm afraid that our village has suffered greatly from the repeated attacks of the Crocolisk Matriarch.} She replied.

Remi decided not to press them, as Hawk said the edge of the swamp was only ten kilometres away. They could just turn west and go look for more targets, as it was only early afternoon.

Instead, Remi took out a Monarch Rank cleansing potion in a decorative glass bottle and extended it to the Princess.

{A first meeting gift from me to you.} She declared.

A guard came forward and took the bottle, while the rest of the Naga along the wall watched with great curiosity. Their village was in bad shape, but they wouldn't just accept a hostile takeover by another Royal lineage. Not while their current Princess was alive.

The Princess examined the gift and began to relax. It obviously wasn't the best that Remi could make, but the System said it was made by her. A polite gift that said Remi wasn't trying to insult them, but also wasn't going to cower before them.

{We have more hunting to complete today. It has been a pleasure making your acquaintance. But I am afraid we must be on our way.} Remi declared, then used [Minor Water Control] to close the gates before turning away.

Thor grumbled, unhappy about more walking in the swamp, but he immediately turned west and began moving.

Lotus hummed happily as she used her vines to pick nearby flowers from the Crocolisk's back during their trip. The swamps had all sorts of medicinal flowers available, and she wasn't going to let them all pass by without at least collecting a few.

Remi had her bodyguards pick ones she didn't have, so she could add them to her swamp. But that was much more practical than the Green Dragon Priestess. Lotus was just making a flower crown out of medicinal plants.

They continued for an hour after they reached the grasslands, headed toward the next region where Hawk had reported another anomaly.

But Hawk hadn't reported any sort of monster infestation around the Anomaly, just the location, and the fact that there were farms in the surrounding area. It was possible that the farmers had already dealt with the monsters from the spawn, and it was just the anomaly itself that was left.

Once they were on dry land, Remi retreated to her space. There were no new plants here to find, and she had potions to make.

So, Karl took her spot at the front, while Thor led the rest of their odd procession through the grass.

The group had become heavily reptile biased, with Remi's bodyguards and the Lamia still active, plus a pair of Crocolisk mounts for Cara and Lotus. They fit in well with Thor's Behemoth body, but were clearly not native to the grasslands.

[There is a farm near you. They hid the house in the hill, you'll see it over the next rise.] Hawk updated.

Karl could already see the soul energy of the farmer in the distance, out in a field tending to something living. It was on their way to the Anomaly, so there was no real reason not to stop in and at least get an update on the situation in the region.

The farmer whistled as he noticed them, loud enough that Karl could hear it. That brought out a middle-aged Trollish woman and a teen boy with a sword in his shaky hands.

"Everyone, wait here, I will go say hello." Karl instructed, then deactivated his armour spell to leave himself in black pants tucked in his boots and a white silk tunic shirt with the sleeves rolled up.

[Brother Tian, help him out.] Cara instructed as Karl began walking.

The tiny fox came out to sit on Karl's shoulder, as Cara had earlier. He was hard to spot among the white and black fur, being snow-white himself, but his bright blue eyes gave him away once they got closer.

Karl stopped a comfortable distance from the two Trolls and turned his hands palm up to show that there was nothing in them.

"Greetings. We were passing by and noticed the Anomaly in the distance. How long has it been up? We can offer assistance clearing the excess monsters." Karl greeted them.

The boy lowered his sword for a moment before remembering that he was supposed to be on guard against thieves and liars, but the woman just gave Karl an amused smile.

"We don't need help with that old thing. It spawned Grassland Buffalo, but that was decades ago. We've raised many generations of the beasts since then."

Karl chuckled. "That's impressive. Normally, the monsters are too crazy to be raised."

The woman nodded. "If you talk to the old shaman by the strange place, he can explain. But his magic calms them for a time, and that let us breed them. Then the next generation was normal, so we killed most of the others and herded the rest back inside.

They don't get old in there, so we always have spares if bad things happen to the trolls' food."

"That is actually brilliant. I never thought about doing things that way.

If they are all tamed now, I will make sure that my people don't attack any of your livestock. We're on a mission from the Dragon Gods to balance out the monster populations, and remove the excess from the anomalies.

But it seems your people have already done that here." Karl agreed.

The woman smirked and nodded. "I came ten years after the army unit arrived here. Word got back to the big village that they had lots of food and homes built, looking for good wives."

"And a good Trollish woman will box her husband's ears until he becomes a good husband as well." Karl joked.

The woman nodded. "Exactly. Good husbands make good living conditions. Good wives make good husbands. You are wise to the ways of the Trolls."

Chapter 1015: Down By The River

Karl returned to the group and explained the situation.

That put a small dent in their plans. It was hard to clear out anomalies when the locals were using them as reserve livestock.

Instead of heading for the anomaly, they loaded everyone in the wagon and followed Hawk's directions northwest toward an area that clearly had far too many monsters, and no local farmers. That one should be something that they could fight against.

"There is a nice spot here by the river, why don't we call it a day and start hunting monsters in the morning?" Dana suggested most of an hour into their trip.

"That's not a bad idea. We're not trying to speed run the clearance, and with all the changes that we have seen, it would be wise to stop and see if this is stable." Nachtia agreed.

There was no real advantage to clearing the whole area if it was just going to reset, and the number of Anomalies didn't actually go down.

A short break before they had to do any more fighting would be good for everyone.

They didn't take nearly as many breaks as most groups would in their situation, but that didn't really bother most of them, except on the days when they wanted to just lie around and do nothing.

Today was one of those days.

They had been on plenty of adventures lately, and they really could use a few down days to just relax. Nobody wanted to burn out, and they had been much more active than nearly any other group of elites that they had met since they had come to the dragon isles.

[There is a really nice stand of trees over there.] Rae suggested as they reached the river.

It wasn't a huge shelter, like the ones that they would usually choose, but the small poplar trees were enough to hide the parked carriage from long-range observation. That was enough to get them through the night in safety, and then they could go looking for more fights tomorrow.

That was enough for everyone in the group, and especially for Rae, who had big plans for the night.

If everything went right, she should be able to complete her advancement in the evening, and then she would be joining the fight as a Totem Ranked Blood Destruction Demonic Spider tomorrow, with a full set of Totem Ranked skills and Golems.

That would absolutely devastate most of the enemies that they had faced so far, and establish her as the strongest sister for at least a week.

The thought made Tian laugh. She would probably be the strongest of all the partners for at least that week, as his body wasn't up to sustained use of his skills yet.

But he was adapting quickly in this space. Especially with all the good food.

He wasn't the only one that was confident, either. Cara was certain that she could make Totem Rank without any real issues, and Butterfly was beginning to awaken from her dreams more often, now that Karl's power had increased to the extent that she had excess energy.

The Totem Rank advancement had been a huge boon for her, as it was finally enough high-quality mana that she could do more than just focus on survival and basic illusions as she dreamed.

A little longer and her mind would fully awaken.

Once that happened, her powers would be much more formidable, and she could join the rest of the team in fully participating in combat events, as well as travel.

Thor was doing all the transport now, but with her solid illusions, Butterfly was certain that she would be able to do at least that well. She could even make flying mounts for everyone.

But in her half awake state, it finally occurred to her that she needed to pick a name.

The Karl had asked her that once before, but she was sleeping. She couldn't introduce herself as some random butterfly when she had already made friends with these people in her illusionary world.

It had to be a good name. Something suitable to her species, but still easy enough to pronounce for others. Her first thought was the sound of crystal sliding down a silver surface, but that wasn't a noise that other species could make.

Maybe something that had to do with music? The language of the Glasswing Illusionary Butterfly was entirely musical notes created by their crystalline bodies. That made it difficult for her to pick a name, as all the good ones were impossible for others.

How could she even explain that the best options were unavailable when nobody else spoke the language?

But didn't dragons have the same issue? They picked two names, one in Draconic, and one for everyone else. Most species couldn't roar at all, and few could mimic a Dragon's roar well enough to pronounce a Dragon's true name.

So, she could have two names as well. The first would be her favourite sound in the whole world, while the common name would be something easy to remember. Argent? Eris? Lira?

No, none of those were quite right. She needed to come up with a name, but it had to be a good name. Something that she would be proud to introduce herself as.

They had Hawk, and Thor, Rae, Remi, Cara, Nachtia and Tian. Dana, Lotus, Tessa, and Ophelia. All the names were so different that she couldn't even use them as a reference to pick one for herself.

What about Nautila? Since she was found in the shoreline waves of Drodh? No, that would just lead to Cara making naughty jokes at her expense.

Opal? She could be Opal. The stone shimmered like the reflection of light on her wings.

Yes, that would be her name. Opal Karlsdotter. She had already studied the Dwarven and human histories, and that was definitely the proper family name for the daughter of a Karl.

Now, she just had to find the perfect time to introduce herself to the others. Maybe after this nap. A little more sleep would do wonders for her mental clarity.

Chapter 1016: Queen Of The Damned

Rae settled in for the evening, preparing her bath, as Tian set them up with a shelter for the night.

Like the first one he had made, it had a domed roof, but this one had flat sides so that they could more easily hang hammocks across the length. The ladies were suspicious when Rae didn't make an appearance during the camp setup, as everyone knew that she revelled in the chance to decorate their spot for the night.

Especially this one, as Tian's tastes ran to a Fox's den, and he only made simple smooth stone walls and a rounded roof that looked like the one in the den where they had found him.

Eventually, Remi knew that she would have to expose him to Dwarven architecture. They loved stone as much as the Stonefur Divine Fox did, and they were much more decorative in their creation methods.

The small building was functional, though. It was Totem Ranked magical stone on all sides, so nothing was getting in except through the door, and once Lotus spent a few seconds with her plant growth skills, it looked like nothing more than a small hill.

That pleased the little Fox. Dens should be hidden from sight for safety.

"Is there a reason we're making a bombproof hidden bunker?" Dana asked as they finished the evening's shelter.

"It makes Tian happy." Karl replied with a shrug.

Dana shook her head in dismay and looked at the half metre thick walls of their shelter. It might be overkill, but the thick stone held its temperature very well, and it was much cooler in here than outside.

While they settled in to make dinner, Rae was balancing the contents of her bath with a level of precision that Remi's Alchemy students would be envious of.

She had used a Totem Ranked Ogre base, but with hints of Hill Giant, a dash of Crocolisk rescued from the last fight, a large splash of Lamia blood, also from the last battle, then a generous sprinkle of crab blood for seasoning.

That made the base scent, and a balance of Earth, Water and Beast focused energies.

Then she added half a litre of the Mythic Ranked monster blood that the Dwarves had procured for her and gave it a stir.

That was very close, but it was missing something.

[Karl, I need an update. Just a splash.] She insisted, while rummaging through her stored blood for the seasoning she needed.

Ah, there it was. Totem Ranked Lich Lord. That was the dark element blood that she needed.

Karl gave her some new blood, now that he was Totem Rank, with an advanced bloodline. That added the spice Rae was hoping for, but it took a bit more Lich Lord to offset the chaos element of Karl.

With the balance now perfect, Rae had Remi cast [Unobtrusive Behemoth] on her and hopped into the pool of blood.

Now that the pool of blood was massive compared to her body, like a human in the Golden Divine Academy's swimming pool, Rae was absolutely certain that she had made the correct choice.

Her body was processing through the blood at an astonishing rate, and her aura was soaring with the combination of monster, beast and undead energies. The balance was just right, slightly demonic, but mostly shadowy and bestial.

The extra dose of Totem Ranked Karl was an interesting high note in the energy flow, as it was somehow both monstrous and bestial at the same time, with notes of dragon and void. The extra energy types were adding more possibilities to her advancement, but Rae knew just what she wanted.

There was only one universal truth that really mattered to her.

Everything in the world should be afraid of the things that go bump in the night.

As she worked to integrate the Mythic Rank energies into her body, Rae felt an icy and dispassionate gaze upon her mind. Instinctively, she knew that it was the true attention of the Spider Goddess, and she smirked at the Divinity.

She wanted to see how her offspring were doing? Rae would remind her that she had created the perfect predators, and that one day soon, this particular child of her spiders would be standing before her with pride.

The Spider Goddess seemed amused at the thought that Rae was so determined to become a Divine Being herself, but the feeling soon faded, and that sense of simply being watched returned.

Rae understood, though. The Spider Goddess loved her children, and waited for one to make her proud. But she wouldn't do anything for them that they could do for themselves.

But that thought gave Rae a great idea.

All this time, she was using blood to advance, and somehow she had managed to overlook the most obvious of all ingredients.

Herself.

Rae clipped her underside with one sharp foreleg and let her own ichor mix into the bath. The added source of energy, from the open wound on her abdomen, massively increased the influx of power. However, it also added a hint of herself to the mix, and helped stabilize the energies, which now had overtones of her existing power to them.

If she could find a more powerful spider species for her next advancement, that might be even better. But so far, it hadn't happened during their travels.

Her power had casually soared past the breakpoint of Totem Rank, and she could feel the [Totemic Blessing] forming, but she wasn't done with the bath yet, and Rae was certain that she could get even more out of it before the process finished and her body reformed.

So, by the time that she stopped, the blood was completely gone, and her body had been scrubbed clean.

Then, like the crabs that she had added to the mix, Rae moulted her outer shell and stepped free from her past with a whole new body ready to face her Totem Ranked future.

{Evolution Complete}

{New Skill Gained} [Hemotoxic Strikes] wounds from physical strikes inflicted by the user will not heal naturally.

{New Racial Skill Gained} [Queen of the Damned] Intact targets of Blood Destruction can be temporarily raised as Blood Golems, undead constructs. Vulnerable to Lacerate, Bleed and Holy effects.

That was a lovely new skill. She could make them explode, then gather the pieces back together to attack their allies. It was devious, insidious, and positively hilarious.

Chapter 1017: But What If We Did?

The evening passed quietly for everyone, as Rae worked to recover from her bath, and harden her new shell.

The visual changes were subtle, just a bit more shine to her chitin. But the composition was completely different, with the innate blessing of the Totem Ranked beasts imbued into every cell. That explained to her why the effect couldn't be dispelled.

The divine blessing became part of you, not an effect that was placed upon you. So, it couldn't be removed from you any more than another body part.

Tian was confused by the concept. He was born this way, so he had never considered that others could just adapt and gain the innate blessings of the Stonefur Divine Fox species.

The Karl had done it, but he was a strange creature to begin with, and Rae was a spider. Tian thought that he understood how spiders worked. At least until he saw Rae advance.

They used to have one that guarded the door to the den, while his mother lured prey for it to eat.

But now they had another Totem Ranked group member, and a powerful one. Rae was a bit of a scary sister, but she was an excellent fighter, and she had her golems to help her. Totem Ranked Golem creatures were overpowered.

Then Tian turned his attention to the Dana Mage.

She also had Golems. There should be some way to make her more powerful as well so that she could make stronger Golems. She was what they called a Monarch, but it wasn't that far from Overlord. If she became an Overlord, her Golems would be strong enough to guard the door to the den, like his mother's spider had.

Tian gently brushed his tail with a comb made of earth magic as he pondered that dilemma.

If only his mother were here, she would know how to do it.

No, he couldn't get lost in reminiscing about things that were no longer possible. He would have to come up with the answer himself.

[Why are you trying to buff our Dana Mage?] Hawk asked curiously.

[To watch the door of the den, of course.] Tian explained.

Hawk thought about the possibilities.

[Maybe we aren't feeding her well enough? Humans are strange, you have to feed them very specific diets because they can't digest all the good stuff directly. I think Sister Remi was working on something.] Hawk suggested.

Tian's ears perked up. [Oh, that gives me a good idea. Rae upgrades her bloodline when she has a bath. I have a divine bloodline. So, if we get Remi to make a potion with some of my fur, and then soak the Dana Mage in it, shouldn't she advance?]

Hawk paused. Would that work?

[We are going to have to ask Sister Remi when she wakes up.]

Rae watched her two idiot brothers making plans, and shook her head.

[Evolving like I do has side effects. Aren't you worried about what it will turn the Dana Mage into?]

Tian fluffed up happily. [If it's made with Fox fur, wouldn't she just get cuter?]

Rae mentally frowned. It was scary that the little fur ball made sense. Dana would be cute with fox ears.

So, when Remi woke up in the morning, they began to plot.

Remi knew the process to force an advancement when you were at the bottleneck. Dana wasn't even close to that point, but the concept was the same. You could flood them with improved mana quality and force the body to adapt.

Then you needed to heal it to seal that gain in.

But that would be pointless if their body could only make a tiny advancement at a time, like breaking a bottleneck. So they would need a catalyst.

That was where Tian's fur came in.

If she added a Divine Lineage beast's fur to the mix, it might make the imbiber a bit more Fox, but the potion should also give her a bit of the little brother's ability to store increasingly large amounts of mana.

Out of all of them, Tian was already the most powerful magic user, though his tiny body hardly held any mana at all, and he was still learning to use ambient mana from the book that Remi had given him.

But Dana already knew that trick.

So, with some work in her lab, Remi was certain that she could come up with something that was both safe and effective, but it would have to be tailored to the user.

Cara helpfully snipped a bit of Dana's hair with her claw as she lay in the hammock with Dana in between her and Karl. That should match with Tian's fur to make the potion. But they had limited time to plan.

Soon, Karl would be up, and he would definitely reprimand them for wanting to experiment on his Dana Mage.

If they didn't want to get lectured, they needed to work fast.

Fortunately for them, Thor was still sleeping. He was terrible at keeping secrets and Remi knew that he had a whole moral system that seemed designed to take all the fun out of experiments.

So, she started on the potion right away, using the past experiments that she had done with various forms of mana recovery potions, as well as healing, stamina and recovery potions.

Remi knew what almost all the ingredients she had available did, though there were possibly additional uses for some of them that she hadn't found useful yet.

So, it was with great confidence that she produced a glowing silver potion an hour later. It sparkled with embedded runes and the holy magic leaking from the sample of Tian's fur that had been dissolved into it. But the fancy appearance shouldn't hurt anything.

Now, she just needed a good way to get Dana to drink it without making anyone suspicious. If they tipped off the others, and it didn't work, they might not let her have another chance to upgrade the Dana Mage.

Chapter 1018: Upgrade The Dana Mage

Cara was the one who came up with the solution.

They would borrow Dana from the hammock, and move her into the Dana Space, where they could be alone. With everyone else sleeping, they could wake her up just enough to get her to drink the potion, and then wake up Karl to give him the good news once the whole process was completed and the evidence of their methodology was hidden.

The first part of the plan went off without a hitch.

The Dana Mage was extracted from bed, moved to her bed in the Dana space, and then gently shaken awake by Remi, who presented her with the potion.

"It's a health tonic. Try it and tell me how it tastes." The Naga insisted.

That was far from the strangest request that Dana had been woken up for, so she simply downed the potion, then tilted her head and pursed her lips, trying to understand the flavour.

That was where it all went wrong.

The power in the potion was overwhelming, with a huge dose of Tian's Totem Rank essence, and a powerful Overlord Rank base.

Dana's body began to flood with mana, but it was too fast. The potion didn't push out the old mana on its own, and by the time that Dana realized and started to do it on her own, her skin had started to split, and Remi had to bring out the healing Totems to help her keep up.

The Epic Guard was active, so she would have [Void Body] active on her. But if Dana was taking that much damage this early in the process, things were definitely not working the way that she had envisioned them.

[Tian, we need assistance. You have healing, right?] Remi asked.

She had healing totems, and if she needed, [Healing Splash]. But neither of those was a high output healing spell.

The tiny fox came out of his space and began to pull external mana to focus [Sacred Heal] on Dana. That stopped the damage, and surrounded her body in a golden glow of healing magic as she took constant magic from the effects of the potion.

Black energy from [Void Body] mingled with healing energy, flooding the [Tiny World] with power, but the potion's effect was still peaking.

Dana's power was definitely upgraded, flowing out at a distinctly Overlord Ranked quality, but if they had to wake Lotus to resurrect the Dana Mage, they were going to be in so much trouble.

So, they kept at their healing efforts, unaware that Karl was now very much awake and aware of what they were up to. He could feel what happened in the Tiny World, and this was definitely not a subtle action, with Tian pouring Totem Ranked healing on Dana at his maximum output.

The effect of the potion began to fade, and Tian was finally able to end his healing efforts, though Remi kept her totems up as a precaution.

As Dana recovered enough to be able to do more than focus on survival, she turned a glare on Remi that made the Naga consider that her good intentions might not have been as highly appreciated as she had anticipated.

{New Skill Gained} [Fox Charm]

[Fox Charm] Passive skill. Grants the user an alluring appearance that attracts others of all species. Increases chances to bargain, negotiate, and induce possessive feelings toward the user.

The notification startled Dana, but didn't change the glare she was giving the errant Naga.

{Congratulations on making Overlord?} Remi asked hesitantly.

"And?" Dana asked.

{And... I'm deeply thankful for the research data on the new potion?}

"And perhaps you would like to apologize for giving me a strange thing that almost killed me without warning me first?" Dana asked, her tone harsh.

{Oh, that too. It wasn't supposed to cause any damage. I will have to work on that part. Perhaps some more runes for slow release.}

Dana's glare said that was not the right answer.

[You're supposed to be sorry for almost killing your friend, not looking for ways to improve your potions right now.] Karl informed her.

[Oh, good point. Wait, how long have you been up?]

[Long enough. Now apologize to Dana and make sure there is no lingering damage.]

Remi hugged Dana, and then handed her Tian as a comfort fluff and distraction.

{Sorry, I got carried away with my idea to make an advancement potion. I should have thought more about your safety and feelings.} Remi said softly.

Dana petted the back of the little Fox's head and then smiled at the Naga.

"Karl caught you, didn't he? But how did this good little brother get caught up in your scheme?" Dana asked.

{I'm the best magic user, and because I have a Divine Bloodline, my fur is great for helping other creatures advance.} Tian explained as he nuzzled into her hand, looking for more head pats.

Brother Thor was so right about the pats.

"Remi is getting more tricky. She knows it's impossible to be mad at you for long." Dana sighed.

{But it was a good potion. It made you even cuter.} Tian added.

"It changed my appearance?"

Dana stood and went to the attached restroom to look in the mirror.

She still looked like herself, but a bit more flawless, a bit more fair, and her eyes seemed to have a slight tilt to them now that gave her a lazy and seductive resting appearance.

{Personally, I was hoping for you to get Earth Magic, but no luck.} Tian informed her as Dana examined her new face.

Dana read over the details of the skill notification. A seductive face wasn't always a good thing. Fortunately, she had a beast form to fall back on if her face attracted too much attention.

"I think it's about time that someone talked to Remi about the possible side effects of giving strange things to others. I'm glad that I'm cute like a fox, but having an alluring appearance can be very troublesome for a lady." Dana informed the little fox.

Tian was confused. {Isn't being cute always better?}

"When you grow up, you will understand. Being cute is good. But there are many people that you don't want to notice your appearance. Bad people with bad intentions."

Chapter 1019: Tian The Persuasive

Tian wasn't sure quite what she meant, but the Dana Mage was a big sister, and big sisters knew things.

Moving to the Tiny World had been a good call on their part, as the commotion hadn't been noticed by anyone but Karl. But now that they were done, they could go and chase Lotus out of bed to make a celebratory breakfast.

{Oh, good idea. I want blueberry pancakes with honey.} Tian declared.

{It's Dana's celebration.} Remi reminded him.

The fox gave her his best pleading look, and Dana laughed.

"Alright, we can have the breakfast you want, but you have to be the one to wake Lotus up to cook it. You will find that my cooking skills are somewhat lacking in comparison."

Tian laughed as she carried him out of the Tiny World and placed him on the hammock that Lotus and Ophelia were sharing.

Tian immediately rubbed up against Lotus' face, and her eyes shot open.

She had been sound asleep a half second ago, but the soft fox fur was very different from Ophelia's fur, and Tian smelled like holy magic after his morning exertion.

After training in the Seminary Academy, the smell of holy magic in the morning always got clerics right out of bed. The dorm matrons would use switches made of holy magic to chase you out of bed if you slept in, and nobody wanted to be on the receiving end of that.

Even Tessa and Nachtia had been dragged from slumber by the lingering aura of holy magic.

"What's going on and why does Tian smell like holy magic?" Tessa asked sleepily as she changed from night wear to her usual robes.

Dana placed a hand on either of Remi's shoulders and pulled the Lamia forward.

"Yes, why does Tian smell like healing magic. You should explain to the group." She insisted.

[Karl, help!] Remi pleaded.

[I think you're stuck this time. I'll rescue you after.]

Remi shifted uncomfortably. {I made a potion to help our Dana Mage reach Overlord Rank, and it was a bit more potent than expected. So, it took a bit of healing to prevent damage, but look, we have an Overlord Dana!} Remi insisted, then twisted out of Dana's grip to push the mage in front of her for examination.

Tessa chuckled at the Naga trying to hide, when it was clear that her potion had more issues than being 'just a bit too powerful'. But Dana was an Overlord, so it wasn't a complete failure.

If she had all the details, she would certainly be much more upset with the Lamia's lack of common sense, but she was only half awake, and Dana looked unharmed.

"Well, now that we have an advancement, I suppose that we should have a celebration meal." Tessa replied, as she realized that was the reason to wake them up so early, and for giving Tian to Lotus.

Everyone knew that she wouldn't say no to anything that the fox requested as long as he was willing to suffer her attention.

Karl wrapped an arm around Dana and picked her up to rest against his side.

"Why don't we move this to the Tiny World? There is much more room to celebrate in there. We can have a Golem watch the door." He suggested.

"Speaking of Golems, where is Rae? She's usually around first thing in the morning." Tessa asked.

"She also had an advancement last night, and she's asleep right now. The advancement baths take a lot out of her, so we're letting her sleep." Karl explained.

Lotus turned her full attention on Karl. "Rae made it to Totem Rank? Did she change a lot?"

Karl nodded. "Yeah. I suspect that it was the reason that everyone got so worked up about advancing Dana. But I will wait for Rae to be fully mobile again so that she can show off her new power level without spoilers."

Karl opened the Tiny World's entrance, and Remi assigned her bodyguards to watch the shelter. This close to the swamps, it shouldn't be too shocking to anything passing by if they sensed Naga by the river.

Lotus was happy to make all the fancy ingredients for breakfast and show off her new food creation skills for Tian, who was quickly covered in flour after an attempt to help with the cooking.

The lack of opposable thumbs made it difficult for him, but Lotus was happy to have him as a mascot on the counter as she made the blueberry pancakes that the little fox wanted.

"Is there a reason for the rush to make Dana an Overlord?" Tessa asked Remi as they waited for the food to be ready.

Remi shrugged. {She was still a Monarch, but Rae reached Totem. Plus, we had the ingredients, since she's a human mage, and Tian's fur would be compatible. I considered how to do it for dragon priestesses, but I don't have the ingredients that we will need.

I might be able to do it for Ophelia as well, but I need to adjust the recipe.}

"So, basically, just because you could? Alright, I believe that I understand how things happened now. But I don't think that you're going to make friends if you keep turning out potions that risk killing the imbiber for the chance to advance." Tessa chastised her, while Remi looked suitably contrite.

"Well, not here in the Dragon Isles. If we sent the recipe back to the Golden Dragon Nation, they'd start giving it to everyone who hit a bottleneck." Ophelia retorted sarcastically.

Karl shrugged. He had seen firsthand what people would do for even one more Rank. If there was a chance for Royals to become Monarchs, and especially for Monarchs to become Overlords, they would definitely risk giving them an experimental potion.

They'd do it with healers present because those people were all valuable assets to the nation. But they would definitely do it.

[I am going to have to set an alarm to wake me up before you do something crazy again. To think that you even dragged young Tian into your plans.] Thor admonished.

[Hey, some of this was his idea.] Remi countered, but Thor wasn't buying her excuses.

Tian was much more sensible than that.

Dana smiled. "You know, that's not a bad idea. I don't mean this potion, that's too risky. But I'm sure that Remi has something that will help grow an Elite's potential to a lesser degree that she used as the base.

I can send a message to Ahmad, and let him know that we have something helpful for him."

Karl chuckled. "How about I send him the message instead? In fact, I can send him one of the potions as well."

Chapter 1020: It's A Feature

Everyone turned to look at Karl as he finished speaking.

"How exactly would you send a potion to the leader of the Golden Dragon Nation?" Tessa asked, breaking the silence.

"Well, I do have a Portal spell, and I'm a Totem, with a massive mana pool. It shouldn't be hard for me to open a small portal back to the Capital.

Then I just pass the potion to someone trustworthy, and send him a System Message to come get it."

Dana flicked him on the forehead. "And you don't think that a random Totem showing up in the Capital will cause absolute chaos?"

Karl smiled, and Ophelia began to laugh.

"How does that saying go? It's not a bug, it's a feature?" The berserker joked.

Cara nodded happily. It would be hilarious to go back and make them panic. Actually, they could send Rae, and she could check on her Baby Rogue, and visit Niall as well.

"We could send Dana in disguise. If there is a spy present, they might report that one of the exiles showed up again, and that could cause troubles for the people in charge." Tessa suggested.

Dana smiled and activated [Beast Form], then paused as the expected furry stripes didn't appear on her hands.

Instead, she was bright white, and had longer fur than she remembered.

{Ooh! See, I knew that she would be pretty.} Tian cheered.

Tessa chuckled and took out a mirror from her inventory to show Dana her transformed appearance.

Under the effects of [Beast Form], she was no longer a Cat Demon, and she was nearly identical to Karl in pattern. This time, the spell had turned her into a Fox Demon, complete with long fluffy ears and a fox shaped head. She no longer got larger with the spell, and thought she might have actually gotten more slender.

But it was her voice that startled her the most.

"Well, that is unexpected. I thought that the spell was set after you used it the first time." She began, then paused as her musical tone reached her sensitive ears.

{Fox Charm is powerful.} Tian bragged.

"And how am I supposed to interact with people when my voice has become a magical seduction technique?" Dana asked.

The little fox shrugged. {Just threaten them with the Karl if they get handsy.}

"You think this is funny, don't you? I was actually happy with how I looked." Dana snarled, but it came out as a gentle pout.

Tian held up his paws in defeat. {Got it. Not funny. You still make a beautiful fox, though. I wonder if you can go all the way with a stronger skill, and become an actual fox? I bet your tail would be super fluffy.}

Dana shook her head in dismay. She was wearing robes still, so her tail was trapped underneath.

And it was super fluffy.

Once she swapped outfits, they would adapt to her form having a tail. But for now, she could keep that information to herself.

"Well, if we're not doing anything else, why don't I take Ophelia with me? She can do the job of bodyguard without me needing to call Golems." Dana suggested.

Ophelia laughed. "I think that you've forgotten one vital fact. A Werebear and a Fox Demon would attract way more attention than just showing up as ourselves.

After all, it was Karl that was actually banished, we just chose to join him in his exile. So, technically, we're not breaking any rules by going back for a visit."

Remi quietly handed the berserker a basket full of potions, along with a notebook, and Ophelia put it in her inventory for safekeeping.

Both Dana and Ophelia changed back to their human forms, and Ophelia stretched her body, unused to being in this shape.

"Karl, you might as well open the portal. We've got ten minutes before breakfast. In and out." She insisted.

"Alright, I know the perfect place to send you to." Karl agreed.

Karl focused on the first place that he had met Niall, the Inquisitor's office in the Capital. Then he opened the portal, and laughed as an irate Overlord Ranked Rogue hurled a dagger at him.

"Good morning, old friend. We have a present for Totem Ahmad, and we were hoping that you could pass it to him." Karl began as Niall glared at him.

"You damned near gave me a heart attack. Do you know what it's like to have a Totem Ranked monster open a portal into your office? Especially when the office in question is supposed to be warded against travel skills."

"Technically, I have never had an office. But I get your point. Good reflexes though, the skill hit right on the throat." Karl replied.

Niall sighed and stepped through the portal, then looked around the main room of the replica Guild House in the Tiny World.

"Where are we?" He asked.

"A separate space I learned to make with a skill. But currently I am travelling with these lovely ladies through the Dragon Isles. We just so happened to come up with a potion that will help trigger breakthroughs if you're at a bottleneck, and thought it should be shared." Karl explained.

{I can demonstrate if you want. Do you want to be a Totem?} Remi asked hopefully.

Niall smiled at the Naga's best pleading face. "Why does that sound like a threat? No, I would rather not be a Totem at the moment with all the chaos that's happening at home."

Lotus brought over a stack of pancakes and a coffee for their visitor, then recruited Ophelia to bring the platter to the table they had set up in what was the store in the real world.

"Let's sit and talk. Have things gotten bad since we left?" Karl asked.

Niall sighed as he sipped the coffee. "You could say yes. But also no. There have been four more unexpected Totem Rank advancements in other nations since you left. But there has also been another in the Golden Dragon Nation.

Worse, from a political standpoint anyhow, it's another Elite from the younger generations. I think that you know her, actually. Lady Othello. Now there's a huge argument over whether she should be the next head of the Church, as she's a Paladin and not a Cleric, but she's the most powerful member of the clergy.

However, every time someone tries to force her, they get zapped by that damnable sword she carries everywhere. I don't know what spell is on it, but you can't try to physically force her to go anywhere."

Karl chuckled. "It's supposed to punish perverts who attempt to grab her with lustful thoughts. It might be a side effect, misinterpreting their desire for her to be in charge as desire for her."

Niall nodded, then frowned. "How do you know about the sword?"

Dana smirked at the Rogue. "He made it."

Ophelia stacked her plate as the last of the food came out, and gestured with her fork.

"Are you sure you don't want to be a Totem? It would make your job easier. And then you could try using Remi's potions on one of the clerics. If they don't die, they can take over the leadership role." She suggested.

Niall sighed and stuffed his face with pancake to give himself a moment to think before answering.

"These are excellent, by the way. But no, I will stay at Overlord as the head Inquisitor for now, and then advance later.

The power level on the whole continent is slowly increasing, and within a few years, I suspect that I might break through to Totem Rank naturally." He sighed.