

Beast Master 461

Chapter 461 Team Reunited

The team said their goodbyes to the Mackenzie brothers and Morgana, then prepared to follow the beasts to their destination.

"Before we go, there are a few ground rules you should be aware of. This is not a human nation, so we expect you to be on your best behaviour. Your military and government ranks mean nothing to us. Beasts have our own ranking system.

The only reason we have agreed to this is that we don't want to offend the gods by refusing.

Now, if you understand that, we should get along just fine. If you have abilities that let you travel more quickly, I suggest you use them now. We won't open a portal directly to the destination." The High Priestess explained.

Dana activated her movement skill, but neither cleric had anything that was going to help them much with that. However, as High Priestesses of the Dragon Gods, they did have some dragon features and solid stamina.

However, when Ophelia transformed into her Dire Bear form, the big Monarch Rank Dire Rank bear made a rumbling noise that almost sounded friendly.

"I think you have an admirer." Dana laughed as Ophelia rolled her eyes at be Bear.

"Calm down, big boy. She's a Werebear, her default form is human, not Dire Bear, this is a skill she learned." Tessa teased.

The High Priestess in the beast group laughed, then winked at her huge, furry friend.

Then she led them through the portal, leaving the Bureau team behind.

The beastkin on the other side of the portal didn't seem impressed to see the group that had come through, but they should have heard most of the conversation, and they didn't try to stop them from leaving the area, jogging down a well travelled dirt path.

They could hear laughing in the distance, and the Dire Bear huffed in amusement.

"It seems your friends will be waiting for you. They're back out again after dinner, working with the children." The High Priestess explained.

"Is this some deal you've made with him?" Tessa asked.

"Not exactly. You will understand when you see it."

Karl had no idea that anyone was coming for him so soon, so he was overseeing a sparring match between the Acolytes and Cara, preparing them for when they might have to deal with a rampaging feral beast.

The others were too large to fight without skills, or in Remi's case, too deadly in her smaller form. Remi's only attack in snake form was a venomous bite, and at her rank that would instantly kill the Acolytes. Cara, on the other hand, could deactivate her skills and play with the kids as long as they wanted.

She puffed up her back, like she was angry, and let the kids circle her. The older clerics laughed. A Void Badger rarely got defensive and angry. They weren't afraid of anything, they just attacked when they were angry. But she was fighting kids under seven years old.

Once she was certain the kids were in position, Cara moved, grabbing a boy around the waist and spinning him around to body slam him before nuzzling his belly to simulate a bite attack.

"What did we just go over? You can't let her grab you like that. If you do that with a feral beast, they'll eat you." Karl reminded the kids.

"The one targeted should use their weapon to bash at her paws while the others move in to capture and restrain her." He explained.

"Now go again."

This time, the boy used his training sword to bat away Cara's claw as he retreated, and the Void Badger began to chase the others around as their plan fell apart.

"Gather around. Force her to the ground. You can hit her, it won't hurt her." Karl encouraged.

She swatted one a bit harder than intended, and Karl darted forward to catch the little acolyte before they hit the ground.

"Keep your guard up. Fighters with shields to the front, keep her occupied."

That was how Dana led the group into the training grounds at the Temple to find Cara with a werewolf in a headlock, giving him a wet willy.

"Karl, what are you teaching the children?" She called.

"Dana! How did you get here? I didn't expect to see you until I got back.

Meet Cara, the winged void badger, and the newest member of the team."

Cara let go of the boy to fly over to Dana and tackle her to the ground, where she could be properly examined.

[Your friend is a human mage? They're kind of squishy. Give her the bracelet, or I'm going to break her just trying to say hello.]

[Kindly don't break my team members. There are likely going to be two clerics and a berserker coming, all human.]

Dana looked up at the Void Badger, who was sniffing at her and pulling at her armour to inspect the equipment.

[The robes smell like Rae. That's good, they shouldn't tear. Oh, more people.]

Cara spread her wings and launched forwards, only to be intercepted and grabbed by Lotus.

"You are adorable. I'm Lotus. Are you one of Karl's friends?" She asked.

[This one doesn't listen well.]

Cara spread her wings and flapped hard, lifting both herself and Lotus into the air, so she could deposit the cleric on Ophelia's back.

Then she slid down to examine Tessa, leaving Lotus confused.

"I swear I had a good grip on her. Badgers are hard to hold on to." Lotus noted.

"Even with magic. They mostly do what they like. It's good to see you all again, but how did you end up here? Unless my map reading skills are exceptionally poor, we are a long way from the border."

Tessa chuckled at Karl's question.

"They brought us to you because of the contract. Apparently, you have things to do before you leave."

Karl nodded. "That is true. I'm in the middle of teaching the kids to use their innate skills, and we learned some very interesting new things in the last day or so."

"Oh, what did you learn?" Tessa asked, as she realized that Karl had become fully side tracked in a temple full of beasts. He was as bad as the Nature Priests, but he was focusing on expanding his System Skills, not just on the new experiences.

Well, the first obvious one is that I'm quite good with children. But more importantly, I discovered that I can use skill books in a whole new way. We were just about to start, if you want to watch.

They were confused, but when Karl called Remi out in her Naga Queen form, they were all shocked.

"Oh, right. Remi advanced. She can only speak serpent so far, but we're working on it.

Now, for the part that we were about to test."

Orthos came out with a freshly written book in his hands, and reluctantly handed it to Karl. If this went wrong, from the Dragon's point of view, Karl would use the book and it would vanish. Their Inscriptionists had spent half the day on this. He didn't want to lose it, but Karl was confident that his theory would work.

Karl opened the skill book, and began to read it to Remi, while focusing on using [Skill Master] to transfer the knowledge to Remi.

It was a four-armed combat style, and the chances of Karl being able to use it were very low. But if they gave the book to Remi, should be able to.

The dragon wouldn't agree to that, but he had agreed to lend it to Karl, with the condition that he replaced it with something of equal value if this didn't work.

It took fifteen minutes of chanting the instructions before Karl was done, and Remi began to make her way through the movements of the skill.

She still wasn't quite there, but she had the basics, and with practice she was getting better by the minute.

"Come back and I will try again. A second lesson might help." Karl offered.

He was right, the second time around, Remi was much better.

She still didn't quite have the skill, but she was getting close.

Karl closed the book and settled down on the grass. "That took way more energy than expected." He explained.

Orthos took the book back before Karl got it dirty, but the ancient Dragon was beaming with joy.

"It really works, you can teach a beast to use a skill from the book without destroying it. There are so many books that we can't duplicate, but can't afford to not have anyone know." He cheered.

"So that is the thing that was so important that you couldn't leave. They want you to teach a beast how to use a rare skill." Dana realized.

Orthos nodded. "Not just a rare skill, I want him to teach one of our prodigies an Epic skill."

Chapter 462 Sharing The Power

"What skill did you want him to teach someone?" Tessa asked, suspicious of the Dragon's intentions. "You don't need to be so suspicious, War Cleric. I am a Bronze Dragon, a disciple of the God of Law and Order. I dislike disruption in the way things are supposed to be done, and I have little leniency for disrespect."

[He's totally talking about me.] Cara laughed, recalling the way she had booped him on the nose.

The newly arrived members were a bit wary of the Dragon's temper, but Karl was smiling at Cara's uncaring attitude.

"Why don't we try that now? It could be fun. I haven't gotten to see an Epic skill in a while. Not since I learned [Bestial Raiment]." Karl suggested.

"Alright. Please, come inside. We will provide refreshments for your friends, but you might want to restrain the Nature Priestess."

"Nature High Priestess." Karl corrected, which made the Dragon roll his eyes.

"Nature High Priestess." He reluctantly agreed.

Tessa took control of Lotus, who was about to wander away, following the beastkin children.

They had promised to be on their best behaviour, but the Void Badger had vanished, and Rae wasn't out to distract her. Plus, the newborn Green Dragon in her mind wanted to know all the things.

Orthos led Karl to a secured room with protective magic cast on everything.

There was a large tome open on a desk, open to the first page, and locked under glass.

"The tome is delicate, we can't let you touch it. Can you teach from that?" Orthos asked.

"I should be able to, I can read the tome. So, as long as someone can change the page, I should be able to use my skill to teach it. The question is if anyone is actually compatible with the skill. Rare skills tend to be rare for an excellent reason." Karl reminded him.

"We have a candidate." Orthos replied simply.

He whistled and a Moor Cat, larger than any Karl had seen before, and at the peak of Monarch Rank, came in to sit next to the dragon.

"Alright, you need to be in a relaxed state for this to work as well as possible. Is there anything that would help?" He asked.

The cat turned to Orthos, and they must have been communing mentally before Orthos shook his head. "No, he should be fine. Do you need him to move? You noted with the children that teaching works better with direct physical contact."

"If you can shift here, so I can rest a hand on you while I read, that would be best."

The Moor Cat shifted a little so he could see Karl, but had his tail draped over Karl's shoulders.

"Yes, that should work wonderfully. Now, Chapter One. The essentials of the [Ghost Beast] stealth skill."

When they reached the end of a page, Orthos would flip them with magic, and Karl would continue, focusing the recently improved [Skill Master] ability on both the Moor Cat and Rae.

She was resting in her space, but listening intently. She didn't need to be outside, they were permanently linked, and this sounded like just the sort of skill that she would love.

It was also the essential skill for a Moor Cat at the peak of the Monarch Rank to evolve into a Ghost Cat and break through the bottleneck to become an Overlord.

Rae didn't understand human politics, but she understood beasts, and this was a colossal favour to be asking of Karl. Advancing a beast to the Overlord Rank added to the nation's top combat power. Even one or two more Overlords in a battle could be enough to tilt it in favour of one nation or another.

There was no way that Cara leaving footprints all over the ceiling as she ran away from the clerics warranted this. Even teaching the children who would clean the mess should have been enough to pay their debt.

But she knew that Karl was doing this as much for her as for the Moor Cat and the Bronze Dragon.

This was an Epic Grade skill that was fully capable of taking her to the Overlord Rank, and it would most likely cause her to evolve instantly when she learned it.

What form that evolution would take was unknown, but for her future, she would do her very best to learn every bit of this skill, no matter how long she had to practice.

But this skill seemed to be attuned to her, a natural fit in the same way that her own innate skills were, even more natural than Golems, and she loved her golems.

Perhaps this was a skill that she would have also naturally gained as she advanced?

When he was finished with the book once, Karl realized that it was a good start, but neither beast had quite mastered the skill yet.

The essence of it was something that was so completely foreign to a living being that it could not be mastered so easily, even by the beasts that would call it an innate skill in their new form.

[Ghost Beast] did not actually hide you, that was taken care of by other skills. Ghost Beast let you step halfway out of phase with reality to briefly move through an object, like a door or wall.

According to the text, it was incredibly draining, and few could hope to do it more than once a day. But for an assassin type beast, being able to step through a door or a solid wall to get to your target was an absolutely brutal advantage.

The name fit the skill, and Karl was looking forward to the terror that Rae could cause once she had mastered the ability.

The Moor Cat, now a Ghost Cat, or well on its way to becoming one, was the first to master the ability, but Karl dutifully continued reading the skill book to let Rae finish learning.

The Cat wasn't moving yet, but Karl could sense the skill activation, so he was reasonably certain that it had mastered the ability.

He briefly considered the fact that a Ghost Cat didn't actually pose a major threat to most humans at home, as they were too large to fit in the room unless they were laying down, but out in the wilderness, or in the bordering nations belonging to the Giants, there would be no such restrictions.

Before they were through the incredibly long book the second time, Rae had managed to phase through one of the trees in her space.

That might not count, as they weren't real, but as far as Karl could tell, the skill was active.

He finished the reading for the second time and nodded to Orthos. "I believe that the task is done. The skill should have been understood and transferred, so if it was the key to an advancement, that should come within the next day or two." He explained.

The Bronze Dragon smiled. "You have no idea how much you have helped us today."

"By allowing the Divine Beast Nation to gain a new Overlord Rank Beast that might be able to instruct others of his species in the skill he has just learned? Oh, I think I have a fairly decent grasp on just what I have done here today. I just hope that I don't regret it later."

Chapter 463 Bishop Misty

Orthos smiled at Karl. "I do like smart people. But if you already knew what I was planning, why did you go along with it so effectively? You could have given just enough to give him hope every day for a week before anyone got impatient."

Karl smiled at the ancient Dragon. "I think it's better to have powerful friends, don't you? Without this skill, there was no way that our friend was going to become a Ghost Cat. It's not a skill that can easily be learned on your own, so the chances of a Moor Cat evolving in that direction are close to zero."

The cat rumbled in amusement that vibrated through the tail he still had slung over Karl's shoulder.

"Perhaps you are right. It is hard to say that you are a threat to the nation when everyone here is beginning to consider you a friend. Even the Acolytes are fond of your lessons. They say that you are a more effective teacher than the clerics are, and that is saying something."

They walked out of the library section with the rare books, and a white haired woman with white eyes joined them.

"Oh, Prince Karl, it is good to see you back in your proper timeline. How was your journey?" She asked.

"Quite productive, actually. If you would like a detailed version, you can ask the young ones, they had me tell the story at least three times. They should have it memorized by now." Karl replied politely.

Orthos chuckled. Three times might be an understatement.

"Bishop Misty, did you have a report for us?" The Bronze Dragon asked.

"That depends on if the Beast Master has already told you everything or if he's still holding out. The Golden Dragon Nation has a stable Commander Rank Dungeon, and I can confirm that it is awakening at least partially complete systems, with the ability to let the recipients randomly or directly select their class.

Um, what else was there? I saw in a vision that you've already met Cara and Remi, so I don't need to go into that. Did the Cerro try to hit on the Forest Dragon here or before? Don't worry about that, his game is smooth, but not that smooth."

Karl stared in shock. He had no idea who this woman was, but she seemed to know an awful lot about him.

"So it is confirmed to be a resurgence? Do you know what is causing it?"

The white - eyed woman shook her head. "No, they're as random as ever. But this human has excellent luck with being sent to where they appear. Perhaps that means your temple gets the next one, as he was sent here when he returned."

Orthos sighed. "I hope not. That's far too much trouble. But I'm glad that you managed to find time to come and give a report, Bishop."

The woman chuckled. "Yes, I found time. That's a good one. Now, I have things to see, people to do. I will return later."

Then she turned into a thick white mist and simply vanished out the window.

"Well, she's an interesting one. Is she a form of oracle or prophet? I hear that they see the world in unique ways." Karl asked.

"Well, I can't say that her way of seeing the world is normal. But I wouldn't call her an oracle or prophet in the usual sense."

Which meant that she had other ways of finding out obscure information. Karl would have to remember that. Bishop Misty, he would remember that name.

He could hear chaos in the next room over, and Karl smiled as he realized that Lotus had met the Acolytes unsupervised. She had almost certainly gotten a lecture in advance, but that wouldn't keep her contained for long.

As expected, she was sitting cross-legged on the floor, with a small Felian catgirl in her lap, reading a story to the youngest Acolytes of the church.

Dana came over to give Karl a hug, then blushed as she realized that Orthos was still standing on his far side.

"I will let you get reacquainted with your team. We can speak tomorrow about other matters. The Acolytes will show you all to your rooms after dinner."

The ancient Dragon walked away, leaving Karl with his team. Curiously, Ophelia was still in Werebear form, and wearing armour. In fact, they were all wearing armour.

"You know, they're not going to attack, you can relax." Karl reminded them.

"You're too relaxed. We're in a foreign nation with no official treaties with the Golden Dragon Nation or the Church. Armour is just common sense. Though I see that you're comfortable training children for them and helping their ranking beasts gain new skills." Tessa replied.

Karl patted her on the shoulder. "It's all under control. Well, almost all under control. But you just got here. There are a few things that I should explain."

[Cara and Remi, can you come out and say hello?]

Remi came out first and stole the Felian child from Lotus before the little cleric could react.

Both Remi and the young acolyte laughed as Remi lifted the girl in the air and spun her as she coiled herself in the middle of the floor.

"Remi? You're a Naga now?"

Remi handed the child to Tessa, who seemed more reliable than the others to be holding a child, and nodded happily.

Remi pointed to the crown on her head, where it was holding her veil down.

"A Naga Queen?" Lotus guessed.

Remi nodded again, and grabbed Lotus to hug her.

"When did Remi get so affectionate?" Tessa asked. "As soon as she got arms. Now that she can hug people without them thinking she's trying to kill them, she has been going all out. She even ran around the temple hugging children the first day."

"When did you get here?" Tessa asked.

"Last night. You got here much more quickly than I had expected. I might have trained an army of loyal children if you gave me an extra week."

A few of the older clerics turned suspicious glares at Karl as they realized that he was only half joking. He was doing very well at training the kids, and the young ones loved him.

"We have a lot to talk about, but I think that we can do that over dinner. How about we get these little darlings to lead us to the dining hall?" Tessa suggested.

The young Gryphon who had gotten the Holy Stone for his draw in the final round of the Thor Challenge flapped his wings and circled the room before flying out toward the food.

"Everyone, follow the Gryphon. There is one more surprise in store for you, and it might be better that you're sitting down for this one." Karl laughed.

Lotus smirked. "I got a sneak preview, it's a badger. A Honey Badger."

Cara popped out of her space and spread her wings to fly around the room before tackling the Nature Priestess and licking her face.

"Close, Cara is a winged Void Badger. And it looks like she likes you. Or at least the honey in the body lotion you use. But that isn't the surprise that I meant. You met her on the way in, remember?

Rae, why don't you come out and show off?"

Chapter 464 Separate Rooms

Rae appeared in the middle of the room, looking very much like she always had. So, why she would be a surprise for anyone present was a mystery.

However, after a quick check to make certain that nobody else was watching, she stepped forward, and through the table next to them, using [Ghost Beast] to pass through the solid stone table.

"Did she just?" Tessa asked quietly.

"She did." Karl agreed, before Rae returned to her nap. She was fairly certain that she still had a ways to go to master that skill, even if she could make it function right now. There was much more to an Epic Grade skill than simply being able to make it activate.

Nobody else said anything about it out loud, as the acolytes were beginning to return with dinner now. But that didn't mean that they were not all silently celebrating.

Dana gave Karl a meaningful look, quietly asking him if this is what he had been up to since his arrival. It hadn't been planned, at least not by him, but even a single skill for his beasts was a huge win, and Rae's new skill was an incredible one.

"So, are we here as substitute teachers for beastkin Acolytes? As adorable as they are, I suspect that will not be enough to keep the Red Dragon happy. It's been a while since we fulfilled the terms of the contract now." Ophelia reminded them.

Tessa declined to mention that whatever Karl had been up to while he was gone had been counted toward their timer. Anyone listening didn't need to know that they had extra time. But she had an idea.

"Maybe we can convince them to let us head back to the battlefield? It's not that far from here to the back side of the Mountain Giant Nation. They shouldn't hold it against the beasts if a few humans are let loose on them."

From somewhere on Karl's right, a derisive snort of laughter caught his attention.

"While I don't doubt that the Monster Man can take on a Monarch Rank Giant, you should realize that they send them out ten at a time in border patrol teams. Not even the Red Dragon would be impressed if you committed suicide, human."

Tessa turned to look at the speaker, and saw that it was a large and muscular Lion type beastkin, nearly as large as Ophelia's Werebear form.

He was on the strong side of Commander, but he lived here, so he would be more of an expert on the situation at their border with the Mountain Giants than they were. But to think that they put border

patrols that strong along the border with the Divine Beasts. That had to be cutting down on the strength they could put against the humans, even though they were at war.

The Golden Dragon Nation didn't have hundreds of Monarch Rank Elites to throw around, and if the Giants were using them as border patrol, they clearly did.

Tessa smiled at him. "Don't underestimate a War Priestess. But you have a point, we're not up to that. I don't suppose you have any suggestion on how to keep the Red Dragon happy while we're waiting for what the representative called 'their earliest convenience' to make sure we get back home?"

The beastkin shrugged. "No idea. But the border is a bad idea."

The group finished their dinner and headed for bed, escorted by the Acolytes.

"Um, we usually have two to a room, so Mister Karl will have to sleep alone, unless you want to share with an Acolyte." A small wolf kin boy explained as he led them to the visitor quarters.

"Or I could share with Dana and High Priestess Lotus could share with an Acolyte." Karl offered.

The boy looked horrified. "You can't share a room with girls. They might have cooties."

Karl did his best not to laugh at the panicked look on the boy's face, while the others tried not to laugh.

"Um, no offence. I'm sure you don't really have cooties." He stammered when he remembered that everyone could hear him.

Karl smiled at the others. "Well, ladies, you heard the young Acolyte. It looks like you're sharing, and I will have one of the Acolytes as a roommate."

Lotus stuck out her tongue at Karl, even though he had tried to set her up with an Acolyte to bunk with. They probably wouldn't get much sleep. Only Tessa could reliably make Lotus sleep before she wore herself out, but it would have helped the Nature Cleric's mood.

Karl didn't actually expect them to transfer someone into his room, as the Acolytes should have all had their own rooms, but when he got inside, one of the beds was already taken by a dragonkin of some sort, with white hair and silver horns.

"Good evening." Karl said softly as he prepared to climb into bed.

The figure turned over, and familiar white eyes stared back at him.

"Bishop Misty?" Karl asked.

"Right on the first try. Very good. Now that everyone else is asleep, I do have a few questions for you about what you saw when you were in the past, and what you learned.

I sent you there, but I didn't have an opportunity to monitor everything that you were doing. Not when that annoying Archbishop was hounding me again."

"You sent me? So it wasn't an anomaly?" Karl asked, now on guard against this strange creature.

"Of course I did. Someone needed to go. Who could be better than you? You have beasts to keep you alive, you have survival skills, the humans will believe what you tell them, and it was easy enough to ensure that you ended up back here where I could talk to you before you left." She announced proudly.

"So, you wanted me to go back and find out something about the past?" Karl asked, not understanding.

"Find out? Nonsense, I can see the past. Plus, Orthos was there. I wanted you to go there and experience it so that you could confirm whether the system version that is being awakened by the new Dungeons is the same for humans.

Tell me, were there any new functions during that time that you didn't have already after visiting the dungeon? I can borrow one of the newly awakened if we need."

That could be a political nightmare.

"Their inventory system was not the same as mine, and I don't seem to have as much storage. They can see names and classes over everyone's head as well. I couldn't do that before, or perhaps I didn't know how to activate it until I saw them do it. I can do it now, but I never think to do it, and only a few people actually have a tag. You do, now that I'm looking for it. My group members all do, and Orthos does, but I haven't been looking to see if anyone else does.

Other than that, they had a guild function, and I have no idea how that works." Karl explained.

Misty nodded. "That is understandable. The ability to make new Guilds was lost even then. Everyone just joined one of the few surviving ones from the times before."

Karl snapped his fingers. "The city control function. That might be part of the Guild functions, but the city was under control of the Guild, and it changed hands with a challenge."

Misty smiled. "That is also lost. The city control stones were a magical item that was linked to the guilds, not part of the core System Functions.

But if you maintained some of the upgrades that you gained there, and we now know that at least a few beastkin can be awakened by the item you brought back, it means that both our Nation and yours should be able to awaken more by having them equip gear from the dungeon."

Karl smiled, and the Dragon nodded happily. "See, I won't make you work for nothing. This is valuable information. But the important part is the next part. Simply wearing the item isn't enough.

You need to equip it.

That can only be done if you're already primed for the system. So, either have all the kids who have taken the injection also try to equip the item, or have someone with a fully functional system put the item on them and focus on equipping it to them.

That is what Orthos did."

Karl nodded and made a physical note to go with the mental note. "Why are you telling me all this? Wouldn't it be better for your people if I didn't know?"

Misty shook her head. "No, it is better if everyone knows now because everyone will figure it out eventually on their own. But Orthos has another treasure for you tomorrow, and the Gods will demand that you have it.

Now, you look rather warm, so slide over."

Karl barely had time to react before the Dragon had slid under his blankets, and was curling up to go back to sleep.

They could talk about this treasure Orthos had for him tomorrow.

Chapter 465 Unfathomable Cheat

Karl didn't notice that Misty had changed into the form of a dog - sized white dragon until the next morning, when he felt a small body trying to insert itself into his bed.

The others had come to wake him up, but Lotus was hoping to steal his spot without waking the dragon.

Of course, it didn't work, but Misty had no intentions of getting out of bed, and Lotus wore pleasant smelling body lotion.

Karl reached up and settled his fingertips into the stonework of the block wall to lift himself straight up out of bed, then pushed off the wall to land on the floor.

"As impressive as that feat of physical strength is, you should put pants on before you come to breakfast. Lotus will miss the meal without complaints, but you should eat." Tessa whispered.

Karl put his armour on to blend with the rest of the team and made his way to breakfast. Halfway down, the Acolytes were holding everyone's hands, acting as their guides. "Are you going to be training us again today, Monster Man?" A half dragon girl asked.

"Most likely. I hear that Grand Priest Orthos has something to tell me first, but there should be time to watch your training after that." Karl agreed.

The Acolyte tilted their chin toward a corner of the room where a bunch of Elders were gathered. "They've been gathering here all night from the other temples in the area. I think that they want to tell you something important."

By Karl's guess, it must be a very important topic, given that he could sense at least three Overlord Rank beasts, and two of them were dragons. Adding in Misty, who was sleeping in this morning, that made three powerful dragons in one spot, plus the other Elders who had come to visit.

Unlike the Golden Dragon Nation, there was a lot of meat at breakfast, served with oatmeal and honey. The Elders were kind enough to let them finish eating before they came over to address their concerns. But they appeared much more concerned than Karl had expected after his previous days here.

"Prince Karl, Commanders. Welcome to Bruse Temple. If you would please accompany us to a meeting room, we have much to discuss." The Elder announced. He appeared to be human, but his temperature was off, and he smelled like seawater, so Karl assumed that it was a transformation ability or a disguise spell.

The other Elders fell in beside them as they made their way to the meeting room, along with Orthos and Misty, who was walking hand in hand with Lotus.

The Moor Cat on guard at the door closed it behind them, and everyone took seats around a huge circular table. The unfamiliar Dragon, a Monarch Rank beast whose human form had void black eyes, started the meeting.

"Let us get right to business. It is no secret that the Golden Dragon Nation has opened a Commander Rank Dungeon with a stable entrance on their territory. With that, they will be able to awaken new System Users up to the Commander Rank.

Even though they will flat line there without further opportunities, the dungeon has become a source of great envy for the other nations, both human and demihuman. But more importantly, it has become a source of concern for the Monster Nations.

The Giants and Newbon Empire in particular.

Now, that is primarily a concern for your leaders, but it is also a concern for us and the Beastkin Nation, who is our ally but does not share our border.

In this case, we find ourselves in a similar situation to the Golden Dragon Nation in that we are beset on all sides by enemies. The Giants won't allow the Newbon Empire passage through their mountains, so they will have to move armies through the lands of the beastkin.

The humans to our north will have to come through our territory to get to yours.

Until there is another stabilized Dungeon, the threat of invasion on the intelligent beasts' territories will not abate." Karl listened intently. Their problem made sense, but he didn't see what it was that he could do about it.

Karl remained silent, but nodded along, so the dragon knew that he understood the issue.

"What we would like for you to do is take an enchanted stone we have created, and deposit it in an unstable anomaly that will open soon in the Newbon Empire.

The humans would rather attack the monsters using their naval fleets than cross the entirety of two nations or more on the ground to send an army. If there is a stable anomaly in the Newbon Empire, the Golden Dragon Nation will become a lower priority target for everyone but the Giants. Safer for you, safer for us. Mutual benefit." The dragon finished.

"And why don't you send one of your own teams? You've got plenty of powerful residents just in this room that could do the job." Tessa asked.

The Red Dragon didn't like trickery, except for ambushes, and the War Dragon certainly didn't approve of sending soldiers on suicide missions.

"For one, we cannot open a portal near the anomaly. But more importantly, we lack the ability to be subtle. We have beasts with great stealth skills. But stealth won't be possible on this mission, as many groups will be gathered for the mission. Intelligent beasts do not live in Newbon Empire.

However, they do have some monster blooded demihumans, and small pockets of humans. There are more than a dozen human nations on this continent, and only one with Divine Beasts. If they suspect you, there is plausible deniability. They cannot pin the blame directly on the Golden Dragon Nation."

Karl nodded. "So, we will have to walk in, through territory controlled by monsters, on the vague promise of potential safety for the Golden Dragon Nation, who is not currently at war with Newbon Empire?"

The Dragon smiled. "And then walk back out again. I will give you a writ of protection, so if you make it to our border or the Beastkin Nation, they will escort you safely home, upholding our agreement with your Bureau people."

Karl's unimpressed look made the dragon smirk, and a few of the Elders chuckle.

However, Misty had the answer. "I have a mission order for the closest team to investigate the anomaly. You're the closest by over two thousand kilometres, and it's all signed by the Chief of Staff of the Military and the Archbishop himself."

Karl turned on the Temporal Dragon, who was back in her fully human form. "And just how did you get that?" He asked.

"Easy, I went there after it was done and requested it, then brought it back. The goddess said it would be fine." Dana and Ophelia stared, overwhelmed by the unfathomable level of cheating that her abilities represented, while Karl sighed and Tessa rubbed her temples.

Lotus frowned. "So, you went and got an order for us to stabilize the dungeon, after we had done it, and then brought it back here so that you could send us to stabilize the dungeon?"

Misty patted her head. "Of course not. You didn't go the first time, now, did you? Because we weren't here to warn you of the danger, and there was no motivation for you to travel that far on your own when there were Acolytes to train with right here."

Lotus glared at the dragon. "I am quite sure that has to be against a rule somewhere. You're a Temporal Dragon. Don't you safeguard time?"

Misty shrugged. "Of course I do. But this timeline is stable as well. There is no harm in sending you down it."

Chapter 466 But Not For Free

Orthos smiled at the Elites. "I can see that even with the order, you are still skeptical. You can check the order, and see that it is a valid magical contract, created by your Archbishop. But we are willing to pay for your assistance to the Divine Beasts."

Karl smiled. Now they might be on to something. The beasts had many good things that would be impossible to get for themselves.

"To show our sincerity, we prepared five tokens of our leader's favour. The magic will fade with use, but you should keep them, as they are also used to secure safe passage through our lands."

He opened a chest, and revealed five exquisitely carved black dragon scales from an Overlord Rank dragon, the faithful of the god of death.

[Oh, those are cool. They tilt the scales of life and death in your favour. Enemies take more damage, friends take less when the token is near.] Cara informed Karl in an excited voice.

[How do you know that?] [I licked a black dragon one time, and this magic feels the same. It's the good stuff.]

What sort of circumstance had led to her licking a dragon was unclear, but Karl didn't doubt that she had done it. The Void Badger had no fear of anything in this world or the next. Karl looked to his team for

confirmation. Safe passage through the Divine Beast Nation was valuable, and as Misty had said, they did have the agreement of the Archbishop that this was the best course of action, even if he had given it after the fact, and possibly under duress when the other nations invaded to get to the Dungeon.

There were no objections, so he passed out the tokens, and let everyone put them in their storage bags.

"So, do you all have an active inventory? Or just a storage bag bonded?" Orthos asked.

Lotus was practically bursting to answer, but held herself back until Karl spoke first. "I have an active inventory, but we all started out with storage bags from an instance reward." He explained.

That way, if the others wanted, they could keep their power level a secret, and he wasn't giving them anything that the nosy Temporal Dragon didn't already know. What Misty knew, she would certainly tell the others if there was a need for them to know.

"How do I know if I have an active inventory?" Lotus asked.

"Just think the word status with the intention of bringing up system information." Orthos explained.

The way Lotus' eyes lit up made it clear that she had found something unexpected. The Nature Cleric would never be a good poker player, but that was enough of an answer for the beasts.

Dana nodded. "I have inventory as well. And the storage bag is in one of the spaces."

"Can you see titles?" Orthos asked.

Everyone looked confused for a second, then Ophelia did a double take. "Over your head in white, your name is Orthos. Why is it white, when Karl is Red and Dana is blue?"

Orthos gestured over her head. "You are a very dark red, for Berserker. Karl is a blood-red for Beast Master, White is Cleric, light blue is Mage. When you see warriors with a fully active system, they are

brown, Shamans are dark blue, warlocks are purple, and so on." "That is brilliant. To think that we were supposed to know all that about other people." Ophelia replied with an enthusiastic smile on her face.

"Focus on me, and you can see more details when you have the Status view open. It will block much of your vision, so don't try it in combat. But you should be able to see a few things." Orthos added.

"Orthos, Bronze Dragon, Grand Priest of the Bronze Dragon God, Overlord Rank, Abbott of the Bruse Temple." She read.

Orthos was obviously making a mental note of how much she could see, as Karl recalled that he used to have a Darklight Host Guild tag, which he didn't see anymore. When the full function of the System had faded, the Guild must have disbanded, or there was something that he needed to do to bring his position back.

Of course, it could be that he just chose to only show certain roles, but Karl didn't know how to do that, or if it was even possible.

Orthos took out one more item from his robes, a small bronze scroll case. "This is for Karl, a reward from the Gods for his previous assistance." Orthos explained.

Karl placed a hand on the scroll tube, expecting Orthos to hand it over, but the Dragon kept a hold of it, and information began to flash in Karl's vision.

[Random Class Skill Acquired]

[Core Skill Tree Selected]

[Tier 3 Taming Ability: Skill Merger] The Beast Master Has a chance to create new skills by combining Shared Skills.

"You look like you got something good." Orthos commented as he took the scroll case back and put it in his inventory.

"Indeed. It upgraded one of my Class Skills. With some practice, I might be able to adapt some of the skills that I can already use, so they are more effective." Karl explained.

That was vague enough that it wouldn't sidetrack the conversation, but it was also true, so they couldn't accuse him of insulting the gift that the Beast Gods gave him.

He already had a few ideas on how skills might be used together to make something truly brutal. Bone Crusher, with its armour bypass, and Chain Lightning, with its stun and spreading damage, would be great together. But if he could learn to use Cara's Disintegration and combine it with Bone Crusher, the result would be nearly unstoppable.

Cara laughed in Karl's mind as she thought about the potential of a [Disintegrate] attack that simply ignored armour and barriers. That would be the greatest skill ever. She would call it [Slap] and she would use it on every enemy she met.

[Blend Eternal Lightning and Circle of Protection. That would be way better.] Thor suggested.

[Circle of Protection] wasn't a shared skill, but Thor thought that there should be a way around that. Maybe Karl just needed to upgrade his new Skill Merger ability.

[We need to teach you to use new skills. If you could blend Bodyguards with Ghost Beast, we could just go straight after the good food and shiny stuff.] Remi suggested.

[Or Golems with Bone Crusher.] Rae suggested. [Alright, I get the point, you all want me to learn new skills so that I can make overpowered combinations. I will work on it. Maybe now that Skill Master upgraded, I will have an easier time learning more of your skills.] Karl agreed.

Hawk nodded in agreement. [If you could combine the extra beasts with all the attack skills, they could be real team members. We could teach Remi's bodyguards to use proper magic, like fireballs.]

Hawk was getting better at putting [Flaming Body] on other people, but he had a point. If the summoned Naga Warriors could hurl fireballs, or create extra totems, they would be even better.

This gift was going to be a lot of work.

Chapter 467 Sparring

Orthos cleared his throat to get Karl's attention. "We will send you as close as possible to the destination tomorrow morning. There is still time before the anomaly opens, and you won't want to be standing around waiting for it. Is there anything that you need to make your preparations for the trip?"

Karl still had far too much prepared from the last time he had help preparing for a trip, and most of his inventory was filled with stuff he had gotten from the Elves. He had supplies for every conceivable situation already, so Karl shook his head.

The others did as well, as they had been prepared at home for an extended mission, in case they were stuck along the border for weeks trying to make a deal.

"Alright, then you have the day to yourselves. Do as you wish, just try not to cause trouble for others, they do have duties to attend to."

Orthos clearly considered the conversation to be finished, but some of the other Elders were intrigued by Karl's training skills, and eager to see what he was going to do next.

"Why don't we all go help the older students today? I worked with the young children yesterday, but there is still a group about to take up official duties that could use some practice with their skills."

And, of course, Karl was hoping that he might pick up one or two of them if he tried hard enough.

That wasn't a possibility with the youngest ones, they barely understood the skills themselves. But the older ones were close to fully grown beasts, so they should have a good understanding of their skills, and they would be trying to advance it to speed their progress through the ranks.

Like Thor and Rae, most Divine Beasts finished growing in body long before they stopped growing in power. The Dragons were an exception, as they never stopped growing, and some weaker species reached peak power before adulthood, but those were mostly considered wild beasts or monsters, not Divine Beasts with intelligence.

The older trainees were mostly in beast form today when Karl reached the training field, though there were a few half-breeds whose natural form was demihuman. Transformation was a skill that he would love to teach the team, but he could feel that it was Holy Magic from their Beast God clerical symbols.

Other than Remi, it was unlikely that any of the others would be able to use that right now, if ever, as they weren't exactly devout followers, much less ordained clerics. But there was zero chance that Karl would be able to steal the skill and teach it to them.

The bias between beasts and beastkin was eminently clear at this stage. The beastkin had mostly fallen behind in advancement and were relegated to the role of assistants, while the beasts were pushing to improve their power.

A winged wolf turned to nod at Karl as he approached, then smirk at Lotus with his tongue out.

"I thought that we would help you all with your skills today. You have gotten skilled at fighting each other, as you live and train together every day. So, today you can train with me and one of my teammates. We will give you pointers on improving your skills, as well any mistakes that you might be making in strategy." Karl explained, then turned to the team.

"Who wants to volunteer to help?"

Dana smiled and nodded. "I will. I have barriers, so I shouldn't be injured too badly."

Karl smiled and patted her on the shoulder, then took off the damage reduction bracelet he had gotten from the bandit leader. "Here, wear this. It will make training much safer." He whispered.

All of the beasts here were in the late Awakened and early Ascended Ranks, so they shouldn't overcome the base damage reduction of the amulet without going way overboard on their sparring. But learning to fight against a humanoid mage would be a change from a bunch of beast clerics fighting each other.

Fighting Karl was more similar to sparring each other, but he could use skills to cheat and keep things interesting.

There was a constant buzzing in his mind as Karl prepared to go to the sparring ring to find his first target, and he realized that Remi was meditating and chanting. She was trying to teach him how to use [Bodyguards]. When she said that she wanted to see what they could do with some enhancement, she wasn't joking.

Karl focused Skill Master between them, and he could actually feel the knowledge of how to call bodyguards flowing into his mind. It was a racial ability of the Naga Queen, and one of the easiest to learn to share. At least for Remi.

Dana picked her opponent first, a Moor Cat whose shoulders were the same height as her own.

For Moor Cats, it was still half grown. But it would be a good matchup, as they were both fast-moving combatants. The Cleric in charge put a golden barrier over them both, both for defence and to indicate who was the winner. The first barrier to break lost.

Karl focused on learning [Bodyguards] as the fight began, and Dana flipped through the air to avoid a leap by the Moor Cat. Her blade flashed down, and the beast twisted to avoid having its back slashed open, then leaped straight sideways to avoid a barrage of magic missiles. Dana was holding back on the power, to the same low Awakened standard that everyone was using, but if the cat didn't figure something out quickly, it would be in trouble.

It didn't take long to realize that keeping a mage at a distance was a bad idea, and the Moor Cat used its Species Skill of [Silent Predator] to vanish from sight and silence its steps.

Dana only had a limited amount of detection ability, but she knew how to deal with invisible attackers.

She created a field of fog, which would let her see the disturbance as the Moor Cat moved, even if she couldn't clearly see the beast.

Claws raked her [Nullification Barrier] as she moved too late, but her blade caused a golden flash as she struck true before the Moor Cat could relocate.

The Winged Wolf transformed into a young man nearly Karl's age, wearing the plain grey robes of the beast clerics. "Fighting mages is tricky. Even invisible, they can still find you. Plus, she can fly. I can see that she's not using it as much to make the fight more fair, but she could be holding this entire fight from above and making Nala jump at her."

Karl nodded. "We're not here to discourage anyone, and flying targets are hard for anyone to deal with. Especially a Moor Cat cleric who doesn't have ranged attacks."

The wolf chuckled. "If I had ranged attacks, I would totally abuse them. But the flying species with ranged abilities train separately, and there is a whole class on how to deal with that."

"If you would like, I can convince Cara the Winged Void Badger to spar with you. If she doesn't use her ranged attacks, it should be a good learning chance." The wolf barked a laugh and shook his head. "Thanks, but I don't feel like getting beat up today. I can't fly without magic, and a Void Badger can nullify that and send me crashing to the ground."

Chapter 468 Bodyguards

The outcome of the first match was set from the start. After only a few minutes of fighting in the fog, Dana managed to hit the Moor Cat with a barrage of magic missiles, breaking its barrier and ending the match.

Dana ended her spells, and the cat transformed back to human form to pout.

"Mages are too dangerous in a fair fight." She complained.

Another beast, some sort of chimera with a mostly feline body, but tentacles on the sides and six legs, stepped up to challenge Dana.

They started off easy enough, with probing attacks. Then the beast seemed to split into three, and a surge of understanding flowed through Karl's mind. That skill was a solid illusion, but it was the same as the essence of the Bodyguards. Now he understood how they were supposed to be formed. But on the battlefield, Dana was having trouble. The clones seemed to shimmer in and out of existence, vanishing only to reappear, and under the effects of the skill, she couldn't tell which was the real one.

Even using wide area blade attacks wasn't having luck, and the beast had landed multiple hits on her shield already.

But Dana wasn't always missing. It only looked like it to her, thanks to the beast's illusion. So when Dana sent a flurry of attacks out at where she predicted the beast to be, then jumped to avoid its retribution, she was as surprised as everyone else when the match was called.

The illusions vanished, and the cat was revealed in a different spot than anyone had been seeing it, other than Karl, who could still see it with thermal imaging. Though, that might not be right. A few of the other beasts were looking smug, including one young dragon. Not many beasts saw heat, but those who did were much harder to fool with illusions.

If the cat was at Karl's level, it might have known how to hide fully, but this one was still young and mastering its skills.

"Monster Man, how would you deal with that?" The Wolf asked.

Karl smiled. "I can see her through the illusion."

The cat motioned for Karl to come prove it. She wasn't ready to accept that he could evade her skill.

Dana left the sparring ring, and Karl stepped in to take her place. He didn't take out a weapon, only nodded at his opponent. There was a split second of lag in her short range teleport when she attacked, and it telegraphed her movements perfectly.

The cat activated the illusion again without waiting for the clerics to bring up the barriers, and Karl smiled as it crept along the ground, looking to ambush him from the side as the three illusionary images approached and Karl remained perfectly still, as the cat hadn't moved out of his peripheral vision.

The illusions prepared to attack as the cat pounced, and Karl lifted a leg to spin himself horizontally to the ground, over the line of the strike. He caught the cat on the way by, then wrapped her back legs with his own and put an arm around her neck and forelegs to pet her head while she couldn't escape.

It took a second for her to release the illusion, she was so shocked at the turn of events.

The problem was that if she transformed to find out how he did it, he would still have her, and that would be even more embarrassing. Karl let her up after a second, and she shook the dust out of her fur before transforming to shout at him.

"How did you do that? It shouldn't be possible. You can't see a displacer beast through her illusion." She demanded.

"When you teleport, your butt wiggles, and it gives away both your timing and your target. That's how I knew to move. Also, for some of us with enhanced vision, we can still see you. Your illusion doesn't hide your heat signature."

One of the other beasts transformed into a human girl with long fox ears. "She still wiggles her butt when she attacks? She totally did that as a kid. Like a blink cat preparing to attack. It was adorable." She giggled.

"Shut up, I do not wiggle my butt. The Monster Man is messing with me." The displacer beast complained.

"If we can't beat him with illusions, maybe we can beat him with speed?" One of the others suggested.

"Or strength. He is higher rank, but he's still human." Another suggested.

Karl motioned them forward. "Why don't we test both theories? I should be able to keep track of two targets at once.

Actually, I have a better idea, you can test against my summons. That way I can give pointers."

The two beasts transformed. One into an Owlbear, and one into a massive scorpion nearly the size of Rae.

Karl focused on the [Bodyguard] skill and called forth the summons.

They weren't quite what he expected. Remi got blue Naga Warriors with black patterns similar to her own. Karl got a pair of Lamias with white scales, vibrant red hair and leather armour. They also only had two arms, not four as the Naga Warriors did. They were also smaller, not muscular warriors with thick chests, but slender females with an assassin's grace.

Of course, there was no such thing as a male Lamia, but some of them were large and muscular.

They were Commanders, which was startling to Karl. Remi's was Royal Rank, but for some reason his was a Rank weaker. He was sure he did the skill correctly, but the bodyguards weren't at the same standard.

But when the match started, Karl realized that they were an entirely different beast than the warriors. On their own, they activated a Royal Rank [Flaming Body] and attacked with [Rend], though they did cut the power of the attack.

[You screwed it up.] Remi complained.

[I have no idea how. I was certain that it was right, but it summoned Lamia instead of Naga.] Karl replied as he watched them fight the students.

[Maybe because he's human and it's a Naga skill? He got halfway in between.] Hawk suggested.

[You're just smug because they can use fire.] Remi informed him.

[Very much so, yes.]

The Lamia swayed on their lower body, enabling them to attack from rapidly changing angles. That mobility was offsetting both the damage of the stronger opponent and the faster one.

"Get closer. You're giving them too much room to evade. If you're nearly chest to chest, they can't sway far enough before your strikes land." Karl offered.

He could sense them rolling their eyes at him. If it were that easy, they would have already done it. The Lamia had swords covered in fire, and almost all beasts were instinctively afraid of fire. It made them want to shy away, not get closer.

But after some consideration, the trainees both came to the same conclusion. The body of a Lamia was more vulnerable than the chest. That was how they landed their first strikes. Just behind the ground contact point, where most of the bodyguard's weight was balanced.

Of course, they didn't make it out unscathed. But they did manage to land a strike, which was better than anyone before them.

The teacher stepped into the ring as they were about to retreat. "Try again. You've almost understood the concept."

Chapter 469 Comparisons

Karl watched the beasts fight with the two Lamia bodyguards, while Rae and Remi compared them to the bodyguards and Golems that they had.

It was hard to tell whose were the most deadly between Karl and Rae, as they both had [Offensive Optimization] available, and the Lamia had to hold back against the student beast.

But there was some argument over whether four arms with swords was better than eight legs, when only the front two were normally used to attack.

They wanted to test the theory, but they didn't want to give away their actual power level while they were still being observed by others. The beast clerics weren't bad sorts, at least not in the mind of the beasts, but they weren't part of the team.

[They told us the first day that you should always have a secret reserve of power that nobody else knows about.] Hawk reminded them.

Not So Evil Lady had said it very clearly.

The students training against the Bodyguards changed, and the pair of white Lamia tested them to their limits, making them improve their strategies in ways that the clerics hadn't thought of before, and use their skills and bodies in the most effective manners.

The teacher was impressed that the training could go so smoothly, and with Karl using Skill Master on both the students and his own beasts, everyone was making progress.

Most of the team couldn't use the skills that they were seeing, but there was hope that it would give them inspiration to more easily learn other skills that they were compatible with.

It was also valuable training for the team, as they had been fighting Giants for a while, and now they had the chance to watch battles with multiple body styles.

The Bodyguards had some combat skills, but at first, they lacked combat instincts. Even after practice, they were still lacking compared to a trained Elite, but the same was true of Golems, so Karl put the spell on the same general level.

Karl let them practice until lunch, when the older students went to their indoor training, which was more private, as it was church doctrine, and the humans weren't followers of the beast gods.

The cafeteria was busy at lunch, but Dana had many questions for Karl.

"When did you learn to use Bodyguards? Or are those Remi's? Plus, why can they use your skills?"

"I honestly have no idea. Remi has never sent hers into combat yet, so I don't know if they can also use some of her skills. If they can use even one or two of her skills, they will be very dangerous. But mine came out as Lamia, and hers are Naga Warriors. It might be the form that determined the abilities.

But for the Lamia, their outfit looks more decorative, while for the Naga bodyguards, Bestial Raiment looks like it's actually making Epic Grade armour on them."

In his mind, Remi was trying not to laugh, which was making Hawk increasingly suspicious. [They can use Bestial Raiment and Tsunami.] She laughed.

Naga were a water element monster by nature, so it made sense that the warriors would be able to use one of her water type skills. Hawk sighed in resignation. He knew that was coming, and he was beginning to accept that his little sister didn't fully appreciate the wonder that was fire magic.

"So, now between you, you can have six summoned constructs? That's a bit unfair." Dana sighed as she did the mental math of his combat power.

Karl shrugged. "Many things with the Elites are simply unfair. Even Morgana, who is incredibly capable now, had to extensively tattoo her own body to get to a point where she felt safe in combat. Speaking of which, I should see if she can help me out with some of those the next time we meet. But I learned something while I was back in time. The class that you start with wasn't always the one you had to stay with. When you gained enough power, you could try to modify your class through advancement. We all went through the First Advancement Trail, but I don't know if any of us managed to upgrade. We all got some good rewards, but as for actually upgrading our classes, I don't think we can know if it happened until the System is active enough to give you your Skill Tree or a full Status report."

The others nodded, and Karl saw them silently trying to bring up both, just to see what they found. They didn't manage to pull up a skill list, but they all had a detailed status that described their abilities.

Orthos sent a cleric to join them as they were finishing their meals. "I have a map for you and details of the mission.

The anomaly will appear forty kilometres straight north of the town of Halsearing. Unfortunately, the monsters monitor for portal openings, in case of invasion. So, we will bring you to the human controlled port at Lutonade. I suggested Penbeck, which is held by tribal trolls, but it would add hundreds of kilometres to your journey.

The issue is that Lutonade is a pirate port, known as a stopover for slave ships headed overseas. It is not a friendly place, and travelling with any females, much less with so many young and healthy ones, makes you a target.

The third safe option is to bring you to the wilderness at the Charham River Delta. It's a safe spot for Portals, but it's a swamp, and you would have to travel three hundred kilometres through the wilderness, or eighty kilometres north to get to the nearest village outside the swamp where you could get on a road." He explained.

He motioned to all the spots on the map, and other than the pirate and slaver issue, Lutonade seemed like the best option.

But tempting slavers when they had a mission to complete didn't seem like a great idea.

The road from Penbeck was a large loop, skirting the swamp, and would be over seven hundred kilometres of travel to make the three hundred kilometres of direct travel.

"Would slavers actually attack Dragon Clerics?" Lotus asked.

That was generally considered taboo among all the human nations on the continent. Kidnapping a dragon cleric brought nothing but bad luck.

"The other continents don't hold to that standard, so the slavers from Newbon don't care who they grab. They'll just claim that they're random commoners when they auction them. We've even had them try to auction transformed beasts who were drugged so they couldn't shift back."

Karl could only imagine how much of a mess that would have been when the drugs wore off and the beast shifted back. Buying a docile human or beastkin slave was a very different level of risk than a pissed off dire bear in the living room.

Dana pointed further up the road. "It says that there are docks at Hatbury. It's also a bit further and the road runs past Lutonade, but that should be better than showing up in the city."

The cleric looked at the reports. "Yes. That should be possible. That town is about half human, a trading camp between human fishermen and the Orc and Demon Tribes that live inland."

Their plan looked like it should be viable if they appeared at Hatbury, and the cleric was sure they could safely appear there. The only concern was that they would still have to cover over four hundred kilometres in three days with the added distance to Hatbury.

Or, they could make it slightly shorter than the road route from Lutonade and go east through the wilderness. That was mostly Orc territory, with some nomadic demon tribes in the region. Both could be quite troublesome, but they didn't usually come near Halsearing, the closest town to the anomaly, as it was largely populated by Minotaurs, who were highly territorial.

"I think that we might be best going down the road. At least we know that it is regularly travelled. We can bring out Thor and the Golems, and travel like a caravan. With the beasts, I don't think that we will be anyone's top targets to attack.

The outfit that Rae made me also looks much like one for a Rogue or assassin, which blends with the magical fighters of the other human nations." Dana suggested.

"Alright, so a rogue, a warrior, two clerics and myself with Thor and the Golems? That sounds like a reasonable group." Karl agreed.

"Bring out the Bodyguards from Remi as well. They should be able to keep up with Thor at a jog, and Naga actually belongs here. Maybe not in that region, unless it's swampy, but we can say that we came from the swamps or are going to them." Tessa suggested.

The beast god cleric looked intrigued. "That could work. The swamp starts not far from the road, and runs from this river here to the Charham River. Most of your journey will be next to the swamp, so it wouldn't be out of character for Naga Warriors to accept a guard contract.

It's a shame that you're only bringing two of them, but your group has other guards. Most would think that you were escorting the clerics."

"I don't suppose that you have a wagon that we could purchase for the trip? Thor likes to pull wagons, and we could put the ladies all inside, so it would be me plus monsters and golems visible." Karl suggested.

"We can get one. There is a portal nearby, and they can bring one from the cities. It won't be cheap, though."

Karl took out ten Gold coins from his inventory.

"Will this cover it?"

The cleric pushed half of the money back. "Not that expensive."

"Thank you for taking care of that for us. It will save us a lot of trouble to look more like average travellers. Well, as average as we can with Thor pulling the wagon."

"I can arrange for some horses, if you would like." The beast god clerics offered.

"No, the part about having Thor pull it is not negotiable. He would be too disappointed if we brought in new beasts just to prevent him from pulling the wagon."

The transformed beast chuckled. Thor did seem like the sort that would enjoy pulling a cart all day.

For a few minutes, everyone examined the map, trying to guess as much as they could about the route, and any detours that they might have to take in order to get to the anomaly on time.

Karl gestured at the direct route across the rural areas. "From what it looks like, even if we have the open wilderness, we should be alright. None of this is mountainous or forest, at least not on the north side of the road, where we will be looking for the anomaly.

We've got the coordinates, but once we get close, it will just be a guessing game until we actually see and activate the device to keep the anomaly stable.

The only issue is that we have no idea what is actually there for the inhabitants. With nomadic tribes making up most of the monsters, I guess it makes sense that you can't pin them down on a map." The cleric smiled at Karl's frustration. "Well, we have some intelligence on the numbers of the Orc Clans, but

they have hundreds of camps over the thousand kilometres east of the coast, all the way north to our borders."

"There are that many Orcs? Then why don't they call it an Orcish Empire?" Dana asked.

"Because the Orcs aren't interested in being responsible for anything, or eliminating the other monster species. If they did that, they wouldn't have anyone left to fight with. That would be a disaster for them.

So, they're happy to let the cities and even the villages full of other species live, while they plant random fields on their migration routes so that there is food everywhere that they go.

They don't even eliminate the Goblin tribes, and everyone finds the Goblins annoying, filthy scavengers. The Orcs get along well enough with the demons, since the species both love to fight and have a sense of honour. How much do you know about Orcish battle customs?" The cleric asked.

"Enough to know that they like to assign someone to count kills so that nobody makes up fake kill counts to brag." Karl shrugged.

The others turned to stare at him.

"What? I met with some while I was out. They're quite interesting. Or, they were ten thousand years ago."

Bishop Misty came to join them at the table. "Things have changed for the Orcs since then. When the system collapsed, so did large parts of their culture that were based on it. They're much less civilized now, but the basics are still intact.

They love to fight for the smallest reasons, but they still have the same code, and they don't attack children or noncombatants."

"Noncombatants?" Lotus asked.

"If you stand back of the fight and wait to heal your side after the fight finishes, they won't attack you. The War Clerics wouldn't get away with it, but Nature Clerics are notoriously flaky."

Lotus sighed. "How did we get such a horrible reputation even here? You follow the beast gods, the fans of all things feral."

"You cuddled an immortal Temporal Dragon this morning instead of going to breakfast."

Then, you had to snack during morning training because you were dizzy from hunger."

The others nodded and Lotus shrugged. "That's not flaky, that's just priorities. Time schedules are not part of nature. When you are safe, you should be able to sleep as much as you want and then eat, not rush off to training."

While they were talking, the guards at the temple were already working to get the plan in order to help them get to the anomaly. It was vital that it was stabilized, so they were doing their best to prepare whatever the team needed.

That included some fake trade goods to load in the wagon because nobody travelled with an empty wagon, even if their primary goal was to move people.

Orthos came in to meet with them when the wagon had arrived, and he was satisfied with it.

The guards had loaded bolts of linen into the wagon, which were a trademark of one of the northern human nations, and only valuable within Newbon. Everywhere else, linen was among the cheapest options.

The wagon was on the small side for a merchant wagon, but big enough to do the job, and there were side platforms for guards. They could put Golems or something on there, so that bandits knew the wagon was protected.