

Beast Master 431

Chapter 431 Last Leg

Karl jogged down the road in front of Thor, who was nearly prancing with joy to have passengers. Especially passengers who were gratefully petting the rough scales around the carrier bags on his back.

Karl noted that they seemed to be becoming more smooth with age, or perhaps he was keeping his barrier up over them, as the sandpaper texture of the scales was not harming the Elves at all.

He wasn't a dragon, but his scales were similar to Dragon scales, and the Elves had a ritual for polishing Nature Dragon scales in their home villages. The Green Dragons apparently liked to visit the Elves when they were young, as the Elves lived long enough for the Dragons to get to know them. So, the Elves viewed them as an extension of the Nature Goddess, which in a way they were. All Dragons who came from the lineage of a Chromatic Dragon God could hear instructions from their species' patron.

[There are more bandits. They have a wagon surrounded.] Rae informed Karl just as the sun was coming up.

[Remi, stay here with Thor. Hawk, keep an eye on the kids while I go with Rae and eliminate the bandits. If we can save a few people from the wagon team, we can have them smooth our entrance to the city.] Karl instructed.

Remi exited her space to appear on Thor's back in a coil, where she could see everything going on around them.

[I will do my best to stay out of sight, you pretend the Golems are yours.] Rae insisted as she raced off into the distance with Karl chasing behind her.

The wagon, as Hawk called it, was actually a carriage with a very fancy sigil on the visible side, made of what appeared to be genuine solid gold.

There were a dozen guards around the carriage, all of whom seemed to be in the high Ascended power range, while the five bandits that were toying with them were all on the strong side of Commander Rank.

Karl noticed that the bandits all had the same red bandana that the fruit merchant had given him tied to their left arms, making them easily identifiable, even if they weren't facing a force in uniforms. But they were also well-trained as a group, and they fought well together, despite not having a single mage in their group.

In fact, there were no mages in either group that was fighting, it was all warriors and rogues.

Karl whistled to catch the attention of the carriage guards, who looked immensely relieved to see Karl, despite him still being in his shabby armour disguise.

It didn't seem wise to change back and look like a Darklight Host member when he was close to one of their bastions without any idea how their organization functioned.

One of the bandits broke off to deal with Karl, and Rae called the Golems in between them.

The man screamed in terror as they appeared, and then the screams cut off with a rasping gurgle as the Golems pinned him to the ground and began to shred his body.

Everyone was so horrified that they completely stopped fighting for a whole ten seconds, just staring at the massacre as the wounded man begged for death.

Then the blood soaked golems turned to face the battle, and the bandits' morale broke.

They didn't even say anything, they just ran.

Rae recalled the Golems and started the hunt. It wasn't her style, but Hawk enjoyed it, so there had to be something to it.

[Like this. Watch.] Hawk informed her as he swooped down, his five-metre wingspan barely avoiding the trees as he grabbed a warrior in his claws and pulled him into the air.

The man shrieked in pain, but Hawk's claws had pierced his shoulder joints, and he couldn't raise his arms to attack his captor.

Then Hawk doubled back and dove, hurling the body at another of the bandit's comrades.

The two collided, tumbling to the ground in a tangled heap as Rae sent her Golems against the furthest two, who were now well out of sight of the battle.

Hawk hit the downed bandits with a [Rending Fireball] as he called his new signature bomb, and the bodies turned to a puddle of goo.

Karl whistled, calling Hawk over to land on his arm.

[Let Rae clean up the rest and gather the loot. These guys will never see through her disguise.] He instructed.

Hawk landed on Karl's outstretched arm, then moved to his shoulder as Karl approached the carriage guards.

"Gentlemen, is everyone alright? I can ask a healing companion to join us if someone needs urgent assistance." He announced as the guards stared at him.

There were a few guards still on the ground, but the others were more guarded against Karl than concerned about their coworkers.

"We will be alright, sir. Thank you for your assistance, we have a Cleric Class acolyte of the Darklight Host with us." The leader of the guard team announced.

"Oh? That makes my life easier. You see, I gathered a number of Elven children from another bandit camp closer to Kanyigi last night.

They are coming this way with one of my bestial companions, and I was hoping that the Darklight Host might be able to arrange for them to be brought home, as they were kidnapped to be sold to slavers." Karl explained.

"You managed to steal from the bandits?" The guard captain asked in shock. "I suppose that is accurate. But I killed everyone in their camp first, so it's not really stealing, I would call it looting."

The guard looked terrified of Karl, but when the acolyte Cleric, as they had called her, stepped out, Karl saw that she was just a young teen girl, likely younger than Karl was, and soft, as if she had never seen combat.

After months on the front line, Karl knew that he had a slightly gaunt face and a thousand-metre stare that made him look as predatory as his partners.

[I got the good stuff. No overpowered bracelet this time. I will give the loot to Thor, he's almost there.] Rae informed Karl as she finished her work and cleaned up the bodies.

Nobody was saying anything, and the cleric acolyte was casting her spells on the injured, who were beginning to get back on their feet, despite her magic only being that of an Awakened Rank Cleric.

As they approached, Remi returned to her space, so she didn't terrify anyone. The Elven children looked confused that the snake had suddenly disappeared, but when they saw Karl, they relaxed. Rae returned a few seconds later, after dropping the loot off with Thor, using an empty pouch on his harness.

The Cerro stopped next to Karl, who gathered the loot into his storage, and gave him a head ridge rub as Thor made happy rumbling noises that had the kids giggling.

Hawk returned to his space, leaving only Karl and Thor outside, but the guards weren't relaxing.

"Where are the children?" The guard leader asked.

"In the pouches. It's the best way to carry children on a fast journey. They're all mostly unharmed, as Thor here is a Lightning Cerro, and his barrier has a regenerative effect that will have helped them heal from their injuries."

They still looked rough, but the bruises had faded, and the few broken bones they had suffered were all repaired.

"You wanted to take them to the Darklight Host?" The young Cleric asked.

"Yes. I was told that they were the right place to bring kidnapping victims." Karl shrugged.

"You would side with the Darklight Host against the Demon Guild Alliance?" The Cleric asked.

"Miss, I don't see any symbols of allegiance on him. It could be a trick." The carriage guard leader whispered.

"We should get going, those bandits will regroup with their friends and be back soon." She whispered back.

But Karl's hearing was far too sensitive to miss that conversation.

"They won't be regrouping with anyone. I killed them all. The Golems hunted them down in the woods." Karl informed the pair.

"What sort of monster are you? You don't even let surrendered enemies flee?" The guard asked.

"Sure I do. If they're in custody. If they're fleeing, they didn't really surrender, they're just retreating. Don't count that one on the ground in front of me, that was an object lesson.

I really do sound like the bad guy here, don't I? I swear, I'm actually a rather kind fellow."

The kids on Thor's back all laughed as Karl stumbled over his words, while the guards stared at him suspiciously.

"I'll tell you what, why don't I lead the way into town, so I'm not at your backs, and then when we get there, you can help me get these kids to someone who can help and won't sell them to slavers?" Karl offered.

The guard leader nodded. "That works for me. But first, I need to know what your class is. I can't see your information on the status screen."

You can see information about others on the status screen? That was news to Karl.

Chapter 432 Bunga City

"I am a Beast Master." Karl explained.

"Then those beasts are summoned?"

Karl shook his head. "No, they are real beasts, bonded to me as allies. Thor is as alive as anyone else, and he's been with me since he was an egg."

That seemed like a good enough answer for the guard, and he motioned for Karl to move in front of the carriage, which had taken some damage, but looked mobile.

"What pace are you keeping? I've been jogging along with Thor." Karl asked, looking back at them.

"We will match with you as well as we can. I don't want to be out here any longer than necessary." Karl began to jog, then grabbed a few tubers from Thor's space to roast with [Flaming Body] in his hand, and then passed them to the children. The skill was able to pass heat through the whole object, cooking them in a matter of seconds.

"Be careful, they're hot." He warned as he passed the tubers to the Elves.

They smiled and bounced them between their hands to cool them, then carefully bit into them.

"Oh, these are good, Mister." The last of the girls to get her lunch declared.

"I'm glad you like them. I wasn't sure what Elves liked to eat." The little girl smirked at Karl. "You're losing the carriage, though. Horses aren't as fast as a Cerro. Especially when they're hooked to a carriage."

Karl slowed down as he realized that the horses were already panting, and looked back with an apologetic gesture.

"Sorry, I forgot that your horses were just horses and not monsters."

He took up a loping trot, which was a more comfortable pace for the carriage, while the Guards on their horses glared at him.

"Do you think he's feral? One of the classes that is born in the woods and never sees civilization? His armour has been patched more than once, and it's damaged again. It looks like he was in a fight with something nasty, possibly even second advancement. But he's not at all concerned about the dangers of the road." One of the guards was telling the occupants of the carriage.

"I think his class made him feral. Did you see how he looked at that poor man being torn apart? He has forgotten what it is to be human or feel empathy. He's as much a monster as his partners are." A new, musical voice replied.

[Do you think that's true? Am I becoming a monster?] Karl asked.

[Nah, they're just scared and weak willed.] Hawk assured him.

[Maybe they don't enjoy playing with their food?] Rae suggested.

[I think that Sister Rae is right. They seem to have some rule against just killing things that are dangerous. They must like to torture and humiliate each other instead. Humans here are weird.] Remi agreed.

Thor snorted in amusement, and subtly shook his head. [They're a herd prey species. Not like Elites. They only fight enough to defend themselves and then let the predators leave with their spoils so they don't lose any more than they have to.]

That made sense.

They approached the city walls, and Karl saw that most of the visitors in line were nobles with guards, fancy carriages, and visible wealth.

So, he changed into his only, and best, suit. The concealed armour underneath gave him a bit of extra bulk, but nothing too excessive, and he had his weapons put away. That should keep the city guards happy, he hoped. He was still relatively clean-shaven from yesterday, and with a quick brush of his hair and a bit of luck, he should look respectable enough.

Karl walked up to the line, and had just gotten settled into his spot when a group of guards with spears came running up.

"NO MONSTERS!" The captain shouted.

"Fine, calm your tits. I will send him away. Kids, you'll have to walk from here. Thor needs to rest."

Thor returned to his space, and the little Elves tumbled to the ground, giggling as they dusted themselves off and got to their feet.

"Where did you hire those servants?" The guard demanded, poking his spear at Karl.

"I rescued them from bandits. I was bringing them here to make arrangements for them to get home safely."

"I don't see a System Status for you." The guard accused.

[Status] Karl thought.

Suddenly, there was information everywhere. Most of the people had names over their head, and they were in a bunch of colours, but predominantly in a boring brown that Karl assumed marked them as a Warrior type.

The city guard looked startled, then suspicious. "How did you hide your status?"

"Stealth skill. Handy when you're in the wilderness and avoiding bandits." Karl shrugged.

"You need to come with us. Bring the little ones as well, we want to talk to them." The guard insisted.

As they passed by, one of the Noblemen reached down toward one of the Elf girls, but when Karl turned to watch him, he recoiled in terror.

From behind them, Karl heard the carriage guards laughing quietly as the Elves moved to put Karl between them and the people in line. He was the scariest person in line, but he was their scary person.

They were led into a large office evidently intended to interrogate an entire guard team for a carriage at once, and the children pressed against the back wall, putting Karl between them and the guards who were waiting for them.

"Alright, traveller. We have some questions for you. The system says your name is Karl, but we can't see any more information about you. That shade of red doesn't match any Class we're familiar with, either." The guard Captain insisted.

"Is that a particular problem? I haven't memorized every colour either, and it doesn't cause me any trouble." Karl replied easily.

The guard did not think he was funny.

"When I focus on you, I should see your general power level and Class. But I don't. That is a safety risk." The guard insisted.

"In that case, I just reached the First Advancement, and I am a Beast Master. If you ask the gentlemen guarding the carriage behind me, they will confirm that. They were in a scuffle with bandits when I happened upon them." Karl replied.

"So, they can verify your power level is at or above First Advancement?"

Karl nodded. "I would say that they can confirm the basic details. They're not as strong as I am, but they should be able to tell that much."

That seemed to put the guards more on edge instead of comforting them.

"And the bandits that they fought, where are the bodies?"

Karl shrugged. "I brought them with me, stored away in case there was a bounty on them. They were all somewhere around the First Advancement point, and robbing carriages, so there might be a bounty."

"You say that as if you single-handedly took out more than one." The guard replied.

The Elf girl laughed. "Six, he took out six. He even hunted them down through the woods so they couldn't get reinforcements. He's awesome." "Put them in the back room and I will check them against the bounty posts."

Karl summoned them out of Rae's space into the next room, and immediately heard a man dry heaving.

"Oh, yeah. Sorry about that. Some of them are in bad shape, but all the heads are intact."

Chapter 433 Blood Blade Gang Returned

The guard in the next room collected himself, and quickly verified the identity of the corpses. "Sir, it's the Blood Blade Gang. Six of their senior members. Their identities are confirmed." The voice from the other room announced.

"He has more of them too. From when he rescued us." The little girl declared.

Karl patted her on the head, so she felt that she was appreciated for being helpful. If he had to explain that he had hunted more of them, he would just terrify the guards even more.

"Send them all in, I'm ready." The man in the other room announced.

Karl sent the bodies over, and the man began to swear.

"What in the Dragon did you use as a weapon? A bloody railroad tie? These wounds look like you drove a club through their chest." He complained.

"Oh, those would be the puncture wounds from my golems. They're patterned after a Bloodbath Spider. Thick, sharp legs. Very effective in close combat."

"I am going to pretend that I know what a Bloodbath Spider is. But this will need my supervisor." The guard Captain insisted.

Karl shrugged, and the kids began to tug at the back of his pants leg.

"Do you have more tubers?" They whispered.

The guards looked suspicious. "Have you not fed the children?"

"I fed them what I could. I wasn't exactly packed for ten people. But the tubers are a magical resource, and they're pretty tasty."

Karl took out another hand and heated them with [Flaming Body].

A red light began to flash, and an alarm sounded, which had all the guards drawing their weapons.

"Whoa, calm down, what's everyone freaking out about?" Karl asked.

"You used an attack skill in the city!" The guard Captain shouted.

"To heat potatoes." Karl reminded him as the kids grabbed the hot tubers from his hands.

"Have you never been in a city before?" The guard screamed, obviously not happy with the situation, as he tapped buttons to get the alarm to end.

The Elves were all giggling as they ate, reassured by Karl's lack of concern about rules and consequences. Of course, they had no idea that he simply didn't know the rules, so he couldn't worry about breaking them.

The alarms were shut off, and more guards came running into the room, where Karl was casually leaning against the wall as the kids ate.

"What happened. Are there casualties?" The most powerful of the new entrants demanded.

Karl would put him somewhere in the Royal Rank, possibly into the Monarch Rank. "This... fine gentleman... was unaware of the restriction on combat skills in the city and used a fire attack to heat food for the rescued Elven children. It appears that he has nearly eliminated the Blood Blade Gang in the last twelve hours. The bodies are in the back room, but don't enter if you have recently eaten."

The supervisor scoffed, and the Elves laughed as he walked into the back room, cursed, gagged and came back out, closing the door behind him.

"He tried to warn you." One of the boys crowed as the supervisor came back out.

"And who are the rugrats?" The supervisor demanded.

"Recovered from the bandits. They were going to sell them to a slaver, apparently." The Captain explained, with a hint of genuine sadness in his expression.

"Well, I suppose that we could ask either the Guild Alliance or the Darklight Host to arrange to send them with a caravan." The Captain's boss reluctantly agreed.

"Do you have an allegiance?" The Captain asked.

Karl changed to his [Bestial Raiment] skill armour to see what it created.

The armour came out all black with a gold trimmed Darklight Host tabard over the top.

That seemed like an obvious enough answer. It had even blinged up his tabard for the day.

The Captain blinked slowly as he stared at Karl's armour until he changed back.

"You are a Darklight Host War Champion? Fuck, fuck, fuck." He muttered to himself.

The supervisor stepped in front of Karl. "Are you here to trigger a Guild War? If you are, tell me right now, and we will take care of the kids, so they're not caught in the middle of the battle. But you should know that you're here to make the announcement, we can't let you leave this office without an escort."

Karl shook his head. "I wasn't intended to be here at all. I was relocated through an anomaly and dumped along the road to Kanyigi. Everything that happened after was simply because I was making my way here to find out what happened."

There was a scuffle outside the doors, and Karl leaned over to see what was going on. There was a large group picking a fight with the guards around the carriage for the Acolyte Cleric.

"Are you going to deal with that, or should I?" Karl asked.

If they were going to make everyone pick factions to come into the city, it was probably better not to be viewed as immediately betraying his side.

Before they could do anything, a loud horn was blown, and echoed by horns all through the city.

"Too late. The Guild War has begun. We will keep the kids safe, but the guards will be locked inside the dorms until the battles end."

"Seriously? You don't even protect the civilians?" Karl asked.

"And take sides? Thanks, but no thanks." The supervisor replied.

The Elves waved to Karl. "Don't worry about us, Monster Man. We will be right here when they stop fighting."

Maybe this sort of thing wasn't as uncommon as he had thought.

Karl stepped out into the street, and everyone froze. The people who had been in line were now fleeing out of the city, along with hundreds of others. But they were all leaving through the smaller doors, or down ladders over the walls.

If this happened enough that they had an evacuation plan for the city, it must be a rough life that they lived here.

"Declare your Allegiance or be attacked." A man in a bright blue tabard yelled.

The guards around the carriage looked hopeful that Karl might choose them, as he had intended to take the Elves to their people.

Karl smiled as he changed his armour and called out the beasts, with Remi coiled up on Thor's back so she could see to fight.

The man in the blue tabard went pale as he saw Karl's armour.

"Get him!" He shouted at his companions. [Good news Rae.] Rae laughed in his mind as she darted forward and tore the man, who was still at the Ascended Rank, apart.

Karl noticed a notification in the corner of his Status overlay.

[Demon Guild Alliance has declared War on the Darklight Host Alliance]

Once he focused on that, Karl noticed that he could see red crossed swords over the heads of a large portion of the town.

He was becoming more convinced that this was one of the strangest Anomaly Instances that he had heard of, but at least he knew what he was supposed to be doing now. They had literal targets on their heads, and he just had to eliminate them while keeping his team safe.

Once that was done, he should be able to return. Hopefully, nothing bad had happened to the Lithium Mines.

[These people are real, not dungeon constructs.] A gentle voice whispered in his mind.

It wasn't any of his pets, but Karl couldn't see who it might have been.

But if that was the case, then his next order, which would have been to have Hawk bombard the city from high altitude, would have to be reconsidered.

Chapter 434 The Real MVP Of The Guild War

The blue tabard wearing Demon Guild Alliance members quickly rallied as Karl brought up all his buffs.

This time there was no alarm, possibly because there was already a Guild War going on. But the members of the blue faction were looking terrified to see Karl standing there.

"How about you run away and go fetch your Champion?" Karl suggested.

A young woman, dressed in black leather armour that Karl associated with a Rogue, nodded numbly, then threw a smoke bomb on the ground and fled with a movement skill.

Most likely Shadow Step.

"Sir, you're with us? Why didn't you identify yourself on the road? We would have greeted you with full honours." The Acolyte whispered as she got out of the carriage to heal the wounded guards.

"I am not from here. I'm not even certain where this is. So, I had no intentions of getting in the middle of anything, until the war notification came up." They waited at the gates, with Rae on the wall above the gates, crafting a comfortable web to wait in, while Hawk scouted the city overhead.

One of the guards from the carriage looked at Karl with concern. "Are you really going to wait right here for their champion to arrive with his bodyguards? We should be headed for the safe house."

Karl waved. "Go, get to the safe house and I will wait for their Champion. It's not like any of you are ready to get in the middle of what comes next."

The guard nodded, and they abandoned the carriage to run off through the city, headed for whatever safe house they had prepared.

A few minutes later, a warrior in black plate armour and a demonic mask jogged into Karl's sight. He stopped five metres away and glared down at Karl.

He was a solid 250 centimetres tall, and built a lot like Professor Tank, huge in every direction.

He was also definitely a Monarch Rank warrior.

"Does this place have a warrior fetish? Did you not think that maybe a mage or two might be useful?" Karl asked.

A few of the bodyguards with him laughed, but the Champion simply continued to glare at Karl.

"The Darklight Host thinks that some little kid with his pet lizard can take the city from me?" He eventually demanded.

"I will have you know that he is the goodest of good boys. And I didn't come here to take the city from you, your boys declared war while I was bringing refugees to the guard station. But now that it is started, we might as well get things settled. It would have been a shame if I had to flatten the city to find you."

[I can still do it.] Hawk reminded him. The buildings weren't reinforced, a single barrage of fireballs would level half the city.

The huge man suddenly launched himself at Karl, who drew his two-handed sword to parry and activated all his buffs.

Then he cast [Chain Lightning] to slow the Monarch Rank warrior's reactions.

The lightning hit an instant before the two blades clashed in a flurry of sparks as [Flaming Body] met a [Flaming Blade] ability.

The two men were at a stalemate, and the majority of the bodyguards began to circle around Karl, looking for an opening, while four of them went to block Thor and Remi from joining the battle.

But they quickly learned that Thor's bags were the perfect platform for Totems, and that a Lightning Cerro was not easy to deal with when he was backed against a wall. Especially a wall that fronted a room full of children he wanted to protect.

Karl broke away from the stalemate of locked blades, and darted backwards before lashing out with [Bone Crusher]. The warrior on his right took the strike on his shield, stopping the blade with ease, but [Shatter] and [Sharpness] took effect, and the shield split clean in half. The man dropped to the ground, spitting blood and cradling a pulverized arm.

"Oh, you're a dirty little weasel, aren't you, Darklight Scum?" The Champion snarled.

"You have no idea." Karl replied as he stepped away from the guard station and put his back to the city, moving further into the gates.

[Hawk, find where the blue tabard team is fighting the Darklight Host and bombard any reinforcements they try to send this way. Just distract their stronger fighters. Don't hurt the city.]

Karl fell into a defensive stance, and the warriors moved forward again. That was when Rae summoned her Golems behind the Champion, letting them lash out at his back.

He responded almost faster than Karl could track, parrying the first four leg strikes as Karl switched to his maul and stacked [Chain Lightning] five times.

But he didn't go for the back of the champion as everyone expected him to. Instead, he went for a Rogue type fighter, crushing his chest, which let [Chain Lightning] spread through the whole group, and brought half the warriors to their knees as Karl moved to attack again.

The Champion intercepted him, forcing Karl into a stalemate for a second time, before the Monarch's superior speed let him break free and land a hit on Karl's barriers.

But that meant he wasn't stopping the Golems, who were tearing apart his stunned and electrocuted bodyguards.

"You bastard. Fight me properly." Karl laughed. "Now you want a proper duel, but you brought bodyguards? You didn't think this one through."

Karl stepped back and switched to his blade, which was better for parrying attacks.

The Monarch Rank warrior was close in physical strength to him, even with his buffs, but the enemy champion was faster than Karl was, so there was bound to be a lot of traded damage.

Fortunately, the warrior classes didn't have much for barriers, just [Guard], but this warrior wasn't even using that.

Three fast attacks were parried, and the return strike caused [Flaming Body] to waver for a moment before Karl stabilized it. The Champion was beginning to get frustrated, and Karl realized what was happening. Karl had taken a new bracelet from the bandit leader, and it reduced damage by a set amount. None of the smaller skills that the Champion was using were registering to Karl because they were all being negated.

Because the smaller damage was being negated and not stacking, Karl's barriers had time to recover between attacks.

The Demon Guild Alliance Champion must have had a skill like [Shatter] that did damage which caused lingering damage to barriers and enemies on hit. But it wasn't enough to overcome the damage reduction.

[The big fight is almost over now. They're too close together to attack.] Hawk informed Karl as he tried to find an opening to attack with something other than [Chain Lightning] which was doing very little to his opponent.

[I get it. He's not using Guard, because he has a better version. It's on all the time.] Rae declared.

Her study of the opponent with [Offensive Adaptation] had paid off, and she now understood why he wasn't trying to use Guard against Karl's attacks. His version was always active.

That was why [Chain Lightning] wasn't doing much. It wasn't a physical attack, so it didn't apply Shatter, meaning that there was no secondary damage passing through to the target.

Karl's attacks weren't strong enough to break through a Monarch Rank [Guard] ability with a single spell.

Karl added [Chain Lightning] to his blade, intending to add damage to [Flaming Body].

The Champion laughed, and his eyes turned a bit crazy.

"So, you've realized it. But if you can't hit me with that armour bypass, there is no way you can hurt me. It's only a matter of time before you are exhausted and ground to dust." He laughed.

"There is only one problem with that logic. You're all out of bodyguards, and I still have Golems. Do you think that you can deal with all three of us at once?" Karl asked.

From Karl's left, power surged, and Thor's scales began to turn gold.

His body began to grow, not much, but enough to be noticeable. However, it was the greenish gold that his scales turned, while his horns changed to deep bronze, that made it obvious that he had advanced.

At this point, he barely looked like a Lightning Cerro anymore, other than his general shape. The deep green lustre that they were famous for was gone, streaked through with thick veins of gold. The bone white horns that crackled with blue lightning were now a rich bronze, and the lightning was as golden as the streaks on his scales.

He looked glorious and regal, but very little like a common Lightning Cerro.

The building behind him was coated in [Eternal Lightning] as the Cerro had been protecting it from the area attacks that had been hurled at him. Ever loyal, Thor had not allowed the building to be damaged while the Elves were still inside, and it had triggered him to break through the Royal Rank bottleneck.

With the advancement, both [Eternal Lightning] and [Circle of Protection] advanced to Royal Rank, and Karl felt a new space begin to form in his mind as the existing ones reached their limits.

Remi was still at Commander Rank, and that was the limiting factor for the spaces right now, so a new one was formed to accept the overflow of energy from Thor's breakthrough.

The Champion got a sly look on his face, and made for the Cerro, aiming a blow for the back of Thor's neck. The loss of what was obviously Karl's support pet should cripple his combat ability, and leave him vulnerable.

But he wasn't the only one that had realized that, and as he leapt forward, a wall of stone spikes formed in front of him, bringing him to a crashing stop before a streak of blue struck out and hit him in the face, then retreated.

His scream of agony echoed through the city as blood poured down the demonic visor of his helmet. Remi had bitten his eyeball, blinding him on one side, and he had never even realized that she was on Thor's back.

The warrior ripped off his helmet and poured a vial on his face, then downed a potion as pain wracked his body.

"Have you had enough?" Karl asked.

The strange voice had warned Karl that these were real people, and while he had killed the bodyguards, and had most likely let Hawk slaughter a small group of them to prevent reinforcements, he didn't want to have to kill every member of their alliance to end the battle.

"I forfeit. The Demon Guild Alliance forfeits the war." He moaned as he clawed at the side of his face, where black streaks were spreading from his eye.

Whatever potion he had used had been ineffective on Remi's poison.

[Remi, heal his face, would you? Or at least neutralize the poison.]

Chapter 435 Host City

The Spirit Snake fired a [Healing Splash] at the man. It looked exactly like she had spit on his face, but the black streaks began to recede, and the blood-red eye stopped leaking as it slowly returned to normal.

[By Trial Of Champions, The Darklight Host Alliance has won the Guild War.]

[Final Damage:]

Demon Guild Alliance ⇒ 31 dead

Darklight Host Alliance ⇒ 11 dead The Champion rolled to his knees and used his blade to help him to his feet as the pain of the lingering poison wracked his body, along with the lingering effects of [Shatter], which had applied with the bite to the face.

[Everyone to the space. Let's not give them a chance to get revenge on you.] Karl insisted.

"No wonder you're a Champion. That Class of yours is absolutely broken. It's like fighting an entire raid team at once." He commended as the majority of Karl's beasts vanished back to their spaces to plan an advancement party for Thor. Remi was pretty sure that they could get the Elves to polish his scales, and there weren't many better rewards for Thor than that.

Karl wasn't sure what to do now, but Hawk was relaying the scene to them.

[There are clerics pouring out of the buildings now, gathering bodies. I think they'll revive them.] Hawk informed them.

Then he paused, and Karl sensed his confusion.

They hadn't been dead long, so it should be possible to revive them, but they were starting the resurrection ritual.

That would put them all in new bodies, which didn't seem like what you wanted for powerful people like these.

"Thirty one to eleven. What a slaughter. Now, I'll have to see what is left of the Alliance as we pack." The Champion sighed before tilting his head back and pouring another potion over his face.

"The snake bite to the eyeball was unexpected, but damn does this hurt. Even after healing, the pain still isn't fading." He complained.

"I don't have anything for strong healing, so you'll likely need a cleric. Should we go inside and check on them?" Karl suggested, just in case someone was planning to cause trouble.

"You might as well, but I'll be leaving. It's not like I can shamelessly show my face in the city again while my Alliance is packing up to leave their homes. If any of them ask, I'm on my way to Hoiringa, and I will wait for them at the Alliance House there."

Karl nodded, and the warrior walked away as the door to the armoury opened and the guard supervisor stuck his head outside.

"We're alright? It's over?" He asked hesitantly.

"Yeah, it's over. Decision by duel in favour of the Darklight Host." Karl explained.

The Elves came pouring out and began to swarm Thor, cooing and praising his much more golden scales.

Rae made them a bunch of polishing cloths, and the Elves giggled as they got to work, scrubbing him down and climbing all over the happy Cerro. The rags didn't seem to be getting damaged, and the kids were sliding down Thor, which made Karl think that his scales were becoming smooth again.

"Are you sure you only knew them for one night?" The Guard Captain asked as he left the building to resume his station.

"Yep. But he did keep them safe twice now. Both in battle against bandits and by protecting the guard building during the fight. Elves are quite in tune with animals, it seems."

The Captain nodded. "They're an odd bunch, but the Elves are good people. They seem to have really taken to your Cerro, though. I don't think that I've seen a group of kids that happy in a long time. Now tell me, how were the casualties?"

"Thirty one to eleven in our favour. They're working on the resurrection ritual now." Karl replied, hoping to get some sort of response that would help him make sense of it.

"Well, assuming that the Guild House is still standing, they should appear there in whatever new form they got. Guild Wars are such a waste.

The number of skilled craftsmen who are forced to move after a Guild is forced out of the city really messes with the economy, and the winners never bring in anyone to replace them.

But that's not really your concern, I suppose. You were just passing through when they started the fight and ran into a brick wall of a War Champion.

I might not have been able to see the fight, but it was pretty obvious that you won it on pure skill, and not raw power."

Karl nodded. "That is true. The number of skills that I have available to me is somewhat more than the average warrior. Plus, I have stronger defensive skills, though that constant guard skill he used was a tricky one."

"Bulwark is what it's called. A constantly refreshing Guard skill that coats his armour and shield. It made him nearly impenetrable to previous challengers. What did you use to get him to surrender?"

Karl shrugged. "He might have been mostly immune to damage, but his skill didn't prevent poison or properly protect his face. He forfeited from the pain of being poisoned."

A small group of teenagers approached the gates, and Karl nodded politely while they glared at him.

"Your Champion was headed to the Guild House at Hoiringa." He informed them.

"He's alive?" The young woman leading the group asked, clearly shocked.

Karl nodded. "Yes. I forced him to submit to end the duel, so there was no need to kill him. The resurrected members should appear at the Guild House here as well, if you want to leave as a group."

They looked confused. "You haven't claimed the Guild House yet?"

Karl looked at the messages in the corner of his vision, wondering if he was supposed to do something.

[Challenge successful. Reward Granted.]

[Claim City for Darklight Host Alliance?] Y/N

[11 Members Resurrected at Guild House.]

[City will automatically transfer ownership in 24 hours.]

Karl shook his head. "There are twenty-four hours to finish the process. So, I let them resurrect. They can gather their belongings and leave in peace. I will have the guard force inform the Darklight Host forces to let them go without trouble."

The Guard Supervisor focused on something for a moment, his eyes going vacant as he paid more attention to what Karl assumed was his Status screen.

"Done. They were letting them leave anyhow."

The small group waited at the gate, trying not to laugh at the happy noises Thor was making as an army of tiny Elves polished his scales with scented oils that the Guards had provided for them.

They clearly wanted to know what was going on, but Karl couldn't be bothered to inform them, and the Guards were too busy heading to the outlying areas to inform the civilians who had fled the city that the Guild War had been won by Champion Challenge, and that the city was intact.

That seemed to be the shocking part to everyone. The Guild War had ended with almost no property damage. Even if there was a challenge, at this level, it was normal that at least a few city blocks would be levelled by missed attacks.

Karl could see that. If Thor had used an Earthquake or Rae had been firing boulders at the enemy, they would have destroyed everything in the surrounding area with dodged or deflected attacks.

Chapter 436 Darklight House

Karl changed to his Royal Rank suit as he waited for the chaos in the city to calm, and then turned to Thor.

"Well buddy, I think you've enjoyed enough massage and scale polish for a moment. Why don't we get the little ones set up with someone who can take care of them and get them home?" He informed the Cerro.

The guards chuckled and helped the little ones down from Thor's back, as he had already put his harness in storage in his space so they could reach the scales underneath.

The Elves gathered around the city guard while Thor prepared to follow Hawk's directions to the Darklight Host Guild Hall. It was a large building in the middle of the city, on the edge of the commercial district, and set up much like a hotel, from outside appearances.

It was a slow walk, as the little ones insisted on walking themselves and not being carried by guards. But the procession brought a smile to the face of everyone who passed by, as the Elves' eagerness to actually see civilization again after months of captivity had the guards explaining everything that they saw.

"And here we are at the Darklight Host Guild Hall. This is your destination, and with some luck, you will find someone inside who can help you get reunited with your family." The Guard Captain informed them.

That seemed unlikely to Karl, unless they had family at their destination. Because the ones they were travelling with had already been sold off in what sounded like another country.

Karl led the group into the grounds, and the Guards returned to their duties, while a young girl in a maid outfit greeted him at the door.

"Hello, sir. How can I help you today? Most of our officers are not in today, but we can arrange rooms for Alliance members." She informed them.

"I have a group of rescued refugees with me, and they need to be sent to the village of Glatt, but I don't have the time to take them myself." Karl replied.

"Oh, transport arrangements. Alright, I will see if anyone is in. Maybe they will come back after the war declaration is over?" Karl chuckled. "The war is over. It was solved with a duel. Do you have a portal mage stationed here?" The maid nodded happily. "As long as they weren't injured in the fighting, we do have a portal mage on our payroll. It might be costly, as the Elven village of Glatt is in a Second Advancement region, and very remote, but it is in our available destinations."

The maid led them to a sitting room with a number of couches, where the children sprawled out to rest somewhere soft.

They didn't have to wait long before a number of people came storming into the house, looking for answers.

"Beth, have you seen a visiting Guild Member?" One of the new arrivals demanded.

"No, sir. But there is a visitor. He came with a group of Elven children, and they are waiting in the sitting room for Nathan to come back. The children are on their way to the village of Glatt." She replied.

That sounded like what they had heard from the guards, so the group rushed over to where Karl was waiting, and then stopped in confusion as they saw that his Status Screen information was all messed up.

"You're not a Guild member? The Guard seemed to think that you were an official War Champion." The leader of the group insisted.

Karl shrugged. "It's a bit of a long story. I arrived here through an anomaly, and I honestly have no idea where here is. I was hoping that you had a proper map, but I ran into some bandits, and they had these children captive. The bandits had intended to sell them as slaves, so I took them, and I would like to arrange to have them sent to their original destination of Glatt."

"Wait, back up. Did you say that you're not from here? As in, not from this continent?" The man asked.

"I'm not even certain that I am from this world. So, naturally, I would not be listed as a member of the local Darklight Host." Karl agreed.

More people came into the house, talking excitedly as Karl finished his speech.

"Hey, did you hear that there is a War Champion in town? He defeated the Demon Guild Alliance Champion and his entire entourage alone." A young woman yelled as she approached the door.

"No need to shout it. He's sitting right here, waiting for Nathan to send some Elven kids home to Glatt." A blonde girl at the back of the group replied.

An older man pushed through the group, and Karl saw a slightly dishevelled man in mage robes. Finally, an actual mage. He was beginning to think that this world had opted out of having any.

He pulled out a piece of paper and held it up, looking at the kids. "Well I'll be. It really is them. There is quite the bounty out for their safe return, you know?" He explained.

"Well, as long as it involves getting them safely home, I'm happy to have helped." Karl replied with a smile as the kids sat silently, watching the new people.

"You will have to take them directly home to collect the reward, as it was not set by the Guild, we only received a copy.

However, there is a more pressing matter. Did you get the notification for the War Completion? We can't tell who has control of the city right now, it's still in limbo."

Karl nodded. "I have it. I was waiting for them to resurrect at their Guild House, so they could leave in a group, and then I was going to verify it for the Darklight Host." The mage nodded. "That is kind of you. Many would have forced them to respawn at a random church or Guild site instead of letting them come back to their Guild House.

They're all on their way out of town now, and the Guild House is basically empty, so you can complete the process with a clear conscience."

[Confirm Control of Bunga for the Darklight Host Alliance?] Y/N

[Control Transferred.] The opposing Guild has 90 minutes to leave the city limits.

[Reward Granted.]

The group let out a collective sigh of relief.

"We were worried that it might have given the notice to someone who was revived and didn't return with an active Class. They wouldn't be able to activate it, and then it would time out after a full day, which leaves the whole city in chaos, as the System collects taxes, fees and duties, as well as paying city employee wages, if you didn't already know that.

I heard that not every region does it that way, and some of them are centrally controlled, and not under the control of local Guilds."

Karl nodded to indicate his limited but functional level of understanding. The fully active System could do wonderful things, and it was a bit of a shame that such a thing didn't exist at home. If it did, so many problems could have been bypassed.

"Well, it's under Guild control now, so things can go back to normal. But tell me, are you Nathan? Nothing bad happened to the Portal Mage, did it?"

The mage pointed behind him toward the other end of the house. "He's here. But he's a bit old, and he needed a break and a snack after so much running around today."

Chapter 437 City Management

For the next few minutes, everything was chaos in the house as the local branch of the Darklight Host began to arrange things to their liking, and sent out messages to all of the relevant town employees and authorities.

Karl sat mostly forgotten with the children, so he took a moment to examine the reward message that he had received from the System Status screen.

[Reward Gained] +2 inventory slots

Karl thought that message was a bit odd. He didn't have inventory, other than a storage bag that was bonded like any other piece of equipment.

Only, that wasn't true anymore. He did have storage spaces, two empty ones, and one that contained his storage bag.

In his mind, they appeared as chests, no larger than a backpack, but that tripled his available space to store items. No longer would he have to rely on the beast spaces if he wanted to keep something, or the limited amount of room inside his one storage bag. He could put loads of items in the chests, and keep it there until he needed it.

The first thing he was going to have to collect was food, other than baked goods. Travelling without a cleric was a massive annoyance, and not an experience that he would recommend to anyone.

Eventually, the Darklight Host members finished their work in the aftermath of the battle, and the reports from the guards who had watched the duel began to flow in.

The younger mage gave Karl an appreciative look, then called Nathan forward from his spot in the kitchen.

"Alright, we understand that you have a quest to complete, returning these youngsters to their families. So, I will open the portal for you, and you can meet with the local Mayor, who is a friend of mine. He will see to it that everything is taken care of." The elderly man explained.

Karl stood to shake his hand, and the mage gave him an odd look. "If you hadn't said that you're not from here, I would think that there is something seriously off about your fashion sense." He sighed, shaking his head.

Karl laughed, and changed back to his Royal Rank [Bestial Raiment] skill armour.

"Better?"

The old man nodded. "Now you don't look like you were taking hallucinogens while letting a Nature Priest make you a Noble Lord cosplay."

In his mind, all of the beasts laughed. The suit was actually quite normal for the Golden Dragon Nation, used for everything from business meetings to politics and news interviews.

A few of the younger members were staring at Karl in admiration, or more correctly, at his tabard.

"Wow, a gold trimmed tabard, with tassels. Just how many battles have you won?" One of the younger staff members asked.

Karl shrugged, "Well, I haven't lost one yet. But mostly I seem to have a knack for pleasing the World Dragon."

That made everyone in the room laugh. "I have a knack for pleasing the World Dragon, he says." Nathan, the portal mage, laughed.

The room fell silent as another man walked in, Royal Ranked like Karl. He was shirtless and covered in scars, which was somewhat surprising, as this world clearly had healers and clerics, but his eyes were familiar to Karl.

They had the same predatory look of a combat veteran that Karl had gotten used to seeing on the faces of the Elites on the Hill Giant front.

He had a Darklight Host sash around his waist that looked like Karl's tabard, only the trim and tassels were silver.

"Good work with the duel, Champion. I am surprised that you let him live, but perhaps that is the tradition where you come from. I am Orthos, leader of this detachment. Tell me, where did you come from?" "Not far from Whiton Temple there was an anomaly, a cloud that no senses could see through. I passed through it and ended up here." Karl explained.

"Whiton Temple in the Great Central Desert?" He asked, clearly confused.

It wasn't a desert anymore, but thousands of years ago, that was what the region that was now Chiptonrith Lake was known as. Morgana had covered that in history class, and Karl was now glad that he had been paying attention.

"Yes, that is the one. Toward the south of the continent, nearly centred from east to west. Sits on top of a large hill." Karl agreed.

"Yes, that is Whiton Temple. You shouldn't be here." Orthos announced.

"Well, once I deliver these little ones, I intend to find a way back home. I don't suppose that you know how to do that?"

Orthos smiled. "Once you finish your quest, you should be returned to your home continent easily enough by the Elves. The location and the description of how you arrived here make sense when you put them together. If you give me a moment, I can ensure that you end up safely back home without doing anything drastic."

Now he was just being cryptic for the sake of being cryptic.

But if he could really send Karl home, it didn't honestly matter if the description of why and how was satisfactory.

Orthos gestured at Nathan, who opened a portal into what looked like a treehouse, with walls covered in bark.

"There you go, the mayor's office in Glatt. Good luck." Orthos informed him with a smile.

Karl stood and shook his hand, then gathered his diminutive charges. "Alright, let's get going. There should be people waiting for you there." He could hear the sound of someone moving about on the other side of the portal, then shouting in surprise as the kids began to move through into the Mayor's office.

"Eliza? How?" The voice was asking.

"Looks like that's my cue. Thank you all for the assistance. The map said it was a very long walk." Karl walked through the portal to join the kids, and Nathan closed it behind him.

"Darklight Host? Did you rescue the children? Were you with the team that went after their parents as well?" The Mayor asked as Karl arrived.

Karl shook his head. "They were separated before I found the children. I don't know where the parents are now. I brought the little ones from Bunga, and they were last together in Senau, I believe."

The small man nodded gravely, understanding what Karl meant. He was well aware of the less savoury practices of this place, and he knew that Senau was a slave market. "Can you wait while we contact the rest of their families? I am certain that they will all want to thank you." The Mayor asked.

"Of course. It's not like I'm in a hurry to go somewhere."

The kids laughed at Karl's casual answer. He was lost on the road to Bunga when he found them, and now he was really lost, over a thousand kilometres to the northeast, and he wasn't even from this continent.

The young Elves had no idea where Whiton was, but the people in Bunga made it sound like it wasn't anywhere even remotely close.

Karl resisted the urge to laugh when the Mayor stepped out onto his balcony and began to shout names. No magic, no fancy device, just shouting across town for people to come to him.

It made Karl wonder how small Glatt was. But his sensitive ears heard people relaying the call, so it wasn't small enough that a shout would be heard all over town.

"Give them a minute or two, and they will be here."

Chapter 438 Elves Reunited

The Mayor remained on the balcony as many people could be heard jogging toward his office, not particularly concerned, as they didn't sense any emergency.

But the moment that the first woman came in the door and saw the children, the screaming and happy tears started.

"Lieverd, kom nu hier binnen! De kinderen zijn gevonden en gered." She screamed out the door.

Karl could only assume that was the Elvish language because the man who came in seconds later was already smiling and crying when he arrived, and he picked up a boy to spin him in circles.

That brought a flood of motion outside, as everyone rushed out of the homes and buildings to see what was going on, or to run to the Mayor's office to get a firsthand view of the day's newest highlight.

When you lived in a small town, new and exciting was rare, so Karl wasn't surprised that they would all want to be involved and not find out secondhand.

More Elves began to gather in the office, hurrying to get to the children. Karl retreated to the balcony with the Mayor while there were many tearful family reunions, and just watched in silence for a while.

Eventually, the Mayor whispered to him. "One of the merchant groups who trade with us saw the slaver caravan, and recognized the locals, so he paid off a mercenary group to recover them. But the children weren't with them, and we feared that they were already lost.

It's been months, more than enough time to sell them and have them shipped so far that we would never find them. I didn't want to say anything at first, in case you were trying to ransom them back. But I should have known that a War Champion wouldn't do that to his own Guild members." Karl nodded. "They were taking them to the West Coast for a better price, according to the children. They were just waiting on their contact to arrive in port and robbing travellers when I came across their ambush and cleaned them out."

"Did you get the entire group of slavers?" The Mayor asked hopefully.

"Probably not. I got all the ones that were at that camp, and all the ones at their ambush further toward the next town, but then we had a portal mage bring us here. There are likely more of them in the port city waiting for their contact, and some that just weren't at the ambush where they were working as bandits." Karl replied in a quiet voice that wouldn't interrupt the reunions.

The Mayor looked tired, worn down by stress, but hopeful.

"Well, at the very least, you got all the children back. There will be no tearful parents realizing that their baby isn't among the ones who returned." He sighed.

[Mission Completed: Calculating Rewards] Appeared in Karl's vision.

"Well, it looks like my work here is done. They can all go home to their families, who they weren't expecting to see again. Especially after the adults were sold off during their journey."

"We should reward you properly. What sort of class do you have? I don't recognize that shade of red." The Mayor asked.

That was the second time that someone had said that. "My Class is Beast Master. I grow my power by helping my bonded monsters grow theirs." Karl explained.

The Mayor looked a bit confused for a few seconds, then his eyes lit up in understanding.

"Oh, you can get skills that aren't part of the skill tree from the Monsters. That is a wonderful class.

If you want another, you have come to the right spot. There are many rare monsters in the forest with unique skills. Does it matter how powerful they are? Or does the skill adapt to your level?" He asked.

"The beasts fight alongside me, so their abilities matter. If they couldn't keep growing, they would end up restricted from coming out in combat."

"So, like a Ranger, you have a limited number of options, and you must choose well for them to accompany you as you level up. That makes sense. There are still suitable options. For example, the Blink Cats. They are mellow enough to be house animals, but they can reach the second advancement if given enough time, and their ability to teleport makes them a deadly predator.

Or the Wisp. They might not look like much, or really do much, but if you can bond one to you, their ability to boost magic damage is far beyond what most other species could offer.

Many of the Elven Rangers like to bond wisps for the additional damage to their archery spells and movement abilities."

Karl wasn't even certain that a Wisp counted as a beast for him to tame, but he could see that the Elves were very fond of them. "So, the forests here have monsters that are in the Second Advancement already?" Karl asked, instead of pondering the intricacies of Wisps.

"Not many, but there are a few to be wary of. The Moor Cats are Second Advancement, and if you're really unlucky, the Moor Cat Matriarchs are an evolved version that can reach Totem Status, or even the Mythic Rank third advancement.

You do not want to mess with a Mythic beast, no matter how cute they are. They take a tenth of the damage you expect them to, and they are far stronger than they look."

Karl laughed. "Well, when they're that far ahead of me, I don't think that the damage reduction will be my greatest concern. I likely couldn't break their basic defences anyhow."

The Mayor just shrugged. "I just thought that I would warn you because while the Moor Cats are four metres tall, the Moor Cat Matriarch is only a metre and a half tall, and the Nature Priests often have issues with them."

"Because they forget that friend shaped doesn't always mean friend." Karl agreed.

The Elf gave a low chuckle. "You have some experience with them, then? They're not all that common outside the Elven lands, so most humans have never met an adherent of the Green Dragon."

Karl smiled. "They're missing out. Not only are the Green Dragon's followers wonderful healers, they're almost all accomplished chefs.

When it comes to long months on the road, there is nothing more comforting than having a chef around that can make their own ingredients, even if they do have a penchant for the same rice and beans food creation spell every day."

Someone joined in their laughter, and Karl turned to see that a young woman was waiting for them to finish talking.

She had a familiar aura of crazy, but in a contained way, that made Karl think that she was one of the Nature Clerics. That was all but confirmed when she began to speak.

"Well, we were hoping to introduce you to new foods in gratitude, but you might already know all our tricks. Will you stay for dinner anyhow?" She asked.

"Of course. I never say no to a good meal."

As she turned to address someone else in the room, Karl noticed the information above her head. Her name was in plain white, but below it were the words "Darklight Host Guild Officer"

Chapter 439 Concerned Parties

Now that he was paying attention, Karl noticed that there were a lot of Darklight Host members among the crowd.

"Does the Darklight Host control this village, then?" Karl asked the Mayor as the parents and relatives of the children began to make plans for a grand dinner celebration.

"Not exactly. We're not large enough to have a control stone like the cities do. But they are the only Guild in the area. The Outreach Workers are everywhere, and this spot started as an overnight rest stop along the road for travellers hunting magical beasts, used to get a decent night's sleep.

Naturally, the Elves took it over as soon as they heard about it, and now it's more of an Elven village than a waypoint."

Karl nodded. "I suppose that makes sense with the rural location in the middle of the forest. Still, this place is pretty impressive to have survived so long in the deep woods with the level of threats that I'm hearing about all around you."

The mayor laughed. "We deliberately don't keep anyone who is too powerful in the village. That way we can deal with the minor threats that attack us, but our presence doesn't threaten the territory of the stronger monsters.

In most regions, they avoid the roads and villages, because of dangerous travellers, but here we don't get many visitors anymore.

The nations to our North and East are both in the middle of civil wars right now, and with that level of chaos, there is very little trade. Only those with the skills and resources to run military blockades enter there now, and that means not the sort that transport goods down the road."

"What about the other villages?" Karl asked.

"There used to be one every day's travel for a passenger carriage. Now they're at one and three days distance from us, headed northeast. The Civil war spilled a bit across the border at the start, and they hunted a fugitive into the village and wiped it out.

Now, the other outposts mostly do like we do. They just live off the land.

But if we get really desperate, there are edible plants in the stable instance where the children train. We will sometimes send them there to gather food."

Right, the Elves were all vegan.

A small hand tugged at the Mayor's pant leg, and he looked down with a smile.

"The Monster Man has wonderful purple tubers. Even better than the ones from the instance."

The Mayor looked confused, so Karl took one out, which made the Elf laugh. "Oh, you have a Rare Grade Violet Root plant. That explains why the kids all like you so much. What do those taste like to humans?"

Karl shrugged, "Slightly sweet potatoes, similar to a yam."

The Mayor nodded. "Our children don't normally eat any refined sugar, but these roots are often used to make spiced cakes. Well, not usually ones this good, the Common Grade ones from the instance, but they taste the same."

The only thing that came to Karl's mind when he said that was spicy mashed potatoes, but if they had a way to make that into a cake, he might have to get his hands on an Elven cookbook.

Lotus would love him forever if he found her an all vegan cookbook that could make mashed potatoes into cake.

Far away, Lotus sneezed as she sat in the hotel restaurant in Lithium Mine Town.

"Oh, someone is thinking about you." Dana laughed.

"It's our Karl. The Goddess says he's alive and playing with Elven children. Tiny, cuddly, adorable Elves." Lotus replied, sounding a bit like she was going to cry about being left out.

Dana briefly wondered if that was the reason that the Goddess had seen fit to grant her the vision. It would calm everyone else's mind, so they could continue their work. But it would also torture Lotus to know that there were apparently extra cuddly demihumans somewhere that she didn't get to play with.

She was already going into danger fluff withdrawals without Rae nearby, and the Mage was beginning to worry that the bored cleric would start befriending the Earth Mice that inhabited the town.

Ophelia poked Lotus. "You saw a vision? Is he alright?"

Lotus nodded. "He had his armour on, but he was indoors and surrounded by tiny Elves. I don't know where they are, but it's not anywhere near here. It didn't look like our country, if that makes sense.

I think that he's in an instance, one of the sorts that you have to finish a quest to exit."

Tessa sighed.

"That would explain why my power flared an hour ago. We weren't doing anything, but someone pleased the Red Dragon. If he was finishing a battle related mission objective, that could explain it."

Morgana made notes of their conversation, while Bob Mackenzie smirked at the War Cleric. "Better him than us. I don't care we're all among the top combat talents below Royal Rank, when it comes down to battle, I can't help but feel like we're the B team. Backup for his main team."

Doug laughed, then turned serious for a moment. "Do you think that Dragon that attacked the helicopter came from the Instance? Maybe he's going to come back with some strange and powerful new beast.

Things that come from eggs seems to be his theme, so I wouldn't put it past him to bring back a Dragon Whelp."

"This is bullying." Lotus complained.

She was a green dragon priestess, if anyone should be getting a baby dragon, it was her.

But if Karl brought back a dragon, she could ride a spider and a dragon. That would be acceptable as well. Perhaps she should be giving prayers to the goddess for him to bring back good things.

Doug gave her a suspicious look, knowing that the little Priestess was up to something strange, but a nervous looking woman caught his attention.

"Excuse me, High Priest. Do you happen to know an Elite named Karl? He has beasts with him. I thought I heard your team mention him." She asked hesitantly.

Doug smiled at her. "Indeed we do. I heard he was born here, do you know him?"

The woman gave him a thin smile that said she was more nervous than she wanted him to know.

"I do, actually. Very well. You see, I am his mother."

Doug smiled. "You hear that, Dana? We found Prince Karl's beloved mother."

Dana laughed and tapped the table across from her. "Why don't you join us? I am his classmate, as well as his teammate. We've known each other since the day we arrived at the Academy. He has told me a lot about you. However, I only recall him ever calling you mom."

Karl's mom smiled, her face leathery and wrinkled well before its time from a life of hard work and exposure to the elements. "You can just call me Ma. Everyone else here does." She insisted as she took a seat.

An aging miner with tobacco yellowed teeth at the table behind them laughed. "Short for Mary Eleanor. But she's been Ma since she was old enough to work at the mercantile store as a girl."

Karl's mom gave him a shooing gesture. "Drink your coffee. My son has told me all about this lovely young lady, but I never thought I would get to meet her before my own son came home again."

Nothing bad happened, did it? He's not hurt, is he? They didn't send a letter or a white robe like they did for Owen's family."

She clearly cared quite a bit about Karl, and the contrast to Dana's own family was a painful memory. The mage smiled gently and flipped her curls back out of her face.

"No, he's fine. The Green Dragon herself saw fit to give us an update. He's just on a solo mission at the moment, and we chose to wait in town for him to return."

Chapter 440 To Finish A Quest

Karl had no idea that his mother and his Dana were getting along so well, or even that they had met.

Instead, he was busy with a much more important matter, making sure that a horde of small Elven children made it home safely and that the people who came for them really were their parents.

The chances that someone was trying to steal one of the kids seemed pretty low in a village like this, where everyone knew everyone, but the risks were never zero, especially when there were likely to be people who had skills that allowed them to disguise their appearance.

The obvious advantages of that sort of skill for persuasion and trickery were obvious, and he didn't want to mess things up at the last minute by passing one of the kids off to the wrong person.

So, he waited and watched as the Elves set up a feast in the forest below the Mayor's office, and everyone from town began to gather to welcome the kids back.

It was a touching scene, proof that people here really did care for their little ones, even after they had gathered great power for themselves.

Back home, politicians were better known for passing their kids to a nanny to raise, so they would rarely actually see each other, unless it was for a social event. But here, the kids were part of everything, and there were Elves from every age group present. From the ones that could barely walk, all the way to ones that could barely walk anymore.

"Sir, if you would like to come down, the food is ready. I know how your people feel about all vegetable dinners, but I promise it will be good." The Mayor insisted.

"I have no doubts about that. If I wanted meat, I could cook it myself. The beasts have a plentiful supply stored. But personally, I have gotten quite familiar with the food creation abilities of my Green Dragon Cleric companions back home." Karl explained.

"Rice and Beans!" One of the kids shouted, before the rest burst into laughter.

"Exactly. But she also has the advanced spells, so she can make other forms of food products with her magic. That gives us a wide variety of options, and we're never wanting for flavour."

The elves all seemed to be delighted with those answers, and they had prepared a veritable feast to celebrate the return of the kids. Some were even still in mourning clothes, which they were hastily changing out of when they were reunited.

They did it the same way that Karl did, just with a swap from their bonded items, so the system must have been a very common thing here, not exclusive like it was in the Golden Dragon Nation with the Elites. The presence of so many people with combat skills would make for a well defended village, even if they only had lower Ranks available. Karl knew full well that one war cleric who could buff the group was worth dozens of soldiers when the monsters attacked, and the Elves had more than a few clerics with them, though they all appeared to worship Elven Gods, not the Dragons.

Not that it made all that much difference to Karl. The Elven Gods seemed to have a gentle nature, as the clerics were all treated like parents among the village. They also had a number of tamed beasts in the town limits, including a small blink cat, who was keenly interested in Karl from the moment that their eyes met.

The version of Blink Cat that Karl was familiar with didn't get powerful, so it wouldn't be much of a combat pet, but seconds later, it was on Karl's shoulder, snuggled against his neck and purring happily.

Hawk mentally rolled his eyes at the cat's lack of self-preservation instinct, but Thor thought it made sense. Karl was the biggest predator around, and he looked vaguely like the Elves. So, cuddling up to him and making friends was the smartest idea that a small creature like the Blink Cat could have.

They survived by being able to escape, not by being able to fight.

Karl was just taking his seat when he got a message from the System. [Mission Complete: Reward calculating]

[Class Quest Reward triggered: The Perfect Pet.]

[Using the coordinates provided, find the perfect pet for your level and skill combination.]

Karl stared at that for a few seconds as he tried to make sense of the reward he had gotten. It was a reward, but also a class exclusive quest? Couldn't it just give him the pet instead of making him hunt it down? Or was there a reason that he had to go look for it? There might be additional requirements along the way that he hadn't encountered yet. Or perhaps the hunt itself was part of the requirement? He had found all of the others legitimately, they hadn't been given to him.

Well, Hawk nearly was, as his egg was among the monster resources that had been prepared for the newly injected Elites and their guards. But he had still picked it up himself, and nobody handed it to him with clear instructions.

Perhaps that stage was vital to the development of the mental bond between partners?

That made sense to the beasts. If it was already born, and not coming from an egg in his space, wouldn't he need to make friends before he kidnapped it? You couldn't just steal people, they would never forgive you, and your team needed to be on your side and loyal.

The thought made Karl smile.

[Loyal, like not running off with my team members.] He sent to Rae.

Thor snorted in amusement at the spider, but Remi laughed at them both.

[Thor isn't innocent this time. How many times did he ignore deployment orders so that he could go charging through enemy lines with Tessa?] She asked, rhetorically.

[Three.] Hawk added.

[Not more than two. One of those times was after I got permission.] Thor countered.

Karl shook his head. [I am glad you understand the issue. Rae gets a bit more leeway since she can shadow step, and return instantly, but Thor has buffs centred on him, so he needs to be in position or other team members could be unexpectedly without circle of protection.]

Karl sat at the table of honour with the Mayor and a few elderly clerics, while the children of the village ran around and played.

"Hey, I'm almost grown now, you're only eighteen, just a little kid." One of the young teens was shouting at another.

Karl couldn't resist laughing, and the Mayor politely hid his laughter behind his hand, while the old woman to Karl's left just smirked.

"Don't feel too bad about being youthful, son. I can't even argue that I'm middle-aged anymore. I've been alive a hundred years for every one that you have." She whispered.

Karl turned to face her. "I didn't know that Elves lived that long."

The old woman laughed. "That depends on how powerful they are, now doesn't it? As powerful as I am, I have bought myself an extra thousand years. Elves get more extra time than humans do as they get more powerful.

So, when you've reached even my level, you get three times the lifespan instead of double. I would imagine that you'll live a good long time if you aren't cut down in your prime like so many of the violent humans are."

Karl chuckled. That was a very real possibility.