

Beast Master 541

Chapter 541 Monarch Guards

While the farmers didn't immediately notice that something was off, the same was not true of Leafa. The instant that the skill advanced to Monarch Rank, before the Naga Warriors had even finished growing, she had realized what had happened.

What she couldn't understand was how.

None of the biological group members were close to the boundary for Monarch Rank, much less past it. But the skill was very obviously advanced by a Rank, just as the Void Badger's [Disintegration] was.

The obvious answer was that Karl had done something, but she hadn't sensed him doing anything. If he had a skill that could bump up a skill's power by a rank for the duration of a battle, the Haint Overlord wanted to know it.

If she could make her [Soul Steal] advance to the Totem Rank even for a short duration, she would become one of the peak powers on the continent.

Karl nodded a greeting as she came over to speak to him, then shook his head in rejection of her pending question.

"I can't make your skill advance like that. I know that's what you're after. Even if I was stronger, it wouldn't work." He explained.

"You're certain? What are the limitations?"

Karl smirked. "Only two things. A comprehensive and thorough understanding of how the skill should operate at the next Rank. Then, the restrictive part. It has to be a beast that is bonded to me and capable of retreating to a separate space I control."

Leafa sighed. "So, it's a trick just for your team members? Well, even if it's one skill at a time, it's still a huge advantage when you have summoned beasts on top of your bonded ones."

Karl turned to face her, but stopped when he saw a very strange heat signature.

Remi had transformed back into her small snake form, and Cara was flying around with her, so they could both attack from the sky. Cara looked like she had gotten bigger again, but Karl wasn't sure with the distance. The next time they came back around, he would have to stand beside her and measure.

Leafa stared into the distance. "Morning is going to be chaos, are you ready for a whole army unit to show up here? They're going to expect you to be able to help them, but they will have a lot of questions if they see your beasts."

Karl nodded. "When they arrive, I will call everyone back to their spaces, other than the two Naga Warrior Bodyguards that travel with us. If I push myself, I can do enough damage that most people won't have questions. That's how I did it in the past when I first met Orthos. It works well enough, but it burns stamina fast, and this is going to be a long night."

The Haint Overlord laughed and seemed to turn to mist for a split second before reappearing in the distance to bisect a group of boars with smooth swings of her blade.

Pale blue energy poured from their wounds to her body as she walked back to Karl, and she shrugged.

"These boars aren't all that tough. I might not be a soldier, but I am an Overlord."

She had a point. Even if she only had a basic attack skill, as an Overlord, it shouldn't be hard to one hit kill any of the Commander Rank beasts, and any of the Royal Rank invaders without defensive measures.

[There is a whole swarm of bacon food coming our way.] Hawk warned.

[Use Hellstorm all around the farm. We can create enough cyclones with the three of us that they won't want to approach.] Karl insisted.

Remi giggled as Hawk sighed. That was going to take a lot of energy, and he was the one doing the flying in his team, where Remi was just transformed into a petite Spirit Snake form and wrapped around Cara like a necklace.

So, Hawk landed on Rae and began spreading flaming vortexes around the farm, so they would cover a third of the circle.

Karl took up his section, and Remi did the rest, as Leafa stared at the thirty pillars of fire surrounding their position.

"That's the spell that they were referring to. The terrifying fire vortex. It doesn't look that bad to me. It's just a Royal Rank flaming tornado with some extra damage." She noted.

"Just wait. They get spicy when someone stands too close."

The boars naturally assumed that if they just didn't run into the fire, they would be fine. But that notion was proven false the moment that one of them got within twenty metres of the initial vortex and a smaller flame storm spawned at his position.

The unfortunate boar was immediately tossed from its feet by the force of the wind and the [Rend] attacks embedded in the vortex. That was a good sign. If the spell could stop them trying to stampede past the main vortexes, they would be trapped on the other side of the line.

A smaller creature would have been caught inside and buffeted to death, but the boars were too large for that, and instead the vortex was aggressively attacking it, and spawning more vortexes every time something got too close.

Leafa whistled a happy tune. "Oh, I like it. Spicy Tornado is an excellent spell."

[I vote that we rename the spell.] Hawk demanded.

[Spicy Tornado is a great name for a spell.] Remi agreed.

[Make it upgrade with Skill Master to one Rank or Tier higher than it currently is, and you can pick the new name for it.]

[Two skills in one day? Well, maybe I'm on a roll. Let's do this. Upgrade incoming.]

If it were that easy, it would have happened to someone before this.

But on the other side of the battle, Hawk was having more luck. His affinity with fire was growing quickly as he practised adapting his [Flaming Body] skill to allow him to more easily create [Hellstorm] vortexes.

Hawk was definitely going to be the first of them to improve a fire skill. But he was combining the two skills in a way that Karl wasn't capable of mimicking.

"Your beasts are strange. What species is that bird, anyhow?" Leafa asked.

"That's a mighty fine question. I'm not even certain anymore. In fact, the way he's going, even if I give you an answer now, it might have changed by morning. His aptitude for fire magic is increasing by the day, and his body is changing as it adapts."

The Haint Overlord stared at Hawk, who was only paying cursory attention to his vortexes as he adapted the casting method to minimize the amount of mana that they used.

Karl could hear his thoughts, and Hawk had a grand plan. If he cut the mana cost in half, he could make twice as many as Remi did, and then he would have uncontested mastery of the Fire Element.

Being a Shaman was a cheat. She got to use evil magic and fire at the same time. But soon, he would be so much better with fire that she would never catch up.

After a few minutes of silently staring at the battle while Karl adjusted the position of his vortexes to ensure that nothing was making it into the farm, Overlord Leafa took out a small blue stone from inside her arm.

"I have a proposition for you. I have an item that will help your friend Hawk advance his power beyond anything he could manage on his own. I will trade you for it." She offered.

"And what would you like in exchange for such a stone?" Karl asked, suspicious of such altruism.

"Your sword. You have a blade that drinks souls to improve its own power. I want it."

It also shared the power that it drank to improve the power and growth rate of the wielder. The extra energy that it gave him was a massive part of Karl's combat stamina.

"If I trade you the blade, will you teach Hawk how to use the stone to improve his power?" Karl asked.

A chance to help Hawk master a new level of flame skills was too good to pass up, and even Karl wasn't greedy enough to think that he could have it without any sacrifice.

"All he has to do is eat it, and he will gain a new level of fire mastery." Leafa agreed.

"The sword is bonded to me, would it even be possible to transfer it?" The Haint nodded. "Just hand it to me and will the bond to transfer. You can't unbind such a weapon, but you should be able to transfer it without issue."

"Give the stone to Hawk and you will have the sword."

Leafa smirked and smoke poured from her mouth. "So untrusting. I told you once already that I keep my word."

Chapter 542 Glorious Hawk Boy

Leafa vanished and reappeared next to Hawk, who was focused on his work. When she held out her hand with an open palm facing up, Hawk was fairly sure that she had snacks for him. That gesture always meant snacks. So, he ate what she offered without hesitation.

The flames of both his body and his [Hellstorm] vortexes immediately turned the same pale blue as Overlord Leafa's smoke, and a massive surge of power flowed through Hawk's body as he turned incorporeal.

[Hawk got a new skill? Unfair advantage. 5 yard penalty. Repeat first down.] Remi complained.

Nobody else had any idea what she was talking about, but the sentiment translated well enough.

A mighty keening scream echoed across the farm as Hawk launched into the sky, his incorporeal form surging with energy.

Light blue flames burst from him, creating a small sun in the sky, bright enough that it lit the ground all the way to the horizon and sent a wave of heat across the farm so intense that the soup pot went from a simmer to a boil, and the thatch roof began to smoulder.

Then he began to reform into a massive bird the size of a Roc, but flickering with blue flames in place of feathers, and with a slender body elegant in a way Karl associated more with drawings of a Phoenix than with the overgrown sparrow form of the Rocs.

Leafa turned to Karl and held out her hand for her prize.

She was obviously impatient to have the blade, but it was resisting Karl's attempt to take it out and hand it to her.

[I know, friend. But we made a deal. I'm sure she will be good to you.]

Karl felt the bond snap as the blade changed hands, and Overlord Leafa surged with power, sending a pillar of pale blue smoke into the sky over her for a moment before it retracted.

"Oh, that is wonderful. Everything that I could have hoped for."

Her words were eerie, not a threat, but they gave Karl a shiver of premonition that he might have just made a grave mistake of a sort far larger than simply needing a new weapon.

Then, Leafa held out her hand and snapped one of her fingers off. "A replacement for your weapon. Don't let anyone say that I'm not a fair bargain maker." She explained. Then she simply vanished, letting the branch drop toward the ground.

Karl grabbed it as it fell, and felt the twig bond with him.

[Haint Claw] Obtained. Artifact Grade Weapon.

{Morphable weapon. Deals Ghostfire damage in addition to skill damage. Haint Claw may grow into a Haint sapling with sufficient soul power.}

Karl was admiring the new weapon in his mental space when the familiar power of a portal opening caused him to turn.

The Oracle ran out of the portal with a massively powerful Troll in rich purple robes, trimmed in white fur, behind him.

"What did you do? Where is she? Tell me you didn't unbind her." The Oracle pleaded.

"I have no idea what you are talking about. Could you please give me another clue?" Karl asked.

"The Haint. The ghost weapon. Where. Did. She. Go." The troll behind the Oracle snarled with a heavy accent that sounded like he was talking with his mouth full.

"She vanished. She does that now and then. She's likely around here somewhere, fighting boars and Cyclops."

The Emperor of Newbon roared, and Karl felt the Hellstorm Vortexes shudder as the Totem Rank Troll's aura shook the energy flow in the area.

"You gon be tellin' me what you dun, or I gon rip yo arms from yo puny body." The Emperor roared.

His voice shook the ground like an earthquake spell, and many of the defenders on the other side of the house stumbled.

"She offered a stone to Hawk, and I traded her my sword for it. The stone helped Hawk master a higher level of flame skills, then Overlord Leafa vanished.

We're in the middle of a battle, but all the enemies are trapped on the other side of the vortexes." Karl tried to explain.

The big troll looked like he wanted to strangle Karl, but the Oracle had more questions.

"What sort of sword did you trade her?"

"It was an item from a monster spawn. A blade of Champions. It stored life force from enemies and transferred some to the wielder to help them grow. I don't know how much good it would be to her, as I already absorbed as much of the energy as I could. But the sword's bond with me transferred to her." Karl informed him nervously.

That big troll seemed quite intent on tearing him into little bits, and his power level made the Overlords seem like children.

Fortunately for Karl's life expectancy, the big man was swearing incomprehensibly and casting some sort of shamanistic spell that was making the clouds vanish from the sky.

"She is going west. Oracle, you will pay for your mistake." The Troll growled, then stepped through the portal, which closed, leaving the Oracle behind.

"Care to explain? We could use our best fighter back." Karl asked.

"She's not coming back. You just gave a sentient weapon the soul power to gain full autonomy. A Haint is a sentient energy being in a possessed body of some sort. Almost an undead, but not really, considering the nature of the energy that is inhabiting the body. In her case, the body of a deceased Dryad that was weaponized as a Golem. They have no soul, they're a purely magical being. But they strip the souls from their enemies to power their growth and sentience. Whatever you gave her allowed her to break free of the Emperor's bond, and now she's on the run."

Karl blinked slowly and adjusted his vortexes to buy time as he tried to comprehend what was going on.

"You're saying that the Haint Overlord, the one who insisted on being called Princess Leafa, is actually a weapon bonded to the Totem Rank leader of the nation, and now she has what? Gone rogue and taken off?"

The Oracle paled and nodded.

"Worse. I think that she might have broken through to the Totem Rank. A Rogue Totem Rank threat loose in the nation and nobody knows what she wants."

"Other than snacks. Elven trail rations in particular." Karl added.

"I don't see how that is... no, you are right. She might be trying to get off the continent. There are far more Overlord and Totem Rank creatures on the other continents, and she needs to feed on high ranked souls to stabilize her advancement.

If she's really planning to remain on the run, she needs more souls to give her the power to resist being bonded again."

It was probably better not to tell the Oracle that he still had a piece of her. Leafa had helped Hawk evolve, and to Karl that meant he owed her a favour larger than a simple sword and a few days on the run.

"Well, you might as well take a seat over by the fire. There are still hundreds of Giant Boars coming for us, and while Hawk's pretty blue flames are scaring some off, they're still trying to get through on the other sides."

The Oracle turned toward the house, then stopped when he saw Hawk circling in the sky.

"That's a Ghostfire Thunderbird. That isn't possible. I would have seen it. No, it wasn't one before, was it? Leafa must have done that with her power. He evolved, didn't he?" Karl nodded at the wizened Troll, who was looking even more haggard than he had two days ago.

"That's right. Maybe he needs an updated name. I can't keep calling him Hawk when he's no longer a Hawk at all." Karl joked.

The Oracle sighed. "Hawk is a less ridiculous name now that he isn't one. I have a cousin named Hawk."

A troll named Hawk? Karl wondered about the naming sense behind that, but it might be a tribal name based on a personal attribute. The Orcs did that, and gave their warriors a second name based on their skills and reputation. It wasn't unthinkable that the Trolls might do the same. Karl hadn't actually asked many of them their names, now that he thought about it.

Chapter 543 Prudence

Karl sighed and looked to the sky for answers. Far above the flames, the Dragon's tail constellation shone dimly, barely visible over the light of the vortexes, even with every bit of cloud cover forced from the sky.

The Oracle quietly made his way to the house, leaving Karl to his thoughts. With the revered Oracle gone, one of the Royal Rank farmers came over to where Karl was standing, and patted him on the shoulder. "I get the feeling that you're going to be leaving here in somewhat of a hurry." He whispered.

"I get that feeling as well." Karl agreed.

"I won't ask what you did that angered the Emperor to that level, but if it has something to do with your friend the Thunderbird, or with whatever emergency called Overlord Leafa away, you should likely get a head start on your travels.

I will look after your wagon until you can return, if you need."

Karl smiled and shook his hand. "We will see once this influx of monsters slows down. If I leave too early and something happens to the Oracle, they will hunt me to the ends of the continent."

The Emperor went looking for the Overlord. Apparently her mission was not approved, and he was not happy about the timing when the Oracle foresaw it. I don't have all the details, but at the very least, the Emperor is busy for the day."

The Minotaur nodded in understanding, then got to the topic that had actually brought him over. "That fire spell you are using, is that something that can be learned somewhere? One of my nieces is a Shaman apprentice, and that fire tornado spell is the sort of signature spell that could let her advance to High Shaman and reach the Royal Rank." Karl shook his head. "I don't know anyone else who can use it outside my group. It is possible to learn, but not quickly or easily, and she would need to know a number of spells as a prerequisite."

The Minotaur sighed. "I feared that might be the case. If it were so easy, more people would know it. But I do need to tell her about those flame totems. Those are the sort of signature ability that should scale well with level and let her stand out from the others in her training group. There is only so much to go around, and everyone competes for additional resources."

Karl nodded. "Resources are the great limiter for all of our growth. But at least after this, nutrition won't be a problem for your community for a year or so. The children will have plenty of energy dense meat to eat, and that will help their growth."

"That they will. Let me know what you decide, but if you're thinking of flying away on the massive bird, I wouldn't recommend it. A twenty-metre wingspan and the fact that he's literally on fire probably don't combine to create the greatest stealth skill."

Karl chuckled. That might make Hawk's scouting duties difficult in the future, but they could work something out to dim his glow if he couldn't do it himself. But even if he could dim the light, he was still enormous. Not even Thor was as large as Hawk now, though Hawk was more slender than the Cerro.

[I will have to make a harness for him later. Thor has his Tessa Knight mode, so Hawk will want a rider too. Maybe our Dana? They both have good range with their skills.] Rae suggested.

[What am I, chopped liver?] Karl asked.

[No, boar liver probably tastes better. But you're a ground combatant like I am. Besides, Cara and Remi have a system worked out, so you're mine by default. Unless I'm wearing my Lotus.]

[Glad to know that I'm the option of last resort.]

[Well, you don't do anything that the rest of us can't, do you? You're like picking all of the others when we only need one. You're a good choice, but not the most efficient one.]

Karl knew that Rae was trying to make him feel better, so he decided to tease her. [That's fine, I have the Lamia Bodyguards now. They'll hang out with me.]

[Or you can hang out with Ophelia. She doesn't have a partner yet.] Rae offered.

[The Bear and the Karl don't need partners. They just like to smash things.] Hawk interjected with a mental shrug.

There wasn't much smashing to do right now, the invaders were stuck on the other side of the wall of vortexes. That was what the Minotaur thought that Karl was focusing on when he was speaking with the beasts.

"How is the situation outside the spell? Can you tell?" The Minotaur Royal asked.

"It's getting better by the minute. The spreading vortexes have eliminated most of the attackers now. If it keeps going at this rate, we should be able to let down the spell in the next half hour.

There will be more attacks for the rest of the day, but the monsters near us are nearly under control. The three of us holding the vortexes will need a break after this, but it was the only viable way to deal with the flood of beasts coming our way." Karl explained.

The Minotaur nodded and turned to walk back to the front of the house. "If you need more assistants than those two Lamias, let me know. We have rested fighters in the yard."

Karl nodded. "We should be alright. These two are excellent fighters, but I will let you know if we need more assistance on this side."

The Minotaur returned to the other side of the fight, but they didn't wait for Karl to make a request before they sent over assistants. If you could call them that. What they sent were four of the General's guards, Ascended Rank Satyrs who had a look of determination, and the glow of Tessa's Holy Blessing on their bodies and weapons.

"Welcome to the dark side of the house. The Vortexes will be up for a while longer, then you can let the Lamias take the front lines, while you harass and distract their targets. It will be the fastest way to get the Giants down." Karl instructed.

"Yes, Sir. We were sent to make up numbers so that nothing made it to the children. Fear not, we won't let you down." One of the Satyrs replied grimly.

"It's not that serious. There are no more high-ranking beasts anywhere that I can detect. It's just Commander Rank boars, and low Royal Rank Cyclops leading them. The three of us can handle those easily enough, but every distraction you cause gives us one more opportunity for a lethal strike."

That was enough to assure the Satyrs that Karl really wasn't messing with them or putting on a strong front to make them feel better. If he could view their assistance as nothing more than a distraction, even when they had the blessings of a High Priestess of the War Dragon on their weapons, he must be extremely confident in his abilities, they assumed.

A normal person would have been overjoyed just to find out that they had anyone with a Commander Rank blessing on their weapons that didn't burn the wielder's energy to attack.

Chapter 544 Calm Their Nerves

[We will need to take down the cyclones soon.] Remi noted.

Her power was beginning to exhaust her, while Hawk was unstable after his evolution. So, it was time for the others to begin to fight again and not rely on the three of them with the largest area effects.

"The vortexes are coming down now. Prepare to face whatever is alive on the other side." Karl warned. There was nothing. The vortexes had killed anything that had gotten within forty metres of them. But it kept the Satyr soldiers on guard, just in case something had escaped Karl's notice.

For the first few minutes, there was nothing coming. Then Karl saw that a few groups of the armoured Giant Boars had noticed the change in defensive strategy, and were heading for the farm.

It was only a half dozen boars and two Cyclops on their side, but the Satyrs were already looking nervous about the situation.

"Relax, I won't let anything happen to you. You have a defensive blessing from a High Priestess of the Red Dragon, the Goddess of War. As far as Commander Rank defensive magic, there isn't much that outclasses it.

Plus, you have the three of us here, and none of us is going to lose a fight to some boar. You've seen my magic, have some faith in our capability."

That seemed to remind them of their earlier determination. At least a little bit, anyhow, and the Satyrs raised their short spears and shields, ready to defend against attack.

"Are your mounts awake and healthy? It might be easier for you if you were mounted and more agile." Karl offered.

The Satyrs shook their heads. "The mounts are terrified of the boars. The boars are food, but they are also a predator, and these ones view our mounts as a food product, which has made them too afraid to be reliable in combat.

We're not a battle hardened combat unit, we're just the ones best trained to hold banners and move pedestrians out of the way of officers' carriages."

Karl chuckled at the description.

However, they were soldiers, even if they weren't much to write home about. And that meant that he could use them as soldiers, and they should know at least basic tactics.

"Alright, split up into pairs and accompany the Lamia. You attack the boars from the side, and then retreat away from their counterattacks, and the ladies will do the rest. I will take care of the Giants."

The Satyrs weren't cowards, and they moved into position as the Lamia each picked out a pair of Giant Boars to target, while Karl charged forward before recalling that he had sold his sword. The Maul was an option, but if he wasn't going to be getting the soul steal effect that both healed him and helped empower him, he might as well have used his bow.

Instead, he equipped the Haint Claw, which appeared as long wooden claws over his fingers, which leaked pale blue smoke, the same way that Overlord Leafa did.

Karl flexed his fingers, feeling the power of the weapon on his hands, then flicked a single finger at the Commander Rank Cyclops on his right.

An arc of [Rend] coated in [Disintegrate] and trailing blue smoke raced across the gap, and the giant paused his advance, confused as to what was happening. Then its knees buckled, and the massive beast tumbled to the ground as its head rolled away, cleanly severed at the neck.

The claws pulsed with power as the attack faded, and Karl sent another arc of power at the second Cyclops.

This one got its blade up in time to parry, and the attack faded as the blade in the Giant's hand shattered.

Karl split Rend, again coated with [Disintegrate], into four arcs and the Cyclops panicked, trying to dodge to the side. But Karl was too close, and the unfortunate creature had no weapon left to protect itself.

That was... far more effective than Karl had expected.

[Status]

Karl scrolled through the basic information about himself until he found the weapon description.

[Haint Claw] Artifact Grade. Deals 280% base weapon damage as Psychic Damage. That was helpful, but Karl already knew that it added the ghostly smoke to the attacks. What he didn't know was what sort of base damage it added to his attacks, or what other status bonuses he might have gained.

So, he checked his bow for reference.

[Unwavering Bow] Rare Grade. Aim Assist Level 1. Increases Skill Damage by 10%.

That was an entirely different description, and there was no mention of base damage. So Karl was on to the Maul.

[Crystal Maul of Resonance] Epic Grade. Applies the effect of spells imbued into an attack up to five times when a strike lands. Deals strength-based blunt impact damage on strike.

Again, no mention of a base weapon damage, and no numbers other than some percentage-based increases. He would have to dig into it later, when he wasn't in combat and had more time to search through rows of numbers and possible hidden subcategories.

Whatever the actual number was, the damage he was doing to the Cyclops warriors said that it was an impressive one. Karl crouched and leapt to the side to attack a Giant Boar whose throat was exposed, coating his new claws with Rend. Hawk would be proud of him.

The claws went smoothly through the thick hide of the boar and left deep gouges in the heavy plate armour, leaving the boar bleeding out with a single strike.

Karl used [Flaming Body] to burn the blood off himself as the boar collapsed, and the Satyrs stared at him in shock.

"If you could do that, why are you using all these fancy skills and weapons?" One of them asked.

"One at a time is fine, but those skills deal with large numbers while they're at a safe distance from the house. We don't want to put the children in danger.

Besides, this method is messy." Karl replied with a shrug.

Then he got a great idea. Maybe the Haint Claw wasn't meant to be used as an actual weapon, for attacking, but as a supplemental weapon.

It said that it dealt a percentage of base weapon damage as a bonus, so if he kept the claws on when he used another weapon, it might give an additional bonus based on the damage that the other weapon was doing.

There were more boars in the distance, so Karl took out his bow, and adjusted his grip to compensate for the length of his new claws.

He made the drawing motion to activate the bow and charged it with [Chain Lightning]. He let the lightning charged arrow fly, and found that it was also followed by a faint trail of ghostly smoke. The arrow sunk deep into the boar, which twitched in pain, or possibly electrical shock, before collapsing with a puff of ghostly smoke coming from the arrow hole. That was definitely an improvement on the Chain Lightning alone, and the Haint Claw seemed to pulse with power after the kill.

Perhaps it was similar in function to the sword that he had traded, but it wasn't passing any of that stolen essence along to the wielder. According to the extended details of the description, it would gather Soul Essence with each kill, and had a chance to become a Haint Sapling in the future.

A sentient weapon like Leafa could make for quite the addition to the team, depending on the abilities that it developed, and Karl was looking forward to seeing what it could do.

Chapter 545 Archery Practice

Karl released arrow after arrow, clearing the area of boars with ease, as he picked the closest targets first and worked his way into the distance.

"So, you could fight with a bow as well? That is wonderful. But where did all these powerful friends come from? I've never seen a group of intelligent beasts like this outside of their own nation." The Satyr asked.

"They are with me. It's a bit hard to explain, but I can call on their assistance when I need it." Karl replied vaguely.

After the wall of flaming vortexes, and Hawk evolving right next to the farm, there was no way that they were going to be able to hide the fact that he had at least a few beasts with him, but Karl didn't want the locals to panic.

Of course, the Satyr likely wanted to know where the Lamia had come from as well, but that discussion could wait. Karl didn't know if he was going to have to grab his team and bolt in the next hour or two, especially now that the Oracle had been dumped in their laps by a furious Emperor whose pet Haint had run away.

The bow had a range of nearly two hundred metres, but in a matter of only a few minutes, there were no more boars to be found anywhere within that range. The overnight fight was coming to an end as the sun rose fully into the sky, and the second day's damages were becoming visible in the distance.

It wasn't as bad as the first morning. The invaders had mostly ignored the empty houses, and the ones that had smelled good enough to pillage had been attacked the first night.

So, while there was extensive damage to the farms and crops, it wasn't as severe as many had feared.

As the fighting died down, the Oracle made his way back to Karl, who had called everyone but Thor, Hawk, and the bodyguards back into his space.

They could remain out for now, as nobody was going to forget that Hawk existed. Plus, he was huge now, and flying was an entirely different experience when he could ride on much larger wind currents and updrafts.

Before, he could soar on the wind, but now, he could simply tweak his feathers and float in the sky. His new body weighed very little, and his [Ghostfire Body] skill allowed him to fly without using his feathers at all.

Like so many magical beasts, he could now use his magic to keep himself aloft, and not just his body.

[I may have to abandon mice as food. But now, regular sized boars are mouse sized bites. Is this what they call an existential crisis?] Hawk pondered as he lazily floated above the fields.

[Is it like growing up and finding out that your favourite little rodents that struggled so prettily in your web are no longer a satisfying meal? I completely understand. It's a tragic loss, but there will be others that put on as good of a show.] Rae consoled him.

That cheered Hawk up at least a little bit. Even the Giant Boars were now small enough to be valid hunting targets for the massive Ghostfire Thunderbird body that Hawk had evolved into, but deep in his instincts, there was still that urge to go for the small and defenceless rodents.

[Did you learn any new tricks along with your new flames?] Karl asked as Hawk surveyed the aftermath of the second spawn.

[I think so, but it feels like they're not ready yet. Maybe after I nap.]

Hawk wasn't concerned. Fire was the best element anyhow, and he was already big with better than ever flames. The rest could wait for later.

Hawk's circling form was a beacon to other defending groups. He was large enough to be seen from many kilometres away, and from a distance, he looked like an Ice Phoenix, with his blue flaming feathers.

The Phoenix was considered good luck, and they were as intelligent as Dragons, even if they could only speak bird. So, if their position was looking untenable, or just not worth defending anymore, they started to make their way towards the farm that had a Phoenix protecting it.

Some hesitated when they were close enough to see that it was some form of Thunderbird, which was also an intelligent beast, but not nearly as auspicious as the Phoenix, but Hawk was obviously guarding an area, continually circling overhead while only sporadically diving to attack boars that got too close.

Every time he rose back up with a snack, more of the Minotaurs began to consider heading in his direction, as they could hear the force, and see the campfire in the yard, showing that Hawk had not eaten the defenders.

Not that a Thunderbird would hang around after destroying a farmyard. They weren't a scavenger bird.

In the morning calm, Lotus had enlisted the help of the children from the farm families to scrub and polish Thor's scales. He needed a good rub down, and the Cerro was feeling depressed now that even Hawk had gotten a great opportunity to advance just handed to him.

All the others got powerful so easily, but he was already struggling, even with his Holy Pond.

Karl knew that Rae was likely to run into the same issue soon, but likely not until after she either reached the bottleneck or advanced to Monarch Rank. She had a few skills that would scale well, and that would give her a better chance at breaking the bottleneck.

Eternal Lightning probably had the potential to go higher, but Thor's body didn't. But that could be a project for him and Remi.

[If you go through the ingredients that we have, and make a list of things that we still need to make resources that will help Thor, I can try to find them. I think that all he needs is just a bit higher quality snacks to advance.] Karl offered.

Thor perked up a little, both at the faint hope of advancement, and at the gentle hands of the children scrubbing down his scales with coarse burlap cloths. Fortunately, his scales weren't as harsh as they had been at first.

They were still rough, but they didn't tear through cloth anymore unless you put excessive pressure on them.

Having something to focus on helped, and Karl knew the others wouldn't let their resident best boy remain sad for long.

Chapter 546 The Whole Gang Is Here

The Oracle sighed as he waited for Karl to stop being distracted. It was clear that he was mentally communicating with someone, but the way that he looked around made the Oracle certain that it was the bird.

He turned to see what Karl was looking at, then realized it was likely out of sight to him.

"You know, out of all of this, I can't believe that I got dad joked by a teenager." The Oracle began.

Karl smiled, and the old man shook his head and continued. "Not that kind of Troll, indeed. You have no idea the sort of chaos that your presence has caused, even if you aren't somehow responsible for these incidents. There is a theory that your presence when the Dungeon formed might be causing these incidents to follow you and whoever else was there on the first day.

But more than that, the mere fact that you managed to make it almost all the way across the country without being detected, while travelling with an entire wagon full of Elites and clerics, is like a cock slap to the face of the council."

Karl chuckled. "Well, that's... graphic. I will say this much, though. We're not here to cause trouble or spy for anyone. I did consider that the incidents might be following me, but only the last two, the undead and this one, have been even remotely close to centred on my position.

The first ones that we encountered near Oakhamping put us on the very north edge, and one of them didn't even spawn with us in its radius, we travelled into it during the day."

The Oracle frowned, then made a note. "The Council isn't sure what to do with you. One thing is for certain, we're not going to allow you to die in our territory if there is any chance that these incidents are focused on you."

"Oh? I had thought that would be the go-to option."

The old troll shook his head. "No, eliminating the target doesn't stop the effect of an anomaly, it simply fixes the position of the anomaly. If something happened and one of your members died here today, it is possible that we would have a Giant Boar and Cyclops spawn at this location every morning, forever."

"See, that is valuable information to have. Do you know what the plan might be? Because I am considering making a run for it." Karl informed him, letting a bit of his curiosity leak into his voice.

"Well, my guess is that Morrissa is going to suggest taking you somewhere to strangle you to death for making fun of her.

But my visions say that it's more likely they will decide to send you back to the humans and make you stay there, or to the Mountain Giant border, where any more anomalies would be their problem.

There has been no decision, and I have seen both possibilities." The Oracle explained.

Karl sighed as he scanned the horizon for threats. "That's not highly encouraging. I'm not sure what I should choose. It's encouraging that they don't intend to kill me or my friends, but I also have no intentions of being locked in jail."

The Oracle gave him a faint smile. "Honestly, I'm not even sure how we would keep you in prison. Even with the suppression field on the Fortress, we couldn't stop you from setting a Royal Rank Bloodbath Spider loose in the hallway behind the guards. Blocking magic and skills is all well and good until half a tonne of razor-limbed arachnid is loose in the locker room."

[Oh, that's a great idea. Attacking them when they're naked on a slippery surface. It will be chaos even before the blood flows.]

"Having the ability to see the future sounds like it's not a whole lot of fun." Karl noted.

"You have no idea. Oracles of all sorts very rarely see anything but tragedy. Even if I want to look for good news, I have to look for the absence of bad instead. Only then can I see things going right."

"What a crap skill set. No offence."

The Oracle chuckled. "Have you never interacted with someone who can see the future before?"

Karl made a noncommittal gesture. "I have, but I never really asked about how they saw things, or about their visions. So, should I be expecting an Overlord to show up here with very little notice, or an army unit?"

The Oracle's eyes went white, and he frowned, then took out a sword.

"Yes."

Before Karl could ask what that meant, a portal opened six metres tall, and an armoured group of Giants that looked like they were made of solid stone, only identifiable as living creatures by their eyes and teeth, rushed out.

A second portal opened behind Karl and the Oracle, and Morrissa stepped through with a snarl on her face and an axe in her hand.

Once the Mountain Giants had arrived, one last Giant, two metres taller than the others, crouched and stepped through the portal.

"You really do see only bad luck. Have you considered the fact that Oracles might be a Jinx?" Karl whispered.

"Has anyone ever told you that you're not funny?" The Oracle whispered.

"More than once, actually. But you might want to step back before things get messy."

The Mountain Giant Overlord scoffed.

"Do you think that having him a few more metres away is going to make a difference?"

Morrisa rumbled a warning, but Karl gave him his best smile. "Do you think that your warriors can go through me without my permission?"

The Oracle poked Karl in the back, and Karl heard Tessa laugh on the other side of the farm.

[Oh, she's glowing red. Does that mean we're fighting?] Hawk asked.

[Maybe, maybe not. We will see what they're planning. The War God's glow could be for protecting the children when things get spicy.]

[Why are we even fighting?] Remi asked.

[Because Rae needs more Monarch Rank Giant blood for her pond, of course.] Thor stated, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

[Oh, that's a good point. I hope the Overlords fight, we can scoop up some of the splatter to make leg cream for Rae.] Remi agreed.

"What are you thinking? Stop it, I can see the shifting possibilities." The Oracle whispered.

"Sorry, wandering mind." Karl replied without taking his eyes off the squad of Royal and Monarch Rank Mountain Giants.

Chapter 547 Intervenor Status

"Is the Golden Dragon Nation going to get in the middle of this?" The Overlord Rank Giant asked.

"That's really up to you, now isn't it? You came to me, not the other way around." Karl replied easily as the Naga Warriors moved to flank the Lamia Bodyguards.

[There are soldiers coming from every direction. Angry Remi and Beef warriors and a few that look like Dana but aren't.] Hawk warned.

[One day we will teach you all the words for other species.] Remi laughed.

[Meh, they'll get names if they need them.]

The Overlord Rank Giant was staring at Karl, trying to determine what he was planning, and what the best course of action was.

Karl didn't actually know what drew them here yet, though. If they came to abduct the Oracle, that could be a huge diplomatic disaster. But Karl couldn't see what else they came for, now that they said they weren't here for him or his team.

Morrisa stepped forward to face her Overlord Rank counterpart, who stood head and shoulders taller than the Minotaur did.

"What are you doing here? You know that your soldiers are not welcome here. Speak your piece and go away."

The Giant snorted at her in derision. "Our Earth Shaman sensed the appearance of an unfamiliar Totem Rank creature here. If Newbon Empire thinks that they can hire foreign Totems for the war, you are greatly mistaken."

Karl hid his amusement as well as he could, but obviously not well enough, as the soldiers from the Mountain Giant side were shifting to defensive foot positions in his direction. It was subtle, but his smile must have been the threatening one again.

"There is no foreign Totem here in Newbon. Tell your Idiot Shamans that they don't need to send an emergency response unit every time the Emperor comes out to greet visitors from The Golden Dragon Nation." Morrisa informed him in a bored tone.

The Giant turned to Karl. "The Emperor himself came to see you? Why?"

"I brought a rare species with me, and he was intrigued about its origin." The Overlord looked up toward where Hawk was lazily floating in the sky and frowned.

A Ghostfire Thunderbird was indeed a rare species. Rare enough that the Mountain Giant didn't even know what species Hawk was. Like many others, his first thought was that he was a Frost Phoenix, but the body shape and tail plumage were wrong.

One of the Monarchs was casting a spell, but Morrisa showed no sign of trying to stop them. Maybe it was to avoid a fight between Overlords so close to an inhabited farm, or perhaps the spell wasn't a dangerous one. If they were just looking for Leafa, they could take a number and wait their turn. The Emperor was already chasing after her.

The spell finished, and the group of Giants waited anxiously as the shaman looked more and more confused.

He was about to whisper to the Overlord, but the larger Giant stopped him and handed him a notepad to write it down.

That was a good call, as Karl would hear even a whisper from this distance, but Hawk was directly overhead, and he could read the note as the Giant wrote it.

[It says he only found a Totem Rank skill that was used by Overlord Leafa. He calls her by name, so he knows the council members.]

Well, that could make things more interesting.

Once the Overlord had read the message, he crumpled it and made the shaman eat the paper.

"Well, that's one way to prevent messages falling into the wrong hands." Karl mock whispered in the Oracle's direction.

The Giant Overlord looked like he was going to respond, then he paused and took a glowing stone out of his pocket. Karl could only assume it was a communication device of some sort, but neither he nor Hawk could see any sort of writing on it.

The Overlord's smile slowly grew as the glow faded from the stone. Then a fresh portal opened behind him.

"Forget this waste of time, we're leaving." He announced.

"That's not suspicious at all." Karl chuckled, which caused the Mountain Giant Overlord to give him an evil smirk.

Morrisa frowned as the Giant left, thinking the same thing that Karl was saying, and then alarms began to blare from her pockets.

She took out a whole handful of glowing stones, all of which were giving off an alert tone.

She turned to Karl. "You, I will deal with your insolence later. But I now have proof that the incidents aren't following you around. These are all regional alarms for anomalies that spawned at dawn today."

"All related to the Dungeon? That shouldn't be right." Karl mumbled.

Morrisa looked between Karl and the Oracle, then sighed and shook her head.

"They aren't. They can't be. The pattern doesn't match. We suspect that the Giants have found something that is letting them trigger them. We started to suspect it when we first heard of the Advancement Trial the Hill Giants triggered. Now, anomalies are appearing all over the continent. But I have to go. Consider yourself warned to behave, I don't have time to come back and deal with your people. Do what you want, as long as you don't cause trouble on your way out of the country."

A stone in her hand lit up red, and she stepped through a portal that closed immediately behind her.

"They left me behind again." The Oracle sighed.

"I am not normally the one to play Devil's Advocate, but I suspect that wherever she was going, you probably didn't want to be anyhow. If nothing else, we will keep you safe for the day. Then we can arrange a team to get you home after tomorrow morning's spawn."

The Oracle gave him a faint smile. "This will be the last one in this sequence. This spot won't be hit tomorrow morning, according to my visions. However, that doesn't mean you'll be safe for long. I don't understand what is happening. I can see it, but I can't decipher a pattern."

Chapter 548 Run Away Home

Karl picked off a few more Giant Boars with his bow, then sent more instructions to Hawk.

[See if you can find the team of Spellblades. They should be somewhere near here if they kept going in this direction. I don't know if they're going to be anywhere near us, but if they are, we should meet up with them.] [Got it. There are plenty of groups of Minotaurs, and some lizards. Oh, I see some Goblins and big goblins too. I don't remember seeing those before. I will keep looking.]

Hawk flew off into the distance, a streak of blue fire in the sky, before he vanished into the clouds.

[Brother Hawk is fast.] Cara gasped, shocked by the speed of his departure.

[Does that happen when you get big? I'm a little faster when I'm big, but I can't fly.] Remi pondered.

They were waiting in their spaces now that the sun was out, and Rae was napping, as was her tradition after the sun came up.

"Can we get a substitution on this side? I need to talk to my team for a minute." Karl called out to the farmers who had come over to support Morrisa.

"No problem. We all heard the Oracle say that this will be the last of the Giant Boar spawns, so it's nearly time for us to get to work curing, salting, smoking and drying what we can. We will have to sell a lot of it to the cities, but we've got a solid year's worth of stored meat now."

That was about as long as a cured ham was normally kept without being eaten, but Karl didn't know how many survivors would be in the next city to trade with. The fire was out, and it didn't start over this morning with the two Overlords present. But that didn't mean that there was much of the city left to salvage.

The piles of boar bodies looked like hills in the countryside, with hundreds of bodies stacked for them to process and hundreds more in the fields nearby.

Some wouldn't be salvageable, but most of them should still have edible bits. Ophelia switched positions with another of the farmers, so the whole group could gather for a short meeting when Karl came around the house.

"What's the plan? Are we going to try to fight our way through a whole spawn?" She asked.

"That's pretty much the plan. I sent Hawk to go scout for a bit, and we can pick a route once he's back. The wilderness will likely be the better choice again. If the monster spawns are being influenced by the population density and power level, they won't be as bad in the wilderness. However, the Oracle thinks that the Giants have something that's triggering the Anomalies. Starting with the First Advancement Trial along the Hill Giant border, and now all over the Newbon Empire, the anomalies all appear to be linked to the Giants, according to his visions." Karl explained.

Dana frowned and gestured around them. "So this, all of this, might be the result of the Giants' interference? That might mean that the Dungeon Anomaly in the west might also be their doing, and now it's a stable Dungeon." The Oracle's frustration made perfect sense to them all at that moment. How and why the Giant Clans were causing anomalies was a mystery. However, if the Oracle could see their interference, there had to be some reason. If they were trying to mess with other nations, it was one thing. But this was excessive, and there was no way that they could control that much territory even if they had an invasion plan that actually worked.

[I found Prince Guy and the Dana herd. No, the Spellblades. They're all too large or too small to be Dana. They are north of the spawn by about twenty kilometres and headed east.] Hawk informed them.

He was getting better at sorting people. At least a little bit.

[Alright, remember where they are, or are they not hiding anymore?] Karl asked.

[They're still hiding. But with these new flames, I can see them glowing anyhow.]

"Alright, I have a scouting report. North and then East appears to be the way for us. Now, we just need to make sure that everyone will be alright with what is left wandering the area." Karl relayed.

However, the fact that Hawk had covered over a hundred kilometres in the last fifteen minutes was extremely impressive. Even the helicopters back home didn't fly that fast.

Tessa referred to the map. "That works. There aren't any major roads in that direction, but there are farms that were still fighting further from us. We can help them clear the area as we go, and then head out of the spawn area to turn east."

The farmers were doing well at taking care of this area, so Karl didn't feel too bad about leaving, but he did hope that someone came for the Oracle before he ended up being blamed for something happening to him.

The one - armed Royal Rank Minotaur soldier came over to join them, and nodded to Lotus, who had been nearly constantly healing the whole farmyard with her area spells.

"If you're all headed out, I wanted to say thank you for the help. If you happen to be back this way, stop in at the farm, and we will make you something." Lotus hugged his leg, and the Minotaur laughed. "You made enough for us in the last two days that none of our families will be satisfied with the simple fare from the fields. We're going to have to start expanding our recipe lists."

Lotus smiled up at him. "It's not my fault that you prefer raw roughage. I just hope that my cooking wasn't too hard on anyone's stomach."

The old Minotaur chuckled. "Our stomachs aren't that sensitive. We will miss having your cooking around, though."

One of the boys smirked at her. "Fear not, little cleric. I will figure out what you did to make rice and beans so good, and then make them even better."

Chapter 549 No More Wagon

Karl looked at the wagon that Thor had pulled this far across the wilderness. Then he turned to the oldest of the Royal Rank Minotaurs who had come to the defence of the farm.

"Jacob, I bequeath my wagon to you. I know yours got destroyed, it was smashed when I got to your house. We are going to have to move faster than the wagon will allow, so you may have mine as a replacement to help bring the supplies your neighbours will need."

The Minotaur patted him on the shoulder. "Are you sure? Humans on foot are not faster than a wagon."

Karl chuckled. "I have a harness for them to ride on Thor. His might won't be challenged by a few dainty ladies."

The Minotaurs laughed while Dana stuck out her tongue at him and Tessa rolled her eyes.

Karl and Ophelia were both fast on foot, but Karl was planning to swap out after the first few hours, once they weren't being as closely scrutinized. The other farmers wouldn't know or care about the beasts as long as they didn't approach the farms, and his secret was already out, so he didn't have to worry about the Council finding out who he was anymore.

[I will take my Dana as an artillery accessory.] Rae agreed.

That would free up a seat for Ophelia on Thor's back, so she was well rested when they ran into trouble. But she would likely want to remain on foot once they got into the more dangerous areas.

But with the Lamia and Naga Warriors flanking Thor, they had plenty of ground forces already.

[I will take Remi.] Cara insisted.

Having the Naga Queen in Spirit Snake form was a great compliment to her skills while flying, and if she wanted to fight on the ground, Remi could transform and bring out her final bodyguard.

The Bodyguards were Monarch Rank now, strong enough to defend against anything that they were likely to find out here, while Cara found a way to disassemble it.

The beasts came out as soon as they were out of sight of the farm, so they didn't leave a strange impression with the farmers they had been secretly protecting for the last two days.

For the first half hour, it was easy travels to head north toward the edge of the incident. All of the nearby farmers had gathered in one spot, and the monsters had followed, or had been hunted by Karl's team.

But no good thing lasts forever, and after that first half hour of cleared monsters, they were into the area that hadn't been cleared yet.

[Turn a bit east. That path will be faster. There are a few farms ahead on that route, but they've taken care of most of the monsters.]

That worked well enough for Karl, and the route between fields was either clear or the fences had been taken down by the Giant Boars.

[Many small farmers in that house.] Rae informed them as they passed by a damaged farmhouse.

Karl turned to see what Rae was looking at, and found that the house had collapsed, but the floor seemed intact, and there was a basement or a cellar under it.

He ran over and rapped his knuckles on the wood.

"We've cleared most of the attackers from the area. Do you need medical help? I have a cleric with me."
He called.

"Dad said to stay until he came for us." A small voice called back up.

"He had to leave the farm. Do you want us to lead you to safety?" Karl asked.

There was a defended farm only half a kilometre away. If they knew about these kids, they should have come to get them already. So, it was likely that nobody told them the kids were here.

A few metres from the rubble of the house, a small trap door pushed up a pile of straw, and a young Minotaur and a Satyr stuck their heads up at the same time.

The yard was completely destroyed, very little could be salvaged. But when they saw Karl, they sighed in relief.

"You said you have a cleric? Some of the others are hurt. They came from the neighbours farms because we had the best cellar." The Satyr girl replied.

Karl whistled and gestured for the others to come over, which brought Lotus running. Tessa wasn't far behind her, but Lotus was obviously the more enthusiastic of the pair, and she had area healing instead of just direct healing spells.

There turned out to be far more children than Karl had seen through the rubble. Over fifty of them had gathered there, and Karl began to wonder what the farmers were doing. Perhaps they had chosen to defend a house with no basement?

[Hawk, go check that out.]

Hawk circled around to check the actual content of the farm, and not just that there were people moving at it.

[No enemies right now, but only five Commander Rank Minotaurs and a juvenile Troll. They all look like they're half dead.]

Thor snorted unhappily. [So, they didn't come for the children because they don't expect to survive the day and hiding is safer than out in the open.]

Karl pulled Tessa to the side. "The last few adult survivors in the area are on their last legs. They're not going to last the day, or possibly even one more attack, if there is a Royal Rank Cyclops. Did you want to search for a way to carry the kids and bring them with us? Or did you want to ask them to hide until a rescue team can come for them? I'm sure someone will be searching for survivors as they clear the area."

Tessa sighed and looked at the rubble. "I will have Lotus make a sled. There is no food in that pantry, it was empty when they got in. They're not going to last long hiding here with no food or water."

There was a wagon in the yard, but it was smashed beyond repair, and they would do better to just have Lotus use her magic to make them a sled to have Thor pull across the grass.

Tessa went to the basement and traded with Lotus, who came up to inspect the rubble, looking for something that could be repurposed to transport a large group of children.

Fifty kids weren't going to be easy to move with any standard wagon, but if they strung a couple together, or made something like the sled Karl had in mind, they could at least have enough room for them all to sit.

It would just be a very rough ride.

"Oh, this can work. Rae, darling, you sweet girl, could you please help me make a large cloth floor with side ropes? It would take forever to grow the wood for it, but we can make a really long wagon out of these two axle assemblies and that fallen tree. Then I will make hangars for the bench seats out of cloth, and everyone can just ride down the sides." Lotus suggested.

She drew it out on a piece of paper, and Rae realized that all she needed was two long pieces of cloth.

So, instead of making anything, she just handed over the tarp they had been using to cover their camp.

"Oh, yes this works as well. Karl, can you bring me that tree? No way can I lift that."

Chapter 550 But Thor Likes Wagons

Lotus turned the wagon into an oversized ore cart, but cloth with high sides to keep the kids from falling out. The silk was stretched tight between the two ends of the long wagon, while the back was open so they could climb in without being lifted over the sides.

Fifty kids were a lot to put in one wagon, even when over half of them were Satyrs, who weren't large even when they were fully grown.

But after half an hour of construction and Tessa getting all the kids fed, they had them loaded and ready to move.

Nothing else had attacked the survivors at the next farm, and Karl was fairly sure there was room in the wagon for them, even if they needed to lay down for a while. The kids had learned that they could dangle their arms over the sides to see out, and the cloth of the walls would support most of their weight.

This method actually turned out to be smoother riding than the hard wooden wagon, as the silk had some stretch to it, so the riders simply bounced and weren't harshly jostled as Thor jogged through the fields.

Thor took them straight to the half dozen survivors at the next farm house, and Tessa began healing even before the wagon stopped.

"Sir, might I ask what you are doing? The children were safe underground." The juvenile Troll asked as they approached.

Karl could see that he had a soldier's uniform on, but the five Commander Rank Minotaurs were all farmers.

"There was no food or water in there. We are relocating them to safety outside the incident, or to a farm that has the capability to protect against the aftermath of this tragedy.

There is one behind us with a General on site and multiple Royal Rank soldiers. We held the position with no losses, so there should be others who have gathered their neighbours." Karl replied.

That was what this group had tried, but none of them were Royal Rank, so when they faced a Royal Rank Cyclops the first night, they had lost half of the nearby families before it had been stopped, and the second night was even worse.

The Minotaurs glared at Karl as he implied that they were less competent than their neighbours. They knew who he meant because there were only two Royal Rank Minotaurs within thirty kilometres of them. There were some strong Commanders, but only the two old Royals lived nearby.

What they didn't know was that there were others who just didn't leave the house often anymore, and one that had been travelling when the incident started. But they had all ended up at Karl's location.

Karl addressed the survivors again when nobody had anything else to say about him collecting the children. "The War Cleric has healed the worst of your wounds. Are you going to come with us? We will take everyone to relative safety. Once the army or a local force clears the area, those of you with families can return home to rebuild."

They turned to each other and nodded. "We will come with you. The six of us aren't enough to handle what is out here, so we will need to find a larger group anyhow. Travelling with you to defend the children seems like the best course of action."

Karl nodded, while the kids seemed nervous. Most of them seemed to recognize these people, but after a few seconds, Karl realized what the issue was. They were all wondering where their families had gone.

They had been safely locked in a cellar and didn't know that the defenders had taken such gruesome casualties, as the bodies were not out in the open.

"Load up and we will get going. There isn't much room, but if you need to bring any essentials, you can hang bags from the corner posts."

They just shook their heads and got in the wagon, swaying awkwardly until they realized only the edges were stable.

Thor had just started moving again when a massive blast of power in the distance nearly knocked him off his feet. The power sent Hawk tumbling through the air for a dozen kilometres, and knocked Ophelia to the ground while Karl slid backwards five metres.

The buildings to their northwest were entirely levelled, and there was a mist of blood in the air near the horizon.

Whatever had gotten too close had been obliterated, but Karl had no idea what had happened.

Cara and Dana both sensed the next blast coming and put up a barrier to defend against it.

Cara's wall of obliterate failed a split second after Rae and Karl both built [Earth Shield] walls to protect the group. The first fell, but the second held and Dana's barrier shifted the remaining energy over their heads.

"What in the seven hells was that?" Lotus complained.

[Totem] all of the beasts thought at the same time.

"There are Totem Rank leaders fighting in the distance. I can only imagine the damage that they have inflicted on their surroundings if we're being hit this hard from over thirty kilometres away." Karl relayed.

"Other side." Tessa warned.

Karl put the shield all around them, making a dome, while Rae focused on the direction she sensed the attack coming from.

This blast was much closer, and Cara's barrier was the one that protected them after both stone walls failed.

This time they could see the cloud of blood and ghostly mist in the air, then the shift in energy as the combatants moved dozens of kilometres between skills.

[The Emperor caught the Haint.] Remi surmised.

It felt like their energy, but the question was: How anyone was expected to survive this?

Then the sense of power faded as they made a larger move, taking the fight elsewhere.

{ALL civilians take shelter underground.} A magical voice boomed over the area.

"A little late for that. They've been and gone.

But on the bright side, most of the boars and Cyclops are dead now." Karl joked, hoping to ease the tension in the air.

"What is gone?" The young troll asked.

"The Emperor is having a disagreement with Councilwoman Leafa. Or at least, that's what it feels like." Karl offered.

"How does that explain anything?" Ophelia asked, and Karl realized that the Oracle hadn't explained anything to anyone else.

"Councilwoman Leafa may have reached the Totem Rank, and she is somewhat of a free spirit. I don't have any real details, but when she left our location, it was assumed she was planning to go overseas on vacation.

An unauthorized vacation, it seems. Hopefully, it doesn't get too out of hand."

[Overhead] Hawk warned as he ducked into his space.

"All barriers up. Thor, we're counting on you to protect the little ones."

Hawk coated Rae's stone wall with [Ghostfire Body] while Karl used [Flaming Body] on his for extra safety.

Then Cara put all her energy into [Nullify], hoping to dissipate some of the energy that was coming at them.

From only a few thousand metres overhead, the blast was overwhelming. Karl felt all the barriers shatter, even with his whole group pouring everything they had into them.

Then a massive Troll crashed into the ground with a victorious smile on his face, and a branch in his hand.

"You bitch, I've got you now." He snarled as magical chains began to wrap around the Haint.

Leafa's face turned to face Karl, and he could have sworn that she winked at him before she was engulfed in purple magical chains, and her aura began to drop, returning to the Overlord Rank.