

Beast Master 421

Chapter 421 Overlord Kenichi

The entire camp was on edge as the two visiting foreign Overlords sat and ate breakfast with the local group.

Now that the Drake Riders were here, it was clear why the Overlords had stuck around, and why it was so important that the extra group of Elites be sent away. If they could see that there were twenty or more Elites who were qualified to be training in this dungeon, they would have realized that the instance had stabilized and was repeatable before they had made the deal, and they likely wouldn't have offered whatever it was that Overlord Ahmad was so happy to see.

Instead, they would have gone with a less valuable offer from the start. The fact that nobody tried to argue for more likely told them fairly quickly that they had misjudged the situation, but the deal was made, and everything was peaceful for the moment, so they would have to take the markup, and call it the price of training their Mages.

Well, Karl assumed they were mages. They had powers, but as far as Karl knew, they weren't awakened with a serum or System Stone the way that the Elites of the Golden Dragon Nation were.

"These cookies are wonderful. You have a truly talented cook among your Nature Clerics. We have one in charge of the kitchen at the weyr as well, but I must say, the baked goods are somewhat lacking." Overlord Kenichi sighed.

"I am not sure which of the two here is responsible for the cookie recipe, but they're both very talented bakers. It makes deployment much more pleasant." Karl agreed.

"Oh, you get to travel with a Nature Cleric? That is truly fortunate. Surely, you don't take them to battle. The Nature Clerics are not known for being reliable combat partners, or particularly fond of combat. We do not force our clerics to go against their aspect's nature in the Drake Isles."

Karl smiled. "The Nature God's High Priestess that travels with me is a healing specialist with excellent cooking skills and an intense fondness for exploration. She might complain if we wake her up early, but I don't think anything we have asked is contrary to her Goddess."

"I don't suppose that the giant spider monster has anything to it? I've never met a Green Dragon who could resist that." The other Drake Rider Overlord joked.

"It might have a small amount to do with it."

Rae had been in her space since just after the riders were spotted, so unless the quiet man had senses that were better than hers, he must have known something about Karl before he arrived.

It had been most of an hour, and the teams were due to exit the dungeon soon. Karl could see the tension of the Overlords as each additional minute passed. The longer they took, the more they must have struggled. Unlike Karl's team, which was on friendly ground when they went in, the purpose of coming with the Overlords was to secure their exit after they had finished, and had hopefully made it to Commander Rank.

Karl could see that Overlord Kenichi was itching to do something, and was about to get up when a portal opened and a group of shouting soldiers rushed out fifty metres from the camp.

The Overlords were all on their feet instantly, and it was only after they were standing that they realized the new arrivals didn't belong to either side's nation.

"Did we put up a 'Grand Opening, Everyone Welcome' billboard or something?" Karl muttered, and the pair of Drake Riders burst into laughter, shattering the tension of the situation.

Overlord Kenichi spat on the ground. "Witry, what are you doing here?"

"The Most Glorious Oracle Foresaw that there would be a great opportunity for the Fourth Grade Mages at this place and time. I can sense the dungeon entrance from here, Dragon Slave." The man in front of the group of Mages, another Overlord, snarled back.

A significant portion of the top fighters of three nations were now gathered in a hostile standoff in the middle of nowhere, and Karl began to worry that the young Drake Riders were going to come out to the middle of a massacre.

The Mage gave everyone a disgusted look, then his eyes landed on Karl.

"Is this your dungeon challenge champion? He doesn't look like much." The mage continued.

Karl winked and blew him a kiss, which made Kenichi laugh even harder.

Karl had no idea what a dungeon champion was, but they had shown up with ten Commander Rank mages, and if it was a battle between champions, nobody but the group's leader could beat him one on one. But if it were the leader challenging, he would be fighting one of the three Overlords at his own Rank.

Overlord Niall smiled under his mask. "Are you certain that you want to make an over Rank challenge? You might not have anyone left to challenge the dungeon after. I am certain you will find our entry fee eminently reasonable."

Karl couldn't tell how powerful the attack magic of a foreign mage might be at the Commander Rank, but Niall was right, none of them would be able to touch him in combat.

The mage glared at him, and Karl saw the thermal image of the ten Drake Riders exiting the dungeon. Colonel Valerie was holding them in place while the argument continued outside the camp, but nobody in the other groups seemed to have noticed they had returned yet.

Karl did a quick headcount, verifying that all ten of them had made it out of the dungeon.

The mages sneered at Karl and quietly began to encourage their leader to take the challenge instead of paying the bribe.

So that was how it worked. The Drake Riders had just paid up and sent their teams in without a fuss. It was fast and efficient, so they were already finished their run, and once Karl could get a better read on them, he would find out if their payment had earned them any advancements to Commander.

The mage turned back to his team and silenced them with one raised hand. "We have conditions. No deliberate lethal blows, no enchanted blades, and a full charge format." The Mage demanded.

Overlord Johann smiled. "No summons, no supporters." He countered.

"On either side." The mage insisted.

That could be a bit of a mess for Karl, if he couldn't call out his beasts to support.

[Humans are stupid. We can fight from in here. We just can't call the Golems.] Rae informed him.

That was likely a rule violation, but how would they prove it? When the beasts cast a spell from their space, you would have to be able to see into the spaces to know that they were helping at all.

The mages nodded in encouragement, and their leader extended a hand for Johann to shake.

"Set the arena boundary and we can get started." The mage announced.

Niall leaned over to whisper to Karl, low enough the others shouldn't hear. "No aiming for the head and don't let your beasts come out.

As long as you don't aim for the heart or the head, you shouldn't be accused of trying for killing blows. Do you have a weapon that isn't bladed?"

Karl took out his maul and placed it on the ground between his feet.

"Oh, that should do just fine. Potions aren't prohibited, so if you have some, you can use them to buff for the fight. Outside assistance is prohibited in general, so no support spells from your team." The Rogue added.

"I just wish that I could use Rae's Shadow Step ability. This could get much more fun." Karl whispered back.

The mage leader was now glaring at Kenichi, who was still laughing.

"What in the seven gods is so funny?" He demanded.

"You should have paid the bribe. He's going to beat the ever-loving hell out of your boys."

The mage spat at Kenichi's feet and turned away, sending his team to the large circle that Overlord Johann had inscribed with an attack spell.

They might be neighbours, but they were obviously not any closer friends than the Drake Riders and the Golden Dragon Nation were. Or perhaps it was personal.

It was about fifty metres across, plenty of room to fight. Normally, that should favour the mages, but it was also a small enough space that Remi could cover it with a Thunderstorm while Karl added a Blizzard.

"Do you need preparation time?" Johann asked. "I'm good. I've already eaten breakfast, as I do despise fighting on an empty stomach."

The Knight patted Karl on the back and gestured to the marked arena.

"If they can't get up for twenty seconds, they're eliminated. I recommend aiming for legs. Easy to heal after, and it doesn't leave them with a grudge."

Chapter 422 Witry Mages

The ten mages were quietly joking with each other as Karl entered the arena space.

"A warrior? They think that a Royal Rank warrior can take the ten of us? We might as well have made a pair's challenge." One of the boys joked.

"He sure is confident for a little herbivore of a man." The girl beside him added.

[Make that one a smashing post.] Thor insisted, offended by the insult to his food choices.

"Are we ready?" The Mage team leader asked. Karl had initially thought his name was Witry, but that was also the name of a country north of the Hill Giant Nation, next to the Drake Riders' island. So, it was most likely addressing him by origin nation, not name.

Karl slung the maul over his shoulder and nodded. The mages began casting their spells as he brought up [Eternal Lightning] [Flaming Body] and [Circle of Protection] all at once, then cast [Blizzard] at Royal Rank, while Remi started a [Thunderstorm].

[Don't use Totems, they will ask too many questions.] Karl insisted as he launched himself forward.

The closest mages were caught off guard, and the girl who had insulted Thor's love of plants was sent flying with a sickening crunch as Karl's shoulder slammed into her chest.

The Lightning shock from his barrier shattered her defensive spells, and her robes didn't even slow his momentum. The maul, with only a coating of [Flaming Body], shattered the thigh of the boy beside her, and he crumpled to the ground as the caustic rain began to fall and thunder echoed through the arena.

Karl tossed out [Chain Lightning], stunning the mages closest to him, before he moved toward the back of the arena, where the majority of the mages had gathered.

He raised his hand to aim Chain Lightning, an unnecessary little mental trick, but Rae used it as a cue to be dramatic, and began firing bullet - sized stones from near the palm of Karl's hand, spraying them into the remaining mages, who struggled to keep their barriers up.

A [Fireball] came flying at Karl, and Hawk blocked it with a [Wind Barrier], stopping it half a metre away.

"Shit, it's not a warrior. He's a Shaman with a hammer." One of the mages was cursing.

Karl could see the frustration of his teammates. They all knew that already, but there was nothing they could do about it as Karl deactivated the spells on his maul and cricket swatted one of the mages who had hit the ground to avoid the rocks.

The hammer hit him in the stomach, broke his barrier, and sent him flying across the arena.

Karl put his head down and charged another mage, while Thor cheered in his mind. The mighty smash was the true best attack. Now, if only Karl had proper horns.

"Enough!" The leader of the mage team shouted, right as Karl found himself wrapped in a barrier.

Five stacks of [Flaming Body] surged from the maul as Karl moved the few centimetres he could, but the barrier only shimmered and fluctuated for a second before stabilizing.

Then it was gone, and Niall had a hand on his shoulder.

"That's good enough, son. They got the message." The Inquisitor insisted.

Karl ended the Blizzard and Remi ended her Thunderstorm, returning the area to a neutral state, though much more muddy than it had been.

Now the mage Overlord was no longer sneering at Karl, but staring at him with what looked like envy.

Even Johann looked impressed, going by how he was standing, as he had his helmet on now.

There must have been some tension during the fight, as they were all on edge and barrier spells were activated.

"What was that? What sort of barrier spell just shrugs off a half dozen barrages of Arcane Missile at once?" The mage demanded.

Everyone turned to Karl for answers.

"That would be an [Eternal Lightning] barrier with a [Circle of Protection] stacked over it. I didn't even notice the Arcane Missiles. I saw the Fireball, though." Karl replied.

The rest of Karl's team had come out in the commotion, and they were giving him odd looks.

"What do you need beasts for if you can fight like that?" Overlord Kenichi asked.

"Beasts?" The Mage Overlord Demanded.

"He's a Beast Master. The first report we had of him, he had a bird of some sort, and a Bloodbath Spider fighting on his side. Neither of them were called for this fight, as Johann banned summons. Not that I think a dozen Commander Rank Golems would have changed the situation all that much. A Royal Rank Bloodbath Spider would have annihilated them before they could touch him."

Niall sighed in frustration as all of the combat power intelligence the Drake Riders had gathered on Karl was shared with another country, but the Golden Dragon Nation and the Drake Riders were not friends. They were just playing by the rules to avoid an Overlord Rank fight.

Something back in the arena area caught the attention of the Witry Mage, and he turned back, with his eyes wide in shock.

Karl couldn't tell what he was looking at until he traced the man's attention to the first woman he had shoulder checked. She had an empty potion bottle in her hand, but she was also casting some sort of spell that didn't have a visible effect. A spell that was at the Royal Rank.

The pair of Drake Riders laughed. "What was it the Oracle said? A great opportunity today for the Commander Rank, right? Well, there you have it. That makes two, no three now, that have advanced to the Royal Rank after understanding the difference between Ranks and breaking the bottleneck."

Karl had heard that sometimes losing a fight could be a greater learning experience than years of practice without a grave challenge, but he hadn't expected that they would send Commanders so close to advancing that watching their friends get beat up would be enough to trigger their advancement.

They weren't the only ones who were using the fight as a learning experience, though. The Magic Knights and Dana were comparing notes on the fight, and how it might have been improved or adapted to their skills.

They also used primarily magic and not physical strength, and while he used mostly magical attacks, Karl had gone for close combat to use the bodies as a shield instead of trying to dodge their attacks while throwing spells from a distance.

The Witry Overlord opened a portal, and silently gestured to his mages, who filed through, mostly limping or nursing injuries, with a few still unconscious and being carried by their teammates.

Nobody was going to die, so it was a win for everyone, in a way. He got to stretch his legs, the mages learned that the Royal Rank bottleneck wasn't just a small step, and the civilians at the camp didn't have to deal with a large-scale fight.

Politics were honestly a giant pain in the ass, but with all of the young Drake Riders coming back out now, Karl had some hope that the day's drama was mostly over. Over for him, anyhow. The Overlords and the politicians behind the scenes would certainly be busy dealing with other nations finding out about their new dungeon instance.

There was a good chance that someone was in real trouble for whatever leak had brought people here only days after it stabilized, and before the locals could make good use of it, but that was also not his problem.

Chapter 423 High Traffic Area

Once the mages from Witry were gone, the young Drake Riders came out from the building with excited smiles on their faces. Six of the ten had made it to Commander Rank, and Karl knew that they would all have at least one or two new pieces of equipment going back with them.

The dungeon was an excellent source of resources for the Commander Rank, with some Ascended items being possible from the Ogres on the way to the bosses, along with the coins.

That was the tradeoff. They had to pay to enter, but they got something in return that may or may not have been worth more than what they paid. Realistically, the experience alone was worth quite a bit, as the dungeon was a controlled environment, where you could send specific fighters without surprises.

The Drake Rider Overlords made a sharp whistle, and the younger Riders gave Johann and the other Overlords a sharp salute. Then they ran to their mounts, and in one smooth movement, they were aloft, soaring up into the sky on the wave of warmer air blowing over the tree line.

"It's always creepy when they do that." Johann complained.

"Do what?" Karl asked.

That mount and takeoff had been textbook perfect. It was like they were doing a synchronized gymnastics routine. Karl didn't see anything creepy about it at all.

The Knight gave Karl a confused look. "Vanish. It's creepy when they vanish like that."

Karl turned and watched them fly away for a few seconds before he realized that it was just echolocation and thermal imaging that still saw them.

"Oh. Sorry, I can still see them, so I didn't realize they did a thing."

Niall smiled and shook his head. "Your senses really are insane. But to think that you could see through invisibility cast at the Overlord Rank."

Karl shrugged. "It hides the visual image of them, but not the thermal image, or their radar signature, for lack of a better word. The echolocation that Rae uses to see in perfect darkness, along with her heat sight."

Ahmad sighed. "Lazy bastard. It's not invisibility. He cast lesser concealment, assuming that we wouldn't be able to track him either way. A proper invisibility spell would hide him from thermal imaging and radar, at least conventional radar."

[Tell him I want that spell.]

"I don't suppose that you could spare a copy of that spell for a particular Princess who thinks Shadow Step isn't sneaky enough for her." Karl suggested.

"If I could turn that into a spell book, every mage in the nation would be trying to learn it right now. Unfortunately, I cannot. But she really does dream of becoming a nightmare for other species, doesn't she?"

Karl smiled and nodded. "You should see it, it is adorable. Her legs make happy little chasing motions when she's dreaming of hunting them down."

"Because that's not terrifying at all." Bob mumbled from somewhere behind Karl.

Johann gave him a curious look, and Karl chuckled. "Bob here isn't the biggest fan of arachnids. Even when they're huge and furry and cuddly with razor legs and definitely not venomous mandibles."

"You're not helping."

"Well, that's two nations now that know for certain that Karl is a beast master, not counting the Giants. I suppose it's not too big of an issue, as they're used to strange things from our Elites, just keep an eye out for strangers trying to cut a deal. It might be foreigners trying to poach your talents, and both the government and the Church feel a certain sort of way about that." Johann cautioned.

"That is understandable. They have put a fair bit of effort into helping me along the way, and they've even agreed to my unreasonable demands to have a specific group with me, to the point they agreed to let us sign a magical contract." Karl replied.

Johann chuckled. "Yes, so I heard. The High Priests say that you have an exceptional affinity for the World Dragon's energy, so they wanted to see if your good fortune would rub off on those around you."

The rest of Karl's team smirked when they heard those words. It certainly seemed like it had rubbed off on them. "Do you think that we're going to have more visitors?" Morgana asked as she walked up with Doug.

"Almost certainly. There is a chance that they will want to do either individual challenges against a Commander Rank Elite, or group challenges against a Royal Rank Elite. Some might have all Ascended fighters, and they'll want a group fight against a Commander, so if one of you is suitable for the task, be ready to volunteer."

The team members nodded, and wondered which one of them would be the best suited to actually taking on a group of ten Ascended mages.

Not everyone was Karl, who had definitely cheated by allowing his beasts to assist without summoning them.

"What if they send a Royal Rank fighter to lead their team? Are we certain that we can win the challenge?" The familiar voice of the politician from the National Treasures Department asked.

"Yes. If it's a proper duel, we won't restrict the beasts. I didn't want the foreign forces to learn any more than necessary about his combat power, but as long as the opponent isn't a peak Royal Rank Divine Beast, it shouldn't be an issue." Overlord Niall replied with utter confidence.

"Is our champion that strong?" The politician asked hopefully.

"On a good day, one in ten Royal Rank Elites could take on Rae. Add in Karl and the other three beasts, and few things short of a full-blooded Dragon or a Divine Beast would stand a chance."

The politician sighed in relief, but all of the Overlords turned to the field where the last duel was fought.

Another portal opened, and Karl prepared himself for another challenge. But the first person to exit was an elderly man in the robes of the World Dragon Clerics. He took down his hood and revealed a wrinkled face with long fox ears and sharp eyes that didn't match the aging joints of his body.

He was an Overlord, and out of instinct, Karl nodded politely to him, while Niall, the Magic Knights and all the Clerics all bowed.

"Ah, I found the right spot on the first try. I knew that if I just followed the sensation of beasts fighting, I would find it." The World Dragon Bishop muttered to himself, then gestured for others to come through the portal.

Ten beastkin, including one Worgen wolf girl that looked quite familiar to Karl, came through the portal, all at the peak of Ascended Rank.

The Worgen stopped and pointed at Karl. "It's you! How did you make it to the Royal Rank so fast? It's only been half a year since we met." The old man smiled. "Good, you're all already friends. I do love emotional reunions.

Now, the Archbishop said that there was a dungeon around here somewhere. Would you care to guide an old man in the right direction?"

Karl smiled and stepped forward with his arm bent for the old man to use as a crutch.

"Of course, High Priest, it's just over this way. Did you have other business with the Overlords first?"

"Oh, they can sort that out between themselves. I am more interested in the portal itself."

Ruth came up and tapped Karl on the shoulder. "I will take the Elder to see the portal. I have magic to make the walk easier on him."

Chapter 424 Newbon

The new arrivals looked nervous now that they had been abandoned, but the formerly human Worgen Rogue took charge.

"We have come to request access to the dungeon, on behalf of the Whiton Temple branch of the Church. The ten of us are all trainees in their care." She announced.

Niall sighed. If they were appealing on behalf of the church, it didn't matter that they weren't from the Golden Dragon Nation. They would be allowed access. Dungeons were considered Holy Relics, which

gave the Church primary rights over them. So, it didn't matter what nation they hailed from, if they were Clerics of the World Dragon, or sent by them, they would be accommodated.

"Alright. The Magic Knights will lead you in. The Dungeon separates entrants into groups of five by order of entry, so sort your groups in advance." The Inquisitor explained.

"What is the challenge level?" She asked.

"Overall, low Commander. A mix of Commander and Ascended Rank Ogres, with Commander Rank bosses. There is minimal magic use, but some of the battle skills of the Ogre Lords are no joke."

The Knights led them into the building, and Johann sighed. "It looks like the discovery is already common knowledge. This can't be something on our end, it must have been a leak on the other side, either in procurement, or in the initial reporting, before your team was sent to clear the area. I'm tempted to say after you arrived. The Witry Mages didn't show up to try to claim it before it stabilized, so they would have found out later, likely from the Drake Riders' movements triggering their Oracle.

But if the word has already spread all through the Clergy, it should be considered an open secret.

That means we're going to have to deal with at least the Newbon Spellblades or demihumans showing up to challenge for a discount on access.

Nobody else would have the guts, I think. The Mage Towers east of the Frost Giants don't need much from us, as they have their own training methods, and the items that come from a dungeon are not usually of much use to Mages who can make their own equipment." The Shining Knight looked significantly more haggard than he had only a day ago, but it was emotional wear. "I don't know much about Newbon. Is it likely to get messy when they arrive?" Karl asked.

"That really depends on the day. Newbon is a majority human magical nation, the largest on the continent, but they have a considerable demihuman population. Every species you can think of, from Elves to Minotaur and Lamia coexists there.

So, when they show up here, their response will greatly depend on the attitude of the group they sent. If it's demihumans, some get along well with humans, some do not. But they respect the human

interaction standards, for the most part. So, once a challenge has been decided, the following groups will respect the outcome for a while.

That makes it vitally important that we win the challenges, or they'll send anyone they please to fight in the dungeon, and they won't be polite about it." Johann explained.

Another portal opened, and a smiling Minotaur woman in an undyed leather dress covered in bead work stepped out. "Were you talking about me? My ears are burning, you must have been talking about me." She announced.

"Funny, it's like you had a listening spell active." Ahmad replied, and the nearly three metre tall woman gave him a bright white toothy grin. "Hello again Ahmad. I don't suppose you will reconsider that marriage proposal? I know you're still single."

"And quite content with the situation, thank you, Morrissa."

She actually looked a bit sad at that reply. Perhaps the big woman had a thing for clean cut Catman mages.

"How are we doing this today? Are you going to let my people through, or do we need to beat someone up to make our point?" She asked.

"Or you can just pay the entry fee." Ahmad suggested.

The Minotaur burst into laughter. "I see you haven't lost your sense of humour. Now, should we do this champion on champion, or will you let my people pass?"

"Champions. Do you want conditions?"

"This is a young adult sort of fight, so we can't just let the children go wild. No lethal blows, no cheap shots. One on one."

"With summons." Ahmad countered. "Do I look stupid to you? Don't answer that, humans are too stupid to tell that Minotaurs are all smarter than them. No summons, or that champion of yours is just going to try to assassinate my champion with his beasts."

[She's not as dumb as she looks. But how are you supposed to tell that with those vacant bovine eyes?] Rae asked.

[I think she's actually not as smart as she thinks. She's just a prey species, and she instinctively knows to avoid us.] Hawk added.

[Why won't they let us out? Everyone keeps insulting us and I can't even go out and bite them.] Remi complained.

[Our little snake is getting bloodthirsty. We will have to find you some peaceful reading materials or keep you away from Sister Rae.] Thor joked as Ahmad considered his answer.

Before he could speak, Morrisa turned to Karl. "I am right, am I not? No matter who I send against you, you would have one of your beasts assassinate them while you restrained them."

"Not in a lethal way. We agreed no lethal blows." Karl agreed.

Ahmad reluctantly nodded as he made a decision. "Alright. One on one, no additional attackers. But no flying species on your side."

Karl hadn't considered the fact that they might send a flying opponent against him to try to attack from further than he could cast spells.

"Why don't we make this one fun? Unarmed, melee range only?" The Minotaur Shaman suggested.

"Do you think we're crazy?" Johann laughed.

Karl chuckled. "Actually, I think she might be on to something. We've all seen the flashy skills, maybe a classic knock - down, drag out is just what we need."

"I don't think that you know what you're suggesting." Niall whispered.

"No, the boy has a point. How about this. No more than twice his weight, so my champion doesn't get taken out with a crotch punch. No weapons, no lethal blows, melee range only. No flying." Karl smiled at Johann and the Knight sighed. "Fine, we accept the terms."

Overlord Ahmad laughed. "Well, at least Karl isn't a particularly large guy. He's only about a hundred kilos, so the opponent won't be someone huge."

Morrisa reached back through the portal she had entered through, and grabbed someone, dragging them forward.

He appeared to be a turtle, standing on his back feet, with human shaped legs, but also with a full shell, and armoured plating on top of his head.

"Dammit, I should have expected that. If you want to forfeit, let us know. A Tortollan will not be an easy fight unarmed." Johann sighed.

Karl clapped him on the shoulder. "Don't worry too much. I can throw a punch."

The actual punch wasn't the point of a melee range fight with what was almost certain to be a naturally armoured Monk. Their skills granted them extreme defence, enhanced by their high base durability. Then they had a wide range of attack skills intended for close combat.

But Karl had Brutality to increase his size. Then there were Haste and Terrorize to increase his speed and damage. Bone Crusher was an effective melee attack skill that ignored armour, Shatter added internal damage, and Crushing Blows would add damage to blunt attacks, like fists and Bone Crusher.

If anything, he was at least on even footing with a Monk when he had his barriers up.

Chapter 425 Donald The Monk

The Tortollan smiled at Karl, his mouth extending all the way across his head.

"I am Donald, what might your name be, human warrior?" He asked.

"My name is Karl. It's a pleasure to meet you, Donald."

The Tortollan laughed. "You might not be saying that in a minute."

Karl shrugged. "We will see. I just hope that a cracked shell won't leave you in too bad of a condition. From what I remember, snapping turtles don't have a skeleton inside their shell."

The Tortollan looked vaguely insulted at being compared to a common snapping turtle, but he didn't dignify Karl's taunt with a response.

Johann led them to the arena ring, and Morrisa called ten peak Ascended fighters through. "If my man loses, I will pay the customary double fee. If not, there is no point in delaying." She insisted.

Johann nodded. "Fine by me. They might as well get started. This fight might take a few minutes."

Karl and Donald squared off, with the Minotaur Overlord as a referee.

"Fighters ready? Bring up your defences and we will start." Karl activated Flaming Body, Eternal Lightning, Haste, Terrorize and Brutality at the same time, then nodded.

The two beastkin both looked shocked when Karl expanded to be close to the same size as his opponent, but Donald didn't look concerned. Tortollan expressions didn't change much, but his body language said that he thought the size expansion was just a trick to give Karl longer reach.

"Begin."

The two combatants launched toward each other, neither trying to dodge, and two mighty blows landed. Eternal Lightning flared as it was nearly shattered by a blow to Karl's left shoulder, but Karl's fist landed in the centre of the Tortollan's chest, and the stout beast was lifted off his feet and tossed backward into the grass, sliding on his back shell for five metres before tucking his head inside his shell and flipping onto to his feet with a pale white barrier flickering around him.

He was a bit more cautious as he advanced, shifting positions, so Karl's darting jabs couldn't hit him squarely again.

"What did he hit him with? I've never seen a Tortollan put on his back with one punch." Niall asked as the two Royal Rank fighters gauged each other's skills.

Ophelia considered it for a few seconds. "Likely [Bone Crusher], increased by the same buffs that he uses on his beasts, since he's expanded his own size like he does for me in bear form."

"Ah, armour bypass. That makes sense. A Weretiger likely would have been a worse matchup for him. That's what I was expecting her to pick."

The Minotaur gave them an annoyed look as Karl shifted targets at the last instant and met Donald's punch with his own fist, sending shockwaves out from the two fighters before the Tortollan staggered back, clutching his shattered hand.

It was quickly healing as Donald dodged and focused his energy on the injured limb.

Monk Class internal healing wasn't as good as a cleric spell, but it appeared to be as good as Bestial Regeneration, just more energy intensive.

Donald was breathing heavily by the time his fist was healed, and a quick jab from Karl made his barrier flicker completely out of existence for over a second.

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But the Monk was deceptively fast, and he managed to dodge enough hits to keep Karl from following it up to finish the fight.

His breathing evened out, and his barrier came back as Donald focused on defence while he looked for an opening that wouldn't let Karl sacrifice his own body to counterattack.

That double barrier over Karl made it a losing proposition to trade punches like that.

Karl took advantage of his need to focus on defence, and chased the Tortollan around the ring, shocking him with Chain Lightning every time they made even the slightest bit of contact.

Most of the effect was being blocked by the barrier, but Karl could see that Donald's muscles were beginning to twitch with every hit as his defences weakened, and the Tortollan slowly became exhausted.

With [Eternal Lightning] Karl was still feeling as fresh as when he started the fight, though a bit hungry.

Karl hadn't realized how much time had passed until he spun behind his opponent to rain a flurry of attacks down on Donald's shell, letting [Bone Crusher] and [Shatter] with the [Crushing Blows] enhancement do their work on his internal organs. That was when he noticed that there were ten freshly advanced Commanders waiting for the fight to end.

The internal shockwaves sent Donald to his shell, limbs pulled inside and spitting blood, as Karl backed away.

Twenty seconds on the ground was out of the fight, and with the lingering tremors in his body, Karl could tell that his opponent was doing the best that he could just to keep his organs from liquifying.

Marissa sighed and signalled the end of the fight. As Karl retreated, she used healing splash to coat the monk in power, and he collapsed on the ground, resting on his back shell as he could finally begin to recover and not curl up with his limbs retracted in pain.

The Overlord Rank Minotaur stared at Karl for a few seconds before nodding. "You are more crafty than you look, human. To think that you wouldn't try to break the shell, but to attack through it to the softer parts of the body. I will be certain to add this lesson to our training." She announced, then easily picked the two hundred kilo turtle man up in her arms and passed him through the portal to someone on the other side.

"Now, the matter of payment." She reluctantly sighed, before producing one large box and a small one, no bigger than the palm of Karl's hand.

The first she handed to Johann, who opened it and nodded in satisfaction, but the second she held out to Ahmad. "Don't deny yourself any longer, little mage. Come home with me." She announced, then opened the small box to reveal an absolutely stunning wedding ring, with a large central diamond surrounded by seven smaller coloured gems.

The mage sighed and shook his head. "My answer hasn't changed. I am quite happily single, and intend to remain that way."

The Minotaur snorted in annoyance and stomped back through the portal, followed by her team.

As it closed, it was clear that the other two Overlords were doing their very best not to laugh at Ahmad. "Laugh it up. Next time, it might be you with a crazy Minotaur stalker," the mage grumbled.

Johann gave him a sympathetic look. "Why do you think that I wear this helmet whenever we're meeting with new people? I can't have my handsome face making them fall for me."

Not even Colonel Valerie could resist laughing a little at that. The Overlord known as the Shining Knight was nearly the picture perfect handsome warrior stereotype, and he knew it. It might have made him arrogant, but he was also an Overlord, and that was bound to affect the Ego of anyone who managed to make it to that level of power.

Niall snapped his fingers to get everyone's attention. "Alright, let's hope that is the last of our visitors for the day. Morrisa will inform the rest of her countrymen and their allies about the outcome, and the details of the dungeon, in the next few hours.

After that, we will see what happens. They might send a few more teams with payment, as it is a large nation. But they might hold off for a few more days."

Just what Karl needed. More practice. If only he could send the rest of the team out. Thor and Remi both had ideas that might help them advance, but nobody wanted to let them fight.

Chapter 426 Emergency At The Mines

"Do you need healing?" Overlord Johann asked Karl as he settled down on the grass by the trail zone to relax for a bit, in case there was another challenge.

Karl shook his head. "No, I'm good. He didn't manage to break the second barrier, and Eternal Lighting refreshes stamina. So, I should be fine after a quick snack. I am just relaxing to see who shows up next."

The Knight laughed and joined Karl on the grass. "I don't think that there will be too many more nations that will be willing to challenge you. Those were some pretty decisive victories, especially unarmed against a Tortollan Monk after proving yourself in a magical battle.

If anyone does challenge for free entry, they will at least take a day or two to try to plan before they come for you." "Well, that's a start. I guess we're going to be hanging around here for a while then. How long are the trials open before they just have to pay to enter?" Karl asked.

"One week. We're already nearly halfway through the trial period. Normally, it is only a day or two of trials after the other nations find out about the dungeon. Not that they open all that often. More commonly, it's only one round of trials before the portal destabilizes and the event is over.

Having one open full-time is going to drive the clerics insane. They are the ones who arrange the formal visits to keep the nations who don't get along from having a conflicting schedule and starting fights at holy sites. This one will be busier than most, as Commander Rank resources are so rare on this continent.

The only ones that might still show up are the beasts, and that could be somewhat difficult for you, as we don't know how they will respond to your class bonding with actual beasts. They aren't the biggest fans of Rangers, and they only bond with regular animals.

You've got Royal Rank Magical Beasts on your side." Johann explained.

Karl nodded. "Yeah, I can see how that might become an issue if they object to the situation. But I think that once they talk to each other, they will understand."

After an hour, Lotus and Doug brought out food for everyone awaiting the next challenge. But no challengers were coming. By now it was fairly certain that every human nation would have been informed of the situation by their spies, so if they were planning a challenge, they were delaying for some reason. More likely, they simply didn't care. Most nations had their own training resources, and paying to come here and use another nation's dungeon was unnecessary.

Some would come to train here later, likely from the smaller factions among the Newbon Empire. Not all of them had access to the resources in that nation's territory if they didn't belong to a large faction. But very few of the small factions would have five peak Ascended or Commander Rank trainees to make up a team. It was the same in the east, the Mage Towers were too small to assemble a team without working together.

That was a chore on its own, and might not be worth the effort when a traditionally trained mage could advance peacefully in their tower.

It was just getting dark when Karl sensed a new presence in the distance, staring directly at him.

He turned, trying to discretely determine what was watching him, but he didn't see anything. He didn't stop scanning, though, and after a few seconds, he spotted a massive body in the trees, barely visible from a kilometre away.

[Oh, the human can see me?] A deep voice asked in Karl's mind.

[Not easily. But the trees don't fully hide your silhouette.]

[Interesting. We will meet again soon.]

Then the creature was gone, and Karl was left wondering just what sort of beast it had been. From this distance, and with the leaves in the way, he could only really spot it by the distinctive shape of its eyes, and the outline of its body was too broken up to say for certain what he was speaking with.

But if that was the visit from the Divine Beast Empire, and they were just curious, it meant he could relax a little.

So, when Karl went to sleep that night, it was with an easy mind. Rae was on night watch in the bell tower, and there were guards on patrol around the camp for the smaller threats. Karl woke with a jolt as an alarm was sounded in the camp, pulling everyone out of bed.

[What's going on, Rae?]

[I have no idea. I don't think the alarm is about something that is happening here.]

Karl put on his armour and stepped to the end of the aisle to jump out the window.

The Overlords were rubbing sleep from their eyes, and the military officer on duty had a portable radio brought out to them.

"Overlords, what is going on?" Karl asked. "Good, you're here already. There is an emergency near the Lithium Mines. Some sort of Anomaly has appeared. We are the closest response team to them right now, with so many of the response teams currently deployed to the borders. They already sent two Awakened Rank locals, who are currently missing in action. The nature of the issue is unknown, but it is likely to be at the Commander Rank or higher. Your team will be going with Niall, while the rest of us remain here with the Magic Knights to deal with resource challenges." Johann explained.

The Knights nodded in understanding, while Morgana gave the fort a longing look. It was far too early in the morning for an emergency.

Karl gestured to the helicopter that was beginning to spin up its rotors.

"Should we get loaded?"

"Go ahead, if you've got everything you need."

Lotus ran back to the fort to grab another container of muffins, and Rae gathered her shiny stones that she had been decorating with. Whoever took over the fort could provide their own shiny stones.

They loaded into the helicopter, making a nine-person response team, from Commander to Overlord Rank. No matter what the issue was, they should be able to take care of it, even if they were mostly just buffing Niall. A [Circle of Protection] would go a long way to keeping the Overlord Rank Rogue safe, and as an Inquisitor, he would be one of the finest fighters among the Overlords to begin with.

The floor shuddered as they took off, and then tilted slightly as the pilot raced toward their destination.

"Get as much rest as you can. We don't know what's coming, but it could be a long day." Niall warned them as he leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes.

It might not be actual sleep, but a bit of meditation helped prepare everyone for the fights ahead.

But for Karl, this was somewhat personal. The destination was just outside his hometown, and if the situation got out of control, his parents would be in danger. They had moved to a nicer house near the centre of town, but there was still only one Elite in the Lithium Mine town. Well, he wasn't much of an Elite. He was more of a prototype, having taken a test version of the Divine Serum in advance.

But while he had plenty of combat experience, he was starting to get older now, and he was slowing down with the soft life of a Mayor.

Chapter 427 Anomaly Zone

While the emergency response team raced toward the Anomaly, those left behind at the dungeon began to worry that there might be more to the situation than they had been led to believe. There were too many Anomalies lately, and they were at war on every side, except for the border with the beastkin.

The Giants had to know something more than they were saying, and the Magical Knights couldn't shake the feeling that they had missed a critical memo.

But in the helicopter, things were more relaxed, as everyone meditated and prepared for the upcoming mission.

"Five minutes to the edge of the Anomaly zone," the pilot informed them.

Karl stood and stretched, getting ready for whatever they found when they disembarked.

[Thor, be ready with the barriers.]

Eternal Lightning came up on everyone as Thor got his last few minutes of beauty sleep, and the other beasts followed Karl in stretching, so they didn't strain anything or have stiff muscles when it was time to come out.

[Descending through heavy cloud cover with extremely limited visibility.] The Pilot announced.

Karl moved to look out the window, keeping an eye out for anything that might have been missed by the helicopter's sensor suite.

There was nothing, just white. That didn't seem right. He should be able to see the ground through cloud cover, unless there was heavy rain beneath them, but these were white puffy clouds, not the dark storm clouds that would bring that sort of rain.

Rae thought the same thing, something wasn't right.

Then the sound of rending steel shattered the drone of the helicopter blades, and Karl found himself flying through open air.

As he rotated, he could see the massive hole torn in the side of the helicopter, which was being violently molested by a pale white dragon that seemed to be made of clouds, not quite corporeal.

The others were beginning to bail out with hastily donned parachutes, and Karl noted with pleasure that all of them had their barriers active still.

With Eternal Lightning active, they should be fine. He was the only one likely to have a rough landing.

Karl felt the air around him suddenly condense, as if he were below water, then it was thin again, the sort of high altitude atmosphere that left the lungs struggling to breathe.

It had to be an Air Element Dragon. That was fine, once he figured out how to track it, he would be able to take it out.

Beneath him, the clouds were thinning, and Karl looked around for the others to make sure they hadn't pulled their parachutes too early.

But there was nobody nearby. Not even the crippled helicopter.

Then, the clouds parted beneath him, and Karl found himself plummeting towards a massive lake.

The only lake that large in the Golden Dragon Nation was Lake Chiptonrith, and that should be hundreds of kilometres away. Karl was reasonably confident in his pathfinding abilities, but moreover, the direct route to the Lithium mines took them away from the lake, not towards it.

As he approached the lake's surface, Karl crossed his ankles and his arms, as he had learned to dive off the cliffs into the intake water pond for the mine as a kid.

He hit the water at an incredible speed, but even after the [Eternal Lightning] barrier broke on impact, the Flaming Body kept him safe and uninjured. The water was wrong, very wrong. It was bath water warm, and even ten metres deep after his emergency entry, the water was still crystal clear, and he could clearly see the surface. So, he removed his armour for mobility, but kept the barriers active for safety, and made his way to the surface.

He was still a few hundred metres from the shore, but that wouldn't be too bad of a swim, especially in this nice warm water, but Karl was beginning to wonder where he was.

It could be possible that he had been knocked into an instance, as he wouldn't have been able to see the entrance through the thick cloud cover. Karl stepped out onto the shore, and he was absolutely certain that he was not in the Golden Dragon Nation anymore. None of the plants were familiar, and the sun was just about to set, despite the fact it had just been coming up when he was knocked from the helicopter.

[It's in the wrong spot in the sky as well. If we were close to home, the sun should be south of overhead. But it's not.] Hawk added.

[Alright, then the question is: What do we need to do to get out of the instance? There don't seem to be any enemies, and I haven't seen a message from the system.] Karl sighed.

[Forget that. They stole my Dana and my Lotus.] Rae reminded him.

Karl laughed a little. [I think that they stole us, and Dana was left behind with everyone else. Or did you see something I didn't?]

That was a great dilemma for Rae. Could someone have been brave enough to abduct her? It made sense, in a way. They were in a new place, and the girls weren't here with her.

[I think the others are all still together. The Dragon killed the helicopter, but it didn't hurt the others who had my barriers. Even if they landed on the ground, they should be alright, and they had the Rogue man Niall with them.] Thor suggested.

[Does this mean we get to explore?] Remi asked hopefully.

"I think that's our only choice." Karl agreed, forgetting to speak internally.

[I will go fly up and see if there is anything we missed on the way down.] Hawk suggested. The others came out and spread out for a bit, getting used to this new place, which felt different from home.

[I found a village. It looks like humans, you can go northeast.] Hawk advised before returning.

That was a good sign. If there were humans, he might be able to find out what was going on, and perhaps even where he was, assuming that they weren't also lost.

So, With Hawk scouting overhead, Karl began to make his way toward the village full of humans.

[Everyone, please return to your spots when we get close. I don't want anyone getting injured on a misunderstanding.] Karl reminded the team.

Thor returned right away, eager to watch the proceedings from his pond full of holy water, while Remi hung herself around Karl's shoulders for the next few minutes, reluctant to return to boredom, but also not enthusiastic about being attacked by random weirdos.

Hopefully, random weirdos were the worst sort of people that he found. For all Karl knew, they could be some sort of humanoid monster trapped in this place, or coded to be aggressive but maintain their position like the dungeon monsters.

He would have to be cautious, but if there was a chance that they were just a random village full of humans who might have answers for him, he would have to take it.

The [Silent Movement] skill let him creep up on the village easily enough, and Karl dropped into a shallow ditch just beyond the edge of the fields, so that he could observe the villagers in peace for a few minutes while he tried to determine whether they were hostile or not.

They looked peaceful enough, going about their daily chores, and there were children. There were never children in the dungeon, only combatants. That was good enough for him, so Karl made his way to the road to approach like any normal traveller would.

Chapter 428 Long Walk

Karl walked down the road past the first few fields, nodding politely toward the farmers working in the fields.

There was an old man sitting along the roadside with a table full of fruit, and he made a wide armed welcoming gesture as he saw Karl approaching.

"Welcome traveller. You look to be a long way from home." The old man called in a strange accent that Karl struggled to understand.

"I do believe I am. I was travelling from just outside Whiton, and encountered a strange cloud. When it cleared, I was here." Karl hoped that the man would know Whiton Temple, which had been there with the same name since time immemorial.

"Whiton, you say? Never heard of it. But a Darklight Host Outreach Worker is a friend anywhere in the world."

That sorted it. He was either inside a trial, or he had been tossed onto another continent.

"I don't suppose you could tell me where I have ended up?" Karl asked, then tossed the man a silver coin from his bag and took one of the peaches off the table.

They were two for a copper, which seemed a bit steep, but when Karl bit into it, he realized that the peach had a rejuvenating property, and wasn't just a plain fruit. He would have to ensure that Thor planted the seed and got it to grow in the space. It would be a real treat for Lotus if he could give her magical fruits for her breakfast dishes.

"You're in Maria, just outside the Port City of Kanyigi, on the West Coast. If you follow this road another hour, you'll be there. I will warn you, anyone who hasn't made it past the first advancement shouldn't come anywhere near that cesspool. Kanyigi is a Fee Port, and it can get a bit rowdy.

If you turn around and go a couple of days down the road the other way, you'll get to Bunga, and it's a much better place to be. The only problem is that you'll have to deal with the wild beasts on the way there.

If you've got a combat class, it should be alright. As I recall, all the Outreach Workers should have reached the First Advancement before they're sent out alone, but then I suppose you weren't planning to travel alone, were you?" The old man asked.

Karl shook his head. "No, I was leading a group, but they weren't sent here with me. I don't know if they ended up somewhere else, or managed to avoid whatever sent me here."

The old man made a protective gesture, wishing them well, and sighed. "If they were sent here, I hope they weren't sent too far inland.

Here near the coasts, it's relatively safe for those at the first advancement, but if you get further in, you'll need to be at least past the second advancement, and there are spots near the borders where you'll need to be Mythic Awakened just to survive."

Karl had gone through the first Advancement Trial, so he at least had an idea what the man meant, but Mythic Awakened? If he recalled right, it should be the Totem Rank after Overlord, would Mythic be the one after that?

If that was the case, he really had to keep himself near the coast because it meant that the Second Advancement should be somewhere around Overlord Rank.

"Is there an outpost or temple near here? Somewhere that might have maps and some clue about what happened to me?" Karl asked

"Aye, there is one in Bunga. A healing temple operated by the Darklight Host. They should have maps of all of the outposts on the continent, and that should get you home." The old farmer offered.

"Thanks for the advice. It looks like I will turn around and head back toward Bunga. I haven't any coppers, but here, for a few more fruits." Karl replied as he used one of the small bags on the table to pick up six of the peaches.

The old man quickly pocketed the second silver coin with a glowing smile and then dug in the bag beside him, which Karl had taken to be his lunch.

"Wear this on your left arm if you're suspecting trouble with humans. They won't normally mess with an Outreach Worker, but even if they're feeling frisky, they won't touch anyone wearing that."

Karl chuckled and tucked the red bandana into his storage. "Enthusiastic negotiators are an occupational hazard, I'm afraid. But I've come across more than a few in my time. Thank you for the advice and the assistance."

Karl put five of the peaches in his bag and passed the last one to Thor, along with the pit from the one that he ate. [Oh, those are good. I will work on growing the peach trees.] Thor agreed once he had a taste.

The actual benefits meant very little to him, as Thor had all sorts of refreshing and rejuvenating plants in his home, but beneficial plants that were juicy and sweet were much more difficult to obtain.

Karl turned away from the village and began to make his way back to Bunga, following the old man's advice.

He made it all the way to the edge of the last farm, and was headed into the treed area when he came across a woodcutter leaning against his mule. The animal was hooked to a large log, and ready to go back to their sawmill, but the man kept it in place for a moment while he talked to Karl.

"Did the old man tell you that the Port isn't safe and to head to Bunga?" He asked.

Karl nodded, waiting to see what the woodcutter would say.

"Well, that's not a lie. But there are bandits all along the road to Bunga. It's a dangerous route, and they have no respect for anyone. Even that Darklight Host tabard isn't going to save you from them. I recommend that you don't follow the road, or you take a detour southeast through the woods and take the path south from Homa and then east to Bunga at the fork in the road by Kapchor."

Karl nodded. "I take it that way is closer to the coast, and generally considered safer, but longer?"

The woodcutter lit a pipe full of tobacco and smirked at Karl.

"Half right. It's closer to the coast, but it's a wagon path that's overrun with monsters. Nobody would call it a safer route on a regular day, but for a solo traveller, it's safer than dealing with bandits."

"Do you have any details on the bandits? If it's reasonable, I should probably take care of that problem." Karl suggested, playing the part of the Darklight Host Outreach Worker as well as he could.

"There are about thirty of them in total, but they spread out down the road, depending on where they think they'll have the most luck. There are a number of villages between here and Bunga, but none of them more than about twenty people. Nothing that can stand up to them, so don't be surprised if you stop overnight, and they turn you in for a reward from the bandits."

With his piece said, the woodcutter spurred his mule into motion and started heading back to the village.

Chapter 429 Eastward Bound

Karl kept walking, so that anyone who might have been alerted of his presence wouldn't be tipped off that the woodcutter had talked to him, and consulted the team.

[What do you think? It appears that the others didn't get sent here, so we're on our own for a minute. Should we head through the woods for safety, or take our chances on the road, where we know we won't get lost?] [How tough could they be? There are five of us.] Rae replied, not concerned.

She had a good point. He wasn't alone, and that seemed to be the real concern of the woodcutter.

Karl activated [Flaming Body], then changed to his much more battered set of armour, with the green tunic, and began making his way down the road.

[Wait, I have a better idea.] Rae informed him, and Karl paused at the side of the road.

She made him a rough woven duffel bag that looked like cheap canvas, then left her space to chop up a log and stuff it inside before rolling the bag in dirt.

[There, now you look like a hobo.] Rae laughed.

Karl laughed and slung the duffle across his back as he walked down the road at a steady pace, not quite jogging, but a comfortable fast walk for a warrior type Elite.

It was already getting dark, and he didn't want to be too close to the village when the sun went down. He still had plenty of energy, and the ability to see in the dark, so there was no real reason for him to stop moving. The bandits would have a harder time attacking at night without him detecting them first, and they might not even be set up.

If it was anything like home, then few people travelled at night if they could avoid it. Karl didn't know if this place had cars, as he didn't see any in the village, and the woodcutter was using a mule. But woodcutters used mules or horses at home as well, it was just more efficient than trying to move machinery through the woods.

Rae got to work and made him a new coat with a hood, and a low hem that almost dragged on the ground. It was the adaptive coloration silk, and would make him nearly invisible in the dark as he jogged along the road. But when there was no mana in it, the coat would be five different shades of green brown and black patches.

Karl activated the coat and put the duffle back over his shoulder. Every little bit would help as the night got darker, and clouds rolled in. With no moon up and the stars obscured, it was incredibly dark out, and nothing was moving within earshot as Karl began to jog with [Silent Movement] activated.

He brought up [Eternal Lightning] to keep his stamina up, and settled in for a long night of running through the woods, until his normal day would have been up.

He didn't know what pace the old farmer had intended when he said that Bunga was two days away, so it would be better to make up time today, and then find a good camp during the daylight hours.

Just after midnight, Karl saw the first signs of life along the road. There were two people high in trees on either side of the road, and a large group gathered around a campfire, looking like they were asleep.

They might just be resting, but thermal vision showed them laying down.

[I will move to the left of the road, far enough that the humans shouldn't see me. If they do, then Rae will send her Golems against the archers in the trees first. Try to take them out before they can send out a warning.] Karl cautioned

[They're hiding their power. That's a neat trick. I wonder if it's a spell? I can tell that they're powerful, but not how powerful.] Rae pondered.

Karl thought about it and realized it wasn't actually a difficult trick. If he had no active spells, he could just focus his energy inward, and most of his power signature would be masked. That would make it harder to detect him if he was hiding in a tree, but it would also leave him open to attack.

[Are we not going to do anything?] Hawk complained.

[Only if we have to. We have places to be, and I don't know how strong those thieves are with their power shielded. The villagers did warn us that there are much more powerful things in this country.] Karl reminded him.

[Still, wouldn't the Red Dragon be happy if we eliminated bandits? Bandits make Orphans.] Hawk suggested.

That was a bit of a stretch, but Karl could see how enthusiastic the beasts were.

[Fine, we test them. Rae, take out the scouts in the trees with golems.]

If they had misjudged the situation and the Golems couldn't make a clean job of it, he would run before the others realized what was going on.

The Golems appeared in the trees, and the guards reacted instantly, lashing out with attacks that did serious damage to the barriers on the constructs, and then slashing three more times as they fell from the tree to the ground.

But that was the end of them. The sharpened limbs of the Golems had punched holes in their chests through the flimsy leather armour they were wearing, and they drowned in their own blood in a matter of seconds, even as large red pools were forming under them as their hearts struggled for a few more beats.

The commotion had alerted the rest of the bandit team, and Karl called the others out, but kept Thor in reserve, as he would be too easy to spot along the road, and the trees were too close together for him to move between them without knocking them over.

Karl hefted his maul and moved into the trees, watching the groggy bandits run for the road. Five charges of [Chain Lightning] on his maul were prepared, and one of the bandits instantly turned to him, alerted by the ability use.

Karl swung the oversized hammer, catching the man in the chest, and a barrier flared before shattering, along with an amulet around his neck.

The Lightning arced between the Bandits, whose movements were slowed by the effect. Then three flaming totems appeared halfway up the trees around them, firing inwards, right before [Rend] infused fireballs began to rain from the sky.

The bandits had no idea how to deal with the attacks from every direction at once. They were well practised in attacks against merchants and other ground-based targets, but the art of ambush from above was what they specialized in, not what was normally used against them.

The majority of the bandits were quickly annihilated, but one man was just laughing off everything that they were throwing at him until the Golems hit him from behind, and tore huge gashes in his flesh.

That got his attention.

[I think he has a skill that prevents smaller damage. We need to hit him harder.] Remi noted as she examined the battlefield.

That sounded good to Rae. She knew just how to do that.

So did Karl.

When the bandit leader turned to deal with the Golems, Karl charged five layers of [Bone Crusher] on his maul and buffed himself all the way up.

When the bandit leader's blade landed on a Golem, nearly tearing it in half, Karl's maul smashed into his back.

The bandit leader went limp, and Karl backed away, suspecting a trap, and let the Golems at him.

They stabbed at the body for a few minutes before deciding that he was dead enough and not just paralyzed from the chest down. Given the skills that many Elites had, if he was just paralyzed, he might have healed.

[There are still heat signatures in the camp, but they're just wiggling. Do you think they're treats the bandits were saving?] Rae asked.

[Possibly, but no eating them. We will go see what they left for us.] Karl reminded her.

[How can I even call them treats if I can't eat them? Oh, never mind, they are treats of the toy variety. I can play with these ones.]

That had Karl concerned as he went to see what the spider had found.

What he found were ten children, bruised and dressed in filthy rags, tied up and immobile around the campfire, so they didn't freeze to death at night.

Elven children in specific, going by the long and pointy ears. They must have been taken from a caravan because there were no Elves among the dead on the road.

[Everyone, I need a cleanup. Get rid of the bodies and remove any signs of a battle from the road. Actually, put the bodies in someone's space, in case there is a bounty on them. We might be able to trade them for good things.] Now, he just needed to decide how to transport the kids.

Chapter 430 Bag Of Treats

As Rae made baskets to carry the children on Thor's back, Remi and Hawk looted the battlefield. It wasn't a dungeon, that was for certain, as the bodies didn't disappear, and they didn't just get the loot. But they did find the bracelet that the leader of the bandit group was wearing, and it looked like it was something excellent.

[Bracelet of Combat Fortune] Reduces damage taken by 150 points per second.

[That item is evil. You can't Blizzard them, you can't poison them, you can't even just slowly bleed them out.] Remi complained.

Karl put the bracelet on, and Remi giggled. [Yes, now we are team evil. It's a shame that doesn't apply to all of us, though. We need to get more of those bracelets.] She added.

[You've always been on team evil magic.] Hawk muttered, thinking about her primary attack skill being Blizzard with a side of Thunderstorm.

She had redeemed herself somewhat with the Poison Fire Totems, but then learned Thunderstorm to offset all the respectability that she had gained the Hawk's eyes.

His little sister was shameless.

Once the harness on Thor was ready, Rae began to use her webbing to load the children into the pouches, before carefully cutting the restraints on their hands.

The children were so terrified by the aura and presence of giant monsters that they didn't dare to move, they just sat silently in the pouches, not even removing their blindfolds and gags after their hands were freed.

"Hello everyone, I do hope that you can understand me. My name is Karl, and I will be your tour guide tonight. There has been a slight change of plans, and now that I have killed the bandit group, I will be delivering you to the city of Bunga. There is a Darklight Host outpost there, I am told, and they will know what to do with you all." Karl announced.

Most of the Elven children just seemed confused and terrified, but one boy carefully pulled his blindfold down, and then realized that he was staring directly at Rae and promptly fainted.

A few seconds later, a girl pulled her blindfold down and turned to face Karl. She was cautiously scanning the area for her captors, but there were none left.

The beasts had already finished the cleanup, and other than some scuffed dirt around the campfire that indicated either a caravan stopped for the evening or that there was a fight, there was nothing left to indicate that this had been the chosen ambush site for a bandit group.

The Elf girl slowly removed the cloth tied around her mouth and began to whisper.

"You rescued us?"

Karl nodded. "We killed the bandits, and you were left behind, so we're going to take you with us to the city of Bunga."

The little Elf nodded reluctantly, and Karl began to worry that the town might not be a good one.

"Is there a spot that you would rather be taken to?" He asked.

The girl shook her head. "We were headed to the village of Glatt to visit family, but that was months ago."

I didn't realize we had travelled so far. Even if you went straight through the forest, it would be over a thousand kilometres to bring us home.

Bunga will have to be good enough, and then we can beg for money to get the Darklight Host to send us closer to home."

Karl smiled and patted her head. "Don't worry about that. I will talk to them and see if I can get them to escort you all safely back. I am guessing that the rest of your caravan didn't survive?"

That seemed a bit insensitive the moment that it left his mouth, but it was too late to take it back.

The girl gave a tight smile that was anything but happy.

"When we passed through the village of Senau in the Thearchy of Roblavil just a few days after our capture, all of the adults were sold off to a slaver caravan. They wouldn't pay as much for the children as the bandits wanted, so they were going to take us to Kanyigi once their contact made it back into the port.

They would likely send us to Akelia. The Khan has a fondness for Elven servants. They pretend that there are no slaves there, but it's illegal to run away from a work contract before your debt is paid. That's what the bandit leader was saying. Elves live a long time, and the Khan demands a third of your wages for life, up front as a tax debt."

That was pure extortion to get around a slavery prohibition, Karl was certain of it. But they were likely afraid of some outside force cracking down on them for keeping slaves, so they found a technicality.

"Everyone, please remove your bindings, so you don't become sick from the motion of the Cerro. We will be moving quickly along the road to get to the city sometime hopefully during the day. I don't intend on stopping, but we do have some food available. Is there anything you don't eat?" Karl asked.

"Elves are vegan." The girl whispered.

"Alright, that's easy enough. We have some foods that fit that requirement. Like these hard tack biscuits. They're labelled as vegan friendly. Oh, and there are fresh vegetables here. That should get you through the night."

Karl passed out the biscuits from one of the ration packs that he never actually used, and then sighed as he realized he had no clerics for food spells anymore. But Thor had planted various edible leafy greens, along with some magical tubers that vaguely tasted like potatoes. He could roast those later and they would grow back.

He motioned to Thor as the kids began to remove their blindfolds and gags, then untie their feet while huddled in the pouches slung over Thor's back.

"Now, once we're moving, I need you all to keep as silent as possible. We will be moving fast, so we get to the city before it gets dark again, and hopefully, we don't run into any more bandits."

Karl led the way, with Rae darting through the trees and Hawk overhead, while Remi retreated to her space, as she was not as fast moving over long distances.

Thor's plodding behind them could easily be mistaken for a wagon or other animal drawn transport, which seemed to be the normal method here, going by the narrow ruts in the dirt road.

He didn't see any rubber tire marks, no sign of tread. Just compacted ruts where hard narrow wheels had passed. The mining carts used those same wheels, the ones that the mules pulled. It was cheaper than fuel for the trucks, so they were still in regular use at the mine back home.

Thor returned to the road, and the kids resisted the urge to cry out in joy that they had been at least temporarily rescued, and that someone was bringing them to safety.

Or, hopefully bringing them to safety. For all they knew, he might be lying and bringing them to a different group of slavers. But Karl with his monsters seemed trustworthy enough. Thor seemed so happy to be bringing them down the road that the Elves, who were deeply attuned to nature, couldn't see Karl as a bad person if he was Thor's friend.