

Beast Master 501

Chapter 501 Eternal Troubles

None of them were sleeping deeply, except for Lotus under the [Disintegration] bubble that Cara had erected over them while they slept.

At first, Karl thought that it must take a lot of energy to keep an attack spell active all night like that, but the void badger used it like a tripwire. There was almost no energy in it until something touched it and woke her up, then she would lash out at them.

With [Eternal Lightning] active, it was no burden at all, and she could keep it active without interrupting her normal night's rest.

So, that was what she did, and took full advantage of the fact that they had a small person for her to cuddle like a stuffed toy.

The first few hours after their arrival, the monsters seemed just as confused to be here as Karl was to see them there. But once they got their bearings, they began to spread out and stake their claim on the surrounding areas.

Nothing had claimed the areas that were dangerously close to their camp, but twice in the early morning hours, Karl heard the sounds of combat as they either attacked a distant farm, or were attacked by the locals whose territory they had trespassed on.

The farmers were mostly Minotaurs and related species around here, and they did not take kindly to whatever these creatures were.

Without light, Karl couldn't be certain, but to thermal vision, it still looked like Yeti and Drakes, as Rae had described them.

The whole group was up with first light, too nervous about the situation to sleep. "What are we going to do? Do we follow the river toward the road and continue with the plan to keep working as merchants? Or do we just assume that everything has gone to shit if they're getting random monster spawns in the monster nation?" Dana asked, gesturing with a spoonful of oatmeal to emphasize her words.

Tessa sighed and nodded. "Some of the monsters are sure to settle in, while others will be killed in territory wars. But hanging around longer than necessary isn't a particularly smart call.

Whether we go north to get out, or east as planned to finish our loop, I think that we shouldn't delay.

It might only be this area that is in trouble, but I have an idea of why.

The Golden Dragon Nation has always had too many anomalies and some low-level dungeons. That's why nothing else really wanted the territory to begin with, leaving it to the humans.

But now there is a stable dungeon here. A stable dungeon should also mean unstable anomalies that dump monsters on the area. That's how it works at home."

Karl frowned.

"So, that means the region around the Dungeon is likely to have a never-ending supply of trouble, just appearing?" He asked.

Tessa nodded. "Not every day, but they are more common near known stable anomalies of all sorts. So, it's likely that there will be more anomalies in this nation now than there were before.

I don't know all the details, that's more the specialty of the Blue Dragons and their research teams, but it's not a secret within the church that a new anomaly means more monster subjugation missions in the area over the next few years.

There is one near the Seminary Academy, and the monster appearances are reliable enough that they use the region to train Church Guards."

"That sneaky Dragon." Lotus gasped as she realized the implications.

Ophelia was taking a moment to consider all the options, while a smirk slowly grew on Dana's face.

"I just learned a valuable tidbit about the nature of the Bronze Dragons. They serve the Dragon Aspect of Law and Rules. But their actual attitude toward the law is much more [If there is no law directly saying you can't, then you can.] The spirit of the law concerns their patron much less than the actual letter of the law.

Many people go out of their way to obey the spirit of agreements, so they don't upset the Bronze Dragon and bring misfortune on themselves. But if they just looked for a clear and legitimate loophole, I don't think he would mind."

Lotus nodded. "That's right. The Bronze Dragon clerics are sticklers for contracts. If you want moral rulings, look for one of the Gold Dragon or World Dragon followers."

Karl had begun to suspect that the World Dragon was much more amusement driven and less moralistic than the church let on. But he wouldn't say that in front of a pair of clerics. At least not until he had definitive proof.

That voice in his head, laughing at him every time something strange happened in relation to the system, was most likely the World Dragon. But that was impossible to prove.

"So, what way are we going? Where does Hawk say the easiest way through is?" Ophelia asked.

"There isn't one. No matter where we go, we're going to have a fight. They've just been avoiding us because they think we're a sleeping monster pack, and they didn't want to fight at night.

Now that the sun is coming up, they will realize that we're a merchant wagon with guards. Once that happens, they will get more aggressive, especially the Drakes. I don't know what skills these sand coloured ones have, but we can hope that it's not something hard to deal with." Karl explained.

Tessa shrugged. "The Copper Drakes shouldn't be too bad. They are a type of sand dragon. They use a corrosive sand cloud attack. The problem will be if they're working with another monster. Drakes are smarter than people give them credit for. They can adapt to the weaknesses of their enemies, and bolster the strength of their allies.

They might not be as powerful as their Draconic cousins, but the Drakes are a higher order beast, and if they're working with an intelligent monster, they could be forming complex and deadly strategies.

What does Hawk say about the power levels?"

Hawk did one more loop of the immediate area to check, and found that it was mostly Ascended Rank, but there were two Commander Rank Drakes in his scanning range.

"Mostly Ascended. At the same level as the Dungeon, so it shouldn't be too bad for us this morning. But that could change at any time."

Chapter 502 Sand Drakes

Cara spread her wings and flew up to rest on top of the wagon's cover, while Tessa packed up the netting, rolling it to the front so it could be quickly unrolled the next evening.

"Everyone be ready. In under a kilometre, we are going to meet up with a drake leading a group of sand coloured Yeti things. They're all Ascended Rank, but there are over a dozen of them, and I don't know their powers." Karl explained.

Their guards altered positions, with the Lamia joining the Naga Warriors on each side of the Wagon, while Dana came to the front to sit with Karl and Ophelia went to the back of the wagon to bother Lotus for snacks.

Her supply was running low, and the Nature Cleric could make an incredible trail mix.

[Incoming. The Drake is ignoring me, so the whole group is coming for you.] Hawk reported.

[That's a good thing, keep scouting. I think that Cara should be able to deal with a Drake.]

Cara thought that was a great idea. She had seen Drakes before, but not for some time, and she hadn't been doing a lot of flying. If she could have a flying badger fight with the Drake, it would be a good way to keep her wings in shape and burn off some of the extra kilos that she had been gaining as she relaxed in her space.

Once they had spotted the group, the Commander Rank Drake led his group of what Karl was tentatively calling Sand Yeti in a full-frontal attack.

They might have just arrived here, but they understood the essentials of dealing with a merchant wagon. They had fanned out to keep Karl from flanking them and making them chase Thor.

"We will send all the golems and bodyguards forward this time. I want to know what these Sand Yeti can do before we face ones that are closer to our level. If the incident is similar to the ones in the Golden Dragon Nation, it will be almost all similar groups of creatures at different power levels." Karl insisted.

It was good logic, and nobody argued as he pulled the wagon to a stop and the summoned guards fanned out to defend the team.

The others held back for a moment, preparing to go anywhere that needed assistance, but the Bodyguards were all Royal Rank against Ascended Sand Yeti.

The monsters all started with the same attack, a fast-moving arc of sand that reminded Karl of Rend, but in elemental form.

The pair of lamias counterattacked, nullifying the attacks with [Rend] as [Flaming Body] flickered over their scales.

The Drake roared and took a deep breath to attack, but Cara was already in motion.

Karl had expected the small badger to square off with the much larger scaled attacker, but at the last second she barrel-rolled and passed under the Drake, which howled in pain.

[That's what you get for having bad breath, stupid. Oh, you don't like that, I'll punch you in the dick.]

Karl had to resist laughing as the Drake fell from the sky with a mournful howl of pain.

First, Cara had raked the sensitive inner thighs with her claws, then she followed up with the promised nut shot, and the Drake was out of the battle, though it was not severely injured.

The Drake hit the ground with a puff of dirt, and Cara landed on his back to pull his wings back, straining the tendons as she pulled upwards with her claws dug into the base of its wing bones.

The scaled beast lurched to its feet, twisting and bucking in an attempt to shake the creature free, while Cara rode its back like a rodeo cowboy.

"The badger is insane." Dana noted.

Karl wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "She's just having fun. Don't forget, at least one of our team members can talk to the creature if it's willing to speak. We might actually learn something about where they came from if we don't kill it immediately."

The Copper Drake sent a plume of corrosive breath in front of itself, then ran inside. Under normal circumstances, that would cripple an attacker and force them to let go.

But being attacked by Cara was no normal circumstance, and the corrosive breath only irritated her, encouraging her to pull harder on the wings until eventually the drake gave up and lay still on the ground, defeated and prepared to face death.

"Someone ask our volunteer where they were before they came here. I want to know where they came from and why." Karl demanded.

The Naga Warrior closest to the Drake relayed the message in Serpent, which all Dragon related species should speak.

At first, the Drake didn't respond, and Karl realized that there was something more wrong with it than the claws in its wing bones. Like a cloud had come over its mind, the Drake had no problem leading its subordinates into combat, but it couldn't understand questions, though it obviously heard them.

They tried for a few more minutes, thinking it was just being stubborn, before Cara decided to try [Nullify] on it. That had some effect, and the Drake began to swear at them, irate that it was being tortured.

"Oh, now you can hear us. Where were you before today, and how did you get here?" Karl demanded, letting the Naga Warrior translate.

The drake actually looked confused for a few seconds, trying to find an answer to that before madness descended over its eyes again, and it went back to roaring gibberish and trying to attack the Naga Warriors.

[Nullify didn't completely remove the madness on it. It's part of them. I think that they might be golems, or something like it.] Cara theorized, right before the Naga Warrior killed the irate Drake by beheading.

Cara claimed the body, while Rae claimed the head as a decoration, then they all came out to examine the other bodies.

The tan fur of the yeti was coarse like sandstone and thick. They hadn't seemed to suffer from the heat, unlike the regular variety, but they were similar in powers, but with their Element changed.

Hawk ordered them all brought into his space after examination. Sand magic was different, and the bird had a theory that one of them could learn new skills using the monster parts as part of a recipe.

It was bothering him that they weren't getting cool new things. Karl had gotten new abilities, and they had advanced, but it didn't have a huge obvious effect on their combat power like Hawk would have preferred.

"The bodyguards are savage. The Yeti didn't even have a chance to defend themselves, and the bodyguards weren't using proper skills. It's like their power is higher than it should be, but not like it has gone up a Rank. Like, the base ability has increased.

They're still limited in maximum power output, but they're on an entirely different level compared to most living things." Dana explained, unsure how to explain what she was thinking.

"I think I get what you mean. Their skills are definitely Royal Rank skills, but their bodies are more like those group leaders in the dungeon. They're tougher and faster than they should be. A grade higher in quality than a regular living thing." Karl agreed.

Dana nodded. "Exactly like that. There should be some way to learn that ability to increase base stats, but I don't know how."

Chapter 503 Pulled the Adds

The sound of their battle had alerted other groups of monsters in the vicinity that there was trouble, and the closest two drakes were leading their groups over.

None of them was above the Ascended Rank, but it was two dozen more of the Sand Yeti things, and perhaps a chance to learn a bit more about their combat abilities.

The first ones had died too fast to use more than one skill, so if these ones tried something other than their sandy version of Rend, Karl's group would know more about what to expect from future encounters.

"Cara seems to really enjoy fighting Drakes." Ophelia noted as the Void Badger flew in circles, waiting for the enemy to get into ambush range.

[All those stupid Divine Species think they're better than us because Void Badgers don't have a deity. But neither do Drakes, so who are they to act all arrogant? Not even their cooler cousins are as tough as a Void Badger.] Cara declared.

"Cara is annoyed that the Dragons are arrogant about having their own deities. The Drakes act like they're a subspecies of Dragon, and she has an irresistible urge to put them in their place." Karl translated for the group.

[If you were bigger, you could give them a power bomb.] Remi giggled.

Her little sister had a flair for the dramatic that the Naga Queen appreciated, even if Cara did usually act like the bigger sister.

Not the same way that Rae loved dramatic effects. Not at all. Rae liked dramatic visuals, while Cara was emotionally volatile, like she had an on/off switch for combat mode.

This pair of Drakes seemed to be a bit smarter than the first one, and they teamed up on the Void Badger, ignoring the rest of the group. It wasn't going to save them, but it was a good idea.

The battle was about to start, with the summons moving to the front as Dana stepped up into the sky so she could rain Magic Missiles on the drakes harassing Cara. It would only last a few seconds, but a mighty roar distracted Dana for a half second.

One of the Buffalo type Minotaurs from the nearby farmhouse was charging towards the battle, already bleeding and accompanied by four smaller Minotaurs, all similarly injured.

They had to be the local residents, and they were most likely under attack by one of these groups before the pained roars of the other Drake had drawn them away.

Dana didn't hesitate for more than a second, as Cara was already hurling Disintegration enhanced Rend attacks at the Drakes. She wasn't even trying to fight them this time, and Dana was pretty sure that she was actually preparing her favourite cuts to be roasted.

Before the Drakes were even dead.

The farmer and his children stopped at the scene of the battle as the Bodyguards toyed with the Sand Yeti for a few seconds to see if they would use a new skill. But they only used that one skill and then went for claw attacks when they were close. Even if you kicked them away, they still used the same skill. They used it in different ways, but it was still just the one skill.

"Merchant, thank the Gods that you're here. Can we pay you to save our farm? My brothers and cousins are holding the farmyard, but there are more of these things coming, and they won't see sense." The Minotaur pleaded.

"We could use some trade goods. You give us a discount, and we will help. Now, lead the way." Karl agreed.

They could use the practice, and the goods. Most of Karl's team took off running after the Minotaur family, while Tessa and Lotus got back in the wagon. Thor was faster than they were over a kilometre or more, even with the wagon. The others were at least fast enough to keep up with the Minotaur family, while Karl already knew where they were going because he could see the pair of Drakes and the large group of Sand Yeti attacking a farm.

There were other homesteads in the area that had been overrun, with the houses demolished, but a large group of defenders had gathered at this one.

There were Commander Rank Minotaur among them, but there were Commanders among the Sand Yeti here as well, and Commander Rank Drakes, which were much more difficult for the Minotaur warriors to deal with.

Dana turned to Karl as they ran. "Have Cara leave at least one of the Drakes for me. I want to fight a flying target so that I have the experience before we meet stronger ones." [Got it. I will leave hers alone. Or, you can practice artillery work, and just shoot at the others to improve your aim.] Cara suggested.

[Do you think that my aim needs work?] Karl asked, curious how she came to that conclusion.

[Of course it does. You're not even a badger, how could your aim be perfect? Even Sister Rae still works on her targeting.]

Rae laughed as she ran towards the farm, startling the Minotaur family, who hadn't realized she was there.

[Yeah, even the mighty Bloodbath Spider needs to practice.]

[Fine, Cara can attack things on the ground, and I will take out the other Drakes.] Karl agreed.

Cara raced ahead, a blur of black and white fur in the early morning light, as she hurried to intercept the attackers before anyone else could kill more of them.

"You know, the rest of us aren't going to get much of a fight if you let Cara just go wild." Ophelia laughed as the Void Badger approached the edge of the battle.

"While you do have a point. This is easier than arguing with her, and there will be more fights today, I can guarantee it. Once she has it out of her system, the rest of us can practice.

Now, Dana can pick her Drake, and I will distract the others."

Rae wasn't going to let Cara get all of the fun, but it would be even harder for the local farmers to identify her, as the Bloodbath Spider was working on her stealth skills.

She could blend with most things effortlessly, but her body wasn't easy to hide. So, she had found that if she moved in spurts and pretended to be another object, in this case a hay pile, she might be able to trick her targets.

She started out behind an actual hay pile, and then Shadow Stepped closer with her body disguised to look as much as possible like loose straw.

But then her patience ran out, and she stepped into the group furthest from the farmers and went to work dismembering the Sand Yeti while her Golems circled around to attack the sides.

The Golems were more obviously constructs, so they shouldn't be attacked by the defenders, while the presence of Rae would likely terrify them even more than the Sand Yeti force, given the power difference.

Cara was in no hurry this morning. She was playing superhero, rescuing the younger Minotaurs from the Yeti attackers and driving the monsters back, while making a big show of it so that everyone knew that they had been rescued and not tag teamed.

Chapter 504 Minotaur Steel

Karl joined the fight just before the farmers who had run after the retreating group, hoping that they might either rescue or recruit another group for their fight. The relief was visible on the faces of the defenders, and Karl called Remi out to toss a couple of [Healing Splash] spells onto the worst injured members of the Minotaur Clan.

None of them appeared to be dead, at least not here at this house, and a bit of healing was all it took to close their largest wounds.

Unfortunately, Healing Splash wasn't an instant whole body heal unless Remi soaked them in it, or got the spell inside them somehow. It would leak in through the cuts, and spread through the body when it stayed in contact, but that wasn't nearly as fast as a Cleric's minor heal spell.

She had been preparing for this situation, with a number of vials of healing potion. Hawk had made the containers for her with flames and sand, and she was delighted with them. The bottles even had their logo on it, a Naga with a Hawk on her shoulder.

Remi had made the logo out of clay, and Hawk had set the vials on it to cool, imprinting it on the bottom of the potion bottles.

"Open up. There you go, and one for you and for you."

Remi took mental notes of how long it took for the potion to start working, as she had never made someone drink a diluted Healing Splash before.

Her pleasure that she had found a way to run experiments that she couldn't get in trouble for was clear through the link with Karl, but he was busy with other tasks, and didn't have the time to praise her ingenuity.

He had hit both of the Copper Drakes with Rend already, and they had moved away from where Dana was fighting the third member of their flight. But they were retreating to hundreds of metres in the air, giving them plenty of time to dodge Karl's attacks, so he had to chase them with the skills.

It took far longer than it should have, as they were incredibly agile flyers. But Karl had a lot of practice controlling his skills, and with dozens of deadly arcs of energy chasing them, the monsters were taking steady damage, no matter how hard they fought to avoid his attacks.

[See, not as easy as you thought.] Cara laughed as she sensed Karl's frustration.

[Change of tactics.] Karl agreed.

Arrows with Disintegration on them were much easier to work with, and the targeting enchantment on the bow did half the work for him.

The first shot was a direct heart shot, as the drake was already trying to avoid the Rend attacks, and the second was not off by much, punching a clean hole through the drake's rear hip and out its back.

It howled in pain, but the effect hadn't been set to spread on contact, so it was a clean injury that the Drake would be able to heal with a few minutes of effort.

However, when the next arrow came, the Drake caught it with a smug smile on its draconic face.

Until the [Disintegration] spell exploded and removed the front half of its body.

[That's cheating. You can't just trick them into holding a bomb to kill them.] Cara complained.

[No, I think that he's on to something. Watching stupid monsters explode is kind of fun.] Hawk countered.

Karl let the beasts argue as he began to fire at the Sand Yeti, taking out the last few who had started to flee.

If they were left alone, they were a threat to other farms and homesteads. That shouldn't actually concern Karl, but it was still the right thing to do.

Dana finished her Drake and landed next to Karl as Thor and the clerics finally arrived. They started right in on the healing process, helping the farmers recover.

"Thank you Priestess." One of the older Minotaurs, a massively muscular woman, greeted them in a deep but somehow feminine voice.

"Are there other survivors or wounded? I see that there are many damaged farmhouses." Tessa asked.

The Largest Minotaur shook her head.

"No, the wee ones are in the house here. The only ones who didn't make it this far are unlikely to be making it anywhere else." She explained.

That must mean that they had some sort of plan in place, in case of attacks. If all of the children had made it here, where the adults had gathered to fight, it meant that the plan worked.

But probably not well enough to prevent casualties among those who tried to slow the approach of the monsters, or who were caught out unaware.

At home, Karl knew that shepherds stayed out in the fields all night to watch over their flock, so the same might be true of some of the farmers here. Those would be the most likely casualties, as well as the ones to alert the others to flee to the meeting point.

Remi passed over a few more potions with a smile on her face that Karl always thought looked like she wanted to eat someone. At least it was a mouth closed smile this time, so she wasn't showing fangs.

"Just in case there is another need for healing in the near future. These keep for a few months, at the very least, so you don't need to have a Dragon Cleric around all the time." She explained in Serpent, but at least a few of the Minotaurs seemed to know the language.

The Minotaur looked at the potions in shock. "These are proper healing potions? I haven't seen one of these in ages. Not since that Beast King came down from the north, selling them to the rich folks."

One of the older men laughed. "That's been nearly eighty years. I wonder whatever happened to him? But thank you, Queen Naga. Our herd is in your debt."

Thor snorted happily. They were herd monsters. Karl hadn't considered that before. The bestial half of them was a herd animal, but they were classed as a monster species, not a beast species. He had previously assumed that meant they didn't take on bestial traits, only their appearance.

"The sun is up enough to travel now. We should get moving." Karl sighed, looking at the horizon, and knowing that there would be a lot more encounters like this in the next week or two until the anomaly ended, and the monsters stopped spawning at midnight.

"You should keep everyone close. These monsters are likely to appear again at midnight for some time. I don't know how long, but I don't think it's over," he added.

The farmers nodded. "At least they're not interested in destroying the crops. That's a good start. If we travel in groups, we should still be able to do our work. It will just be uncomfortable for a while until we can rebuild everyone's houses."

[There are more coming. Do you want to do something about them?] Hawk asked as he continued his patrols.

[How close, and what direction?]

[Ten kilometres, from the south. They're past the city and headed this way.]

There should be quite a few farms, and a couple of bandit traps, in that direction. If these farmers were lucky, the Sand Yeti wouldn't make it this far.

[No, let the locals deal with it. We will get what trade goods we can and move on.]

The Minotaur group was already busy with that. They weren't gathering food or goods they would need, but they had quite a few tools made in identical copies.

Karl looked at what they were laying out and realized that what he had taken as tools weren't actually tools. They were all combat weapons designed to look like farm implements.

They could be used as farm tools, but they were designed to either do double duty, or be partially disassembled to make them into proper combat weapons.

That must be a Minotaur thing, as they were all Minotaur scaled. But the designs were brilliant. Some of these could become quite popular with farmers at home. They might not be as strong as Minotaurs, but Karl had a suspicion that as the Elites learned more, they would be able to help the rest of humanity even the odds.

Chapter 505 Reasonable Monsters

Karl made a guess as to what those weapons would be worth at home, given that they were all Common Grade magical weapons, then put about half that much money on the bench in front of him.

The Minotaurs didn't look happy with the offer, but they didn't look insulted, so he was at least close to what they would accept after he helped him with the attack.

Karl added six more gold coins, and watched as the largest Minotaur woman began to relax a little.

Two more gold coins, and most of the others had lost their concerned looks.

"Do we have a deal?" Karl asked her.

She was the oldest, the largest and the most powerful. By most standards, she should be in charge.

She looked around the other farmers and nodded in satisfaction. "Yes, we can accept that, merchant. We appreciate your business. Going to the city has become a troublesome experience lately."

Karl smiled. "If you see others, you might want to flag them down. They will appreciate a safe spot to stop for the evening, with all the new troubles, and many of them have been avoiding buying anything in the city. The higher quality items aren't going into Oakhamping, so there is nothing worth buying."

The farmer nodded. "That's why we had so many here. We were waiting until we had a full cart load to take them for sale. If we all leave at once, other than one family, they can watch our animals, and we

will have enough guards for the trip. But now, we can put it off until next year. We've got enough to buy what we need, but the farms have been mostly self-sufficient for a while now."

"Best of luck to you, then. We will get on our way so that we can get to another safe spot before it gets dark."

The Minotaurs nodded, and Karl picked up their purchase to load into the wagon.

The beasts didn't immediately return to their spaces, Cara and Rae just wandered away from the farm, as if the locals would forget that they existed if they were out of sight.

Or, perhaps they really did. Nobody seemed concerned about a missing pair of Royal Rank beasts as Karl led the team away with Remi curled up in the middle of the wagon, on top of their new cargo.

It would be more comfortable if they put the net in place, but that blocked the side benches where everyone else was sitting.

So, it wasn't long after they were out of sight of the farms that the beasts, other than Thor, returned to their spaces to rest. Hawk had scouted everything within an hour's walk, so he returned for breakfast, with the intent to head back out after, but for the moment, they were just an average looking merchant wagon. Karl had even dismissed the Lamia bodyguards after the battle, so they didn't have an excessive number of guards.

Hawk came back out a half hour later to scout the area and directed them straight east, away from the river.

[There are too many fights along the river. All the wagons have attracted the Drakes, which has attracted more monsters, and others hoping to get loot or valuable drake scales and body parts.] He explained.

That was a good point. The drake body parts were actually precious resources. The price might be dropping hard in this area, but if they had a number of bodies with them, they could sell them after they were out of the area where the monsters were spawning.

Giant Strength rings were some of the cheapest magical items you could get in the Golden Dragon Nation because of the spawns and now the wars. So the same would apply to the drake scales in this area for at least the next few months until the materials had cycled through the market.

[There are a lot of farms out here. Should we go to the ones that are being attacked so we can loot them?] Hawk asked.

He meant it the same way that they had traded with the last one, but that was just a form of looting to Hawk because coins had no value in his brain. You just got them from hunting things or getting rid of stuff you didn't want.

[How far off course are the battles?] Karl asked.

[Not far, you'll be able to see them if we stay on the best course.]

"Hawk has found more farmers fighting. Does anyone mind intervening? The materials are valuable, and we can sell them later. Plus, it leaves fewer monsters to worry about at night." Karl offered the others.

Ophelia sighed as she turned to look out the front of the wagon. "As much as I hate to say it, that's what a local merchant would do. All these farms are potential customers. If we're not going to follow the river to the road, we might as well trade with all the rural farms along the way.

I just wish that we had gotten a reason that there are no towns along this entire savanna." She agreed.

Tessa nodded. "It's because of the nomadic tribes. Nobody dares to try to build a road and settle villages out here, but there should be random farms and nomadic villages."

"And because the nomadic villages move to where the food and water are, there are no permanent roads, only recently used trails. Alright, that makes sense.

I will follow Hawk's directions to the farms, and then we will trade with the nomads as we go. I suggest that we keep some bags or barrels of food for trade once we get to the nomads. That's all that the Orcs will trade for, and I don't know what the Demons will want." Karl suggested.

Dana looked at Karl like he was crazy. "And what makes you think that we can trade with the Demons?"

"It shouldn't be impossible. The ones we've seen so far have been intelligent and reasonable enough. If it's just a matter of being evil, I think we've all met a couple of humans who would qualify for the title."

Dana huffed in annoyance. Karl was likely referring to the mine bosses, but she recalled that one year when she was a kid that her dad opened a general store. He had been absolutely terrible to his employees until word spread through town and people stopped coming to buy from him. The last straw had been when another shopkeeper came in with his goons, beat her father unconscious and looted the store empty. With all the store profit spent on liquor, he had nothing left to restock or repair, and that was the end of his attempt at self-employment.

If that was the sort of evil that the Demons were, it would be manageable. But she suspected that it was a more primal sort of amoral evil. Like an aggressively cruel version of Rae.

That could be much harder to deal with, and there weren't enough of them to take on an entire nomadic tribe. If they were going to be passing through the nomadic areas, it would be better to just try to avoid them entirely.

Tessa and Lotus were thinking nearly the same thing. Demons were unpredictable, unless you were dealing with matters of their aspect. Obsession Demons were actually the most predictable, once you knew what they were obsessed with.

Wrath and Plague Demons were far less predictable, and the unaligned ones nobody could predict. They seemed to enjoy pranks more than anything else.

Chapter 506 Fill The Gaps

Karl turned Thor to meet up with the next farm that was being attacked by the Sand Yeti. This group didn't have a Drake with it, which should make it easier for the locals to deal with. Not that it would be easy for the Minotaur farmers to deal with over a dozen of the creatures, assuming they appeared in the same size of group as his team had been fighting earlier.

"These ones are weaker. Lower Ascended." Hawk noted as they got close.

A full-grown Minotaur was usually a Commander, so there was a chance that even a married couple could deal with the group, though it would be incredibly dangerous.

The farmers were holding their own, and Karl saw five adults in battle, all Commanders. That would be enough to deal with the Sand Yeti on their own, but when they got close, he let Ophelia, Dana and the Naga Warriors go fight while he pretended to drive the wagon.

Thor didn't need directions like that, but it was easier to pretend than to explain.

The four additions were able to quickly overcome the Sand Yeti warriors, and Karl noticed that the Naga Warriors were getting better with their use of [Tsunami].

They had learned to create it with a downward strike of the sword, sending a narrow vertical arc of water racing toward the target for a much more concentrated and energy-efficient strike than the wide version.

The Yeti were not particularly intelligent creatures, and they were mindlessly charging at the farmers without any sort of coordination, far from the level of threat that the groups led by Drakes had managed.

Ophelia didn't transform, she just hacked into the Sand Yeti with her axes, while Dana attacked from above, so she could see over the defenders.

Compared to the others, she was tiny. Ophelia could use [Berserk Terror] when she was enraged to increase her size and power without Karl's assistance. That made her larger than the Minotaurs and the Sand Yeti, while the Naga Warriors were not as thick, but their body length let them fight at an equal height to the others.

Their combat style was much more three-dimensional than most. They had no problem stretching out to attack from below, or raising to let their upper arms attack from above. Any target would have trouble dealing with four blades at once, and the more that they practised, the more skilled that they were becoming.

With their combined efforts, all the attackers were dead by the time that Karl pulled up to the farm house.

"Do you need any healing? I have Dragon Clerics with me." He called over to the farmers.

The bull headed grandfather of the family snorted in what sounded like annoyance, then gestured to the house.

"If they don't mind helping our kind, we do have injured." He agreed.

Lotus hopped down from the wagon to take her turn at healing, and Cara poked at the mental link with Karl.

[Tell her to try to polish their horns. I want to know what they look like when they are shiny.]

[Later. Let us heal them and get them to calm down before we try to get them to agree to let Lotus groom them.]

The presence of the Nature Cleric seemed to set them at ease. Lotus was possibly the least threatening person that Karl had ever met, and when she came in with an area healing spell active, it gave everyone a warm, welcoming feeling.

"What are you doing so far off the track, merchant?" The oldest of the farmers asked.

"This nonsense is happening all over the region, and we got a report that the route along the river, to bypass the battles at Berwickham, is even worse. The Sand Yeti are usually accompanied by Copper Drakes, who give them organizational skills. Between that and the opportunistic ones looking to either kill the drakes or the merchants who might have valuables, this way is safer. It's not much of a trade route, but I'll try to make a go of it as I head east." Karl explained.

"Well, if you can trade with the remote farms all the way through, you might do alright. What do you have for trade items?"

"We've got some Minotaur tools, the sort that double as weapons for the farmers." Karl offered.

The Minotaur nodded. "Do you want more of them to sell? We've got lots of steel here, but it's rare further into the savanna."

Karl shrugged. "I think that we have room for some extra gear. What do you have for sale?"

"We get numerous requests for the sickle spear, or quality shovels. Grain and grass crops are the majority of the roughage grown around here, but we also do root vegetables.

Sickles are essential for cutting wheat and hay, so we're carrying them for most of the year. Shovels are just generally good weapons. So, we make some with serrated edges for dealing with thick hides and leather armour."

That sounded like an innovative way to make a dual-purpose tool, even if you would have to sharpen the sides regularly with use. But Karl suspected that the sharpness was secondary when you were using the shovel as an axe.

Minotaurs were strong, and a shovel head had a decent bit of weight to it, so it would make an acceptable axe in an emergency.

Karl turned to Tessa, who gave him a thumbs up from the wagon. They didn't have too many of either, so they could afford to buy more here. The Minotaurs also had a crafting method that made Common Grade magical items out of their weapons, and she wanted to study that.

If it was something that the church could do, the Red Dragon Clerics could make good use of it when a conscription happened on short notice. Teaching conscripts to use anything but a spear was difficult, and even their spear skills were questionable. However, handing them a shovel shaped axe should be more familiar.

It had surely been tried in the past, and she had seen more than one pitchfork used in combat before, but it might become more commonplace if they had better quality tools already in hand.

The farmer sent one of the younger girls to go get their goods, and she came running back with a wheelbarrow full of them a minute later.

"This is what we have stockpiled. We haven't had a lot of spare time to make tools this year, but it should be enough."

Karl did the quick math and set out the money. Minotaurs weren't hard negotiators from what he had seen. They had a more communal mentality, and looked for the price that was best for everyone. So, offering them a fair price at the start actually saved time, and didn't cost you any extra.

The farmer nodded as he did the same math Karl had.

The little girl counted coins on her fingers and looked up at the elder Minotaur.

"Is that a good price, grandpa?" She asked.

"It is two thirds of the market price. That is a good price from a merchant, who has to carry them and find a buyer. It will be enough to cover all the supplies we ordered this spring." The older man replied.

The little girl smiled and carefully put the coins in a bag before running inside with the bag held proudly in front of her.

"Cute kid. Here, I have a couple extra healing potions, just in case you have more monster trouble."

Remi passed Karl the potions from her space. She had been busy making these, and she was getting better at them. They still lost some effectiveness compared to directly using the skill, but she had mixed some medicinal herbs in them from her swamp, and it was getting closer to full power.

The old Minotaur smiled as he carefully put the potions in a straw lined wooden chest.

"If you're certain, I won't say no to your generosity. Emergency healing supplies are hard to buy, but not many merchants have clerics with them."

Lotus giggled from inside the farm house, and Karl smiled.

"They're actually not made by the clerics. They're made by a Naga Queen friend of mine. They're Shaman healing magic."

The Minotaur's smile got even larger. "Oh, that is a shock. I don't think I've ever seen a Naga Shaman, much less a Shaman Queen. Even those Noble Warriors are a rarity outside their southern swamps. But if you're headed east, there will be Lizardmen among the nomadic tribes. They are the closest thing to permanent residents that you'll find east of the Minotaur farms.

Arrogant bastards they are.

Lizards and Minotaur don't get along all that well, but with Dragon Clerics and Naga they should be easier for you to talk to."

Chapter 507 Dangers To The East

Remi wasn't sure why the Minotaurs kept equating the Lizardmen with Naga. They were entirely different species. The lizardmen weren't even aquatic like the Crocolisk species were. All they had in common was scales. Karl took note of the old man's attitude on the other species before asking more questions. "Have there been any recent troubles with the nomadic Orcs or Demons?"

The farmer shook his head. "The demons all went west, intending to claim a city for themselves. I haven't seen any sign of them in months. The Orcs passed by here just a week or two ago, but they were in a good mood. We had a short fight, and then they traded us some steel in exchange for food."

Karl chuckled. "Yeah, that sounds like them. As long as they're not on a warpath, we should be alright, then."

Karl saw Lotus sneak the younger Minotaurs inside the house a small bag of rice and beans, along with a bag of seeds that he couldn't immediately identify. Then she came back out with her typical happy smile.

"We're all finished with the healing. Did you finish your trades?" She asked.

"Yeah, we're all done. We can head out as soon as everyone is back in the wagon."

Lotus held out her arms, and Karl laughed as he grabbed her by the hips to put her back in the wagon.

Ophelia rolled her eyes as she climbed up the ladder into the wagon, but Dana mimicked Lotus, holding out her arms. Karl grabbed her behind the legs for a one-armed princess carry and hopped up onto his seat.

The farmer laughed at her shocked expression, and Karl waved his free hand as he got Thor moving.

Dana thumped him on the head as she wiggled out of his hold to sit beside him on the bench, cheeks flushed with embarrassment.

There were a few other farms to the East, but Hawk didn't spot any more trouble. In fact, the rest of the morning was quiet as they travelled.

"Do you think that we reached the edge of the spawn area? When we went on missions, we would have reached a group at least twice an hour at this pace, but there isn't much of anything here." Ophelia noted as they travelled across the open grassland.

"That is possible. We have no way to tell what the edge of the spawn was, so it is plausible that it was centred closer to the city, and that would have put us outside the range by now.

We only have Hawk's reports to go on, and he's focused on finding us the best route east. But I won't complain if we have a break between battles.

Dealing with Drakes and a nomadic tribe at the same time would just be confusing, unless it was Orcs."

The others all stared at Karl, waiting for an explanation of that idea.

"Orcs like a good fight. If we ran into them and a group of Sand Yeti at the same time, we could send a champion out to fight, and they would accept that as a show of pride."

"What are you, the Orc whisperer?" Tessa laughed.

"Just wait. There are nomadic Orc tribes here, and we will see them eventually. When I was sent back in time by Bishop Misty, I learned a lot about them. They used to be more civilized, but they have easy to follow rules of behaviour that seem to have survived the years."

Tessa gave him a suspicious look, but Thor was nodding in agreement. Orcs were good people, they liked to smash stuff just as much as he did.

Karl sighed as he realized that everyone trusted Thor's judgment more than his own.

Hawk's scouting didn't turn up much of anything for the rest of the day. They had left the spawn area for the Drakes, and even the farms had mostly ended.

"Hey, do you think that the populations are related? As soon as the farms ended, so did the spawn. There were larger and stronger groups in the morning than at lunch, and now there is nothing. It feels like the spawn is tied to the local population." Tessa noted as they prepared to set camp for the evening.

"I've never heard of it being like that before, and they usually appear in the more rural areas. Or perhaps those areas are rural now because that's where the spawns happen. But it does track. Hawk agrees too. The stronger groups were in the areas where the farm houses were clustered.

If we add that to what you said earlier about them appearing near other anomalies, this might have been the smaller of the spawns as well.

We're days away from the Dungeon, so if distance has any relation to strength, this should be the weakest that it gets." Karl offered.

Tessa took out the map and looked at the area in front of them, which was basically one large blank spot on the map.

"Going by this, it's going to take us a week just to get back on the road, and close to a month to get to the border with the beastkin nation. When we set the schedule, we greatly overestimated how fast you can travel without breaking a wagon.

It's faster than having us mere mortals on foot, but compared to having us ride Thor and the rest of you jogging, we're less than a quarter of our daily travel distance, maybe even an eighth." Tessa sighed.

Ophelia nodded. "That is true. But it is what it is, and we're not under any sort of set deadline to get back."

Dana nodded, then smiled as she made a realization. "You know, this is as close as we've gotten to a vacation since we started at the Academy. We can just travel at our own pace and there is nobody to tell us otherwise.

We might have to do something that pleases the Red Dragon eventually, but we can find a way, I'm certain."

Ophelia smiled. "The gods have a way of making sure that we have the opportunity to make the right choices. That's probably a red flag, but maybe it will be cute orphans again."

Lotus laughed. "We do have good luck with orphans. It's like small creatures are attracted to us."

Tessa smirked at Ophelia, and Lotus stuck her tongue out at them. "That's not what I meant, and you know it."

She could protest all she wanted, but she was one of the small creatures.

"Do we have any major landmarks along the way?" Karl asked, with a gesture at the map in Tessa's hands.

"Nothing. We're heading straight east, and not following the river as it bends northeast, but we're only going to end up a hundred kilometres from where the ones following the road will end up. But if we go a

bit south of true east, we would end up following the road for quite a while. That might be safer if there are more incidents along the way, but according to the Dragon, the road route is the safer route.

It's after we reach the road again that we will have to decide to follow it southeast or go cross-country for a thousand kilometres to get closer to the Beastkin Nation."

Karl frowned at the huge gaps on the map with no marked population centres. It didn't make sense for there to be nobody living there, but if there were no established roads, the Divine Beast Nation might have not bothered to fill it all in.

Chapter 508 Visualize Your Desires

Without a monster spawn nearby, Rae's night watch was depressingly uneventful.

But uneventful was good for Karl, as it gave him time to study his skills and theorize ways to combine them that might make a whole new ability.

Trollish Regeneration and Limited Invulnerability had combined to make [Void Body]. The skill basically combined the best of both, with a bit more power, while keeping them as a passive skill.

That wasn't really what Karl was hoping for. It was an absolutely incredible skill, but he should be able to combine them into an ability that was better than just having both skills active, which he was doing anyhow.

None of the other skills seemed all that compatible, though. Karl considered his options, and while it seemed like he might be able to combine some of his attacks skills, his imagination was failing him on how to combine them to make them better than skill plus skill combined.

There was no way that a skill so difficult to obtain could be limited to this degree. It wasn't available on the offensive or defensive skill trees, so there had to be more to it.

Perhaps the point was to try to make incompatible skills work together to do something new and innovative.

[Maybe you just need to think about how to make something from each of us work together? You can visualize skills, so just imagine all of us working together on one spell.] Remi offered.

She was actually the one with the most talent and success creating new skills. She had made two different types of Totems so far, and she had learned a wider variety of skills than anyone else.

[Just make the snake's magic less evil and go from there.] Hawk suggested.

Karl laughed at the bird's loyalty to his element, and focused on the one shared skill from Remi's advancement that he hadn't tried yet.

[Cyclone] created a vortex of water, similar to the defensive cyclone that that Naga Shaman boss had used.

Hawk would want that to be less evil. So, Karl focused on converting the element to be fire. A flaming tornado was more acceptable to Hawk, even if it wasn't better than the base Cyclone.

[SOUP!] Cara shouted, startling them all.

[What in the world are you talking about?] Karl asked. It wasn't even close to lunchtime, and the drake leg that Hawk was roasting her wasn't ready yet.

[You know, soup! Just keep putting stuff in the pot until it's good. You have a flaming Cyclone, but if you added the Earth Barrier from Rae and a dash of Nullify...]

The Void Badger trailed off to let Karl finish the thought.

Karl thought about it, and that might be good, but not quite right. However, if he added Shatter to cause physical hits to inflict additional vibration damage, then made the Earth Shield swirl in the Flaming Cyclone, with a touch of [Nullify] to help it break defences, they might be on to something.

It was a great concept, in theory. Except for the fact that Karl couldn't use Nullify.

In practice, trying to add Earth Shield to the cyclone was a pain, and he was unable to use Rae's [Boulder Toss] to just add small stones.

However, if he added [Shred], the swirling vortex became positively hateful.

In practice, trying to add Earth Shield to the cyclone was a pain, and he was unable to use Rae's [Boulder Toss] to just add small stones.

However, if he added [Shred], the swirling vortex became positively hateful.

But it still needed a bit more, and [Bone Crusher] did a fine job of replacing Nullify in this situation, as it bypassed armour.

It wouldn't break their defences, but having a portion of the damage bypass them was a great start.

Karl spent most of the afternoon trying to make that work together.

He could form it in his mind, but it was unstable, and missing something.

Chain Lightning, that was what it was missing. The Lightning would arc around it, carrying Shred and Bone Crusher with it, while the repetitive nature of the spell would help stabilize the mess of magic elements.

In his mind, it was a great spell. It only gained a fraction of each component, but Rae and Cara were unhappy with being left out of the new ultimate skill.

Disintegration wasn't going to merge with this spell, though. There was already too much going on.

[We might have to make this one the Hawk and Remi combo. I've already added far too much to this soup, and I don't think that it's even going to stabilize. If I go any further I'm just going to be making a mess of things.] Karl sighed as they prepared to stop for the evening.

[At least try it once to see if you can make a less evil Cyclone.] Hawk pleaded.

"You've been lost in your head all day. Did you make some sort of discovery?" Dana asked as she leaned against his shoulder.

She had been there all day, and Karl had been so preoccupied that he had hardly noticed.

"I've been trying to use the Skill Merger ability that I got from Orthos to turn some of the Shared Skills into a higher grade skill. It's harder than it seems, and the skill doesn't seem to want to give me hints on what might work." Karl sighed.

"How far along are you?" Dana replied.

"Well, I think I've got an upgraded [Cyclone], but fire element instead of water. In theory, it should be much more powerful, but I don't know if it's going to work at all."

Lotus popped her head over his other shoulder. "Are we going to get a show? I want to see you try to use a made up skill. That is too cool. Does that mean, if you learn enough different things, you can just make up a whole new set of attacks?" "I suppose that might be true. If I had the next stage of the Skill Master ability, the beasts would naturally be able to evolve their skills to new ones that are related to the base, like how Shred is an evolved Rend." Karl explained.

A single use version was how they had gotten [Eternal Lightning] and that one skill alone was enough to call Thor overpowered as a defensive support.

"Well, let's see what you have? Just cast it over there. We don't want to get caught up if it goes wrong." Lotus insisted as Thor pulled the wagon to a stop next to a large boulder that would be their windbreak tonight.

Karl chuckled as he got to the ground. "Alright. This might need some extra space, so I'll go some distance away."

Karl walked fifty metres from the wagon, just to be safe. That should be beyond the range of any accidental misfires, especially when he was casting it away from the wagon as well.

Karl focused on the new Cyclone, then activated all of the spells that would need to be combined to make it work. It was a massive energy use, but the spell was beginning to take effect as he had envisioned it.

The cyclone was fire, it was energized with Shred and Chain Lightning, but when he tried to add [Bone Crusher] it vanished in a puff of unstable fire.

"Alright, that might have been too much to ask. Let me try that again."

Karl began to reform the four-metre tall Cyclone with more focus on the base spell to keep the form and then activated Shred for the tearing damage, and then Chain Lightning. That was fairly stable, but nothing special had happened, so Karl began to tweak the balances.

If he could get it right before he was exhausted, it would be a great victory.

The spell began to settle, but the mana cost was still that of four spells at once. That wasn't really an improvement, but at least the effect looked right.

Then suddenly, lightning arced off the vortex, hitting an Earth Mouse ten metres from the main Cyclone.

A smaller version of the spell formed at the impact site, wandering off on its own without Karl's input or control.

Then another Chain Lightning arc hit a hidden creature and a second two-metre tall vortex formed, wandering through the grass.

Karl nearly collapsed as a pulse of energy was pulled from him and a dozen more small vortexes formed, one metre tall and spreading from the secondary vortexes.

[Brother Hawk, it is glorious.] Cara breathed, barely loud enough for Karl to hear in his thoughts. Hawk blinked a tear from his eye. [It is beautiful.]

[New Shared Skill Learned: Hellstorm]

[Usable by Remi]

[Usable Hawk]

There was only one problem with that new skill. They had started a grass fire.

[Remi, would you mind putting that out for us? Congratulations to you and Hawk on your new spell.]

Chapter 509 It Worked

Thunderstorm quickly put out the grass fire, and Karl sighed in relief that the skill creation process had actually worked.

"That is absolutely ridiculous. Why was it splitting? Is it supposed to do that?" Dana asked.

"There were Earth Mice. The spell used Chain Lightning to stabilize it, but that made it arc to nearby targets. I think that it's overall a success. The system didn't call it an Epic Grade skill or anything, but if the energy cost is reasonable, it should be one of the most powerful area attack spells that I have." Karl explained.

"Well, it will make Hawk happy, anyhow. Wait, he can use it, right?"

Karl smiled at the panicked look on Dana's face. "Yeah, he can use it. So can Remi."

Ophelia began to laugh, and everyone turned to see what was so amusing.

"I can see it now. Just fire tornadoes all over the battlefield, randomly duplicating every time they get too close to something. It will be utter chaos. Nowhere will be safe, and we won't even be able to work with allies without risking them getting a fire cyclone to the face.

It's both the greatest and most horrific spell that I've ever seen. It doesn't even spare the grass. When you cast a normal fire magic spell, it doesn't target the ground unless it actually lights the target on fire, but those things leave a burnt path as they wander." She explained between giggles.

"I might need a bit of practice with the targeting." Karl admitted.

"But are you even in control of the additional ones? The first one that you created sat in one spot, but the rest didn't."

"Minor technical difficulty. But it's an effective group combat spell. Besides, if there are no extra targets, I can just create the vortex on top of the enemy and make them fight their way out."

Tessa shook her head and began to hang a silk sheet between the wagon and the large boulder beside them, so she could set up a fire pit underneath. It didn't seem like it was going to rain naturally tonight, but the tarp would keep the light contained, in case something was watching.

Lotus grew the firewood to warm the area, while Ophelia and Dana strung out the hammock nets for the evening.

"Has anyone else noticed that the air here smells funny? It's like there is something rotten, but I can't figure out where it's coming from." Lotus asked as she finished lighting the campfire.

Karl sniffed the air, and yes, there was some smell of rotting vegetation, but that was normal for any wilderness area. "Nothing out of the usual. Do you think it might be something like that weird feeling before the last monster spawn?" Karl asked.

Tessa frowned. "It might. You were the one who felt the strangeness last time, or at least the one that felt it the most powerfully. Tonight it is Lotus. Perhaps we should sleep early and prepare to be awake at midnight, in case of an attack?"

"That's probably a good idea. If nothing appears in the middle of the night, it might happen at dawn, or it might be the next night. The area around Oakhamping felt wrong for days before the monster spawn." Karl explained.

That night, everyone slept armoured, much to Karl's dismay. What was the point of sharing a hammock with a lumpy suit of chain mail? Even if it was covered in the soft silk of the outfit that Rae had made for Dana, armour still wasn't fun to cuddle with.

Rae mentally nudged Karl just before midnight, so he would be the first awake if there was anything happening. Karl woke the others, and they lay in the wagon, waiting for news from Rae, who would be able to see the enemy from the furthest distance.

Karl waited, watching the distance for heat signatures.

They watched for a half hour, and Karl was about to relax when movement in the distance caught his attention. However, it didn't give off a heat signature, it was the same temperature as the ground and the trees. But it was moving, and from over a slight rise, there were more moving objects.

"We have motion in the distance, but they seem to be cold-blooded. They're not giving off a heat signature. I am just seeing them with echolocation. The amount of noise that they are making while they move makes them fairly easy to spot."

"So, a reptile species, or possibly something unexpected." Tessa whispered.

Reptiles would be the best option. At least Karl had a good idea how to deal with them. But most of the reptiles that they had come across, the monster varieties at least, were warm-blooded.

Even the Naga, who appeared to be snakes, were warm-blooded.

With movement in the distance, everyone got out of bed to prepare for an attack. Even the low light vision that Karl had inherited from Hawk was no use at that distance, they were just vague shapes in the long grass, as Hawk's night vision wasn't colour vision. But they were bipedal, and not much larger than humans. However, as they got a bit closer, the details were easier to pick out. However, that wasn't helping Karl in his attempts to determine what the threat level was.

There were lizardfolk, Orcs, some Demons, humans and others just walking around aimlessly.

"I don't know what is going on. They're all cold as the surrounding plants, but it looks like humans, orcs and other monsters." Karl whispered.

"More slime monsters? They might be mimicking things that they've seen recently." Tessa suggested.

"That is a possibility. Or it might be some sort of spectre. They don't have an internal temperature, but they're much more uncommon." Ophelia added.

Dana looked around in the dark, unable to see much of anything beyond the radius of the firelight.

"There is one more thing that they could be." She whispered.

"The Undead."

Karl looked out at the variety of species, the way they didn't seem to have any animosity for each other or any urge to gather. Combined with the fact that they had just appeared at midnight, but didn't take any proactive actions to do anything but slowly walk in random directions, and it did look like a setup from a horror movie set.

It was too soon to say for certain, but if they were stuck in a zombie spawn, he would no longer be surprised. They had encountered enough abnormal activity since joining the Academy that he wasn't putting anything outside the realm of possibility.

Even if they had been told by those in charge that it wouldn't happen.

The fire had burnt down to embers, but it wouldn't be easy for the creatures to sense anyhow, being surrounded by the tarps to keep the light in.

"I need to check the other side of the rock and make certain that there isn't anything sneaking up on us. Then we can start planning for how to deal with whatever spawn we're stuck in." Karl whispered.

"Fighting in the dark is going to suck." Ophelia sighed.

"If we need to, we can make light. It's better than risking a mistake in the dark. I'll be back in a few seconds."

Karl moved around the boulder to scout the area. If there were monsters close enough to be a real threat, Rae would have sensed them by now, but Karl wanted to see with his own eyes, so he had a clear grasp of the situation.

In the distance, there were hundreds of the same assorted monsters and humans with no heat signature, all wandering aimlessly in the dark. At least nothing had appeared right on top of their group this time. They weren't going to get much sleep tonight, but they weren't in immediate danger.

Chapter 510 Sound of Violence

Out of the darkness, the sound of combat carried to Karl's sensitive ears, as well as the Naga Warriors.

It was too faint for Thor to hear it, but Rae perked up, trying to find the source of the disturbance. It was out of sight, and Karl quickly realized that someone had found a low spot to camp in, where they wouldn't be spotted from a distance in the morning.

That was a much better idea than just camping next to a big rock, but if their battle was intense enough that it could be heard from kilometres away, they might need assistance. But more urgently, the sound of battle was drawing the attention of all the creatures in the area. Once they started to move with purpose, it got the attention of even more, and soon every one of the creatures that Karl could detect was headed in the same direction. Some would be passing right through their camp if they didn't move, and there were hundreds of them.

"Okay, that's not good. Whoever is fighting in the distance has gotten the attention of every creature within five kilometres, and they're all headed that way. Some of them will be passing right by us, and that means a fight.

But a fight means that there will be more of them turning our way.

I think it might be best to go for a strength in numbers approach." Karl explained.

Tessa frowned as she replied. "So, head towards the battle and hope that whoever is over there is more friendly than whatever spawned? Well, given our experience with the spawns, that shouldn't be hard to achieve.

Do we know what the enemy is yet?" Karl shook his head. "Just our various theories, but we will find out when we get to them."

[We won't have to wait long. There are already monsters headed this way.] Rae reminded him.

"Alright, pack quickly and let's get going. I want to get as close as possible before the fight spreads." Karl insisted.

They only had to pack up the two sheets that were hiding the campfire, then they were ready to move, as fast as Thor could go without risking the wagon. Karl jogged alongside the wagon as Rae kept Thor updated on the best routes.

The monsters weren't fast, and they were actually catching up to the ones in front of them, so Karl ordered Thor to slow a little. They would get as close as possible before they had to actually join the fight.

He could already hear the voices, and they were speaking the Common language, so at the very least the defenders weren't insane.

"Shoulder to shoulder, keep your positions circled and don't get so far from the ground that they can get under you and inside the ring." A male voice was shouting.

The sound of blades and the flashing lights of spells were now visible. Whoever was there, they had magic users. That meant it wasn't a random group of farmers, as the Minotaur didn't have any spell

casters that Karl knew of. They had extremely powerful warriors, but that was the extent of their combat power.

"Tamarind, watch your offhand blade technique. You're slow on the left side."

[Hellstorm!] Remi cheered in Karl's mind, and a massive funnel of fire formed off to their right side, where a dense pack of the attackers had gathered.

There was a short stone ledge there, but for some reason they were not climbing it, just piling up against it or going around.

But with the light illuminated their features, Karl knew that today was going to be a lousy one.

Every face was rotted, eyes glazed in death, as the zombie horde pressed towards the signs of life. The undead were relentless. The only option was to kill them all or run away. But they were all around both groups, so running wasn't an option.

"What the fuck is that?" The voice shouted. So they were close enough that they could see the fire.

"Merchant team coming to your location." Karl shouted, drawing the attention of a number of zombies.

He called out the Lamia to join the Naga Warriors around the wagon, and Rae called out her Golems to help her clear the path for Thor.

Karl used Rend to cut down swathes of the creatures, then realized that the upper halves kept moving. Crushing the heads or burning them was the best option.

So, he brought out his bow and began to fire [Chain Lightning] enhanced arrows into the horde.

Most of them were Awakened and Ascended, but there were a few stronger ones in the crowd.

Karl could feel them there, but it was impossible to tell which was which when they were packed so densely.

The source of the spells came into sight as the ground dropped away into what looked like a dry dugout pond, the sort that farmers made for their cattle.

It was an oval about ten metres by twenty, and only five metres deep. However, the defenders were all human, wearing the black cloth outfits of a Spellblade clan.

They were putting up a valiant defence, and the zombie bodies were beginning to stack up.

"Don't attack the Spider, it's a friendly." Someone was shouting, and Karl breathed a sigh of relief. It was good to have intelligent allies.

Karl started a second [Hellstorm] on his left, matching the one that Remi was still holding active on the right, along with over a dozen smaller flaming cyclones.

They were wandering through the horde, lighting zombies on fire. The weaker ones burned to ash in seconds, but the smaller cyclones weren't Royal Rank. They stepped down by a Rank as they shrunk, first to Commander, then to Ascended Rank.

Karl let his vortex wander, spreading the chained Vortexes through the horde, but it was nowhere near enough.

With Rae's assistance and Karl's arrows, they managed to push the wagon to dugout position, where the Spellblades parted to let them through.

Ophelia and Dana hopped down to join the defensive line, while Tessa and Lotus worked to bring up holy spells for the defenders. Thor already had [Circle of Protection] active, and he quickly spread [Eternal Lightning] over the group as he settled in to focus on his magic.

Karl nodded at the golden masked Royal Rank Spellblade as he stopped at the edge of the circle to reposition his [Hellstorm] vortex.

Remi did the same, putting hers opposite Karl's at the top of the hill as she came out to join the fight.

Hawk used the light from the spells as a guide to take flight and bombard the area, while Cara wandered out into the horde, looking for something worth fighting.

She had a barrier up, and she was virtually immune to low rank attacks anyhow, so Karl wasn't all that worried about her, as long as she didn't get too far away.

Most of the Spellblades were Ascended Rank, with four Commanders and one Prince leading them.

That was a pretty normal group composition for a thirty-person team, but against this horde they would eventually exhaust themselves. Having Thor here would help immensely, with his barrier refreshing everyone's stamina, health and mana.

The blade skills looked familiar, and Karl quickly settled into his role killing zombies who made it to the ridgeline, using minimal power with his arrows so that he didn't have to take down [Hellstorm], which was still mana intensive even after it was completed and learned as a skill.