

Beast Master 491

Chapter 491 Traffic Jam

The road was becoming busier by the minute, to the point that by noon, it almost felt like they were back in the city, with a wagon caravan passing every minute or two. There shouldn't be that many people in the cities nearby, according to the maps that Bruse Temple had shown them. They had seen hundreds of merchants just this morning, and there should have only been a few thousand people in the fifty-kilometre radius around the city. Certainly, not enough to need this many merchants.

In fact, there shouldn't be that many people with merchant as a trade in the entire region.

Then, suddenly, there were no more merchant wagons coming.

[Hawk, what is going on out there? Was it just a morning rush?] Karl asked.

If it was some sort of regional event, like a major market day, it might explain all the people on the road.

[There are more stopped in the distance. I don't know what they're up to. Oh, I see it now. There are Orcs coming from the east. If you keep going, we should meet up with them.]

Hawk didn't see any reason to fear Orcs. They had been quite pleasant every time he had seen them, and they didn't use water magic at all. Not even one little bit.

Karl kept the wagon rolling. If they were going to get delayed, it might as well be chatting with the Orcs, not waiting for an entire tribe to pass by. They were nearly in front of the Orcish tribe when their scouts reached the road.

"You're a merchant?" The young Orcish man asked.

Karl nodded. "We have mostly tools for the Trolls, farming tools. We've got a bit of cleric made food as well, if your tribe wants a trade." "Wait here. Chief Nantucket will speak with you."

Karl nodded, and behind him, he felt the surge of power as the clerics started to make the promised food.

They were creating dry rice and beans, which would keep for a long time, along with some fresh vegetables and a single pie. They had hidden the rest, but they left out one of the sweet potato pies from the market and even heated it so it would still seem fresh, even after being in the wagon all morning.

The Chief and his group were already running their way as Karl stopped the wagon and climbed down to greet them.

"Chief Nantucket. I am Karl." He extended his hand, and the Chieftain shook it with a smile on his face.

"The scout says that you had a Dragon Cleric make you food to trade. How much do you have?" The Orc asked.

Karl took out the rough burlap sack to set on the ground, then carefully took the pie and handed it to Nantucket. "That is a first meeting gift from me to you. Fresh from the markets in Halsearing."

The Chieftain smiled. "Still warm. You know about Orcs."

His tone was approving, and Karl chuckled softly.

"That's the same thing that Chieftain World Smasher said yesterday. His clan is just west of here. The Gods granted them a dungeon trial for one of their boys who wasn't strong enough to claim his mate."

Nantucket laughed. "How can an Orc be too weak to claim his mate?"

Karl smiled and leaned in to stage whisper, as if it was a secret. "He had earned his spot as a warrior, but she very publicly called him out and then beat his ass in a wrestling trial. Quite the woman, he set his sights high."

The Orcs that came with the Chieftain's group were roaring with laughter, and the big Orc clapped Karl on the shoulder.

"I've got to see that. You say he's just west of here?"

Karl nodded. "About fifteen kilometres, mostly west, maybe a bit southwest. I went south to the city after I traded him a hundred kilos of salmon. There will be a lot of fighters there if the dungeon is still open."

"A big fight and an old friend? Now I do have to go. How much do you want for the food?"

Karl heard Tessa clear her throat in the wagon. The church didn't charge for their food.

"It's for you. You know how the clerics are, they share their food."

The Orcs laughed at the subtle reference to the similarity with their own customs. One of the warriors picked up the bag, while another handed Karl a folded lump of burlap, presumably a replacement bag.

"It was a pleasure to meet you. May good weather and better fights be in your future." Karl added as the assistants ran back to the tribe.

"Same to you, Merchant Karl. If our tribes cross paths again, we will drink together."

What sort of liquor the Orcs made was a mystery to Karl, but he had visions of something almost toxic levels of potent.

The Orcish tribe altered their path to run behind Karl, and he got Thor moving again.

"Don't you think that was too easy? The nomadic tribes are supposed to be feral and dangerous, but they're even easier to get along with than the cities." Ophelia asked.

"I think that the issue might be local, not generalized. The Orcish tribes must have an issue with either the Trolls or the other monster factions." He replied after a moment's thought.

"Could it be something about our group instead?" Dana asked.

"It could be, but I don't think that we have a way to test that."

Karl saw a wagon caravan in the distance, and began to relax. They must be clear of the area that the locals had identified as dangerous.

Thor moved to the side as he rolled past them, and Karl noticed that a few of the monsters guarding the wagon sniffed at the air.

They tensed as if they were going to attack, but backed down when the Naga Warrior glared at them. Karl remained silent until they were well past the stopped merchant group, then looked back at the others.

"I think I have an idea. We might be having better luck with the Orcs because they don't consider us food or competition. Orcs view humans as weak, so we're not competitors, and they don't want to eat us. It's the Ogres and a few others that are most likely to be an issue for us." He explained.

There were more wagons parked a few hundred metres behind the first group, and the driver of the lead wagon flagged Karl down as they approached.

"Did you see the nomads on your way through?" A blue skinned slender troll asked.

"Yeah, an Orc tribe. They're west of the road now, and headed west looking for the big fight that was the talk of the city this morning. What's with all the traffic today?" Karl replied.

"Dunno. Messengers called for every farmer and merchant we know to bring everything to Halsearing. It might be preparation for a siege. Are you trading with the Trolls up north?" He asked.

Karl nodded. "I've got tools for them, quality ones."

"Good call. If there is a siege, they'll need everything they can get to keep the armies fed. It doesn't take a genius to know that armies get hungry, and it's easier to feed them than to fight them."

Chapter 492 Not All Friendly

The next few groups of Trollish farmers and merchants were similarly eager to get any news that they could, but when Karl got to a group of Ogres using oxen to pull large carts, things began to take a turn for the worse.

At first, it was just the same sort of posturing as the last hostile merchant group. But these ones didn't look like successful merchants. They were filthier than usual, even for Ogres, and looked half starved.

When the wind shifted and blew from Karl's wagon to theirs, bringing the scent of humans to them, they snapped and began to charge.

"Rae, Golems." Karl called as he jumped down to meet the charge.

Both bodyguards joined him, as well as Dana's Golems. That should be enough to deal with the threat, and that was their plan to not blow their cover as merchants. However, that plan was entirely too boring for Cara, and the Void Badger was headed for combat before Karl could even tell her off.

"Meat!" The Ogres roared as they charged toward Karl's wagon, not even focused on him.

The other merchants nearby, groups that had been waiting for the signal that the danger had passed, began to scatter. They didn't want to be implicated in the fight between the Ogres and Karl's group. Karl took out his blade and hacked the first Ascended Rank Ogre clean in half, from the shoulder across the chest. But even as the two halves fell to the ground, the others didn't stop. They were fully focused on the smell of humans, and running blindly into the blades and forelimbs of the defenders.

The battle was over in under thirty seconds, nothing more than a flurry of steel and blood. In fact, the last one fighting was Cara, who had taken offence to the existence of their cart oxen.

"They're dead, you can stop now." Karl reminded her.

Cara paused and looked around. [So they are. I thought that we were going to fight?]

Karl patted the badger on the head after she landed on the Ogres' wagon. "Not a real fight, just defending the wagon against attack. You got too excited."

Cara sighed, then vanished into her space to get clean before coming back out to sit with the ladies in the wagon.

[Disappointing. One out of Ten, do not recommend.]

Rae did grab one of the oxen, though. Just in case it tasted good.

Karl got back on the wagon and started to move again, which startled the other merchants who could see him. His team only had a few members, the fight should not have been over that quickly, but his wagon was moving again, and nothing else was.

Just to be safe, the next one in line continued to make their detour well around the incident as Karl rolled past them.

The merchants who were parked behind them were unconcerned. Fights between groups of monsters were a common occurrence, and if you started a fight that you couldn't win, that was your own fault.

Groups of Ogres seemed to be rare in the region, but trolls of various sorts, as well as lizardmen and something that looked like a featherless bird walking upright, were plentiful.

The last one gave Hawk the creeps because they had grown weird fingers out of what used to be wing bones, unnaturally long for hands. Between that and the beaked heads with no feathers, Hawk was glad that no such thing existed at home. He might have to reconsider water as his greatest enemy if someone compared him to one of those things.

Remi had a very different opinion. They looked like pre plucked chickens, and she was pretty sure they didn't need any prep at all to eat. Thor walked past the line of merchant wagons, which were starting to

move now, following the lead of those in front of them. Karl wondered how long they would have been sitting there if he hadn't been the first one to move through. Would they have sat there all day, waiting to see who went first? Or was there some sort of estimate on how long it would take the Orcs to move past?

Karl didn't see any scouts, and neither did Hawk. But even with the delays, they were going to make it to the next town before dinner.

They weren't anywhere near the city of Oakhamping, but this appeared to be the layover point, as the town had large amounts of parking for merchant caravans, as well as taverns, motels and blacksmiths advertising wagon repairs.

"We will camp here for the evening. They have guards on patrol, and there are others around to help keep watch, so we won't have to worry as much about opportunistic thieves as we might alongside the road." Karl explained.

"That makes sense. We might be going the opposite way to everyone else, but there is safety in numbers." Dana agreed.

That didn't actually make much sense when everything around you could be considered an enemy, but nothing recognized Karl as a human, and they had the Naga Warriors on guard to blend in with the other Monsters.

Most of the wagons weren't setting up much of a camp. At best, it was a small fire for the guards to sleep around, while one of them kept watch. That was about what Karl's team would do as well, with most of the team sleeping in the wagon, and the summons on guard. Lotus grew a small collection of firewood from the boards of the wagon using her magic, and they prepared to heat dinner. The new arrivals and their fire caught some attention from the farmers in the next group, who were sitting in the rapidly fading twilight, leaned against their wagon.

"Would you like to join us? The heat is free, but the dinner needs a good story." Karl offered.

The troll smiled and brought two boys over with him.

"I think that we can come up with a story or two. Good evening, everyone. Might you ladies be Dragon Clerics? You don't smell like beast clerics, and you're certainly not Giants."

The troll gave them a toothy smile as the firelight flickered off the silver band on his lone remaining lower tusk. The other had been broken at some point, leaving a jagged stump a quarter of its full length that hadn't regrown yet.

Trolls normally regenerated quickly, but the tusks needed to be pulled to regrow, much like hair, which grew at a normal rate unless it was pulled out.

That led to a strange phenomenon that Karl could see at another camp. One of the older trolls was actually growing a beard by shaving with a dull razor that pulled the hair out.

Then he trimmed it to shape with a pair of scissors, except for a portion in the centre, which he braided. It was one of the strangest grooming routines that Karl had ever seen, and it made him think of the [Trollish Regeneration] skill in his skill tree.

He could afford to get it now, or he could keep saving for some of the offensive abilities. He hadn't been able to see them until Skill Master evolved to Rank 2. It seemed to be an oddity of the skill tree, he had to finish a tier of his core abilities before he could use more advanced secondary skills.

He might have done better in the short term by picking the offensive tree, as he would have all those abilities by now. However, that would have left him without access to Evolution and Skill Master.

Those two skills were going to be essential to his team very soon.

Chapter 493 Tier 4 Skills

Tier 4 Offensive Skills ⇒ Only One May Be Chosen

{50pts} [Devastate] Strikes dealing more than ten percent of the target's health do double damage.

{50pts} [Overwhelming Presence] Causes a {Terror} type debuff that causes affected targets to become paralyzed for 5 seconds, plus 10 seconds per Rank difference between caster and target.

{50pts} [Rampage] Every time an enemy is damaged by the Beast Master or a bonded beast, increase the damage done by the Beast Master or the bonded beast for one minute.

There were over a dozen greyed out attack skills, which were only available to an attack specialist Beast master, but there were three core skills that Karl could use.

[Rampage] Cara and Remi demanded at the same time.

[Devastate] Rae insisted. She hit hard, and double damage stabbing sounded better than slowly stacking damage.

[I want to see them pee themselves when they see us.] Hawk recommended.

That did have a certain appeal to it. Making them too terrified to even move as they were slaughtered could be interesting.

The real problem was that they could only choose one, and it was fifty points. Karl probably didn't have that many.

They could most likely get [Trollish Regeneration] from the defence skills tree, though. That would be a fun skill to have.

Bodyguards and Golems with Trollish Regeneration seemed like it would be a most excellent prank to play on people. Even after the barriers broke, and the enemy hacked a limb off, they could just pick it up and let it reattach itself.

It would be hilarious.

Karl did his best not to laugh at their antics as they settled in for dinner with the Trollish farmers telling stories of mundane events on the farm. It actually made the trolls feel much more relatable, with the same concerns he had at home. Earth Mice getting into the cupboards, stoves that didn't heat evenly,

long hours and insufficient pay. Even if you were a troll, a worker was a worker. They didn't have any of the technological items that Karl was used to, but it wasn't all that different in lived experience.

The older man had his boys seated slightly behind him, a precaution in case Karl's group wasn't actually friendly, and the trio smiled as Lotus and Tessa began adding chunks of meat and cheese from their inventory into the rice and bean stew.

The pot would normally be too much for just the eight of them, but Trolls should have a big appetite after a long day of travelling.

The pot that Tessa had chosen was a pressure cooker with a locking lid, and while the whistling was a bit annoying, to the trolls it was the sound of good things to come.

Cheesy rice and beans didn't sound all that great, Karl thought. But Lotus was happy to add spices to anything, and it came out much better than anticipated. It made a moderately spicy gumbo style stew, short on meat but thick and filling.

The church kitchen would never serve something like that, but it proved to be a huge hit with the trolls, and Karl could see the wistful looks that those further away were giving them.

With the stone pile around the fire pit and the Naga Warriors on guard, everyone settled in to sleep near the heat.

Trolls were rather flammable, but they were also fond of being warm. It was a tradeoff that had to be made for comfort.

Karl's team paired up for warmth, with Ophelia and Tessa sharing, while Lotus and Cara shared a sleeping bag.

If anyone had noticed Cara leaving her space to join the little cleric, they hadn't said anything about it. It would solve their wandering Lotus issues, as even if Lotus was eager to explore, Cara didn't like moving until morning, and she would keep the inquisitive one locked in place.

There were dozens of merchant wagon caravans outside this small farming town, one of many along the main road, all with new cultures, stories and experiences to share. But sleep was more important, and everyone was more interested in being well rested for tomorrow's long day than staying up all night telling stories. A commotion just before dawn caused the Naga Warriors to wake Karl and the others. They weren't at the edge of the camp, and it didn't sound like an imminent fight, but Karl got up and dressed anyhow, just to be safe.

The commotion seemed to be a handful of humans with lizardmen in tattered armour who had staggered into the camp covered in blood and fading fast.

"Tessa, come lend a hand. I think something attacked the merchants along the road." Karl whispered.

By Tessa's estimation, attacked was an understatement. These few survivors were merchant's guards, and they were all horribly maimed and barely hanging on to their lives when she began her healing work.

It was more difficult than she was used to, as some were monsters out of favour with the Dragon Gods, but that was more in the nature of her not receiving the bonuses she was used to than the Gods actively preventing her from healing them.

The spells closed their wounds, and stopped the internal bleeding, but most of these men would never work as caravan guards again. Some were missing limbs, one most of a hand and both eyes. But that didn't answer the question of what happened to them.

"They should be stable now. They might not be able to tell us much until they have calmed down, but there is a troll among them, and he will be fine in a few minutes, as long as his eyes heal properly." She explained.

The half troll gave them a weak thumbs up, and blinked his newly regenerated eyes.

"They will be fine now. I had to scoop them out so they would heal right, and that takes time to grow back naturally. Everything was going well, and we had cut around the city to bypass all the traffic and the road pirates exacting tolls to get to the gates.

But there was some sort of massive battle going on in the middle of nowhere, and they just attacked us without warning.

Some massive Orc calling himself Dora The Destroyer annihilated our entire caravan. We fled, and we were over five kilometres from the main battle, but they still chased us down." He explained.

"So, it was the nomadic Orc tribes fighting?" One of the farmers asked.

The merchant shook his head. "They were there, but there are Orcs, trolls, dragons, Minotaur herds, and I swear I saw an entire Spellblade Clan. It's hell, they're going to tear the whole region apart at that rate, and it's still spreading. I saw five more portals open as I crawled to safety."

One of the humans laying near him laughed.

"You got lucky. We weren't even trying to get near the city. We were going cross-country from the coast and got ambushed by a Demon Clan. Same thing, they just came out of nowhere and started killing everyone."

Karl nodded. "Whatever is going on there must have riled them up. I heard rumours in the city that it was a Dungeon opening, but both Orc tribes that I have met with this week were pretty reasonable."

Chapter 494 Farmer's Breakfast

The survivors and the farmers all looked at Karl like he was insane. "You met, as in stopped and spoke with, the Orc Tribes, and you didn't get attacked?" Karl nodded. "Yeah. We traded fish with the Yellow Tusk Orcs, and then greeted the ones south of here as they passed by the highway. Neither one of those tribes was just randomly violent."

"Once, I can see. But twice in a week, and you're still here to tell us about it? Are you part Orc or something?" The troll asked, sniffing the air to try to determine what Karl was.

"They just admire his brand of insanity. He threatened to punch Chieftain World Smasher in the face if the Orc didn't like his gift." Tessa joked.

The farmers blinked slowly as they stared at Karl. "You should have been the one telling the evening stories, it sounds like yours are far more wild than ours. How did you even find out his name in the first place?"

Karl shrugged. "The scout told us. Then we had a chat, and I explained that I had trade goods. It was all quite normal as far as trades with nomadic tribes goes."

The farmers shook their heads in dismay. "These few are what most villages look like when the nomadic tribes pass by. But then, most of them don't have a good relationship with the Trolls or the Demon Tribes.

I just hope that nothing comes back this way tomorrow so that we can get our supplies to the city and go back home."

The commotion had roused the closest few groups from their beds, despite the early hour, and some of them were preparing to start on breakfast, so they could eat a hot meal and still be among the first on the road when the sun was up enough for the oxen to see.

"Do we have a big pot? I think that our two clerics might be able to help you out with some Dragon Cleric oatmeal for breakfast." Karl offered.

"There is one in town for the poor. I will go get it. You don't mind, do you, Priestess?" One of the farmers asked.

"Not at all. Feeding travellers is always good for the church, even if it's not the faithful."

The troll chuckled. "Well, we might not be the most faithful, but we're not Giants to call the World Dragon and his Pantheon of allies our enemy."

That made a number of the farmers laugh, and even the Demons among the farmers smiled at his response. The Lizard folk were somewhat torn between factions, as they weren't quite dragon descended, but they also didn't consider themselves to be evolved from common beasts. Their history was somewhat murky, so they normally only followed the shamanistic gods. Either the Shaman God of

the Titans and Beasts, or the Green Dragon, who wasn't actually a Shaman God, but was in tune with the elements.

It only took a few minutes before a troll was coming back with a pot nearly a metre round, as well as a number of friends carrying firewood.

Corded muscles under blue Trollish skin clashed with ivory tusks and silver accessories in the morning twilight as the trolls got to work setting up the breakfast pot.

Cara had chased Lotus out of bed so that she could help Tessa with breakfast, and the little cleric was already hard at work rolling dough to make fresh flatbread to go with the oatmeal.

The Trolls had a wide variety of toppings for bread, apparently, as that was their usual morning travel ration on the road. So, fresh baked, instead of dried and then soaked in tea or oatmeal to make them edible would be more like home.

Tessa casually filled the pot with oats and hot water, as it had legs on the bottom, so the fire could be built under it to bring everything to a boil.

The bread was the hard part, but both Lotus and the farmers knew a great trick for breakfast. If you greased and heated a cast iron pan first, you could leave it sitting by the fire, on the ring of fire pit rocks, and just toss the flattened dough on it to let it cook much faster than a regular loaf in an oven. With this many groups, they had a dozen suitable pans all around the pot by the time that Karl set fire to the first batch of wood and got the heat started.

While they were happy to stack the firewood, everyone had been reluctant to actually light the fire, an instinctive aversion to the potential of a wound they couldn't properly regenerate. So, Karl had taken care of it with [Flaming Body] and the wood was crackling under the pot before an aging troll in a leather apron could even get in place to begin stirring the oatmeal.

Karl was a bit concerned with what it would end up tasting like, as each farmer came by to add a small handful of berries or crushed nuts to the mix. There was no method to it other than they each added a bit of what they had.

Then, Lotus added ground cinnamon and nutmeg to the pot to give breakfast an inviting scent that drew all the remaining farmers and merchants out of bed to see who was torturing them so early in the morning.

"There is enough to go around, and we've got flatbread cooking as well." Tessa informed the farmers, who were giving the pot curious glances.

From what Dana and the others could discern, this was their grand plan for making it safely out of the Monster controlled territories. They were going to pretend to be merchants, and make friends across the country, if possible. There would be no reason to hide if nobody was after them.

There was a rapidly growing stack of flatbread on a small table by the pot, but with the magical assistance, and the water already hot when Tessa created it, the oatmeal wasn't going to take long even in a cauldron that large.

They were already developing a lineup, and Tessa was becoming concerned that they might not have a big enough pot for everyone, but they would have to make due with what they had, or boil another pot once this one ran low.

They didn't have to hurry out this morning, they were going the opposite direction to everyone else. But if they did have to come back this way, a little goodwill would go a long way in ensuring that they could pass without trouble.

If they were lucky, it might even start to build them a positive reputation if they did happen to come here again.

They were still young and fast-growing Elites, so there was a chance that more official missions might send them outside the Golden Dragon Nation, with the possibility that they might end up somewhere here in the Newbon Empire again.

Karl was thinking that it might eventually be an official thing, as they did have good luck with foreign trips. But the others had a very different opinion on this particular side effect of hanging out with the man who had gathered too much attention from the Gods.

As a few of the Monsters had mentioned, it was not only the World Dragon that might have taken an interest in current events.

There had been far too many strange coincidences, and the Archbishop himself had said that the System Stones they had encountered early in their travels might have been linked to the Laughing God, and not the World Dragon.

That ancient Deity was a curious one. Nobody really knew what he was supposed to be the God of, but every ancient legend mentioned him as a trickster, a deity that granted your wildest desires in a way that you could never have anticipated.

He was neither good nor evil. Unlike the World Dragon, whose very existence brought stability and magic, the Laughing God simply existed for his own amusement. That alone was enough to make his attention a dangerous thing.

Even worse, there were rumours that the Laughing God was not one of the Dragon Gods at all, but an ancient god lingering from the time of creation, even after the memory of most other primordial gods had faded. Something like the God of Magic that Karl had been named after.

Chapter 495 Change In The Air

The increase in traffic and resultant danger along the road caused the towns to send out their guards to patrol the main road that day. They were patrolling in groups of three, all heavily armed and armoured, but compared to what the average merchant caravan had with them, it wasn't much security.

For one, most of the merchants had strong Commanders on guard, and for two, this was a nation full of monster species. Even the average farmer was Ascended Rank.

The threat of bandit groups wasn't the only danger along the road. The merchants fought with the farmers, the farmers fought the merchants, the guards extorted the weak, and everyone was on edge from the moment that Thor pulled the wagon out of town after breakfast.

"Compared to yesterday, this is a mess." Ophelia muttered as they moved to avoid a fight between farmers who were both hauling the same root vegetables.

"I wonder what changed? Are they afraid that the price is going to go down, and that they're being ordered to bring crops to the city at a massive discount?" Karl pondered.

"That might be it. I think that some of it is just an excuse to air old grievances and take out their frustrations on people that they didn't like to begin with. They're not attacking everyone, it's targeted." Ophelia noted as she took a seat beside Karl on the front bench of the wagon.

Dana was watching the back with her Golems while the two clerics rested and played cards.

There wasn't much else to do when you were in a wagon all day.

With the traffic and the rough roads, they were unlikely to cover more than a hundred kilometres a day. It was faster than walking, but not by as much as they had hoped. However, heading off into the wilderness would blow their cover, so they just had to bear with it until they got to the open roads.

They could see the next village in sight when a group of locals in ill-fitting guard uniforms stepped out in front of them and motioned for Karl to pull off the road.

"There's a road tax to pay. Twenty percent of cargo if you want to pass." The leader of the group demanded.

Karl smiled back. "How about you turn over the contents of your money pouch there, and I let you live?"

The fake guards nervously gripped their weapons, and Karl nudged the reins. "Thor, Earthquake please."

The ground trembled, causing the farmer who was closest to their group to pull his wagon to a stop as the guards lost their balance and fell to the ground.

"Keep it moving, Thor. I don't think that they're dumb enough to try anything."

The farmer laughed as Thor simply trampled the fake guards and kept walking. "Well. That's one way to deal with them. How did you know they weren't real town guards?" The next wagon driver along the road asked.

"Mostly by the fact their uniforms didn't fit. Even a village should be able to come up with clothes that fit. But mostly, I just wasn't going to give them twenty percent of my cargo. This village is like thirty people, including the children. I can give them a discount, but it would take titan sized brass cojones to demand my freight."

The merchant laughed, and his whiplike tail thumped the seat beside him in amusement.

"Have a safe trip north. There isn't much behind me but more farmers. The number that they called to the city is insane. It's good that you got out when you did. If I didn't have a purchase contract for this load, I wouldn't even consider going there this week, or perhaps for the rest of this year."

Karl gave him a sloppy salute, fingers to forehead, not the fist to chest Golden Dragon Nation military salute.

The driver nodded and made a hand gesture meant to resemble the head of the Fox God, one of the Demon Gods of trickery and merchants.

They continued on past the village, after which the traffic began to slow. With a day of warning, most of those who were going to travel were already on the road, and those closer to Oakhamping wouldn't have come south at all, as it was a major city and presumably also preparing for whatever was going on, including the dungeon opening.

If the issue was the dungeon, or more correctly, all the new arrivals that were coming to check it out, they would also be in danger.

Once there was no more traffic coming south, Thor picked up the pace a little. They would still not cover much more than a hundred kilometres in a day, but the wagon ride was too bumpy to be travelling much faster.

The only real advantage was that they didn't have to be worried about being bogged down in the mud if it started to rain. Even if they were dragging the belly of the wagon like a sled, Thor would still be able to keep up the same walking pace.

Most of the farmers used oxen to pull the wagon, and while they were powerful beasts, they were a quarter of Thor's size. The Cerro was nearly as large as the wagon he was pulling, and that was without combat buffs.

But the roads were dry, even if they were heavily rutted from the traffic last time it had rained.

The area around the road was slowly changing as they went north, Karl could feel it, even if it didn't look any different. There was a scent in the air, a feeling that wasn't the same as it was further south.

It wasn't something that could easily be placed, but as they continued to travel, Karl began to understand what was happening.

Monsters left a scent on their territory, a lingering something that marked the land as theirs.

Beasts could sense another beast's territory by the scent of its patrol routes, but this was different, more of a lingering feeling of magic similar to what a Temple or Cathedral had, but primal and somewhat sinister.

The lizardmen became more scarce as the day wore on, replaced by an increase in the trolls and the presence of Minotaurs, which had been nearly nonexistent to the south.

That change helped Karl understand the change. It was not so much a physical thing, but a change in the population. Even more than the territories of the beasts, the territories of the monsters had a feel to them, and Karl could tell that he wasn't the only one that had noticed so far. Dana and the clerics hadn't, but Thor had, and Ophelia might have, as she looked a bit more uneasy than the situation called for.

But as unwelcoming as the territory itself felt, the Minotaur locals that they passed were no more hostile than the trolls, and mostly just watched the merchant caravan to ensure that Karl's team didn't intend to attack them or swerve in front of their carts.

However, with the change in species, the power level of the region was growing as well, and it wasn't uncommon to see Commanders among the common workers.

That could turn out to be a problem later because Commander Rank farmers meant they would most likely have Monarch Rank Guard Captains and enforcers in the next city.

Chapter 496 Minotaurs and Trolls

The Minotaur tribes reminded Karl a lot of the Orcs, in a way. He was using [Brutality] to increase his size and keeping his face covered with a bandana, which was mostly to keep the dust down. Between that and the hood of the coat that Rae had made him, it was good enough that he didn't need to wear a mask while travelling, and he wouldn't risk being identified.

He wasn't all that worried about being called a human, he had realized that was unlikely to be an issue with the group that they had. But being personally identified was still an issue, if there was someone looking into the dungeon opening.

The increased size actually seemed to set the monsters more at ease than his normal, human size had. It was as if by being visibly inhuman in some way, he was more like them.

Now, if he took the mask off, and they mistook him for a Giant or an Ogre, there might be issues, as the Giant Clans did not get along well with the rest of the monsters. Unfortunately, they didn't have a disguise spell that could help him with that.

[If I had more materials, we could dye you a new colour too. I don't think that an ash black like Thor would work. I am pretty sure that both humans and giants come in that colour. But if we could make you blue or green, that would work. The Trolls and Orcs are both good people, and it wouldn't be bad to look like them.] Remi suggested.

[Well, if you happen to come across the rest of the ingredients, I will consider it. For now, I will just keep the bandana up.]

Remi had made him a half dozen mask prototypes so far, but she wasn't happy with any of them, so they had all been scrapped, and now she was trying to get inspiration for another, while she looked for the ingredients to make a different coloured version of the Shadowbranch paste.

Evening still hadn't taken them to Oakhamping, but it did take them to another small farming village full of Trolls and Minotaur.

[Do you think that you can milk a Minotaur? How far down are they bull? Do you think that you can polish their horns like Troll tusks and make them shiny? I have so many questions.] Cara was rambling in Karl's mind as they settled in for the evening.

[I don't know any of those questions, and I don't want to know most of them. But I'm pretty sure that you could polish the horns to be shiny. See that one on the left of the gate? There is a bit of damage on the horn where it hit something, and it's slightly shiny. So if you polish them, they should buff up.]

That was enough to sate her curiosity as the clerics got ready for the evening's public relations work. They had made an entire bulk bag full of rice and beans, and now it was up to Karl to find out if anyone wanted to join them.

He parked Thor between the few other merchant wagons and the village's low stone wall. The guards watched him, but didn't really care, as his group wasn't doing anything threatening. It was only when he approached that they were on alert.

"Gates are closed for the night." The guard informed him brusquely.

"That's alright. I have a Dragon Cleric with me who is making an evening stew, and it is their custom to invite anyone who is hungry to join them. So if there are other guards or someone else in town who could use a meal, let me know. I will leave you to it and go talk to the other merchants now." Karl replied with a shrug.

He made a loop, quietly informing them that the Dragon Priestess would have dinner if they wanted some. The merchants had all eaten already, as Karl stopped later in the day than most, but they came over to socialize anyhow. It was good to hear the stories of the road from fellow merchants, and these were actual merchants, far from home, not farmers called in to supply the city.

"The road has been rough these last few days. All the big bosses are off to do something important, and the stupid ones are trying to test their luck while the Overlords are away." One of the Minotaur merchants began as his assistant poured a potent smelling cream liquor into a mug.

A few of the others nodded. "The entire town council in Oakhamping is gone. They used the portal array in the city to go somewhere, but they didn't tell anyone where. They just grabbed a bunch of city guards and left right in the middle of market day." "Are you all headed south?" Karl asked.

"Yeah. You came from that way, is it the same at Halsearing?"

Karl shook his head. "It's much stranger. They've called for every farmer they can get in contact with to stock the city with food. But there was also a huge battle west of the highway, and talk of a possible dungeon.

I don't know how much of the rumours are true, but there is definitely a big fight going on, we saw that much ourselves, and there are at least two Orc Tribes, plus every combat capable Troll from Halsearing."

"That doesn't sound good at all. It might be all over before we get there, but if they've called so many people to the city, how are we going to make a profit? We've had some of these goods too long already. It might not be food, but we can't just lug them around the country all spring without a plan." The Minotaur with the strange liquor sighed.

Tessa smiled as she looked at the city walls and saw a number of small faces hiding behind the stones. She added more of the mix to her largest pot and topped it off with hot water, preparing for guests.

The merchants chuckled. "Every village is filled with urchins, the dregs who have lost their families in battle, or to the wild. I suppose having a Dragon Cleric around might actually make things safer."

Karl smiled as he realized what they meant. The street kids would steal food or coins if you weren't careful, but Tessa was going to feed them tonight, so they would be a bit less desperate and hungry.

They might still try, but they wouldn't be driven by that life or death instinct when their belly was full.

They just had to sneak past the guards, whose job it was to keep them from wandering out and causing trouble.

That was easy enough, there were only two on guard at the gate, and they were pretending that they didn't see anything. So, when the food was ready a half hour later, nearly a dozen kids and two off-duty guards came out to join the circle of merchants around the campfire.

They had all brought bowls and spoons with them, understanding the process. This pot wasn't as huge as the one that the last night's stop had brought out, but for their travel group, it was already hugely oversized.

There were a few servings left when the last of the bowls were filled, and Tessa smiled in satisfaction as she moved the pot off the heat.

"Have there been many attacks north of here? We're near the edge of Minotaur territory here, and I haven't been this way recently." Karl asked.

The Minotaur looked startled when Karl said that, but he just shrugged.

"Nothing too close, but once you get past Oakhamping, things are never all that good. The towns are getting smaller every year, with the people all moving to the city unless they're farming. But I hear that there have been strange appearances away from the highway. Monsters that don't belong, ones that attack anyone they see." The Minotaur explained, taking on a storytelling tone.

One of the others scoffed. "It's not just a tale. We ran into a group of Hill Giants. Damned Hill Giants, two thousand kilometres from their territory, just two weeks ago northwest of here. Something strange is going on.

They didn't even answer when we tried to talk to them, they just attacked."

That sounded familiar to Karl and the others, but apparently it wasn't a thing that normally happened here.

Chapter 497 Combined Skills

Once everyone had returned to their homes or beds for the evening, Karl settled in to meditate and work on combining skills. If he could get [Skill Master] to Rank 3, he would be able to upgrade monster skills by a tier, making more powerful versions of the base skills. So, if he had combined skills that were

already more powerful than what the monsters had begun with, the upgrade to Skill Master would become even more impressive.

There was also hope that one of the others would get a skill to Monarch Rank soon as well. Cara had begun with Disintegrate a Rank above herself, but Rae and Hawk had skills advanced well before their body did. If they could do the same again, it would give everyone an extra level of safety against attacks.

So, dealing with stronger attackers became Karl's priority for the evening. An effective combat skill that would allow the beasts to eliminate threats at the Monarch Rank before they made it there themselves.

The problem was that they all used different skills. Unless one of them advanced a skill on their own, he would have to choose who would be the one that got the attention. Cara understood that she was at the bottom of that list, as she was not only the youngest sister, but she was also the only one that already had a Monarch Rank skill, so she could somewhat take care of herself.

Oldest to youngest would be the way that Karl tried this time.

Hawk and Thor hadn't had new skills in a while, and Thor had gained most of his through hard work and not a deliberately concocted resource.

But that was the easiest way to gain new skills, assuming that Karl could find the materials.

[Is there anything in particular that you want?] Karl asked Hawk as he tried to uncover some secret to combining skills.

[We haven't seen cool new skills in a while. We need to look for new creatures to fight.] Hawk sighed.

That might not be an option for some time, as they were trying to avoid fighting as they pretended to be merchants, and they had already gone through the dungeon that they had come here to find.

It hadn't given them any new ideas, as the slimes were just mimicking their appearance.

[What if you learned Trollish Regeneration from your Skill Tree and combined that with Eternal Lightning?] Hawk suggested.

[For faster regeneration while the barrier is up? That's not a terrible idea. They'll both be skills that I can use, so I'll at least have the chance.]

[Do that then. You have enough points, right?]

Karl checked his status

[Skill Points] 31

He had enough. In fact, if he had to, he had enough to get [Barrier] or [Refresh] as well. He had skipped almost all of the defensive tree because he had Thor and the Clerics with him, but at some point in the future, those core skills might become the basis for new abilities.

He also wouldn't be able to see what the Tier 4 defensive options were until he unlocked them, and following the logic that it would include a skill that was better than [Trollish Regeneration], it would make Thor a very happy Cerro.

[Trollish Regeneration] learned.

He also wouldn't be able to see what the Tier 4 defensive options were until he unlocked them, and following the logic that it would include a skill that was better than [Trollish Regeneration], it would make Thor a very happy Cerro.

[Trollish Regeneration] learned.

[Remaining Skill Points] 11

[Merger Available] Success Rate 100%

[Proceed?]

Karl stared at the information on his status screen. He hadn't expected that there would be something that was guaranteed to mix with [Trollish Regeneration].

[Details?] Karl tried, unsure what the command was, to look at the option before he chose yes or no.

[Merged Skill: Void Body] Limited Invulnerability and Trollish Regeneration may be combined to create the Epic Ranked skill [Void Body].

[Void Body] Ignores all attacks under ten percent of total health and regenerates five percent of total health per second. Severed body parts may be transformed to void energy that may be merged with the main body to speed regeneration.

So, it was basically the same effect as the two skills individually, but if he lost an arm again, it would just turn to energy and grow back. No need for Lotus to practice her embroidery skills on him again.

Karl rubbed his forearm where it had been reattached. That arm still felt slightly different from the other one, even if the doctors had assured him that it was all in his head, and the cleansing spells had purged the taint of Frost Giant blood from his body.

[Skill: Void Body] learned

[Shared Skill: Void Body] gained by Cara

[Additional Group Members Able To Learn Void Body] Dana, Ophelia

Karl smiled as he read through the message. Perhaps tomorrow, while they were driving, he would try to make them a book to learn the skill. That wouldn't be too hard.

[Materials needed] 1ml Totem Rank void element blood, 3 Void Stones over 6 grams each, ground onyx sand, 10ml Overlord Rank Troll blood

Or maybe it would.

Why was that skill so much more ridiculously difficult to turn into a book than anything else that he had made? First off, a Totem Rank Void Element beast probably didn't exist on this continent, and secondly, Void Stones, and most other Elemental stones were normally tiny. Finding ones over six grams was ridiculous, like asking for a thirty-carat diamond.

Hawk laughed. [I guess that you won't be making that book for anyone else. But can you use it on us?]

Karl focused on spreading the passive skill and mentally frowned at the bird.

[No, it will only work for myself and Cara. At least for now. I can use the passive skill of Trollish Regeneration on you all, but not the new skill, and not Limited Invulnerability.]

Hawk shrugged and pulled a feather that was bothering him. It immediately grew back in its proper position, and he chirped happily.

Trollish regeneration was going to be a true pleasure for preening, as he could pluck any feather he was dissatisfied with, and get a new one instantly.

[Can our clerics have Trollish Regeneration?] Cara asked curiously.

Karl quickly checked the requirements for the Trollish Regeneration skill.

[Nope, just the beasts. Two of them might be able to learn the new skill, but Trollish Regeneration is just for us so far. Like with Refreshing Lightning, I might have to learn how to share it with the whole group.]

[Ooh, ooh, when you learn to use it on them, will it make all their hair grow back? I know that they like to cut it off with a blade.] Cara giggled.

Karl didn't have the answer to that. If the trolls cut their hair short, it grew normally, but if they ripped it out, it returned at a much longer length.

Applying it now shouldn't cause their hair to rapidly grow. It hadn't changed Karl's as far as he could tell.

[I think that they will be fine. If we do learn to share the skill, we might want to warn them before they shave, though. If they shave everything and it immediately grows to full length, they will not be happy.] Karl replied, trying not to laugh out loud while everyone was in bed.

Dana had just fallen asleep, and as eager as he was to tell everyone about the new skill, there was no need to do it right now.

So, Karl double-checked that the Naga Warriors and the Golems were on duty and let his mind go blank, much to Cara's dismay.

There were new developments, and she needed answers. But Karl was ignoring her, so she would have to wait.

Chapter 498 Oakhamping

After they got up in the morning, the road began to take them northeast along the bank of a large river. Oakhamping, the next major city on the route, was built along the banks so that they could have plenty of fresh water, but Karl did wonder if they had problems with spring floods.

The road itself was in rough shape, but it showed signs of having been groomed. There were drag marks where something large, perhaps a group of logs, had been pulled along the muddy road surface to flatten it.

The traffic was light, and the fields were busier, with more livestock and fewer pulse crops. It made the area feel more alive, even if the ambience still felt somewhat unwelcoming to Karl.

There was no good reason for it that he could tell. The people were kind enough and happy to see him, but he got the feeling that the land itself was rejecting him.

The city of Oakhamping was impossible to miss. Unlike Halsearing, it was a stone-walled fortress city, designed as an eight pointed star fort, on a hill beside the river. Being twenty metres over the riverbank, plus ten metre walls, Karl could see it from a dozen kilometres away, and Hawk had been giving him updates all morning, while avoiding getting too close, as the town had huge crossbows on the walls equipped with magical bolts.

When they got a few kilometres away, Hawk returned to his space and Karl led Thor into the lineup to get into the gates.

There was a massive Rock Troll in an ornate guard uniform filling water skins for travellers and asking questions.

"What are you importing?" He asked, ready to make a note on the sheet attached to his clipboard.

"We've got an assortment of tools from Halsearing."

The Troll nodded. "Anything else in the wagon?"

"A barrel of Rum and one of cooking oil. That's also going to be up for sale if we find a buyer."

The Troll whistled and raised his hand, which brought over a smaller troll with deep red skin and highly polished tusks that had golden bells hung from them.

Karl almost mistook him for a jester, then he realized that it was the Troll version of a nobleman's outfit.

"Yes, Guard Captain?" The Troll asked.

"Check this wagon, they've got good stuff to sell." The big Troll explained.

The Troll Noble gave Karl an appraising glance, estimating his power level and wealth. His outfit was naturally mostly made with an Epic Grade skill, but the coat was Royal Rank silk.

That caught the Noble's attention, then he noticed the inner lining of the wagon's cover, which had also been made by Rae.

That was enough for his trained glance to know that Karl was no average merchant, no matter how cheap the good he was selling were. In fact, with the two Royal Rank Naga Warriors guarding the clerics and their personal guards, it didn't take a genius to know that Karl was more likely to be a mercenary than a merchant.

That didn't matter to him, what mattered was that they might have items that the city was short on, which could be sold at an unusual markup.

Tessa pulled back the cover on the tools for the Troll to check, and he smiled in satisfaction.

"The tools all appear to be good quality. How is the oil and liquor?" He asked.

Lotus grew a pair of sticks with a small scoop on the end and popped the bungs on the kegs to dip a small sample.

The Noble appraised the oil carefully. By smell, taste, and then by shining a glowing stone through it. Karl wasn't sure what that tested, but he seemed satisfied. The sip of Rum made him wheeze, and the Guard laughed.

"It must be the good stuff." He joked.

The Noble gasped and handed back the spoon, which Lotus dipped for him.

The Troll sipped the Rum and smiled. "I don't think this is quite fit for the average Nobleman's palette. But I will buy the whole barrel from you right now. I can give you twelve silver coins and a trusted merchant trade token for it."

Karl saw at the edge of his vision that the merchants in line on either side of him looked envious, so the price was either above average, or the trade token was worth the loss.

"Alright, I will take that deal. Let me know when you've got someone to grab it." Karl agreed.

The Troll just smiled and handed Karl a fistful of coins and a wooden token on a leather necklace. The Nobleman was wearing an identical token, so it wasn't something that was traded, but one that you kept with you to signify that you were trustworthy to trade with.

The gaudily dressed Noble finally caught his breath as the big guard grabbed the barrel of rum and slung it over his shoulder.

The Guard Captain motioned for someone to come take over his water distribution and questioning duty before opening the bung and pouring himself a whole mouthful of rum directly from the barrel.

He was a big troll, but it was still comical to see him drink directly from a barrel.

The replacement just shook his head as the Guard walked away, and checked the notes that had been left behind.

"You have tools to sell, and Mister James is here to purchase them? Alright. If you finish the sale, let me know. If you don't need a sales spot in the market, you can skip the line." He explained.

The Troll Noble that had been identified as Mister James took out a notepad and made marks as he counted the tools. "I will give you four Gold, six silver. That's as high as I can go, even with your new trusted trader token."

That was more than they had paid, Karl was fairly certain. "You have a deal. Did you want a ride back into town? We can drop these goods at your shop before I go looking to restock for the next leg of the trip."

"That would be excellent. My shop is near the gates, the James Mercantile Store."

Karl pulled out of line and gestured to the Guard that they were headed in. He just waved for them to go, and Karl made his way to the front of the line, with the merchant on the other side of the driver's bench at the front of the wagon.

The Naga Warriors were getting strange looks again, but at least it wasn't lustful lizard folk this time, just curious trolls wondering why they were so far from home.

The interior of the Star Fort designed city was a direct contrast to the masterful stonework of the walls. Everything was dirt roads, crude wood and thatch or field stone buildings with shale and slate roofs. Perhaps the Trolls hadn't made this place, but had only taken it over at some point.

They should have the technology to make it, though. The quality of the tools that Karl had brought to them was good, and it wasn't that hard to cut square blocks. They just hadn't, for whatever reason. This entire country was strange, but this mystery really made Karl wonder what sort of history the city had.

Chapter 499 Factions

They stopped at a decently built stone shop near the gates, and the Noble called out a group of servants to collect his purchases. It was only one load for the burly troll, and the well-dressed man vanished inside with one last polite nod towards Karl.

He seemed to be in a hurry to be out of sight, but that might have been because he was overdressed for this part of town, and he wasn't wearing armour.

As strange and run down as this city was, they did need some sort of trade goods to take along the road with them. They could keep just doing donations to the needy, but that was more of a church mission, and it would seem odd for a powerful merchant to go along with it.

The options in the city weren't great, and most of the vendors goods made the ramshackle stalls look like they were decent quality.

But as Karl led Thor through the street, they were encountering more of the original stone buildings, which were far too large for the Trolls. It might have been Minotaurs, but Karl suspected that this was actually a Giant built city. The doorways were close to seven metres in most of the buildings, and the Trolls rarely got over four metres. The Minotaurs weren't any taller, if you didn't count their horns, but they seemed to have much more of a fondness for grandeur. That might explain the state that the city was in. If the trolls had recently taken it over, they might have never had the building skills to maintain it, and the majority of the city might have been destroyed during the battle.

It was a long way from the borders that the Giant nations held, but the stone of the surviving buildings held signs of long forgotten battles and showed centuries of wear, to the point that the walls had a line worn in them from pedestrians shoulders rubbing against them.

Once the city was looking more civilized, Karl led Thor towards one of the market areas. With some luck, they would be able to buy enough goods to keep up pretenses as merchants.

None of them were eager to stay any longer than they had to in the city, so they were all keeping their eyes open for anything promising. However, there was nothing worth buying, even if the price was low.

[Why don't we leave, and you can sell what me and Remi make instead?] Rae suggested.

[Remi? What is Remi making?] Karl asked, checking her space, where the Naga Queen was mixing plant products into various clay containers that Hawk was drying with his fire for her.

[She was trying to make new disguise pastes for you, but they're not working out right. She's got a number of moisturizing lotions, some makeup, an anti aging cream of questionable ability, and a painkiller.] Rae joked.

[I'm close to getting another colour right. We're just short on plants, because we picked them based on what was pretty or tasty, not on what had the best compatibility to make stuff.] Remi complained.

Karl turned to talk to the ladies in the wagon.

"How about we get out of here? Rae has agreed to help us with some trade goods for our next stop. I don't think that there will be much here that will be worth buying." He whispered.

Ophelia and Dana both nodded as they watched the crowd out of opposite ends of the wagon.

Karl thought about the flow of traffic in the city and turned Thor north down a main street. That should take them to the north gates, assuming there were north gates. Leaving empty wasn't optimal, but they could claim that they had an arrangement to pick something up a few days down the road.

It would also give them more room to sleep in the wagon.

The trolls were busy at work, ignoring Karl and his team, except to move out of the way of the massive Cerro as Thor pushed through the crowds.

The north gates were only partially open, just a man door, not large enough for Thor or the wagon.

"Pardon, can we get the gate opened? I need to head north." Karl asked the guards.

The pair of Rock Trolls turned to stare at him.

"Taxes are due on exports." The grey skinned creature insisted.

"We didn't buy anything today, Just sold our tool shipment."

The troll stared into the wagon, then smiled. "We will take one of the women instead."

Karl shifted so they could see his trusted merchant token, in case it made a difference.

They didn't seem to care, and Karl took a glance at the wooden gates, which had no visible enchantments on them.

"That's not going to happen. Now, are you opening the door, or is this going to get messy?"

They were starting to gather a crowd, and Dana prepared for an attack from behind. They hadn't been warned by any of the other Merchants about this city, but perhaps everyone had assumed they knew the process.

Perhaps they just needed to bribe the guards, but going by the angry looks on their faces, that wasn't going to be an option anymore.

"You're not even a Troll, but you think that you get to leave here for free?" The guard laughed.

Karl ignored the taunting and turned to the overdressed Troll closest to the steps of his wagon.

"How mad would you be if I broke the door on my way out?" He asked.

The Troll Noble laughed. "If you think that you can get past them, nobody will mind about the door."

"Low-key, remember?" Ophelia whispered as Karl stood up on the front of the wagon.

Karl hopped forward to walk down Thor's back before stepping to the ground in front of him and looking up at the guards.

They were just smirking at him, confident that he would give up one of his passengers or crew for them to sell.

Faster than the Troll could follow, Karl's maul was out and swinging.

Five stacks of [Bone Crusher] collided with the massive monster's chest, and the air was filled with the sound of shattering bones and splintering wood as he was sent through the closed gate.

Karl turned to the other guard, who had frozen in shock.

"Looks like the gate is open now. No need for a fee to open it."

"Thor, let's go. I have no more patience for stupidity today."

Karl expected something. Some response, whether it was anger, fear or outrage at his actions. But the Trolls just stood there as Thor walked out the gate with the wagon, and the puddle of Troll in the wreckage of the gate began to heal and reform its bones.

The gate guards were big, but only Commander Rank. However, Karl could sense that there were more powerful Trolls all over the city that hadn't been alerted to the incident.

He walked a few hundred metres as Thor followed behind, with everyone tensely waiting for something to happen.

Only when they made it to the first of the farmers who were leaving the road to detour around to the south gate of the city did Karl begin to relax.

"Did the Stone Guard Gang lose control of the gate?" The farmer asked hopefully.

Karl shook his head. "No, I just smashed one guard through the gate itself. What is going on in Oakhamping?"

The farmer laughed at him. "I guess nobody told you. The City Guard disbanded last month, now the gangs control the gates. The Noble Silks control the south gate and most of the old city. The Stone Guard controls the North Gate, and most of the northern wall, while the slums change hands too fast to keep track of.

Did you manage to sell your goods? I see that you have a token from the Noble Silks."

Karl internally sighed. So that was why they were giving him a hard time at the gate. He thought that the city was more organized than it was, and he was actually wearing a rival gang's token.

"Yeah. The Noble Silks bought my entire cargo. I'll have to pick something up along the way before I turn east."

The farmer nodded. "There might be a bit left. Stay away from Berwickham entirely if you can, though. The Trolls have been at war with the Obsession Demons all summer for control of the city. When the

river branches, follow it east, and you will end up back at the road again in a bit over a hundred kilometres.

If you're lucky, there won't be too many wild tribes or bandits along the way."

Chapter 500 Detour

The best wishes for not too many bandits turned out to be a red flag much faster than any of them could have expected.

By the time that the city was out of sight from the ground, Hawk had already spotted three groups of bandits waiting for travellers along the road.

The first one, all the travellers were going around, as they were set up at a bend in the river with two bridges, and it was simply faster to go through the field in a straight line to where the road came back to their side.

But the second was going to be an issue, Karl could tell already.

There were twenty buffalo type Minotaur, much like the sort that Karl was familiar with, but Hawk said that they were much more heavily built, and their heads were different, with forward curled horns instead of their usual upright ones.

There was a farmer following them who had his two boys as guards, and they all looked nervous. If they were ambushed on the way back to the farm, they wouldn't lose their crops. Instead, they would either lose the money they needed to keep the farm running, or possibly, their lives.

Karl considered just going through the coulee where the Minotaurs were hiding, but there was a chance that they would ignore him to go after an easier target who was guaranteed to have cash on them.

So, he followed the flat lands further east, as he was going to be turning that way when the river forked, which might not be for most of the day.

He didn't have a precisely scaled map, only their reproduction of the one that the Beast Clerics had at the temple, and there was no telling exactly how accurate it was.

If it was right, they should reach the split later that afternoon, but it might be near dark, or even the next day.

The farmers followed them for another hour, then turned off on a small track and pulled into a farmhouse.

After that family had separated from them, the number of bandits began to increase steadily. Whatever was going on in this area had created an influx of desperate bandits, and the situation was disgusting to Hawk.

In his mind, bandits should be predators. Like Rae, they hid in the trees and set traps. They should be dangerous, not a bunch of hobos with rusted weapons, or even just tattered clothes and their own claws.

Their state was embarrassing. Even if they were just monsters, they should have some dignity.

One of the groups of bandits, Minotaurs who had set up a checkpoint of downed trees, was struggling to even make a proper campfire with the fresh green wood that they had collected.

It was so pitiable that even Hawk was moved. Moved enough that he bombarded their campsite a little and lit their cooking fire before flying away.

Thor had decided that the best route wasn't on the road, so they were travelling nearly a kilometre to the east of it, in between farmers' fields. That meant that they were in no danger of bandits along the road, just anything that might be in the fields.

If the farmers were alarmed to see his group travelling between their fields, they didn't say anything about it, and by dark, Hawk had found the split in the river, and they were prepared to set up on the edge of a stand of trees, where they could get firewood and set up camp for the evening.

An empty wagon made a good tent substitute, and with a bit of reorganization, they had everything set so that the whole group would be comfortable and nobody was sleeping in the dirt.

Dana joined Karl in his hammock slung under the wagon, while the other three made a nest of blankets in a net that Rae had created across the wagon bed.

It looked like a cargo securement net, or a fishing net, but it was made of the same stretchy silk that Rae used for hammocks.

The Bloodbath Spider had decided to join Thor on the outside today, so she could keep a proper watch. There was a better than zero chance that something would come looking for them at night, even if Karl had put the wagon and the trees on opposite sides of the small campfire.

That meant there was a chance, however faint, that she might get to hunt tonight.

Hawk was asleep, resting after having scouted all day, but she was ready to go and eager for someone to try her.

Her dreams were doomed to be left unfulfilled. Nothing really moved around at night in this region. The dense population had run off the wild beasts, and the danger of the more intelligent monsters kept everyone else home at night.

So, while Karl and Dana silently held each other in their hammock, Rae was left to focus on her skills. Nothing was as good as actual combat, but a little practice wouldn't do any harm. She wanted her Golems to improve by a Rank again.

Even if they couldn't be as smart as the bodyguards, they could be stronger. Rae prided herself on the amount of damage that she could do, and while her Golems still held the edge, thanks to Offensive Adaptation and Lacerate, it was getting close.

Karl had bodyguards now too, and unlike Remi's limited arsenal, he had far too many skills to help them cheat.

Only a few hours after everyone fell asleep, midnight by Rae's reckoning, something changed in the air around them. There was a surge of power and suddenly the area was filled with monsters.

Not a portal, but a monster spawning Anomaly.

Despite this being the best thing that Rae had seen in a month, she resisted the urge to run out and turn them into a new art installation.

Instead, she woke Karl up to inform him of the good news.

[There are new monsters. The ones that just appear. I can see three Drakes, or maybe baby dragons, and a dozen big, Minotaur sized things.]

That didn't seem right to Karl. [Did they just appear in the middle of the night? That's only supposed to be a problem at home because of the broken anomalies. The books said that doesn't happen in other places.]

[Well, they're here. Maybe you can ask them?]

That was a novel concept. If they were not insane and feral like the ones at home, they might be something that he could talk to and see what was going on. But with this feeling in the air, Karl suspected that it would not be that easy.

He gently roused the others, spending a few extra seconds to kiss Dana until her eyes opened, then motioned for silence, so she knew to be ready for danger.

The group slowly gathered around the embers of the campfire, and Dana sleepily settled into Karl's lap.

Cara, seeing an opportunity, came out to sit on Lotus, knocking her over for a moment before the cleric got herself adjusted.

"Sorry to wake everyone up in the middle of the night. Rae reports that there has been a monster spawn in the whole region. She has located at least three drakes or small dragons, as well as over a dozen Minotaur sized monsters in our vicinity. I didn't want you to be caught unaware if they gather to fight. They're not that close right now, but I am calling out the other bodyguards for the remainder of the evening, so we can get a bit more sleep.

But we should consider this to now be a hostile battleground, not just a hostile nation." Karl explained quietly.

Everyone nodded quietly, and Tessa shook her head as she realized that Lotus was already asleep under Cara. They could stay on the ground for the rest of the night, it was warm enough on the grass. Plus, Cara would defend her sleeping buddy, so if there was an attack on the camp, Lotus wouldn't be in much danger from the initial assault.

Not that it was likely to get past their defenders, but you could never be too prepared.

It was a good thing that none of them snored, though. The night air was so silent, as if every small creature had gone to ground, that Karl could hear the wind rustling the grass, and the faint crackle of the fire's embers.