

Beast Master 471

Chapter 471 Travel Plans

Karl looked over the wagon with satisfaction. "What is the plan to get us there? Will you just open a portal at the edge of town? Or perhaps at the docks and pretend that we unloaded from one of the ships?" He asked.

"We were going to deliver you just outside of town. You can act as if you came down through the beast nation, or used the trade port at Hitchbird and then had your crew deliver you to the beach. The docks at Hatbury are good for small fishing boats, but not for the sorts of large transport that could be moving a wagon. I would say that you could claim to have come from inland then south from Picheap, but there is no road south of Picheap and both are fishing villages, so a cross-country trek to gather fish makes no sense. You would have taken the goods back inland.

Picheap is a deepwater port, so you could have gotten the linen there, but the route still makes no sense, as Lutonade is right there." The Dragon explained.

"So, we claim to have come ashore on the beach for the safety of the ladies, if we do have to answer questions, and then we get going?" Karl confirmed.

"Stop and grab dried fish in Hatbury. Having some of it visible at the top of your cargo will also make them less likely to attack as you pass Lutonade. They have plenty of fish of their own, even if the fish are cheaper in Hatbury.

Bandits are resourceful, so don't try too hard to hide your team members. They will think that you have something valuable tucked away. I would have the ladies switch to their most tattered robes and get them dirty before leaving. Nobody washes clothes during a journey, the dirt helps insulate against the cold night air." The guard who brought the wagon insisted.

"That makes a lot of sense. We don't want them to realize that it's a pair of high priestesses. Two junior Priestesses with their guards, plus the wagon driver and the security Naga should be good enough."

The guard nodded. "If you have more golems, have them run behind the wagon, to guard from the back. It's standard practice.

Plus your curly one will likely be mistaken for a Spellsword anyhow. They dress like rogues, but they're much more dangerous. It's safer for bandits to assume that the rogues might be using magic."

Karl smiled as he realized that it wasn't just his team that had problems with the common tongue when it came to people as individuals.

"They wouldn't be far from right. Dana did train with the Magic Knights so that she would have better close combat skills than the average mage."

Of course, she also had received powerful blade skills as well. But the beasts had already seen a bit of that during training and there was no reason to tell them that it was a System gifted set of bonuses.

Orthos nodded in satisfaction. "That team composition works out perfectly. Two clerics, two pretend bodyguards, and the wagon team. That makes it much more believable than one cleric with an overpowered bodyguard team.

The church wouldn't shell out the money to get a team that powerful, and they wouldn't rely on a local trade wagon to be the guards for a travelling high cleric. More likely, they would open a portal close to the target and then deal with the response directly.

We're trying to avoid that this time, so neither of our nations is linked to the Anomaly becoming stable."

"Alright, then we have our plan and cover story. Two Dragon Clerics with a merchant team. That should be enough to not start any strange rumours. The massive Cerro pulling the wagon will draw some attention, but they do have Cerro herds in the region, so it's not completely outlandish, other than the fact that you tamed one." Orthos chuckled.

"Should we head out early for the extra distance. Or is it better to go there just after dawn and push through the day to get as far as possible?" Karl asked.

"I would go in the morning so that they don't have time to send a runner to warn bandits and slavers that you're coming. They might have magical communications, but you can't prevent that. Staying overnight in hostile villages is dangerous."

Staying in the wilderness was dangerous as well. But at least they had a chance that outsiders wouldn't find their camp, and now they had multiple guards who could be up all night.

With the Golems and the Naga in place, the wagon should be safe enough for the evening, and Karl would have Rae remake the tarp cover for it so that they would have the luxury of arrow - resistant Royal Rank silk.

It might not make a fully armoured wagon, but it would make ambushes less deadly, which would give the team members inside more time to react.

There was one skill that Karl wished he had, and that was the ability to hide his active barriers.

He wasn't certain that was possible, but if he could make it look like they had no active skills, they would be harder to detect from a distance. He wouldn't risk a team member for a bit of extra stealth, though. If they couldn't hide, it was better to seem like a target that shouldn't be attacked.

From what he had managed to learn so far, the danger level here should be lower than it was during his trip to the past. If they had that many Monarch Rank monsters and that much territory, they could have taken over the continent.

So, it was more likely that they would come across Ascended and Commander Rank monsters in groups.

That should be something that they could handle. Most monsters had limited magic, so there was little chance of them being ambushed with an area attack. But pure numbers could bring down even the mightiest.

"Bishop Misty, what are the chances that other groups will be sending teams toward the Anomaly based on visions from their Oracles?" Karl asked.

"Not until after it opens. That is why you must get there at just the right time. Anomalies are strange things, you can't see them with predictive magic until they have already happened. So, as long as you arrive before anyone else discovers the exact location, or within the first few hours, you should be able to stabilize the anomaly without anyone seeing you do it.

If that fails, I suggest that you go in and stabilize it from the other side. You will be separated from the others, and while it will be a fight to get in, once you do, there will be no way to prove that you were responsible, even if they do suspect that you had something to do with it.

I suggest that you blame the strongest magic user in the area. That is my favourite way of passing the blame."

The Temporal Dragon had a good point. Do what you could in secret, blame someone else for the rest. Karl could do that. In fact, the more people who showed up near the same time that he did, the easier it would be to deflect the blame when the Anomaly stabilized.

It was just a shame that they would all be fighting to be the first to get inside. The restrictions on portals into foreign nations clearly went on vacation when it came to dungeon type anomalies.

Chapter 472 Why That Order?

Karl finished writing out contingency plans, and making a duplicate of the map, along with some additional notes, in case they had issues along the way.

Unfortunately, they didn't have a topographical map of the area, which would make it easier to find their way by landmarks, but Bishop Misty had managed to describe the area where the Anomaly would appear with decent accuracy, so Karl was reasonably certain he would recognize it even if they arrived early.

"Alright, that should be everything that we need to be ready for the morning trip. What's the time difference between here and there?" He asked.

"About an hour. You have time for breakfast, and you'll still arrive outside town as if you packed up camp at dawn."

That was good enough. Now, they had a whole afternoon to kill, and all of the students were in proper classes.

"Hey, why do you have them train in the morning and then do classes all afternoon? The Dragon Church does it the same way, but I never knew why." Lotus asked.

"It's because children are hyper, and you need to wear them out so they sit still for more than ten minutes at a time. Once they've finished training and all their muscles are sore, they're happy to sit and listen to lectures before evening training after dinner." Orthos chuckled.

"Oh, that makes sense. Feed them, then make them sleepy." Lotus looked like she had just learned a truth of the universe, even if it were one that everyone else had figured out years earlier. Of course, she was so bad at keeping to a schedule that it might not have registered with her like it did for everyone else. One of the many side effects of being a nature cleric.

So, after dinner, that was precisely what Karl and the others did. The evening training was shorter, more for physical fitness for the beasts than for training. It was great for burning energy, and turning the run into a game of tag and chase around the crude track through the area around the temple kept everyone running and not slacking off.

Keeping up with the beasts was impossible for most of Karl's team. But in Dire Bear form, Ophelia could do it, and Dana had movement skills to make it a bit more even, while Karl relied on overwhelming strength to make up for the lack of agility that the beasts had.

"How is that fair? He can run through the trees just because his legs are too strong." One of the Fox type beasts complained.

They were still faster than Karl, but he was nearly impossible to catch because he would use trees as a launch pad and not hit the ground for dozens of metres at a time.

Compared to that, Ophelia was much easier to catch, and she wasn't as fast. But if she caught you, she was impossible to dodge. It was like someone threw a house at you, she was just too large to avoid.

The kids were quickly exhausted from the evening practice and off to the showers before bed, just as planned.

The same was true of Karl and his group. They were ready to shower and sleep as soon as they were back in, despite the fact that it was only just getting dark.

The natural cycle of the beasts was that of the sun and moon, so when it got dark, they slept, unless that was their time to hunt.

Karl came out of the shower into his room and found Bishop Misty in the room again with a mischievous smile on her face.

"I take it you liked the warmth?" Karl joked.

"It's not bad. I even got to sleep in with a small cleric last time. But technically, I am your security guard. If it wasn't me, it would be one of the other High Priests. The humans aren't a real threat, but you could be." She replied with a shrug.

"Ah, so instead of posting a guard outside the room, they just assigned one to share the dorm, in case I got ideas about doing something crazy like letting Remi run around with a toddler in her arms again."

That made the Dragon laugh. "I think the protocol is for situations more dangerous than an excited Naga Queen. Your class makes you a lot more relaxed around us than any other human I've met. Even your teammates are constantly on edge, and one of them is practically a beast herself. Being around this many predators should cause an instinctive defensive reaction, but you're missing that. It is fascinating. Other than you and the suicidal insane sorts, only apex predators such as the Dragons and Gryphons are usually missing it."

As she talked, her form shrunk from close to Karl's height, to less than one hundred fifty centimetres. She was wearing robes the same colour as her white scales, and she climbed into her bed while staring at Karl.

Karl smiled at the fascinated Bishop. "I wonder if it's a side effect of having beast minds linked with mine? I have been informed a few times that I'm slowly becoming more bestial. Considering the personalities of my team, and the way that I hear their voices, perhaps you could consider them a substitute for my conscience?" He suggested.

"A Bloodbath Spider as the voice of reason in your mind? I can see how that would make you seem a bit less human."

Rae laughed. [If she thinks you're bad now, just wait until Cara gets comfortable.]

The dragon smirked, and Karl gave her a suspicious look.

"You can hear them, can't you?" He asked.

"Not exactly. I can't hear them in their separate space, but I can hear your thoughts, which means that I hear when they talk to you."

That made sense. Nobody else had been able to detect or interact with the separate spaces, and her powers were time-based, which shouldn't be a hard counter to his system skills.

"Alright. I will see you in the morning. But I do have one request, in case you're too busy to tell you tomorrow. If you plan to send me through time again, give me some warning, would you? That was supremely confusing."

Misty laughed and gave him a thumbs up, before pretending to be asleep.

Tomorrow was going to be a long day, so he should likely get as much sleep as he could.

Chapter 473 Arriving in Hatbury

The next morning, Karl woke up much warmer than expected.

Cara had come out to sleep in the open, draped across his chest, and Lotus was on Karl's other side in the small single bed, doing her best to hug the Void Badger.

The fact that she had not chosen the dragon was surprising, but perhaps new creatures won out over dragons in Lotus' mind.

It was a mystery how she had gotten in, as Tessa normally kept her from wandering, but at least she would be up on time today, and she wouldn't try to keep sleeping if Karl moved Cara back into her space for breakfast.

The sun was just coming up, so it was almost time to start getting ready. Karl shifted so that Lotus was holding Cara, who sniffed delicately then opened one eye to see where Karl was going. He was the one with the food, he wasn't allowed to escape while she was sleeping.

She knew that she could just return to her space for food, but it was ingrained in her instincts not to let him get out of her sight.

The cleric made food, but she made Thor's favourite flavours, not Cara's. Cara could eat almost anything, from vegetables to magical items, but roasted meat tasted the best.

Once Karl was showered, Cara dragged Lotus out of bed, pulling the drowsy cleric into the shower before turning the water on.

It was a warm tiny waterfall, and Cara greatly enjoyed the water, so she was startled when Lotus began to splutter and curse as she was soaked.

[If she just took her clothes off, she would be fine.] Cara grumbled as she jumped and flapped around the cramped confines of the shower stall.

"What are you doing, crazy woman? I was sleeping." Lotus complained.

"Cara says it's time to get up. Also, to take off your clothes while you are in the water." Karl informed them from the bedroom.

From her bed, Misty laughed. "I see that you've found an assistant to get your most reluctant team member moving in the morning."

Karl chuckled. "She's not the most reluctant, it's just that Ophelia understands that coffee will make everything better, so she powers through."

Lotus and Cara came out a few minutes later, both freshly towel dried and smelling like some sort of minty shampoo.

Cara was very pleased with herself. Having someone to shampoo your fur was pure luxury on a level that she had never experienced. Lotus could even get to the spots that Cara couldn't reach by herself.

She was going to have to make this a regular thing.

Unlike Rae, she wasn't big enough to run around with her personal human on her back. She still had some growing left, but she wouldn't even get to the size of a wolf with short legs, there was no way that she could carry a human on her back unless she got much larger.

It did sound fun, though. If she was big like Thor, but with wings, she could fly into combat with Karl and they could dive bomb enemies.

That seemed like a pretty good goal to Cara. Even Rae approved, as she was learning to enjoy dropping large rocks on things from above.

Breakfast was a quick meal, and then the guards at the portal location south of the Temple were ready to send the group on their merry way.

The wagon that the clergy had obtained had long steps on the side, so Remi called her bodyguards onto them, while Thor waited for Karl and Rae to get him hooked up to the wagon. Dana's Golems were summoned to jog along behind the wagon, and everyone else took their seats inside, while Rae created a secondary tarp of strong silk for protection.

"Alright, that looks like we've got everything that we need to get started. Where will the portal bring us?" Karl asked as he took the driver's seat.

"It will deposit you at an empty pull off five kilometres north of town. We have had our members monitoring it, and it was clear all night. Good luck, I hope you get the anomaly stabilized without anyone having to take drastic actions." The gate guard informed them in a dry voice.

Karl nodded and led the team through the prepared portal, then turned Thor south down the road beside the camp site.

"Dana, have the golems stomp around the area to make it look like someone stayed here last night. Then we will head out."

The Golems quickly worked their way around the area with the assistance of the Lamia Warriors. That should be enough to make it appear that they actually stayed the night if someone came along behind them.

Chances are it would never matter, but it was better to cover all the bases.

Then Karl remembered that he had missed one important item on his checklist. He had forgotten to fully activate everyone's system, the way that the old items did for Orthos.

First, he focused on Dana's wrist, where the bracelet was dangling. If it was properly equipped and not just worn, it would have adapted to her wrist size. Fortunately, it only took a moment of focus to get it to equip on her, and then Karl moved on to the others.

"Ophelia, trade me your Giant Strength Ring. I have another for you that might be better, but should also activate more of your System abilities." He explained.

They made the trade out of Cara's collection, and then Karl went hunting for cleric compatible items as Ophelia equipped the ring.

Thor had the answer. Gold chains that had been soaking in his pond. They weren't originally useful magical items, just decorative items that had been taken from the bodies of Bandits and Giants. But a quick inspection said that they gave a small bonus to Holy Magic now, in addition to the bonuses they originally had, so they should be equippable.

"Ladies, try these on. Courtesy of Thor."

The two clerics put on the necklace, then muttered the word "Status".

"Yes, that worked perfectly. I have all sorts of information about myself now. There are still a few greyed out buttons, but almost everything works." Tessa explained.

"Wonderful. Items that were brought back from the past still have a strong dose of the System's power on them, and they can finish awakening the System of people now. Or at least, as much of the System as can be resurrected." Karl explained.

"We will see if there are more useful bits available to us now. Hopefully, we can do something with this new ability. That must be why everyone was so excited about a stable dungeon." Tessa replied.

"Exactly. Elites who awaken in the Dungeon apparently have their power capped to the level of the dungeon, at least if they're human, but that might not apply to monsters and beasts who grow in power naturally. For them, the System is just bonus powers, a pure cheat when they were already powerful."

The ladies considered what Karl had said as they got on the road, keeping to a pace that was a jog for the Golems so that they could overtake Thor if they needed. The Naga Warriors kept a close eye on the fields around them as the wagon left the trees, but the area looked clear, and they could see the ocean in the distance, along with a small village.

Hatbury wasn't as small as Karl had expected. It held about a thousand people, and was built between two small bays, so they had docks on both sides of town. It wasn't an impressive place, made with simple field stone buildings, but they should be sturdy, and wouldn't rot in the humidity from the ocean.

The village wasn't built at the end of the landmass, instead they had a number of fields between them and the ocean, as a defensive measure against invasion from the inland side.

That told Karl a fair bit about the region, if the lessons that Sergeant Rita had made him memorize were right. He might have only taken a crash course on tactics, but knowing nothing about the conventions and customs of war was working out well for him, as his first instinct about threats was usually right.

Hawk took off into the sky to scout for them, and immediately started sending back annoyed messages. [Are they joking here? The town can see them there in the open grass, and they're still going to try to set up a checkpoint? Hobgoblins don't even taste good. But when did they get smart enough to operate a checkpoint? Oh, there is a pair of Ogres overseeing them.] The angry bird relayed.

"It looks like we've got some monsters setting a checkpoint ahead. There is no actual cover, so we're going to do this the quick and dirty way." Karl explained to the rest of the team.

"Can we just go around? It's not like we actually need the dried fish from the village." Dana suggested.

"That is a good point. Hawk says the strongest of them is a Commander, though. They might not bother us if I don't drive right through them. They are just on the road, I can go around and still get to the village." Karl agreed.

Tessa laughed. "You think they're not going to do anything if you just drive twenty metres away from them through the grass?"

Karl shrugged. "They might, or they might not. That depends on how smart they are."

Ophelia smirked at him. "This sounds like an excuse to kill Goblins and Ogres with a clean conscience."

"Oh, I don't need an excuse for that."

Chapter 474 Clear the Checkpoint

Karl directed Thor to move off into the grass, away from the road where the monsters had set up rocks and a fallen tree to block the way.

There were no ditches to the dirt road, and it was in open grassland. There was nothing stopping them from going around, but it didn't bode well for the monsters' intelligence.

Fortunately, or perhaps unfortunately for them, the hobgoblins and their Ogre overseers were not stupid enough to miss the fact that Karl was driving a wagon past them only a hundred metres away in an open field.

They lacked any sort of organization as they charged across the field, shouting and waving their weapons.

In the distance, Hawk noted that the guards from town came out when the monsters had started shouting, then went back in when they realized that the monsters were headed away from town.

So, either they didn't have the manpower to deal with a small group of bandits, or they simply didn't care, and assumed that travellers would handle it.

"Real meat!" The Ogre shouted, brandishing his crude stone blade at Thor.

The craftsmanship was childish at best, but the edge was jagged and looked sharp enough, while the stone gave off an aura of magic from its monstrous wielder.

"Well, it looks like they're not just toll collectors. I suppose that we should do something about them." Karl joked as he instructed Thor to stop the wagon.

[I'll send the bodyguards.] Remi agreed, as the two Naga Warriors headed forward to meet the incoming attackers.

[Didn't you make three of them the first time?] Rae asked as she watched the warriors rapidly moving through the grass.

[The last one is mine. My bodyguard.] Remi pouted.

Karl chuckled at her attitude. If she wanted to keep one in reserve so it was close to her, that was her call. Now that she wasn't just a small snake, she would be coming out to fight when there was real danger.

They hadn't even sent Dana's golems, which were guarding the wagon, much less Rae's. So nobody was too worried about the situation or the lack of one bodyguard.

The Ogres were only Commanders, while Remi's bodyguards were Royal Rank, and the Hobgoblins were just Awakened Rank monsters.

They started the fight from ten metres away with a [Tsunami] attack, which created a wall of water that raced forward toward the attackers, and sent the Hobgoblins tumbling along the ground as their bones were crushed by the tumbling water.

The Ogres fared a little better, by meeting the wall of water with a counterattack that negated most of the power. But they were still hopelessly outmatched, and immediately turned to run off into the wilderness.

"Let them run, they're not going to bother us anymore." Karl loudly announced, as if the Naga needed verbal commands.

The guards at the town wall were watching and listening. Karl didn't want to come across as a ruthless mercenary to them.

[Hawk, once they're out of sight of the town, kill them.]

Thor turned back to the road, on the other side of the barricade, and began to happily trot towards the town's fish market.

At the gate to their rather pathetic attempt at a town wall, which didn't even reach all the way across town, the guards stopped the wagon to do their checks.

"What's your business here?" The guard demanded, his scarred face twisted in what might have been disgust, or possibly just nerve damage.

"We have come to buy some dried fish for a buyer in Halsearing." Karl replied in a bored tone.

"Not a big wagon you've got, with those passengers." The guard replied.

"Big enough. I only need a hundred kilos of dried fish."

The guard nodded and waved them through while glaring suspiciously at the Naga on the side running boards.

It looked like the swamp monsters weren't particularly welcome, even when they were accompanying humans into town, but nobody tried to stop them.

Karl stopped the wagon and climbed down in front of a stall that had a large amount of dried fish hung up and bundled. There were others, but most of the shops sold fresh or frozen fish, not dried. Drying changed the flavour, and it was better for long-distance travel than general consumption.

"How much for a hundred kilos?" Karl asked, getting straight to the point.

If it was close to buying bulk dried meat at home, converted to the worth of gold coins, it should be about three of the dungeon coins.

"Who are you? You want bulk prices, you should have a referral." The merchant replied, not even looking over his shoulder.

Karl put two gold coins and five silver ones down on the counter with a solid thump of jangling metal.

"I'm just a man with money. A hundred kilos of dried salmon worth." Karl replied, taking note of the predominant fish in the drying racks.

The merchant turned around, looking ready to tell Karl off. Then he saw the armour, and the money on the counter.

"Well now, if you knew the King, you could have just said so." The old man replied, looking at the money.

"But you don't know him well enough."

Karl put down five more silver coins, and the old man smiled. "I do believe I have a bundle weighed already."

The merchant was surprisingly strong for an aging human with no magical abilities. He managed to get the hundred kilo bundle up on the scale on the second try, and the gross weight came out perfect. That meant the actual fish weight was a bit low, and the last kilo or two was the canvas wrap and rope, but it was close enough for Karl.

The old man untied the bundle and Karl sniffed to make sure there was nothing else bundled in the middle of the salmon, then nodded in satisfaction.

"That will do just fine." He agreed, allowing the old man to tie the bundle back into a brick.

"Let me go get some helpers." The old man grumbled.

Karl shook his head and gestured for the old man to stay where he was.

"I've got them."

A gesture brought one of the Naga Warriors forward, and he easily hefted the bundle into the back of the wagon.

There was plenty of room with only four people in the wagon, and few other trade goods. Well, almost trade goods. What the beast clerics had procured for them was two kegs of cheap rum that had failed quality control at a local brewery. They were still strong alcohol, but not good alcohol.

"Are you selling goods here?" The merchant asked, with a nod toward the wagon.

He couldn't see in, but it was normal to both buy and sell at every stop.

"Nah, the last deal fell through, so all I have is two barrels of discount rum. Hardly fit for fishermen. They'll sell inland, though." Karl shrugged.

The old man chuckled. "Well, you're not a stupid one, stranger. I'll give you that. No sailor deserves cheap rum. But if you get some good stuff, stop in the next time you're through. Lutonade takes up most of the shipments, and it's becoming a right pain to get more than a pony keg here at a time."

Chapter 475 Overnight Stop

With the goods loaded, Karl was ready to leave for their next destination, but it seemed too fast to be in and out of town. They should at least look around at a few other spots, and not just stop in at one merchant and bolt like they were running from something.

So Karl didn't turn Thor directly around, he made a small loop through the surrounding streets to go by a fish and chips vendor and grab a bite to eat. They weren't hungry yet, but it would be the usual thing for a travelling merchant to do, even if they were in a hurry.

The vendor was happy to make an early morning sale just as he was getting the fryers heated for the day, and Karl left with plenty of food for the day, wrapped in crudely made straw paper.

It smelled delicious, and they had two healers with them, so once Karl had taste tested it for poison, everyone started a second breakfast.

The guards didn't even give them a second look as they headed south out of town and headed toward Lutonade. The road was little more than a well-worn wagon track, and didn't show much sign of improvement in the last few decades. The road north of town was better, so it was possible that the travellers in this area often split up to take other routes and avoid bandits.

That seemed like a good idea to Karl. If they went a bit inland of the current road, they would eventually meet up with the main road heading east. It was harder for bandits to guess how far you would be from the road, and if they had to come to you, the ambush was ruined. Karl's team was on the strong side for this continent, and even on the other one, he would be able to hold his own with a group like this. At the very least, they weren't a soft target or tempting to bandits who didn't have a death wish.

Karl led Thor off into the open grasslands, and kept him at a cautious trot, both for the sake of the passengers and the wagon itself. It was a good one, but it was still just a regular wooden wagon. If they abused it too hard, they did risk damaging it before they got where they were going.

That would be a nightmare for them all, and they would have to walk the rest of the way unless Lotus' magic could fix a wagon. It was good for growing and altering wooden things, so it was possible, but Karl didn't want to risk having to find out in the middle of nowhere with a broken wagon.

Fortunately, the ground was open grasslands, with only a few stands of trees, and they were able to make good time. Even at this pace, it would take almost all day to get past Lutonade, and they would still be uncomfortably close if they didn't detour further east.

So, any time that there was an obstacle, Karl led Thor to the east of it, getting further from the road which stayed close to the coast.

Just after the sun passed its zenith, marking midday, they found a pounded path that went southeast. There were no markers for where the tribal and nomadic villages were, but this looked like an entire army had passed by multiple times.

It hadn't crossed their path earlier, so at some point it must have turned, but it was going in generally the correct direction to avoid the pirate port. The only problem was that it might lead to an army camp, or a slaver village that wasn't marked on the map.

"Are we really going to follow the path of an army?" Dana asked as she realized what Karl was doing.

"It doesn't look fresh. See how the weeds are regrown? The path was used multiple times, but not in the last month or so. At least not by a full army. It might have been the path to and then from an attack." Tessa noted.

If that was the case, there was a fifty-fifty chance that they wouldn't come across anything because the target would have been destroyed or moved by now. The tribes in the area were all nomadic, they wouldn't stay in one spot that long during the summer, when they were mostly stocking food for the winter.

The pounded ground made it easier for Thor to drag the wagon along, and the ride became smoother for the passengers as the afternoon began to fade into evening. That was when they found the main road and turned east toward their destination.

Thor would do well enough in the twilight, and then Karl would stop for the night. It would not only be too suspicious to be moving at night, but it would put them too far ahead of schedule.

As it was, they were making better time than expected, so they didn't need to hurry tomorrow.

They were still in open grassland, without a hill in sight, when the sun finally went under the horizon.

"We will park beside the road tonight. We can start a fire if you'd like, and sleep in the wagon with the Naga and Golems on guard, with Rae watching the area. Chances are nothing will sneak up on us during the night, Hawk doesn't see anything close to us at all.

But if it does, we've got early warning covered."

The others just shrugged. They had confidence in Rae and her ability to find anything that might sneak up on them in the dark. She was the monster that every other monster was terrified of in the dark.

Karl parked, and the clerics went to gather what wood they could from a nearby stand of trees. They didn't need much, just a small fire to give them light while they ate. Everyone would be sleeping with barriers up and in their armour, so there wasn't much evening prep to be done.

Then they would use the extra wood to make a breakfast fire. That would be enough to get them all motivated.

"Where is everyone sleeping? The wagon isn't huge." Lotus asked.

Dana gestured to the floor. "I will stay here with you, and one other."

Ophelia gestured outside. "I am going to sleep in Dire Bear form. It's actually the most comfortable for sleeping outside."

Karl nodded. "That works, I will sleep under the wagon, as is customary for the driver. That means Tessa can stay with you and keep up our escort job appearances."

Lotus sighed and pulled out her bedroll. They had been spoiled for too long. But the three of them would be comfortable together in the wagon once they combined all three blankets.

Dinner was quick and silent, then the Naga Warriors took their places on either side of the fire, watching for threats coming down the road, while Dana's golems watched the back of the wagon, closest to the road, and Ophelia took a spot on the far side of the fire.

Her massive black form looked like a hill of fur when she was sleeping, and Karl could tell that Lotus was already regretting not volunteering to sleep on top of the bear.

Chapter 476 Pirates and Rogues

Karl set up his hammock between the wagon axles and stretched out for the evening. In his armour, he would be plenty warm enough, so there was no need for a blanket that would hinder his response time if they were attacked.

He had thought that they would have plenty of warning before anything reached them, but just before dawn, when a Portal suddenly opened in the camp, he only had a few seconds warning to roll out of bed and get his bearings before the first attackers were coming through, twenty metres away and creeping through the dark.

They must have thought that the Naga couldn't see them, even though Naga could see exceptionally well in the dark.

The reason why they were so confident became obvious when they Shadow Stepped behind the Naga warriors and tried to slit their throats silently.

If the Naga had been Ascended, or even regular Commanders, they would have died instantly. But they were Royal Rank, with Eternal Lightning barriers on them, and they were fast to respond.

Karl's whistle to bring everyone awake was followed by the sound of blades meeting blades, and the shouts of the rest of the fighters coming through the portal.

Ophelia was up within a second as she activated [Berserk Terror], her upgraded Rage skill, and charged at the pair of Minotaur that had just come through the portal.

While complex thought might escape the rampaging Dire Bear, battle tactics did not, and that was all she needed as she transitioned from slumber to war mode.

Karl took out his maul and swatted a wounded Rogue back through the portal with five stacks of [Bone Crusher]. If that wasn't enough to convince them that they had picked the wrong target, he wasn't certain that they were going to learn at all.

He wasn't certain what species was under that hood, but going by the sound the maul made, it wasn't one that could take that hit.

A small monster with long claws and neon green skin jumped at Karl, who caught it by the face and retaliated with [Chain Lightning], killing it instantly.

The corpse was unceremoniously tossed through the portal after the shattered Rogue, and Karl heard cursing from the other side.

That was Rae's cue, and her golems mutilated two targets instead of killing them, then threw them through the portal.

[Garbage disposal hole. Brilliant.] Cara laughed.

Her skills weren't well suited to leaving intact bodies, but she was happily helping Ophelia beat up Minotaurs.

Cara jumped on their backs and pinned their arms wide, disintegrating the back of their heads, while Ophelia tore them into little bite sized chunks, perfect for Hawk to roast.

[I like the bear lady, she's got that anger in her.]

The attackers still hadn't gotten to the wagon, at least not as far as Karl could tell, and the ones closest to him were in full retreat.

"You have five seconds to retreat before I put a Royal Rank Blizzard on the other side of that Portal and follow it up with a Meteor barrage." Karl shouted toward the portal, hoping that there was someone intelligent on the other side.

In response, a massive Monarch Rank Troll in plate armour under a long coat with a red sash crawled through the portal that was far too small for him to walk through.

"Who are you to threaten innocents?" He demanded.

"There are no innocents in a bandit camp. You made a mistake attacking my team. If you want any of your people to see tomorrow, I suggest you take the loss and go home."

The troll laughed and flexed his prodigious muscles. At four metres tall with skin like tree bark and a massive physique that said he didn't miss many meals, the leader of this group was an impressive specimen. But he was rapidly running out of teammates.

"Go back. I am going to teach this human a lesson about the pecking order." The troll demanded.

Karl smiled. "Everyone stand back. I think our new Trollish friend needs a little sense beat into him."

Karl stacked [Flaming Body] on his maul, set to explode on contact.

Trolls didn't do well with fire, and this one was about to have a very bad morning.

[Use Disintegrate. You should be able to do that.] Cara suggested.

It was the only Monarch Rank skill that they had at the moment, but Karl hadn't tried it yet.

The troll snorted in amusement as Karl switched out the fire for disintegration, and stacked it.

"You think that you can take me on without even using fire? Humans are more foolish than expected." He chortled, sending a deep rumbling laughter echoing through the area around the other side of the portal.

"I don't want to kill you. If you die too fast, you won't learn anything." The troll stepped to the side, giving them room to fight, away from the portal. But when he did, three more Monarchs came through, all dressed as Pirates, and all walking with the characteristic gait of someone who spent too much time at sea. Karl had seen it on the TV before.

They nodded to Karl, showing that they were here to watch, and weren't going to interfere. At least not yet.

Karl had the maul slung over his shoulder, but didn't even make it to his opponent's waist.

Plus, the Troll was using what looked like an entire tree as a club.

The monster made a "Come and get it" gesture, and Karl launched himself forward. The Troll must not have been expecting his speed because he was past its hand before the massive club had come around. His maul smashed into the Troll's chest, disintegrating a large chunk of the Troll's torso and dropping it to the ground, paralyzed.

But Karl didn't follow up, he just stepped back and recharged his maul as he waited.

The clearing was silent for a whole minute as the Troll regenerated, then got to its feet, letting the tattered remains of its clothes fall to the ground.

"Now, did you learn anything, or do I need to explain it to you one more time?" Karl asked.

The Pirates chuckled grimly as the club came crashing down on Karl.

He threw a punch up to block it, and the club shattered, along with Eternal Lightning. But Limited Invulnerability absorbed the rest of the damage, and Karl gave the maul a one-handed swing, taking one leg and most of the troll's pelvis off.

"Oi, old boy just Kraken Smacked a Forest Troll." One of the Pirates drawled with a mixture of shock and amusement. Karl couldn't tell whether that was intended as a personal insult about his age or not, but the Troll didn't think that they were funny.

The troll was panting when he finished regenerating his obliterated leg, and Karl waited for him to say something.

The healing was clearly taking a toll on his stamina, and the monster was in no fit shape to continue the fight.

"Look, you can give up and bugger off, or I can start using fire. What do you say?" Karl asked.

The troll glared at him for a few more seconds, then stomped off through the portal, leaving the group of Monarch Rank captains behind.

"Well done Boyo. Here, keep this with you, and the slavers won't touch you. Every Captain carries one, and I think that you've earned one, even if you didn't kill Trevor." The Pirate Captain was some sort of Demon with a long braided beard and three eyes on his head. Karl had no idea what that should be called, but the others all respected his opinion and didn't raise any arguments.

"Thank you. I do despise dealing with troublesome sorts before it is properly morning."

The Pirate laughed. "I don't know who hired you to escort the lovely ladies across the country, but they made a good call. Next time you're close to Lutonade Port, stop in and visit, we run supplies every few weeks. I'll set you up with something that pays better than dried fish."

Karl smiled. "Now we're talking. Nothing wrong with a bit of high-paying cargo now and then."

"And a Captain's word is his life." The demon agreed, then turned and walked through the portal with the others. It closed quickly once they were through, but not before Karl smelled the scent of terrified trolls and demons as the wind shifted. His threat to send them a Blizzard must have gotten through loud and clear.

Ophelia changed back into a Werebear and gave Karl a raised eyebrow look.

"And what exactly was your plan there? To just get in good with the Pirate Captains and let a murderous slaver leave?" She asked.

"We have things to do. It's almost morning now, and if I'd offed the boss, the rest of his team would have come through. Then we'd be stuck fighting them all morning, and we'd be late for our next stop."

"You're too soft." She insisted.

Karl turned to Cara and Rae for confirmation.

[He didn't look like he tasted good. Minotaurs taste good, but Trolls probably don't.] Rae replied.

Not exactly a helpful answer this time.

Chapter 477 Enemies At Your Back

Ophelia wasn't the only one unimpressed by Karl's choice. Dana also sighed and shook her head. "Now we have an enemy at our back that can use portals. That's going to make our whole trip dangerous."

"The other side of that portal was downtown Lutonade. I don't think that they have the luxury of following us around. Hawk can still see the city from high enough in the air. I think they just attacked because I made a mistake stopping this close."

They were still looking mad, so Karl raised his hands in defeat.

"If they attack again, I will leave no survivors." He relented.

Lotus frowned at him. "Why do I feel like the bad guy now?"

Tessa laughed. "Because there is no good answer to that situation. Killing them all brings more powerful ones and subordinates to avenge them, but leaving them alive puts an enemy at your back. I suspect that none of us will sleep particularly well until this is all over. But if they could easily grab prisoners from anywhere in the country, they would have emptied every village of its young girls by now. The slave trade is insatiable, and they want mostly women for breeding children that can be trained. They learned years ago that taking adult men is more trouble than it's worth."

[I want to smack more things with that hammer. Did you see how big of a hole it knocked in that Troll? That was awesome.] Cara added helpfully.

Karl smiled and reached down to pat her before realizing that the Void Badger was covered in blood.

[That's easy to fix. I just go in and out of my space, and I'm all clean. But I don't smell like soap anymore.] Cara replied, demonstrating as she spoke in Karl's mind.

Karl stroked her head and Cara made a happy noise before flying over to the cart. Lotus was good with a brush, and Cara wasn't sure that Karl even owned one.

"Well, we might as well get going. We've had enough trouble for one evening."

Karl packed up his hammock, back into his backpack in the storage bag in his inventory, and helped everyone into the wagon before hooking up Thor and taking his seat.

Thor got the wagon moving down the road, leaving behind a blood soaked patch of grass as a warning to others that the campsite was not a safe one.

Heading east to Halsearing would take them all day, but according to the map, it should be safe enough. It wasn't known for bandits, thieves, slavers or really anything negative. It was just a decently sized city full of Monsters and Demons.

That might be awkward for their team, but as long as everyone kept their hoods up and their helmets on in public, it would be fine.

Tessa had it easiest, as she had [Dragon Armour] which made her look like a dragonkin with a healthy dose of dragon bloodline. They might technically be beasts, but not many species of monsters volunteered to mess with the dragons.

With the mask and hood of her new outfit in place, Dana could be from a half dozen different species, especially with sunglasses on.

Ophelia had no reason to be anything but a Werebear, even if that marked her as a foreigner, so it was just Lotus and Karl that would have the hardest time blending in.

Lotus had supervision, and Karl wasn't particularly concerned about himself. Even if they realized he was human, there were humans here. Not ones with the powers of Elites, but some were mages, and many were hybrids with monster blood.

[There are bandits near the road, but they're moving away.] Hawk noted as the hours rolled into afternoon, and Thor kept up his happy trot with the wagon.

They were in a wooded area between two hills, impossible to see from a distance, unless you happened to be flying overhead.

What Karl couldn't see was their scout. They were pulling back from the road, which suggested that they could see someone coming that they didn't want to fight, but they shouldn't be able to see him yet.

[Hawk, who else is on the road?]

[I dunno. Pike people in Bob armour riding horses, and someone in a shiny carriage that I am surprised you can't see from there. It must be the hill in the way.]

That sounded a lot like armoured knights and a nobleman's carriage.

[Are they all wearing the same colours, or do they have someone carrying a flag?] Karl asked.

[They have six flags, and they all match. They're all shiny and the horses are all green like the flags.]

Karl made a mental note of where they were in Hawk's mental image, and then the speed they were going. They should be on this side of the valley with the bandits before Karl reached it. That would make life easier, as they would be expecting him to move out of the way. Rich people always acted like they owned the road. Even the mine's shift supervisor drove like a douchebag in the company truck.

Karl slowed Thor just a little, to give them a margin for error, in case he guessed wrong, or they slowed down through the trees.

When they got close to the trees, it was clear that Karl didn't have anything to worry about. The knights were already on the close side of the valley, banners flapping in the wind as they trotted along the road.

Karl moved Thor to the side of the road, giving them plenty of room to pass by.

One of the lead guards peeled off to speak to him, and Karl brought Thor to a full stop.

"Merchant. There are bandits in the woods ahead. I would recommend not bringing your precious cargo through there." The knight informed him.

"What power level?"

The Knight frowned. "At least four Commanders. But they have nearly fifty members in total. If you go thirty kilometres south, there is a bridge across the river that will get you around the valley."

That would put them nearly five hours off course.

"Are there rewards for them? A bounty perhaps?" Karl asked, perhaps a bit too eagerly.

"You did hear me say that there are fifty of them, right? You've got passengers, and only two guards plus Golems."

The knight obviously thought that he was an idiot.

"They can wait here a minute. Fifty bandits below Commander Rank won't take me more than an hour. But if there is no reward, I'm not putting in the work."

The noble carriage had stopped beside him, and from inside someone was laughing.

"You think that you can take out an entire bandit camp within an hour, alone? I would pay good money to see that." A delicate female voice announced.

A Lamia stuck her head out of the window, though Karl would have thought she was human if he couldn't see the heat signature inside. Her smile was warm and genuine, and her dress looked like it was made of thin layers of the finest silk. Even Rae was impressed with the quality.

Karl turned back into the wagon. "Do you mind staying here for a few minutes? I will go make sure the road is clear, and we can earn a few extra coins."

Ophelia laughed. "I give you ten minutes, or you have to turn over the good sleeping spot for the night."

Chapter 478 Leftovers

The Lamia was about to say something, but Karl was already gone. Rae used [Shadow Step] and a length of silk to drag him with her into the trees, then a second step to where Hawk had found the Bandits.

The group turned to stare at Karl, who had appeared alone next to their camp, and began to slowly get to their feet, brandishing weapons.

"I have some good news and some bad news for you." Karl informed them.

"Oh, you think you have good news for us, do you?" An aging bandit informed him with a smirk.

The man looked at least half Ogre, and smelled far worse, but that could have something to do with whatever it was that they were cooking. It smelled of rot and vomit, and Karl was becoming certain that he was about to do these bandits a favour.

Karl nodded at him. "The good news is that none of you have to go to work tomorrow."

The bandits began to laugh and circle Karl, who still didn't have a weapon in his hands.

"And what is the bad news?" "I forgot to ask that lovely young lady how much she was willing to pay for your stinking carcasses."

Karl called the team out, and Remi got things started with a [Thunderstorm] that had Hawk immediately complaining about her poor decision-making skills.

He had his [Wind Barrier] up to stay dry, but he didn't love water magic any more just because it was his little sister using it.

Remi's lone bodyguard hit the leaders with a Tsunami, while Karl followed it with a flurry of [Chain Lightning] enhanced arrows.

He hadn't had his bow out in a while, but all the bandits were running as soon as Remi and Rae appeared. They didn't even seem to see Cara until someone nearly stepped on her and the Void Badger flew into a rage, tearing everything apart.

Not even the trees were safe from her wrath. Rae was herding bandits toward Cara with her webs and golems, while Remi and her bodyguard focused on the core area.

Karl called out the two Lamia bodyguards, and let them loose on the camp.

It was over in under a minute, leaving only one dome of silk, and a lot of blood after Rae picked up the bodies.

"What is in there? Snacks for later?" Karl asked Rae.

[Small creatures. They weren't fighting, and I didn't know what to do with them.]

"Bring them back with us. Toss up a rock or two and we can shadow step." Karl suggested.

Instead, Rae made him a blanket and passed Karl the bag. With both on her back, she was covered enough to Shadow Step.

Remi retreated to her space, and Cara sniffed around the camp for a minute before realizing there was nothing worth taking.

Not even roast meat.

She returned to her space empty-handed, and Karl hopped back toward the wagon, with Rae's help.

She returned to her space, and Karl jogged the last dozen metres to the waiting group with the bag full of children dragging behind him.

That was a minor oversight. When they were on Rae's back, it was fine, but he shouldn't bump them along the ground like that.

"I don't suppose that you have an Orphan collection program, do you? I've got a bunch of them from the valley." Karl asked as he approached.

"Pardon?" The closest guard asked, confused.

"The bag, it's full of the children from the bandit camp. They don't really count as bandits because they didn't even try to fight. I have the corpses of the combatants stored in a separate space."

The Lamia and her guards were staring at Karl now, and Ophelia began to laugh. "Well, that was definitely less than ten minutes, you can keep your good sleeping spot."

The guards came over to grab the large silk bag, and one of the others gestured for Karl to step aside.

"Did you really kill them all and collect their bodies?" He whispered.

Karl nodded. "You can have them if you like. Or I can put them in the ditch over there."

The guard nodded. "We do need to verify their deaths, and if the bodies are gone from their camp, we need to see them."

Karl led the guard away to a low spot, where he began to stack the bodies.

The guard looked more horrified with every addition, and Karl realized that with the extensive use of [Rend] and [Disintegration] there weren't all that many fully intact corpses.

"How did you do that?" The Guard whispered. "I'm part troll." Karl joked.

That didn't really answer the man's question, and Karl didn't look part troll. But it was a good enough answer for his superiors. A rampaging Royal Rank troll would be the sort of natural disaster that a bandit group would not survive.

"We should get rid of those." The guard sighed.

"I've got this. Hawk, please do the honours."

Hawk bombarded the pile with fireballs, roasting it all to ash in a matter of seconds.

"A troll that isn't afraid of fire?" The guard asked.

"Find the one thing in the world that can kill you, and make it your friend. Dragon Hawks are a great and loyal partner once you earn their respect."

The guard looked at Karl like he was insane, but didn't say anything else before returning to his team.

The bag was open, but the kids were still sitting in a terrified huddle, too afraid to even cry. There were demons, a young Minotaur, three half Ogres, and a few Karl couldn't identify.

Their eyes were locked on him, unwilling to look away from the danger, even when the guards were trying to talk to them.

Karl smiled at them. "Why don't you tell these nice people all about how you ended up in that valley? I think that they can help you find a much safer spot to be, with no monsters. I mean, maybe with monsters, but not the scary kind."

The Lamia in the luxurious carriage giggled softly, and a few of the guards facepalmed.

"You have a way with words, Merchant. We will have a team from the city escort the children back to town for placement. Were you heading for Halsearing?" She asked.

Karl nodded. "We are. Then I head north tomorrow. There is a nomadic Orc tribe that should be in the area, and they wanted the dried fish."

The Lamia nodded, and Karl added a warning.

"We were attacked this morning, between here and Lutonade, using a Portal. If you're going to head west with a fine lady, you should be careful. They had Pirate Captains with them."

The Knights looked grim, but the Lamia looked calm as she nodded in understanding. "They shouldn't bother us. Lutonade has an agreement with the Knight Orders. Would it be too much to ask you to wait here for the retrieval team to come get the children? They should make it here near dark."

I would ask you to walk them to the city, but you wouldn't make it before dark with their pace."

Karl did the mental math. They would have to avoid the city to make the anomaly on time tomorrow night, but that might be better for them.

"If I do the delivery first, then come back to the city to resupply, that should be fine." Karl agreed, while the children cowered in terror at the thought of being left with him any longer.

Chapter 479 Retrieval Team

Once the Lamia and her escort left, Ophelia turned to Karl to give him the updates on their situation.

"The Knights aren't worried about bandits on this trip, they are on their way to a wedding announcement and can't be late. They did leave us with a whole bag full of coins for your trouble, so we're good on spending money while we're here. But how are we on time? Will we still make our meeting?"

Karl nodded. "We will have to move the stop in the city to after we deliver the fish, but that's not a big deal. We can resupply there, then we will make our way to the next stop."

The children from the bandit group were listening intently to their conversation, and Karl didn't want to give anything away. Nobody in this region seemed to mind the bandits all that much, so it was only the outsiders that would run into trouble with them.

The kids would likely tell whoever came to pick them up what Karl and his team were planning, even if it wasn't to set up another bandit attack.

Letting the city know that they were meeting a nomadic tribe might lead to questions later, but they didn't have anything to hide other than their identities, and having everyone looking for illicit goods took the attention off the actual group.

The children didn't seem to relax at all, and they were still huddled on the silk sheet when three wagons arrived to pick them up.

"You're the one that the Knightly Orders sent us to assist, I take it? We will take in the survivors of the bandit camp. But can we know what led to them being completely wiped out?"

The kids looked up in unison and pointed at Karl.

"The Knightly order made me a friendly wager about how long it would take to remove the bandit threat along the road. So, I went and eliminated it." Karl shrugged.

"You?" The green skinned demon man with a single forehead horn asked.

"Me. It wasn't all that hard. I had a significant power advantage."

The wagon driver just shrugged. "It's fine. We don't need the details, as long as there weren't any escaped bandits who will be looking for their kids."

Karl shook his head. "None that were around the camp. Hopefully, the little ones will be given a proper chance to live a decent life. I think that today might have scared them off the path of a bandit."

The kids all nodded in agreement. No way were they going to let that madman and his monsters believe that they would ever consider going back to banditry.

"I trust you don't mind sharing a camp? The bandits might be gone, but with the nomads, it's never truly safe out here." The leader of the recovery team asked.

"Make yourself comfortable. We will have a nice fire to keep the kids warm, and we can split watches." Karl agreed.

Ophelia changed back into Dire Bear form with a longing glance at Karl's hammock, while the other ladies rearranged the cargo so they could hang theirs in the wagon.

They hadn't thought of the method yesterday, but running lines between the metal hoops that held the tarp would support their weight, and they could have a better bed than a blanket on the wooden wagon floor.

"I will take first watch, who wants second?" Karl asked.

The leader of the caravan gave an annoyed grunt. "I will. I suspect that the little ones are just waiting for a chance to run off again and look for a hiding spot. We can't have that when the Knightly Order only pays on completion of an assignment."

The made Karl chuckle. Of all the ways to keep a contractor motivated, guaranteed pay but only on completion seemed like one of the most reliable.

The night was quiet, and the children were all passed out from exhaustion as Karl took the first watch.

After yesterday's incident, there shouldn't be more trouble. The Pirate Captains wouldn't bother him now that he had their token, and the next city along the way was where the retrieval team came from.

So, Karl actually managed to relax during his shift with Rae watching from her space, and then woke the team leader for his turn.

A few hours of meditation would get Karl through the night, but they were only doing two watches, splitting the evening, so he had nearly five hours before he had to be awake again.

He didn't fall into a deep sleep, even with the beasts watching for him. Cara had escaped her space again to curl up with Ophelia, and she didn't seem to require sleep at all. She just enjoyed doing nothing. That would be a good enough bodyguard. Nothing on this continent short of a dragon was likely to win a fist fight with a Void Badger.

Just before the sun came up, the clerics started to make breakfast, much to the relief of the retrieval team and the children.

"Dragon Clerics? What brings you all the way out here?" The team leader asked when he saw the breakfast meal.

"The Gods willed it." Tessa replied with a shrug.

That was a good enough answer for most. Clerics could end up anywhere, following the whims of the Gods, and only the Giants and a few isolationist nations would stop them.

Not that the feral monsters wouldn't kill and eat them, but the civilized ones would let them be.

The kids were beginning to relax as the retrieval team explained how the orphanage worked, how it sorted them into school years, and helped them find real work.

It was when Karl got up that they began to huddle together again.

"He won't hurt you. I know what happened with your parents, but he won't hurt you now." The group leader explained softly.

"You don't understand. That thing isn't human. It looks like a human, but it's not. It's really not." One of the demon children explained.

The team leader looked to Karl for an answer, and he just shrugged. "I don't eat children if that helps? Besides, I already put this nice man in charge of bringing you back, and I wouldn't want to make his job harder."

Lotus poked Karl in the side and smiled at the kids. "He's only scary in combat. Now, let me fill everyone's water skins so you're good for the trip to your new home."

Chapter 480 Wilderness Detour

The kids were quickly packed up into the wagons, and Karl's team prepared to head out.

"Will you be following us to town?" The retrieval team leader asked.

Karl shook his head. "No, we need to make a delivery to a nomadic tribe today, and if we go through the city we won't make it on time after all this delay."

The team and the bandit kids all looked concerned with that answer.

"You're going to make a trade deal with the nomads? The Yellow Tusk Orc Nomads? Are you insane?" The team leader asked, unconsciously checking his armour as if they might hear and attack.

"It's just a load of dried fish, it's not like we're trading weapons. Besides, I'm pretty good at getting along with Orcs."

One of the wagon drivers laughed. "Is that even possible?"

"Of course. When they challenge you, just tell them off and demand to talk to the boss."

The wagon driver held his belly as he laughed. "Oh, it's like that. I suppose if you're not averse to a fist fight with an Orc Champion, it's a good method. Presuming that you don't die of stupidity."

Ophelia changed back to Werebear form and took a seat on the front of the wagon after everyone else was loaded. She had put Cara in the wagon to keep both Lotus and the Void Badger entertained, and they were ready to leave as soon as Karl finished chatting.

"Alright, gentlemen. Good luck with your work. Perhaps I will see you again one day."

Karl turned the wagon northeast across the road and into the open grassland.

He had a general idea where he was going thanks to Hawk's scouting, and now he just had to wait for the bird to find the exact spot where the Anomaly was going to appear.

Thor was making good time, as the grass was mostly untouched, and the dirt soft enough that the wheels weren't taking jarring hits, except when they found a hidden stone.

[There is a large group of people walking in the distance, near the hill with the three upright stones where the Anomaly should be.]

[What species?] Karl asked.

[Orcs, mostly. But they've got some others with them.]

That sounded odd for Orcs, but Karl altered Thor's course so they were all headed for the Anomaly location. Even if the meeting with the nomads went badly, it would be good cover for them interfering with the Anomaly.

"There is an Orc tribe ahead. They're near where the Anomaly will appear, so I will go meet them, and we can delay until the Anomaly opens. If what Bishop Misty told us is correct, it should be soon." He explained, so the others understood.

The Orcs sent a runner when Karl was still five kilometres from the stones. He turned to meet them, so the Orcs didn't think he was running away. But he didn't turn directly so that he would end up with a few hundred metres of the stones when they met each other. The Orcs were intending to pass by the stones, but they had stopped on the far side to see what the merchant who would keep driving a wagon toward them wanted.

The Orcish runner straightened the tie around his neck, worn with nothing but a pair of tattered black shorts that were once fashionable pants.

"Yellow Tusk Clan Chieftain, World Smasher, wishes to im-choir what yer business is."

He spoke slowly with a thick accent, as if unfamiliar with the language.

That was a major change from the last time Karl had seen them, when the leader spoke with a posh accent, and wore fancy clothes that the clan had made themselves, not looted from another species and altered.

[Rae, make a pair of simple black pants that will fit the leader of the clan.] Karl instructed.

[Why? Are we making friends?]

[Yes. I am going to give them to the leader as a gift. Trust me, it will be fun.]

Rae didn't get what Karl was going for, but if he said it would lead to fun, she trusted him.

She quickly made them, but left them a bit loose and with a rope at the waist so they could be cinched to stay up.

"Please tell Chieftain World Smasher that we wish to trade a bundle of dried fish, fresh from the coast, for any trade goods he has that the cities will take. Here is a gift of good faith for him, to show my sincerity."

Karl handed over the pants, and the Orc got a cunning look on his face that he tried to hide.

"And what if the Chieftain says he doesn't want your pants?"

"Then tell him I will punch him in the face for disrespecting my gift. Go ahead and inform him that we will meet him at the standing stones to talk business."

The Orc ran off back to his Clan, while Rae laughed in Karl's mind.

[You're right, this will be fun.]

Karl stopped the wagon before the stones, so it was less likely to get caught up in the chaos, then double-checked on the item he had gotten to stabilize the Anomaly when it appeared.

After a few minutes of shouting and swearing that Karl could hear from three hundred metres away, a massive Orc came over with freshly made black pants on, and four large orcs carrying bags of something.

Karl went to retrieve the fish and set the bundle on a relatively clean stone while he waited.

The Orcs walked up until the leader was chest to chest with Karl, but towering over him by a full sixty centimetres. He had an intimidating scowl on his face, but he was wearing the gift, so Karl didn't back down or make any aggressive moves.

"These are good pants." He announced.

"Of course they are. I wouldn't give cheap pants to a Chieftain." Karl scoffed, and the big man smiled as he stepped back.

"What kind of fish do you have? It's not often someone comes looking for us to trade."

"One hundred kilos of dried salmon." Karl announced, then untied the top strings holding the cloth on the bundle.

The Orcs took a deep breath and smiled. Orcs didn't deep water fish, so they could only get salmon during spawning season, and that wasn't prime salmon flavour, as they were exhausted and had burnt most of their fat to get to the spawning grounds.

These were prime specimens, carefully dried. The flavour would be incredible, and just the smell was more appealing than the dried jerky that they had.

Chieftain World Smasher motioned for his man at the back to bring a bag forward, then for the others to leave. Karl didn't know what was in the other bags, but the Chieftain had made his choice, and he was digging through the bag for something.

A few seconds later, he started tossing armour pieces out, then boots and miscellaneous equipment that wasn't fit for an Orc.

He stopped and looked at the pile, then at the fish. Karl frowned as he mentally calculated the value. It should already be more than the fish was worth, by a factor of at least three, but the Chieftain went back in for one more set of bracers and added them to the pile.

He nodded at Karl, who smiled and nodded back.

"We have a deal, then. Boys, pick up the fish and spread it through the tribe. Today we celebrate." He announced.

"Oh, are you holding a wrestling competition? I was once sent to the past, and I heard that was a favourite of the tribes."

That was one hundred percent bullshit, but it would keep them all right here where the Anomaly should be opening within the next hour or two.