

Beast Master 511

Chapter 511 Old Friends

"Prince Karl, what a sight for sore eyes. Of all the things that we expected to be coming our way, Thor and Rae were not even on the list." The Prince next to Karl informed him.

"I take it that we have met before. How is your team? Skilled fighters or recruits on a training mission?" Karl replied.

"All skilled combatants now. We were reassigned from the Mountain Giant front to try to reach an anomaly that opened west of here. There is a rumour that it is stabilizing, and it might be high-ranked."

As the man spoke, Karl realized where he knew that voice from.

"Prince Corbin?" He asked.

"Right in one guess. Muffin is four or five spots down, and Tamarind is on the other side somewhere."

Karl didn't remember a Tamarind, but he was more focused on the battle right now than people's names.

"And the others from the Yeti anomaly?" He asked instead.

"Larry and Darrel, the Commanders, are here. The other youngsters had duties at home."

Karl continued to casually fire arrows into the crowd while Remi stood with her arms outstretched, guiding her main vortex with her hands while Karl let his roam freely.

Corbin sent arcs of energy that were rather similar to [Rend] into the zombie horde, keeping them back of the defenders on their side, but some of the others were beginning to have trouble on the far end, where there was no Royal and no Hellstorm to slow the attack.

"I will move to support the others. Once this initial wave slows, we can talk again." Karl informed the Spellblade with a quick nod of his head.

"Greatly appreciated. We will see you soon. Let me know if your team needs to take down that regenerating barrier. The mana it grants is likely all that is keeping our Ascended Blades going at this point."

The fight had only just started, they hadn't been fighting for more than fifteen minutes. But if they had been surrounded when they woke up, they might be working on four hours of sleep, and they would have burnt a lot at the start of the fight.

They were doing their best, but most of the Spellblades weren't specialized in multiple enemy fights, and these ones had most likely been fighting Giants before being sent on this mission, the same as Karl and the others had. It limited the skills that they were familiar with, as large area attacks were less effective against widely spread, larger targets. But the zombies were shoulder to shoulder, and packed tight front to back, trying to claw their way to the living.

Karl used [Rend] at neck height and spread as wide as possible, decapitating dozens of weaker zombies in a single shot before returning to firing arrows along the new front.

It was becoming clear that they were still on the losing side of the battle, just not soon. The group didn't have enough area attacks to keep the horde back forever, and minute by minute, the lines were advancing. Blizzard wouldn't effectively get rid of them, it took too long to get through to the brain, and the zombies didn't stop for mere flesh wounds. It might be worth a shot, though. Hellstorm was killing at a steady pace, but didn't move between targets fast enough when it would only arc to a dozen or so targets at once while pulling almost all the mana Karl was getting from Eternal Lightning and his own regeneration.

So, Karl switched the spells, with [Blizzard] spread as wide as he could make it.

Unlike the flaming vortex, the zombies didn't see it as a threat, so they didn't try to go around. That caused a momentary increase in the number of them reaching the front of the lines, but with the help of the Bodyguards, the perimeter was holding.

Hawk's bombardment was burning the piles of bodies, preventing them from creating piles that could be pushed down the hill onto the defenders, while Remi had a [Thunderstorm] on one side, and was following Karl's lead in switching to [Blizzard] on the other.

The Spellblades were concerned, seeing more wounded zombies making it to the front. If the new arrivals couldn't sustain enough output to eliminate the zombies, they would soon be in hand-to-hand combat again.

Prince Corbin understood the long game, though. Blizzard was low mana cost, so the casters could focus on other spells at the same time. Plus it was a huge area, with the two Blizzards and a Thunderstorm completely encircling their position, leaving no gaps.

All they had to do now was to hold the zombies in place long enough for the damage over time to tear those stuck in the middle of the pack apart, and the defenders would get a respite while another wave of attackers made its way through the spells.

"Just keep holding them back. Let the area spells do their work." Corbin shouted to his weary Sect members.

That was all that they could do anyhow, but the prospect of getting a break when the area spells wiped out a whole region of the enemy was a welcome one.

Rae was firing stone bullets at the zombies from her position beside the wagon, while her golems hunted the stronger zombies in the area.

It was the closest that she could come to having fun in this fight when the zombies smelled so terrible. Their blood was rancid and corrupt. Even with a barrier over her, Rae did not want any of that getting on her. Just the thought of smelling like that for the entire battle grossed her out.

It didn't help that the Spellblades didn't know about the spawns, so they had only put a minimal guard rotation on duty for the evening, thinking that if they did face anything it was likely to be bandits or local monsters.

So, when the spawn had happened, the undead were already on them by the time that they noticed.

That meant close combat, and zombie blood on the mages.

Zombie blood that smelled absolutely terrible and was all over the area around the camp.

Chapter 512 Clearance Section

The area spells were working their magic on the zombies, and every wave that replaced one that had been destroyed was in a bit worse shape. Then, for a few glorious moments, there were no more zombies on the front line, only wounded ones shambling through the blizzard.

"Catch your breath and prepare for the next wave. After this, it will be a steady wave of wounded zombies, but the storms will help keep the battle from attracting more of the creatures." Prince Corbin shouted to his Sect members.

Karl's team, mostly the summoned creatures, could take care of the influx for a few minutes. With the area damage and the slow movement of the zombies, they were arriving already heavily damaged. Plus, with the initial wave dead, they were losing their guidance, and they weren't charging straight ahead anymore. They were lingering in the storm, and many of the weak ones were dying without ever making it to the front.

That was making it easier to deal with, and Hawk's reporting said that the worst of the influx was already here. They had drawn the majority of the spawned area to them already, as the Spellblade Sect had been close to the centre of the anomaly, and there just weren't many left to arrive.

Karl wasn't going to pass along that news yet. The others might get their hopes up, and Hawk's search range was much more limited in the middle of the night than it was in the daytime. If he could bring Rae up with him, he would be able to see much further. That seemed like a good idea to Hawk. If he could work on a skill like Brutality, to increase his size, but by a lot more, he could carry someone with him to do the actual work of scouting.

Maybe he could do it with a skill that he already knew? If his Flaming Body didn't set everyone on fire when they sat on him, it would be able to do the job of making him big, but it couldn't emulate his wings well enough, so he still wouldn't be able to fly with them.

That meant that he actually needed to get big in order to fly with a passenger, and that would be much more difficult.

[I'm going to hunt the ones that haven't made it to the storms yet.] He announced, turning away from the battle.

[Alright, have fun. If you find a way to make yourself big enough to give rides, we will work out a method to teach you.] Karl agreed.

[Or maybe we can do it backwards? If we could make Rae into a tiny bloodbath spider, she could ride on Thor at the size he is now.]

Rae laughed at the thought. If she was the size of a common house spider, she could get under armour and clothing to just carve her enemies apart. Or circle their neck with Royal Rank silk and give it a tug to decapitate them.

The possibilities were endless.

Karl lazily fired arrows into the few zombies that were still making it to the front of the swarm. Then he created a new [Hellstorm] to make a loop around the ridge line. The bodies had started to pile up, and with Hawk off hunting, they needed some fire to destroy the corpses. Frying their brains with lightning killed them, and decapitating them effectively immobilized them, but only fire got rid of the bodies entirely.

"That spell is just nasty. Where did you learn something like that?" The Spellblade on Karl's right asked as their eyes met.

Karl was turning to guide the vortex in a circle, not trusting a route that he couldn't see, but he had to move somewhat slowly, so the smaller secondary vortexes had time to kill the other zombies in the area and burn those corpses.

"It's an evolved version of the water spell [Cyclone]. I picked up the knowledge quite recently, and I'm still working on mastering it, but it's a pretty brutal spell."

The Spellblade frowned. "Not from a monster in this region, I hope? I would hate to see that spell could do to a group of Spellblades while the large vortex was set on top of the group leader."

Karl nodded. "The real drawback is the energy cost. By the time that I've got it all the way around the camp, I'll be nearly drained just keeping [Hellstorm] and one [Blizzard] active."

The young man laughed and gestured at himself as Karl continued to turn. "I doubt that many of us could do more than that. Multiple spells are hard on anyone but a strong Commander or a Royal."

As Karl turned, he saw one of the Spellblades, a small girl who looked like she might not even be ten years old yet, but an Ascended Rank Mage, was giving him a curious look. Not like a curious child, but more like she knew who he was and wanted answers to something.

Karl set the thought aside for a moment and finished the loop with [Hellstorm] so he could return to only one active spell and his sporadic targeting of the stronger zombies.

With the extra time between targets, the Commander on Karl's left also began to chat.

"You must be that Beast Master that everyone at home has been talking about. I can't think of anyone else who has a team like yours, but I don't recall there being Naga and Lamia among your bonded monsters. Are they new?" He asked.

Karl shook his head as he sighted another arrow. "No, the Lamia pair is summoned. The Naga Queen evolved from the Spirit Snake you were likely expecting to be with me, and the Naga Warriors come with her."

All three Naga Warriors were out around the perimeter, using [Tsunami] to crush the zombies, while the Lamia happily sliced the zombies heads off with [Rend].

The Spellblade nodded. "Prince Corbin told us all about his battle alongside you, as a motivational tale of what could happen if we worked hard and had a bit of luck with encounters.

Now, I wouldn't say that we're having great luck so far, but we're having encounters."

His joke brought laughter from their side of the line. They had certainly had an encounter. They had just arrived in this nation, at a spot that had been determined to be too low on the priority scale for anyone to come see who had arrived by portal from the Wilds.

The Clan had done a two-step transfer, moving into the region controlled by wild beasts first, then here. That way, there was a chance it could have been hunters harvesting resources and specialty meat, or even a border patrol team who had detected something out of the ordinary.

There was a lot of that going around. Enough that they could make up all sorts of stories about their travels if someone did come to check.

It was the opposite of what the Divine Beasts had done by sending Karl to the coast, where there was simply nobody monitoring for portals, as it was too far from the major population centres to be worth the effort in extending the detection spells.

Chapter 513 Moving Forward

As the zombies began to stop reaching the front of the storms, the mages began to relax. Karl's team had everything under control, and they could finally catch their breath and begin to get their bearings. The sudden and intense attack had caught them by surprise, turning their seemingly genius camping spot into an inescapable trap.

"Prince Karl, High Priestess, do you think you could spare me a moment for a debriefing? What in the Dragon's name is going on around here?" Prince Corbin called as he retreated from the line.

Tessa gestured for Lotus to continue cooking as she got to her feet, and Karl retreated from his spot on the far side of the line.

"You missed all the fun stuff, Spellblade." Karl laughed.

"There was a dungeon opening a few hundred kilometres west of here, and it stabilized.

First it turned into an absolute shitshow of a fight with every nomadic tribe in the region, as well as the combat capable residents of the nearest cities, and then for the last few days there have been anomaly level Monster Spawns in the wilderness. The first few were just insane monsters, but this one was a bit different.

None of them seem to be related to the dungeon itself, as the monsters there are slime monsters that mimic the appearance of the members attempting to clear it.

Minimum ten person entry, with a low Commander Rank power level." He finished.

"And how, pray tell, might you have discovered all this information in the last few days, while under attack by monster spawns?" Prince Corbin asked.

"Because the dungeon opened about three days before the monster spawns began, and I saw it stabilize with my own eyes.

We were having a polite and genteel parlay with the Yellow Tusk Orcs at the time, and they were vigorously enthused to see such a serendipitous happenstance."

Tessa burst out laughing while Prince Corbin rubbed his temples.

"Setting aside the part about a polite and genteel chat with Orcs, you do understand that using big words doesn't make it more likely I will believe that you're not lying to me, right?

My guess is that whatever you were up to before it appeared is directly responsible for the appearance of a stabilized Commander Rank dungeon here in the Newbon Empire.

From what I hear, you've been missing from the lines for quite some time. You were on a mission and simply vanished. Now you're here with your whole group of lucky charms and a Void Badger." Corbin replied.

"Winged Void Badger to be precise. And she's part of our team. Her name is Cara, and she enjoys holding small creatures and booping dragons on the nose." Karl agreed.

Corbin determined that the only way forward was to simply pretend that Karl didn't exist and go to the Dragon Cleric for answers. Anything else was too hard on his sanity.

The Spellblade turned to Tessa with his polite business smile in place. "Where might your next planned stop be? Your team is a long way behind enemy lines."

Tessa gathered herself and stopped laughing so she could answer. "We're headed for Clifnal, where we plan to get back on the road, and then head east to the Beastkin Nation.

It was either that or go back into the Divine Beast Nation and go through the wilderness to the border."

"Who sent you? The Bureau and the Prime Minister himself said that we were the only team in the region." He asked.

"We arrived with the assistance of the Bronze Dragon Orthos from a negotiation location within the Divine Beast Nation. The trip was authorized by the Archbishop himself, I have the letter here." She explained.

She handed him the paper, and Corbin frowned as he read through it. "Well, that is unexpected. But if I might ask, what secret mission were you on in the Divine Beast Nation? Something to do with the Void Badger?" Karl smirked as Tessa frowned, trying to decide where to start explaining.

"Not exactly. Karl was relocated by an anomaly, and when he exited, he was in the Divine Beast Nation and already had Cara. There was some concern that the Beast Gods would be unwilling to return him to the Golden Dragon Nation, and the rest of us were sent to ensure that the contract we signed with the Red Dragon, that demands we not leave a party member behind, was not broken.

So, that's where we were when this anomaly was discovered, and we enlisted their assistance to arrive on the West Coast. We have been posing as merchants since then, making our way across the country at the speed of a merchant wagon."

Prince Corbin sighed. "That's actually brilliant. With the Naga, you can pretend to be a proper group of locals. Our plan was to pose as a nomadic Spellblade Clan while we investigated. Nobody expected us to

get close enough to see the dungeon firsthand, so we would be reporting back whatever we heard. How many powerful dungeon Champions were there when you arrived?"

Tessa shook her head. "We were on location when the anomaly opened. It was just us and the Orcs, and then we left as the first challengers arrived. We're on good terms with the Nomadic Orc Tribes, and we didn't want to fight them for control when our half of the job was already done."

"To see if the anomaly stabilized?" Corbin asked.

"To ensure that it stabilized. Which we did from the inside before anyone realized what was going on. The Beast Gods have a theory that having the stabilized anomaly here will help keep trespassers out of their nation.

It's close enough to the coast that every other nation can just sail in to Lutonade and make it to the dungeon in a day. It's easier to sail into the port and go down the road than it is to try to sneak in across the Divine Beast Nation or from the eastern border." Tessa explained.

The Spellblade took out his map and looked at the various options. "That seems like a logical option. Can you show me where the Dungeon should be?" He asked.

"It is right there. If you're going to continue that way, it was spawning Copper Drakes and Sand Yeti among the farms in this region. Oakhamping is a disaster, don't bother trying to enter, as you'll probably have to fight your way out. South of there, Halsearing is preparing for a siege, or massive traffic, as it is within a half day's walk of the dungeon. The roads were crammed with farm traffic, but everyone is paranoid about running into the Nomadic Tribes." Tessa gestured at the map as she explained, as his map was even worse than the one that they had hand copied. Corbin was adding details as Tessa explained them, along with notes on what monsters to expect in the area. Both the spawn and the local farmers.

"This could be more difficult than I thought. Unlike your group with the Monster Man, we're going to be bringing a whole Sect of young humans through. That will make it pretty obvious to anyone we see that we're headed for the Dungeon." Tessa frowned. "Do you still need to get to the dungeon? If we go back with you, we can give them all the details that you would get."

Corbin tapped the map as he considered it. "Let me think about that for a bit. Having you here is an unexpected twist that wasn't in the predicted scenarios."

Chapter 514 Check Your Inventory

As the last of the zombies were eliminated, the storms were disabled, and silence fell over the depression where the Spellblades were camped. With a mixture of relief and exhaustion, the mages collapsed to the ground, while Ophelia and Dana came over to join Karl and Tessa.

"Sleeping early was a good call. The other mages look horrible." Ophelia joked.

"I'm not sure if you've noticed, but we have been in combat for nearly two hours, miss 'I don't have ranged attack skills'." Dana replied.

The berserker snorted in amusement. "I'm not getting zombie blood in my fur if I can avoid it. Didn't I come around with water for everyone?"

Rae laughed in Karl's mind at that comment. She had been in the centre of the camp, firing stones at the zombies the entire time for the exact same reason.

It wasn't easy to be a furry lady surrounded by zombies. She was just thankful that the area was full of mages who were happy to use fire to get rid of all of the leftover bodies and viscera.

[There are no more zombies around. Are the Danas all recovered yet, or do we need to guard them?] Hawk asked, distracting Karl.

[The Spellblades are recovering, but they have enough Commanders who are fit to watch over the camp that you can return and sleep until the sun comes up at the very least.] [I'm on my way back. Tell Rae not to slack, since she's the only one who can see anything coming in the dark if I'm asleep.]

Hawk was definitely cranky about being awakened in the middle of the night. The moon was half full in the sky, and there were no clouds, so even the humans could see a little in this light.

Karl paused there. He had forgotten that he was one of the humans again. Perhaps if he thought about them as their classes, it would help. Mages and clerics had more trouble seeing in the dark than he did. Yes, that was better.

Prince Corbin took notes of the situation as the team began to relax, and then got back to his original line of questions.

"You said that you had been in the dungeon. Did you complete it? What sort of rewards did it give?" He asked.

Karl realized that he had never even checked, and now he had to search through his inventory boxes to find what might have come from the dungeon, and separate it from what had certainly been there already.

There were some Commander Rank armour pieces, nothing special. Some decent Ascended Rank armour, and then a small golden chest.

That was unexpected.

"There were some coins, some armour, and a golden box." Karl replied with a shrug.

Tessa turned to him. "A golden box full of what? Did you even examine it, much less open it?"

Karl shrugged, and Tessa rolled her eyes at him. In the dim light of the camp, backlit only by the cooking fire that Lotus was tending, it was easy enough to ignore the fact that she was exasperated by his lack of interest in the rewards of the dungeon.

Karl checked the box, a bit embarrassed that it had slipped his mind.

[First Dungeon Completion Random Reward]

"It's a random reward. I don't know what is in the box." He explained.

Dana poked him on the side of the head. "Those boxes are a group reward. Why don't you go ahead and open it, so we can see if it's something useful?"

Corbin made a 'get on with it' gesture. He was just as interested in what the dungeon had given as the ones who had actually been there.

Karl took the small golden box out of his inventory and held it out for everyone to inspect. "Well, it looks normal enough. I wonder what sort of reward fits in that box." Corbin noted.

In the edge of Karl's vision, Lotus smirked. One of them had opened up into a full stage with a spinning wheel when she tried to open it.

Karl flipped the lid to the golden chest, and it immediately vanished, replaced with a message in his Status overlay, appearing as words in his vision.

[Calculating First Clear Rewards]

[Group Reward Calculated] Epic Grade items granted

[Individual Reward Calculated] Over Rank Penalty Applied

Karl sighed as he saw the message, and then waited for the next message while he checked his inventory for the Epic Grade Item that the group should have gotten.

[Ring of the Beast Lord] Increases Luck by 150 points. Increases damage of Skills used by bonded or summoned companions by 15 percent.

Karl had no idea what the Luck stat was supposed to be. It was nowhere in any of his interfaces, even when he checked them again. It must exist if he could get a bonus to it, but it was not a visible status line.

However, fifteen percent more damage from the skills of his beasts was a pretty good ring. Combined with the Giant Strength Ring that he wore on his other hand, it would make a noticeable difference in their combat ability.

[Individual Reward Granted] Karl's vision went blank, and he found himself standing in an empty void with nothing but a spinning wheel with square spaces on it like a paddle wheel on the grain mill. It was the same concept as the other spinning prize wheel, but this one had the prizes around the outer edge instead of on the face.

That made room for many more options, and the wheel was dozens of metres tall.

Karl looked at the skill in front of him. The actual square looked like tinted glass, but there was elegant script on the front that read 'Skill Book: Pimp Slap'. Now that was a skill. How useful it would be in common was questionable, but the name alone implied that it had great possibilities.

The other slots couldn't be read from his position, as if the titles were blocked. So, Karl knew what spot to watch as the wheel spun to get a guess at what might have been possible.

There was no benefit to delaying any further, so Karl jumped up a few metres and grabbed the wheel to drag it down. It was huge, and it would take some effort to get more than one full spin out of it, he assumed.

The slots began to blur by too fast for him to read as the wheel rapidly picked up speed from Karl's overly enthusiastic spin.

It felt like an eternity before it began to slow, and he could finally see the options. There were clothing items, an Epic Grade tent in a box, whatever that was, some oddly named skill books, and even experience bonuses.

It wasn't on par with the last time that they had gotten a reward, but there were some good items interspersed with the cosmetic items. Perhaps if he didn't have Rae with him, a Commander Rank coat might have meant more.

The wheel slowed to a stop, and Karl stared at the words on the reward slot in front of him.

[Congratulations. Random Reward Granted.]

Karl stared at the label on the spot in front of him. [Skill Advancement Token] Advance one known skill by one tier.

Chapter 515 Advanced Skill Mastery

Karl smiled as he saw what he had gotten. [Advance Evolution by one Rank]

[Invalid Target]

[Advance Skill Master Rank 2 to Skill Master Rank 3] [...]

Karl got the impression that the system couldn't decide whether he was trolling it or not. It was obvious that the token was a single use Skill Master Rank 3 token. Using it to advance Skill Master to Rank 3 seemed to have confused the system.

But, he waited patiently to see what would happen.

The token could have just told him it was an invalid target and made him pick a different one. In fact, Karl expected that it would, after a few more seconds.

[Skill Master Advanced to Rank 3] [Skill Master Advanced to Rank 4]

[Max Tier reached]

[Skill Master 4] Allows all skills to evolve to one Rank and one Tier higher than their current tier with practice. *Additional Functions Locked Until Second Advancement*

Karl stared at the notification. Now he understood why everything had frozen. Skill Master 3 allowed Skills to evolve by a Tier with practice, and he had a lot of practice with Skill Master.

So, it had tried to evolve to Rank 4, the next logical tier of its own ability. However, he didn't meet all the requirements of Skill Master Rank 4. So, it had momentarily frozen as it attempted to advance.

"Are you back with us?" Tessa asked as the scene faded from Karl's vision.

"Yeah, sorry. There was a random item thing, and it's a bit distracting."

She nodded. "So, did they give you something good? Random rewards are usually pretty good." Karl shrugged. "We will see. The reward it gave me is somewhat situational. It could be good, or it could be no different from a skill I would have already gotten soon."

A small girl came over and stared up at Karl. He wasn't sure what she wanted, but he put a hand on her head and patted her while he finished talking to Tessa and Corbin.

"Dammit, stop with the hair. Have you forgotten me so fast?" She demanded.

[Do you collect small women?] Cara asked curiously.

[Definitely not. We're at two and two, tall versus short.]

Karl looked down, and realized that he really didn't recognize that face. No, he did, but he had only seen it once before.

"Tori?" He asked.

"I am Tamarind now. It's good to see you again. You've gotten stupidly powerful since I saw you last." She replied.

"So, you're a proper Spellblade now, are you?"

The vicious smile she gave him looked wrong on such a cute child's face.

"Not yet. I am an Ascended Rank mage, but I haven't earned the right to call myself a Spellblade yet. I am along as a trainee, working to expand my combat skills until I'm good enough that I can pass the exams." She explained.

"I'm glad you're doing well. After the resurrection, I wasn't certain that you would be able to adapt so easily."

Tori, now Tamarind, laughed at Karl's concern. "You don't need to worry that much about me. I have turned over a whole new leaf. I've got all this family to look out for me now, and they're happy to keep me away from any sort of misbehaviour."

"Why don't we relax and have something to eat?" Tessa suggested.

"A midnight snack? I think that we've earned it. We will have to rearrange our night watch, but everyone should be able to get at least a few more hours of sleep tonight."

Karl nodded in agreement. "Your team was nearly in the centre of the spawn, so even if we start moving later in the morning, we should still make it out of the area that is likely to be covered in zombies tomorrow night."

Sleeping wouldn't be a problem for most of the Spellblades, and the wagon was still set up for sleeping, other than the tarps that they had taken down. All the hammocks were still hung, and only a little dirty from the race across the grasslands.

Everyone ate quietly, and by the time that they were finished and everyone except the Commanders who were on guard from the Spellblade Clan had gotten back to bed, the horizon was already beginning to lighten.

A couple of hours was all they were going to get to rest, and then they would have to discuss where they were going next.

A soft whistle just after full dawn caught Karl's attention, and then someone knocked gently on the side of the wagon, alerting them that someone needed their attention.

Karl rolled out of his hammock, and Prince Corbin motioned for him to remain silent. "There is motion in the distance. I think that someone knows we are here." He whispered.

"Should we split up?" Karl whispered back.

"How certain are you that your cover story is good?" "It's solid. How sure are you that you can take whatever is coming?" Karl replied.

"Not at all. I suspect that it's an army unit. They must have come from the Capital to deal with the Anomalies. Their seers will have known that there was going to be something happening here tonight, and if they dispatched an army unit to deal with it, they're not going to be weak."

Karl nodded. "What direction are they coming from?"

"Southeast. Where are you going to go?" Corbin asked.

"I am going to go straight east, as planned. It's the logical route for me to take, headed straight to the road. Where are you going?" "Southwest. I have disguise magic that will hide us from cursory detection. The army is charged with keeping nomads under control, so they're not going to be particularly kind to a nomadic Spellblade Clan."

Corbin nodded, and Karl prepared to hop back on the wagon as Dana packed up the hammock.

"Good luck. We will see you soon. I'm not going to push for more information when things are this bad. The government might have been willing to sacrifice some lives for valuable information, but there is no need to waste my people when we already know the answers we came for."

They shook hands, and Karl sent everyone but Thor and two of Remi's bodyguards back into the spaces. With Dana's Golems walking behind them, they headed east through the ash piles left after their battle.

Once they were up out of the depression, Prince Corbin activated an air spell that made a mirage over their group, effectively hiding them from simple visual detection. That should be good enough to prevent the army from finding them, and the whole Clan was headed straight south, on a course where they wouldn't be intercepted.

But Karl and his team were in the open, and it wouldn't be long before the scouts changed course to intercept him and his team. There would certainly be questions. Especially if they were expecting a massive horde of zombies right here. They were still close enough to see the remnants of the battle, so there wasn't going to be any way to hide that the zombies had been here.

Karl raised a hand in greeting when the closest of the scouts, a Tortollan warrior with a sturdy turtle shell around his torso, gestured in their direction.

"Everyone ready? It's time to play our parts."

Chapter 516 Guard Patrol

Karl pulled Thor to a stop as the warrior, who was carrying two narrow blades across his back, ran in their direction.

"Merchant. Did you encounter the undead during the overnight hours? We were informed they should be near here."

Karl nodded and gestured behind him. "They were drawn to a depression over there, and we fought them for most of the night. There are no more around, but I wouldn't hang around here for long. They're likely to come back at midnight. The Beast Nation told me about those phenomenons." Karl explained.

The Turtle man nodded in understanding, then gestured behind them.

"Were there others with you?"

Karl nodded. "We were camped by that big stone over there, then we heard the sound of battle over here. Once I realized we were both surrounded by the undead, we moved to help them defend their camp. Strength in numbers and all. It was just a small nomadic tribe, demons and humans. They moved on at first light, before full dawn."

The Tortollan made a note, then tapped his chin with his pen.

"How many in total? Keeping the numbers of nomads under control is part of our job."

Karl shrugged. "I didn't count them, but I would say about two dozen fighting age adults and an equal number of elders and children."

That answer seemed to please the soldier.

"So, roughly fifty, perhaps a few less? And mixed humans and demons?" With that, he looked at the ladies in the wagon.

Ophelia nodded. "That's right, I would say just under fifty. Not much of a fighting force, as they didn't have anyone stronger than a Commander, but they had a couple of magic users that made the fight a lot easier."

The Tortollan made a note of that as well. "That's normal for demonic Nomads. I'm just glad that you didn't suffer any casualties from the undead or the demons. I will need to see the battleground. Can you tell me what sort of spells your team used?"

"I am an Elemental Shaman, so there was a large blizzard and flaming cyclones, as well as some lightning. The Naga Warriors use water magic attacks, so there will be lots of that, plus the attacks of our golems and the other guards." Karl explained.

The Tortollan frowned. "Is there anything that you didn't use? Something that we can use to pick out how much of a threat the demons are, and if there might have been advanced undead among the

zombies?" "Oh, I forgot that there were thrown boulders as well. A specialty of the Golems. But there should be some fireballs and arcane attacks from the others. They'll look a fair bit like ours, though. If you can pick out the power difference, most of the attacks by arcane type Commanders were from the other group. We just have one with us. Then a bunch of the fireballs were also theirs.

I don't know if you'll be able to tell them apart from my fire spells, though. The flaming cyclones come in two varieties, both at my rank and one below that." Karl explained.

"Thank you, merchant. Please wait here while the unit Commander comes to speak with you."

If the army unit was going to come to them to talk to get more details, that would give Prince Corbin and his Spellblade Clan plenty of time to escape. As long as they could make it past the patrol, they would be able to turn east and start heading for the border. They were not going to get there any time soon, but it would be safer every day that they moved away from the dungeon.

The whole military unit was coming towards the wagon, and Karl could sense the tension in the wagon behind them.

The monsters didn't seem to suspect that Karl's team had been doing anything wrong so far, but they also hadn't gone looking for the battlefield yet.

Once they saw the outcome of the battle, they would certainly have some serious questions about what sort of combat power Karl and his team had.

The Commander of the unit, a Royal Rank Demon with tattered black wings that clearly wouldn't be able to fly, stopped in front of Karl and took stock of the group.

"Merchant, I am told that your team has a surprising amount of combat power to be able to take out an entire undead horde with only the assistance of a small nomad tribe." He greeted them.

"We do alright. You know how it is for merchants, we have to be able to take care of ourselves when we're on the road." Karl agreed.

The demon smiled. "I would imagine that it's a lot easier to take care of yourself when you're actually a Royal Rank human Elite with an active system and not a merchant at all. Tell me, what have you been telling everyone that you are, to pass so easily through half a country?"

"I think you might have misunderstood something in your dispatch. My father is a stone troll. As much as every kid loves stories of the system, that's all they are. Stories." Karl countered.

"So if I cut your hand off, it would just grow back, with no help from your cleric friends, would it?"

Karl chuckled at the demon's attempt to call him out. "I am only half troll, but I regenerate well enough."

Karl took his sword out of his storage space and held out a pinkie finger.

With a grimace, he severed the digit and held it up to the shocked soldiers. Then he held his bleeding hand up and watched with what he hoped was hidden shock as the original finger seemed to melt into mist while a new one grew out of his hand.

He had never tested [Void Body] before, but it worked exceptionally well. It did leave him hungry, though.

There was just one odd thing about it. He didn't bleed red anymore. The blood that had poured from his severed finger and across his hand had been deep black, though most of it was already absorbed into his skin.

The Demon stared for a few more seconds, suspicious of Karl's honesty, then dragged a young Minotaur forward.

"Is this the man that you saw?" He demanded.

"Yes, Unit Commander. That is the Dungeon Champion from the Golden Dragon Nation, I am one hundred percent sure of it now that I can smell him. Even if the trouble seer hadn't said we would find him here, I would be certain that he is the human's Champion." The soldier insisted.

He was a Commander Rank Minotaur, likely still in his teens, or whatever the Minotaur age equivalent was. His horns were polished to a black sheen that greatly pleased Cara, who had been wondering for some time if you could polish them, and he did look vaguely familiar to Karl, though they had only seen each other once.

Karl hopped down from the wagon, and the Minotaur blinked up at him, then frowned. The last time they had met, Karl had been under 190 centimetres tall, but right now, he was well over two and a half metres tall, towering over the young Minotaur.

"Look, I'm sure this is an honest mistake. Perhaps it's because we have a human guard and the Dragon Clerics with us?" He asked, gesturing to Dana and the others.

The demon turned to the Naga warrior on his side of the wagon.

"Did this man hire you to pretend that you were his guards?" He demanded.

The Naga gave him an unimpressed look.

[Are you retarded? We Naga have our own dignity. We have been his guards as long as he has been a merchant. There is no pretending involved.] He responded in Serpent.

The Demon's eye twitched, and Karl watched carefully as he barely resisted going for the blade on his hip at the insult.

Karl looked through the soldiers, taking note of the ones in lighter armour, which wouldn't interfere with their mobility when casting spells. The soldiers noticed where he was looking, and began to believe that Karl might be telling the truth. If he took out the mages before they could respond, the rest of the team would have a devil of a time trying to kill a Royal Rank Troll without fire magic.

The Demon frowned as he started to consider that they might have gotten the wrong target. But he couldn't just let it slide when they had been specifically sent here.

"I will need to ask you to come with us until this matter is settled. You will be free to make your sales when we get to the city."

Chapter 517 Bethoke City

"So you're going back to the city of Clifnal? That's no trouble, we were headed there anyhow." Karl shrugged.

"No, the fortress City of Bethoke. You will be brought to the Overlord's Temple for questioning on suspicion of being a spy."

"Whatever, as long as they're interested in buying tools, it's fine by me. You don't mind if we make a few pit stops at the farms along the way, do you?" Karl asked.

"What part of this are you not getting?" The demon asked.

"The part where you think you're in charge here. If it wasn't likely to offend the delicate sensibilities of the War Cleric, we would be having some harsh words about your assumption that you can just throw around accusations and detain merchants.

I would think that you would be a bit more understanding when you're asking for a favour. There are countless nomadic tribes out here, after all, and it would be a shame if we walked away the next time you met one."

Karl could feel the glares that he was getting, both from in front and behind. However, after a few seconds, the Demon relented.

"Alright, you have a point. Until we can prove that you're the spies from the Golden Dragon Nation, we will ask that you accompany us as honoured guests."

"That's much better. Lead the way. But I was serious about stopping at the farms. They're the ones most likely to need the tools, and my wagon is nearly full."

The Demon sighed and motioned for his unit of a hundred soldiers, mostly at the Ascended and Commander Rank, to encircle the wagon.

They had just started to move when something in the Demon's pocket began to glow.

The unit leader took out a flat stone object with runes all over one side, then stared at the other.

"It looks like our guest is a prophetic one. There is a nomadic Orc Tribe coming our way. We won't be able to avoid them with the slow-moving Wagon, so everyone should prepare for a fight."

Karl cleared his throat. "If you don't mind, we've got Dragon Clerics with us. Do you mind if we trade some food to the Orcs before things get messy?"

"I swear to the Vampire Gods, you are the most annoying Troll that I have ever met."

Ophelia poked Karl in the back. "If you're trying to get him to kill us before we make it to the city, you're on the right path. But that's not the greatest idea I've heard to convince people that we're not spies."

A few of the nearby soldiers chuckled, while Karl smiled at her. "They'll get used to my loveable personality soon enough. Besides, if the lovely ladies of the church have created some food supplies, the Orcs will be happy to see them."

06:35

From high overhead, Hawk gave them an update. [There are a lot of Orcs, and they've already got weapons out. I don't think that they're going to be willing to negotiate.]

That could be bad news, but the soldiers were surrounding their wagon, so it wasn't like he could drop back and stay out of the mess. All that Karl could do was wait to see how things turned out.

Once they were a hundred metres apart, the Orcs began shouting a war chant, a rhythmic battle cry in time with their advance.

The Demon at the head of the patrol reached into his coat and set off a marker flare of some sort that sent bright-green smoke billowing into the sky.

"We will need your people to stay back. Not that we don't trust your capabilities, but it's safer not to mix our force." One of the soldiers informed Karl as he prepared to join the fight.

"No problem. We will wait right here."

With the two groups moving towards each other, that put Thor and the wagon well out of the way of the hostilities. As long as they weren't dragged into the fight by a retreat by the soldiers, there shouldn't be any issues.

But as soon as Karl decided that this was a great opportunity to simply leave while the Orcs butchered the patrol, more soldiers started to appear out of portals all around the smoking beacon.

Now, it wasn't the soldiers who were outnumbered, but the Orcs. The two sides' current numbers were close, but it was unlikely that either side would fight to the bitter end out here in the middle of nowhere, for no good reason.

The Orcs just wanted a good fight, and they would calm down once they had one, Karl assumed. That was how they had been every other time that he had met them.

Karl dug through the items that the Elves had loaded into his inventory and brought out a stack of paper and a fountain pen that he loaded with a bit of Hill Giant blood from Thor's space.

"What are you doing?" Ophelia asked as he began to write with a smile on his face.

"I want to make a spell book for Crushing Blows. None of you can use it, but the leader of the Orcish force can. He's an unarmed combat specialist, you see. Crushing Blows adds damage to blunt impacts based on Rank.

Once this fight is over, we can trade them some food as a show of goodwill from the church, and I will give him the book as a first meeting gift."

"That assumes that he's going to be alive at the end of the fight." Dana reminded him.

The massive Monarch Rank Orc sent a soldier flying with a single blow from his fist, which was easily larger than the soldier's head.

"I think that he will do alright. They don't have a duel challenger here to fight him, and I'm not about to volunteer to get beat up for sport."

One of the reinforcement groups sent a runner over to see what Karl was doing, a nervous looking Satyr that was even shorter than Lotus, and barely Ascended Rank, by Karl's estimation.

"You are not going to join?" He asked as soon as he arrived.

"The Clan looks like they're doing alright. I am just a merchant who sells wares through the nomadic areas and a few of the cities. The first group of soldiers asked me to stay out of the fight, as they didn't trust my loyalty was to them and not to the Nomads." Karl explained.

The Satyr nodded. "Wait here. The leader will want to talk to you soon."

Karl laughed. "The other one said the same thing. Don't worry, I'm not going to run away while you're in the middle of a battle. Not that I would make it far with a loaded wagon."

The Satyr hesitated to return to his leader, and Karl saw that all of the unit leaders were fighting the Orc Clan leader at the same time.

"They never learn, do they?" He asked.

"What do you mean?" The Satyr asked.

"Well, it's insulting to gang up on a Clan Leader, isn't it? If you want to fight him, you should challenge him to a proper duel. Four on one is just rude, and makes them look weak and cowardly." The Satyr looked confused. "You understand the way of the Orcs?"

Now everyone was confused. Even Ophelia was baffled about what sort of policy they had regarding the Orcs.

"Did you never consider talking to them? Just ask them for a trade or a challenge. It's not that hard. We figured it out the first time that we met them." Ophelia insisted.

The Satyr was thoroughly baffled. "You speak Orcish?"

Chapter 518 I Speak Orcish

They all stared at each other for a few seconds, unsure what part of the conversation the others weren't understanding.

Then a large Orc with a club in his hand pointed at Ophelia.

"Hey thick, sexy and furry. How about you come over here and show me if you would make a good wife?" He shouted.

"If you wanted a strong woman to spank you like your mother should have, you just had to ask." She shouted back.

Karl laughed, but the Satyr looked confused.

Perhaps he just wasn't familiar with crude humour.

Ophelia sized up the Orc, and then nodded for Karl to buff her up. They were both Commanders, but she wasn't taking any risks of ending up as some random Orc's wife.

Haste, Terrorize, Brutality and Trollish Regeneration stacked with her own Berserk Terror skill, and she transformed into a four-metre tall Dire Bear before charging at the Orc.

"Goddess, she is massive. What is she doing? I thought your team was sitting the battle out?" The Satyr asked, panicked.

"Weren't you listening? The Orc challenged her to a bridal duel, and she went to beat some sense into him."

"How am I supposed to know that when they're shouting in Orcish?"

The Satyr was waving his hands in frustration as he screamed at them. Karl looked back at the others, but the ladies just shrugged. They had only heard one language, the Common Language.

But Thor thought the whole situation was hilarious.

[What if the only reason we get along with them so well is because we're the only people who speak Orcish, other than the Orcs?] He chortled, laughing out loud along with his thoughts.

Ophelia and the Orc were going at it in a brutal battle that looked like they had a vendetta against each other, but Karl could see that they were both pulling their strikes so that they wouldn't seriously injure their opponent. It wasn't a war, or a duel to the death. It was more like Orcish flirting, and while Ophelia was playing along, it was clear that the suitor was about to be rejected, as her last strike had nearly put him on his back.

Once he was on the ground, he was done for. In Dire Bear form, she was much larger than he was, and she could just pin him to the ground with one massive paw.

They all watched for a few more minutes until Ophelia got the final blow and got the Orc in the back, pounding him face down into the dirt.

A few other Orcs whooped in celebration nearby, laughing at his misfortune as Ophelia rubbed him in the dirt for a few seconds before backing away and transforming back into her Werebear form.

The Orc got to his knees and made a show of bowing before Ophelia before standing up to look for another challenger to improve his combat skills.

The Satyr snapped his fingers. "Wait, if you can speak Orcish, can you end this insanity? Ask them for a parlay or something?"

"At the start, maybe. But it's a bit late for that now. There are a lot of dead on both sides already. Once there are deaths, it's generally too late for talking." Karl sighed.

If he had known that for some reason he could understand the Orcs when nobody else could, he would have insisted from the start.

"I need to tell my leadership. I will be back." The Satyr informed them, before turning to run off.

"Do you think that it's the system translating? The Orcish tribes seem to have more memories of the past than others, so maybe they still have an affinity with the System?" Dana whispered, just loud enough for the others to hear.

Tessa nodded. "That's as good of a guess as any other reason. We all understood them just fine, but we've all got active systems, while the Monsters here didn't need one to be strong." Lotus looked excited as she realized something. "Orcs have their own Gods, but they include the World Dragon in their pantheon. I think Tessa might be right. They still have some lingering affinity with the System. In fact, they might even have a limited version of the System still active, like the other Elites do. But they're Orcs, and they all pick the warrior class, other than a few Shamans. They are different from other species, but that makes me wonder what they were like in the past. You met them during that time Bishop Misty sent you to, right?"

Karl nodded. "They were strangely civilized. They were smart, and spoke with a very refined accent. There is still some of that, like the fancy pants that the messenger they sent us was wearing. It's all threadbare and faded, but they remember. They're just not willing to go to other species to get assistance to bring them back to the status they lost."

They were interrupted by the Satyr running back with a Royal Rank soldier in an ornate uniform. Karl couldn't pick out what sort of species it came from, but it had a bird's head and wings, as well as arms with taloned fingers and triple jointed legs.

"Joffrey says that you know something about Orc culture and how to end this fight without it being a massacre." The officer demanded.

"Sure, just back away. Don't turn your back and run like cowards, they don't respect that. But stop fighting and just back away. They'll figure out what you're after in a few minutes.

But if you just spoke Orc, it would be a lot easier." Karl agreed.

"Can you assist us? I see that your Werebear friend managed to have a solo battle with one of them." Karl rolled his eyes and hopped down from the wagon.

"Make sure that your side doesn't attack me. I will explain the situation."

The officer looked overjoyed, Karl guessed. It was nearly vibrating with excitement, but the bird head didn't show any emotions that Karl understood.

The officer called for a guard to protect them, and Karl sighed. "What are you doing?" He asked.

"Guarding you so you can make it to the leaders?"

Karl laughed and patted him on the shoulder.

"You really don't know anything about the Orcs at all, do you?"

Karl stomped toward where the leaders were fighting, while the soldiers did their best to keep up.

A large, Royal Rank Orc blocked his way and Karl smiled at her. "I need to talk to the boss. These guys are too stupid to understand Orcish or even what a duel is."

The woman laughed, and motioned for him to follow her.

That did not set the officers' nerves at ease. Not even a little.

The three leaders and the boss were all bleeding heavily when Karl stepped in between them with a hand out toward both sides, signalling for them to pause their fight.

"Chieftain, these idiots asked me to translate because they don't speak Orcish. They want to withdraw their force, but don't understand courtesy." Karl explained.

"That part was obvious already. Why don't they just do it?" The Chieftain replied while glaring at the three Monarch Rank unit leaders.

"Their custom is to just turn and run away."

The Orc paused for a second, and then started to laugh as he realized what Karl was trying to say.

[Oi, everyone back off and let the soldiers run away.] The Chieftain yelled.

Over the next few seconds, the battle calmed, and Karl sighed in relief.

"I have a welcoming gift for you once you're done with these soldiers, as well as some food to trade from the Dragon Clerics. Let me talk to the soldiers for a bit and I will explain what they want." Karl informed the massive Orc.

"No need to translate, I speak their language." The Chieftain shrugged.

The Orcs might have a point about the soldiers of the Newbon Empire being idiots. The Chieftain spoke their language, and the Commanders hadn't even tried to keep this from turning into a huge mess. It might have been a political thing, but Karl got the impression that the soldiers thought there was no other way to deal with Orc Clans.

Karl turned to the Unit Leaders.

"The Orcs have disengaged after I told them that you weren't intending to completely wipe them out." Karl informed them.

"Why do I get the feeling that you weren't that civil about it? I might not speak Orc, but I am fairly certain that I was just insulted to my face." One of the men, a tall and slender Demon with violet skin, insisted.

[Not as dumb as he looks.] The Chieftain laughed.

"Dammit, he did it again, didn't he? That bastard speaks our language!"

Chapter 519 Present For The Chieftain

[What sort of welcome present did you bring for me? I'm willing to ignore their rudeness if you've got something good.] The Chieftain suggested.

"First, I'm only with them because they suspect that I'm a spy from the Golden Dragon Nation, and they're taking me into custody so they can interrogate me in the city. But I brought you this." Karl replied.

He handed the Orc the hastily scrawled skill book and the Chieftain took it with a curious look, then flipped it open.

The book vanished, and the air was filled with curses as weapons came back out.

"What the hell did you give him? Was that a skill book! Everyone on guard, the Orcs might have a System User!" The slender, purple haired, Monarch Rank Demon officer shouted.

"Relax, it's a skill for punching people in the face. It's Orc-specific, not many others can use it." Karl explained, with his hands up in surrender, as dozens of blades were pointed his way.

"What was the skill?" The Demon demanded. "Crushing Blows. It's worthless to me, but valuable to him. Gifts between group leaders are a common courtesy among Nomad groups." Karl offered.

The Orc smiled and put his hand on Karl's shoulder, implying that his Clan would defend the merchant if the soldiers turned on him.

Even though they were outnumbered, the Orcs had been on the winning side of the engagement, taking fewer than half the number of casualties that the soldiers had before the fight was halted.

Karl saw that Lotus was running away from the wagon with an Orcish child and silently prayed that she was going to work as a Cleric and not just running away on the whim of a small Orc. She could resurrect, so that was most likely what she was up to.

She had an area healing spell active as well, Karl could feel the holy Magic in the air. Tessa got down from the wagon as well, and began to move through the soldiers, healing them with a touch as she went.

She couldn't bring the dead back to life, that wasn't the specialty of her Goddess. Even Lotus wouldn't be able to bring many back before becoming exhausted, so she would likely focus on the ones with important skills or small children.

Normally, a Nature Cleric would just pick some at random, or do the closest ones. But she had been hanging around Tessa for a long time, so taking care of the Orphans took precedence in her choices.

Especially if the choice was to make them no longer an Orphan by bringing one of their parents back.

The soldiers were regrouping as they pulled away from the Orcs, leaving only their dead behind. Tessa nodded politely as she stepped up beside Karl, with Dana beside her. "Officers, healing of the severely wounded is finished. Your soldiers should be mobile again. There are a few who lost limbs and that will take more healing to recover, but other than that, I've done the Goddess' will." Ophelia had gone to join

Lotus, in case she needed anything. The Orcs wouldn't bother her. She had already put one flirtatious Orc in his place, and it would be harassment to continue flirting with her today unless she started it.

"Can someone explain to me why there is some random merchant and a pair of Dragon Clerics here in the first place?" One of the assistants to the Unit Leaders asked.

A junior officer nodded and referred to his notes. "The Trouble Seers informed us that there was a spy from the Golden Dragon Nation at a specific location. When we arrived there, we found this merchant matching the general description of a suspicious person that we had recently been informed of.

There is some doubt that he's the right person, though. We were informed that he should be a Human Elite, but when we pushed him, he confirmed that he is actually part of a Stone Troll Clan. He can regenerate fingers like any other troll, and his blood is black." The others looked like they didn't believe, so Karl held out his hand to the Orcish Chieftain, who handed him a blade. He deactivated [Void Body], but left [Trollish Regenerations] as he cut his hand and let the black blood drop onto the ground.

"Evidence enough? It takes a lot of energy to regenerate limbs." He asked.

The two newly arrived Unit Leaders shrugged. "Looks like troll blood to me. I've certainly never seen a human bleed that colour before. Perhaps the seers misunderstood what they were seeing? The presence of the Clerics might have been the Golden Dragon Nation influence, while he was the threat they were concerned about."

The leader of the first group gave Karl an assessing look. "I still think that if he was flagged as a threat and possible spy, we should bring him to the fortress."

The Orcish Chieftain stood still, patiently waiting as the soldiers decided what they were going to do about Karl.

"Why don't we do our business first? The Clerics made a bunch of food when we heard that you were coming. We can take care of the trade while they argue, and then you can do whatever else you had planned for the day." Karl suggested.

The Chieftain smiled and the two of them quietly moved to the wagon, where Tessa and Lotus had left twenty bags of their creations, split between rice and beans.

"Cleric food usually lacks variety but..." Karl began.

"No worries, Karl. My people love the rice and beans. We aren't eating it every day, so it's a rare treat for them to get such a fine crop that they don't even have to sift weevils out of.

I see that the Minotaurs traded you a full load of tools as well. We don't need those, but you'll be able to sell them as soon as you get to a city. Most of the farmers are still Minotaurs in this region. As you go south, you'll find that more of them are Naga or Lizard species. Naga farmers are good ones, they appreciate a proper fight." The Chieftain laughed.

Karl began to hand down bags so that the Chieftain could have someone gather them, but when the Orc picked them up, they vanished into a separate space.

Karl activated his interface and looked over the Orc's name.

{Kilgore, Chieftain of the White Fist Orcs} was written in the traditional brown of a warrior.

Everything was transferred in under a minute, and the Chieftain turned to smirk at the soldiers.

"You know, eventually they will figure out that you're lying to them. They might not be able to see the nameplate, but even the Demons will eventually reach the point where they guess that your regeneration might be a skill and not proof that you're a troll." He quietly informed Karl.

Karl chuckled. "I'm hoping that they don't come to that conclusion until after we've already parted ways. If the World Dragon favours me today, they might decide that I can go about my business."

The Orc snorted in laughter. "One day, we will find the lost scale, and then we will see whether the World Dragon still favours us or if he gave up on this world."

The words startled Karl. That statement made it sound like there was a method to their travels.

"Are you searching for signs of an ancient temple or something where the Scale might be?" He asked.

The Orc shook his head. "No, it should have been with a powerful Titan when he died. Nobody knows where his grave is, and nobody has found it yet, either. If we do, and we can recover the scale fragment intact, the Clans should be linked back to the System in its fully active state."

That was astounding news, on a level that Karl couldn't fully appreciate. How much dedication did it take for an entire species to agree to search a continent, or perhaps the entire world, for millennia?

That level of devotion would put the average cleric to shame. Not only did they say the words, and preach their Orcish gospel of righteous battle, they lived every day on a holy quest.

For that reason alone, Karl had the utmost of respect for Chieftain Kilgore. But more than that, he would never look at the Orcs the same way again. Just knowing that they were on the same path as he was, a path towards fully reactivating the system, was enough to count them as potential allies and friends.

[Everyone needs a friend who knows when to punch someone in the face.] Cara agreed.

Chapter 520 Bethoke Fortress

The Unit leaders came over and glared at Karl and the Chieftain.

"If you're done conversing in your own language, we have come to a consensus on the status of the suspected foreign spy." The Demon leading the first team that had met Karl informed them.

"Alright, lay it on me. It had better not interfere with my work, though." Karl replied.

The Demon sighed and shook his head. "The risk that you really are the spy from the Golden Dragon Nation is too high, we can't let your team leave until we have brought you before the trouble seers for an assessment."

Karl sighed. "So, it's going to be a huge pain in the ass, then? I take it you're all planning a long walk back to your fortress and then an undefined duration of imprisonment on arrival?"

The Orc Chieftain gave a low chuckle, and the three Monarchs gave Karl a suspicious look. "The council of Overlords has the right. They will determine what will happen until you can be brought before an Oracle.

However, if you are truly innocent and concerned about your business, we can allow your guards to continue the business of escorting the Dragon Clerics on their pilgrimage, along with a small escort from our wilderness forces."

Karl looked at the wagon for an answer.

"We will wait in the city for the decision. It is safer for us if we aren't travelling without one of our primary combat assets. Karl was chosen to escort us for his capabilities, not just because his wagon was in the right spot at the right time." Tessa insisted.

"Alright, we will bring you all back to the Bethoke fortress, and you can wait for the Council representatives to make a determination on the situation with Merchant Karl. If he is determined to be a spy, there will be questions for the rest of you as well. After the incident is settled, we will assist you in finding a new escort if necessary."

Tessa nodded. If things got that far, it was going to be a real mess, but there were nearly a thousand soldiers here right now, and they suspected Karl of being a spy, which meant that the Dragon Clerics were certainly under suspicion as well.

The soldiers were just too polite to say it, as nobody wanted to insult the Gods if Tessa and Lotus were really on a pilgrimage.

Karl shook the Orcish leader's hand. "Chieftain Kilgore, it was a pleasure meeting you. Enjoy the supplies, and perhaps we will see you the next time that we are both in the same region."

Kilgore patted him on the shoulder with a smile. "Be careful as you leave. The Overlords have a touchy temperament. They have a habit of ganging up to attack any Orc that gets too powerful so that they don't have to admit that the Clans have better potential than they do."

Karl's laughter brought confused looks from the Monarchs of the Newbon Army.

"He's just explaining that the Orcs don't have the best opinion of the city dwellers." Karl relayed.

The orcs close enough to have heard the whole conversation did their best not to laugh at the difference between Karl's version and what had actually been said.

"That's enough delay. The portals will be open in a few seconds, so please return to your wagon and prepare to travel to Bethoke fortress." The slender Demon Monarch insisted.

True to his word, a set of portals opened, and soldiers in fancy uniforms rushed out. The first six of them surrounded Karl's wagon, then the soldier on his right gave a nod, indicating that he should start moving.

Karl waved goodbye to the Orcs, who laughed and waved back.

The entire Clan understood that he was being accused of being a spy, which could lead to his execution. But the fact that he wasn't showing any fear multiplied their respect for him.

Thor passed through the portal, and Karl felt them enter a barrier on the other side. It restricted something, but Karl couldn't immediately tell what.

[I think it's intended to limit the level of abilities used in the city, so that nobody can challenge the leadership. If they can use Royal and Monarch Rank skills, but you can only use Awakened or Ascended, what threat can you pose to them?] Cara suggested.

The soldiers visibly relaxed as they followed Karl's wagon through the portal into the open cobblestone courtyard that appeared to be the parking area for the stables.

[Sorry, Thor. They'll realize that we've been lying right away if you return to your space.] Karl apologized as he realized his mistake.

[As long as they have good food, it's fine. I will just talk to the other mounts here.]

Karl looked into the stables and saw a large number of reptiles that walked on two legs with their tails extended behind them. They were a bit larger than an ostrich, but with powerful legs. The army units hadn't been using them, but there were dozens, or even a hundred of them here in the stables.

They greeted Thor with bugles and keening cries, which he replied to with happy Thor noises and a few snorts of amusement.

[They're friendly, and they're all part of one big hunting pack. That's weird for carnivores.]

[They're not going to try to treat you like prey, are they?]

Thor laughed in Karl's mind. [No, they're all Awakened Rank. They know that I'm not edible. But they've been trained to follow orders and not to hunt independently, they don't really behave like predators.]

[Let me know if you have any troubles with them. I suspect that we're about to be escorted to a comfortable prison cell.]

That prediction was confirmed when a group of grooms came out of the stables to get Thor comfortable and put the wagon away.

As they approached Thor, Karl noticed that someone was missing. Remi had recalled her bodyguards, or perhaps the barriers on the city had deactivated them. But they were definitely down by two Naga Warriors.

Karl didn't say anything about it, and instead focused on more urgent problems.

[Remi, the disguise won't wash off when they polish his scales, will it?] Karl asked.

[Nope, it's a magical effect. It won't wear off his scales unless Thor wants it to.]

It didn't change the surface or sensitivity of his scales, only the visible colour, so Thor had no problem staying black instead of green and gold. If the grooms were going to polish his scales, he would happily let them.

"We've been on the road a while, he could use a full rub down and his scales scrubbed, if you don't mind." Karl relayed to the grooms.

"Of course, Sir. Your Cerro will be ready when you call for him."

When Thor left with the grooms, the guards moved around Karl and the others. "Please follow us. We have a suite prepared for you while we wait. I believe that the Oracle will have time to meet with you today."

The building they were led into was undoubtedly the most ornate and opulent building that Karl had ever been inside. There was gold everywhere, jewels studded into the frames of paintings, magical armour suits in alcoves all down the walls, and the oppressive feeling of the spell that was restricting their magic the whole way.

"Please wait here. The maids will be along presently with appropriate attire and refreshments." The guard informed them.

Karl nodded, and the guard stepped outside to lock them in the suite. There was no sound of footsteps, and Karl could see his heat signature through the grate of the viewport in the door. So, they were locked in and under guard. But the room was beautiful, and Lotus had already changed to clean robes and slippers to stretch out on one of the divans.

"There should be bedrooms to the side if you want a proper nap." Tessa suggested.

"I'm not sleepy, I just wanted to enjoy the sofa without getting it dirty." Lotus laughed as she shifted to get comfortable.

Karl admired the rest of their holding area. It was certainly a guest room, even if the windows were barred and the walls were reinforced. But it was just as richly decorated as the rest of this palatial estate. There were gold fittings on the cabinet doors that kept dust off the bookshelves, fine crystal glasses on the bar with a small selection of liquors and juices, and the furniture had high-quality padding, if Lotus' happy noises were anything to go by.

Then again, after travelling on the wood bench of the wagon, everything might seem comfortable.