

Beast Master 571

Chapter 571 They're Back!

The moment that the attack became imminent turned out to be about ten seconds later.

The leaders moved to the far end of the line, and Karl adjusted his position to match them, with Remi close to him, but toward the main body of the Mountain Giant force.

"Remind me again why I am doing this?" Karl asked as he watched the Commander Rank Giants form ranks behind their leaders.

"Because they're mad that you showed them up, and they're not going to let you leave without a fight." Tessa reminded him.

"Right. Almost forgot about that part. Alright, if everyone is in position, I will move forward with Remi to make the unofficial challenge."

When Karl moved, the Monarchs and Royals all moved to match his group. That made life a lot easier on everyone else, and the Giants were already charging forward, aiming for the trial orb with superior numbers.

[Hawk, see what you can do to slow the attackers once I have the strong ones busy.] Karl instructed.

[ALL the fire.] Hawk agreed.

Karl moved to lure the stronger Giants away from the group, while the rest of his team grew increasingly concerned about the odds on his side. With all the Royals gone, they would have an easier time with the Commanders, but twelve on two, or seven, depending on how you counted it, was not great odds when Remi was a ranged fighter.

The bodyguards were Monarchs, though. That should make enough of a difference, Tessa hoped. Thor was itching to charge into battle, and she could feel the will of her Goddess flowing through her. The will of the Red Dragon wanted a war, and there was one waiting for them only a few hundred metres away.

Or at least they would get to enjoy a small sample of the ongoing war at the borders right here in their own backyard. That was close enough for the War Goddess.

Karl equipped the Haint Claw as gauntlets on his hands, and then drew his sword. The Monarch Rank Giants smiled at the sight, not realizing the hell that was waiting for them, and increased their charging speed to take out Karl before they dealt with the others.

Karl pushed his speed as much as he could manage, testing the limits of the enhancements that he had gotten from the new class, and the bonus he received from each of his pets.

With [Disintegration] on his sword, Karl lashed out at the largest of the Monarch Rank Giants, internally wincing at the sound of his blade breaking the sound barrier. He either needed to stop doing that or invest in some earplugs. It had been the same thing when Leafa fought the Emperor, a cacophony of violence that could be heard for dozens of kilometres.

The Giant was unprepared for that sort of speed, and hastily erected a [Guard] barrier to defend itself. But the skill didn't hold, and the lingering remains of [Disintegration] along with the ghostly trail from the Haint Claw were still in effect as the blade pierced the Giant's throat.

Karl jumped to stop his momentum by kicking off the Monarch, and managed an almost smooth backflip to land on his feet.

[Not bad. Eight out of ten. You need to work on your form.] Remi congratulated him.

However, the Giant wasn't dead. At least not yet. But it was bleeding heavily from the neck, and a stream of pale green energy was being ripped from its body as it struggled.

The other Monarch saw this and came to the rescue, but the trio of bodyguards intercepted it, while Remi threw [Chain Lightning] to slow the Royals until Karl's Lamia bodyguards could cut off their advance.

It took Karl a moment to realize what had happened to the wounded Giant as he was evading the strikes of its enraged companion, but when the stricken Monarch began to have seizures, he finally understood.

The blow had come so close to killing the target that the Haint Claw had grabbed a hold on the Giant's soul and was forcibly ripping it from his body with lingering psychic damage.

Karl parried with his full force, and both blades rebounded away, nearly putting the tip of his blade in the dirt as the Giant's chest was exposed.

The Monarch twirled away from Karl's counterattack, but immediately found itself falling. A Naga Warrior had taken advantage and wrapped its legs with its muscular lower body, and once the Giant was face down on the ground, the Warrior went wild attacking with all four arms and blades coated in [Tsunami] water magic.

Crude, but brutally effective.

That left Karl and the warrior free to engage the Royals, as the first Monarch struggled for its life while fending off one of Remi's Bodyguards from a kneeling position.

The increased speed was an unfair advantage, and while the Giants had no problem keeping up with Karl's running speed, his hand speed was far too high for them to effectively counter.

However, after only a dozen strikes on his way through the crowd, his arms were getting sore.

There was an imbalance in his stats. He could move faster than his body could currently sustain. Human bodies were not beast bodies, and despite all the enhancements, he was actually dealing a significant amount of damage to himself, which was being negated by [Void Body].

That was going to have to change. Once they got out of here, or at least found time to go through their loot, he needed something that was going to increase his durability. Even if it was a workout routine and not a magical item.

It was either that or he would have to hold back in combat to avoid injuring himself, and the amount he would have to hold back would increase with every beast that advanced.

Worse, if it didn't work, he would have to change his role from frontline fighter to ranged support.

The Lamia moved to Karl's flank as the Royals double-teamed all three of them. That shouldn't be right, there weren't that many Royals in the group.

Then Karl noticed that once the Monarchs were both dead, Remi had taken her trio of Bodyguards into the flank of the Commanders to set up a combination of [Blizzard] and [Hellstorm].

The defenders were in combat now, and Hawk had just arrived, striking at the back of the force with a wall of [Hellstorm] vortexes that were moving forward at a walking pace, while Dana's Golems attacked the survivors, and she assisted Hawk in raining attacks down on the Giants.

Being attacked from three sides was not in their plan, and despite the Giants outnumbering the defenders by an overwhelming margin, they were unsure what side to send reinforcements to.

With that being the case, Karl held back against the Royal Rank Giants, testing the limits of his physical durability compared to his maximum strength.

It was fast enough that the Giants could only haphazardly parry, and took indirect hits from most of his attacks, a distinct advantage on Karl's part, as they were forced fully onto the defensive.

The Bodyguards appeared to have gotten faster as well, but Karl couldn't be certain, as he hadn't spent much time actually watching them fight.

"Prince Karl, the reinforcements are here!" A Satyr runner shouted from a few dozen metres behind him.

"Have them join the main force and push the enemy back into the flaming vortexes." Karl shouted back.

The goat legged Demon ran off to relay the message, while the Royal Rank Giants rallied into a circular formation, where each of them would have a helper to cover their blind spots, and defend against tricky attacks.

There were still five of them to Karl's trio of attackers, who now had them surrounded.

Karl was about to move in for the kill, aiming to cut through one Giant and attack the others from behind, when a Portal opened, and the Giants, including the dead, turned incorporeal.

Then, they vanished, and the portal closed. All that they had left was a lot of scorched grass and blood, plus one Monarch Rank body. The unfortunate Giant whose soul had been siphoned by the Haint Claw had not been recovered with the rest of their force.

Remi tossed the body into Rae's space for later, then took stock of her bodyguards.

They were a little beat up looking, but with [Trollish Regeneration] and [Eternal Lightning], their bodies were still solid.

Then they refreshed their armour spells, and they were back to pristine appearance.

[Resounding victory. Is it lunchtime yet?]

Chapter 572 Called Back To The Chaos

"What portion of them do you think that we killed before they ran away?" Colonel Lu asked as the defenders were catching their breath and preparing for the next attack.

Karl shrugged. "At least a third, but I don't think that it matters because they took the bodies back. They will most likely resurrect them right away, and then they will have suffered no losses."

The Minotaur sighed. "Whereas our losses are permanent, so they're running a campaign of attrition."

Karl gestured behind them. "Who said ours are permanent. We have Lotus, High Priestess of the Nature God, and a healing specialist, here with us today. It looks like she started with the strongest of the fallen, and then the cutest. She might not be able to save them all before she is exhausted, but with two Dragon God clerics here, we shouldn't have too many casualties."

They had many wounded fighters. Almost all of them had some level of injury after the battle, but about half of their force had been heavily injured and were slowly moving around, getting used to the feeling of their limbs again.

It was a measure to prevent lingering mental trauma that would reduce healing effectiveness in the future, an accelerated version of rehab to remind the body that it was healing properly.

"At least there are more reinforcements incoming now that the first group is out of the trial." Tessa noted as she rode up beside Karl on Thor's back.

Karl looked back in the direction she was pointing and saw an entire army regiment coming out to surround the ruins. Dozens of white robed clerics, nearly a thousand soldiers, and a full artillery battery had arrived so far, on top of hundreds more soldiers from Newbon, and one adult blue dragon.

"We should likely go speak to the dragon before they have to come here. Blue Dragons love knowledge more than anything, and if we give it to them, they will like us by extension." Karl suggested.

Tessa smirked at him. "Is that your plan to gaslight the clergy? Just play to their aspect?"

"Hey, I brought you a whole battle with the world's best charger to ride, didn't I? I think I'm doing alright."

Tessa rolled her eyes. "You provided this lovely charger, but I don't think that you can take credit for the whole battle. The Giants were coming whether we were here or not."

[The Not Dana Mages are coming back.] Hawk updated as Karl prepared a good reason why he should get credit.

"Oh, there are Spellblades incoming as well. We should prepare to welcome them." Karl announced, changing the topic while letting Tessa know what was happening.

"What direction, I will go update them on the situation so that there aren't any conflicts between allies today." Tessa asked.

"Under Hawk. He's circling them now and preparing to land."

The Minotaur wondered how that was going to help with the stated goal of not starting a fight between allies, as the gigantic Ghostfire Thunderbird was not a comforting sight to strangers.

Thor rushed off to greet the people, which would give him time to socialize while Tessa explained the situation. Of course, Dana was on Hawk's back, and she knew most of it already, but that didn't sound like nearly as much fun as going over himself.

"Why would they appear all the way over there instead of being here with the rest of the reinforcements?" Colonel Lu asked as the group came back into sight.

"They were likely sent from their Clan Compound, or another mission, so they didn't want to appear right on top of someone in an already chaotic situation. They're only a five-minute walk away." Karl replied with a shrug.

The Royal Rank Minotaur decided to leave it alone. He knew that the one who had found them was Hawk, so the rapid response was perfectly reasonable, and there were more forces expected from both sides, as they would be sending as many people as possible to take the trial and attempt to awaken System Functions before the orb ran out of energy, or the ruins vanished again.

That was what usually happened with these things, and why they couldn't just get along and peacefully use the resources that appeared.

There were too many factions with too many people who all wanted or needed that power.

Whether it was for survival, political gain or like the Blue Dragons, just because they didn't already know.

Karl and the Colonel waited with a few other officers as the Spellblades approached. The uniforms were simple, so nobody would have known which nation they represented without the introduction, so sending out someone to greet them and verify their identity was actually a good idea, no matter how redundant it seemed.

Corbin nodded at Karl as he approached, then at the Minotaur and the Satyr runner who was waiting behind them.

"I am Prince Corbin, of the Golden Dragon Nation. You can just call me Corbin. My people will be on guard here until the incident has ended." He explained.

"Not headed in to gain the power of the orb?" Colonel Lu asked.

"We have been paid handsomely for others to get that opportunity. Our instructions are that it is likely to be usage limited, so we are to prioritize not letting unauthorized users in."

"Should we be expecting anyone else?" The Minotaur asked.

"Orcs. There is a group of Orcs headed this way. My instructions are that the nomads are considered part of the Newbon delegation, but I am aware that your people have had some issues with them in the past. So, we will have Prince Karl escort them in if they do choose to come here." Corbin explained.

[I saw them in the distance, and Dana told him.] Hawk explained.

"I understand. Though, the thought of Orcs with a System is a frightening one. I had expected that such an honour would be reserved for more civilized factions." Colonel Lu grumbled.

A lineup was already forming around the Orb, as it appeared to have reached its usage capacity. That would likely drain it much faster than anyone would prefer, but Corbin had already received a message by portal describing the situation.

The content of a magical message was easily intercepted by the Totems, but a small portal to drop a physical letter would not be noticed.

His excuse was a good one. The Spellblades were a powerful faction, but they were willing to be paid for their work and pass up other opportunities. So, the Minotaur and the other Newbon officers wouldn't question why they weren't trying to barge to the front of the line.

Chapter 573 Fortify

The Spellblades weren't the only ones that had been sent here. The Military Regiment was only the start, as they were not expected to be system compatible. The government was assembling Elites who had been out on missions to come to the orb as soon as possible, and Karl could hear the military commander talking to someone on the radio about the next expected arrivals.

Both nations had more people coming, but the Blue Dragon was beginning to look impatient.

"I will see you all in a few minutes. I need to go greet our draconic visitor, and make a good impression before they start reading everyone's minds."

It was a male blue dragon, so at least they didn't need to worry about Thor hitting on this one. But if the Dragon started searching for information directly from everyone's mind, they were going to find countless things that Karl would rather they did not.

"Greetings, Prince Karl. I am Librarian Gareth." The dragon greeted him as Karl approached.

"Welcome, Librarian. It's a pleasure to meet you. I presume that you have a number of questions about the inner workings of the orb, as well as the many historical events that the visitors have seen." Karl replied.

"Indeed. The historical events that I have heard so far have added many pages to the history book, and there are so many more to go through. But it is the advancement opportunities and how they might function that is of the greatest interest to me.

So much about the System is unknown to us now."

"Well, I can describe how it went for me. After I entered, there was a group of mannequins, or illusions. They all looked like me, but in slightly different armour, with different weapons. When I used the System Interface to look at them, I could see the different class names, and a few minor details about them, like the starting details, or a theme for the class."

The dragon had heard all of that before, and it wasn't all that interested in hearing it again, so Karl added some juicy details to bring its attention back.

"However, I had a number of skill points, and one more skill from my existing class that I wanted to add. There was a skill called Rampage, a passive skill that adds damage to my strikes every time I hit the same target. A bit like stacking damage over time effects, but I have to keep hitting them for it to take effect. Or, if I could poison them, I suppose that would work as well.

But the part that actually applies to this situation is that when I learned the skill, it gave me another option."

That got his attention. "Adding a skill gave you a new option? Perhaps it was the combination with the other skills you already knew? There has long been a theory that the progression of Elites was individualized, and that not every person with a certain Class would get the chance at the same advancements.

But to hear that it could be directly related to the skills that they had mastered is wonderful news."

Karl nodded. "If I happen to return to see Orthos at the Beast God Temple, I will be sure to train some of the children there in new skills. Then, when they grow up, you can study them and see what paths they follow."

The dragon's massive blue head turned to look off into the distance. "This wouldn't have anything to do with the Naga Queen and the Nature Priestess wanting more time with the pups and whelps of the beast nation, would it?"

Karl gave him his best fake innocent smile and the dragon laughed. "I will consider extending an invitation at some point in the future. Orthos has enough on his hands right now without bringing others to cause chaos.

But your people will get to see the pups again. We are sending many acolytes here before the orb deactivates, so they can try to gain access to the system."

Karl nodded in agreement. "That sounds good. We will look out for the children and keep away any attackers. The faster that we get through the advancement of the defence groups, the more secure the area will be. However, I do expect that we will face attack by either the Giants or one of the other nations soon.

If experience has taught me anything, it's that nothing on this continent remains a secret once more than two people know of it. With that in mind, most of the continent will know about the situation by tomorrow."

"I will leave you to it then. Please send your people by individually, and we can finish the debriefings. I will be providing a copy to the Capital Cathedral's library, as well as to Orthos at the Beast God Temple, as per our agreement on information sharing."

Karl nodded. "One last thing before I go. Which location do you call home?"

The dragon gave him a toothy grin. "Neither. I am from Whiton Temple. When there is new knowledge of this level, the blue dragons hold a lottery to see who gets to go."

Karl walked away and sent Tessa over to give her report next. If there were children coming, her and Lotus would likely want to be nearby. The Red Dragon prioritized protecting children during battle, and the Green dragon loved all creatures, so it was a duty that neither would have any problems with.

That left just the waiting for things to go wrong part of the day. They were slowly getting more soldiers and monsters back to the defensive lines around the ruins, but there was still a long line of them waiting to use the Orb, and most of the ones who had success were too giddy with joy to actually pay attention to anything.

Thankfully, they had Hawk overhead, and he could keep watch for approaching threats. But if there was one, Karl wasn't sure he would be able to get anyone's attention in time to have them actually respond.

Chapter 574 They Don't Give Up

The tension held on long enough that the defenders were beginning to relax. Almost all of them had completed their attempt to activate a system interface, and another round of candidates was being brought in.

These ones were mostly youngsters from the Divine Beast and Newbon Empires, while the Golden Dragon Nation was holding off, for fears of overcrowding.

But for Karl, Librarian Gareth, and a few others with good intuition, or a lot of combat sense, the quiet was unnerving.

The kids who were waiting their turn had been moved to the former slums of the town, where no ruins survived, and Rae had built a maze of stone walls and pillars for them to play tag in. The clerics were all sitting on the walls, keeping guard, and watching for injuries, while the soldiers finished their turn.

"Bring them out ten at a time. That should be a smooth enough pace that they won't have to wait now that the line is gone." Gareth directed, using the advantage of his enormous size to simply swing his head over to the clerics.

"Alright, the next ten who are it and tag someone come to High Priestess Tessa at the entrance. She will lead you to the trial while everyone else plays. Then you can come back after." One of the Beast Clerics instructed.

That brought an increased energy level to the game, as everyone either wanted to go to the trial or play as long as possible before they had to work.

The Children formed an orderly line to the orb, expertly shepherded by the clerics, and Karl turned his attention to the distant horizon, scanning for danger.

[There, I found it. Fifty metres from the edge of town, a giant sized portal is about to open.] Hawk announced.

"Incoming Portal." Karl shouted, with a gesture toward the portal, which would be under a hundred metres from him.

Both Karl and Remi called their bodyguards in front of the portal location, and the attack began. But not how Karl had expected it.

A barrage of spells crashed into their barriers, and an armed unit of human soldiers in shining red plate armour flew through, attacking everything that they saw.

{Artillery!} Someone shouted from the Golden Dragon Nation lines.

That triggered a barrage of anti-aircraft guns and artillery rounds, which were aimed through the portal to delay the reinforcements.

Three of the Commanders broke off and targeted Dana, who was nearby, but behind the lines.

Then the others focused their attacks on the Spellblades and the soldiers from Newbon.

Thor put up a barrier around the Orb, protecting the children, while Tessa took her spot on his back.

The attackers could move through the air, but like Dana they had to run on air, and that meant it was more efficient for them to fight on the ground, surrounded by larger enemies where they couldn't be focused on with multiple attacks.

For the first few seconds, they appeared to be ignoring Karl. Then a Monarch Rank mage came through the portal just as Karl fired a [Disintegration] coated arrow through the opening.

The mystical bolt hit his shield and shattered it in a single strike, drawing his attention and blood from his cheek.

[Oh, he took that one personally. If he didn't want to be embarrassed, he should have put more effort into his defences.] Remi laughed.

"You damnable beast. I will put you in your place today." The mage shouted.

Karl took out the Haint Claw and let it form on his left hand, while he wielded the Sword of Champions in his right.

"In my place? Don't be ridiculous. Your mother's bedroom is nowhere near here. But you can still call me Daddy if you like." Karl's shouted reply made a good portion of the Golden Dragon Nation soldiers burst into laughter, while the Newbon soldiers began to make crude jokes about the inexhaustible stamina of a Rock Troll.

The mage dove at Karl, who sent a barrage of [Rend] attacks at him. Each was hardly Commander Rank, but Karl sent dozens of them, five at a time.

The Mage laughed as he decided that was all the ranged attack power that Karl had. Trolls, as he assumed Karl was, were close combatants. And the mage had no intentions of getting close enough to be hit with that sword. He only needed to be close enough that his attacks couldn't be parried.

The [Rampage] skill caused an increasing damage buff with every hit, but Karl kept reducing the power he was putting into his strikes, to keep the final effect the same and conserve energy.

He could feel the bonuses from [Pack Tactics] and [Bestial Champion] taking effect as his pack came under attack, and had to cut the damage back even more to lull the mage into complacency as he approached.

It had only been five seconds, but Karl had sent nearly a hundred [Rend] attacks at his barrier, all on the low side of Commander.

The Mage was beginning to sweat with exertion from maintaining the defence, and Karl could see that he was going to go for the kill as soon as he thought he was too close for Karl to avoid the attack.

Ten metres, that was the distance he chose.

Unfortunately for him, with Karl's increased speed and strength, that was melee range.

The Mythril blue blade of the Sword of Champions glinted in the light as Karl launched himself forward with a thrust, extending [Disintegration] in front of his blade like a spear.

The Mage spun as the skill shattered his barrier, and Karl flicked his wrist, turning the thrust into a slash as Disintegration missed its target.

One armoured arm fell to the ground as the mage howled in pain, then the air shattered as Karl's left fist came around, and the Haint Claw smashed into his opponent's face.

Like a puppet with its strings cut, the mage crumpled to the ground, leaking ghostly green energy into the Haint Claw.

A long bovine bellow echoed through the city, followed by the deep voice of a Commander Rank Minotaur.

{First blood goes to Champion Karl!}

The voice must have echoed through the other side of the portal, as the incoming mages all turned in Karl's direction. There was one Royal with ten Commanders, a standard deployment, but Karl had no idea what nation had sent them.

To Karl's left, he could see that Remi had transformed back into Spirit Snake form to protect Cara's neck, and catch a ride, while Rae was tearing her way through the incoming mages at a truly ridiculous rate.

The extra damage from the new class skills stacked with the damage increases she already had, and even the Royal Rank mages had a hard time taking more than one or two attacks.

However, it was Ophelia that was surprising everyone. She had learned some sort of ground slam ability that either increased gravity or negated flight magic, and when she used it, dozens of mages fell from the sky.

Once they were on the ground, or close to it, the seven-metre tall Dire Bear simply mauled them.

[Angry Bear is funny. Look how she chases after the terrified not Dana Mages.] Hawk laughed.

[Kind of busy right now. Make sure that nobody manages to hurt her.]

Chapter 575 Poke Them With A Stick

The mages weren't giving up as easily as Karl had expected. They had built a barrier around the portal that was withstanding the artillery barrage, and while Karl and Ophelia terrified them, the mages were not hesitating to engage with the monsters of the Newbon Army.

More of them were pouring through the portal by the second to establish the beach head outside the city.

[Thor, how are things going there? The faster the kids get finished, the faster they can be relocated to somewhere safe.] Karl asked.

[Most are inside right now. Tessa has the others calm, and they're waiting for the last few soldiers to come out.]

That was as good as they could hope for. As long as the defenders could keep the invading force away from the orb until the kids could finish and be extracted from the combat zone, it should all be fine.

They were mostly Awakened and Ascended Rank magical beasts or monsters. Most of them were only half grown, and they wouldn't have done more than the very basics of combat training so far.

Karl faced off with the mages who had come to challenge him and considered his options. Hellstorm wouldn't work, as he didn't have the control to keep the vortexes in midair.

Remi already had a [Thunderstorm] going, but the mages all had barriers, so it wasn't taking them out until they were already heavily injured. The question was what was the fastest way to achieve that.

Karl decided to start with the classic crowd control skill. [Chain Lightning]

The bolt came out ethereal blue from his left hand, and arced to ten more targets, shattering Commander Rank barriers and knocking mages out of the sky.

They didn't have a chance against the skill, and Karl simply continued to channel it, allowing the damage to stack and the lightning to function as a magical stun baton.

The leaders of the attack squad realized that within seconds and began erecting a barrier to block the lightning before it could hit and arc.

That let some of the mages get to their feet and make a shaky retreat back to the safety of the portal.

It wasn't like Karl had something in particular against these mages from one of the other human nations. But that didn't mean that he was going to give up an opportunity for his people without negotiation.

If they had sent someone powerful, the leaders would have sorted it out between them. The fact that they hadn't implied that they were either too weak of a faction for it, or they wanted it to be solved this way.

With their shield isolating them from Karl, the mages retreated. The same was happening on the other side of the battlefield, where they were facing Ophelia, and the battle was quickly turning into a rout.

Hawk and Dana were raining spells down on the barrier defending the portal, but it didn't appear to be faltering at all. There was most likely a powerhouse on the other side keeping it active, though it was only at the Royal Rank. If they couldn't exhaust the power behind that barrier, they would be unable to do any more than hold the battle to a stalemate.

[The kids are all done. Tessa is moving them to Rae's stone maze, and I will keep them all protected.]

[Excellent news. Thank you, Thor.]

While Thor prepared to protect the kids, Karl studied the barrier that was erected between them and the portal. He had enough power that he could shatter it with one strike of the maul, but it was definitely being fed power from the other side of the portal. If he broke it, he could get through, but it would be back up in under a second, and that would be troublesome for him. Trapped inside a barrier full of enemies, with a portal to their home base, was a terrible idea, even by his standard of bad ideas.

However, that didn't mean that he couldn't mess with them at least a little bit.

Karl put away his sword and took out the maul to stack [Disintegration] on it.

The first swing of the maul shattered a hole in the barrier, through which Karl hurled [Chain Lightning] into the startled mages. Off to his right, Cara was torturing the mages in a different way.

She had blocked a group of them from retreating, and she was just repeatedly casting [Nullify] every time they tried to cast a spell to get around her. On foot, they weren't fast enough to get around her, and she wouldn't let them use magic, but without using skills, they couldn't harm her either.

She was having a great time, and every mage that saw it was absolutely terrified, so it was a win on both fronts.

Cara knocked them all over once more, and then sent Karl a mental message.

[Tell them to stay put. They are my prisoners now.]

[What are you going to do with prisoners?] Karl asked.

[I dunno. Poke them with a stick maybe? They're funny when they're frustrated.]

Karl laughed and walked towards where she was pummelling a mage's face in the dirt before flying off to recapture another one who had made a run for the barrier.

"Gentlemen. I believe you have found yourselves prisoner of a Void Badger. If you will kindly stop resisting and trying to run away, she can stop beating you." He announced.

The closest mage cursed and tried to throw a skill at Karl, but at the end of his sword swinging gesture, nothing happened.

Cara had [Nullified] his skill.

"It seems that you are slow learners. You can either sit here and behave, or I can stun you into submission. Which would you prefer?"

The mages put away their blades and sat down on the grass, while their comrades only a dozen metres away watched with concern.

"Now, my lovely associate here just wants to poke you with a stick to see what noises you make, but I have a few questions. First, what nation are you from. Second, what will it take to make you go away? This matter has been settled between the Totems, it is not up for discussion or such impolite attempts at poaching." The Mages gritted their teeth, unwilling to provide him any information that he didn't already have.

[They're from Baria. The Dana Mage recognized a token on a body I collected.] Hawk informed him.

"Fine, I will start the question and answer period for you. You were sent here by Baria to try to gain the benefits of the Relic. That much is plainly obvious.

We can skip those basic details, and I don't care what faction, Clan or Spellblade Sect you were hired from. So, we can skip straight to the important part. What will it take to make you go away? Will your people leave voluntarily? Should I call for a couple of Overlords to come here and flex their might?

What's your directive on retreat?"

The mages that were caught outside didn't want to say anything at all, so Karl simply stepped over and smashed a hole in the barrier, through which he cast another Chain Lightning.

The retaliation was half-hearted, only a dozen Commander Rank fireballs that were crushed to nothingness by [Flaming Body].

"Is my inflection unclear? I am being nice for now. Don't make me send a fist of Monarch Rank mercenaries into your barrier with orders to kill anything that moves." Karl suggested.

"Fine, we can do this the hard way, then."

Chapter 576 Now They Listen

Once Karl made his threat, a new Spellblade came through the portal. He was Monarch Ranked, and wearing the same black robes and shining red armour as the others, but with a gold embroidered cloak hung over his shoulders and clasped with a gold chain studded with rubies.

"Who do you think that you are to threaten my people?" He demanded.

"Prince Karl of the Golden Dragon Nation. And from what I can tell, I personally command more Monarch Rank combat power than your Clan does, so I am asking you politely to take them and go home. If you want a piece of the action here after this pathetic attempt at poaching, you need to ask the Archbishop, or one of his people."

The mage paused, considering his response before this situation got even more out of hand. Spellblades trained to fight above their rank, and were considered an Elite force all over the continent. The Elites, on the other hand, were a new force without a lot of the respect that the Spellblades had earned over the centuries, but some of them had unique classes that were more than a match for anything else at their level. The Clan Leader knew the stories of some of the other Elites who had achieved things that were considered conventionally impossible.

But that didn't mean he would back down from a challenge, at least not just on the off chance that this particular one was capable of such remarkable feats.

"And if I say that my people aren't leaving?" The Spellblade replied.

Karl called the two Lamia Bodyguards, and the mage paled. Monarch Ranked intelligent summons were far more dangerous than a conventional Golem, and these ones had immediately created their own Monarch Ranked barriers.

Karl smiled. "As I said to your men, we can do this the hard way. I was only extending a measure of courtesy to you."

The pair faced off across the barrier around the attacking Clan, who were all looking haggard and exhausted from the effort of holding the barrier against the constant artillery barrage.

The artillery and Hawk, Karl mentally amended, as Hawk was taking full advantage of his evolution to Ghostfire Thunderbird to sit on top of the barrier and let his flames drain the defenders' energy without having to do anything himself.

It was a brilliant move, and as soon as the barrier cracked, Dana could cast her Golems inside. With the barrier up, you couldn't cast spells from the outside in. But every time Karl cracked the barrier with his maul, you could for the next second or so. At least spells that didn't try to move through the solid parts of the barrier.

Remi came over with her trio of bodyguards, reminding the mage that if they pushed, the defenders could get inside the barrier and wipe out the Spellblade Clan in a matter of minutes now that they were tired and low on mana.

"Release my people, and we will retreat for today." The Clan Leader relented.

"That should be fine. The energy of the Relic won't last much longer. Cara, if you would kindly send the Spellblades back to their bubble." Karl agreed.

Cara mentally cheered as Remi passed her a large stick out of her space, allowing the Void Badger to poke and herd the mages, who she was still preventing from using any spells.

There was no particular reason to make them walk the rest of the way to the barrier, but Cara wasn't willing to give up her game yet.

The Clan Leader turned and walked back through the portal to his home Sect, and the others quickly followed, leaving an empty barrier for half a second after the portal vanished.

Ophelia came over to where Karl was standing, and Hawk circled down to land nearby, now that his perch was gone.

"What did they say? Are they giving up?" Ophelia asked.

"For the day, anyhow. They might not be back, but someone else will, and likely with a larger force, now that they know that this one failed.

Well, there are more reinforcements coming now, so we will be able to relax a little and let the new arrivals take over for us." Karl replied with a sigh.

The others all laughed as Karl finished his speech. There was no way that the next group to come invading them not was going to expect an overpowered Royal Rank Elite and a seven-metre tall Dire Bear to be part of the force.

Ophelia took a small notebook out of her inventory, which looked ridiculous in her Werebear hands. "Alright, ladies and gentlemen. Get some rest. I am taking wagers on when the next group arrives. Closest to the time wins the pool."

She was about to continue when energy surged in the air, only a few metres from where she was standing. "Let me amend that. I will take wagers on the one after this because that was too fast to even get our bets in."

The soldiers from both nations began to laugh at the absurdity of it all. They were still recovering from the last battle, and there was another portal already opening in front of them.

The others retreated, leaving Karl at the front, with Cara standing on his left side like a guard badger.

She now nearly reached his hip, and was thicker in the body than any dog Karl had ever seen. She had to be close to seventy kilos of pure muscle, but when Karl extended his fingers and gave her back a rub, the skin still shook loosely, in the odd way that Void Badgers fur did. You could pick them up by the excess skin, and they wouldn't feel anything other than a gentle massage.

In fact, Cara had considered picking fights a few times just to get someone to properly massage her, but had given up the notion when she realized she could just ask Remi and Rae.

In front of them, a Royal Rank Mage in ornate armour stepped through the portal with a barrier around himself, then stopped and addressed the defenders proudly.

"The Staptonbia Tower would like to negotiate for access to this Relic." He declared.

Everyone turned to Karl, and he realized that his positioning had nominated him as the official spokesperson for the defenders.

The Newbon Army was happy to let him deal with the humans, who were notoriously rude to monsters, as most of the Newbon army still didn't believe that he was actually a human, despite his allegiance.

His own allies were happy to let him, simply because he was the strongest one here. It was either him or Corbin, and Corbin was more interested in looking after his Spellblades.

Karl nodded in response.

"Alright. I think we all know the routine. The Relic allows ten people to attempt to use it at once. There are no known Rank limits, but the benefits are greatest for those who have at least one specialty skill and time to grow." He agreed.

The mage nodded and held out a small metal box.

Karl flipped the lid open and saw a potion inside. He couldn't identify it at first, even with the system interface, but Remi did.

[It's not finished. They think it is, but they're just humans. If we add a powdered Earth Stone to that, it will be good stuff.]

Chapter 577 Tasty Snacks

Karl closed the lid and took the box. "Pick your ten. I will guarantee their safety while they are here."

The mage looked relieved that his offering had been enough. He didn't know quite what the Relic did yet, but it was an opportunity for ten people, so some would have demanded an exorbitant price for it. Most of the duels for access were a result of a price too high for the challenger to easily afford, though Karl didn't know that and thought it was just a matter of ego.

Karl gave the box to Remi, who began grinding a Monarch Rank Earth Stone that she had pilfered from the Cyclops invasion.

[This will be such a good thing. We can't feed it to Rae, though. She's already a bit too Earth Element. So, either we can feed it to Thor, or sell it and get something Holy for him.] She suggested as she worked.

[More Earth Shields? Rae already does Earth Shields.] Thor complained, feeling slighted with a duplicate ability.

[No, this is what my book calls an Exuberant Vitality Potion. Well, before I added the Earth Stone to it. Now it just says that it is good for you. It's more health and plant based, and less dirt.] Remi explained.

Thor thought about it for a second. [So, you're saying it might be better to feed it to the Lotus.]

Remi considered that. [She might explode if we give her any more energy. She's been playing with children for over an hour, and she's not tired yet.]

The Spellblade brought through ten teenage acolytes from his Clan, all at the Ascended to Commander Rank bottleneck. The System Interface said that they were all classically trained mages, so if they were compatible, they would be getting Classes today.

That might eliminate some of the bottlenecks for them and let them advance. Getting to Commander was difficult, but getting past it was considered nearly impossible. So, for a faction that sent a Royal as their Champion, it was better to get more Commanders than to take risks trying to get another Royal.

Ophelia stepped up beside Karl and motioned for the young ones to follow her. Protocol said that Karl would remain here with the other leader, and someone should bring them food while they waited.

Karl waved his hand, activating [Earth Shield] and created a crude set of stone chairs and a table.

"Why don't we sit and wait? There are some conditions to access, so it takes a few minutes for most." He offered.

The mage smiled and sat on the chair, subtly activating a barrier underneath himself in case Karl tried to use the skill to attack.

Rae transformed into a human again and stepped out of her space with a plate full of roasted pork and berries.

"Sorry for the lack of cookies, I hope this suits your taste." She greeted them.

The mage did a double take as he saw her and couldn't immediately identify her species, other than that she was a Royal Rank beast and had managed to sneak up on him.

"Thank you, Rae. I have some in my inventory."

Karl took a small package of travel biscuits that the Elves had provided for him and placed them on the tray.

He had close to fifty kilos of the biscuits, and they didn't often eat them, so this was a great chance to bring them out.

"Are those... Elven travel biscuits and Royal Rank Giant Boar meat? You have extravagant tastes, my friend." The mage stammered.

"Far from it. The Giant Boars appeared in an Anomaly spawn not long ago, so I have an abundance, and the Elven biscuits are something of a unique snack option that I reserve for special occasions." [Like finding someone who likes to eat bread.] Hawk noted.

[Rae, tell your Lotus to make more of those fried rice ball snacks with the red bean paste in the middle. I like those.] Remi added helpfully.

Rae agreed. She liked the rice balls, and wondered what this mouth made them taste like, so she [Shadow Stepped] to where Tessa was standing to inform her of their dinner order.

"By the gods, that is terrifying." The Mage muttered.

Karl laughed. "She has a knack for terrifying people, and she has mastered using her movement skills without a power surge, so she just kind of vanishes." "I take it that she's more friendly than she looks?" The Mage chuckled.

"Not really. But she doesn't like being in the sunshine, so she's unlikely to start murdering people in the middle of the afternoon."

All of the beasts laughed in Karl's mind as Rae nodded in agreement, both mentally, and in person, which confused Tessa, who had to try to decipher what body language was intended for her and what was for someone else.

Rae was not yet used to keeping her body language for the person in front of her, as for so long, she had only been able to speak to Karl and the other beasts, who could all hear her thoughts. "What did you say her name was?" The Mage asked.

"That is the Lady Rae. Princess of the Bloodbath Spiders."

The mage went even more pale than he had been when Rae vanished.

"I see. So, she's using a transformation spell, then?"

"She obtained one from Bethoke Fortress, and she's working on mastering the skill so she can transform on her own. It will be a great victory for her mobility if she can access human scaled corridors." Karl agreed.

Many human fortresses were designed with ceilings just over two metres high and narrow hallways for exactly that reason. So that monsters couldn't run wild inside the fortress, even if they managed to enter. A Royal Rank beast loose in the hallways was the last thing that they wanted, and the most powerful beasts were far larger than humans.

"Is it possible for a beast to learn a skill like that?" The mage asked.

"With the right motivation, it is. Lady Rae even learned how to summon Golems with a little assistance. She's become quite the versatile hunter."

[Karl is learning our ways. The mage is terrified.] Rae laughed.

[I knew he would catch on eventually. We should have brought Thor over so he could see how much a Lightning Cerro could advance. His mind would be blown.] Remi agreed as she finished her concoction.

[There we go. Now, we can either feed it to Thor and see what happens, or wait until we're bored and then feed it to Thor and see what happens.]

Thor chuckled. [Those are the same options. You're bored right now.]

Chapter 578 Duplicate Order

Within five minutes, all of the youngsters had managed to follow the instructions and enter the Relic's separate space. Now all that was left was the waiting.

Karl was just getting comfortable when another portal opened, and Rae used [Shadow Step] to go greet their visitors.

"Ah, monster!" The woman on the other side of the portal screamed.

No, Karl realized half a second later. That was a man with an exceptionally high-pitched screaming voice. Because the woman who stepped through looked disgusted with his cowardice.

"Princess. Are you the leader of this team? I have been sent by the Staptonbia Tower to negotiate access to the Relic." She announced.

Rae smiled at her, a gleaming crescent of serrated teeth.

"No, my Karl is the leader here. But I could have sworn that we already had your person here." Rae replied, confused by the way that the humans were using the same name twice.

The woman gave her a perplexed look, then turned to where Karl and the Royal Rank mage were sitting.

"What are you doing here, Joseph?" She demanded.

"The same thing that you are. I paid for my students to access the Relic." He replied with a smug smile.

The woman glared at him, then held out a box. "I suppose that he also paid with one of these?" She asked, showing Rae a potion identical to the first, except higher quality.

"This one is better than the first one. I can give you a chance to try the relic along with your ten tributes for that price." Rae offered.

The leader of the first group of mages, Joseph, turned to Karl.

"Can she do that? Normally, there are politics involved in which faction gets to make the decision." He whispered.

"It's fine. We're in agreement on the price." Karl replied, dismissing the mage's concerns.

The new mage woman turned over the box, which Rae tossed in her space for Remi to upgrade later. They had one ready to go, and now they could make another. That way, they could feed them to both Thor and Lotus to see what happened.

All she needed was to find another Monarch Rank Earth Stone. Or a nature stone. It should work with a nature stone too. Assuming that she could find one.

[I will check my swamp first. I might already have some.] Remi noted. Rae was busy playing hostess, so Remi would get started on the work.

[I have a Royal Rank Nature Stone. Is that good enough?] Remi asked after a few seconds.

[Probably. I recall Hawk saying that humans can't absorb resources well, so you can't give them really good things.]

A Monarch Rank potion would be two full ranks above Lotus, and that might be too much for her to handle. Normally humans used potions at their own level to advance, not ones that were already above their rank, simply out of access issues. Any resource that they could use was usually consumed by the finder, or traded for one that they could use. So, there were no over level resources available. The human nations simply weren't capable of keeping up with demand.

The [Identify] skill that Karl had gotten, and passively shared with the team, was practically a cheat code for Remi when she started to study potion making. She only had to see the combination that would be good for one of the team members, and then try to make something that wouldn't kill a human.

She had wanted to make a growth potion that would make Lotus taller, but one of the ingredients was her own venom. If it didn't work to make her taller, it would probably kill her.

"You're really fine with a Royal Rank mage using the Relic?" The woman asked.

"Of course. But only on the condition that you give our friend Librarian Gareth a full description of what happened inside. The Blue Dragons hate when they miss out on possibly useful information." Rae insisted.

[Plus, it will be funny to find out what insults the System came up when we send another old woman in.] She mentally added.

The woman led her group in just as the first ten came out, all within thirty seconds of each other.

Once they were at the Relic, and the Blue Dragon was debriefing the young mages coming out, Joseph finally gave in to temptation and asked Karl the question that was burning in his mind. "What are you expecting to happen that you are willing to risk a foreign Royal advancing with the aid of the Relic you're assigned to?"

Karl laughed. "That Relic won't immediately advance anyone. Your people will explain to you soon. But there is a sentience inside the Relic, and it loves to insult people. Rae let her enter just so that she would be forced to describe the experience to the Blue Dragon. They can read minds, and they will know if she's lying or trying to hide anything. Trust me, you don't want to leave before she gets out, especially if you're rivals in the same Sect."

Joseph blinked slowly, then looked at Rae, who was very proud of her idea.

"That's brilliant. Evil, but brilliant. Now, as I'm going to find out anyhow, what sort of Relic is it?" He asked.

"It gives the chance to awaken a System Class if you are compatible, or view a historical video if you're not. But you see, the System was typically awakened during puberty.

Your counterpart is significantly older than that, as is Colonel Lu, the Royal Rank Minotaur over there. It berated him the entire time that he was there, even though it gave him the reward.

So, even if she is successful, we are expecting entertainment."

Joseph chuckled as he waited for his acolytes to be returned to him after interrogation by the Blue Dragon. His nation also followed the Dragon Gods, though they didn't follow the Golden Dragon Church.

But the actual religious faction didn't matter much when it came to showing respect for the dragons. Even the Beast God followers were kind to the chromatic dragons, and most of the others on the continent followed suit out of common sense. After all, you never wanted to upset someone who might eat you.

Chapter 579 Judgmental Trial

Once the first group of Acolytes were finished with Librarian Gareth, they returned to Joseph and explained the situation to him in detail. All of them had managed to awaken the mage class, and while some had considered other options from the base classes, they had ultimately all chosen to go with the one they knew.

As with the Spellblades under Prince Corbin, they had to worry about messing up their future by picking a class that was incompatible with the Sect teachings.

Unlike the Golden Dragon Nation, there was really only one path for most of the other nations, and that was the path of the combat or research mages.

That was the only way that the humans could compete with the other species without technology, and the Golden Dragon Nation was the only one that had focused on technological development, thanks to their previous lack of mages.

It was the largest human nation on the continent, but before the Elite program began, it had only three Spellblade Clans in the entire territory, when most capital cities in other human nations had at least two, plus all the ones that were scattered through the countryside.

"Oh, Janice is out already, and she doesn't look happy." Joseph chuckled.

She began stomping toward the portal with a glare on her face, but she was intercepted just outside the ruins by the massive body of Librarian Gareth, who hadn't gotten his part of the bargain yet.

"We had a deal. No leaving without telling me everything that happened inside."

Janice sighed and gathered her thoughts, while the Blue Dragon smirked at her and read her mind.

"When I first entered, I was in a space with a clone image of myself, where I was allowed to choose a Class from the System. But it only gave me one option, Spellblade." She began.

"Did the system say anything? Give you an idea why you only got one option? Many of the young ones got a half dozen choices, but only one of them could choose Spellblade." The Dragon asked.

The mage gave him an annoyed look, then sighed and mumbled something too low to be heard.

"Sorry, I didn't catch that." Gareth informed her.

"I said, it called me fat and lazy, then berated me for not awakening the system interface before now. I'm a researcher, for World Dragon's sake, when would have I awakened the System? Yet, it yelled at me for five straight minutes before it let me choose and leave."

"So, you selected the only option and left as soon as it let you?" The dragon asked.

"That is correct."

"Alright, that's all I needed to know. You can wait at the table if you like. There are refreshments."

Karl created another chair so she could sit with them, and Janice eyed the tray of snacks with curiosity.

"Who provided these? What an odd grouping." She commented.

"That would be me. It was what I had available, but they go well together. There is tea as well. It's pretty good, a little minty." Karl informed her with a smile.

The tea was a Remi creation, and it was technically boiled leaves, even if most of them came from medicinal herbs growing in her swamp.

Janice sipped the tea, then did a double take. "What did you put in this? Is this some sort of regional delicacy?"

Joseph laughed. "It's an acquired taste. I like the devil mint and spirit leaf grass combination, though. It goes well with the divine chamomile. Calming and refreshing at the same time."

The female mage shook her head. "What a waste using them for making tea. Such precious resources should be appreciated, not treated as a snack."

Her counterpart chuckled and slid a bit of roast pork belly on an Elven travel biscuit to make a sandwich.

"You need to get out of the library now and then. Have a sandwich and some berries. It will help your mood."

Joseph popped a berry into Janice's mouth, and her eyes went wide in shock as she realized what he was feeding her.

"You bastard, I could have sold that." She gasped.

Joseph put on an innocent expression while Karl laughed. There were literally thousands of those berries ripe in Remi's space right now, grown as a peace offering for Hawk when she irritated him with her inconsiderate use of water magic.

Karl took out another handful and put them in her palms. "There you go, plenty for later. They're good in cakes and muffins as well. I grow these at home, no need to be shy."

Janice held the berries in her cupped hands and gave Karl the most confused look that the beasts had seen so far. It was like he had told her that he was actually a tricolour hydra who lived on the moon. She simply couldn't compute his words.

But the berries were the same ones that came from Karl's balcony at the Academy. Only these ones were Commander Rank resources, enhanced by the space they were grown in, and not just a bit of tasty junk food.

In fact, the roast meat that they were enjoying had been seasoned with them and a few other plants from the beasts' spaces.

Janice managed to get the berries into a pouch without spilling any, and finally managed to ask the important questions. "Do you perhaps live in one of the protected Sects of the Divine Beast Nation?" Karl shook his head. "I have a dorm at the Golden Divine Academy. Or at least I assume I still do, I haven't been there in a while."

"And you can grow resources like this there? That sounds, frankly, unbelievable."

Karl winked at her. "Trade secret. I can't go giving away all my horticultural knowledge."

[You don't know anything about hortis or their culture, though.] Rae reminded him.

[Horticulture is the knowledge of growing plants.] Remi clarified for her older sister.

[Silly name for it.]

Karl tried his best to ignore them bickering and joking as the second batch of mages came out to meet with the dragon.

This group had a special class with them, a Magical Knight. That should still be compatible with the rest of the Spellblades, and it was an advanced class, so it had powers in the skill tree that should be superior to many of the basic ones that the regular Mage class got.

"Well, it looks like you got your money's worth. I do hope that you enjoy your evening." Karl informed the two group leaders, then stood to shake their hands and send them on their way.

"We certainly did. Our money's worth and more. It was a pleasure doing business with you, Prince Karl, and Lady Rae."

Rae bowed politely, delighted that they had thanked her directly, and not through Karl.

She could get used to this form if people were going to be so nice.

[Then POOF, giant spider.] Cara laughed.

[Precisely. They'll never see it coming.] That was just diabolical. Rae's humanoid form already terrified people, and made it far too easy for her to sneak up on them. If she started just changing back into a spider right behind people, she was going to give someone a heart attack.

[Or make them soil themselves. Pick your targets wisely, sister. We all have sensitive noses.] Thor added.

Chapter 580 Lotus Root Juice

For a few minutes, the ruins were quiet as the last of the trial takers left. Then a portal opened back to Bruse Temple, and one of the clerics came through to take the children of the Divine Beast Nation home.

She waved at Remi from across the ruins, then began the task of making sure nobody forgot anything, so they could be returned home in one trip.

Then a portal opened and Council Head Arnold, the Troll that led the Newbon Council, came through.

"Merchant Karl, I have come to collect the kids. Thank you for your efforts so far." He greeted them.

"Not a problem at all. I was asked to remain here for the time being, and I couldn't really refuse." "Is there anything entertaining coming up in the next few minutes? I could put off my return." Arnold suggested.

"It's hard to tell, really. We're mostly waiting on the next group to come challenge for the Relic, or more reinforcements to be sent to take over from us and have their turn. It doesn't show any signs of instability yet." Karl replied.

The Troll nodded. "You've likely got a full twenty-four hours worth of access. As powerful as that one is, I can't see it lasting longer than that. But until then, you're going to have an interesting day.

But before I go, tell me something. Did you get a new benefit from the Relic?"

Karl nodded. "I got a most curious new class. It only has three skills available right now, and they're all insanely expensive. I will have to work hard to see the true benefits."

The blue dragon turned to the Troll. "Do you know the Beast Master? How was his strength before? I don't have a frame of reference for what he was at before and after encountering the Relic."

Arnold just shrugged. "You would have to ask Overlord Leafa, but she's confined to the Fort on security detail for the time being. She was the one who saw him in combat. If you wish to visit, just send a message and we will welcome you."

Librarian Gareth nodded his massive head. "I believe that I will. This Relic is absolutely fascinating, and the potential growth of the ones who have benefitted from it is astounding.

I suspect that many of them are hiding the extent of the skills that they could use so that they can advance in private, but that is normal. Even the mighty predators return to their den when they want to advance."

Ophelia poked Karl in the back, and he made a face at her. "Come on, we know you're holding out. Just give the potion to Lotus if you don't want to give away Thor's advancement." She whispered.

"Alright, I know exactly how to do this." Karl whispered back.

"Hey Lotus! Sister Remi made you a new type of juice!" Karl shouted over to where the clerics were gathered.

That brought the Nature Cleric running, and Karl took the potion out of Remi's space.

"She says you're supposed to drink it in one shot." Karl explained.

"Thank you so much, Remi! I wonder what it tastes like? What kinds of juice do Naga even like?" Lotus wondered, while everyone else stared at the glowing neon green potion in her hand. Lotus sniffed it once, then tipped it to her lips and sipped a little. Her eyes widened in excitement, and she began to gulp down the potion like it actually was a glass of juice.

Then the Cleric began to glow the same green as the potion, then rise into the air, suspended by a pair of vines under her feet.

The vines wrapped around her, until Lotus was nearly engulfed in them.

She looked a bit like a tree stump with a head on top, but she was radiating healing magic. Then, branches and leaves began to grow from the vines, and she really looked like a tree that was slowly moving around the open area around the ruins.

The tree was giving off an area healing aura that was far stronger than any that Lotus had used in the past, and it was hard to tell if she had advanced, or if the potion had brought her right to the bottleneck of Royal Rank.

"I love this new skill. There are birds in my branches." Lotus giggled. The birds were part of the skill, and could be dispatched to heal people by flying into them and turning into healing energy. But the visual effect was perfect for a Nature Cleric.

"[Tree of Life] is the name of the skill that the potion gave me. To think that the Spellblades gave us such a good thing to access the Relic." She gave a twirl in tree form, shaking her branches and sending gold dust scattering to the ground, where it healed any lingering wounds on those nearby.

Librarian Gareth chuckled. "Little Cleric, they didn't give you something that good. They gave you a decent enhancement potion, but not one that would grant an Epic Grade healing transformation spell. That must be the result of whatever your friend Karl, or did you say that it was Remi, did to it afterwards.

Now I wish that I had analyzed it before you drank it. Who knows what sort of thing I might have learned from the concoction."

Karl sensed that he was going to have to give a step by step description to the Dragon, but he had already been expecting that when he agreed to Ophelia's suggestion that they test the first potion on Lotus.

"Does it take a lot of effort to maintain the tree?" Gareth asked.

Lotus shook her head, which made the upper branches of the tree shake. "Nope, it's just here. It's kind of slow and heavy, though. I can't move very fast."

"So, limited mobility, but greatly enhanced healing effects. Is there anyone here with a lingering ailment? A limb that has recently undergone regrowth, or other injuries that were still healing?" The dragon asked.

All the defenders looked around, then shook their heads. They had been picked because they were in good health.

"I was recently healed in my arm, and by High Priestess Lotus herself. I don't know that there is any more lingering injury to repair, though." Colonel Lu explained.

"That's alright, please go stand in the shade under her branches."

The Minotaur complied without question, and the dragon cast a series of spells on him for observation as he stood in the healing aura, being regularly sprinkled with golden dust falling from the leaves as Lotus danced around in tree form.

"Fascinating. It is healing the lingering nerve and tissue damage that regular healing won't touch. The traumatic damage that leaves so many crippled from repeated magical healing spells." Gareth explained.

Colonel Lu flexed his arm and shrugged. "I will take your word for that, but I feel like a young Minotaur again. All refreshed and full of energy."

"A skill well worth its reputation as one of the grand healing magics."

Then he turned to Lotus. "The Cathedral will be glad to see you returned. I assume that you are going back there after this engagement?" Lotus giggled. "Nope! We're going to the headwaters of the Seabingin River to find a temple for research, and then to the Whiton Temple to hug beastkin, and then we will take the long way back home. Maybe we can go back to the Beast God Temple first."

The dragon turned a questioning gaze on Karl. "This sounds like a Nature Cleric set the route. Why are you headed to the middle of the jungle?"

Lotus stuck out her tongue at the dragon, while Karl laughed. "The jungle itself isn't the target. We're going to study ancient architecture. There are more examples of it popping up in the ruins and anomalies, so we want to study a temple that has survived the years to see what sort of differences there might be, and if there is some clue that might have been missed in the past, because of a lack of knowledge."

The dragon was suspicious, but he likely got most of the real reason from Karl's mind. The Blue Dragons were sneaky like that.

"That is understandable. I would ask that you bring an escort with you, as I have many questions for you once you reach Whiton Temple. However, all of that is for later. Today, we get to babysit a newly appeared Relic, and test all of the newly awakened Elites on the skills that they have mastered. Surely one or two of them had a skill point available to upgrade a spell or attack skill."