

Beast Master 521

Chapter 521 Appropriate Attire

The 'appropriate attire' that the maids brought them looked like the sort of puffy and frilly noble attire that the Trolls at the south gate of Oakhamping had been wearing, but in plain white.

It was quality clothing, but unless they were at a church or a wedding, they would definitely stand out.

[They put a spell on it to track you.] Cara reminded Karl as soon as she saw the clothes.

[Can you remove it without coming out of your space?]

There was a pulse of power over the clothing, and Karl sensed her satisfaction.

[Done.]

"I suppose that we should change to make them happy. The clothing should be safe." Karl informed the others.

Dana looked at the clothes. "I don't know what was cast on them, but there is still magic on these clothes." "It should be safe, though." At least, Karl assumed that Cara would have noticed if there was something harmful on them.

Karl disabled his armour spell and slid the pants of the only not a dress type outfit up before pulling the coat over his shoulders. There was no shirt, but in his size enhanced form, he was more heavily muscled than he remembered his natural body being. Even with the coat only having two buttons at the bottom and the chest open, it wasn't a bad look.

Then he put on a pair of the slippers and the whole outfit changed colour. It was a deep blood-red with black trim, and a bit of gold embroidery. With his shaggy black hair in need of a trim, the rich fabric was a bit of a visual contrast, especially at the filly collar and cuffs.

Dana giggled as she slid one of the dresses over her head before removing her armour and outfit.

It was a frilly sleeved princess dress with multiple layers of petticoats, and Karl couldn't help but smile at her frustration as she realized that there was no way to properly put it on yourself. It buttoned up the back all the way to the neck, and then a ribbon was designed to be tied around the waist.

It was a Princess' dress, for certain. Exclusively intended to be worn by a lady with maids.

Ophelia was staring at the clothing in intense disgust, but the four dresses were the same, just in different sizes.

"You could transform into a Dire Bear and just refuse to wear clothes." Karl offered.

"Thanks, but no thanks. My mother used to force me to wear things like this when I was little. Well, right until the day of the serum ceremony, actually. It's personal, not a concern that it won't go with my fur."

Karl turned away to let everyone get dressed, so he was the first to notice when the maid came in with food.

"Oh, good. The clothing fit. Those are some... interesting colours." She murmured, looking at the floor.

"Do you think that they don't suit us? I might be able to get them to change if I change outfits then put it back on." Karl suggested.

"No, it will always be the same. The clothes reflect the colour of your aura."

Karl turned and looked back behind him. Tessa's dress was bright crimson, the same as her cleric robes, Dana's was a very princess powder blue, and Ophelia's was deep bronze with gold trim.

Lotus, on the other hand, was wearing a shimmering mess of chaos that looked like someone had tried to do a pearl white paint job, then let their kids throw glitter all over everything.

It was mostly green and gold sparkles, and Karl couldn't help but laughing.

"So, you're telling me that the little High Priestess' aura looks like that? I should likely be less shocked than I am. But that is glorious."

"I think it's broken." The maid whispered.

"No, I've known her a while now, and I think it's working just fine. See how happy she is with her new dress? I hope you don't expect to get that one back when we leave."

The maid smiled a little, but Karl noticed that she was avoiding looking at him.

"Did I say something weird?" Karl asked. She didn't have a problem looking at anyone else. Perhaps she was just shy.

A deep voice laughed from the door. "It's not what you said, Merchant. Or should we call you Merchant of Death? Your aura is blood-red and void black, with only the barest hint of honourable gold at the edges. I have met mass murderers and Demon Lords that didn't have an aura that dark and bloody." The man at the door, a Satyr of some sort, but with antlers and not curled horns, informed them.

"I think it's glitched, like the Maid said. I'm not actually a bad guy. Even the Nature Priestess will vouch for me."

The Satyr laughed as Lotus did a twirl to show off her dress.

"I'm not sure that a Nature Priestess is the best judge of character. Though, it could just be a side effect of your lineage. Some of the more violent species always have a disturbingly dark aura base from their nature, and then another colour for their personality." The man suggested.

[I say that we pull his legs off and roast them. He looks like he would be less annoying on a rotisserie.] Rae suggested.

[He's kind of fluffy and cute.] Cara disagreed.

[The antlers would get stuck in my throat, we need to take them off too.] Remi sighed.

Karl realized that he might have found the source of the aura issue. It was this bunch of hungry beasts messing with the colours. Perhaps the outfit would normalize once they had lunch.

[Why don't you all make yourselves something to eat? Thor should be able to pull food from his space as he needs it, but they promised to feed him properly.]

While Karl was distracted talking to the beasts, a group of overdressed guards came in, then stopped and did a double take before staring at him.

"Come on, it's not that big of a deal, just a malfunctioning spell on the outfits." Karl insisted.

"If you say so, sir. Please follow us this way. We need to... have a private talk with the ladies while you meet with the oracle." The leader of the guard detachment agreed.

[Summon more guards.] He whispered to the man outside the door.

He wasn't as quiet as he thought that he was, and all of the women, including the maid, were trying hard not to laugh as Karl followed him out into the hallway, where an entire unit of ten Commander Rank Minotaurs were waiting for him.

"Alright, have fun, ladies. Holler if you need me and I will be right back." Karl joked.

"Stop making the soldiers want to cry. We will be fine for a few minutes." Dana laughed as Karl waved and began to walk down the hallway.

As soon as the guards thought that he was out of earshot, the questions began.

"Are you alright? Is he holding you against your will? We can help you escape his influence if you need, give you a portal to the docks at Penbeck or Legore if you want to get on a boat and flee."

Tessa laughed and shook her head. "No, we are fine. I think that the aura colour really is some sort of glitch. He's not the sort of Troll that takes anything in life all that seriously."

Chapter 522 Lie Detector

Karl was led to a room where he was sat down across the table from a feathered Demon, with some sort of magical device between them.

"This is a lie detector. My species reacts subconsciously to lies. If you speak, one of the lights will glow. Do you understand how this works?" The Demon asked.

"Yes."

The green light glowed steadily as Karl spoke.

"Good, it seems to be working. Now, we will start on the basic questions before you are sent before the Oracle. This is just for his safety, and we would hope that you don't take it as a personal slight."

[That's why there are Overlords at all three doors to this room.] Rae laughed.

"Of course not. The Oracle sounds like someone important, you can't just let random strangers see him in person without vetting them first." Karl agreed.

The green light glowed, and the Demon nodded.

"You don't seem as surprised as most are to hear that the Oracle here is male. But let's keep on track. Were you sent here to spy, gather information, or otherwise obtain information about the Newbon Empire for another nation?"

"Nope." Karl replied, and the green light glowed.

The Demon looked confused, then continued his questions.

"Did you come here at the behest of someone outside the Newbon Empire."

"No."

Both light glowed, and Karl tried to keep a straight face as the Demon growled.

"If I rephrase that to 'did you arrive in Newbon at the behest of someone outside the nation' does it change the answer?"

"Yes."

The feathered Demon made a happy chirping noise.

"I see the issue here. You arrived in the city of Bethoke because the local guards requested it, and that was not what I meant, but it was a valid answer."

Karl nodded, and the Demon continued. "Did the person who sent you here wish for you to harm anyone within the Newbon Empire?"

"No."

The green light glowed, and the Demon sighed.

"What did they send you here for?"

Karl considered how to answer that for half a second.

"I was sent here to deliver a present that would help the Newbon Empire for many decades to come. I have already done that, and when I met your guards, I was intending to take my group to Clifnal to sell the tools that we are carrying and restock with whatever they had suitable for trade to the east down the road." The light remained a steady green.

"So, you haven't harmed anyone, and you came here just to deliver a present? Is that what I am to believe?"

Karl chuckled. "Don't get ahead of yourself. I've actually killed a fair number of people since we arrived here. But none that I would feel guilty about. Bandits, mostly."

The Demon frowned. "That's the job of the guard patrols."

"But it's more fun when I do it. Besides, we got a rather handsome payment for delivering a group of orphans to the driver from Halsearing."

The Demon smiled and began to relax, but from the other side of the door, one of the Overlords that Rae had detected asked the important question.

"Ask him how the children became orphans." The deep voice demanded.

"I killed their parents, of course. They were bandits, and there was a bounty on them."

"Dark Gods, what sort of monster are you?" The Demon sitting across from Karl gasped.

"The sexy kind."

The red light glowed so brightly that it drowned out the dim white backlight in the room.

"Well, that was rude. It didn't have to glow that bright." Karl mumbled, and the red light glowed again, though not as brightly.

"How many monsters have you killed in your life?" The voice from outside the door demanded.

"I don't keep an exact count. A couple or ten," the red light began to flicker. "Thousand." As Karl finished his sentence, the green light came on, faint but steady.

"Would it be closer to two or ten thousand?" The deep voice asked. In Karl's mind, Rae did a quick mental calculation of the bodies they had collected.

[Definitely closer to two than ten, but not for much longer.]

[You guys are a bunch of gluttons.]

Karl noticed that the red light flickered as he replied to Rae, though he hadn't spoken out loud.

"Closer to two, I would say."

The green light glowed as the door opened, and a delicate looking Lamia slithered into the room with a terrifying look on her face, followed by a cream scaled Naga warrior with four arms, and Overlord Rank power.

[Oh, tall, pale and sexy. Keep that one alive, I want him.] Remi insisted.

[I think he's already taken.] Karl reminded her.

[I am Queen, though. I'm sure he will see sense.]

His small snake was coming of age, and Karl wasn't sure what to do about her newfound attraction to Naga Warriors.

The Lamia gave Karl a smile that conveyed no happiness at all. "The Council of Overlords believes that you might be a direct threat to this fortress. I suggest that you take this seriously." "If they thought I

would be a danger to the fortress, wouldn't it have been smarter to just leave me in the wilderness instead of bringing me inside?"

The Lamia glared at the glowing green light, but the Naga Overlord smirked.

The other two doors opened, and an older Troll came in on Karl's left, while a young-looking woman with bark on her skin entered on his right.

His first thought was that she was a Dryad, but there was blood on her lips, and her body seemed to be filled with some sort of living smoke.

The Naga Overlord reached into his coat and took out a piece of paper. On it was a drawing, an excellent facsimile of Karl.

[Is this you?] The Naga Overlord asked.

"It looks like me. But I have no clue who they had in mind when they drew it." Karl replied.

The Lamia was about to translate, but Karl had received the live feed from Remi in real time, as she understood him just fine.

"What other languages do you speak?" The demon across the table from Karl asked.

Karl shrugged. "I'm not bad with Troll and Orcish." The green light glowed, and the Overlords began to look impressed.

"So, the reason that you weren't concerned about going across the wilderness is because you speak Orcish? We read the report from our guards, and they say that you broke up the fight and your clerics minimized casualties on both sides." The Troll asked with a heavy accent.

Karl made a noncommittal gesture. "The Orcish tribes aren't bad guys if you act properly. But mostly it's just that the odds of running into a nomadic tribe in the middle of nowhere are actually pretty low.

Compared to the chaos near the main travel routes with feral beast and monster spawns, plus the looters that are drawn to that sort of misfortune, it's just safer in general."

"What other spawns did you encounter?"

"Undead yesterday, and Copper Drakes with Sand Yeti a few days earlier."

The Demon across the table from him was baffled by the answer.

"What is a Sand Yeti?" "They look like yeti, but light tan, and they use sand element attacks, not ice."

"Oh, I understand now. Desert Howlers."

"That name sucks." The green light glowed with Karl's answer, and the Naga Warrior chuckled quietly.

[Can you guess where we got this picture of you?] Naga asked, bringing them back on track.

"My guess is that the Oracle drew it for you. The quality is pretty good. It's a bit more slender than I am, but that could just be perspective."

The light glowed green, and the Naga shook his head.

"Do you know a Minotaur named Morrisa?" The Trollish Overlord asked.

Karl thought for a second.

"That name sounds familiar. I'm sure I heard it not long ago. Was that the matriarch of the farm herd that I traded with outside Oakhamping?" The green light flickered faintly, reflecting Karl's confusion.

"No, she is an Overlord. Does that ring a bell?"

Rae giggled in his mind. [I bet she would murder someone if they suggested that she wear a bell like a common cow. That's the Minotaur that wants to bang the catman.]

Karl snapped his fingers in realization and burst out laughing.

"That's the one with the beastkin fetish. The Overlord who wants to marry the Golem Mage Ahmad, the one with the golden cat ears." He explained.

The light glowed bright green, and the room went silent.

"For the good of your health, I suggest that you never say those words out loud again, and certainly not in her presence." The Troll muttered.

"She's still mad, is she? I don't blame her. I heard he shut down her marriage proposal without even taking a night to consider it."

The odd tree woman moved so fast that Karl almost lost track of her in the corner of his vision. But she didn't attack, she took a seat across from him, and shuffled the demon interrogator over to the end of the table.

"Tell me all about it. How did you learn of it? Was he as cute as the Oracle says he is? Are his ears fluffy?"

"He's a very handsome man. When I first met him, I thought that he was a human. But when he came over to introduce himself, he was excited. His ears were lifting his hood, and eventually, he just gave up and took it down.

The Nature Clerics who were with me at the time had been baking cookies all morning. He's got a huge sweet tooth, so if you want to shoot your shot, you should try bringing sweets with you." Karl explained.

"But the ears." "As fluffy as anyone could hope for. I think his cat side is a rag doll or something similar. The fur is long and looks very soft."

Chapter 523 The Oracle

The sound of soft slippers coming down the hall caught Karl's attention. An older Troll with pale blue skin and one broken tusk, along with a scarred face and missing eye, made his way into the room.

The Overlords bowed to him, despite his power only being at the Commander Rank.

"The Oracle, I presume? My name is Karl. It is a pleasure to meet you."

The old Troll smiled at Karl.

"I sensed that the interview was only going to go in circles, and I have little time for questions today. I must watch the borders for attacks." The old troll wheezed.

"Would you like me to ask the Dragon Clerics to help you with your healing? Trollish Regeneration is good, but it's not almighty, and the clerics can help with most wounds." Karl replied.

The Oracle waved off his concerns. "It's a side effect of my ability. It will heal slowly, then return as I look out into the world for dangers.

So, let's get right to business.

I saw you in a vision yesterday morning. You used a skill, a most horrific skill. There was a Naga Queen standing behind you, and you created a vortex of fire that arced with lightning and created smaller vortexes. So, after the trouble seers informed me of their findings, I cast a scrying on your location, and I found a sensation that could only be a spy from the Golden Dragon Nation. Who else could you be except for the spy?

They wouldn't dare to send a nobody into our Nation, and there is talk of an Elite bearing your name. A Dungeon Champion of the Golden Dragon Nation who challenged a Tortollan Monk to single combat and won.

Overlord Morrisa drew a picture of that Champion for us, and what do you know? It looks just like the man in my vision of danger. It looks just like you."

Karl nodded along. "That's quite the convoluted story, but I follow what you're saying."

"Do you deny that you are a spy for the Golden Dragon Nation?" The Oracle asked.

"I do. I am not a spy for the Golden Dragon Nation. They had no part in my business ventures here."

The Lamia whispered something to the Naga, who nodded in agreement. "Oracle, perhaps you should look into his past and see what we're missing. We're obviously asking the wrong questions." The strange Tree woman suggested.

[They're terrible interrogators. If they were a little smart, they would have asked you where you were born and where you grew up.] Hawk scoffed.

[But it's good for us that they're not that creative. I'm not going to question our luck today.]

The Oracle nodded and Karl felt a strange magic surround him. The Oracle held his cheeks and looked deep into his eyes, while Remi giggled. [Do you think he's going to kiss you? Does this count as romance?]

Karl did his best not to laugh at the situation, and just waited for the spell to take effect.

The Oracle was staring into his eyes and chanting for a few minutes before he nodded and spoke in a demanding voice.

[Show me the first memories you have, as far back in time as your mind is capable of recalling.] He intoned as his eyes faded to pale white, losing track of the present and immersing himself in Karl's past.

An image quickly came to Karl's mind of landing in the lake when he was sent by Bishop Misty into the past. [When is this, what is the date?] The Oracle demanded.

The scene skipped to the battle at Bunga City, where Karl first met Orthos.

[Darklight Host Champion, Gold tabard, Lord of Bunga City. The last resurgence.] The Oracle muttered, then shook his head.

[That can't be right. Show me the earliest memory, closest to the day of your birth.]

The scene changed and Karl saw his parents, both in simple clothes stained the light grey of the bentonite clay from the Lithium mines.

[Where is this? What date.] The Oracle muttered.

[A village with no name, next to the deepest mine on the continent, under the light of the World Dragon.] He intoned, then the colour returned to his eyes and he stopped to stare at Karl.

[Have your parents ever even owned a calendar?] Thor asked curiously in Karl's mind.

[Almost certainly not. They track everything by the workdays. Only the church uses years and months for anything.]

The Overlords waited patiently for the Oracle to finish. "He was born in a mining town with no name, and at one point he was a Darklight Host War Champion on the Neia continent. I saw him challenge for the ownership of Bunga City. It doesn't make any sense, unless he was thrown through time by an Anomaly.

But if he was moved through time by an Anomaly, how long must he have been on this continent to regain his sanity? My visions are missing something."

"Were you a Darklight Host War Champion?" The strange tree woman asked.

"Yes. You can verify that as well. Grand Priest Orthos, the Bronze Dragon, is still alive and living in the Divine Beast Nation. He was there that day, and he can confirm that I did win the challenge for the city in single combat."

The green light glowed, and all of the Overlords began to stare at Karl with the sort of curiosity that was normally reserved for rare items and new species.

"I'm honestly not that interesting. Not long after that incident, I was brought forward through time and didn't live all those years in between then and now. In fact, I've only been in this century for fifteen years or so." Karl offered.

The green light verified his words were the truth, but that only baffled the Overlords even more.

"Do you have anything that could verify that? Some item, artifact from the past, or other item that could be scanned? I have a spell that can verify the age of a non-living item." The tree woman asked.

"Well, they went through time with me, so I'm not sure if they gained the age, but I still have some supplies in a storage bag. Here, try these. If not, I have other items from bandits I dealt with."

Karl took a small bag of Elven trail mix out of his inventory and placed the mix of nuts and fruits on the table.

The Overlord looked ecstatic to see them, and almost reached into the bag to eat some before she could stop herself.

"Those are Elven trail rations. I haven't seen them in a century. Those plants don't grow on this continent." She explained.

She cast a spell that made the bag glow green, then her eyes opened wide, and she stared at Karl.

"This bag was filled nearly ten thousand years ago. But the contents are fresh, and juicy, and they smell so good..." Smoke was leaking from her mouth, as if she was drooling at the sight.

"You can have them if you like. They might be irreplaceable, but it is still food, and intended to be eaten."

Her long, slender fingers darted out to grab the bag, pulling it to her chest. Then she delicately picked one of the nuts out and set it in her mouth, where it slowly disintegrated in the mist.

Chapter 524 Confusion

The Overlords silently conversed with each other, either with a spell, or just with body language that Karl was missing because he was fascinated with the happy way that the tree woman was snacking on the trail mix one piece at a time.

But he also noticed that she didn't finish any of the options. She was putting one of each to the side so that she didn't eat them all. Whether it was for research, her garden, or some other purpose, he didn't know. But she was meticulous about it, and even managed to make her bark covered face look sad when she found a lone nut that didn't have a partner for her to eat.

"Well, if he's not the spy, and just a danger to the city for some unknown reason, what do we do with him?" The Lamia that came in with the Naga asked the others in a low voice.

The Oracle made a frustrated gesture.

"Forget that, why the hell are there two of him, one troll and one human? Or better yet, where in the seven hells did the actual spy that I detected go? Could he have been with the nomad group that was also fighting the undead?

And for that matter, where is the human who looks like him? He went missing ages ago after the Dungeon Champion challenge, and Morrissa is worried that he might have found another opportunity to advance his power." The Oracle was whisper shouting at the others.

"Well, we can't just let him leave without knowing why he's a danger to the Fortress, can we?" "Why would we keep him inside the walls, knowing that he's a danger to the fortress?"

"Those morons should have left him in the wilderness, and he wouldn't have come within a hundred kilometres of us." Karl and the tree woman both smirked at that part, which caught the attention of the others.

"Something funny?" The troll Overlord asked.

It seemed to Karl that the Troll had been nominated to communicate directly with him, as they were supposedly the same species.

What Karl didn't notice was that the massive Overlord was speaking Trollish, and it was being automatically translated by the System. So when Karl replied directly to him, the others heard it as Trollish and not Common.

"You know that we can all hear you, right? But on a serious note, are you familiar with the concept of self-fulfilling prophecies. The Oracle had a vision, and he told others about it. By telling others, and having them take action on it, he made the prophecy happen. If nobody had come looking, or they had only come for the undead, who were already destroyed, I would have never been here. If I were never here, there would be no danger to your fortress. I don't even know what sort of danger I'm supposed to be. It's not like I care enough about your existence to make myself your enemy. No offence intended.

But for all I know, there might have been zombie blood on my equipment or supplies, and my arrival here might have started an undead outbreak.

That is the self-fulfilling prophecy part. In trying to avoid it, any action taken regarding the prophecy actually has a chance of causing it to happen."

The troll stared at him for a few seconds. "That's a deep thought for a troll. Who knew that the Trolls still had philosophers among us? So, what do we do to make it not happen?" Karl shrugged. "At this point, I have no idea. Once the process starts, it continues whether we want it to or not. That's why it's better to just leave well enough alone. I learned that from the Bronze Dragon Orthos."

[Didn't he just swear at you and tell you to stop teaching the children strange skills?]

[Same thing, really.]

The green light glowed happily on the desk, and the Overlords sighed.

[What if we just put him in a room with his group members? If they're only interacting with the maids, it could be a small danger.] The Naga suggested.

The tree woman appeared to be ignoring the others, until she suddenly stabbed a finger into Karl's hand. It punched right through his palm, as he didn't have [Eternal Lightning] active, but he did have [Void Body] active, as well as [Limited Invulnerability] and [Trollish Regeneration].

Her finger came back out of his hand cleanly, without so much as a spot of blood on it, and she hummed curiously, much like Rae did when she found a new thing.

"Might I ask what you're doing?" Karl asked.

He didn't think that he had actually taken damage, but it appeared that it was possible for certain species or skills to puncture him anyhow, which meant there was a chance he could be crucified and stuck to something, which would be incredibly inconvenient.

"You're immortal." She informed him in a matter of fact voice.

"Far from it. I demonstrated that for the guards when they didn't believe that I was a Troll."

The green light came on, but the tree woman was ignoring everything except her finger and Karl's hand.

She stabbed him again and smiled. "I get it. You have to focus on stopping your regeneration so that you will bleed. It might be limited invulnerability? Giving that skill to a troll is the sort of thing that the old Gods would do."

The Lamia cleared her throat, and motioned for the tree woman to explain.

"Oh, I've been trying to figure out what was so strange about him. He doesn't smell like a Troll, and his energy feels strange, almost bestial, not earthy like most trolls.

I realized it when the Oracle mentioned that he's from the last resurgence. He's a Darklight Host War Champion, or at least he was. That means he has a System. He's not just a troll, he's blessed by the Gods. What if the danger to the Fortress is that his very presence is going to cause chaos? If he has enough of the System intact, he might be able to claim the Fortress if he interacts with the City Stones." She mused.

"And if he becomes Lord of the city, he would automatically receive all the taxes that come to the Fortress. Every single coin collected by the Newbon Empire." The Troll realized.

Karl nearly choked at the mention of that much money.

"Why would every bit of Tax collected in the nation come here? Forgive my lack of knowledge." He finally managed to stammer.

"This is where the Council is based, and where the Emperor is resting. Do you know nothing of the Newbon Empire at all?" The Troll asked.

"I never cared about politics, so I didn't ask. I thought that the Oracle was the one in charge of the Fortress. But if he's just in charge of defence and strategy, that makes sense as well." The tree woman chuckled. "No, the Newbon Empire has two Totem Rank leaders. The Emperor and the General. The Emperor is resting here, while the General lives near the border with the Mountain Giants.

But if you've been trading without a home base, you must not have paid any taxes, have you? You never ran into a tax collector to get an annual token?"

"I got one of these. Does this count?" Karl asked, holding out the token he got from the Pirates.

"No, that is not a tax payment token, though I do want to know how you got recognized by the Pirate Lords later. We will let it slide for now, but you should get that sorted out eventually. It is a serious crime to avoid your taxes." She informed him with a smirk.

Perhaps this Fortress was more dangerous to Karl than he was to it. Few things in the world were more terrifying than having to pay the tax man.

Chapter 525 Esoteric Reading

The tree woman stood up from the table and extended her hand to Karl. "I am Leafa, you may call me Overlord, or Princess Leafa. I believe that it is better that you return to your friends for now. They should be finished with the counsellors by now, and we haven't heard about any issues from that interview.

You can wait in your suite for now, and I will come talk to you later."

Karl smiled and kissed her knuckles, which were cold as ice. "It's been a pleasure to meet you, Princess. But if I can request a maid who isn't as terrified by the colour glitch of my outfit, I would appreciate it."

The Overlords all laughed at his comment. "What makes you think it's a glitch? Our base nature and our civilized thoughts are often in conflict with each other, but there is no doubt that your aura tells the truth."

Karl shrugged. "Well, I suppose I can't argue with that. I just hate seeing the staff so terrified."

The Troll Overlord rumbled with laughter. "Don't forget that we already know how many people you've killed. They have good cause to be terrified. Just be kind to them, and they will calm down before you are ready to leave.

Once the rest of the council is here, we will come to a decision, and then you should be able to return to your merchant route."

That sounded problematic to Karl. If the rest of the council was coming, it meant that Overlord Rank Minotaur was coming, and possibly with the turtle that he beat up at the dungeon.

One of them was likely to insist that he had found a way to lie to them.

The guards came in to escort Karl back to the suite, and while they did give him a generous amount of personal space, they looked more relaxed than when they had led him to the meeting.

As before, they closed and locked the door once Karl was back in. Then the ladies began laughing uncontrollably.

"You should have seen how concerned they were that you were keeping us prisoner." Dana giggled.

"It looks like you made it back here intact, at the very least. Did you get any more hints about what the plan is?" Tessa asked.

"They're calling the rest of the council here, or the council was coming back anyhow. They're not going to make a final decision until they're all here.

There is only one issue with that. Morrissa, the Overlord Minotaur that was hitting on Overlord Ahmad, is part of the council. She's the one who drew the picture the guards were going on.

If she decides that I'm the one that they were looking for, it could be a real pain."

"Alright, we will have to come up with a plan if they're going to make it difficult for us." Tessa sighed.

The first thought through Karl's mind was that they couldn't just hack their way out of here with a whole group of Overlords present.

Then the realization that the clothing colours might not be wrong made him frown in annoyance.

The maid came back with food to find them all laughing and lounging on the sofas.

She kept her distance from Karl, and kept her head down as she placed out cups of tea and bite sized snacks.

"Thank you." Karl offered as she finished.

She bobbed a nervous curtsy, then rushed out of the room again.

There wasn't much more detail that they could discuss here, as there was definitely someone spying on them and listening to everything that happened in the room. So, they just relaxed for a few minutes, then Karl got up to see what sort of books were on the shelves.

"If we're going to spend the day here, we might as well enjoy ourselves with some light reading." He suggested.

It was all boring stuff. Poetry, travel journals, romance novels.

No, that last one was fairly promising. Karl flipped open the cover and chuckled as he read the intro.

"The dramatic love story of a rejected Succubus and her six Alpha Dragon mates." He read out loud.

"What are you even looking at, and why is it even on the shelf?" Lotus demanded as she ran over to see if Karl was messing with her.

He handed over the book, and Lotus flipped a few pages, then her cheeks blushed bright red. "The body doesn't work like that!" She was about to drop the book in horror, but Ophelia was there to rescue it, and then begin laughing as she read the page. Then she passed it to Dana, who turned bright red as she read the passage, and passed it to Tessa so that everyone could suffer the same horror.

Tessa read the page with an intrigued look.

"I think part of the problem here is that they don't understand dragon biology. Or maybe we don't understand succubi biology." She mused.

Karl knocked at the door and a guard opened it a crack to see what he needed.

"Is there a succubus on the guard team? We were reading a novel, and we have questions." He explained.

The guard smirked and shook his head. "I know the book you mean. We use that suite as a break room when there are no guests. No, that's not physically possible, even if they weren't all ancient dragons, who should be fifty metres long."

"Thanks. I'm sure you just saved the maid a very horrifying question and answer session."

The guard chuckled. "She's a satyr, not a demon. Her legs are just hidden under the dress."

"Noted."

Karl went looking for another book to read, one that wasn't as disturbing, and ended up with a book on Demonic Blacksmithing.

He might have no skills with metalworking, but it was still more interesting than doing nothing, and he could lightly meditate to build the energy in his spaces as he waited.

Remi had been hoping for something alchemy based, but there weren't really any technical manuals of any sort in the library. Even the one that Karl was reading was about the styles, not the details of how they were made.

At the very least, it was interesting, and it kept his mind occupied for the next few hours until a knock at the door informed that they had visitors.

"Ladies and Sir, you have been invited to dinner with the Council of Overlords. We have prepared suitable clothing for you. This set is not aura coded, it is just a regular outfit suitable for dinner. Most guests do not arrive with such clothing, but if you have it, you are free to wear your own." She quietly greeted them.

Karl stood back and let the others do the talking this time. Ophelia took the pile of clothes with a smile. "Thank you. We appreciate the concern, and we will happily wear what you have preferred. How long do we have? Is there time to properly bathe and groom?"

The maid bobbed a curtsy. "Yes, Miss. There are ninety minutes. If you wish, I can have a team assembled to assist you all in bathing and preparing for dinner."

Karl smirked and nodded his head. "I think that the ladies would greatly enjoy that. I can take care of my own grooming, but they will appreciate a full team to get them ready for dinner."

Maybe not all of them, but Lotus for certain. And probably Ophelia, who had a lot of fur to shampoo and brush out.

Chapter 526 Awkward Dinner

A guard led Karl to a room down the hall that had a large shower and bath, plus a dressing room and a few more options of clothing.

"We will knock fifteen minutes before dinner. Let us know if you need anything before then, we will be outside the door and there is a manservant available should you require assistance." The Guard explained.

"Thank you, I will let you know if there is anything missing."

The guard closed the door and Karl headed for the shower room.

It was stocked with a dozen different body washes, shampoos, brushes, scrubbers and even an assortment of trimmers. There wasn't much that he couldn't do to make himself presentable, so Karl started right in on trimming his beard and cutting his hair.

The sink area had adjustable mirrors, so he could even see the back of his head in the reflection, and the process was going much more quickly than he had expected.

He considered letting Remi out to see what his hair would look like after she had her way with it, but Karl suspected that he was still under surveillance, and having a random Naga Queen appear in his bath would be hard to explain.

It didn't stop her from giving suggestions anyhow, and by the time that he was finished with the trim, she was delighted with his makeover. [You just need tusks. I wonder if we could make Trollish Regeneration grow you a set of tusks?] She pondered.

[That would be more Trollish. But I don't think that we have time to experiment. I spent too much time getting my hair perfect, now I need to get clean and dressed.]

Remi was sad, but she did have a few minutes to spare as Karl showered, and she could practice on her own claws in an attempt to shape them into a new design while making them grow out.

If she could do it with nails, they should be able to do it with teeth as well.

Unfortunately, it wasn't working as well as she had hoped. She had made a pretty design out of her claw, but it didn't grow out like they would need Karl's teeth to do in order to make tusks. It just returned to its default state if she damaged it too much. It didn't get longer than that.

Karl finished his shower and quickly changed into the provided outfit. Then looked at it in dismay. The colour combination was horrible, pale gold and green. There had to be something better in the racks.

A short search turned up a white shirt, black pants and a silver and black tailed jacket. [You need the waist band.] Rae reminded him.

[Right, there we go. How do I look?]

[Like you're going to a meeting with nobles ten thousand years ago.] Remi laughed.

[That's perfect. As long as I don't look too ridiculous, a little bit of oddity will help sell the story that I'm from the past. With any luck, this should be our last meeting with the Council, and then we can grab Thor and the ladies to make our escape.]

Karl added a spritz of each of the three fancy perfumes that were on the counter, hoping to hide his natural scent, and then double-checked to make sure that he hadn't messed up anything on his outfit.

The guard knocked at their door and gave Karl an approving look as he saw that everything was in order.

"The Council will be ready soon, and it is considered polite to arrive before they do." He explained.

"Lead the way. Are the ladies ready?" Karl asked.

"Hopefully, soon. The tiny one is a menace, and the head maid had to rescue one of her staff, but they should have things sorted out by now."

Karl chuckled. "Nature Priestesses are like that. They're a bit too wild and free for most social situations, and they love meeting new people. I wouldn't be shocked if she dragged a maid into the bath with her."

The guard laughed. "I hope that it wasn't that extreme. But such things are the ladies' private business."

Karl followed the guard to the dining room, where the others were already gathered, along with a group of maids who had brought them.

They were all elegantly dressed with intricate hairstyles and immaculate makeup, except for Ophelia, though Karl suspected that there were highlights in her fur that were not there before.

Once he had arrived, the guards and maids backed away, except for a pair of maids who guided them to their spots at the table.

They were all seated along one side, and the other side of the table was set with five spots, plus one at the head and one at the foot. That should mean seven Overlord Council members in total, or fewer than that plus a few other guests.

Karl had met three of them so far, the Naga, tree lady and troll. The others hadn't met any, and it was just the guards and staff that were showing concern for their safety while Karl was away.

The trio that Karl had already met were the first ones to come out, followed by what Karl thought might be a Pixie, who transformed into a human sized form as she reached her chair, a Chimera who did the same, smoothly shifting from four feet to two, and finally Morrisa, the Minotaur Overlord.

The last to arrive was the Oracle, who took a spot at the foot of the table, across from the Troll, who took the seat at the head.

"Welcome everyone. I will do the introductions for the day.

From my right, we have the Lady Ophelia, Mage Dana, Priestess Lotus of the Green Dragon, Priestess Tessa of the Red Dragon, and Merchant Karl of the Stone Trolls.

Guests, I would like to introduce you to the Oracle, Overlord Morrisa of the Minotaurs, Overlord Thrax of the Chimera, Overlord Tink of the Faeries, Overlord Sslyth of the Naga, Overlord Leafa Oak of the Haints, and I am Council Head Arnold of the Forest Trolls."

Everyone nodded politely as the names were read, then Morrisa turned to Karl with narrowed eyes.

"You look familiar, a lot like a human I met not long ago." She insisted.

"I have heard that a lot lately. Tell me, did you find anything interesting in the humans' territory? Once I make it past Whiton Temple, I might keep going and check out the lands to the north before coming back through the Divine Beast Nation."

The Minotaur scoffed. "That would take most of a year to complete."

Karl nodded. "It will be a good opportunity. And, I can find some new trade partners for the next trip. If I skirt the edge of the Mountain Giant territory just right, I should be able to bring some quality imports across the wilderness."

The Fairy, Tink, looked incredibly excited about that idea. "That would be great. They have all sorts of new and shiny things, and you could almost pass as a human. Their sense of smell is terrible, so they would never know the difference. They might just think that you were big."

"That's the plan. As long as they don't mistake me for an Ogre, I should be fine." Karl joked.

Their discussion on trade routes was interrupted by the servants bringing out the food, and Karl made a note of the way that Council Head Arnold ate. If there was some odd way that Trolls liked to eat, it was best that he noticed it before he outed himself as human.

Fortunately for Karl, the Council head wasn't doing anything odd, just gnawing the smoked ribs clean of meat and popping the diced and deep-fried potato bits into his mouth like everyone else.

Having perfect peripheral vision saved Karl a lot of trouble at dinner. He didn't have to look to the side or turn his head to see what everyone was doing, only to let them know he was talking to them.

"Is that your goal? To bring the clerics to the temple at Whiton?" Thrax, the Chimera Overlord, asked.

"Yes. We're going to trade and let the clerics do their work all the way from here to Whiton. We've made it this far from the coast already, so we're doing pretty well." Karl agreed.

"A proper pilgrimage it is, then. Not many choose to make the trek across the continent from west to east, but the combination of a War Cleric and a Nature Priestess does make for an interesting balance." The Chimera added.

"Good food too. I'm not sure if you're aware, but as well as their combat duties, all the Red Dragon Priestesses are trained in the basics of caring for War Orphans, so they're excellent cooks." Karl informed him with a pleased look at his plate.

"Perhaps as good as your Fortress Chefs. My compliments to them, by the way, this is spectacular."

The Chimera nodded, and the meal moved through the courses without interruption.

Once they were finished eating, the Overlords began to excuse themselves from the table, saying goodnight to the Council Head and the Oracle in turn before getting up to leave.

Karl and the others rose when the Oracle did, and the visionary nodded his head towards the door. "Sleep well tonight, and you may continue on your way in the morning. I will have the maids deliver you a token before you go. Lady Oak is quite intrigued by your past, and she may wish to contact you again in the future." He explained, then turned and walked out.

"Council Head, it was a pleasure to meet you. My apologies for any trouble we might have caused." Arnold simply nodded his head and walked away, leaving the door open for the maids to come in and escort Karl's team to their suite.

Chapter 527 Misunderstood Innovation

Once they were back in the suite for the evening, Rae began to get excited, and dropped a pile of cloth into Karl's hands.

[This is for everyone.] She insisted.

"Presents from Rae." Karl explained, then wondered how to sort the silk.

That proved to be much easier than expected, as she had stitched everyone's name inside what turned out to be a set of comfy flowing nightgowns of the non-sexy sort that Karl associated with his grandmother. The only difference was that these were all soft silk, not cheap cotton repurposed from flour sacks.

"Thank you, Rae. This looks even more comfortable than the last set of night clothes you made me." Dana giggled.

She had only found a few chances to wear those ones since the first time, as they were rather skimpy for casual wear. But this one she could wear all the time, and she would never have to worry about it being dirty or frayed, as Rae's clothing options always bonded to the wearer.

Karl went to the other room to change so that he wasn't accused of peeping on the clerics. But what he found was a whole room full of oversized bunk beds.

They were six metres long and three metres wide, suitable for even the largest of Trolls and Minotaurs to get comfortable. Yet even with his size buffed by Brutality, Karl was only a third that size.

One thing was certain, none of them would actually need to climb the ladder to the upper bunks tonight. They might do it anyhow, but it wouldn't be necessary.

He changed quickly, leaving his dinner outfit carefully folded on one of the end tables. The staff could clean and store that for the next visitor after he left. The others came in only a minute later, and Lotus laughed as she pulled back one of the massive blankets.

"Can we share? Just turn down the other side of the bed, and we can sleep sideways." She suggested.

Karl and Ophelia would only be a little shorter than the bed that way, but it should work just fine.

Tessa got to work, moving pillows and folding down the other side of the blanket.

"So, how are we going to work this?" She asked as she finished the work.

Lotus pointed at the pillows in order. "Dana, Karl, Ophelia, me, you."

"So you're still next to me, but you get to cuddle the Werebear? That makes sense."

Lotus looked proud of herself. "And she's close to the same size as Karl, so they're well-matched."

Ophelia ran a hand down her nightgown, then down Tessa's back.

"Can you ask Rae why mine is different?" [Anti-static for furry friends.]

"She says that this version shouldn't generate static against your fur. That will make you less frizzy in the morning. Though, the staff did a wonderful job of brushing you today, and I'm sure you wouldn't mind an excuse to do it again."

Ophelia laughed. "I wonder if we can hire a Satyr maid to come with us, just for grooming purposes? They're better at it than anyone I've ever met."

"I can talk to them and see if there is a hiring location in town with maids who don't mind travelling." Karl suggested.

Lotus smirked. "Can you imagine the look on their faces when we tell them that we want to bring the maid outside the country, and maybe bring her back next year on our way through?"

"I don't think that we will be able to find one with that proposal. Perhaps a human or a half troll, but not a Satyr." Ophelia noted.

Lotus pointed at Ophelia and smirked. "We should ask that bear working the portal at Bruse Temple if he wants to come along and groom you for a living. I bet he would say yes."

Ophelia thumped the wayward cleric on the head and frowned. "I don't need that sort of attention, especially not from a Dire Bear."

They all settled into bed, with Ophelia turned away from Karl so she could make Lotus her little spoon. Karl did the same with Dana, and that was how they were when the maids came in to wake them in the morning.

"Do you think that they..."

"That would have to cause internal damage, right?"

"Forget that, the bear and her teddy are so cute."

"No, that's a cleric. Adorable." Their whispers woke Karl, which startled the maids. They had a lot of experience speaking softly, so they didn't bother guests.

They bowed politely and one of them began to speak quietly.

"Sir, your group has been cleared to leave at your leisure. Breakfast will be ready in one hour if your group wishes to dine with the other guests." She informed him.

"That sounds lovely. Can you send in some assistants to help the ladies get ready? We have somewhat suitable travel garb." Karl replied.

The maid bowed, and Ophelia got up out of bed, still holding Lotus, whose arms were wrapped around the Werebear's neck.

Karl nodded to her and headed out for the men's shower room, with a guard escorting him. They could sort out their sleepiest members while he got ready.

Moving from the bed woke Dana up, and the disappearance of Lotus woke Tessa, so they were all mobile bright and early. Early enough that Karl even had time to carefully blend the perfumes to perfectly match the scent he had worn the day before.

Then he pocketed a small sample of each, so he could do it again if he needed.

With his preparations finished, Karl returned to the suite to find the ladies getting their hair done. [Don't wait outside. I want to see how that works.] Remi insisted.

"I'll be on the sofa while you all finish up." Karl informed the maid, who was trying to tame Dana's curls.

They eventually settled on a loose bun that let her curls hang out the bottom. Nothing else would stay, and random strands kept escaping, as Dana refused the use of "an army of bobby pins" as she put it.

The maids looked very proud of their work, and the way that they'd managed to make the ladies look elegant even in their travel outfits.

For the Clerics, that was their fancy robes, Ophelia was in her new coat and pants with a silk sash, and Dana had gone for the hoodie and cargo pants Rae made for her, instead of her actual travel clothes, which were closer to the Spellblade uniform, and covered her face.

The guest dining hall held about thirty overdressed monsters, mostly transformed into humanoid forms. One Chimera preferred to eat in his natural form, but Karl saw that many of the others were wearing amulets with the Fortress insignia on them. [Rae, those are the transformation spells, right? What are the chances we could get one of those to study?] Karl asked as he took his seat.

Rae considered it for a few seconds. [I would say close to one hundred percent. I've taken six of them so far.]

Well, that was one way to do things. Karl hadn't even noticed her taking them, so there was a good chance nobody else had either. There was also no way for anyone else to prove that Karl had them, even if they noticed them missing.

The only issue was that they didn't actually have a team member who wanted to be human shaped.

Chapter 528 Leave With Grace

There was no fancy sendoff after they finished breakfast, just a runner sent to the stables to get Thor hooked up to the wagon and staged for departure.

Thor was happy to help them with their work, even if they had done a lacklustre job of scrubbing his scales last night. They had at least scrubbed him down, but there was no enthusiasm and no extra attention to the itchy spots, even when he tried to point them out.

So, he was hooked up and ready when Karl arrived with the team, while the grooms pretended that they weren't intensely curious about the fact that his entire harness rig was made of silk rope.

Normally, the shoulder brace would be wooden, with hemp ropes attaching it to the cart, but Thor's harness was entirely silk, and included ties for a rider to be securely strapped in place.

Karl checked the cargo, and found that it appeared intact under the net as the others loaded themselves into the wagon.

Guards on the bipedal lizard mounts escorted them through the city streets, clearly not intending to let Karl stop and do business inside the city limits. That actually worked for everyone, as Karl had no intentions of staying in the area.

With a whole group of Overlords and seers here, Karl was looking forward to being out of their sphere of influence. The less likely they were to notice what he was doing, the safer he would be.

Nobody challenged them as they made their way out the gates and into the open farmland that surrounded the city, where the others began to relax a little. They weren't going to say anything to blow their cover, but at least that feeling of being suppressed was gone, and so was the feeling of being watched.

Inside the fortress, The Oracle, was sitting with a group of twenty Trouble Seers, staring at an image on the smooth surface of a pool of water in a silver pool.

"Are you sure that he's not going to be back, Oracle?" One of the seers whispered. "Yes, he is gone. I don't know what sort of threat he is, but my advice is that we don't follow his movements directly. If we interfere, it might encourage our soldiers to do something that triggers the danger.

I believe that the one known as Karl said it himself, and it is something that we should have been more mindful of in the past. It is possible for a prophecy to be self-fulfilling. The more people who know about the monster hidden inside that body, the more likely they are to start a chain of events that lead to their destruction." The Oracle sighed.

"Surely, the danger isn't that high? I sense threat from his position, but not higher than a military unit. We sensed nearly as much when those mages from the Wilds arrived." The Trouble Seer asked.

"That was thirty mages. This is one creature. I suspect that he isn't truly a Troll, but it is unlikely that he's a human either. It might be a doppelgänger, or worse, an Echo."

The seers shuddered at the thought. Most of them had seen one of the Echoes when they looked into the distant past during their training. They were constructs created by the Gods to guide and shape societies, but they were terrifying on a level that no living being should be capable of.

Their mere existence was enough to put terror into the minds of those who could see the past.

"Should we not have one person observe him to make sure he really is leaving? He might be posing as a merchant, but that is no guarantee that he's not scouting for an invasion." One of the seers suggested.

The Oracle began to cast another spell, watching Karl's progress as they left the city.

At first, it all seemed normal. But then, two Naga Warriors appeared on the steps of his wagon, without the Oracle even sensing that anyone had cast a spell. The Oracle didn't sense a portal, and he didn't detect the surge of magic for a summoning spell. His first thought was that the Naga Warriors had simply released an invisibility spell that had been cast on them, but the wagon had been in the fortress for over a day. Someone should have sensed them if they were simply invisible.

He made a note of it among his other visions, and continued to watch for a few more minutes as the group simply travelled past the farms, and called out to those that they passed.

None of it was out of the ordinary, only a merchant trying to sell his Minotaur made tools. But the oddities were enough to put the Oracle on edge and convince him that he had made the right call in telling the others not to do anything to prevent him leaving.

If his guess was right, and he really did have a massive wealth of hidden power, there might be others watching over him from the shadows. Others who would come to his rescue if he were actually in trouble.

That dragon, Orthos, for example.

Karl had mentioned him during their interview, and the Oracle had seen them interact in his visions. He might not know their current relationship, but the anger of an ancient Dragon was not something to tempt.

But in the wagon, Karl and the others knew nothing of these concerns, and they were happy to have simply escaped the notice of the Overlord Council without anything major happening.

They had just passed the first cluster of small vegetable farms that served the fortress, and had passed into what Karl would consider a wilderness area, headed east down the main road.

Karl turned to talk to the others. "You know, this shortcut is actually pretty nice. The road here is all gravel and well maintained, much better than the deep ruts and soft dirt that we were getting on the other sections of the road. Maybe we can stick with it for a while before we move back to travelling through the wilderness to get to the underserved customers?"

Dana nodded. "That's not a bad idea. We might be able to make a few good trades along the way, and pick up more than farming tools."

Tessa nodded. "We might pick up a side quest or two as well. From what I understand, the further northeast we go from here, the more trouble they have with Giants and wild beasts.

If we go that way, we should be able to get some excellent customers, but if we follow the road to the southeast we will get to the capital city of Newbon, and from there we can head east through human populated lands until we get to the wilds, then we're into more dangerous territory.

The Wilds are almost completely controlled by beasts, but there are a number of towns and one major port there as well.

A pirate port again, but that's to be expected. Only this one specializes in beast materials, from what I understand, and not slaves."

"And from there, we can follow this huge river all the way up to Whiton Temple. There are major trade routes along the river, and a road going from there into the Golden Dragon Nation. It's a pretty solid route, and we should be able to make sales and purchases at nearly every stop."

"We might even find buyers for some of Rae's silk."

Chapter 529 Road to Mitford

Mitford was a city of ten thousand people only a day and a half down the road, so that was their goal. If they could make it there early, they could trade some goods at the market in town, or to a local shop, and have time to relax and eat before leaving town for the night.

It was safer to be out of the cities to sleep, and that let Thor have a proper rest in his space, instead of some filthy barn somewhere.

The number of farms didn't decline much as they travelled, there was one every quarter kilometre for the entire day. But the quality of the road didn't decline either, it was a well-groomed gravel double track, wide enough for two fully loaded carriages with guards to pass each other.

It made progress much more comfortable, though Thor didn't speed up much, for the sake of everyone in the wagon.

There was a conspicuous lack of pullouts, though. Normally, there would be parking areas along the side of a road for wagons and merchants to stop, but along this stretch there weren't any at all.

There weren't even any smaller villages, which seemed a bit odd.

Farmers wouldn't want to travel all day to get supplies, so normally a small village would form every few hours of travel.

Once it started to get close to dark, Karl noticed that there was a different practice here. The wagons pulled into one of the farm houses, and if he was seeing it right, they provided the evening meal, or at least a good portion of it, for their hosts.

They were setting up tents in the yards, so Karl picked a decent looking carriage and pulled into the yard where it was parked.

"Good evening. Do you mind if we join you?" He asked the farmer who came over to greet him.

"Not at all. The General and his entourage were just about to start cooking. If you would like to let them know what you have for the pot, we can make adjustments."

Karl smiled at the Minotaur. "We have Dragon Clerics with us, so we have rice and beans, and I have some meat stored in a storage item, so it's still fresh."

"That will make everyone happy. I will let them know, while you get parked and set up for the evening. I don't know how much you have stored, but there are a total of twenty-five heads here tonight. The rice and beans are likely enough to go around, though."

Karl frowned in confusion. "Your family is that large?" The farmer chuckled. "My family is six in total, then there are your seven, and twelve with the other carriage. Their mounts are in the back pasture, being tended right now."

Tessa gave Karl a thumbs up, as she already had enough ready, and Karl passed her a roast sized piece of boar meat. "I will let you go with our host to greet the other cook. Let me know if you need anything else, or Lotus."

Lotus was their resident spice expert, after all. The small perks of being a nature cleric.

While Tessa went to get dinner started, carrying a sack of rice on her shoulder, the others got the camp set up, hanging tarps over the ends of the wagon that reached the ground, and one stretched out from the back of the wagon so they could get down onto dry ground, should it rain overnight.

The process only took a few minutes, then they were free to go join the other carriage to see who needed a whole entourage of mounted guards. The farmer had said it was a General, but Karl didn't sense anyone powerful in the area. It could be that the General was a strategic officer and not a combat officer, though. The Golden Dragon Nation had many such officers in their military ranks.

The General turned out to be a very familiar face. He looked nearly identical to the Naga Overlord, except that he had a scar over one eye that hadn't healed properly, and he was a Commander, not an Overlord.

"General, it's a pleasure to meet you. I am Karl, a travelling merchant." He greeted the Naga, who seemed more interested in the two silent Naga Warriors who were waiting by the Wagon.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. You seem to have developed quite the esoteric group on your travels." The General greeted him.

"Travelling with Dragon Clerics makes everything much better. If it were just the guys, we would have a rather dull and silent journey." Karl joked.

The guards returned as they were talking, and Karl noticed that they were all nearly identical Satyrs, at the Ascended Rank. "Pardon my curiosity, but isn't that a bit flimsy of a guard for a General?" He asked quietly.

The Naga laughed and shook his head. "They're an honour guard, not like the wagon guards to protect your trade goods. If I'm actually in trouble, I just summon a military unit to my location. Ten honour guards won't stop much, but a full regiment of mounted cavalry will."

Karl nodded in understanding. "I forget that it is so easy for some people to use portal magic to get others to their location."

The General shook his head. "The portal calls are expensive to make, and the other side has to be at a designated portal array, which only exists in the larger cities. It's impractical to have it for every mission. But in my case, the risk is low, and I'm only going to the city. This route is pretty well travelled, and there are multiple guard patrols along it every day."

They had only seen one yesterday, but the first might have been by before they left the city, as the breakfast routine in the mornings at the palace didn't start too early.

The general nodded towards the wagon. "Where were you coming from that you got so many quality tools? You could likely make a killing off those in the city of Mitford."

"We picked them up outside Oakhamping, but we've been going cross-country to avoid the chaos on the roads. There have been some incidents in that region lately. Then we got picked up by a patrol and taken to Bethoke for questioning, so we're a good bit south of our original destination." Karl explained.

The General nodded. "That makes sense. Anyone who has a Royal Rank Cerro for their wagon isn't the ordinary sort. He seems quite friendly, though. Normally, Cerro get territorial when you hook them to a wagon."

Karl chuckled. "He knows nobody is after his wagon or his passengers. But he loves people. If we get the farm kids to rub his scales, he will be in heaven."

Thor nodded in agreement, and the General smirked.

"I can do one better, as this farm has no small children anymore. They're all grown and unmarried. But I've got Satyrs who need to be distracted until the food is ready."

He whistled and gestured to bring one of the guards over and explained that he had volunteered them to rub down the Cerro for the evening as trade for the quality of dinner.

They got to work, and Thor gave a happy rumble as they began to rub his head and polish his scales, just as they did for their own mounts.

[Maybe travelling on the road isn't all bad.]

Chapter 530 Cyclops Spawn

Dinner ended with a huge pot of leftovers that were transferred to a container provided by the farmer's wife for them to enjoy later, and Karl settled in for the night.

The beasts could watch from inside their spaces, other than Thor, who had positioned himself in the driveway to the farmyard, between the entrance and the people.

There was a sturdy fence all around the yard, so that was the only likely area for entrance by an unknown threat, and therefore the best spot for him.

Ophelia was with the first watch group, which was more than a little upsetting to Lotus, who wanted to cuddle, while Karl and Dana would take the dawn watch, just before the sun came up. The guards had wanted five watches, each with two guards, which was a bit excessive in Karl's mind, but they also didn't have the beasts watching out for danger. If it was a single guard, an assassin could sneak in and eliminate them, then go for the General. It was odd that they hadn't insisted on someone from their team taking the morning watch, but they were likely planning to be up by then and starting on breakfast, so they didn't see the need to have one of theirs as the guard.

Tessa would likely be awake for that watch as well, or at least halfway through it. She rarely slept past the dawn wake-up call after so many years on the church's schedule.

So, Karl settled in to sleep peacefully with Dana after their watch, only to be awakened by the sound of screaming far too soon after he closed his eyes.

[Report. What is going on?] Karl asked.

[Another spawn. Hawk is already in the air.] Remi replied.

[It seems to be centred on us, and it extends all the way back to the fortress, a whole day's travel. I can see the torches as the fortress army units gather to fight in the dark.] Hawk added.

That was massive. If it was centred on them, and they had covered close to eighty kilometres during the day, this newest spawn was absolutely massive.

[What is attacking?] Karl asked as he equipped his armour and took out his maul.

[That's the best part! Food! We're under attack by food.] Hawk cheered.

[Translator.]

Remi giggled before explaining. [The attackers are some sort of boar monster the size of Ophelia's Dire Bear form, and they're accompanied by some sort of cyclops. A giant with one eye. That's what has the Satyrs on guard duty screaming.]

There was a group of the boars at the edge of the camp, just reaching the firelight but momentarily stopped by the mounts of the guards, who also saw them as food.

Unfortunately for the agile lizards, these boar monsters were not only massive, they were also Commander Rank beasts, and wearing armour.

They even had metal sheathes on their tusks, so they could more effectively attack.

Karl was just about to send everyone out to play when he realized that they were standing right next to a General and his entourage. A general who was very likely to call for an entire army unit from the fortress that they just left.

[Can we just kill him already? I want to come out and play.] Rae complained.

[Not yet. Or at least not where he can see you. I give it like two minutes before he panics and calls the army. I don't know if they're going to show up while everything is under attack, but they might.]

Hawk was racing through the sky, trying to determine the extent and density of the situation, when he realized that they were about to have a not so minor problem.

[The next city is full of monsters from the spawn. It's within the radius by at least ten kilometres, and it's not just surrounded, it's overrun.] He informed them.

[Well, that will put a damper on our chances of making a mass sale. However, I bet we can do some charity work with the farmers, if they're short on weapons.]

Karl jumped onto the roof of the house to take in more of the situation and realized that these ones weren't the only one who would need some assistance.

He could see four other farms in the distance, and they were all fighting with makeshift weapons, like the ones he was selling, but not adapted to be used as weapons.

They were so close to two major cities, and along a heavily populated route that was travelled by hundreds every day, that they didn't really need weapons other than for defence against unscrupulous travellers.

The farm family was coming out in hastily donned coats over their pyjamas, carrying whatever farm tools came to hand.

"Hey, over here. We have weapons." Karl called. The Minotaurs rushed over to where Karl was, while the guards from the General's caravan harassed the Giant Boar who had made it closest to the farm.

The ladies had taken the net from over the cargo, and the Minotaurs smiled as they realized that the weapons were all modelled after things that they already know how to use.

They each grabbed a tool and pulled the working heads off the convertible ones. "We will stay near your charges, would you guard the back side of the house? We should be alright, even if you take both the Naga with you." "I will have them watch the side of the house. The guards for the General have the other side, but we can send someone to help them if you need."

The oldest of the Minotaur Farmers smiled and patted Karl on the shoulder. "As long as they don't make it to the house, it's fine. We have no animals, and they've already trampled the fields. We will see in the morning what can be salvaged."

Karl nodded. "I will do what I can to keep them out of the vegetable garden out back."

"I would appreciate that."

[Remi, have the bodyguards watch the two sides of the house and keep everyone mostly on this side, so I can let everyone out to play.]