

Beast Master 451

Chapter 451 Raid Successful

The Orcs assisted Karl with escorting the varied assortment of slaves out of the inner city and through the nearly finished battle in the outer city, then past the gates to freedom.

The Elder Orcs looked impressed at the performance as they held off the remainder of the Giants so that the younger fighters could make their retreat. The battle was a success by any measure, and though they hadn't completely eliminated the defenders, they had inflicted severe injuries on them, including their most defended members, and they were going to have time to retreat from the battle before the other Giants could arrive to support them.

That was the goal of the night raid, and the Giants' terrible night vision was working in the Orcs' favour, as the massive warriors wouldn't be able to even see where the Orcs went. At best, they could follow the dust cloud, but Karl suspected that they were going to separate to create a massive dust cloud in multiple directions that would throw off pursuit.

They had run close to five kilometres, with the freed slaves loaded on the attack beasts as they were too weak to keep up with the pace, when the Orcish Champion jogged over to Karl, who was pacing the same pair that he had approached the battle with.

"Human, you fight like a true Orc. We kept records of the battle, and you earned a distinction. Take this for your reward, and turn off in that direction. It will take you west to the village of Baberg, just across the border. It is the closest village outside the battle zone, but close to three hundred kilometres south of the Elves that sent you east."

Karl shook his hand and smiled. "It was a pleasure picking on the Giants again. If we cross paths in the future, I look forward to having time to tell battle stories over drink."

The Orc laughed. "You are pretty good for a human. Your name will be remembered, and not just because your mother named you after the human god of magic."

They parted ways and Karl began to jog towards the southwest, headed for the border. Now, he just needed to find a way back home and his mission should be completed. The problem was that he didn't know how he got here, and there was no sign of the Anomaly when he arrived, so he couldn't even go back to where he started to try to leave.

If it was out of sight thousands of metres in the sky above a lake, going home was going to be a nearly impossible task.

Karl ran for the rest of the evening, and began to look for a good spot to sleep as the sun came up.

[That looks like a good spot.] Cara suggested. The target was a large sunny rock in the middle of the grasslands, next to a larger pile of rocks.

Karl adjusted his path towards Cara's targeted sleeping location, and found that the rock was actually part of a destroyed temple.

There were still paintings visible on some of the other stones, and part of a doorway intact, forming a cave that would put him out of sight.

Cara wasn't sold on sleeping in the dark. She liked to sleep on a warm stone in the sun, but both Rae and Remi were fans of dark caves for naps. Thor liked sunny spots as well, and Hawk preferred trees, so it was always going to be a split decision.

[I am going to check the inside and see if it's safe to sleep there. If it is, we can nap for a while then finish the trip back to Baberg.] Karl explained.

Once Karl stepped through the collapsed entryway, he found that it was a side door leading to a basement level of some sort that appeared to be intact. It was cavernous and empty, as well as fortunately bone dry.

If it had been full of stagnant water, they would definitely have been sunning themselves on a large rock.

[Hey, this place feels comfortable. I think it was an animal-friendly temple.] Remi noted as she exited her space to explore.

The space certainly did feel like it was inviting, and not hostile or filled with angry spirits of a maligned and forgotten god.

The rest of the team came out and relaxed in the forgotten temple, while Remi explored the ruins to see what she could find.

There were a number of side rooms, all empty. But no fun stuff left behind, not even a new statue for her altar.

The last one was pretty good, and she still got inspiration from holding it, but two copies would be better than one. It worked that way with golems, so it should be the same for statues.

But when she settled in to rest on the floor of the old temple, she could feel the energy of the patron deity imbued into every surface.

Remi curled up on the old altar to contemplate the nature of her existence as a Shaman Princess, and the rest of the team left her to it. This was a sacred place to the beast gods, there was no better spot to understand what she had learned from the storm god's temple.

Karl sensed that something was moving outside, but couldn't sense a power signature, so he brought up his barriers and motioned for the team to remain in place.

[You should be safe inside. Just stay here for a bit while I go see what's going on.] He informed them before using [Silent Movement] to creep up the stairs.

Whatever was there would sense the barrier ability active, but it was safer than waiting until he'd walked into an ambush predator's trap to activate his defences.

Karl searched the area for whatever he had felt moving, but there didn't seem to be anything. There was no sense of threat to him, no paw prints or claw marks, and the long grass was still upright, so there shouldn't have been anything large in the area.

Karl was certain that there had been something here, though. He just couldn't find it.

In the distance, perhaps fifty kilometres away, he could sense two beasts at the Monarch or Overlord Rank fighting. In the grass closer to the temple, he could see a number of rodents at the Ascended Rank popping out of their burrows, but none of them would have made the sounds of movement that he had heard.

Karl crouched so he wasn't visible above the ruins and waited. Some creatures could turn invisible, but very few creatures who could be invisible were patient hunters. They didn't have to be.

If he just waited here while Remi did Remi things, he would find out soon enough what was hiding from him. He would much rather be sleeping, but that wasn't an option until he was certain that the area was secure.

Karl closed his eyes and whistled softly, using echolocation to try to find anything that might be hidden from his eyes.

What he found was nothing like he had expected. It was ethereal, as if only half present, but Karl could sense the outline of the temple, still standing, with beasts moving through it as naturally as if they lived there.

But perhaps they did. No gathering of beasts would contain that many species. Even with the intelligence of the higher species, they didn't get along all that well. However, these ones were working together, and even changing in and out of human form to take down books from the shelves, so their claws didn't damage them.

Haunted. The temple was haunted, and what he had been hearing were the echoes of the former clerics who populated the location when it was still standing.

[Rae, do you see what I see?] Karl asked.

[There's nothing down here. Maybe only the broken parts of the temple are weird? But Remi is doing strange stuff, and Hawk is getting mad at her.]

[Did she surround herself in a water shell?] Karl asked, guessing what might have been going on during his absence.

[Oh, you got it on the first try. I made it too easy. It's nice down here, we will let you know when she's finished.]

Did he just get evicted from the basement while he was upstairs looking for intruders? This was a temple by beasts and for beasts, so whatever Remi was doing might work better when there were no humans inside. But he could also keep watch so that nothing interrupted Remi if she was really going to evolve today.

Chapter 452 Patient Hunters

Karl sat at the top of the steps and watched the spectral images of the beast clerics going about their daily business, as if the temple was still operating, and not thousands of years destroyed.

At first, he had thought it was some sort of playback, a spectral image of their last day that they were forced to relive over and over, but when the acolyte that was headed for the field accidentally brushed against him, the feline beastkin paused, looked around, then shuddered and continued about their day.

Karl wondered if that meant that there was a duplicate of the temple somewhere else, that was supposed to be linked to this location, but couldn't be because the temple itself was destroyed.

Karl had been watching them for over an hour by the time that he realized that this was a form of closed anomaly. He could see the beast temple and its occupants, but it wasn't actually this temple, and they were not haunted. At least not in the conventional sense.

The temple layout didn't quite match the floor plan of the ruins here, though they were so close that it took him a while to figure it out.

How they ended up connected by an anomaly was a mystery, but it didn't seem to be harming anything, and neither Karl nor his beasts had any issues with it. Perhaps that meant the anomaly was on the other side, and that it couldn't be accessed from these ruins, but if they could pass through, there was no sign of it.

However, there was a sign of power. A sign of a magical beast undergoing an advancement. Remi's whatever she was doing downstairs was noticeably growing in power, and if she kept it up a little longer, Karl was fairly certain that the last of his teammates was finally going to make it to the Royal Rank.

This was a momentous occasion, but he got the feeling that he should remain outside the temple for the process to finish as smoothly as possible. But more importantly than that, the amount of power that was radiating from the basement of the ruins was going to be noticeable to beasts from dozens of kilometres away.

Most of them wouldn't mess with a Royal Rank monster, even during their advancement. But there might be some close enough that had enough power of their own that they wouldn't fear a freshly advanced Royal Rank beast, and they might be willing to eliminate the competition before Remi could finish her advancement.

Of course, with the others in the basement with her, that wouldn't be an easy concept. Even the average Monarch Rank beast would not survive a full minute in the tender loving care of Rae and Cara, while Thor wouldn't let anyone hurt his sister.

Karl settled in to meditate, trying to keep as fresh as he could for the inevitable moment when things went wrong.

He could sense the powerful residents in the distance, but he didn't sense them coming closer yet, so there was hope that this could all end peacefully, but even thinking that gave Karl a sense that a flag had been raised.

That moment came as he felt the energy in the basement beginning to change. It was Royal Rank, and felt like Remi, but more. It should be the evolved energy of the Spirit Snake, in whatever form she had decided upon.

That was when a portal opened roughly a kilometre away, and directly in Karl's line of sight.

"Stupid beasts, they still think that their gods can protect them as they advance. Let's see what we've found." Karl heard the deep voice laughing, but the portal was blocking the view, and they had stepped out the other side of it.

[Do you need help?] Rae asked.

[No, I've got this. Take care of our small snake as she advances.]

Karl stood and put his blade tip down in the dirt, so he could rest easy, without having to carry the weapon.

A large group of what might have been Ogres, though they were more stone grey than fleshy looking, moved away from the portal, and turned to face Karl.

They began to laugh as they saw Karl. "Well, look what we have here. Some idiot nature cleric thinks that he can keep us from taking our prize while it's inca... incapashu... while it's weak."

Karl smiled over the distance separating them. Dozens more grey Ogres, along with a few dozen other demihumans that Karl didn't have names for, left the portal with three huge cages on cart bases. They had come prepared to take prisoners, and they weren't going to miss out, even if there was more than one beast trying to advance at the ruined temple today.

They were almost all Commanders, but with a pair of Monarch Rank leaders. That seemed like something that Karl could handle, as long as he could take out the two leaders.

When they got to a hundred metres from Karl, they began to spread out, leaving a few of their members at the back with the wagons.

The wind shifted, and Karl smelled blood, as well as unwashed Ogres. His sharp vision picked out the mostly dried blood on the wagons, as well as the smell of humans and Elves. Neither species was here, so they must have been the last occupants of the cages.

"He looks like a capable enough fighter. Boss will pay good money for that one, so don't kill him." One of the Monarchs instructed.

They were not in the front rank, they were both planning to send their minions forward first.

It was a simple strategy. Weaken and exhaust him, then they could bind him and claim the beast downstairs in the middle of its advancement when it was utterly helpless.

"Is this all that you could muster? You might as well turn around and go home." Karl informed them.

The leaders laughed, and two Commander Rank demihumans in the back, ones with deep mahogany skin and glowing violet eyes that matched the glowing horns at their temples, cast a barrier over the Ogres in the front.

Karl shook his head in dismay. A low Commander Rank mage armour spell was not going to last long once this got started.

[Well trusty blade, are we ready?] He joked, but the blade actually pulsed red in anticipation.

"I asked the sword, and it says you all die here today." Karl joked.

The Ogres in the front laughed, but Karl raced forward with [Chain Lightning] arcing from his fingertips.

The first hit shattered their barriers, and Karl followed it up with a wide sweep of [Rend] as his blade arced through the sky.

The Ogres in front hit the ground to get under it, but the ones behind them had no idea what was coming for them until the skill bisected them.

Karl took a deep breath as his blade flooded him with stolen life energy. That attack at full output and over such a large area took a lot out of him, but half the enemy force was gone already, and the Mages were beginning to panic.

Three more long steps brought him into melee range of the front row of Ogres. Karl ignored them, using them as a stepping stone to spread [Chain Lightning] as he went for the mages.

Hastily erected barriers shattered like glass under the flames as the blade descended, and the first mage fell.

"Go for the beast, we will deal with the human." The Monarch who had spoken earlier instructed his slavers.

The back swing of Karl's blade eliminated the other mage in an arc of black blood, leaving Karl free to face his real targets.

"I warned you, didn't I? You can still run away and live." He warned them.

"Oh, a feisty human. The slave masters at the market will have a field day with you once we lock away your system skills." The Ogre laughed.

Karl spared a bit of attention for the entry of the cave to see if Rae was ready for the attack, but none of the Ogres had gotten up. Nothing had survived the lightning.

"I think you might have misjudged your situation. You don't have a team left." Karl laughed as he felt Remi's exultant cheering in his mind.

She was finished with her advancement, and they were almost ready to start moving. She just had to get used to the changes in her body.

Chapter 453 Ogre Overreached

Karl's blade twirled, creating a field of fire from [Flaming Body] that acted as a shield as the Ogres launched their first attacks.

Two rapid steps to the side, and Karl used [Shred] to launch an attack at the flank of his closest opponent. The skill only cut a shallow line in the thick hide of the Ogre, but it stretched across its back, which would make every swing ache.

The other Ogre hurled a spear at Karl too fast for him to dodge, but the obsidian head of the weapon slammed into his armour with a clang, while the outer shell of [Flaming Body] was pierced, but under that [Eternal Lightning] was only vibrating, and then the spear was tossed to the ground.

Karl stomped on the spearhead, shattering the fragile stone so it couldn't be reused, and let a cruel laugh escape the confines of his helmet.

Not because he was feeling enthusiastic. If they kept up those attacks, he was in real trouble, and he knew it. But to taunt the Ogre and make the dimwitted creature do something stupid.

A stone blade came crashing down where Karl had been standing as he charged his target, and the tip of his blade met Ogre flesh, burning and searing it as the Monarch Rank monster's defensive abilities kept it from being run clean through.

Then Karl kicked at the back of the beast's legs as hard as he could manage. The unexpected strike caught the Ogre off guard and threw it to the ground, where it rolled backwards across the grass to avoid a follow-up strike.

The remaining Ogre snarled something in their language as it summoned another spear to throw at Karl.

The wounded member went running for the basement, so Karl stopped focusing on it.

If that was where it really wanted to be, it was welcome to try.

But before either of them could make another attack, a deep blue bolt of lightning struck the Monarch Rank Ogre in front of Karl, killing it instantly.

Next to the temple, a pair of Gryphons stepped out of nowhere, their elegant white feathered wings flaring in rage as they threw their heads to the sky.

The final Ogre turned and fled, leaving the cages and closing the portal behind it as it left.

The battle was over, but the look that the two monsters were giving Karl was enough to encourage him not to take even a single step closer.

They were, at the very minimum, strong Overlords. He was reasonably sure that even Thor's formidable protection would not take one of those lightning bolts.

Fortunately for Karl, he didn't have to find out.

From the basement steps, a gigantic serpentine form emerged. The hooded head of a Naga was decorated with a veil of shining rocks woven into a black silk veil that nearly blended in with the patterns on Remi's blue scales.

As she stretched her newly evolved body upright, Karl saw that she now had a nearly humanoid, but serpentine scaled upper body. She kept the head of a snake, but had gained four arms. Four arms that now all held blades and had enchanted jewellery on their wrists, while her chest was hidden by a golden armour plate covered in black chains.

That was a familiar feeling outfit, Karl decided.

Remi had learned how to use [Bestial Raiment], his armour spell, and she had used it to make her Queenly Attire.

Three smaller Naga Warriors appeared around her, spears in hand. It was an innate skill of the Naga Queens to summon bodyguards, and Remi's had taken on her coloration, but with all black armour.

[Congratulations, Naga Queen. It has been a long time since an adherent of the old gods has advanced here. I see you brought many friends with you.] The Gryphon's voice boomed in Karl's mind.

Remi smiled happily. [Thank you for coming to my assistance, I love this new body, but it took some time to get used to, and we were delayed in coming to help our final pack member.]

The Gryphons gave Karl suspicious looks, then seemed to shrug.

[If you say that a human is trustworthy, we will believe you. The others will be excited to hear that a new Shaman Queen has been born today, and they will be certain to reward you in their own ways.]

The Gryphons looked upward at something that Karl couldn't see, then spread their wings.

[Your time here is done for today. But we will see you again soon enough.]

Karl wasn't certain what they meant until the impenetrable white fog began to descend over them. The beasts were forced into their spaces, and the Bodyguards were dismissed along with Rae's Golems. It was a shame that they hadn't gotten a chance to fight. Karl was interested to see how Remi's bodyguards stacked up against Rae's Golems.

[I wonder if we're going skydiving again.] Rae pondered as the world seemed to vanish around them.

[Skydiving sounds fun. What is it?] Cara asked.

The two started on a profound discussion of the benefits of dropping indestructible objects from the sky on your opponents, but the world was already coming back into focus.

Only Karl still had no idea where he was.

They were in a room made of white marble with a well-worn wooden floor, and they were surrounded by clerics. But it wasn't the capital cathedral, and Karl could have sworn that he could see tails swishing out of many of the robes, and horns on heads.

In a strange unison, the chatter in the room faded, and everyone turned to face Karl, who was covered in black Ogre blood and still holding a massive flaming sword.

"Sorry." He muttered as he put the blade away, but everyone was still staring at him.

"Sir, do you need assistance? Where are you injured?" One of the clerics stammered.

"Oh, sorry. Thank you for the healing, but I'm not injured. This isn't my blood. I was trying to return home through an anomaly, and for some reason it brought me here. Wherever here is."

The clerics were still staring at him, unsure if they were supposed to answer, run away in terror, possibly fight him, or douse him with holy water. A familiar voice came from Karl's left.

"Prince Karl of the Golden Dragon Nation?"

Karl turned and nodded. "I am. Might I ask again where I happened to end up?"

The priest smiled, and his eyes went fully bronze, and slotted like a dragon's eyes.

There were bronze horns on his head, and he was almost guaranteed to be in charge here, with his Overlord Rank power.

"I suppose you don't recognize me like this, as I have changed appearances since we last met. I am Orthos. Formerly the Town Champion of the Darklight Host in Bunga, and a purebred Bronze Dragon. Welcome to Bruse Temple."

"Well fancy that. I didn't think I would be seeing you again this week. I was on my way back to Baberg after a quest sent me east out of Glatt. The last of my beasts reached Royal Rank, and it sent me here.

I am impressed that you could hide your power that well. I could have sworn that I was the stronger of the two of us when we last met." Karl laughed.

The dragon threw his head back and gave a full throated draconic laugh that shook the walls of the temple.

"You might have been close back then. But that was well over ten thousand years ago. However, a bronze dragon remembers every moment of their life as clearly as if it were yesterday, and I have not forgotten the Beast Master War Champion who accepts duels over his Rank."

"Wait, so Bunga is somewhere nearby?" Karl asked.

"No, it's on another continent. I'm not certain how much it has changed, I haven't been there in thousands of years. Not since the last of the system collapsed, and I moved to the Divine Beast Nation to be with my kinfolk."

"It seems that we have a lot to talk about. Or at least, I have many questions for you. But first, where is Bruse Temple?"

"In the Flokwar River region of the Divine Beast Nation. I do hope that you weren't in a hurry to leave, human Beast Master. That could be problematic."

Well, that did explain the room full of beastkin giving him strange looks.

Chapter 454 Bruse Temple

Karl sighed. The Divine Beast Nation had always sounded like an area that was just a monster wilderness, but it should have occurred to Karl that Dragons, and most other powerful divine beasts, could shape-shift.

It also made sense that they would welcome the beastkin in their nation, as those species were at least half beast anyhow.

Most of the ones here were fully furred, despite being humanoid. Not like Overlord Ahmad, who just had cat ears, most of these had animal shaped heads and fur or scales everywhere.

They were actually rather adorable when they were nervous. From beside Karl, there was a soft chuckle, and an elderly Werebear woman smiled down at him.

"You can all relax, the human isn't going to attack. Though, with the way that he looks at swishing tails, he might be dangerous in an entirely different way." She declared.

The Werebear laughed at her own joke, and most of the clerics gave Karl a strange look, but he could see that a few of them were walking with extra sway in their hips.

One of the male priests, a man with small round ears and black streaks in the light-brown fur on his head, frowned at Karl.

"Are we sure that it's safe to have a foreign predator here? This place is a safe spot for the clerics of the beast gods, not for hosting international guests." He suggested quietly.

"Would it help if I brought out a friend who recently advanced with the help of the Beast Gods? She even did so in the old temple Northeast of Baberg. It might have been in ruins, but the link to the Gods was still there, as they sent a pair of Gryphons to defend her when the Miviascan Slavers attacked."

Orthos the dragon looked skeptical. "You needed help to defend against a group of slavers?"

Karl shook his head. "No, but it's the thought that counts. But that temple was an interesting one. I could sense the anomaly there that linked it to another temple, one that was very similar, but not quite the same layout. If you go there and check with echolocation, you should find it."

Orthos looked excited. "The temple was still linked after its destruction? That is wonderful news. I will have a team sent there immediately with at least one bat. They should find your anomaly if it's still active."

The squirrel cleric with the striped head frowned at the excited dragon. "You can't think that there is a chance to link directly with the old gods again."

Orthos shrugged, as if he didn't care either way, but Karl had questions. "Why wouldn't that be possible. I could swear that I have heard the Gods speak more than once. The most recent time was a warning that the people in Orthos' town were real and not just instance mobs that I could slaughter for loot and food. But the time before that, they were mocking me for making an odd choice inside a trial instance. Instead of trying to walk up or down the stairs, I jumped straight in the air to see what would happen."

"What did happen?" Orthos asked.

"I landed on the same step I jumped from and got laughed at. But I would like to think that it positively influenced their decision when it came time for the instance rewards."

The squirrel man did not look convinced.

"Can you bring out this favoured beast for us to meet?"

[Remi, want to come and meet people?]

Remi perked up and cast her armour spell, getting prepared in her finery for meeting new people. But Cara was much more excited.

[Can I come out and meet people too? I have never gotten to meet new people.]

[Once they've gotten used to Remi, you can come out. This is a Divine Beast Nation, I would say that you're likely more welcome here than I am.]

Remi exited her space once she was happy with the appearance of her armour, and the crown on her head.

Her torso was a good bit larger than Karl's now, nearly as big as Ophelia's in Werebear form, but more slender. Her four arms were slightly offset, with the lower set being behind the upper, so they could all rest comfortably at her side, if she wasn't so excited and waving to the new people.

{Hello, I am Remi. Good to meet you all.} Her voice was a hissing that Karl recognized from the dungeon where she was found. The Clerics mostly nodded politely, and her enthusiasm began to fade.

"She says her name is Remi, and she's happy to meet everyone. I am sorry, young Shaman Queen, most of them don't speak Naga." Orthos translated.

Some of the clerics called for others, and a few Lamia women came forward to meet Remi.

The Naga were considered an uncivilized species. Somewhat intelligent, but still instinctive monsters, and even when transformed they were incapable of human speech. A Lamia, on the other hand, had a

more human head and upper body, and they could speak the common languages used in the temples, as well as the serpent tongues.

{Princess Remi, or do we call you Queen Remi because of your species? Either way, welcome to the temple of the Beast Gods.} One of them greeted in the same language Remi used out loud.

The two began to talk rapidly enough that the others were having trouble following them, then they moved forward to hug each other before the Lamia began to give Remi a tour of the temple's highlights.

"Well, I think they will be busy for a few minutes. Is it alright if the others come out? I know they're not Divine Beasts with human forms, but they're all eager to see the place with their own eyes." Karl asked.

"Of course. We would also like to know more about your team." Orthos replied.

Karl paused. The dragon made a good point. At this time, he was not in a friendly nation, and most likely was not particularly safe.

If they tried to do something to mess with the bonds, he could be in trouble.

"Relax, young Beast Master. We're not going to try to steal your friends. We just want to meet everyone and make a proper report. Many in our Nation have been curious about you since the war with the Giants broke out." Orthos explained.

"On one condition. I have a question about how there were so many system users ten thousand years ago, when I was told that the system had faded over a hundred thousand years earlier." Karl replied, hoping to make a trade.

Orthos smiled. "That is information that I can give you, and the answer is actually a simple one.

You see, ten thousand years ago, there was a resurgence in the presence of the Dungeons. We don't know for certain what caused it, perhaps the World Dragon testing us to see if we could meet some standard to get a new World Dragon Scale or set of System Stones.

But for that thousand years or so while the dungeons were active, the continent had nearly as many System users as the old days. Then, the dungeons faded, and only a handful of long-lived creatures remained.

There were Elves that lived a bit longer, and could help their children awaken, but their children lacked that ability. On this continent, it faded nearly as fast as it had appeared. You see, all of the dungeons that appeared here during that time were Common Grade. Nothing powerful managed to awaken the system by completing a dungeon, they were too far beyond the level for it to reward them.

So, the resurgence came and went, and the presence of system users became an urban legend, tales of heroes and champions of the churches and armies that faded into the founding myths of the nations that came after."

Karl sighed. "It would have saved me so much research time if whoever wrote my textbooks had just asked you."

The dragon rumbled with laughter. "What makes you think I would have told them? I wouldn't have told you, but you were there to see it, and I despise misinformation."

Karl nodded in understanding. Once upon a time, the dragon had been aligned with the Darklight Host and the largely human population of the area where Karl had landed. But that was a long time ago, and he had no incentive to remind the humans now of the truth about the past.

[Alright, everyone can come out and say hello. Thor, no flirting with the priestesses. Rae, no eating anyone.]

Cara laughed. [You people are way more fun than I expected. I'm going to go poke the dragon.]

Chapter 455 Poke The Dragon

And poke the Dragon is precisely what she did. As soon as she left the space, Cara flapped her wings and extended one black claw to poke Orthos in the nose, then she flew away across the room, laughing as the clerics tried to at least track the Chaos gremlin in Badger form as she explored.

The ancient Dragon simply stared after her in shock, unable to process the fact that he had been booped by a juvenile Void Badger.

"That creature is not afraid of anything, is she? I could eat her in one bite." Orthos growled as Cara dove through a slime monster priest as she evaded capture.

They were making a valiant effort to capture her, but now that she was covered in slime, even when they could get a hand on her, they couldn't get a grip, and she would just fly off to explore another room, leaving slippery blue footprints everywhere.

It was utter chaos, but other than avoiding capture, Cara was pointedly ignoring the clerics.

Rae made herself silk socks for the end of her legs so she didn't destroy the floor, and then she also began to wander, but by using her silk to lift herself to the second floor, where the Acolytes were watching from.

"They are under control, right?" Orthos asked nervously as he watched the nonsensical scene in his temple.

This was a Beast God temple, but not all beasts were capable of rational thought.

"Yeah, they won't hurt anyone, they just want to explore. They spend too much time in their own spaces, and they need to stretch out now and then."

"Well, most of them." Karl amended.

Thor had settled onto the floor so that the Clerics could pat him and take measurements.

A Commander Rank Lightning Cerro was rare, but a mutated Royal Rank Lightning Cerro that gave off holy energy was a unique find. However, the examination process came with Clerics stroking his scales, patting his head, feeding him snacks, and praising him. In short, Thor had no intentions of moving.

"Does the Bloodbath Spider enjoy terrifying children?" Orthos asked as he looked up at the balcony.

"Not just children, she just loves terrifying people in general. But I think she's going to make them some sort of playground. At least that's what it looks like. You can take it down later." Karl explained.

The dragon smirked up at the balcony as Rae started to make a silk play area for the acolytes.

"Fortunately for me, I am an Elder of the church. It is not my job to take down decorations or clean the upper floors of the temple. However, adding that net just made it a lot more tempting to order them to thoroughly clean the fresco paintings." Orthos joked.

Karl looked up and realized that the entire ceiling was covered in ancient murals that portrayed either religious or historical events. As he wasn't familiar with either, it could be both. Damaging one was unthinkable, but every decade or so, they would need to be carefully cleaned so that the colours didn't fade and a fresh coat of clear protectant could be applied to any spots that had flaked.

Like Karl, who hadn't realized they were there, the clergy rarely looked up at them. They were more for visitors than the daily residents, but with the acolytes playing up there, someone was bound to notice that there were spots that could use some cleaning.

After a few minutes of exploring, Cara was the first to call it quits. People kept bothering her, but now she had the perfect defence mechanism. She could just go back to her space and watch them while they couldn't see her.

For the solitude - loving badger, this was possibly the greatest thing that ever happened to her. She could now speak with nobody but family, while still watching everything that happened around her.

"Did the Void Badger, Cara, I believe you named her, retreat to her space?" One of the clerics asked.

"Yes, Cara is her name. Unlike the others, who I got as infants, she had already picked a name when we met." Karl explained.

"So, your class lets you capture older beasts as well?" Karl shook his head. "I can't capture them at all. I brought the others in as eggs, and we bonded when they hatched. Cara stayed for the buffet."

That made both the cleric and Cara laugh. The bond was solid now, but when she had first awakened in the space, she could have chosen to leave and fight off the effects of the class ability bonding her.

"Is that how it works?" One of the younger acolytes asked.

Karl reached into Cara's space and cut a small strip of meat from the roast pig, then held it out for her.

"Ooh meat. Thank you."

The Acolyte gobbled down the snack, and Karl patted her head while the older clerics facepalmed.

"Alright, I see your point. Sometimes our nature can be used against us."

Once she finished eating, the Acolyte realized that was precisely how Karl had convinced Cara to stay, and that she had fallen for it as well.

"You're not going to try to take any of our clerics, are you?" An older woman asked suspiciously.

"I have no idea where the cutoff is, but one of my beasts tried to claim a human for the team, and it didn't work. So, I suspect that most or all of these demihumans would not be considered beasts by the system, even if I wanted to try."

Orthos' eyes lit up with excitement. "Do you happen to have a piece of equipment that you obtained while you were sent back through time?" [Did anyone grab any loot while we were there? I don't really want to give him my bracelet for whatever experiment he's got going on.] Karl asked.

[Oh, yeah. I've got lots, they're tasty.] Cara announced.

Karl had thought she was just gathering random bits from the battlefield, but she had been cutting limbs with magical items from the fallen Giants. All of the bits in the pile at the edge of her space had a magical item on them.

[You can eat that?]

Cara nodded happily. [Void Badgers have a strong stomach. Magical items are good for growth, but not really worth going to look for. Here, you can have this ring. I've got too many of that flavour.]

Karl took the Giant Strength ring and handed it to the dragon.

"Yes, this is perfect. The system stats are still active on it." He declared, then slid it on his finger.

He blinked a few times as a smile grew on his face.

"Yes, that is perfect, the System Interface refreshed. Thank you for this. Do you mind if I hold on to it for a while?" Orthos asked.

"Only if you tell me honestly what you want it for. It's just a Giant Strength ring. They make new ones every year."

Orthos tilted his chin toward where the children were playing with Rae.

"System imbued items, like this one, have a chance of awakening the children, the same way that your Divine Injection does. If the children wear it, there is a chance for them to awaken a class until the effect of the old times fades."

Karl nodded. "So that is how you kept awakening more systems during the first generation or two after it couldn't happen naturally. Then eventually the system energy must have only brought partial effects, or no effects at all."

"I am glad you catch on quickly. Your stay here might not be so bad."

Karl frowned. "I have half a year left on a contract with the Red Dragon that requires me to stay near my teammates, and do something that pleases her every few months. We've already been separated for a while during the time that I was gone."

Orthos was a Dragon, he had to understand. Or so Karl hoped.

"We will work on something. The Beast Gods and the Dragon Clerics don't always get along, but the Red Dragon should understand that you are unavoidably detained and not deliberately leaving them behind."

"How did you know that was the terms of the contract?" Karl asked.

"Bronze Dragon. It's part of our thing."

He was going to have to accept that as an answer for now because it didn't seem like Orthos was going to give him more answers, or let him just walk out of here and into the Divine Beast Nation's wilderness.

Chapter 456 Beast Temple Friends?

Their conversation was interrupted when a commotion at the other end of the temple turned into an argument in Serpent.

Karl sighed and turned to see what was going on as Orthos hid his laughter behind his sleeve.

Remi had a small, furry acolyte, and she had raised her body to keep the child out of the reach of the guardian clerics that were trying to take her back to whatever passed for daycare here.

[What are you doing, Remi?]

[This creature is fascinating. She's half dragon and half catgirl.]

[And why are you keeping her away from the clerics?]

[Because it's funny. Plus, I'm a Queen now, Queens get to do what they want, right?]

[Your species is Queen, but you're still a Princess. You should likely give them the child.]

Instead of handing the child over, Remi used her lower arms and her elongated body to climb one of the pillars and escape to the upper floor, with a group of clerics chasing after her.

"I will give her a time-out once she puts the child back in bed. Sorry, she had never seen whatever species that is before."

"The father was a dragonkin from the western regions, and the mother is a Felian, one of the cat women. But a winged beastkin with fur is quite uncommon, especially when they're not bats. The little one gets a lot of attention, and I do fear that we're spoiling her without teaching her about stranger danger. If Remi hadn't been friendly, she could have been injured or abducted by a visiting beast."

A few seconds later, the shouting turned to laughing, and Remi came racing back down the hallway and around the spiral staircase, this time holding a full-grown priestess.

It was awkward, but with four arms, Remi could hold her no problem, and the Naga Queen was surprisingly strong.

Karl was used to thinking of her as a small snake, but she wasn't anymore.

Well, for another five seconds, before she put the cleric on the ground and turned back into a small Spirit Snake to escape up Karl's side, seeking protection on his shoulders.

"Your Naga friend is insane." The Priestess that Remi had been carrying insisted.

"In her defence, she literally got arms a day ago. If they're not for cuddling small furry creatures, what is the point of having arms?" Karl replied.

Most of the clerics in the room laughed, and some sort of large beast outside rumbled in amusement.

The cleric gave him a skeptical look, and Karl gently stroked Remi's head.

"Fine, point taken. Sometimes we forget how excited the youngsters are to see new things." The Priestess sighed.

[Pat the head for good luck.]

Karl didn't question the voice in his mind as he patted the beastkin woman's soft furred head. Even if it didn't bring good luck, it was totally worth it, the long bunny ears were so soft.

"Gah, he got me. I let my guard down because he was human, but he did it." She complained.

"Is that some sort of running thing? I heard a suggestion that it was good luck." Karl asked.

The clerics went silent and Karl turned to Orthos.

"Did I say something strange?"

The Dragon shook his head. "No, but you might have really heard the voice of the gods. They have a particular fondness for messing with rabbit related beasts and beastkin. Even in the time when you saw me last, there was a superstition that gently touching their ears brought good luck.

But you see, their ears are very sensitive, and depending on how you touch them, it can be an erogenous zone."

Karl bowed to the Priestess. "Sorry, I didn't know it was sexual harassment. Patting as a form of friendly encouragement is pretty common for me. Thor loves it."

Some of the other clerics who had been in charge of his measurements smiled at the memory. Thor aggressively loved head pats and most other forms of affection.

He was currently outside having his scales polished and scrubbed with sand.

Rae returned to her space to let the children play, and the clerics began to relax. Nobody could view Thor as a threat, and the only other outsiders around now were Remi and Karl, and Remi had the favour of the beast gods, even if she was troublesome.

"Princess Remi, can you tell us what god favoured you when you evolved?" Orthos asked.

[Tell them lucky statue lady came to visit me.]

"She has a statue of a pregnant giant that, I believe, is one of the titan shaman gods. She says the statue lady was the one." Karl gently removed the statue from her space and took it out to show the dragon.

"Fascinating. So, a Shaman God helped her evolve, in a Beast God temple. That isn't something that I had expected. But the primordial gods are supporters of both beasts and Titans, though they fell from favour when the new pantheons of Beast and Titan Gods were formed.

So, it's not inconceivable that she would favour a shaman who wasn't of the Giant Tribes, but it is unexpected. Where did Remi get that statue from? Did she make it herself?" Orthos asked.

Karl shook his head and put the statue away, while Remi laughed.

"No, it was attached to a spell to summon clones of Frost Giants, along with a large Frost Stone. We were aiming to break the spell, so we stole the focal object, which was that statue, and it caused the Frost Stone to shatter." Karl explained.

"You didn't stop the spell first?" One of the Clerics gasped in shock.

"Wait, there was an off switch?"

The Clerics looked at him as if he were crazy.

"All you had to do was tip over the Frost Stone. It's the power source, so the spell would have naturally ended when you removed it. I'm surprised that removing the statue or destroying the circle didn't cause a massive explosion." The Priest on Karl's right explained.

Remi was laughing so hard she almost slid off Karl's shoulder.

"Oh, there was an explosion. A rather sizable one." Karl explained.

One of the Priestesses in the back snapped her fingers. "I know where you got the statue. The spot along the border, just north of where the Magma Dragon appeared from. There was an explosion that sent a cloud of frost magic high into the sky. Our scouts saw it from Whiton Temple."

Karl whistled in appreciation. "Now that's a good range. We didn't get a good view, being as close to the blast as we were."

"You were still nearby when it exploded?" The Priest asked.

"We were still getting clear of the crater that the stone was in when it exploded. Even with Commander Rank barriers, there were injuries."

The Priest and Orthos nodded in understanding. The explosion was huge, but not contained, so it was lower damage over a much larger area than if it had been indoors.

"Is it true that you challenged a Royal Rank Frost Giant at Commander Rank?" One of the Priestesses asked, sliding up beside Karl so he could pet her fluffy cat ears.

That was clearly a bribe to trick him into giving away secrets, but it wasn't really a secret that he had taken out a Royal Rank Frost Giant. It had been on the news.

"Let me regale you with the tale of an investigation gone wrong, or successfully failed, as you might say." Karl began.

A well told story was as important as the actual details, and the clerics were all eager to hear all about the war between the Golden Dragon Nation and the Giants.

Chapter 457 Story Time

Karl ended up seated on the ground by the altar, with a semicircle of acolytes in front of him, invested in his stories of the battle zones along the border, and of his adventures in the time regressed instance.

That one was their favourite. Not only was there the story of saving Elven children, the Grand Priest Orthos could even confirm some parts of it personally, as he had been there for it.

What was better than a hero story that you knew was true?

"So, if you just stand there and don't flinch, the Orcs will respect your bravery and not just run you over?" One of the Acolytes, a boy about four years old, asked.

"That's right. If you have the strength, Orcs will respect it. Then you just have to prove to them that you're not bluffing. I hear that the clerics of the beasts gods are outstanding fighters, so if you grow up big and strong like Auntie Sslyth over there, you can make them respect you. Then you can join them to beat up the bad guys and rescue the prisoners."

The reptilian clerics laughed, as Sslyth, the way Karl had pronounced it, was just the word for Lamia in their language. With a different inflection, it was Naga, and the clerics were surprised that Karl had gotten it right, despite not speaking the language.

Karl launched into the story of defeating the Giants, and the kids became skeptical. "No way. The Monarch Giants are too strong." The protested.

"Why don't we go outside, and I will show you something amazing?" Karl offered.

Everyone followed him outside to where Thor was basking in the sun with a number of Dragonkin clerics leaning against him.

Karl took out two Monarch Rank bodies. One from the village, and one from the Slavers. Rae had saved both of them for blood and personal use.

"See, these are the bodies of the two that I defeated on that trip. Now, I will have Miss Rae put them back in storage, and we can put out a blanket to tell stories here in the sun where it is warm."

Orthos smiled at the High Priest next to him. "He's actually a skilled babysitter. He might have made a proper bard if he had different luck with the System."

"That Class of his is dangerous, though. See how the kids are drawn to him? He doesn't feel like a human, they instinctively react to him as if he were a beast himself, even when they're looking at him." The High Priest countered.

Orthos shrugged. "We tend to trust our nose over our eyes, with so many shape-shifters in the church. He smells like a beast, not a human."

"Can you show us how that skill works?" One of the kids was asking. The boy was a Fire Basilisk, and his species had Flaming Body as an innate skill, but he was still young, and Awakened Rank. He hadn't mastered the advanced methods that Karl was describing.

"Alright, pick up that stick. That should do. Now, focus on extending the ability over your hands and down the stick."

The boy glowed in pride as he showed off that he had already mastered the weapon coating.

"Now, when you spin it, focus on letting the edge of the flames stay right where they are."

Karl waved his hand back and forth, leaving a shield of Flaming Body in the air.

A little girl jumped to her feet next to the boy and grabbed another stick from the ground.

"I've got that skill too, let me try." She demanded.

"Alright. Start it here on my hand. Now move the stick and imagine that I'm holding it in place, so you can spread it out."

Karl grabbed the edge of the ability as she moved the stick with great effort. Then he did the same for the boy as the clerics stared at him.

The High Priest turned back to Orthos. "There is something wrong with that human. Who grabs an attack skill with their bare hands? Humans aren't immune to fire."

Orthos chuckled. "I think he has damage reduction on his equipment. Their skills aren't doing enough damage to hurt him."

That changed the High Priest's estimation of Karl's threat level.

"He is using a Royal Rank Epic Armour spell." Orthos added.

"What are the gods thinking?" The High Priest muttered. "I think they want him to bring the System back. Everything he has described so far sounds like he's being guided toward a larger fate."

An ancient Lamia woman slid up beside the Dragon. "Do you think that it's possible that we are having another resurgence? Even if it's only a thousand years, we might be able to make better use of it this time. There is that Commander Rank dungeon that opened. That sounds like things might be changing for the better."

Orthos thought about it as Karl brought more kids with innate barrier skills up and showed them how to make shields with them away from their bodies.

The teachers would show them eventually, but the kids were more eager to learn from Karl because he had cool stories about defeating bullies. Motivation was a major factor in beasts and beastkin expanding their skills.

"Who went to investigate the dungeon. I don't recall getting a report."

"Bishop Misty went to investigate. You know how she is, she will file a report in her own time." The High Priest sighed.

"Bishop Misty, the Temporal Dragon, is the one that investigated the Dungeon? I don't suppose we have asked Prince Karl where he was before he went missing through time." Orthos sighed.

The rest of the clerics paused. That was right. Misty was less reliable than the average Nature Cleric, and had zero sense of punctuality, as she saw time as a fluid function. But the fact that she might have met with an interesting human and interfered in the time flow hadn't occurred to them until now.

She hadn't done it in generations, as her kind hated to change the timeline and cause ripples in the natural order. But she was certainly capable.

Orthos gestured to one of the Felian clerics who went over to stand beside Karl, who was happily teaching a young Gryphon to make a better wind barrier.

"Where did you go between the battlefield and the Anomaly? Our scouts saw you leave weeks ago. Did you get to explore more before you were transferred?" She asked.

Karl smiled and stroked her ears, making the Priestess purr. "Sorry, that part is confidential. I had to take care of some things away from the battle for a while, and then celebrate the birthday of one of my team members."

Orthos sighed. That wasn't a confirmation, but enough for them to suspect that he had been the one at the Dungeon when it first opened. But in the process, she had told him that they were watching the battlefield from a distance, when officially they didn't have any spies within the Golden Dragon Nation.

It wasn't exactly a good trade of intelligence details. But once they found the Bishop, they would have confirmation of the timeline, even if she hadn't been the one that had been messing with it.

Chapter 458 Teaching Skills

The Clerics went inside while Karl taught the children, leaving only a few junior Priestesses with him, as they were instinctively drawn to Thor, who was currently napping in the sun.

So, when Karl went from hands-on training the young beasts to writing, nobody in charge noticed.

[This will be great. I'm sure I can use Rend.] Cara was laughing as Karl finished the second copy of the book.

He had been careful to make sure the kids were not paying attention as he worked, and they had thought he was just doing paperwork, so they hadn't realized that he was doing anything special.

Karl passed the book into her space, and the book vanished as soon as the Void Badger touched it.

"Alright, does everyone understand the rules to the Thor challenge? You have to extend your barrier in front of yourself and charge at your training partner. Whoever's shield fails first loses. Then the winners challenge each other. The last one standing gets this Skill Book." Karl explained.

This was likely a terrible idea, giving new skills to citizens of a hostile nation. But they were baby clerics in training, and they were all beasts or beastkin with claws. They should be able to use Rend, or they could trade it with the others for something they needed.

Most beasts couldn't innately use it, as they didn't hunt like Hawk did. Instead, they would have [Claw] or [Shred], sometimes [Slash].

The Priestesses looked up when they heard the first collision, but the kids looked like they were playing, so they went back to sunning themselves with Thor.

The Acolytes were really invested in the game, running full speed at each other, not caring that most of the effect was going to be from the two shields interacting with each other. If they could hit hard

enough that their target lost their footing, they would also lose focus on the barrier, and most of them had only just learned to expand it, so they would lose.

After a few minutes, the noise drew the elder clerics back outside. They paused for a moment as they saw what looked like the kids roughhousing, but the organization showed that it was some sort of unorthodox training exercise.

There were only four left. The young Gryphon, a half dragon, the Fire Basilisk and a Felian who had learned an earth shield skill.

They were all under six years old, and all Awakened, so the contest was a hard fought one, but they were all exhausted, and they were barely stumbling towards each other when the High Priests came back out.

They weren't known to push themselves this hard in training without a reason, so the Elders stopped to watch as the Felian lost to the Gryphon, and the half dragon continually clashed with the Fire Basilisk until he actually passed out from exhaustion.

Once they were out, Remi doused them with a healing splash and Thor put Eternal Lightning over them to help recover their energy, but the latest few defeated acolytes would still be in no shape to watch the finals.

Half Dragon and Gryphon squared off and flapped their wings, crashing barriers together at a remarkable speed that made the clerics flinch.

Someone could be seriously injured with this game, and they would have to ban it before the kids tried it unsupervised and someone broke their neck.

Four times they collided and flew apart, then on the fifth, they collided with a shattering of shields, and crashed shoulders together.

"That's a draw. Congratulations to our two winners. Now, I only have one book for you, but I think that I can come up with another prize."

[Give them a stone.] Thor suggested. He was very pleased with the game, enough that he was willing to part with one of his precious Holy Stones.

"Alright, I have two rewards. Do you know the game of rock, paper, scissors?" Karl asked.

The two laughed, and the half dragon stood up straighter, smirking at the Gryphon, who was sitting on its haunches, so its clawed front feet were free to play the game.

"1, 2, 3, GO"

"1, 2, 3, GO Ha, I win. Scissors beat paper." The Half Dragon cheered.

Karl held out his hands, the stone in one and the book in the other.

"You won the showoff, so you pick first."

The girl grabbed the book and held it over her head, cheering, before she opened it and the book vanished.

Then the Gryphon gave a happy coo and plucked the stone from Karl's hand.

The half lion, half bird monster promptly ate the stone, leaving Karl staring at it in confusion.

[It's storing the stone in its gizzard. It won't leave there, and it will be used to grind its food, imbuing everything it eats with a bit of Holy Energy from now on.] Thor explained.

"Wait, NO!" The clerics were shouting as they ran over.

"It's alright. It's just a Holy Stone, it won't hurt anyone." Karl shouted back, thinking that they were concerned about him giving candy to the Gryphon.

"Not that. The skill book. You let a child use a skill book." The Priestess sighed.

"It's only a [Rend] book, I can get more when I get home." Karl explained.

"Still, skill books are incredibly valuable, you don't give them as presents to children."

One of the other kids laughed. "So are Holy Stones, and Emma ate one of those."

The clerics sighed and glared at Karl, while Thor and Remi laughed.

[Hey, all clerics use that same look. It's not just a dragon cleric thing.] Remi noted.

[I think it's a special Karl thing.] Hawk suggested.

[No, they give the same look to Lotus.] Thor reminded him.

"You really don't understand why we're upset, do you?" One of the clerics demanded.

"Relax, I promised them the Rend skill if they won, and I paid in full. It would be an insult to the gods to cheat their Acolytes." "How many of your beasts can use that skill?" The Felian catgirl who had come to get information from Karl earlier asked.

"Just Hawk and Cara. The others don't actually have claws, so they're not well suited to it. They have other ways to attack."

[Oh, I bet I can put Disintegration on Rend and throw the skill even further. This is a good skill.] Cara realized.

[Rend flies much better than thrown balls.] Hawk agreed.

Cara was going to be a menace the next time they got into battle. Disintegrate was dangerous enough on its own as a Monarch Rank skill.

The Clerics sighed in frustration, and Orthos smirked at them. "Those are all important questions, but you're asking the wrong questions. What you should be asking is how he taught the kids to use such complex applications of their innate skills before they were even old enough for school." The Dragon suggested.

Karl knew perfectly well what the reason was. [Skill Master] didn't require the beasts to be bonded, and the ones that had done the best were all at least half beast.

He had completely forgotten that he had the skill active constantly, as it was an essential for his team. But when he was focusing on teaching a skill, it was even more effective, as it was targeted.

Chapter 459 Found Him

While Karl and the beasts were in the temple playing with children, a certain Nature Cleric was having horrific visions.

"I swear I did something to make the Goddess mad. How is this fair?" Lotus cried.

"What did you see?" Lotus asked.

"He's playing with a baby Gryphon. It's not even part of his team, someone just gave him a baby Gryphon to play with." Lotus complained, with tears of frustration in the corners of her eyes.

"When did he get to a temple? Do you know what sort of temple it is?" Tessa asked, trying to keep the little cleric focused. Visions were usually intended to give them some sort of valuable information, not just to taunt a single bored priestess.

They had been stuck here for an entire week now, waiting for some news or new orders. The issues had been dealt with the first day, and there were no known threats in the region anymore.

Doug was at the mine's cafeteria, helping them with lunch for the workers, a company provided meal for every shift, but the others were simply lounging around in the courtyard outside the only hotel in town.

The sound of a helicopter let them know that something was coming, but there was no announcement over the radio to let them know to be prepared for a pickup. Normally, any pickup flight would give them an advanced warning so that they weren't wasting time.

That was the first helicopter they had heard since they had been dropped off, and after a few seconds, they saw that it was a Bureau of Elite Development helicopter, so it had to be here for them, even if there was no message.

The pilot put it down outside the city limits in a field, and a ten agent mission team disembarked. That was not what any of them were expecting. Colonel Valerie led the team to the town wall as the helicopter's rotors spun down, suggesting that they were expecting to be here for at least a few hours.

"Ladies and Gentlemen. It's good to see you all rested. Where is High Priest Doug?"

"Cafeteria." Tessa replied with a gesture over her shoulder.

"Would you mind going to get him? We need to have a discussion about some new intelligence that we have received."

Tessa nodded. "I think that we have some for you as well. High Priestess Lotus has been having visions all day."

Bob ran off to get Doug, while the Colonel led them to the Mayor's offices, the only soundproofed area in town where secure meetings could be held.

In minutes, everyone was gathered, along with the Mayor of the Lithium Mines village.

"I believe it goes without saying, but nothing said here leaves this room." Valerie began.

The others nodded, and she continued. "We have confirmation that Prince Karl is alive. He was recently spotted at a Beast God Temple in the Divine Beast Nation. It is not currently safe to attempt to recover him by force, but we have been in contact with two of the Dragons at the Temple, and we believe that we can arrange to have him safely returned to the border."

Lotus let out an annoyed grumble, and the Colonel turned her attention to the cleric.

"I have been having visions all day of him playing with baby monsters. I think that he made a deal with the clerics to let him babysit, or maybe train the youngest Acolytes. It's not fair."

Colonel Valerie looked confused, so Tessa explained.

"It's a Lotus thing. She can see the visions as if she's there, only she can't touch anything. First it was visions of Karl with young Elves in an Elven village, then today it is a vision of him with young monsters. It also appears that he has a new partner, a honey badger, and that Remi has evolved into a Naga Shaman, or possibly a Naga Queen."

The Colonel looked shocked. "That could complicate things. If he has that much amassed power, the Divine Beasts are not going to want to let him go so easily. He is a high-level threat that might be turned against them in the future, and his class allows him to bond beasts.

If the dragons agree to work with us and bring him back, there might be a price to pay for his return. But that is the Government's problem.

Our team is here to collect you all in preparation to meet with him, so that the contract with the Red Dragon isn't broken."

Doug tapped the table as he thought. "Do you think it is possible that he might make a break for it through the wilderness?

If there is anyone who wouldn't fear the wild areas of the Divine Beast Nation, it is him. In fact, they might not even realize that he's not one of them. If he put his hood up, he could pass as one of the beastkin."

Colonel Valerie sighed. "That's what we're afraid of. He's at a temple right now, but they might not prevent him from leaving, and that would put him out of reach of both our spies and any sort of safety he might be enjoying. There are two dragons there, a Bronze Dragon Overlord, and a Commander Rank Green Dragon who is practising her healing skills at their temple."

Lotus froze for a moment, then frowned.

Her linked dragon was a Commander Rank juvenile Green Dragon. If it was not a vision, but an info dump from her patron who was usually so eager to see new things, it would make all sorts of sense. She never got to see things on her own, so now that she had seen them, she was just sharing everything with Lotus.

But when she thought about it, her patron seemed naive and intrigued by the concept of getting to go apprentice at a temple. So, it wasn't her Green Dragon, just another young one.

That was a relief, somehow. Colonel Valerie continued her explanation. "Tonight, we are going to head to the border and make contact with the representatives of the Divine Beast Nation. We are not officially at war with them, but we are not on particularly good terms with them either, so I need everyone to be on their best behaviour.

I don't know who they will send to meet with us, but be extra respectful, and remember that they are the representatives of another nation. A neutral nation that we need to stay neutral in our conflict with the Giants.

They are known to send a lower ranking beast as their representative, just to see if we will take it as an insult. That means no trying to treat the representative like a child or a wild animal. No talking down to them, in short, don't do anything out of line if you want us to get Karl back without months of headaches."

Dana laughed. "You know, now that Thor is surrounded by Divine Beast Nation clerics, he might not want to leave. They're extra friendly to beasts, right? So even if they don't want Karl there, the rest of the team should be pretty popular."

Ophelia laughed. "There is no way that Thor is not popular. Everyone loves Thor."

The visiting Bureau team members chuckled. They could only imagine the chaos that would happen if the Divine Beasts refused to assist in returning an Elite that had been brought there by an anomaly because his beasts were too likeable.

The team smirked at the thought. They could definitely see it happening. But the good news was that they now had reliable intelligence on Karl's safety and not just vague visions of him interacting with small animals.

Chapter 460 Making A Deal

Four hours later, the helicopter landed at the border of the Divine Beast Nation, not far from where the Flokwar river headwaters started at a natural spring. Assembled to meet them was an odd assortment of creatures. There was a Dire Bear, a dragonkin Priestess, and a trio of Moor Cats.

Other than the Priestess, who was a Commander Rank High Priestess, the others were all strong Monarchs. The Colonel had been expecting the Divine Beast Nation to send a weak representative as an insult, but it appeared that they had sent an exceptionally powerful emergency response team to meet them. There was still a portal open behind the beasts, waiting for the meeting to end, and Ophelia began to suspect that this meeting might not go the way they were hoping.

So, as they got out of the helicopter, she shifted into Werebear form, ensuring that there would be at least one Beastkin with their contingent. She had some hope that it would help alleviate the hostility she could feel, and unlike her Dire Bear Form, she could still speak as a Werebear.

The two sides stopped a few metres apart, and the dragonkin High Priestess nodded at the newly arrived clerics while ignoring the others.

"First, as a sign of good faith." She announced, then opened a viewing spell that showed Karl teaching a combat class to a group of five-year-olds.

He was currently showing them the art of the side chokehold, where you could get close enough to a beast's neck that they couldn't bite you as you attacked.

Thor was napping in the background, and Colonel Valerie prepared for the worst. Karl was clearly accepted by the beasts if they were letting him be around the kids, and that was going to make it harder to get him back.

[We should have warned him not to be so friendly to foreign nations.] Colonel Valerie's assistant whispered to her.

[But if he wasn't what sort of condition would he be in now?] She whispered back.

The dragonkin gestured for Tessa to come forward and speak with her, but the beasts growled when the Colonel tried to join her.

"High Priestess. I have been informed that your team has a contract with the Dragon Gods." The dragonkin began.

Tessa silently nodded and took out a copy of the contract.

"So, the four of you?" She asked.

"Normally, we travel as a group of eight. Ophelia is our fifth for most situations, while Morgana, Bob and Doug bolster our numbers for dangerous situations."

That was a rather powerful group, with Bob and Doug both at Royal Rank, and Morgana right at the bottleneck.

But the High Priestess had been informed of Karl's combat power with his beasts, and he would still be the designated leader of the team even in the Divine Beast Nation, despite his youth.

"I have been approved to bring his contracted team members to him. No more. I am willing to make an exception for the Werebear, but not the humans."

"What are the chances that he could be returned to the group here? We do have duties to take care of as well." Tessa asked.

The dragonkin High Priestess shook her head. "The Grand Priest says his skills are too valuable to let him go before his debt is cleared."

"What debt?"

The dragonkin shrugged. "I have no idea. It wasn't explained to me, as it was considered non-negotiable."

"Can you ask? Perhaps we can help settle the debt right now." Her eyes seemed to glaze over as she used a communication spell.

"He did not clarify, and only said that they are still cleaning slimy footprints off the ceiling."

That left Karl's entire team confused. None of the beasts had slime type abilities, and the ones that could conceivably be on the ceiling were Rae and Hawk, neither of which would leave footprints.

Had Karl done something that involved him fighting indoors with slimy feet?

Hopefully, he hadn't gotten into a fight with the Beast God Clerics.

Tessa turned to Colonel Valerie for answers. Sending more Elites into the Divine Beast Nation defeated the purpose of trying to recover one. But they did have a contract that said they wouldn't leave each other behind.

He certainly seemed like he was on an adventure, and if they let him go alone now that they had the chance to join him, it might be a violation of the contract.

"Can I have a moment to confer with the Bureau Agents?" Tessa asked.

The High Priestess nodded and Tessa stepped back to talk to the others.

"Where do I go from here? It's pretty clear that they're not going to let him go easily. We came here to get an Elite back, but with the contract, most of us will have to go to him if he won't be brought to us." She whispered.

Colonel Valerie sighed and nodded. "If it comes down to that, try to get terms from them. Preferably a condition to return you all home once whatever debt he racked up has been paid. I suspect that it's a made up charge, an excuse to keep him there. I just wish that I could confidently say that him leaving slimy footprints on the ceiling was a false accusation."

Dana smirked. "Yeah, we were all a bit startled at that, but I don't think anyone would say it's impossible, or even all that unlikely."

In the distance, they heard the Dire Bear's rumbling laughter.

"The bear has definitely met him. He wouldn't be laughing that hard if he didn't know Karl." Doug noted.

The Dire Bear nodded in agreement, letting everyone know his hearing was sensitive enough to hear their whispers.

"Why are we pretending that any of this is a secret meeting? We can all hear each other." Dana asked.

The Bear and the Moor Cats all made huffing laughing noises at her comment, and even the Dragonkin Priestess chuckled.

Tessa stepped back toward the Divine Beast Nation group. "We would ask to join our partner until such time as we can all leave together. What we ask is that you guarantee our safety and our return together to the Golden Dragon Nation at the soonest opportunity."

The High Priestess was silent for a minute as she considered the wording. "We can agree to bring you to him and assist you in fulfilling the terms of the contract with the Red Dragon until such time as you all leave together, at our earliest convenience," she suggested.

That was not quite the same thing, as there were many exceptions to "earliest convenience", but it was not a bad agreement, as they had agreed to allow them to fulfill the terms of the contract. The contract stipulated that they needed to please the Red Dragon, so it would be difficult to keep them there in a secure temple for an extended period, as the Divine Beasts were not at war with anyone. The Black Dragon who ruled their nation didn't see the need, the deaths on the continent were balancing themselves.

Colonel Valerie nodded and handed Tessa a small bag that she put in her storage. She could check the contents later, but it was most likely a method of contacting home from outside of regular radio range.

That was all the signal that Tessa needed to know that they would be leaving.