

Beast Master 391

Chapter 391 Photo Shoot

"I suppose that I should call Lotus and Rae back if there is a big group meeting." Karl realized as they started to walk back toward the centre of camp.

Inquisitor Israel laughed. "I think everyone in the media and government would be happier if they forgot that High Priestess Lotus was a thing. But yes, call them back, I am looking forward to the uncomfortable looks they give her when they have to address her as High Priestess for formal introductions.

I don't even think they had her do a short, cameo length interview. She said they asked her to wait two hours, and it hasn't been that long yet, but they're wrapping up the press duties.

They almost definitely lied to her about how long everything would take and then sent her away so that she didn't notice she was being excluded until everything was done." Karl laughed as he realized that the Inquisitor was right, so he called Rae and Lotus back to do the final meet and greet.

Rae appeared in front of them, and Israel instinctively drew his sword before he saw the laughing High Priestess on her back.

"Hey guys, are we ahead of schedule?" Lotus asked.

"They tried to trick you because the world wasn't ready for High Priestess Lotus. But we're about to do the group photo shoot, so I called you back. I wouldn't want you to miss out on all the fun just because they weren't going to do a full interview." Karl explained.

Lotus frowned. "I have half a mind to show up on Rae's back just to punish them for not interviewing me.

I'm a High Priestess, I should get some respect.

It was fun playing in the woods, though."

Rae returned to her space as Lotus hopped down to accompany Karl and the others to the meeting. The frustration and annoyance on the face of the reporter who had come to fetch them was obvious, but that was only making it more fun to escort Rae back with them.

"Wait for it." Israel whispered as they reached the edge of the lights around the photo op mingle. They had set it up to appear to be some sort of military base, with ballistic walls that were made of composite armour and then decorated on the inside to look like a garden pavilion. The cameras wouldn't be looking up, they just wanted to make certain that the location wouldn't be obvious to anyone who wasn't here when they saw the footage.

"Announcing Prince Karl, Lord Inquisitor Israel, and... High Priestess Lotus." The staffer declared as they entered so that the ones keeping track of the photos would know who had arrived.

They hadn't seen most of these Elites before, as they were almost all students, but everyone needed some shots of them meeting with the visiting dignitaries and politicians. Mostly so that the visitors weren't accused of playing favourites with the Elites, but it was also a valuable way to network and make new connections that would help you later in life.

Karl knew the theory, but he had never actually tried to make those sorts of connections. He should likely start now, he realized as he saw how easily some of the students got along with the wealthy businessmen and policymakers. The problem was that they were all so smarmy and obviously lying through their teeth that he couldn't blend as smoothly as he would like.

He could see the change in their skin temperature when they flushed as they were embarrassed or nervous. He could track every little fidget and tell when they lied. His enhanced senses were making it nearly impossible for Karl to deal with people who weren't completely honest.

So he naturally gravitated to the ones who were the most honest with themselves, and that was the few Elites among the businessmen, and the Clergy.

"Prince Karl, I am Awakened Warrior Nathan Roth, head of the Roth Savings and Loan Corporation. We finance homes and businesses all over the nation." One of the men introduced himself when he noticed that Karl didn't have that signature disapproving look for him.

"You look like you don't care for these functions." He added.

Karl laughed quietly. "I have thermal vision, and Hawk eyes. I can literally see them lying, and it's disturbing."

The banker looked confused, so Karl continued.

"See the way he clenches his thumb and forefinger? His skin temperature increases at the same time. He's nervous, but only at those certain moments." Karl explained.

"Crap, you really can see them lying. How long did it take you to learn that skill?" Karl smiled. "I have been around people who don't see any good reason to lie, or they make it very obvious that they're not going to tell you the truth. So, when I see people trying to fake it, their actions just look unnatural, and it's creeping me out."

"That skill would make me a fortune at the poker table, but what about that man in the gold tie? Does he have a tell?" Nathan asked.

"A business competitor? Hmm, let's see. He's confident, I don't actually see any strange reactions from him. Either he's not lying or he's very good at it." Karl replied.

"That's what I was worried about. He's pitching a new commercial development to anyone who will listen, and he's self financed it. If he was running a scam, it should have been obvious to you, as it's his own money backing it.

Did you have any plans for a namesake development? Royal Rank Elites tend to make obscene amounts of money after a while, so if you want to build a community, or a high rise somewhere, it won't be long before it's in your budget, and we can help you with not only the financing, but the permits and legal blockades that often delay development." He suggested.

"I will have to think about it. I haven't actually spent much time in the cities to know what sort of development would be best suited both to the area, and to myself. I am a Beast Master, after all, so something more attuned to nature might be best. But if you happen to see more news about me later, my plans for my work might make the choice more obvious. I just don't know where that's going to lead me next."

The banker nodded and adjusted his expensive suit coat. "You want to do something that is associated with your work, or the people you were working with, then. That makes sense, not everyone wants a landmark building in the Capital in their name.

I am told that you met Prince Corbin already, and he made that Sect compound for the Spellblades. They used to be in an ancient monastery near the border, but it was becoming too dangerous for new students, so he relocated all his people."

"That's actually a great idea. Perhaps if there are more Beast Masters in the future, I can set them up with a place that raises tamed beasts, so they don't have to head out into the wilderness looking for rare monsters or make a random guess as to what their first beast's skills will be." Karl suggested.

"Do you really think that there will be more like your mark in the future?" Someone asked from behind Karl.

"I do. Now that there is one, there are likely to be others. But there are also similar classes, like the Rangers, that bond a living partner. Most of them end up bonding with a common animal. But what if they could bond with a relatively docile monster instead? They would get the benefits of something like a Warbear instead of a hunting dog. It might make a noticeable difference to their progression if they were able to find monsters that weren't wild and territorial when they first entered the Academy." He explained.

"You are quite dedicated to assisting the growth of the Elites, are you planning to apply to the Bureau of Elite Development?" The man asked.

"Colonel Valerie is a good friend of mine, and Commander Morgana, who might be Princess Morgana soon if I'm judging her power correctly, is an agent, and a member of my team. But as for officially joining the Bureau, that isn't in my immediate plans."

The visitors didn't seem to know what to do with Karl's independent stance, and the man just nodded vaguely as he failed to determine Karl's current alliances.

"I'm afraid I missed your name." Karl added when the man didn't say anything else.

"Oh, my apologies. I am Director Jones of the Military Finance Committee. We're part of the Department of Defence, and in charge of ensuring that money is being properly allocated for the needs of those defending the nation." He explained.

"It's a valuable job, Director. From what I can tell, your committee has been doing an outstanding job. Nobody expects money to be endless, but none of the locations I have been stationed at were desperately short of supplies."

Chapter 392 Impress The Money Men

Once the Director of Military Finance broke the ice and showed them the way to interact with a ranking Elite who wasn't picking factions, more of the politicians began to come over with similar ideas. They didn't try to sell him on joining them, or push their particular niche. Instead, they just discussed current events, which Karl was missing out on at the front lines. Or they praised the work that others were doing if it related to the topic at hand, and made sure that Karl would at least recognize their faces if he saw them again.

"You know, I've had a question for a while now. Why did they call these ranks Prince, King and Overlord? Isn't that a bit too presumptuous? It's not like I'm going to become King of the Golden Dragon Nation the next time I advance." Karl commented.

One of the reporters spit out his drink as he began to laugh, while the government ministers managed a bit more decorum.

"It's actually borrowed from older times, and not created for the Elites. You see, in the magical kingdoms, as well as most of the beast nations, a King Rank Beast or Mage can hold a territory. Normally, that's only a few square kilometres, but it is their undisputed territory.

A Prince is not quite there, but they lord it over the other beasts in their territory if it doesn't have a stronger leader.

But the Overlords are the ones with the power to force Kings to work together. It's been translated through a few languages, so it might not be perfect, but it works well enough for the time being.

There is a whole progression for the Divine Beasts, but we don't have most of them on this continent. There isn't enough food here to support them, they need the continents with more magic, so we rarely see anything above Overlord.

But if you are more widely travelled, you will find territories controlled by or even populated by stronger beasts.

You won't see many humans there, we're just not a powerful enough species to survive that, but Overlord is only halfway through the rankings in this world." Director Jones explained.

"I recall that the Archbishop was above the Overlords, at the Totem Rank." Karl replied.

An aging mage at the Ascended Rank, who Karl recognized as one of the producers for the news station, nodded politely as he approached.

"Yes, he's a Totem Rank Cleric. A rank above the Overlords. The Mountain Giants also have Totem Rank leaders, while the Divine Beast Nation goes one rank further and has a Mythical Rank Black Dragon leading them.

That's why they rarely attack us. It might be a servant of the God of Death, but the Black Dragons understand that you need to keep a healthy population if you want the deaths to continue at a steady rate into the future."

That was both depressing and remarkably pragmatic. Karl hadn't realized that the Black Dragons were into things like sustainable populations.

Of course, they were also known to decimate entire regions, indiscriminately killing one in ten and then moving on. So, perhaps he had just misunderstood their nature.

It didn't take the others long to get back to their favourite topic of the day, though.

"So, is there any sign of when the rest of your beasts will advance?" One of the businessmen asked.

"I would say that a second one should be at Royal Rank within the week, but the other two aren't giving any clear signs." Karl explained, for about the tenth time that night.

The man smiled. "This class of yours is like dropping a nuke in combat. You're one Elite, but when you show up, it will be five Royal Rank threats at once.

The Giants can prepare for a single strong Elite, the same way that we prepare for a Royal Rank Giant. But when the beasts come out, it's just an overwhelming change in the state of the battle."

Karl nodded. "There are advantages to sending a particularly strong Royal Rank leader with a team of Commanders to deal with a threat. We're not exactly overloaded with strong Elites, so it's better not to take risks when we don't have to."

Director Jones looked excited, as this was getting back to his area of expertise, though he was only actually in charge of supplies, not troop deployments.

"You have ideas on how best to send out the teams?" He asked.

"It's just a thought that I had about the ability to deal with threats. You see, if you send a leader at the high end of a Rank along with a team one rank below them, you have the best chance of dealing with a surprise threat above the estimated level.

So, if you send a strong Ascended leader with an Awakened team, they're safer overall without changing the composition. Then, when they reach Ascended, send them with a strong Commander until they're further up the Rank and take over a team of a rank below them, or they have formed a solid team of their own.

Teams that know each other are still the best, but for random groups, leaders at the top, and not the bottom, of their Rank makes the most sense. If we keep doing it that way, they will all have experience fighting at their own rank with a stronger leader, so when they take up a team leadership position, they will already be trained for the threats that they are there to protect the team against." Karl detailed his thought, while the few Elites and Mages among them looked impressed.

The Producer tapped his chin as he thought. "You know, that's how most stable groups are already. Either the leader is at the peak of their Rank, or they've got skills that make them surprisingly effective in combat, like the Spellblades, Magical Knights, or Elites with rare classes like your Beast Master."

Karl nodded. His team was mostly made of people who would be well suited to leadership positions, but they were better together. They had been working together for quite a while now, or like Morgana, they just fit so naturally into their role that there was no friction or overlap in what their skills should be doing.

With her new skills, Karl couldn't think of an Ascended team that wouldn't happily steal his Dana away to lead them. Once she had mastered a movement skill like the other Knights were using, she would be incredibly deadly in combat, supporting her Golems.

There was a chance that she already knew one. The skills she had gotten were [Disruption Blade] and [Windwalker Combat Style], which was a bit ambiguous. It might include movement skills as well as combat skills, given the name. They hadn't needed to actually test the new skills yet, and even with the book, it might take a few days to get used to thinking differently, so you could fight in close combat as a mage.

The others had all gotten skills that were more similar to their existing abilities. Except maybe Ophelia. Her new transformation was a Dire Bear, which was basically an overgrown Warbear. Karl was looking forward to seeing how that thing looked in combat while enraged. In his mind, it would be like the cartoon superhero Smash, a nerdy gamer kid who got huge and blue when he was angry. Only she would be massive and furry when she raged.

Chapter 393 Doug And Hawk Showdown

The gathering broke up after another hour of camera people running around to take shots of everyone mingling.

Karl's reluctance to mingle actually made their life easy, as he was with a group in the background of many shots, and he just had to move between them for individual photos. They didn't need a photo with everyone, just enough that they could fill multiple articles with whatever fit.

In contrast, the hyperactive ones like Lotus were harder to properly photograph because they kept disappearing, or appearing with the same people over and over, so you could never get a shot with the people you wanted.

They talked to a hundred people in the evening, but every time the camera caught them, they were with the same ones. That would just cause scandals if they posted too many.

The bored population wouldn't see a hyper nature priestess talking to all the fun people, they would see a married politician with a much younger woman in multiple photos, as if they were a couple.

Lotus wasn't helping that situation, as she had no qualms about hanging off people, and there were multiple pictures with her in either Bob or Tank's arms, gaining elevation so she could see what was going on.

Karl almost felt sorry for the reporters who had to do damage control so they didn't cause rumours that would get them yelled at by ranking Elites or their bosses.

"Prince Karl, could we get one last photo?" One of the reporters asked as Karl left with his group.

"Of course."

They all turned as a group, and Karl put an arm over Dana's shoulder as she leaned against him.

Doug had done the same with Morgana, who was currently tipsy enough that she wasn't yelling at him, while the others arrayed themselves around the couples.

"Thank you all. Have a splendid evening. Will you be at the general mess hall in the morning?" The reporter asked.

"Perhaps. We may be busy again tomorrow with the aftermath of today's advancements." Karl explained.

The reporters left them, and Karl's expanded group, including the Mackenzie brothers and Morgana, returned to the Fort for the evening. Now that they had hammocks there, the trio hadn't returned to the teachers' dorms for an evening since, and Karl didn't blame them. They were in the same dorm tent as Tank, and Karl could hear him snoring from the mess hall if the big berserker had a morning off.

Anyone with enhanced hearing had to be suffering or using earplugs to sleep in camp.

They had the next day off, and Karl was looking forward to sleeping in, but first thing in the morning, the sound of loud celebrations woke him up from a deep sleep.

"What is going on out there." He muttered to himself as he equipped his suit and rolled out of his hammock.

Oddly, there was nobody in the fort, they were all outside, gathered in a circle on the ground while Hawk and Doug stared each other down.

There were vines in between them, being blocked by a wall of fire, and both of them were surging with power as they competed.

Why they felt the need for a power game before six in the morning was a mystery, but they were dedicated to it, and Hawk was so focused on his work that Karl wasn't even picking up any stray thoughts from him.

Karl sat down in the entryway and watched the challenge while the other beasts slept. Both Hawk and Doug were right at the boundary to the Royal Rank advancement, and their contest seemed to be to keep up with each other.

The vines enlarged and contracted, while the flames shifted in colour, adapting to each other and maintaining the stalemate. Flames would burst from a new location, headed for Doug, only to be intercepted by a new vine, or a new vine would be intercepted by a ball of fire, increasing the density of the conflict every time one of them had a slight advancement.

It looked like any progress that they were making were balancing each other out, at least for the first few minutes.

Then Hawk's body began to enlarge, and his feathers started to turn transparent with flames. The wall of fire was pushing back the Thorned Vines now, and Doug's forehead was rolling with sweat as he worked to increase his peak power output.

Then Hawk's flame body went from a red-orange to a deep vermilion, and his power surged as his body expanded from condor sized to nearly five metres in wingspan as his wings spread in a majestic sweep of fire.

Doug's power was growing as well, and a soft green light surrounded his vines, which had been burning away. Now, they were slowly repairing themselves, but not fast enough, and in only a few seconds, Hawk had overcome him and the flames hit the barrier Dana had placed over the Cleric.

The two of them grinned at each other, pleased with their success, and Karl wondered if Doug had managed to make it to Royal Rank. Hawk clearly had made the advancement, as his feathers had changed. It was a particular characteristic of most monstrous Hawk species, in that they were visually identifiable not by size but by coloration. It had been true of him as a Windspeed Hawk, and now as a Dragonhawk. But the new feathers were fantastic. They were literally made of solid fire, as far as Karl could tell. They still looked like feathers, but the opaque portion was paper thin, and the rest of the feather was rich vermilion red flames.

Lotus climbed on Doug, sitting on his crossed legs with her nose centimetres from his chin, as if a shorter distance between them would help her understand better.

"Did you learn a new skill? I got a new skill when I made High Priestess, do we get another at Royal?" She demanded.

Doug poked her and Lotus glowed with green light before looking confused. "What did it do?"

"It's a regeneration spell. It applies to me and my living targets. That naturally includes my summoned vines, and that's what you saw.

But more importantly, you didn't mention that you got a spell at Commander Rank. What did you get?"

Lotus ignored his question and went over to carefully attempt to pet Hawk. She didn't know if he was actually on fire or just looked like he was, and there was one easy way to find out.

"Not going to answer?" Doug asked.

"Later. There is a Royal Rank feathered friend here, and I have to know." She replied.

She stretched out her hand and Doug laughed. The flames dimmed under her hand as Hawk adjusted them to not scorch the priestess, and Lotus beamed in pride, then smacked out the smouldering sections of her sleeve before repairing them.

"So, they can burn, but they can also not burn. That is fascinating. You are a beautiful Hawk." She cooed while the bird straightened in pride and spread his wings to show off his enlarged size and majesty.

[The Lotus appreciates me.] [Oh, you think because I'm not interrupting them that I'm not proud of you? I will preen your feathers all you want later, let them have their fun.] Karl replied with a soft laugh.

Their little experiment this morning had not gone unnoticed, and Karl saw that there were dozens of teachers hanging out in the background, along with a few news cameras and Director Jones of the Military Finance Committee.

It was still nearly dark out, the sun wasn't even over the horizon yet, so most of the camp was still asleep, but the energy had caught the attention of someone in charge, and they had sent over cameras.

[Hawk, make a loop over the camp. The cameras are running, and this is your chance to really show off your majestic feathers for the world.] Karl suggested.

Hawk gave Lotus a friendly headbutt, and then took to the sky.

The glowing flames of his feathers lit up the sky as Hawk used [Flaming Body] to enhance his appearance and make himself easier to see.

With a five-metre wingspan, Karl estimated that Hawk had to weigh over fifteen kilograms now, truly prodigious for an evolved Windspeed Hawk, and the trail of fire that he left behind him as he swooped through the morning twilight made beautiful patterns for the cameras to follow.

Doug smiled at Lotus. "I see now. You didn't want to step on Hawk's moment. We can discuss your new spell later, don't think I will forget."

"You never forget about things. Even when you should forget about the little things." Lotus pouted.

Doug and Tessa both laughed, knowing she was referring to something from her training years.

"Hawk is glorious, though. Not even the Rocs will dare to challenge us from the sky now." Doug agreed.

Chapter 394 Bags and Skills

Karl focused on his mental spaces, which seemed to have settled a little now that Hawk had advanced. They were all at the same Royal Rank standard, and he could feel the possibility of adding another, but as he focused on all of the things that made up his mindscape, he found something new.

There was a simple white cloth bag there.

Karl stared at it for a moment, wondering where it had come from. He didn't recall getting a bound storage bag.

"Hey, does anyone else have a bag in their bound items? Like a piece of gear, but just a white cloth bag?" Karl asked.

There was a moment of silence as everyone checked, and then Dana's surprised gasp. "Where did that come from?" "That's why I asked you, I don't remember getting a bound bag. Was it from the trial?"

Morgana sighed and shook her head. "Was nobody else paying attention? There were three chests and a bag for everyone. We opened the chests, then got distracted by the big shiny box, and the bags vanished into our bonded items. I've already moved my backpack and spare essentials into it, the bag holds much more than it looks like it should."

Karl went back to his hammock and grabbed his backpack, then focused on tossing it into the bag he was bonded to. The whole pack vanished, despite being three times the size of the white bag when it was outside his mind, and Karl could see from the top that he still had nearly half the space left.

"That bag is brilliant." He called to the crowd on the ground as he realized that no longer would they have to lug around backpacks when on patrol, or risk the packs getting damaged during a fight, or trampled as they were forced to move after taking them off for a battle.

Plus, Karl could now store his own personal items, and not just things that were useful to one of the beasts. He would be able to actually carry useful everyday items without worrying about the weight or pack space.

Well, with half his bag already taken by the essentials in the backpack, he would still have to worry about space, but not to the same extent.

The outsiders were still distracted by Hawk as Karl slid down the ladder to rejoin the others in congratulating Doug on his advancement.

Hawk came back as the sun climbed higher in the sky, and Karl realized that they had caused too much of a spectacle to have a quiet breakfast alone in the fort. They were going to have to join the guests for breakfast, but they could play the guessing game, and see how long it took for someone to realize that Doug's aura had changed, and he was now a Royal Rank Priest of the Green Dragon, the Nature God.

The camp was busy by the time that they came back, as everyone had realized that Hawk had advanced, and it was the talk of the Academy that morning. He was their eyes in the sky, and everyone knew that Karl was relaying scouting information from him to the rest of the students. So, the fact that he was now Royal Rank, and most likely even more capable than he had been at detecting enemy movements in advance, was bound to get the students excited.

The soldiers were just happy to have anything Royal Rank along the line. They didn't care if it was an Elite, a foreign mage, or a friendly monster. It just had to be on their team.

Most of the visitors were already packed up, with their bags sitting beside them, and the cargo crews were loading the equipment into buses for the ride back to the closest safe helipad. Even with the extra confidence in the safety of the area, they still weren't going to risk public figures flying this close to the border conflicts when they could safely send them by bus for the last hour of their journey.

The dining hall was packed with Elites about to go on shift, and everyone was too engrossed in stories of yesterday to be paying any attention to other groups outside their table, so Karl was reasonably certain he would have to wait for someone to notice.

And wait, they did. By the time that the meal was over, nobody had noticed, and then the group was off to one of the training tents with Morgana while Bob went off to teach a class and Doug went to help with the healing corps. There were always ongoing injuries, so all of the clerics who had downtime went to help out, and Doug had just gotten a new regeneration ability that seemed like it would be quite powerful.

Lotus followed behind him, ready to take notes, while Karl prepared to take his geography lessons, and Dana was dragged away by the Magical Knights to practice their new skills.

"You don't need to practice your new skills, do you?" Morgana asked as she brought out the textbooks.

"I'm good enough with the armour already, and the other skill is once per beast. I am not going to use it on them until they hit an absolute dead end. If they get to a bottleneck, and they simply can't get past it, even after the others have, then I will use the skill to let them evolve and advance, to hopefully move them far enough forward that they can rejoin the main group." Karl explained.

Morgana nodded. "Good, then you can continue lessons on schedule. Now, we just need to actually get through a lesson once the rest of the students arrive with questions for you." "It's not easy being famous. Just wait, you're about to find out. I can feel that you're at the bottleneck already, so you're almost certainly going to make Royal Rank now that you have new skills."

Morgana looked curious. "What do skills have to do with it?"

"It's a theory that the beasts and I devised. One of the things that all Royal Rank creatures have in common is that they have a skill that is not common to their race. The same seems true of the Elites I have met at Royal Rank or higher. They all have a skill that is not part of their basic kit. So, now that you've gained some new skills from the Trial, it should be much easier for you to make the transition through the bottleneck."

The students came in as they were talking, and remained silent so they didn't interrupt this vitally important discussion. Everyone wanted to know what it took to make the Royal Rank, and Karl had just

dropped the equivalent of a nuclear bomb on their understanding of Rank Advancement. Most of the mages in the class had assumed that it was just a matter of potential. That most of the Elites got stuck at Commander Rank because that was as good as they were. But what if it was a matter of lacking a skill that was compatible with their new Rank? If what they needed to advance was a Skill that could move to the Royal Rank, then the whole strategy behind their training would have to change. Or perhaps not for all of them. One of them was a Lightning Element Mage, and he now had [Chain Lightning], thanks to Karl donating it to the Inscriptionists.

Chapter 395 Dana's Training Day

While Karl was in history class, Dana was working hard to master the new skills that she had learned.

[Disruption Blade] was a simple one, as it operated the same way that she had seen Karl extend his barriers over his sword, except that it didn't need a blade to begin with. All she had to do was focus on the shape of the weapon that she wanted, and the spell would create one out of shimmering purple and silver energy.

It was as beautiful as it was deadly, and it seemed to just cause anything that it hit to fall into separate pieces with no real resistance.

Only when it hit a magical barrier did it provide resistance, acting as a solid blade in her hand.

But the movements of the [Windwalker Combat Style] were a much different story. She knew exactly how they were supposed to be performed, but her body had never moved that way before. She hadn't taken martial arts, done any sort of strength training, or even self-defence courses. The closest she had come to being in a fistfight was playing with the neighbourhood kids when she was little.

She had done dance classes, far too many of them, since she had entered the Academy, but at the moment she was wishing that they had included gymnastics in those courses.

The Combat style wasn't just a sword fighting style, there were movement skills and even kicks involved, and after half an hour, her whole body ached in muscles she didn't know that she had.

"Perhaps I can get Thor to cast [Refreshing Lightning] on me?" She suggested as she slumped down to take a breather with the Magical Knights.

"Save that for when you are in combat. You need to train all your muscles to fight the way you want without external assistance, so that if your group changes, or you have to fight separately, you are not reliant upon a skill that isn't available." The lone female among the Knights, whose name she had come to know was Ruth, informed her.

"How long did you train to learn to fight like that?" Dana asked, hoping that the answer wouldn't be too long.

Ruth smiled, and Dana heard the other Knights laugh under their helmets.

"The Magical Knights are chosen from among the students who are picked for advanced training from early childhood in the orphanages. The ones who like to train, to fight, or who show a natural aptitude for magic without the Divine Injection awakening them.

We all came from the Red Dragon Orphanages, and we've all been training to be soldiers since before we started school.

It was only a twist of fate that we all ended up as mages, and then proved ourselves worthy to join the Magical Knights." She explained.

"Did you all grow up together, then?" Dana asked. Ruth shook her head. "No, we all came from different locations. Those two are war orphans from the south, near the coast. That one lost his parents in a workplace accident, while this idiot and I were both turned in by our parents when they decided they couldn't afford us."

Dana nodded. She had often seen it as a possibility that her own family would abandon her, if they one day decided that it wouldn't hurt their public image too badly. It was hard enough for her father to hold down a job as it was, he didn't need a worse reputation that might put his access to charity in danger.

"Why don't you use your names?" She asked hesitantly.

"It's a tradition of the Magical Knights. We are supposed to be anonymous, as we often enforce penalties and hunt criminals. Giving out our names or routinely showing our faces defeats the purpose.

But you're working with us for a while, and it would just be too awkward not to have one person among us that you could properly talk to, so I chose to give up that anonymity."

Dana nodded. "That won't come back to harm you, will it?"

The Knights laughed. "Only if you end up on the wanted criminals list. You already know who I am, so I won't be among the ones to hunt you. The Church would never allow the possibility that I might go easy on you or let you escape justice."

"Oh, that makes a lot of sense. I thought that you were more elite soldier sorts, I didn't realize that you did law enforcement as well. It's not really something that gets described in detail for most of us. We hear the horror stories of someone committing a crime so bad that the Inquisition has to come and take them away, but I had only seen the Inquisitors a few times in my life, and the Clerics at our local church didn't really go into details." Dana explained.

"That's understandable. Nobody wants to think too hard about how the Inquisition or Church Law Enforcement works. I would guess that a lot of the lay priests who do the day-to-day work of the church don't even know the details. It's not part of the curriculum, as it doesn't really matter what division of Inquisitors comes for the criminals, or what their specialty is. Most of the time, when we show up, we just flash our identification and no more questions are asked.

It's only the Elites who need to know our skills when they're going to be fighting alongside us as allies." Ruth explained.

The other knights got to their feet, and Ruth helped Dana up before giving her a warning.

"Stretch after you rest. Your muscles aren't used to proper training yet, and if you let them stiffen and cramp, you're likely to injure yourself and undo weeks or months of muscle memory training."

Dana didn't have weeks or months worth of training to undo, but she got the point. If you injured yourself during training, or tried to learn new skills while you had cramps, you would be learning it wrong, and your muscles would remember how to do it as if you always had a cramp or an injury.

"The next exercise is one that I think you will like. As a practice of our movement skills, we will be playing tag. Only, if you touch the ground, you're out. I will go first, you all have a three-second head start." Ruth announced.

Dana activated the [Wind Walk] core skill of her new combat style to move up and away from the Magical Knight.

Out of mercy, Ruth didn't come after her first, and Dana managed to get a bit of distance beyond the three seconds. But she quickly realized that the delay was a trap. She didn't have all the practice that they did in maintaining the skill, and after fifteen seconds, she began to stumble and nearly fell out of the sky as Ruth drove one of her companions to the ground, eliminating him by ground contact as he tried to dodge.

Then one of the others moved so she was between him and Ruth, and Dana focused on her movement to get out of the way again as the Knight charged in her direction.

She made it three steps, just enough to get out of the way, but then lost her focus and went tumbling to the ground. Her shield flared as she hit the grass and the wind was knocked from her lungs.

Dana knew she wouldn't have any injuries, as the barrier would protect her, but being winded by the rapid stop was never fun. It was also far from the first or last time that day when she would experience it.

Chapter 396 You Can Try

In a nest atop the tallest tree in his space, Hawk was working frantically to improve his skills. He was almost stronger than Rae, he could feel it. He just needed to push himself a bit harder to get his body to accept more mana, and he would be there.

Rae watched with smug amusement as the Dragonhawk pushed himself to the limits, trying to overcome the racial disparity between the two of them.

At Royal Rank, her combat power had skyrocketed, while his primary ability [Flaming Body] had already been at Royal Rank, and it was just his body that underwent a minor transformation toward becoming a Vermilion Bird. He was almost there, or perhaps he was a very juvenile Vermilion Bird, but Rae's racial memory said that they should be five times the size of his current five-metre wingspan.

Until he started packing on the kilograms, there was no way that his body was going to support a power level higher than what she could show. Even her stones were on par with his flames.

Thor thought it was all quite amusing as he floated in his pond, napping the afternoon away as he soaked up Holy Power, but Remi was doing her best to try to catch up to her senior siblings.

They had the head start, and she was just a small snake. Well, not so small anymore at Commander Rank, but not nearly as big as Thor or sister Rae.

Remi sung happily to herself as she worked. She had been generously donated a whole new book of spells from the library last night, and she was eager to learn what all these new magics were.

Of course, the Library didn't know yet that they had loaned any books to Remi, but she was confident that they would understand, since she didn't have hands to hold a pen and sign them out.

[Introduction to Shamanistic Magic] sat open in front of her, turned to the first page.

[Natural Phenomenon are the domain of the shaman, from blinding rain and crashing lightning, to the howling winds of a snowstorm. From the fiery lava of a volcanic eruption to the crushing waves of the ocean depths, all are within the domain of a Shaman.]

That sounded pretty awesome. She only had basic water control, which couldn't really do much. But being able to control huge waves sounded fun.

Big brother Hawk would freak out and it would be hilarious.

But it was the next paragraph that really caught her attention.

[Shamans are far more than a force of destruction. While the might of a lightning bolt can burn an enemy to cinders, a smaller jolt can restart a stopped heart. Under massive pressure, the normally gentle water can cut through solid steel, but water can also be a revitalizing force, refreshing the body and carrying healing magic through the veins.]

The druids and nature clerics might be the masters of the living beings, but the Shaman is the master of the living world, and their healing skills should never be underestimated.]

Brother Thor wanted to be a healer, healing was a noble profession. But Remi thought that he was more suited to protecting and regenerating. That was the way of the Cerro. You could hurt them, but the wounds just closed. But she might be able to do more than just her simple healing splash.

With her nose, Remi flipped the pages, looking for the healing spells.

There was a whole chapter in this book dedicated to Shaman Healing, and she wanted to see what it said.

However, she only made it halfway through, past the ice and lightning and fire attacks, when she found something even cooler than a healing spell.

[Chapter 7: Totems]

[Defensive Totem]

[Mana Totem]

[Healing Totem]

There was a healing totem? Why did nobody ever tell her that was a thing?

But what was a mana totem? You used mana to make totems, but what did it do?

Remi flipped the page with her snout and stared at the diagram in front of her. [Healing Totem] Provides a constant stream of healing to all targets in range.

That sounded a lot like what Sister Lotus could do, and that spell was one of her favourites, so it had to be good. Remi looked at what the totem needed, and began to build one out of the bits and pieces that were in her space.

When she sent out totems, she didn't send the real ones, just a projection of the ones that she had made in here. So, they were never really smashed, and they could just be summoned over and over.

The book talked about making them and transferring them to your mental space, but that was for common humans. She was a Spirit Snake, and she had a space of her very own to work in.

This sure was easier when she had a textbook. The last book had been all ancient mumbo jumbo, but this one was just gibberish letters for her to ignore, and then very detailed diagrams with step-by-step instructions.

Remi couldn't read the common language very well. She was much better with the ancient Runic Language that was used for spells, so she had no idea that the complex words were actually more instructions.

Step by step, she made her new totem while Rae watched Hawk struggle to catch up to her.

The bloodbath spider wasn't actually slacking, she was working on improving her silk as she sat in her web. It was better already now that she was at Royal Rank, but the new advancement had opened up new possibilities. Like Fire Retardant silk.

So, none of them noticed that Remi was actually the one making real progress that day, or that she nearly had a healing totem functional by the time that Karl returned to the fort that night.

By the next morning, she was reasonably certain that she had a working prototype.

Her happy singing woke Thor, who actually lifted his head out of his pond so that he could see into her space more easily.

[What are you making, little snake?] He asked curiously.

[I made a healing totem, from the information in this book. It's pretty cool, or it will be if it works like I think it will. According to the book, it's supposed to send out pulses of healing energy every second. So, your magic protects them and makes them regenerate, and then the waves of healing will patch up the parts that are left over.] Remi declared proudly.

[Oh, you thought it all out. So, you will do the extra healing while I do the extra protecting?] Thor asked, intrigued by her logic.

[Well, you are much bigger, I'm just a small snake.] Remi replied confidently.

[But when you reach Royal Rank, you evolve, right?] Thor asked.

[Yeah, but I don't know what it will be yet. Probably a Shaman, maybe? Do snake shamans look different? Or will I be an actual Naga Shaman next? I don't feel like I'm growing arms, but perhaps.]

Thor shrugged, splashing water about.

[I don't know how snakes work. I'm not even certain I know how birds work anymore. I thought that they stayed the same colour, but Hawk doesn't.

But I think that if you want to be a Naga and have arms to hold your own totems, you could be one.

Or you could stay a small and cute snake and just put the totems on the ground. They work well on the ground, and silly monsters like to chase them.]

Chapter 397 Opinions

The beasts had a lot to think about now that two of them were at the Royal Rank. Remi and Thor still had to advance, but their major concern was that there would be another space opening soon.

A new space meant a new brother or sister, and none of them knew what sort of sibling they would like to have.

[We should get another one for the front with Thor. Thor and Ophelia aren't enough to block the whole front.] Remi suggested.

Rae thought about that. If there was another, she could send her Golems off on adventures more often.

[Yes, another one at the front would be good. Then we would have a person on each side of Thor.] She agreed.

[I think we need another scout so I don't have to do it every time. I could be an extra mage and throw fireballs at things all day.] Hawk thought.

[But Ophelia can be a bear now, does that mean she gets her own spot?] Thor asked.

None of them knew the answer to that.

[I think Ophelia is like Dana, you can't pull her into the space because she's already an Elite.] Karl suggested.

[Oh, that makes sense. A human who wasn't an Elite would be useless, though. So, what we need is a front fighter to accompany Thor and Ophelia, who can also fly and scout when they need to.] Rae announced.

Karl laughed. [Well, I will keep that in mind, but usually flying things don't want to fight up close. That's why they fly.]

[Why are they making it hard for us?] Remi complained.

[If we could find a way for Rae to grow wings...] Thor began.

[Rae is pretty big to be learning to fly. But Remi is still waiting to evolve, right? Maybe she can learn to fly.] Hawk offered.

Remi thought about that. Maybe she could develop wings. Were there winged snakes? She hadn't seen them in her borrowed books, but there might be.

Or, perhaps she could work on a wind magic spell that would let her fly like Dana Mage and the Knights did.

That still seemed like a lot of work when she could just catch a ride on someone to get where she wanted to be. Plus, if she wasn't touching the ground, how was she supposed to know where things were?

[Remi has a point. She relies too much on her tongue and ground vibrations, she would be a lousy flying scout. We will have to find Karl a better new member.]

While the beasts argued about who their new sibling should be, Karl relaxed along the line for his shift. He had decided that not calling them all out was the best course of action so that he didn't scare the Hill Giants away or make them think that there was an increased military force here.

They already knew about him, but it was better not to let them believe there were more Royal Rank combatants here.

Karl listened to them argue about the next team member all shift, but as they were returning to camp for dinner, Karl's group was intercepted by a military messenger with documents for them.

"Prince Karl, your extended group is needed for an emergency. Please bring them all to the bus, and we will go straight to the landing pad." The messenger informed them.

"All of us, including the Knights?" Karl asked.

"Yes, sir. All of you, including the High Priest, Agent Morgana, Commander Mackenzie and the Knights."

They all headed for the line, but the messenger stopped them. "You should get your packs and other personal belongings, this could take more than a day. I am not privy to the details, but you should bring your belongings."

Karl smiled. "We all received a reward that allows us to store our belongings. We should be ready to go, unless someone left something behind?" Everyone shook their heads, and they continued to the bus parking area.

The driver started moving as soon as they were loaded, racing down the battered dirt road as fast as he safely could in the large vehicle.

If they had a smaller vehicle that could carry a dozen passengers, it would have been better, but the smaller off-road vehicles were only suited to a maximum of five or six Elites.

The driver didn't say anything, and Karl didn't expect him to know anything, except that it was urgent that this group was brought back to the helicopters.

What was normally an hour-long drive took them under thirty minutes at his breakneck pace, with the passengers bouncing around in their seats, but their ride was waiting for them, and there were other Elite teams already in the helicopter that Karl was being waved into.

"Good, they didn't have to search too long for you. Sorry about the short notice and what will be a long night. There is a monster outbreak that we need an additional Prince to deal with." The crewman welcomed them as he shut the door behind Karl's team.

"What happened, give me the abridged version if necessary." He insisted.

"We noticed an anomaly within the southeastern region, near the Magma Dragon's territory, one hour and forty minutes ago.

It was then determined that the threat level of the monsters leaving the anomaly included high Commander Rank monsters of the Ogre varieties.

The usual response teams for the southeastern region are currently deployed to the Mountain Giant border, which put you at the top of the response list."

Karl nodded. "I understand. How large of an area has the threat spread to?"

"Less than one square Kilometre, but the monster density suggests that the Ogres are preparing to defend the area."

Karl sighed. Attacking a fortified position with an unknown enemy force was going to be a headache, but if there was an anomaly at the core of it, they might actually get some benefit out of this situation.

"How long is the flight?" Doug asked.

"One hour fifteen."

"Alright, wake me up when we're five minutes out. We just came off a shift on the line, and it would be better if we got a bit of sleep before fighting all night." He insisted.

"Of course, High Priest."

Karl closed his eyes to get some rest while they made their way to the target, headed straight south so they didn't approach the Frost Giant border too closely before they reached their destination.

It had been mostly quiet along that front, but there was no need to stir them up with powerful auras from a group of Elites in transit.

A change in the pitch of the helicopter's noise brought Karl out of his meditative trance, and he saw the groups who were there before his team preparing to depart.

"Everyone is going down close together. It's a few minutes early, but you can wake your team." The crewman announced.

There was no need, they were already all awake. "There are no teams in the area at this point. You are the first. Group One will be on the North Side, Group Two is on the West." Karl nodded, and accepted a map of the area from him.

The area was flat and lightly forested, without any nearby landmarks. It was safe to say that they would probably not be sneaking up on the Ogre camp, even if they were dropped five or ten kilometres out.

Chapter 398 Ogre Anomaly

They had circled to approach from the west, which would put Karl's team down first.

"Team Two, get ready to deploy. How far out do you want to be?" The pilot shouted over the intercom.

Karl looked at his team, and Doug gestured downward then closed his fist.

"Drop us right on top of them, as close as you can get." Karl informed the pilot.

That sounded like crazy talk to the other team, but for Karl's group, it wouldn't be so bad.

He would summon the beasts right into combat, while the Magical Knights could fly. The rest of them would form up on the edge of the Ogre defences, allowing them no time to shift their formations, and the fight would be on.

The helicopter dropped fast a hundred metres from the Ogres, as close as the pilot felt wasn't suicidal on his end, and Karl charged out at the head of his team, sending Hawk into the sky while Rae and Thor fell into position with the group. Remi found herself momentarily homeless, as she usually stood next to Dana, who was now with the Magical Knights, but she soon found a spot between Morgana and Doug to cast from.

Karl fired three arrows with [Blizzard] on them from left to right across the visible monsters, blinding and damaging the weaker Ogres as his team advanced, while Hawk began his bombardment from above.

Ophelia shifted into her new [Dire Bear] Form, and Karl realized that he had greatly underestimated how large she was going to be.

Ophelia in Werebear form and buffed was three metres tall and must have weighed close to three hundred kilos.

Ophelia in Dire Bear Form was over four metres tall while standing on all four feet. There was no comparison, the new form was massive, though she might not appreciate it if someone mentioned she was roughly the size of a delivery truck.

Ophelia and Thor alone were enough to hold the front line, it was hardly necessary to send Bob forward, much less the Magical Knights, who had stepped up into the sky with Dana and tore into the Ogres with their spells.

Attacking from so close gave them all the advantages, and Dana's Golems appeared deep within the enemy ranks, sowing chaos as they fought back to back.

Then Rae lobbed a boulder in the air and [Shadow Stepped] to it so she could do the same with her golems before hurling the boulder at the Ogres.

Then she retreated to her defensive position and began firing stone bullets at the enemy, keeping them from flanking the group.

The Ogres were mostly Ascended, and with the Royal Rank [Chain Lightning] spreading from Karl's arrows, they were falling like crops being harvested.

Even the [Blizzard] wasn't going to take long to kill them, and Karl was prepared to fire more of the enhanced arrows into the deeper ranks near the anomaly.

The Ogres were preparing to charge at the invaders, but what Karl was waiting for was word from Hawk or Rae's Golems that they had found the Royal Rank Ogre variant that the army suspected was here.

Cutting down the weak ones was a simple task when they had gathered like this, but if they couldn't find the leader fast enough, it might escape.

A Royal Rank Ogre loose in the wilderness was a catastrophe waiting to happen.

[Hawk, make sure that none of them run away. We don't want them causing problems somewhere else.]

From his vantage point, Hawk could see the whole formation, but from what he was relaying to Karl, it seemed that the Ogres were gathering Commanders for a counterattack.

[There are incoming two headed Ogres.] Hawk warned.

Those should be the Ogre Mages. Ettin, Karl thought they were called. They couldn't use too much magic, but their fireballs would be much more effective than anything that the other Ogres had managed to accomplish so far.

[The other team will be down soon.]

Ophelia seemed to greatly enjoy her new form, and her [Toxic Claws] left the Ogres twitching and shivering with the slightest scratch, as black poison spread from the wound.

Commander Rank lethal poisons were no joke, and even if they were only slightly wounded, the Ogres would be dead within minutes unless they were healed.

The fact that she was bigger than the Ogres didn't help their chances, and a swat of her massive paw was enough to throw them off their feet and shatter bones. With Thor and so many mages, there was no danger of her losing her defensive barriers, but the group's spell casters were mostly focused on dealing damage.

Dana gracefully stepped down as an Ogre turned its back and severed its head with her new [Disruption Blade] before stepping back up into the sky.

Karl almost felt sorry for Bob. Everyone else had gotten so many ridiculous new powers, while his new skills were much less flashy.

He had gotten a new [Slam] skill that sent out a shockwave in front of his shield when he attacked with it, and the blow was hard enough to send three rows of Ogres staggering backward, but Karl couldn't tell what his second skill was, or if he was even using it.

Thor cleared a path with [Earthquake], then charged forward into it, gaining more ground and trampling the surviving Ogres underfoot.

Karl moved up, waiting for the Ettin group to get a bit closer before he focused on them. However, the moment that Hawk hit the first of them with a Rend Explosion, Rae moved her Golems to tear into them, racing the Dragonhawk to see who could kill more of the real threats.

They hated losing to each other, especially in cases where Hawk didn't have to do any real scouting duties.

"Are they even intending on letting the rest of us do anything?" Morgana asked as she watched the Ogres fall.

Doug chuckled. "Probably not. I forget that your magic doesn't have a very long range, and we've got so many ranged fighters right now, without the threats of giant stones coming our way, that not much is getting close."

The Witch Doctor's magic was much like [Blizzard] or Ophelia's [Toxic Claws]. It took a few seconds or a minute to deal its maximum damage. But nothing was living that long.

[The other group is coming our way, chasing the Ogres. I don't think the Ogres care.] Hawk updated them.

[Any sign of a Royal Rank Ogre in the group?]

[Nothing so far. Not even many Commanders, just some strong ones.]

The response to this appearance might have been overkill, Karl decided. But after a few seconds to look at the map, he realized that there were two coal mines within ten kilometres of this point. The loss of production would be a national security concern, so it was better to divert extra resources for the day.

The emergency response fights were supposed to be a sure thing, not a hard fight, after all.

[Yes, they're starting to run. This is my time to shine.] Hawk cheered as he flew off to bomb the deserters.

[He's just running away early so that he can say he didn't lose.] Rae joked.

That might be true, but it was Karl's orders to make certain that nothing escaped.

[That's his job, don't give him a hard time and make him consider abandoning it. I don't want to be chasing Ogres through the woods all night.]

Chapter 399 Meet In The Middle

The two groups began to converge, and Karl could see the fear in the other group leader's face as he saw the Spider Golems putting in work to shred their way through the Ogres who had come from the other side of the anomaly to try to remove the threat.

The Golems weren't interested in the humans, though. Once the two groups got close enough that Team One was becoming concerned about how controlled that carnage actually was, the Golems turned to fight off in a different direction, leaving the last few dozen Ogres between Karl's group and theirs alone.

Karl noticed Hawk diving into the field of bodies, and assumed he must have seen something that looked tasty, or possibly a survivor that was hidden from his explosions, but the bird came back up with a sword clutched in its claws, and made a large loop before dive-bombing the Ogres, using the blade as a projectile.

[Unsatisfying.] Hawk informed him with great sadness as he followed the blade with a barrage of fireballs across the heads of the Ogres.

[Very unsatisfying fight. Everything is too big to eat again.] Remi agreed with great sadness.

Hawk laughed and threw a Rend attack at the ground, then dipped beneath the tall grass to pick something up. [Here, try this, it might be tasty.] He suggested.

The bird tossed a large Common Grade ferret monster over the heads of the defenders, and Remi instinctively struck at it, dosing it with venom before giving it a squeeze to make sure it was finished.

[Oh, not bad. It's got a good texture. We should go out and do this more often.]

Karl sighed as the two beasts got distracted. [If you're done with your mid-battle snack, we've still got work to do.] He reminded the wayward pair.

Remi shrugged off his concern. A large part of her damage output was her totems and Blizzard spell, and both of those were still active. She had even given Lotus and Doug one of her Healing Totems to hold on to until they expired.

She wanted to test them, and it looked like the targeting runes worked, since they were not healing the Ogres, but nobody was injured, so she couldn't be certain that they were properly healing anyone at all.

Maybe once the other group got here. They didn't have [Refreshing Lightning] so they might be taking some damage for the totems to heal.

The two groups reached each other, and Remi immediately rushed over to put her healing totems in the middle of the other group.

They also hadn't taken much damage, but one warrior had a scrape on his arm, which healed on the first pulse of the Totems.

[Victory! I have proof that the healing totems work.] Remi declared.

Closing a scratch wasn't exactly a high standard of healing, but it was what they had to work with, and the healers in the other group didn't specialize in long duration healing like Lotus did. They would do an area heal at the end of the fight for all those little scratches and scrapes, as they didn't affect the combat abilities of the group.

"Did the snake just cast a healing totem in the middle of our group?" The other team's Royal Rank warrior asked.

"Yeah, she just learned the spell, but we've all got a Lightning Barrier on us, so nobody took any damage to test it. One of your guys had a scrape, so she put out the totems to prove that they worked properly." Karl explained.

The team leader took a moment to make sure that he didn't hear Karl incorrectly. It was rare that anyone just learned a new skill without extensive training or some sort of special resource.

Most of them had only learned a few since they started their second year at the Academy, so to hear that a snake had just learned to make healing totems was mind-boggling.

"We will circle the anomaly back in the direction we arrived from, and we will meet you in the middle. It looks like most of the threat is cleared, but we will need to do a full sweep to ensure none of them fled." He responded instead of getting side tracked by the shaman snake.

"I have a Royal Rank Dragonhawk hunting deserters and ensuring that nothing fled the area already, I will update you if we find anything." Karl agreed, then led his team toward the trail of carnage that the Spider Golems had left.

There wasn't going to be much left to kill by the time that they double-checked all the Ogres to ensure they were dead and didn't have any magical items on them. But it was important that they did not leave survivors, and Rae had discovered that many of them had new types of rocks and magical plants.

The plants could go to Thor, for a bit of variety in his diet, but these special rocks didn't shine or glow, so Rae was collecting all that she could.

As magical resources, many of them had purposes beyond simply decoration, including a few Fire Elemental stones that Karl saw could be used to make concoctions to help Hawk, and a Water Element Stone to help Remi.

He really had to put more work into finding all the ingredients that went into these concoctions. There was a very real chance that he might be able to bring the team to the peak of Royal Rank in record time if he could find the identified ingredients.

The problem was that none of the names it gave were the common ones in use for the items that he needed, so when he asked about them, there was only a slim chance that a Librarian of the Blue Dragon, or some other researcher might recognize the ancient name for the resource.

None of the stones or resources in the spaces could make a resource that he hadn't tried yet. There was a chance that some of them could be used twice, but from what he knew of growth resources, they usually didn't have the same level of effect the second time.

The others were picking up random items as they progressed, mostly stuffing them into the silk bags on Thor's sides, so they could donate them to the armoury for credits.

The Spider Golems made their way to the other team, then doubled back, looting what they could understand from the instructions Rae gave them.

Mostly it was larger magic items that the Ogres had, which baffled the other team.

"Where are you even going to put all that? You can't possibly need a load of Awakened and Ascended Rank weapons and jewellery." He asked.

"We put it in bags on Thor, and then we load it in the helicopter when we leave. It keeps the main lines stocked with random stuff, and sometimes there is an actual treasure."

The team leader looked around at the mess, and then at the anomaly. "Should we check that? It might still be allowing monsters out." He asked.

"Rae, send a golem in and see what happens." Karl instructed.

The Golems jumped into the anomaly, spiked forelimbs first, and the group anxiously waited for a few seconds until Rae gave her update.

[It's empty, no treats.]

Chapter 400 Anomaly Stable

Karl shook his head at the other group leader. "The Golems report that it is empty, no targets."

Then random items began flying out of the entrance to the anomaly.

"Hey Charles, is it a lottery machine? Just paying out after we beat the defenders?" One of the other team members called to their leader.

"How the hell should I know. Just look for valuables." Prince Charles laughed.

It was actually just the Golems throwing anything that looked valuable out of the anomaly. None of the team members wanted to risk going in, as Anomalies were known to close unexpectedly, and you could well be trapped inside indefinitely, but the Golems could just be dismissed if it started to close.

Everyone had to be attentive if they were going to sort the loot, though. The Golems were just throwing stuff out without looking at the exit, so if the next item out was a weapon or a chest of coins, you could take some real damage if it hit you.

There was a surprising amount of stuff coming flying out of that Anomaly, and Karl began to wonder what in the world was going on when the Golems reappeared, holding a large box between them and dragging a massive ogre corpse.

[Rae, I thought that there were no enemies inside.]

[No treats inside, just a smelly guy. He doesn't look tasty at all. They killed it once all the good stuff was gone.]

That sounded an awful lot like the final boss of a dungeon instance.

But it was a Commander Rank Ogre Lord, and he was wearing the mangled remains of a very fancy set of plate armour.

The other team began to strip him down, hoping that something could be salvaged, while Karl's team did their best not to laugh at Rae's attempt to look innocent.

Karl hadn't said anything out loud, but it was pretty clear that she had lied to him about what was inside the Anomaly.

While they were looting the Ogre Lord, the Anomaly shimmered, and turned red, then blue, before stabilizing into an oval portal.

"Did it just stabilize into a Dungeon entrance?" Prince Charles asked.

Karl turned to the clerics. If anyone knew, it would be them.

Both of the clerics with the other team were in white with gold trim, High Priests of the main branch, the healing specialists. They began to cast a spell, creating some sort of glowing barrier over the portal as they chanted and prayed.

It took about ten minutes before they were finished, and then the Clerics stood and smiled at them.

"It is now a stable low Commander Rank dungeon. There should be four Commander Rank bosses in the dungeon, while two thirds of the ogres are still Ascended. It should be stabilized now, and if it is, then the Ogres would be trapped inside. That also means that we got all of the ones that escaped after it formed. If there were any of them still wandering around, the Anomaly wouldn't have stabilized." One of the clerics, a man in his late twenties with his head shaved to hide a severely receding hairline, explained.

"Who do we call first?" Karl asked. This was the first time that he had been on a mission like this, but the last time he had found a system related thing, he contacted the Inquisition, who handled it all for him.

The Cleric pointed behind Karl, and the Magical Knights laughed.

Ruth nodded before replying. "He has a point. Normally, you call the Inquisition, and they send a team to secure the area, or one of the Elite security teams if we don't have an Inquisitor nearby. But we're already here.

I will call it in, and then we can let the Church's asset management teams move in." "That makes sense. I wonder how long it takes to reset after a team goes through?" Karl suggested.

"That's part of what the next teams to arrive will determine so that they can maximize the benefit. Of course, we already got all the loot from going through once, split between the two teams, with some extra Ogres from the respawn." Prince Charles noted.

Karl sighed, and Rae gave the entrance a longing look.

"As efficient as it might be to send your beasts through the dungeon, protocol is to leave it respawned so that they can make a proper investigation. Some dungeons respawn on a timer after death, and not all at once, so it might only be partially respawned if we clear it now." He explained.

Bob and Doug both nodded in agreement. They had been through this before. "Alright, I guess we just call in and wait. I will let Hawk scout until our ride arrives."

Hawk was happy to comply, and he took off to go see if there was anything interesting in the area. The two nearby coal mines would be close enough for him to scout, but he didn't want to scare them, so he would stay out of sight.

Chances are, he wouldn't see anything more than some Common Monsters, but some of those were tasty, like the boars. If there were wild boars, he might grab one just for old times' sake.

Unfortunately, as a Royal Rank beast, everything fled the moment that they sensed him, and the only creatures he could find were the ones that hoped that going to ground or freezing in place would be less likely to attract attention.

The humans might have no idea that he was here, but the other beasts knew, and they were terrified.

The inhabited areas of the nation were regularly patrolled to clear out stronger monsters, and even an Awakened Rank Monster could live like a King in many areas, so they were not at all prepared for a Royal Rank bird monster to show up this far from the wild territories.

[Oh, there is a helicopter. No, three of them, all from different directions. Did we do something to annoy them?] Hawk asked.

[I don't think so. They're just excited that the Anomaly stabilized into a Dungeon.]

Hawk returned to the group now that there were helicopters, and people who might not understand that they were on the same team. Humans were slow like that.

All of the beasts except Thor retreated into their spaces as the teams approached. Thor had Tessa sitting on his back, so it should be pretty immediately obvious that he wasn't a threat. But the others didn't trust strangers quite that much.

The first thing that Karl noticed was that while they were all green, the three aircraft all had different logos on them. One was a Church group, one had an official government logo on it, and a third had a symbol that Karl didn't recognize.

Only when it got within a kilometre could Karl read the logo for the Bureau of Elite Development.

That should be a sufficiently varied group to make all the decisions that needed to be made here. The emergency had been solved, now it was just up to the teams to gather the data that they needed.

The sun was beginning to set as the Bureau team was the first to land next to the gathered Elites. The side door swung open, and Colonel Valerie stepped out onto the trampled grass. Seeing that it was the big boss, Karl, Morgana and Prince Charles all came forward to greet her.

"Colonel, good to see you again. The area has been scouted and verified secure. There is nothing above Common Rank within a two-kilometre radius." Karl greeted her.

"Look at you, all professional. I like the new armour, by the way, that had to have cost a pretty penny." She replied with her usual business scowl firmly in place.

"It's a skill, actually. Free repairs, I just need to summon it again."

More familiar faces followed her out. Jodi, Anise, Dave and Jill led six more unfamiliar faces out of the helicopter, all carrying large crates of gear for whatever they were doing here.

"I hope that you weren't in a hurry to go anywhere. There is a lot of work to be done, and we are going to need both of your teams to remain in place for security and testing purposes." Colonel Valerie announced as the Bureau members disembarked and prepared to set camp.

"Understood Colonel. Let me know what you require, and I'm certain we can sort it out." Karl agreed, while Charles simply nodded and walked away.

The government and church teams landed on the opposite side of the battlefield, and two security teams charged out to make sure that the monsters were truly dead.

They would realize soon enough that there was no need. Rae had already done that when she was looking for pretty rocks and loot for Thor's bags.