

Beast Master 411

Chapter 411 Private Fort

[Rae, can you make a smaller fort far enough back in the trees that people in the camp won't hear us? I would like to take Dana for an evening alone.] Karl requested.

[I can do that. I will get everything set up for you, and I know the perfect spot.] Rae replied instantly, suggesting that she had already been thinking about this topic.

Rae exited her space in the distance and darted off to a spot near a river that Hawk had scouted on his way back from hunting for good food.

It was over a kilometre from camp, far enough that sensitive ears shouldn't hear what they were up to, and in nice strong trees, so they could be up in the air, like a proper fort should be.

[I will get everything set up for the evening. Trust in the spider, I know about these things.]

Well, Karl couldn't say that he had more experience with women than Rae did, so he wasn't going to argue with her logic.

Now, he just needed a smooth way to get Dana away from camp. Really, it shouldn't be too hard. Hawk was in the tower of the fort, and if he stayed there all night, Karl would have his early warning system in place in case something went wrong.

Fifteen minutes later, Rae was confident that she had everything that she needed ready.

[There is a fort, the birthday gift for my Dana, a change of clothes for the evening, and everything you might need.] She informed Karl as she settled into her security office web a few dozen metres away.

The other crews at the dungeon had brought pressure cookers, so the clerics teamed up to make a proper stew with the deer creature that evening. Bob had made fresh bread for them, and the smells coming from the fort were incredible.

But the rest of the camp was cooking dinner as well, and the bureaucrats weren't the sort that skimped out on their meals when they were in the field.

So his team likely could have made something fancy just by pilfering the three groups for some specialties. The government researchers had brought plenty of supplies for the Elites that they were holding on station, but Karl's team had always preferred to cook for themselves.

"What is the plan for the evening? I am guessing that Karl is going to steal the birthday girl for the evening." Bob asked as they finished dinner.

Karl winked. "Rae has already set it all up. But Hawk will stay here all night, so if something happens, we can be back in only a minute or two."

"Then shoo. Have a good night, and we will prepare for the birthday celebration when you get back in the morning."

Karl held out a hand to Dana, who blushed and accepted the help to her feet, before Karl swept her up into his arms and jogged off into the woods.

"Where are we going? We're supposed to be protecting the civilians." She asked as Karl ran through long grass in an open field on the way to the river.

"We will only be a kilometre from camp. Close enough to be back before most of the humans have even noticed anything is wrong. Trust me, it will be worth it."

Karl spotted the fort right where Rae said it was supposed to be, with the Bloodbath Spider waiting in a nearby tree. She had made it a simple design, spacious, with a fully suspended floor, so that it would all be stretchy and soft, with no hard spots where branches passed underneath.

[There is a change of clothes inside. Have fun.]

"Rae says she made us an outfit for the night. I don't know what she made, but there is a present in there for you to open in the morning as well." Karl explained.

"You know, my family could never afford birthday gifts when I was growing up. This is a whole new experience for me, and a private fort overlooking the river in the moonlight is like something out of a fairy tale." She whispered.

Dana got excited about the idea of a fairy tale birthday and hopped out of his arms to run up the ladder and check out the view and the gift that Rae had left for her.

Karl jumped up from ground level, and found Dana holding up a bit of thin black silk with a deep blush on her cheeks as she stared out into the fading twilight through the open window.

"I think it will look fantastic on you." Karl whispered as he stepped through the entry.

"There are clothes for you as well." Dana smirked with a gesture toward a pile of cloth beside the door.

Karl picked up a matching black set of silk pyjama pants with his name embroidered on them in white thread, though his were a bit thicker and less detailed than what Rae had made for Dana. He suspected that the spider had an innate bias, but she was giving them as much privacy as she could with her mind linked to Karl's.

Dana licked her lips as she saw Karl strip down and change into the thin silk, then steeled her resolve and changed into the nightie that Rae had left for her.

The silk fell to her knees, but as thin as it was, it wasn't actually hiding anything.

"Absolutely stunning." Karl stammered as he took a step in her direction.

He barely registered her nails digging into his back as he pulled Dana into his arms and pushed her bouncing curls away from her face.

Dana closed her eyes in pleasure at the feeling of his fingers massaging her scalp and gasped at the feeling of soft lips on her neck as Karl kissed his way down to her collarbone. She instinctively leaned

forward into his body as he pulled back, longing for more contact, but as his hands slid up her hips under the silk of her night gown, her back arched in pleasure.

There was something strange about tonight. Her skin was far too sensitive, every touch was like lightning through her body, and she couldn't get enough.

She found herself straddling Karl's lap as he fell back into a swinging chair, and when his lips found hers, all thoughts of anything outside the fort faded away.

Dana blinked her eyes in the early morning light, and flashes of last night came crashing down on her brain, along with a soreness in her body like she had never felt before.

She recalled the intense urge to taste him, and falling out of the chair when she tore his pants off. There was no silk between their bodies now, and Dana desperately hoped that her gift from Rae had survived the evening. It was definitely the sexiest piece of clothing that she had owned in her life, but it was so soft that she would happily wear it to bed every night.

More memories of the evening returned to her mind, and she buried her face in Karl's chest in embarrassment.

"I think it's a bit late to be body shy." He whispered in her ear.

"Do we have to get up?" Karl kissed her forehead. "We can stay here a little longer. Remi set up a shower in the corner of the fort, and we're going to need it before we leave, but we don't need to hurry."

Chapter 412 Birthday Morning

An hour later, Dana was intimately familiar with the benefits of sharing a shower, and they were finally clean and ready to go back to the camp.

Dana had found her new nightgown sitting in a pile under the window, hastily discarded and thrown across the room. She picked it up and blushed as she realized that it would need an intense cleaning before it could be worn again. However, when she thought about wearing it again, it bonded with her, vanishing into her mental space as clean as the moment it was made and ready for its next use.

She would have to thank the spider for putting in so much work to make gifts that could be safely reused, no matter how much they were mistreated. The silk was nearly indestructible, and if you were bonded to it, it would always come back clean.

Dirt and stains were not brought into the mental space with a bonded item, though it wouldn't repair any damages they managed to do to the thin silk.

"Rae left your present by the hammock." Karl reminded her as a gentle smile came over Dana's face.

Dana leaned over to pick up the present and rolled her eyes when she felt Karl's hand on her backside. She had thought that the novelty would have worn off by now, but no. Karl was fairly certain that he would never get enough of that view.

[The present goes over armour.] Rae reminded them, bringing Karl's thoughts back on course and away from activities that would lead to needing another shower.

"Rae says it's fitted to go over your armour, the set you got from the traitors." Karl relayed.

Dana put on the armour, then took out the large box with a pink ribbon on it. It was beautiful, and the box had been stiffened with stronger spider silk to give it the semi-rigid texture of cardboard.

Rae had really improved her versatility with the silk once she had advanced to Royal Rank.

Inside the box was a black combat outfit, loose pants that tucked into calf high boots, with a waist scarf, a tunic style shirt and a long grey coat that split up the back with ties to attach the lower section to your legs for mobility. It also had a hood with a detachable face mask that would only leave the eyes and forehead visible.

The style was halfway between the Spellblades and the Assassin Clans that the Rogue Class teachers belonged to, and the more that Dana stared at it, the more that she loved it. She would be able to fight easily with a sword, reach any reagents or potions she needed for magical combat, and it was all Royal Rank silk, so most blades wouldn't easily cut through it.

The outfit bonded once she took it from the box, and Dana equipped it with the hood and mask up.

"Rae, it's beautiful." Dana gasped as she examined herself.

Karl untied the wide black sash at her waist and retied it over the coat so that everything was held close to her body and all the storage pockets were accessible without shifting her clothing.

"There we go. That's how Rae meant for it to look." He explained before stealing one more kiss.

"Now I really look like an Assassin." She noted, impressed with the improvement in functionality with the outfit rearranged.

[Tell her to put mana in the coat.]

"The coat should be enchanted, or magical somehow." Karl explained.

Dana tried it, and found that it began to blend into her surroundings. Rae had managed to keep a little bit of her upgraded stealth ability on the silk after it was woven, so it blended with the colour of the fort's silk. It wasn't as good as when Rae was doing it herself, but when she was attacking in limited visibility, Dana would be extremely hard to track.

"Alright, we should head back. Breakfast will be ready soon, and then they will want us to go through the dungeon again before we take the rest of the day off." Karl sighed.

"I will race you back."

[And I will call Hawk here to burn the remains of the fort. That place is a biohazard.]

[Thanks, Rae.]

[Ooh, that was sarcasm, right Sister Rae?]

Karl ignored the ongoing banter between Rae and Remi as he brought up [Eternal Lightning] over both of them, both for the energy refreshing and the healing effects. Both effects were much stronger than when it was [Refreshing Lightning], and by the time that they were back in camp, their limited sleep last night didn't matter, and they were in peak shape, ready for the big bosses of the three departments to come call them for a dungeon run.

If Karl had to guess, the healing rate of the [Eternal Lightning] skill didn't match up to what Lotus' area healing had accomplished at Ascended Rank, but it might have been a match for a constant stream of Awakened Rank healing. When it was combined with Remi's new healing totems, they should be more than the area healing had done at Ascended. That was enough that the two beasts would actually be considered a proper healer in most groups, as the effect was on everyone and not just one target.

"Oh yes, I forgot one thing." Karl informed her as they walked into the fort for breakfast.

"What's that?" "Happy Birthday."

His announcement got everyone's attention, and they all turned to see Dana enter the tent in her new outfit.

"Is that what you made her? I like it. Full coverage for anonymity, functional, flexible, and durable." Ruth complimented Rae's handiwork.

Dana took her hood down and everyone noticed that her ponytail was tied with the pink silk ribbon from the parcel, giving her new look a bit of a girlish softness, even though it was blended in neutral tones that matched the ground and furniture in the tent.

Tessa and Morgana jumped up out of their chairs to grab her and turn her side to side, admiring the new outfit that Dana had gotten for her birthday. "That is incredible. I think that half of the Rogues in the

Academy would kill for that, and that's before you consider that it's a Royal Rank stab proof outfit." Ruth noted from her chair at the back of the room.

Tessa examined Dana's legs and nodded in satisfaction. "It's got Commander Rank leather as soles on the boots, and a wide heel. If you're riding in a saddle, like I do on Thor, it would make for a much more stable position than a flat sole."

She gestured to her own boots, which had a similar heel, and Rae clicked her mandibles together happily.

Everyone was praising her design features, and nobody had found a flaw in it yet. That had to mean that she had made a nearly perfect outfit. She was slowly becoming the greatest Bloodbath Spider in history. If she kept it up, maybe they would rename the species after her. The Rae Spider had a very nice ring to it, and it would remind people that she could do so much more than turn them into a bloodstain.

Not that she didn't enjoy turning things into bloodstains, but it was far too limiting for a creature as majestic as she was.

Chapter 413 Morning Run

As if the sound of utensils drew them to the tent, Colonel Valerie arrived with the head of the church research team as soon as the food was served, and happily sat for a meal.

"We will need a team to go check to see if they can enter yet. The other team did the twelve-hour check, and they couldn't enter, so we are hoping that it is only one day of waiting and not a full week or something even longer." The Colonel explained as she cut her eggs to let the yolk run out over her potatoes.

"Once a day does sound like a rather good deal. The amount of gear and loot that could be brought out by multiple teams farming a dungeon every day is rather impressive." Karl agreed.

"Eventually, it won't be worth it for the team anymore. Some dungeons will let you enter indefinitely, and they are the primary source for our lower level equipment, but that is very rarely true about one as powerful as a Commander Rank dungeon. If we could just farm equipment drops from a dungeon at this level, we would be able to provide much better gear for our soldiers." Colonel Valerie laughed.

"So, what is stopping it? Is there an entry limit beyond the timer?" Karl asked, unsure how this worked.

"Normally, yes. Each person will only be allowed to enter so many times, after which the dungeon won't provide them any more rewards if they continue."

"So, you can keep going in, but you won't get any loot? What if it were one out of five, with a fresh team? We could keep someone here from the Inquisition to lead weaker teams through so they could get the benefits." Valerie shook her head. "Just like with the members without a class, a fully formed dungeon considers all members. Now, we expected that they would just be excluded from the rewards as they didn't have a class, and actually giving them one was a shock, but the principle still applies."

"So, we're likely going to be here until the dungeon stops giving us rewards?" Karl asked carefully.

There were sure to be limits on what she was allowed to tell them, and this had been an emergency deployment, after which the response teams would normally be sent to a new location. That meant either back to fight the Hill Giants, or off to a new battlefield.

Colonel Valerie nodded. "That's right. Team One will be reassigned later today, off to another emergency call, while your team will remain here until the construction of the new facility is complete and the long-term staff have arrived. Construction will start today, after we have determined that the dungeon is indeed repeatable. That isn't expected to be an issue, there are rarely cases where an instance stabilizes and can't be repeated. Normally, the single entry versions vanish after the first use or fail to fully stabilize, like the First Advancement Trial that you underwent."

Karl nodded in understanding. It made sense that a stabilized dungeon wouldn't have the same sort of restrictions on it as an unstable instance. It would have been much better if they could just assign someone to farm them for equipment, though. They were at war on too many sides, and being able to send Elites out to train in a predictable dungeon before going to the front would probably reduce some of the trauma when they faced Giants in real combat.

"Are we at our timer yet?" Bob asked as they finished eating.

"Ten minutes ago. We start the timer when you leave the dungeon, as that seems to be the most reliable version of what the dungeons consider twenty-four hours to be."

Karl's core team, Tessa, Dana, Lotus and Ophelia, stood to join him in the mission to the dungeon, and the two clerics winked as they prepared to head out.

"Oh no, you don't. Lotus is staying here, we've got work to do. You can take one of the others." Doug reprimanded them.

They were the two Nature Clerics, and there was a birthday dinner to prepare. Doug wasn't about to let the second chef escape for hours to go play in a dungeon if he didn't get to come with her.

Lotus sighed, and Bob patted her on the head as he got to his feet. "I will take her spot today. We will let the Nature Clerics do their thing, and then we will be back for lunch."

Karl noticed that Morgana and Colonel Valerie shared a secret smile as they were headed out, so he was certain that the Colonel knew what they were up to today, and likely had something planned for the evening, as Doug was intent on making lunch and not dinner.

Fortunately, Dana was facing the other way, adjusting her face mask and hood, which were attached to each other, and she wasn't fully accustomed to yet.

The cloth armour might not prevent broken bones from the impact force, but it would keep her from being cut or hit with particularly nasty sprays. Now that she was learning a combat style that mixed blades and spells, often in close quarters, getting sprayed with blood or something worse was becoming a concern.

Karl led the team to the dungeon entrance, and extended his hand, so he didn't walk face-first into the portal if it was still closed. Luck was on their side, and the team passed smoothly through, with Bob moving to the front to take his usual position as Tank, while Karl called out the beasts.

"I'm almost to Royal Rank, I can feel it. I was so close last time I was in here that I could feel the barrier trembling, and I think that now I will be able to advance. I've got a good feeling about this time." Bob explained.

"In that case, lead the way. The Golems will support you, but a bit more practice with your new skill might be just the thing that you need to push you to the next level." Karl agreed.

The others weren't going to argue. There was no observer in here with them, so they could move as fast as they pleased, or take breaks between the bosses so they didn't come back out too early, before the food was ready.

The others would definitely know if they were slacking, but there wasn't much that could actually be done about it even if they were aware.

Bob led the way, knocking the Ogres to the ground with his [Shield Slam], and then chopping them with [Titanic Cleave]. It was a pair of mana intensive skills, but it severely wounded all of the Ogres, and the golems finished them off before any of them could even defend themselves.

They didn't even slow when they made it to the first boss, everyone just attacked, hacking it apart in seconds to see what would be in the box.

[Boss Defeated]

This time the announcement wasn't in the air above the chest, but in Karl's view, as if he had the interface active. He didn't keep it up all the time, as it was just distracting, especially with his highly enhanced vision, but seeing the announcement was enough to remind him that he was gaining more System functions by the day.

Bob opened the chest, and inside was a small assortment of armour, along with a large number of coins.

[Split Coins or Claim?] Karl saw from his interface.

[Split] he chose.

[73 Gold Coins gained]

Karl checked his interface quickly, and saw that the money function was now active, while everyone else looked around, confused as the money vanished.

"It gave me the option to split it. Check your interface and your bag, it should be there." Karl explained.

"Oh, there it is, right in the bottom of my bag. Well, that's a fun new function. Auto-splitting the money makes things much less difficult, especially when you have a berserker in the team. You know how they feel about math." Bob joked.

"Me? Excuse you very much. Your math is worse than mine." Ophelia laughed.

They tossed the armour pieces into Thor's bags, and Tessa checked the ring that was left in the bottom of the chest.

"A ring of [Fireball Enhancement]. It only works on the Fireball spell, but it increases damage by fifteen percent." She explained.

"Might as well put it in the bag. None of us use the actual [Fireball] spell, but the two new mages might."

Chapter 414 Cleared

The second boss went very much the same as the first. Swarmed and beaten within seconds, with nothing they needed in the chest, but this time the coins just auto-split the first time that someone touched one.

"Oh, now it seems to be the default setting for the dungeon. The others who come in will love this if the setting doesn't just apply to us. Though, if they don't have a storage bag, I wonder what will happen?" Ophelia noted as they finished adding the items from the second boss to Thor's bags.

They moved on to the third boss, letting Bob lead the team, but the closer they got, the more that his frustration was growing. He was stuck at the bottleneck, and there was a missing ingredient for him to advance.

But there was hope that the last boss would help him break that, and judging by the look on his face, Karl was certain that Bob wanted to fight it alone.

"Alright, give it a go. The ladies will keep you healed." Karl agreed before Bob could ask out loud.

The warrior prepared himself, and Thor refreshed [Eternal Lightning] on him while bringing up [Circle of Protection] on the boss's platform.

If Bob was going to fight alone, that was about as much as they could do for him, and [Eternal Lightning] was a much more potent skill than any defensive ability the warrior had. It would also improve the reduced damage effect from the circle of protection, and he should be able to hold off the boss with minimal healing.

The Ogre Lord's club crashed down on Bob's shield, which glowed with golden Holy light as [Eternal Lightning] activated, then [Titanic Slash] crashed down on the beast's shoulder, carving a deep furrow in the armour and causing a spray of blood.

But between two Peak Commander Rank opponents, the battle was incredibly evenly matched, and only the extra abilities from Thor were keeping Bob in the fight.

The two warriors circled as they tested each other with quick strikes, then a flurry of harder attacks intended to put each other off balance.

Karl had never noticed before how similar the fighting style of an Ogre Lord and a Warrior Class Elite was. But other than their weapons, even their skills were similar.

However, Bob was quickly gaining the upper edge with superior sword skills, and the Ogre Lord was taking repeated strikes whenever a strike was blocked or parried well enough that he was left out of position.

It was clear to Karl what Bob was missing, though.

He wasn't understanding the change in energy patterns between Commanders and Royals, and Karl wasn't certain that fighting Commander Rank ogres would help him in that regard.

It might actually be better for him to spar with Karl, so he could experience the feeling of Royal Rank power repeatedly without needing to risk his life.

It wasn't really something that most Elites did when they were in the field. There were plenty of other targets to fight, so Karl hadn't thought about it. But for someone like Bob who was stuck at the bottleneck, it might be just the thing.

After a particularly brutal exchange, Bob stepped back and gave a nod to the Golems. He had realized it as well. The answer to breaking the bottleneck wasn't the Ogre Lord.

The Golems were on the wounded dungeon boss in under a second, and three seconds later it was falling dead to the ground, while the final chest of the Dungeon appeared.

[Cooldown Timer 24:00:00]

The Golems were on the wounded dungeon boss in under a second, and three seconds later it was falling dead to the ground, while the final chest of the Dungeon appeared.

[Cooldown Timer 24:00:00]

Bob sighed as the reality that he hadn't made the advancement sunk in, and Karl went over to give him a conciliatory pat on the shoulder.

"Don't worry too much. I'll spar with you while we're here, and you might find what you're looking for. I can tell that you're so close to understanding, but there is no way to explain it until you already understand." Karl informed him softly.

"Thanks. I'm sure it's something small that I'm missing, but I just can't seem to get it."

With a somewhat defeated sigh, Bob opened the final reward chest, and then smiled down at the interior. "I think this one is for both of us. Check this out." Bob laughed, motioning for Karl to come inspect the loot.

On the top of the pile of armour pieces and weapons sat a single skill book. [Bone Crusher] was a budget version of [Shatter] that caused extra damage that bypassed armour.

Karl called it a budget version because it didn't stack on top of another attack, it was an attack skill of its own. It also didn't do as much damage, Karl guessed, as the book was only the mildly decorated Tier 2 book, and not one of the fancy ones that skills like Shatter would create.

"Oh, that does look good. Any warrior class can use it, so I should be able to, I think. And then I can make a copy for you, one for Ophelia, and a copy for the Church library." Karl agreed.

"Should we wait in here while you do that? Or will they take a long time?" Ophelia asked.

Karl shrugged. "I will find out once I've learned the skill, I guess."

He picked up the book and opened the cover, letting it teach him the new skill.

Then he checked with [Skill Book] to see what it would take to make the copies.

"I need Commander Rank blood and bone dust. That's easy enough, I can borrow some from Rae or Hawk." Tessa provided a pen and paper, and Karl sighed.

"I'm really going to need to start carrying writing tools with me, so I don't always have to borrow a pen and paper when someone wants a skill book. Alright, this should be fairly short. Most warrior class books are."

Karl began to write out the skill, and finished the first book in under ten minutes, which made Ophelia laugh.

"The KISS principle holds true for all warrior skills, I guess." She joked.

"KISS principle?" Tessa asked.

"Keep it simple, stupid." The berserker replied, snorting with laughter.

"Berserker friendly books is what we called them when I was in the Academy." Bob added.

Karl finished the second book and then handed both over to the group's warriors. "Alright, let me know if you can't use them, and we will give the spare to the church."

Ophelia laughed at the hope in his voice as she opened the book and learned [Bone Crusher] at the same time Bob did. "Sorry about your luck, you'll need to make another one later. But tomorrow, I think. We've got a birthday lunch to get to today. They should be almost done with the cooking by now." The berserker reminded him.

Karl wrapped his arm around Dana's shoulders as Bob sorted through the rest of the chest, and Thor laughed in Karl's mind.

[What's so funny?]

[You don't need to rub on her, she still smells like you.] Thor laughed.

Rae joined in. [Only humans would think that a shower would wash away the scent of skin to skin contact. She will smell like you for days.]

Karl took off a glove and let his hand brush the back of Dana's neck as he moved to help load the loot into Thor's bags, which made all of the beasts laugh.

Now the scent wouldn't fade until at least the end of the day.

Chapter 415 Cookies

They made their way out of the dungeon, and found Colonel Valerie, along with a large number of researchers, waiting for them.

"How did the run go?" She demanded, notepad at the ready.

"The twenty-four-hour cooldown is confirmed, it notified me as we finished. So the timer starts after the last boss dies. Mostly we got armour and some accessories that we all have better versions of, but we also got one skill book. I will make a copy of it later." Karl explained.

"You used the book right away instead of passing it to the Inscriptionists?" A portly researcher asked in horror.

"I have a skill for making copies of the skills I already know. It's a bit odd, but I have already given the skill to Bob and Ophelia, and that used up my creation attempts for the day." Karl explained.

Colonel Valerie smirked, as she knew that was an outright lie. He could make more than just two books a day, she had the reports from his interview with the Archmage.

"Alright, we will let you get to the birthday celebration that your team is preparing. There will be a large team arriving this evening to build the structure over the dungeon entrance, and we will be holding a small social event to welcome them." She explained.

Bob chuckled. "That sounds an awful lot like more important people are coming, and we need to keep them entertained while the news cameras hound you and the other team leaders for information." "I am not going to say that you're wrong. But what I will say is that attendance is compulsory, so put on your very best outfit, and maybe trim your beard."

Bob scratched at his stubble and shrugged. "I will see what I can do. You're welcome to come over for lunch. Dana wanted turkey and dumplings, so the other half of the team has been working on it all morning while we were in the dungeon."

"So that is why you're with them and not Lotus. They needed someone else who could cook. Alright, they've been over to steal enough ingredients from us this morning, I will have to come visit to see how

it turned out." That startled Karl. He had brought everything that they requested for the birthday meal that was planned, so if they were looking for more, they must have added more to the menu that the two Nature Clerics couldn't create on their own.

When they entered the fort, it looked like someone had been prepping for a church bake sale.

There were four large pizza ovens lined up along one wall, three long griddles with pressure cookers, or possibly steam pots, on top set along the other, with two massive mixers in the middle next to dozens of tubs full of baked goods.

Doug waved as Karl entered the tent. "You're just in time. Help unload the small cakes from the steam pots, and get them out on the cooling racks. We've got another batch ready to go. Happy birthday, Miss Dana. Here, have a cookie."

Doug gestured to what looked like a three gallon bucket full of gingersnap cookies, and Dana laughed, pulling one still warm cookie from the top of the pile.

"Oh, these are amazing, but how did you even get so many of them made, we were only gone an hour or so." Dana asked.

"Magic." Doug deadpanned.

Lotus nodded, and loaded fresh cupcakes into the steam pots that Karl was emptying. They had three layers of racks and a bit of water in the bottom, so the contents steamed to perfection, which was a bit different from a baked cupcake, but they looked delicious.

Then she cast a spell over the pot as she put it on the grill and went to load the next.

With that as a reminder, Karl noticed that the cookies in the ovens were flattening suspiciously quickly, and realized that the clerics must know some spell for rapid baking.

Doug gestured to one of the ovens. "We need more hands. Everyone but the birthday girl, hop to it, keep the line moving, and we will have sweets for weeks.

Dana, enjoy your cookies. Lunch will be ready in a half hour."

The procession of baked goods in and out of the ovens and steam pots was a smooth process for the next hour, until Doug decided that they had enough now to feed a small army, as well as provide snacks for the arriving guests and construction workers.

Then the item they had all been waiting for, the turkey and dumplings, was ready to be served.

"There are cornbread mini loaves in one of those bins. Grab some to go with the stew. We have far too much for just us here, so we can eat it all day." Doug announced.

Lotus scooped up a large bowl for Dana and then decorated it with onion greens and placed a small loaf of cornbread, shaped like a bread loaf instead of a biscuit, which was a bit odd to Karl, next to it with a pat of honey butter.

"Perfection. Happy Birthday!" The little High Priestess announced.

The ladies moved out of the tent, where the tables to eat at had been relocated, and Karl went to Doug to get some answers about Lotus' strange behaviour lately.

"Did you manage to find out what is up with Lotus?" He whispered.

Doug smiled and nodded. "It's part of becoming a High Priestess. We all develop a closer bond with the Dragons, normally with one in particular, or with the Goddess herself.

Lotus just happened to bond with a newborn Green Dragon who hasn't seen anything before, so its voice is constantly in her head, demanding to see new things and experience new settings.

We've been working on toning down her voice, so Lotus doesn't get as distracted. I got a more normal connection with the Goddess Directly. She is less chatty unless there is something that she needs to happen.

It might take a while, but eventually, she will return to as normal as Lotus gets."

Karl laughed. "Well, that's good news. I thought that there might be a major issue, but she just gained a newborn Lotus Dragon. So, it's a bit like getting a kitten, you just need to let them explore until they learn everything they're interested in."

Doug laughed and shook his head. "The Green Dragons might be upset to be compared to curious kittens, but I can see where you would get the impression. Newborns of all species are similarly inquisitive."

They both grabbed lunch and headed outside as the ovens were still hot and the interior of the fort was a bit stifling with so little ventilation, even with the door open.

Dana went for seconds, then thirds, until she was leaned up against Karl's side in a food coma. None of them were in any hurry to do anything, they were just relaxing in the sunshine until the sound of helicopters alerted them to new arrivals.

Ten of the double bladed transport helicopters, and two that carried a large metal container beneath them, were coming into sight, presumably with the construction crew and materials.

[I can see why helicopters are afraid of Hill Giants. I could take those out from here.] Rae noted idly as she lounged in the bell tower of the fort.

The first helicopter landed, and a whole crew of workers piled out and began to spread around the site, setting stakes and lights for the other helicopters to land at for unloading.

"I think it's safer that we just wait here until they're all done with the unloading. They don't look like they're going to have time for cookies until later." Lotus noted.

"Much later. They're very energetic about the prep work, aren't they?" Karl agreed.

Even more workers came out of the following helicopters, and Karl began to wonder just how many people it actually took to build the structure over the dungeon portal.

Some of them would likely be the long-term caretakers of the location, but there had to be fifty new people here, and the area they had staked out for the building was not much larger than an average house.

If that was as large as the building was going to be, they had far too many workers. Did they plan to just give everyone one piece to assemble? That would be the most unique strategy Karl had ever heard of for a construction team, so they had to have something else in mind.

Chapter 416 Honored Guests

Once the helicopters were all on the ground, the workers started to stake out other building locations, as if they were making a small village around the dungeon.

Now it made a bit more sense. If they were going to make a dozen permanent buildings at the same time, they might actually have a use for all these people.

Bob looked around at the work in progress. "This is chaos. It looks like they're going with metal frame and sheeting buildings for most of the structures, but they're going to need to build a wall around the whole complex if they're not going to make something more sturdy. They don't usually keep Elites on station at these things, or at least not strong ones. So, they need some sort of protective barrier that will keep the wild beasts out of the complex." Doug brought out a cake, sliced for the whole group, and they turned people watching into their afternoon entertainment. The important people weren't here yet, or at least they weren't coming over to talk to the Elites, so nobody was in a hurry to get up from their seats.

Late in the afternoon, a feeling of approaching power drew Karl and the beasts' attention to the west. "Do you see something?" Doug asked as he noticed that Karl was distracted.

"There is more than one Overlord coming. By the speed, I am guessing that they're in a helicopter. It's too fast to be a car, even if there was a road that came to this spot." Karl explained.

"You can tell that from this distance?" Ruth asked.

"Yeah. Or one of the beasts can, which is the same thing because when they are alerted, I am alerted." Karl replied with a shrug.

[It's not Overlord Drake.] Rae noted.

[And there are three of them, I am pretty sure.] Hawk agreed.

"Three Overlords, Hawk thinks. None of them are Overlord Drake, who I have often crossed paths with in the past." Karl explained.

Bob laughed. "It seems like every time we run into someone famous, you're already friends with them. Even the Colonel is an old friend of yours already, and you're only just about to finish your first year at the Academy."

Karl shrugged and waited for the helicopter to come in sight.

"I have met a rather extraordinary selection of people so far, I can't deny that. I even met the Archbishop for a few seconds."

Bob looked like he was going to ask, then realized that the incident was almost certainly classified, and while they were pretty relaxed in their assignment to accompany Karl, there was still a whole team of Magic Knights from the Inquisition sitting right next to them.

Karl saw Colonel Valerie in the distance, motioning for them to change. "Alright, it looks like it's showtime. Everyone get into your formal best, the important people are on their way in."

He was about to change to his suit with the Royal Rank cape when Jodi, one of the familiar Bureau of Elite Development's Agents under Colonel Valerie, came jogging over.

"Stay in your armour. The fancier, the better. They have a cameraperson with them, and that means they'll be expecting staged photos. Most of you should be fine as is, just Karl and Bob will need to change." He explained.

Morgana was in her usual black dress, the clerics were in their robes, and the Magic Knights never changed out of their armour in public. So it was really just Karl, Bob and Ophelia who were in casual wear.

Karl changed into his armour with the fur trimmed Ice Giant cloak, but without his helmet, while Bob changed back to his shining Knight outfit with the most glorious horned helmet equipped.

Ophelia giggled as she checked her armour. "It feels weird to be wandering around in armour, but as a human. All my fighting is done in Werebear or Dire Bear form, so I'm never really wearing armour in human form."

Jodi smiled at her reluctance, and then examined the group. "Karl, what's up with the Darklight Host tabard?" He asked.

"It is part of the armour created by the skill. It adapts to the situation, and today, it thinks that I need a tabard." Karl replied with a gesture of defeat.

"So, it doesn't always have a tabard?"

Karl shook his head. "I have seen it without the tabard, but normally, it does have it. Sometimes it creates a tunic and puts that under the chest plate. I think it's formal enough, and it's still a symbol of the World Dragon, so it shouldn't cause any issues with photos."

"Good enough for me."

Jodi led them over to the main camp area, where the small helicopter was about to land with the three Overlords in it, plus three other Elites and the two pilots.

"We should all be there to greet them, especially the Royals." Jodi muttered as he hurried them along toward the landing zone.

Karl and Doug got there just in time to take spots in the front row with Prince Charles and the team leaders of the response teams.

The first man out was an Overlord in shining silver armour with a golden tabard and close-cropped blonde hair. He had the look of the perfect noble gentleman from a romance story, and Karl could see that there were more than a few of the women giving him admiring glances.

Not Colonel Valerie, he noted. Perhaps they were on bad terms?

The next out was a man in a black hooded outfit that was somewhat similar to Dana's, but without the coat. It was the common stealth outfit for a Rogue Class Elite, but Karl thought it was a bit extra to be wearing it here with his face covered in the middle of the day.

It wasn't like a black outfit actually helped him blend in with anything here.

That man noticed Dana right away, and then did a double take when he realized that she was a mage, and that the coat was a Royal Rank item. The quality was clear in the construction, and the adaptive coloration made it even more valuable.

The last man out was a mage in deep blue robes that seemed to sparkle with an entire galaxy of stars, as if you were looking at an eternal void, and not a piece of clothing.

[That is spectacular. I need to learn how to do that.] Rae sighed as she admired his outfit from her space.

She had created her own fake stars all over, but if she could make something that realistic, she could completely redecorate her home. She could even make it look like her favourite trophies were floating in the void.

Their assistants stepped out behind them, with the copilot serving as photographer, and began the formal introductions. "Overlord Johann, The shining Knight, representing the first military fast response battalion. Overlord Niall of the Inquisition, and Overlord Ahmad the Legionary Golem Lord." The man informed them simply.

Colonel Valerie stepped forward. "I am Colonel Valerie of the Bureau of Elite Development. This is Lord Inquisitor Mable, then Minister Davies of National Treasures, followed by Prince Charles, Royal Priest Doug Mackenzie, and Prince Karl the Beast Master."

Karl was more than a little startled that he was introduced with a title when the others weren't, but when he saw the eyes of the Overlords light up, he knew that the Colonel had done it on purpose.

Chapter 417 Overlord Upgraded

Overlord Johann strode directly to Karl with a smile on his face. "It is a pleasure to meet you, young Prince. We have heard much about your talents and exploits lately."

Karl took his outstretched hand with a smile. "It's an honour to meet you as well. It isn't often that we are graced with the presence of Overlords out here in the wilderness."

The Shining Knight laughed and nodded. "That is true. But this is a unique situation. There are only a few repeatable dungeons active in the nation, and only one other is at the Commander Rank. The fact that this one is entirely Ogres and far enough from the border that it won't be easily contested is enough to pull us out here for the day to take a look."

Overlord Niall was more interested in Dana's outfit, and he was silently inspecting her, turning Dana side to side to get a better look.

"Was that a reward from this Dungeon? It seems too high level for that." He asked in a low voice that was clearly altered with some sort of voice changer.

Dana shook her head. "It was a gift from Prince Karl, made by his Royal Rank Bloodbath Spider."

Dana looked shocked that she had said that out loud, and Karl began to suspect that the Overlord from the Inquisition had a skill that made people tell him the truth.

The final Overlord made his way across the rest of the group before settling on Karl.

"I am told that you can make skill books. Do you suppose that you could make me one of the Fire Element?" He asked, though the tone suggested that the request was merely a courtesy and declining was not an option.

"Certainly. I have an excellent Fire Element skill if you are compatible. Tell me, do you have any sort of bestial affinity? The skill was designed for use by a beast, so it can be considered a prerequisite to using the skill book directly. I believe you can still learn by studying the book, but you know how that goes." Karl agreed.

The mage lifted his hood upward slightly, and Karl caught a glimpse of fluffy blonde ears on the top of his head.

"That should work wonderfully. I can make it for you before you go, or whenever we get time this afternoon."

[Finally, not an evil magician.] Hawk cheered.

Then Ahmad the mage paused and sniffed the air. "Was there a celebration already planned? I smell all sorts of fancy baking."

Karl nodded and gestured behind him. "It is Commander Dana's birthday today, and our Nature Clerics were kind enough to make a remarkable number of baked goods to celebrate. Would you care to join us?"

"Once we finish with the rest of the welcoming. But do save me some of those cupcakes that I can smell, if you would."

That shouldn't be a problem, there were hundreds of them made. One case full reserved for the Overlord wouldn't be a hardship to anyone else. The Overlords moved on, saying hello to everyone, or in the case of Overlord Niall, saying hello to his fellow Inquisitors and the Magic Knights, then standing back, so people didn't bother him.

He wasn't really the talkative sort, but that wasn't all too surprising for a member of the Inquisition.

While everyone else was busy, Karl walked over to Overlord Niall and lowered his voice. "I don't suppose we get to know what happened that you all came here today? It's a monumental occasion, but you are an emergency response team, and there are still two Princes here and only one man with a camera, no reporters."

Karl saw the thermal outline behind the mask change as the man smiled. "I suspect that we will find out sooner rather than later. But that is classified above your pay grade."

"Shit, I didn't know they were paying me." Karl joked, making the Inquisitor laugh and pat him on the back.

"Let your Spider know that if she is willing to make another of those fantastic outfits, I will pay her full asking price."

Karl nodded. "Rae is a simple and sweet character. She really only wants one thing. Blood from a King Rank or higher beast, enough to fill a bathtub."

Overlord Niall blinked slowly as he processed that. "What in the world would she want with that? Is she short on food?"

Karl shook his head. "No, we've got plenty. But when she is getting close to advancement, she will literally bathe in the blood of her enemies and absorb their power to help her grow. It prevents bottlenecking."

"So, as fresh as possible? I can arrange that, but it might take some time."

[I will make it on credit. Thor says it's good for people to owe you favours.] Rae suggested.

"She says that she can make it on credit, and you can repay her." Karl relayed.

"So they actually speak in your mind? Interesting. Alright, I will make that deal."

Rae started to work in her space as Karl and Niall shook on the deal. She couldn't come out and play without terrifying all the workers, and the strange Overlords were a bit scary, so keeping them happy seemed like a good idea.

The two waited silently as all of the aspiring politicians and bureaucrats from the government group chatted up the other Overlords and their assistants, who Karl assumed were assigned to them by the military, as they were only Ascended Rank Elites, and couldn't possibly be part of the actual response team.

"Alright, everyone back to work. Overlords, if you would like to inspect the design, you are welcome to." Colonel Valerie informed them all in a stern voice that said they had wasted enough time already.

The crews split up, and the original three response teams went to supervise them, while the three Overlords grabbed the members of Team One and dragged them along to the fort, following Karl's team.

"Did you make a tent out of... Wait, that really is Royal Rank Spider Silk, designed to mimic the Capital Cathedral. Bloody brilliant. How do you even pack it, though?" Overlord Johann laughed.

"It was actually created on the spot. Rae, the Bloodbath Spider, is quite the artist, and she likes to build art exhibitions to show off her skills everywhere that we're going to be stopped for a while." Karl explained.

Ruth laughed. "Look upstairs, it gets even better. It's got dividing curtains and hammocks for two expanded groups, plus a shower room. The main floor is currently set up as the kitchen to do all the baking for Commander Dana's birthday."

Overlord Ahmad stepped inside, and Doug gestured toward the sealed containers full of baking. "Take your pick. We will be passing them around the camp later, but everything is made fresh today."

The Catman Golem Mage happily grabbed a cupcake in each hand, and Karl could have sworn he saw the mage's eyes glow in victory as he obtained his prize.

Overlord Johann laughed. "Well, Ahmad got what he came here for. I swear, that man shouldn't have any teeth left with a sweet tooth like that. But we don't have much else to do but sit here and watch the construction teams work for now."

That made it even more obvious that the meet and greet wasn't the reason they had come, but they certainly weren't going to discuss it.

Chapter 418 More Fire

The presence of additional people didn't slow them down, though.

"So, I hear that you agreed to try to make Ahmad a new skill. Do you think that it will be able to adapt to his level? Finding skills that don't cap out at Royal Rank or lower has been one of the hardest parts of trying to advance." Overlord Johann asked in a jovial voice.

"This one is somewhat special. I think it should be able to adapt enough to match up with an Overlord Rank mage, but it was a bit of a nightmare attempting to find one who could actually use it. The chances of just stumbling across one, and such a powerful one, are crazy." Karl joked.

Hawk had all the materials that he would need already prepared and waiting for Karl, and he dropped them on the table as he was speaking, so that Karl couldn't back out now.

One way or another, he was going to make that book.

Karl smiled at the angry bird's insistence on spreading fire skills, and started to work. The [Flaming Body] skill took much longer than the warrior skills to write out, but there was a whole table full of baked goods in front of him, and Karl only needed one hand to write with.

"The Inscriptionists would cry if they saw your skill book creation process." Overlord Ahmad laughed.

"Yeah, I don't usually snack while working, as I don't want to get crumbs on the book, but it's too good to miss out on."

The mage shook his head. "No, I meant that they need intense focus, constant mana transfer and multiple reagents to create the book."

"Oh, that makes sense. I can do the mana transfer easily enough, but Hawk made the ink for the book before he put it on the table. There are five different Fire Elemental ingredients mixed in there, blended with his Royal Rank fire and my spiritual energy.

I might not be an Inscriptionist type class, but I am still a Royal." Karl slowly finished the text, and with a final surge of mana, it formed into a deep red tome that seemed to flicker with flames under the surface. It was locked with a golden strap, and the design was absolutely exquisite.

"This is a thing of beauty. Does the Library have one yet?" Overlord Ahmad asked.

"No, they said to hold off for now, as the restrictions on the book are so extreme. Hopefully, you will be able to use it, I think that you meet all the requirements."

The Mage crossed his fingers for luck and carefully opened the latch on the book. "So far, so good. It let me look at it." He breathed.

Then he flipped open the cover, and a surge of red light flooded from the book and surrounded his body as the book slowly vanished.

It looked like it was working properly, Karl thought. At least for the first few seconds.

Then a gust of magic blew back Ahmad's hood, allowing fluffy cat ears to poke free as the fur changed to a deep flaming orange and red along with his hair.

Power poured from the Overlord as the [Flaming Body] spell took effect, and his eyes glowed bright crimson, then a deep red shine settled in over him, and Ahmad smiled.

"It works. Overlord Rank Defensive Skill, Flaming Body." He gasped, still shocked, even though he was the one using it.

"It's not just defensive. You can use it to coat weapons to attack, and with practice, you should be able to use it to enhance your fire attacks." Karl explained.

The Overlord smiled and created a flame in his hand, then focused and let the power of the Flaming Body spell flow into it.

"I think that will take some time, but for now, it will be a huge benefit for me because I can do this."

As he finished speaking, Overlord Ahmad summoned four golems that looked like overgrown hoplite legionaries, with their banded golden chest plates, small round shields and short swords.

Then, the flames surrounded them, and they gained an extra layer of protection, as well as a damage enhancement to their weapons.

Johann whistled in appreciation. "Now we're talking. Overlord Golems with an extra barrier. Is that stronger than the regular barrier spell?"

Dana laughed, and Ahmad smiled.

"It's the primary defensive ability of Vermilion Birds. It's on an entirely different level than a basic barrier spell." Karl explained while the mages struggled to stop laughing.

Overlord Ahmad nodded. "While the barrier spell can be used with Overlord Rank strength, it's still a Tier 1 ability. The Flaming Body skill is a Tier 3 or possibly a Tier 4 ability. I can't use it to its fullest capability yet, as it's an adapted species ability, but it would take you three or four slashes to break the barrier on the Golems."

"Does your Hawk use it as a primary attack ability?" Johann asked Karl as he considered the versatility of the skill.

"Indeed. He likes to fire explosive fireballs at the ground laced with [Rend] for the extra shredding damage when they explode."

The Knight looked confused. "You're saying that he uses a warrior's Rend ability, mixed with a mage's fireball that is derived from the Flaming Body ability, as his primary attack?"

Karl shrugged. "They're innate skills to his species. It only made sense to blend them, and having a sphere of Rend attacks burst out is much more effective than just a fireball on its own."

"I will have to get you to show me that later. I have never seen such an odd thing. Many monsters at the higher Ranks use creative and deadly skills, but that particular combination sounds like it would be a mass casualty level terror." Overlord Ahmad insisted.

He then dismissed the golems and ended the [Flaming Body] spell, which returned his hair and ears to their natural honey blonde colour, and his eyes to green.

Karl briefly wondered if constantly using a racial ability from another species could make a beastkin evolve, but that seemed a bit farfetched. Hawk had evolved as he learned new skills and gained power, but that was more likely to be because of the bond, and not just because he learned a new skill. Beastkin were at least half human, and Karl had never heard of a human evolving.

Well, other than the ones who had randomized themselves with the system stones.

Maybe it wasn't so outlandish to think that gaining new skills might have a physical impact on the user. Most skills were pretty human compatible, but ones like [Refreshing Lightning] and [Flaming Body] were made specifically for beasts.

"I don't suppose that you have other useful sorts of skills, do you? You know how limited the Library is. There's only like ten skill books available, not counting the Blue Dragon Barrier." Overlord Niall, the Inquisition Rogue, asked.

"For ones that you could use, I would say either Rend or Bone Crusher. I'm not sure whether you can use the second one, though. The original said it was for warrior classes, and Rogues aren't really warriors, are they?" Karl asked.

Niall shook his head. "No, we have entirely different skills than the warriors. No warrior could use Shadow Step, and no Rogue can use Cleave."

Lotus giggled. "Rae, the Bloodbath Spider, can use Shadow Step, and it is hilarious."

[Just wait. Soon, I will teach the Golems to Shadow Step.]

Chapter 419 Late Night Visitors

There were a few more photos taken as they sat and ate, watching the work.

The crews were really hammering through the construction, and though the buildings were simple, Karl saw that there was a logic to the design. What they were building here didn't look like a fancy rural temple or a holy spot of any sort. It looked like a storage warehouse in the middle of nowhere, which could have belonged to a defunct mine or even to the furthest branches of the nearby coal mines.

Making it look like an unimportant industrial facility as a disguise was a much better safety measure than just keeping someone powerful enough to deter intruders on staff.

The work was going much faster than Karl had expected, and the set of warehouses were nearly finished by the time that it got dark.

By then, Rae was finished as well, and she had made a simple black version of the outfit that Dana was wearing for Overlord Niall, with the same adaptive ability for the coloration. It was a beautiful set, and it would allow his stealth skills to become even more effective.

"Gentlemen, would you care to join us for dinner?" The Minister of National Treasures asked just before the sun set.

The overlords were still with Karl's group, sitting around eating baked goods and telling jokes. They had met with everyone who was on the site, but only because everyone came to them. At no point since they had taken a seat had any of them gone more than five metres from the containers full of baked goods.

But there was a full feast prepared for the workers, and Doug had called someone over to bring out the desserts for everyone to share, now that it was looking unlikely that Dana could eat even one more cookie, and he had hidden a full container of his favourites in his storage bag.

He wasn't the only one. Karl suspected that everyone had at least a small container of sweets in their storage bags now, but there were still entire piles of containers full of them.

The cameraman was there again, doing short meet and greet style photos with the Elites and the workers. Normally, those always made Karl laugh when they came out in the newspaper because they looked so forced, but the workers were enthusiastically greeting them all, and profusely thanking them for the help in obtaining tables full of sweets. The cameraman wasn't making videos, so it didn't matter what they were talking about, and a joking conversation between a Royal Rank Elite and a steelworker about their favourite type of cake made for great photos.

Once dinner was finished, Team One made their way to one of the supply helicopters, and left on whatever mission they had been assigned to next.

That was the last order of business for the evening, and everyone retired to their tents as twilight turned to full dark.

Karl had thought that the Overlords would be leaving with Team One as soon as their business was finished, as their helicopter was still waiting for them, but they set up camp in one of the new buildings to stay the night.

Karl woke in the middle of the night to the feeling that something was wrong. Rae was awake, and she didn't see anything, but she was uneasy about something.

He waited in his hammock, ready to equip his armour the moment there was something solid to go on.

[Incoming] Rae reported, and Karl silently got out of bed, not wanting to wake the others until he knew what the situation was. He waited in his hammock, ready to equip his armour the moment there was something solid to go on.

[Incoming] Rae reported, and Karl silently got out of bed, not wanting to wake the others until he knew what the situation was. His team wasn't on watch, so it wasn't his job to respond right now. He just wanted to make sure that whoever was on watch had noticed the threat.

[What do we have coming?] Karl asked.

[Big flying things. Probably Drakes. It's hard to tell from this distance.] She replied.

Karl crept out of the tent to see what was going on with his own eyes, and easily spotted the flight of large winged things near the horizon.

Their body temperatures were high, making them easy to spot in the cool evening air, but they were still close to ten kilometres away.

"Something caught your attention?" Overlord Johann asked as he walked up beside Karl.

"There is a flight of what looks like drakes headed this way. I can't pick out the numbers yet, but at least six. Rae informed me of the intrusion into her sensory range." Karl explained quietly.

Johann nodded, then tossed a black coat on over his shining armour.

"They will know which Overlords are here soon enough, we don't need to give them more time to plan. Just keep calm and don't do anything rash. There is a sort of ritual and protocol to this, if it really is Drake Riders, or other humans on flying mounts," the Knight explained.

Karl shrugged. "The last time I met with Drake Riders, they attacked on sight."

Johann chuckled. "That might fly at Awakened, or even Ascended Rank, but a battle between Overlords with our movement skills and area attacks can cover dozens of kilometres, and rage on for hours, causing massive collateral damage.

If they came and indiscriminately attacked us at that power level, we would do the same to them, and our nation is much larger. Theirs is a highly populated island."

There was a short pause, and then from behind Karl, Niall's voice spoke softly.

"Commanders lead with valour, Princes can be headstrong. But Kings maintain their dignity and Overlords keep the peace. Those are the customs when dealing with other humans. Dealing with beasts is much more simple. If they left their territory, there is a reason. Find out what it is. If you're invading their territory, then might makes right. If you don't have the power, you have no right to be there."

That made sense to Karl. Humans might not be able to unite or even really get along, but when it came down to it, they were still the same species, so they did show each other some consideration.

If this was an incoming flight of Drake Riders here to try to claim or get a shot at the dungeon to advance some of their members, then it was likely possible that they could come to a peaceful agreement.

The flight was coming closer now, and it was clear that there were twelve of them in total, and there were two Overlords with the group. The others didn't seem to be as strong, but their auras could have been hidden by the two leaders of the group. "So, do I just wait here behind you while you talk to the leaders of their flight?" Karl asked.

Niall nodded. "Just wait behind me, and keep your beasts in their hiding spot. If they think they're going to be jumped by monsters, they might attack before they realize that they are with us, and that will turn this whole area into a war zone."

None of them was likely to fare well if there was a large-scale fight between Overlords here in the camp, and the workers wouldn't take a single hit. With that in mind, Karl called Rae back before the Drakes were close enough that they were likely to be able to identify her.

When the drakes were a kilometre out, Overlord Johann set a light spell over the area outside the camp, signalling the visitors in, but none of the Overlords' mannerisms said they were confident that this would not end in violence.

As the drakes approached, Karl realized that it was a pair of Overlords with ten Ascended Rank Drake Riders and mounts. They were all on the brink of reaching Commander Rank, and it seemed obvious why they were here. The question that Karl had was, how did they even know? They must have found out nearly immediately if they had flown all this way on Drakes. Their nation didn't border Golden Dragon Nation, they had to fly halfway across the continent to get here. So, they hadn't left this morning, that was certain.

They landed in an organized formation, and the Ascended Riders remained on their drakes while the two Overlords dismounted.

"Johann, Ahmad." The leader of the Drake Riders greeted them.

"Kenichi. You're a long way from home. Don't you think the youngsters are a bit too new for such a long flight?" Johann replied.

The man known as Kenichi laughed, his long black hair fluttering in the wind as he turned back to his wing of drakes.

"Oh, I think they're just about the right age for this vacation, don't you?"

Why don't we sit down and have a drink while the children play? For old times sake." The drake rider suggested with a sly wink.

That confirmed it. They knew that it was a stable, low Commander Rank dungeon. They had brought two full groups of Drake Riders who were about to reach Commander Rank, and just needed one last push to advance.

"This might go better than expected. They don't know that the dungeon is stable." Niall whispered in Karl's ear.

Karl wasn't sure how Niall knew that they weren't aware, but most likely it was by their reaction. If they had known that it was stable and repeatable, they would likely have taken a different approach, he assumed.

Johann looked like he was considering something, then smiled. "How about a small trade. This is a valuable resource, after all." Johann offered.

The other Overlord came forward with a chest in his hands and set it on the ground in front of Ahmad.

The mage opened the lid with a gust of wind, and nodded with a small smile on his face.

"We can let both groups of five go through while we have an early breakfast. There are still some fresh baked goods and stew, I believe. Would you like to join us for breakfast?" Ahmad questioned, gesturing toward the Fort, where there were still a half dozen sealed containers of baked goods.

"I think it would be better if we ate near the beasts, they can be fickle." Overlord Kenichi informed them.

Karl gave a low chuckle at the mention of fickle beasts, and the Dragon Rider gave him a curious look.

"The young Prince looks quite relaxed around the drakes. Is he perhaps an immigrant from our lovely island home?" Kenichi asked.

Johann shook his head. "Nope, a local. But the World Dragon blessed him with an affinity for beasts. Perhaps he could calm your drakes if they are feeling finicky?"

The Overlord laughed as his drake growled and sent a fireball into the sky.

[He's just hungry.] Hawk informed Karl, rolling his eyes in annoyance.

[What do drakes like?] Karl asked.

[How should I know. Feed it a Giant leg or something.]

Karl laughed at the sleepy Hawk. That wasn't actually a bad idea.

[Drakes like cold things. They overheat when they fly long distances because they use their fire magic to fly faster.] Remi added.

[How did you know that?]

[It's in this book on beasts with Elemental Magic.] She replied proudly.

[Just how many library books did you borrow?]

[The sign said you could take up to four at a time.]

Karl thought about it, and then separated both legs from the knee down on a Commander Rank Ice Giant corpse and walked over to the hungry drakes.

"Here you go, friends. A nice cold treat after a long trip."

Karl tossed the two Royal Rank drakes that the Overlords had flown in on each a leg, which they caught in their mouths before making a happy keening noise that was sure to wake the entire camp.

The rider known as Kenichi gave Karl a suspicious look, but Karl just smiled at the drakes and returned to his spot by Niall.

Ahmad cast a spell, and a container of mixed cookies floated out of the fort, along with a pressure cooker full of chicken and dumplings that was beginning to steam as it moved.

"Did you bring a table? If not, we can fetch one." He suggested.

The second Overlord of the drake riders brought out a large blanket from his pack and spread it on the ground between them.

Ahmad put down the food, and the silent Overlord brought out dishes. The four Overlords took seats, then Kenichi motioned for Karl and Niall to join them.

"No need to stand guard during breakfast. Come and join us. One of the Commanders can show our children to the trial." Kenichi insisted.

Karl turned his head slightly so he could see Colonel Valerie coming.

"It's the Colonel. Or at least, she will get here first." Karl spoke softly to Niall, so he didn't interrupt their conversation.

"You can tell that?" The formerly silent Overlord asked, startled by Karl's senses.

"Even if the wind wasn't blowing her perfume my way, I can see her. My night vision is quite a bit better than before I awakened." Karl joked.

"You do have a rather bestial affinity. To be able to see into nearly absolute darkness with a light in your eyes is an uncommon trait."

Karl suspected that he might have given too much away, but the Overlord hadn't mentioned that she was at the very edge of his peripheral vision and didn't seem all that worked up about it. More like he was attempting to put Karl at ease with his presence by showing that he wasn't a fan of simple tricks, being open and honest.

The Colonel stopped a few metres behind them, just into the light spell, and waited for someone to acknowledge her presence.

"Gentlemen, this is Colonel Valerie. As per our agreement, she will escort your two teams of Ascended Riders into the anomaly for one attempt each. I trust that they have brought sufficient healing potions if they don't have a cleric with them? It is a five-person limit, so two healers for the group would be best." Johann informed them.

Kenichi nodded, then pushed his hair back out of his face in annoyance. He must have lost his hair tie at some point because it was obvious that he didn't prefer to have it loose.

"Yes, we have clerics of the Dragon Gods with the trainees. Thank you for your assistance, Commander. We will be looking forward to good news."

The ten young riders dismounted and followed Colonel Valerie into the building where the dungeon portal was. It was inevitable that they would find out that it was a stable dungeon portal, but with a bit of luck, there wouldn't be a fight over it.

They had gotten what they came for, a trip for their trainees into the dungeon, and now they were about to gorge themselves on sweets.

That reminded Karl. "Be careful with the brownies. They're made by the Nature Clerics."

That made the two visitors laugh, though Karl did notice that Kenichi's hand passed over the brownies. Technically, they were in hostile territory, and it wouldn't be a good idea for the Drake Riders to get stoned right now.

No matter how funny the Green Dragon might find it.