

Beast Master 581

Chapter 581 Relieved

It didn't take long before another group of reinforcements arrived, a team of Monarch Rank Elites led by a Warrior Class Overlord in a black latex bodysuit that looked more at home in an idol video than on the battlefield.

"Who is in charge here?" She demanded.

Karl rose from his seat to face her.

"I am responsible for this location at the moment. You can call me Karl."

The Overlord nodded. "I am Tabitha, and this is my team. We will be taking over control of this Relic. Thank you for your dedication, you may continue about your assigned duties, if you were not assigned to remain here."

It was a dispassionate response, not like she wanted him gone, but more like she didn't care where he was, as she was only here to do a job.

"Understood, Overlord. We were headed east, so once I introduce your team to the other leaders here, I will take my group and be on my way again.

First, we have Librarian Gareth, from the Whiton Temple, he has come to study the effect of the Relic on the various candidates.

Then we have Colonel Lu, who is temporarily in charge of the Newbon Empire forces. He's an excellent warrior, and easy to get along with. Especially if you have some knowledge of farming. In charge of the artillery regiment is Commander Jamison, and beside him is High Priest Dolores, who oversees the infantry."

The red robed war priestess nodded a simple greeting to the Overlord, only sparing her a few seconds before she returned to rearranging her troops.

"There is no leader from the Divine Beast Nation here?" Overlord Tabitha asked.

Gareth chuckled, then gestured between himself and Karl. "We are serving as the representatives of the Divine Beast Nation today. They didn't see fit to leave a military force here while they had no trainees present."

"How could an Elite serve as leader for the Divine Beast Nation?" She asked, confused.

"He is a Beast Master. There are four Royal Rank Divine Beasts with him, and they represent the only divine beasts present. So, Prince Karl leads their force, while I am the impartial researcher."

The Overlord shrugged, and Karl noticed how Dana blushed and Tessa looked a bit disgusted by the way that her tight-fitting latex suit shifted and pulled with the motion.

But he also noticed that it was an Overlord Rank defensive skill. Why it looked like that was a mystery, but why she didn't wear anything over it was even more of a mystery, unless her skills gave her extreme agility, and she needed the flexible material with no impediment to her movement.

"In that case, you are dismissed, Prince Karl. The honourable Librarian can take over the duty of leadership until such time as the Divine Beasts see fit to send a replacement."

Karl bowed to the Overlord and motioned for his team to join him. Five people would be too much to be comfortable on Hawk's back, so Karl let Dana mount up while the clerics hopped on Thor's back and Rae prepared her Golems for riders.

The other Elites looked intrigued by the process, and even more when Thor began to jog away with his passengers, while Hawk rocketed into the sky.

This time, he used his barrier to hold Dana in place, cradling her like an ergonomic chair with head support. That made riding much easier when he wanted to make extreme changes in direction.

Gareth sighed as he saw them running away. They weren't actually afraid of the Overlord's temper, they just wanted to go do fun things and not sit here being attacked while they sat at a huge glowing target.

He couldn't blame them. Their plan to go explore an ancient temple sounded like way more fun than getting information about the same three basic class options over and over.

Very few of the volunteers got an advanced option, and Gareth had already realized that the advanced options were related to the skills that the applicant had. In fact, he even had a pretty reliable chart to tell whether a mage would get the Spellblade option or not.

The young ones got to choose classes, but the nations kept sending ones that were already undergoing training for a specialty, so they weren't picking any of the fun options that they had described.

That had to change.

Gareth sent a message to the Bruse temple in the Divine Beast Nation. He needed fifty young beasts or beastkin who hadn't started training yet so that he could encourage them to try the other classes and see what they all did.

They had a full listing of all of the promising children of the nation that had been brought to one of the temples for the traditional blessing of the newborns, and they had all of the school enrolment information for those who were in the right age group to be gaining system skills.

There had to be some good ones in there, and if he didn't get to see them, it was a huge waste of the opportunity.

It only took a moment for Gareth to craft a message, and even less time for a positive response to the idea to be sent back.

Orthos took one look at the incoming message, then decided that he had the perfect group.

There was a misfit class at the school in Holney, specifically for beasts and beastkin who wanted to pursue paths that were not well suited to their species. If they could get an actual class for their ambitions, they would have an excellent chance to grow up as something more than wastrels.

Karl was almost to the horizon when the portal opened, and Hawk began to laugh.

A hundred juvenile beasts and beastkin had just arrived to use the Relic, which was fair by the rules of usage splitting. But the students that the newly arrived Elites were seeing were not what anyone expected.

There was a Forest Weasel dressed as a blacksmith, despite only weighing two kilos, a Dire Bear with shamanistic bead necklaces, a fox kin wearing leather pants and carrying twin battleaxes, and it only got more insane from there.

That idea spurred Colonel Lu to do the same thing. What if the key wasn't to find the most qualified, but to find the oddballs and make them qualified?

So he called for another twenty from his nation, and they arrived within the next ten minutes, as the first group was getting organized at the Orb. They had sent all sorts of wild options from Newbon. There was an Orcish War Chief that wanted to be a mage, but could currently only cast fist. A succubus that had sworn vows of celibacy and only fed secondhand, and a Minotaur boy who desperately wanted to be a chef. That one the Colonel recognized as one of his neighbours. They must have taken him to the Fortress after the Colonel and the other Royal Rank defenders were called to duty.

"What is with all the misfits?" Overlord Tabitha demanded as she saw the new arrivals lining up and realized there was a pattern.

"It's an idea that the Librarian had. What if the orb is best used by those who don't want a conventional path? The ones who want to defy fate and become something more than what they were born for?"

Humans can be anything, really. Because they're not born with any real worth or skills. They're not even strong enough for farming or mining until they train. But our people have innate paths that are easy for them. But this orb, it could be the key to unlocking more futures for our children. We will see when the first ones come out if they manage to accomplish that." Colonel Lu explained.

"And you are expecting this to succeed?" Tabitha asked.

The Minotaur nodded. "Just wait. I am sure that at least some of the beasts will succeed, while the others will at least have a path they picked for themselves."

The first one out was the Fox kin boy, who was now glowing with red energy and wearing black metal armour.

"I have found my new calling in life. I will be a Blood Knight." He declared. Librarian Gareth smiled. "That is wonderful news, and not a rogue type at all. Just as you wished. Now, come tell me all about it, and you can go practice your new skills in the open area."

Chapter 582 Too Slow To Escape

Karl and his group had made so much progress by the time that the sun went down that they had no idea how much chaos Karl had caused by simply ordering everyone to get started using the orb.

Everyone else had assumed that was an order from the Archbishop, so they just went with it.

However, when the Totems returned after dinner, they were thoroughly baffled to see hundreds of newly awakened adolescent System users. They had just come to an agreement on the schedule to use the orb, but everyone who had been called was just lined up double file, allowing the nations, including the Beastkin Nation, who hadn't even been part of the negotiation, to use the orb equally.

"What is this?" Lord Nacht, the black dragon, demanded.

"We are following the instructions passed to us by the group we relieved. Double file, equal access for both groups. The Divine Beasts were said to be part of the Newbon delegation, and the representatives from the Beastkin Nation paid for their access as part of the Golden Dragon Nation's quota." Overlord Tabitha explained, not understanding why the dragon was upset.

"And who did you relieve that set this policy?" The dragon asked. "That would be Prince Karl, the Beast Master."

The black dragon began to laugh, while the Archbishop gave a rueful smile.

"I don't suppose that he said where he was going, did he?" The Archbishop asked.

"To a temple in the beastkin nation, near the headwaters of some river." Tabitha replied with a shrug.

"The Seabingin River." Librarian Gareth clarified.

"Alright, I know where that is. It appears that all our negotiations were unnecessary if everyone can share so well. Now, we are going to have a long discussion with a certain young Elite about what the words Executive Decision mean."

Tabitha began to laugh as she realized what had happened. Someone had decided to just act while the Totems were negotiating, and hadn't expected them to come back in time for anyone to catch him.

The young Prince was a brave one, she would give him that much. Perhaps not too bright, but he had initiative.

"On a positive note, even among the ones who were found to be incompatible, there have been no injuries and no fatalities." Librarian Gareth informed the two Totem Rank leaders.

That made this a superior resource to the 'divine injection', and the trial here had a success rate that was over fifty percent overall, and increased with youth. Among those who were under their fifteenth birthday or equivalent for their species, it was nearly three in every four that obtained a class.

"Wonderful news. We will ensure that there is a steady supply of candidates for as long as the trial remains open. Do we know the exact time it opened?" The Archbishop asked. "I don't, but as I understand it, the portal opened early this morning." The Archbishop nodded. "Then we have plenty of time left."

As if the world wanted to spite him, it was at that moment that the light of the orb began to flicker. The energy from it appeared to be as strong as ever, but something was changing.

Then, it stabilized, appearing just as it had before.

"No more red flags." The black dragon insisted.

"Seconded. Let's see who comes out next. Perhaps an interesting choice was made. Who is in there right now?" Lord Nacht asked, turning to his fellow Dragon.

Librarian Gareth shrugged. "A bunch of misfit kids from the Newbon Capital and a couple of acolytes from the Divine Beasts. Almost everyone has entered already, the rest are just practising their new skills over there." The Blue Dragon explained.

The two Totems looked around at the situation and nodded in satisfaction. "Alright, we will leave this to you who are here now. Send a message when you are finished or run out of volunteers, and we will come back." Lord Nacht insisted.

"Yes, brother." Gareth replied.

The Archbishop closed his eyes to focus and then frowned. "How can he be five kilometres apart from himself? I think that his beasts are messing with my targeting."

The Black Dragon chuckled and ducked down so that the Archbishop could climb on his back.

"Open the portal in the air, and we will find them."

Karl pulled his Golem mount to an abrupt stop as a massive dragon head appeared through a portal twenty metres in front of him.

"Lord Nacht, good afternoon. How was your dinner?" Karl greeted the Dragon, then realized the Archbishop was on his back.

"Archbishop, may the blessing of the World Dragon be upon you." The Archbishop floated down from the Dragon's back, and Nacht transformed back into his humanoid form.

"We have been informed that you waited less than five minutes after we left to discuss the rotation of use before you decided to just send everyone present into the trial and start calling for more people." The Archbishop began.

"Your Eminence, I would like to clarify that I was not the one who called for more people to come for the trial. I simply set out usage guidelines that everyone could work with until your final decision was made." "That's a beautiful way of saying that you didn't pay any attention at all and just did what you wanted." Nacht agreed.

"Thank you."

The Archbishop hid his amusement at the way that the Beast Master didn't back down, even in front of a Totem Rank black dragon.

It might be confidence, or he might just be oblivious to the danger, but he could sense that Karl's attitude was partially from his bonded beasts, and with three apex predators linked to him, it was no wonder that he was self-assured to the level of arrogant.

[Are you thinking what I'm thinking?] Cara asked.

[If he takes two more steps forward, I will consider it.] Karl agreed.

Nacht tilted his head curiously and cast a spell, then another spell.

"You're trying to determine what my beasts are saying to me, aren't you? Orthos told me the easiest way is to listen to my thoughts because I will think the words as I hear them." Karl suggested.

The black dragon nodded. "That's not my specialty. I am looking at your intent, and it keeps fluctuating, like a rainbow of different intents all mixed together. I am wondering which one is which. I would assume the one that is focused on mischief is the Naga Queen."

Karl shook his head. "No, that's the winged Void Badger. She has a thing with dragons."

The Archbishop looked concerned that Karl might do something stupid, but Nacht was just amused. "The Dark Goddess is fond of small and fearless creatures. They often get away with things that no larger creature could. I heard what she did to Orthos."

[I think that's a warning.] Cara noted.

[He's definitely on to your shenanigans.] Remi agreed.

[I will have to find new ones.]

The Archbishop cleared his throat. "We will escort you all to the temple, on the off chance that there really is something there. Unfortunately, the Spellblade Clan won't be able to join us, but Prince Corbin will get credit for his reports if there is something found."

Corbin really had gotten cheated on this deal. He was the one who wanted to go there in the first place. Karl just hoped there was good stuff there for Thor.

"That sounds wonderful. Thank you for your assistance."

Chapter 583 Lost Temple

The black dragon or the Archbishop must have known exactly where they were going because the portal opened right beside a temple that looked exactly like the step temple in the very first trial instance that Karl had entered.

"There is an opening at the top. Would you like me to fly you up there to begin the investigation?" Nacht asked.

Karl shook his head. "No, I think it is important that you walk up the steps. This is identical to a World Dragon Temple in a trial I was in. The goal was to get as far up as you could. Now, this one might be broken, but if there is even a little lingering magic, it will be important that we have walked all the way up under our own power." Karl explained.

All of the beasts came out to examine the temple, and Hawk was filled with a sense of nostalgia. It would be much easier to walk up the steps now. He was huge, and he might even be able to do three at a time.

Karl led the way, then paused and went around to the left side of the Temple.

"If I'm right, this one used to be the strength test side." He explained.

Karl stepped onto the temple and began his ascent. There was no magical resistance, no sign of response from the temple, but he continued up the thousand steps to the top anyhow. If nothing else, it was a good workout.

The others followed behind, curious to see if Karl would be able to provoke a response from the temple by mimicking the way that it used to function as a trial. They were about to give up on the whole notion when Karl reached the top and nothing happened. But when he took one more step forward, the temple began to slowly pulse with energy, a faint signature, but growing.

"Well, I'll be. It really did respond to your technique. What do you think you should do next?" Nacht asked.

The Archbishop was making notes as he walked up, ensuring that no detail was missed. The old cleric surely had ideas, as he was the greatest expert in the world on the topic, but Karl went with the simplest idea first.

"There is what looks like an offering box on the altar. I will start with that."

The altar was made of the same ancient grey stone as the rest of the temple, but the box was heavily weathered brass, and most likely bolted down if it was still there.

Karl reached into his inventory and took out a piece of gear that he knew was system compatible from the last resurgence, and placed the magical dagger in the offering chest.

The dagger vanished as soon as he placed it in the box, and Karl waited to see if anything happened, or if everyone had to make an offering.

The power in the temple was growing, but not everyone was at the top yet, as the clerics and Dana lacked the superhuman stamina of Karl, Ophelia or the dragon.

Eventually, they did all make it to the top of the temple, and the power level began to grow proportionally to the number of people gathered around the altar.

"Are we going to do something?" Ophelia asked.

"First, we wait a few more minutes. Then we will offer it a few more system enhanced treasures in the offering box. It accepted the dagger I offered, so I know it works, at least a little." Karl explained.

After a few minutes, the power growth seemed to slow to a crawl, but the Archbishop had an idea.

"I think it just lacks the mana to continue. You clearly triggered it well enough, it just can't complete its desired task. Between myself and Nacht, we should be able to fix it." He explained in a tired voice.

For the first time, Karl noticed that the Archbishop was not a young man, or what could be called middle-aged, or even aging. Behind his beard and his clear eyes, he was very obviously elderly, and might not have more than a handful more years left.

But once he recovered from the long walk up the stairs, the strong aura was back, and the two Totems began to focus their energy on whatever was happening in the pyramid. That was bringing it to life, and Karl smiled as he realized that Corbin was right. There was something immensely powerful here. It was faint, but the energy coming off it was like nothing that Karl had ever felt before.

It almost felt holy, but not in a way that Karl could put his finger on. Perhaps they really had found the tomb of a Demigod? If that was the case, Corbin was going to be devastated, even if he was given the credit for the initial find.

The Black Dragon smiled. "I can feel it. There is something remarkable here. Prepare yourselves, I think that it is going to activate."

The air seemed to twist, as if an anomaly was opening, and then Karl was floating in the void. There was nothing around him, only absolute darkness.

For the first half of a second.

Then he felt wind rushing past his face, and altered [Flaming Body] so that it gave off a large amount of light.

On his right, Lord Nacht was spreading his wings to begin a gentle glide around the area. So, Karl called Hawk out, only to find that the beast hadn't been returned to his space, and he wasn't here wherever they were.

Karl shifted to flatten himself against the wind, slowing his fall, and waited for the ground to come into sight.

Nacht was already far above him, as the dragon had simply opened his wings. He hadn't realized right away that Karl was beside him and couldn't fly, so his first instinct was to explore the area.

Then Karl realized that he didn't have to actually fly. He could change his armour and hope it adapted.

[Bestial Raiment] was removed and reactivated, giving him a new pattern of armour with a layer of cloth connecting his limbs that allowed him to soar through the air, greatly reducing his fall speed.

[Good call Boss.] Remi congratulated him.

[You're with me? I thought we were all separated.]

Remi gave a mental shrug. [When things started getting weird, I just went home.]

That was a very Remi thing to do. She wasn't fond of trouble, and liked to watch new things from the safety of her swamp. Only once she knew what was going on, would she come out.

Karl realized that the others were likely in the same situation he was in right now, and frowned.

[I hope they're all alright. Hawk can fly, so can Cara. Dana can walk on air, but the two clerics, Thor and Rae could be in trouble.]

He had other things to worry about, though. He could see the ground now, or at least a mountain range in the distance, and Nacht had come to soar beside him.

{What a curious thing this trial is. If there was anyone else in this instance, I would have expected it to be the old man, not you.} He offered, keeping pace beside Karl.

"It is a shock to me too. I wonder how it sorted us, or what sort of trial this is. It clearly didn't sort us by power level, and it doesn't make sense to sort us by size." Karl agreed.

"Land there, on that ledge halfway up the mountain. Then, if we need to fly again, you can get on my back."

Chapter 584 Temple Trial

Karl steered himself awkwardly toward the ledge, slowly getting the hang of manoeuvring in free-fall with his adapted armour.

He could likely achieve the same effect with a cloak or cape if he tied it to his ankles, so he wanted to remember this skill for later.

As they approached the cliff, Karl could see that there was a cave at the back, but he could also see that there was something alive in there.

"There's something in there. I can see the aura of its soul." Karl informed Nacht as he steadied himself on his feet and refreshed his armour so it would spawn a more practical design.

Then he dimmed the light of [Flaming Body] so that it didn't draw the attention of whatever he had seen.

"You have the Soul Sight as well? How did you manage that?" Nacht asked.

"It's a benefit of being bonded with Hawk, who has evolved into a Ghostfire Thunderbird. I gain the sensory specialties of my beasts, but most of them are duplicated, or inferior to a version I already have.

But I have thermal vision, echolocation and soul sight to work with, which ironically makes it even more disorienting to be high in the air in the dark."

Nacht nodded towards the entrance to the cave. "Shall we? If we're in a trial, standing around out here isn't going to do us any good. But we might have an advantage on some of the others, as we found something living the moment that we landed."

He had a point. He had forgotten that he should be seeing anything living, if there was something alive in the trial, but Karl hadn't seen anything else living beneath them, only the ground and the mountains.

Nacht moved toward the cavern entrance, shifting into human form so he would fit within the confined space. The ceiling was over five metres tall, but in his adult dragon form, he was still far too large to fit within the available space.

Karl also ended the [Brutality] skill and let himself shrink back to his normal size, which suddenly felt very short compared to the height that he had gotten used to on his travels through the Newbon Empire.

"So you're not an exceptionally tall human. You just keep a skill active all the time to be taller. That's an odd choice." Nacht noted.

"It also increases my strength by fifty percent. When there is heavy lifting or fighting to be done, it is much better to have it in effect, but if we're headed down into the tunnels, it pays to be a bit shorter than average."

Nacht laughed. His own human form was quite large, but Karl's was roughly one hundred eighty centimetres tall. Taller than most women, but not particularly tall for a man. However, he was broad and muscular.

The tunnel was gently sloping and carefully carved, not a natural formation in the stone. Karl used [Silent Movement] to reduce noise to the point that echolocation was only a faint image, and he was relying almost exclusively on thermal imaging to navigate the darkness. Nacht didn't appear to be suffering from the low lighting situation at all, so Karl took the lead and followed the winding passage down into the mountain.

As they descended, Karl picked out patterns on the walls, and motioned for Nacht to stop.

A tap of his knuckles on the stone to give him an echo image of the hallway clarified the situation for Karl. There were Dwarven runes carved all over the walls around them in two lines. One at just over waist height, and one near the ceiling.

"Can you read those?" He asked Nacht, once he realized the extent of the carvings.

The dragon created a small light, and began to mumble to himself. The system was translating, but it was just random words. Stone, forge, Ale, Deep, Hammer.

Then Karl realized what they were reading. It was a recounting of the names of the rulers of this place. "We are in the Legendary City of Graska. Or more correctly, a replica of it. This place was home to a population of Dark Iron Dwarves, and perhaps in a trial it still is." Nacht explained.

"It isn't populated anymore in reality?" Karl asked.

The dragon smiled at him. "Most likely not, but it was never a real place in our world in the first place.

If we go by when the legends were first recorded, the actual city's mines would be hundreds of thousands of years old by now, and surely played out.

The dwarves wouldn't remain forever if there was nothing but stone, they would have rebuilt the city on another nearby mountain. But when Dwarves move a city, they give it a new name, and the upper line of runes clearly says that this is Graska, and that we are coming in from the Southern entrance.

What I'm more interested in is what is causing that soul glow. Something is alive down there, and powerful enough that we could both see its aura from the entrance."

Karl shrugged and used [Flaming Body] to bring back the light.

"We might as well walk proudly into the city. Perhaps it's an ancient guardian left behind. This is a trial, and there is no reason to think that they are trying to play mind games with us." He explained.

The black dragon chuckled. The young human had many things left to learn about the true nature of the gods, and the non-draconic members of the Pantheon. That was a common oversight of the humans' nations. They taught about the Dragon Gods, but they tended to overlook the others. This place reeked of ancient power, and ancient power meant the Laughing God, an ancient Demon God who had once operated a system for the humans, separate from the one that the World Dragon operated on the worlds that he protected.

Nacht had heard rumours that this human with him had encountered remnants of that system in the past, so it wasn't impossible that his luck and affinity for fate had dragged them both into another Laughing God aligned trial.

"What do you know of the Laughing God?" Nacht asked as they walked through the ancient corridor.

"The God of Pranks and Ascension? Not a lot. He's supposed to be the God you turn to when you have reached your limits, and you need divine favour to survive. But according to my parents, his sense of justice is questionable, and the favours are often granted in the most unlikely ways. Personally, I think he's the scapegoat God. When things don't quite work out, and you don't want to say that another God's decision caused you hardship, you say that it's the favour of the Laughing God."

Nacht chuckled. "In a way, yes. The random choice options in the System selection, the ones that can change your gender and species? Those are almost certainly his additions. But you are right about his aspect, he is known to help humans reach the status of Demigods, even during times when no other God was willing.

This place we are in, it might be a Relic left by the Laughing God, or the Ancient System he implemented. It doesn't feel like dragon energy, so I don't think that what is here is a Relic of the World Dragon."

Karl nodded. "If Prince Corbin is right, this might be the resting place of a Titan Demigod. I should have asked him more questions, but I was expecting to travel here with him."

Chapter 585 Graska Mountain

With the additional light, the details that had been painted on the walls became clear, as well as the fact that the city had most likely not met with a peaceful end.

There were scorched spots on the walls, and some cuts in the stone that Karl had originally mistaken for tooling marks were actually weapon strikes.

That gave the area a very different feeling than simply being abandoned for many years, and the two intruders began to move with a bit more caution as they followed the soul energy towards its source.

The tunnel ended in what looked like a forge district, the furnaces long dormant. However, the buildings were intact, and Karl took the opportunity to look inside a few to see what he could find.

The first was completely bare, nothing but a stone shell, but the second had a forge left in it, covered in magical writing.

"I will need a moment before we move on. I have never seen anything like that before." Karl whispered to Nacht.

[Good call. Brother Hawk will love me for writing these runes down for him. I don't know what they do, but if they're in a forge, they should all be fire related, right?] Remi agreed.

The dragon waited patiently, well aware of the curiosity of humans. Karl was also very young, and he wouldn't be familiar with Dwarven Forge Runes. It wasn't something that they taught in school, and Nacht didn't know if there were any Dwarves left in his nation. Before the thought crossed his mind, he hadn't cared. Who lived in the Golden Dragon Nation was of no concern to him.

The signs of battle had been everywhere in the city as they travelled, but the houses had been carefully vacated, and there were no signs of the destruction that usually came with looting. There were no broken housewares or low-value items, and even the paintings on the walls had been removed and not left damaged or discarded.

Perhaps whatever battle had caused the Dark Iron Dwarves to leave the city was not a losing battle, after all. It might have simply been infeasible for them to continue living here.

Nacht gestured left. "It's that way, through the opening in the stone and further up toward the peak."

Karl followed Nacht through the city once Remi had finished copying all the runes she could see. The ramp spiralled up to another layer of the city, laid out much like the one they had just departed, only this level appeared to be more residential and less industrial. There were also fewer signs of battle here, and more signs of belongings left behind, both in the houses and in carts by the doors.

The soul energy was on this level, and Karl could see it glowing from its source. It wasn't moving, and it wasn't pulsating at all, just a steady glow of immense internal power.

As they approached, Karl saw that the power was coming from a stone sarcophagus, but not one for the Titan Demigod that Prince Corbin had expected to be here. The entire stone box was less than two metres long, though it was on a much larger pedestal, surrounded by stone pillars that were covered in runes and beautiful carvings.

That was when progress became difficult.

Every step forward that Karl tried to take seemed to put an increasing strain on him. Not a physical pressure, but a mental one, crushing his soul and attempting to break his will.

He knew that if he slipped up just a little, he would instinctively take a step back, and that would probably be the end of his progress.

"Well, this is an unexpected challenge." Nacht noted as he strode towards the grave with his hands behind his back.

"Oh? It doesn't look all that difficult to me? You've certainly got an easy time of it." Karl replied.

"While that is true, I can't touch it. I have the protection of the Black Dragon, God of Death. My soul is immune to attack. However, that means I cannot subject it to the attack of this trial to find out what it is supposed to do.

I will have to watch your struggle and see if you can make it close enough to touch the stone that is set on the lid.

If you can manage that much, you should receive a significant reward. There are immense amounts of divine energy in this place, waiting for someone to pass the trial and activate it."

Karl continued to walk forward, completely focused on not letting the pressure drive him to the ground, as he moved past the point that it was simply trying to force him away.

"Fascinating. Your soul is compressing under the pressure." Karl didn't even hear Nacht's words. He was completely focused on the task at hand. From the outside, it would look ridiculous, a grown man staggering down the street like he was drunk. But the normally invisible force was far stronger than anything Karl had ever felt. Even the aura that the Emperor of Newbon emitted when he was enraged wasn't close to this powerful.

Karl wished that he had Thor here with him. His stalwart friend would know the best way to get across the road to his destination.

Karl nearly stumbled as he moved from the cobblestone street to the soft gemstone gravel surrounding the tomb. Resting with his hands on his knees as he leaned forward, Karl saw the target, a large white opal stone. It was the source of the energy, and if he could just put a hand on it, he should have completed the trial.

"Just a little further. Today will be a good day, I can sense it." Nacht chuckled, excited to find out what sort of trial they had been sent to that could accept a dragon of his power.

It was absurd to think that someone had set a trial capable of accommodating Totems, unless this place was truly a Legendary Relic. But here he was, and although he couldn't fully partake because of his affiliation with the God of Death, he was still part of the trial.

Karl could feel his mind beginning to shatter as he took another step forward, but Remi, who was unaffected by the trial in her space, was singing as she worked on potions, and that was just enough to ground him and keep Karl moving.

A final step, and millimetre by painstaking millimetre, he extended his hand to the Opal.

[Trial Successfully Completed]

[Calculating Rewards]

Chapter 586 Temple Trials Complete

The pressure vanished, and the soul aura that had been leaking from the stone was retracted, leaving it as a simple Opal that was practically vibrating with power.

"You really did it. I can see the system message that the reward is calculating." Karl gave Lord Nacht a weak thumbs-up as he sat down on the gemstone gravel to catch his breath and let [Void Body] overcome the damage that had been done to his soul.

[Reward Calculated]

[Evolution Stone] Awarded

[Error: Some Functions unavailable]

[Randomizing]

Nacht began to laugh as they both saw the message at the same time.

"I will see you shortly, friend. Good luck on remaining a Dragon." Karl laughed.

They had gone through all that, only to get a glitched reward that didn't even work properly.

The Totem Rank Black Dragon seemed to think that this was the funniest thing that had ever happened to him, and his laughter echoed through the city as Karl waited to find out his fate.

[Optimal Advancement Skill Selected]

[Iron Within Rank 3: The Flesh Is Weak]

Remi giggled. [Well, it's not wrong. Your flesh is weak. That was the real issue here.]

Karl mentally rolled his eyes at her. [And what are we going to do if it changes me into something strange?]

[Then you get to be the Monster Man for realsies! We can just keep doing fun stuff forever instead of going back to work.]

[Passive Skill Active] {Iron Within 3}, beginning transformation.

Pain shot through Karl's body, worse than the side effects caused by any of the experimental treatments that the Bureau agents at the Academy had provided for him, and he felt his bones shattering then regrowing.

[Error Encountered: Incompatible Skill Active]

[Adjusting]

No, adjusting wasn't necessary. Karl was thrilled with whatever it had come up with, as long as it wasn't planning to make this process worse.

It had to be [Void Body] that was messing with the skill implementation, but in his current condition, Karl couldn't change any of his skills, not even to turn it off.

[Adjustments Completed]

[Continuing]

The pain resumed, but this time it was fading to numbness, and Karl could see parts of his body turning to mist before reforming to look like they originally had.

Once the wave had crossed his entire body, and Karl was fairly certain the process was complete, he slowly got to his feet and tested his body.

It felt the same as it had before, but his footsteps felt heavier on the gravel than they had before.

[Status] He thought.

Everything looked similar to how it had before, but with one notable change.

[Name] Karl

[Class] Beast Master Packmaster

[Rank] Pending

[Constitution] Void Iron Body

[Bonded Beasts] 5

[...]

There had never been a line there for a special constitution before. Karl had feared that it was going to make him something other than human, as the description of the reward had said Evolution, and that tended to make his beasts something other than what they were.

But once he got through the miscellaneous details, Karl looked back up at the top.

[Rank] Pending

Did that mean he was in the middle of the transition from Royal to Monarch? If the change in his body had triggered a promotion, this reward would be considered one of the highest tier rewards ever encountered.

Nacht was distracted with whatever reward he had gotten from the trial, so Karl waited for him to finish with his progression.

[You're really the Monster Man now. I can feel the difference. You smell like Cara and metal.] Remi informed him as they waited for the Black Dragon.

Nacht slowly recovered his senses and smiled at Karl, then pushed a bit of energy to him.

The power filled Karl with a lingering warm glow that seeped into his bones and remained, driving away the strangeness of his remade body.

"It appears that your luck is infallible, young friend. I have officially reached the status of an Ancient Black Dragon, and with it, I gained the gift of potential.

However, the gift is not for me, but for a successor. Normally, the advancement is made in one's own nest, surrounded by family and Clan, and the most promising of the youngest generation is given the gift because it can only be granted at that very moment.

Today, you are the only one here that I might grant it to.

So, you have been given the gift of potential, ordained by the God of Death, The Great Black Dragon. May you rise forever to the skies, and taste the aura of divinity long denied to your ancestors."

The last bit felt like a ritual, and Karl could feel the dragon's resignation and dismay that such a gift couldn't be given to his own offspring.

"I will do your legacy proud." Karl assured the transformed dragon with what he hoped was an understanding smile.

Nacht sighed again, then turned his head to the sky and closed his eyes for a moment. But when he looked back down again, there was mischief in his smile.

"I wonder what nation has the strongest claim on you now?

I daresay nobody would mistake you for a human anymore, and you've got the blessing of a Dragon God that isn't the World Dragon now.

Perhaps you should come back with me and get to know some of the Beast Nation's leadership?" He suggested.

Karl chuckled. "I will have to come back and visit soon. But I suspect that I will be expected to return home first, at least to check in. However, I really do need to stop at Whiton Temple before I get there. There might be a chance to evolve Thor, who has reached the end of his natural progression path.

If we can increase his potential to Monarch Rank with a resource, then I can use the skills of my Class to increase it from there."

Nacht shook his head. "You're not going to find anything stronger than whatever holy resource he has been using. If they had the ability to elevate clerics and holy beings to the Monarch Rank with any sort of reliability, the Beastkin would be among the strongest forces on the planet.

Unfortunately for you, they will be more interested in how you managed to get Thor to Royal Rank than they are likely to be able to help."

Karl frowned. "I guess that settles it, then. I'll have to force an evolution, and then I can work on finding a way to get through his next bottleneck.

Rae likely won't be that far behind him. She hasn't evolved at all, and I don't know how far a Bloodbath Spider can go on their own."

Nacht smiled. "Further than you might think. They're very instinctive, and with a safe spot to advance, plus plenty of blood, her evolutions will be subtle, but powerful. The Spider Goddess is kind to her children, and they often have more adaptability than any other species would consider reasonable."

Karl chuckled. "Like allowing them to learn Earth Magic because they bathed in Hill Giant blood when they advanced to Royal Rank? I can see how other species would find that somewhat unreasonable. If humans could adapt like that, the whole species would be nightmare fuel."

Nacht laughed. "Humans are already a pain in everyone's ass with their excessive breeding rate and magic use. If they could evolve, we would likely have quarantined them."

Chapter 587 Trial Time

The trial began to fade around them, and Karl wondered how the others might have fared. Not all of them would have easily entered the city from halfway up the mountain. There might have been an entrance at the bottom, or perhaps there were other spots in the area that they could have landed and searched.

When Karl's vision cleared, he was back on top of the temple, where all three clerics plus Thor were waiting for them.

"Oh, welcome back. We were wondering how long you would take." Tessa greeted them with a smile.

"I hope we didn't make you wait long."

The Archbishop chuckled and Lotus giggled as she lay curled up against Thor's side.

"You could say that. We've been back for nearly two days already."

Karl and Nacht turned to each other in confusion, wondering if this was actually part of the trial, and they weren't really out yet.

"Two days? We've only been in the trial for an hour and a bit." Karl asked carefully.

Lotus looked up from her nap spot. "That was our thought as well. We appeared in a forest village full of Elves, had lunch with a human cleric lady, and then we were back here." "Did you get a reward?" Karl asked, wondering what sort of trial they had undergone.

"We did. We just don't know what yet. When we check the system interface, it still says rewards calculating." Tessa explained.

That made both Karl and Nacht believe even more strongly that they were still in the trial, but then Nacht received a message, which shouldn't be possible in the separate space.

"Before we go any further, what happened to Prince Karl?" The Archbishop demanded, waving a hand in his direction.

Karl nodded in agreement. "I suppose a run-down is in order. We landed on a ledge outside an ancient Dwarven city. Then we followed a powerful soul aura to an opal mounted on a tomb deep in the city, and it gave us a test and a reward. I was given a gift of Evolution, and a skill called [Iron Within] that appears to have reforged my body and granted a special constitution." "A special constitution? It sounds more like is partially changed your species. Or perhaps entirely changed it with minimal change to your outer appearance." The Archbishop retorted.

Then he got a curious look on his face and opened a portal.

"Jeeves, come here and bring your assistant." The elderly Archbishop demanded.

A blue robed dragonkin poked his head through, then nodded and vanished back to wherever he had been.

Only a minute later, he came back out with a young blue robed girl that immediately made Lotus stand up and smile.

Karl discretely sniffed at the air, then chuckled. The young one was a juvenile blue dragon, not a dragonkin. Lotus must have noticed faster than he had.

"Jill, it's so good to see you again. You will never guess what we have been up to since I saw you last. Ask the big meanie if you can stay a while after he finishes working, and we will catch up." Lotus insisted, speaking so fast that her words were jumbled together.

Jill winked at her and continued following the cleric known as Jeeves.

According to the System interface, his name was Geraldo, but the Archbishop might either know him by a nickname, or simply forgot his name long ago and hadn't realized it.

"Your Eminence, I have brought all my tools. What sort of new species have you found for me?" He asked.

"That one. I suspect that a System gift made him no longer human. I would like to know what he is. Demihuman? Some form of monster? An unknown species?" The Archbishop replied.

Geraldo smiled at Karl. "My Class is Scholar. I have a skill to allow me to compare a sample against any information I have ever read. So, if you are changed into another species, I should be able to tell." Karl nodded, and the cleric took out a needle.

Ting

Everyone turned to see what the metal on metal noise was, while Karl and Geraldo stared at the needle.

"Well, that was unexpected. I'm sure I found a vein. Do you have a skill active?"

Karl shook his head. "I have all my invulnerability and regeneration skills deactivated at the moment. The new one isn't something I can turn off, though. When it interacted with another skill I have, it became that new Constitution."

"Were there any other oddities?" Geraldo asked. "My Rank is listed as [Pending] at the moment."

The cleric looked impressed. "You're going to make it to Monarch Rank once your advancement finishes? That is incredible. I'm sure that everyone will be delighted to find out that there will be a new Monarch."

However, that does explain the issue. Archbishop, I may need your assistance. Can you coat the needle in holy energy so that I can draw a blood sample? I'm not powerful enough to puncture his veins."

The Archbishop took the needle from him and carefully drew a sample from the underside of Karl's forearm.

The blood came out deep black and faintly shimmering, which intrigued everyone present. Karl included.

They had never seen blood like that before, and when Geraldo tried to test it, he just shook his head. "There is nothing about this in any of the research materials that I have seen. I could study some of the more obscure entries that I haven't prioritized, but that's mostly for extinct species and mythical creatures." The blue dragon cleric explained.

Nacht stared at the blood sample for a moment, then took the needle and let a drop fall on his hand.

"I think that it has been permanently altered by his skill. If I apply small amounts of death energy to it, the blood regenerates. If I'm right, you're not getting a reading because the skill that has modified his

body is stabilizing the sample. You're going to have to send it to one of your scientists if you want answers, and they'll have to do a whole research project." The Dragon explained.

Tessa smirked at the dragon. "So, you're saying that even if his blood is spilled, the blood itself won't degrade?"

The dragon nodded, but the Archbishop realized the implication right away.

"And if he happens to impart that ability to his beasts?" The elderly cleric began.

"An immortal Bloodbath Spider." Rae announced as the remainder of the team exited the trial at the same time.

Chapter 588 For Thor

"Welcome back. Did everyone make it safely?" Karl asked.

"As safely as could be expected. That trial was wild, and we didn't have the clerics or Thor or Remi. I couldn't even get her to give me stuff from her space. Fortunately, the buffs you cast on everyone were still active." Rae replied.

"Alright, you had a very different trial than the rest of us. There was nothing to fight in ours."

Rae seemed lost in a fond memory for a moment. "Me and Cara appeared with Dana and Ophelia, and Hawk was in the sky over us. We thought that everyone else must have gotten separated, but then there was angry bacon and zombies and the whack a mole lady, and not quite humans, and some blue not quite humans.

Everything was attacking, and I got to squish the zombie lady again, but with a hole in the middle of the stone, so she sprayed into the air." Ophelia shook her head in dismay, while Dana did her best not to laugh.

The berserker was back in her own form for the first time in weeks, and it was strange hearing her normal voice, instead of the deeper voice of her Werebear form, as she added details to the explanation.

"The trial told us that we would get a reward for every target killed before the timer ran out. Of course, with the three beasts, we were searching for targets halfway through the timer, and then it kicked us out with ten minutes left on the timer. But it gave me a reward, so I guess we did it right." She added.

Dana nodded. "It gave me a reward as well, but it says that it's calculating, so the reward is still pending."

[I'm pending too.] Hawk noted.

[What do you mean, you're pending? Did you get a reward from the trial?]

[Not quite. I'm just stuck halfway to Monarch. My skill advanced while I was playing with the not food, and now I'm pending.]

Oh, Hawk had learned a new word, and it somewhat fit his situation. He would advance to Monarch very soon, but something was stopping him.

Maybe it was his space? Karl was also stuck in limbo, so it might be a deficiency in the stored energy levels or quality.

[I don't think so, the spaces have plenty of energy.] Remi informed him as she worked on more healing potions to give out to the group, so they would have some if she wasn't nearby.

"Is there someone here who has to make a selection within their system interface?" Karl asked, wondering what the holdup was.

[Remi, why don't you come out? Maybe that's the issue.]

Remi remained in her Naga Queen form and came out to grab Lotus, picking the little cleric up in a princess carry.

One after another, everyone confirmed that they didn't have anything waiting for them to select an option. So, the System must have just hung up and wasn't processing the rewards at its usual speed.

"Well, if we're waiting anyhow, why don't we give Thor a potion and see if that changes anything? It's here and ready." Remi suggested.

The two Totems chuckled. Watching what the beast came up with regarding new concoctions was brilliant entertainment.

[Well, there's nothing to lose.] Thor agreed, still worried he wouldn't get anything but a duplicate skill that Rae and Karl could already use.

But he dutifully tilted his head back for Remi to feed him the potion that she had upgraded, and power surged through him as well as the beast spaces.

Far above them, thunder rumbled and power surged from the temple beneath them as Thor began to grow.

"Oh, it works really well. I should find good things to feed everyone." Remi cheered.

His height increase wasn't excessive, but Thor seemed to have gotten noticeably longer than he was before, in proportion to his height.

Karl guessed the length increase between his legs to be a bit over a metre, with about the same added to his tail, while the armoured ball on the end had turned nearly all golden, as had his horns. Thor was definitely the first of them to reach Monarch Rank, and while Karl didn't have a proper name for his evolution, it looked like Nacht did.

"Well, isn't that interesting. You found a way to turn a Lightning Cerro into a Divine Thunder Cerro."

Thor bugled happily as he realized that the potion hadn't disappointed, and that he was actually ahead of the others for the very first time.

Not for long, as Karl could feel that the bottleneck was released, and Hawk would advance in the next few minutes. But Hawk was happy to let his little brother have this victory.

"And you have gained another Monarch Ranked Divine Beast. I must say, the potential of this Beast Master Class is absolutely incredible." Nacht amended.

"Actually, I might have an idea about that. I can't do it yet, but I think that by the time I am an Overlord, I should be able to teach the core ability to create a Beast Space to others.

Once they have that, they should either be able to awaken with the Class, or choose a variant similar to it during their next advancement trial." Karl explained, mostly for the benefit of the Archbishop, who was currently giving Thor gentle head rubs as he examined the changes.

"Fascinating. He really has changed species with just a potion. I knew that it was possible for some beasts, but I never expected that a Lightning Cerro would manage it. The odds are lower than a Carp jumping through the heavenly gates to become a Dragon." The Archbishop noted.

Nacht rumbled with laughter at the thought. There was such a legend, but as far as he knew, it was nothing more than that. No known dragon had ever evolved from a Carp, though it was said that during the early days, when the system was active, a few had come from lesser species like drakes and dragonkin.

[What new skills did you get, buddy?] Karl asked Thor, who was immersed in the head pats.

[Hmm, Eternal Lightning didn't change. I got [Thunder Stomp] and [Lightning Zone]. Those both seem pretty fun. That's it for new skills, but I'm working on Ophelia's new one. [Gravity Slam] she called it. I think I will have it soon.]

Chapter 589 Runes Of Fate

[Reward Calculated] [Random Reward] Skill Book

[20 Percent Bonus Experience]

In Karl's experience, those bonus experience rewards were the ones that made huge and unexpected changes to a person's power level, as they appeared to be retroactive for some time, and didn't just increase the bonus that you got for the trial.

Either that, or trials gave a massive influx of power to start with.

Karl checked his inventory for the Skill Book, which was sitting on top of a pile of supplies left over from the Elves on the other continent.

That seemed to be a prophetic placement, or perhaps it was a reminder of areas in which Karl was still lacking.

He had incredible defence for someone of his level, and his attacking skills were both powerful and well-rounded for use on nearly any target. Combat was not an area where he was lacking.

He even had [Silent Movement] for stealth operations. Plus, strength and stamina for long runs. So, the system had given him something that he hadn't really focused on during his development.

Noncombat skills.

[Epic Grade Skill] Runecrafting

[Runecrafting] The fine art of inscribing magical power runes to supplement the abilities of a magical object.

Karl thought about that for a moment. He didn't have any crafting skills, and he wasn't sure that it would actually help to add runes to Remi's potions. However, he knew someone with a skill that would go very well with Runecrafting. Morgana's enhancement tattoos combined with Runecrafting would make for incredibly powerful buffs to the target.

Once they made it back home, he would have to find a way to get time to study her skills. Or even a library book that had more details about magical tattoos.

Karl used the book and an entire language began to flow into his mind, complete with syntax rules.

The language was far more complex than the common spoken and written languages, with over six thousand base runes which were compounded to make a form of single word sentence.

Then they were strung together in one of eight different ways to create a complex concept with an activation order for the magical effect you were trying to create.

Even with the skill book teaching him how it worked, Karl wasn't certain that he could completely comprehend the skill.

While Karl was busy deciphering an entire new language, everyone around him was seeing their status change and in most cases, they were advancing. While Karl had left the Royal Rank behind him, with both Thor and Hawk advanced to the Monarch Rank alongside him, all of the ladies had reached the Royal Rank.

[How does this work? The boys all advanced, and we're left behind.] Cara complained.

[You've got a Monarch Rank skill, though.] Remi reminded her.

[Still not caught up to them. I need to work harder. Once I'm a Monarch with an Overlord Rank skill, I can taste test all the dragons.]

Remi carefully considered the outcome of that.

[Yes. I think that should work. If it's Disintegration that advances again, you can run away in a safety bubble.]

Hawk was rapidly expanding as he advanced again and took his place among the Monarchs of the Beast Kingdom. With a thirty-metre wingspan, the Ghostfire Thunderbird was as large as most adult dragons, and his innate abilities were far beyond what most beasts could claim.

His fire most likely challenged dragon fire for pure power, but the dragons wouldn't take it well if Karl suggested that to them directly. They were proud creatures, and enjoyed the thought that they were better than other species.

As he finished his advancement, Karl realized that they had visitors. The portal was already closed, so he must have been distracted for a while, but Rae wasn't concerned, and she wouldn't miss a chance to tease Hawk about missing danger.

Karl turned to the new arrival and saw an unfamiliar Overlord, along with Colonel Valerie of the Bureau of Elite Development.

"Colonel Valerie, excellent timing. I have things to inform you about." Karl greeted her, then turned to the other person.

"Overlord."

"Monarch. Sorry, I don't know who you are either? How does that even happen? Are there so many Overlords and Monarchs now that it's even possible that we don't know each other?" The man replied.

Karl checked him with the System interface and saw that he was a ranger, but his System wasn't fully active, and it wasn't giving Karl his name.

Then, he just had to go through the Overlords he knew about. But none of the Ranger types looked anything like this man. He must be one of the hidden assets of the nation, not one of the public facing idol type powerhouses.

"I am Karl, from last year's intake at the Golden Divine Academy." The Overlord nodded. "I am Joram, mostly stationed along the Mountain Giant border. The Colonel was visiting my station when we got the message that your group had been found."

Karl nodded. "Did we forget to tell anyone where we were going? Sorry for the trouble."

The Overlord chuckled. "You have all been missing for months. I don't know what you've been up to, but it is possible that there is a time flow difference within this trial. I can sense it below us, but for some reason I can't access it."

Karl nodded. "You have to walk up all the steps. But none of us suspected that so much time had passed. I had thought it had only been a few days."

Colonel Valerie looked him up and down, inspecting Karl's enhanced physique against her memory of him as a new student. "Well, on the bright side, you missed winter. Most of it, anyhow. The end of semester exams at the Academy are coming up soon, and then spring break starts next month." She explained.

Karl winked at Dana. "Should we request a ride back? We can see if my balcony survived, and maybe take the exams to graduate formally."

Overlord Joram laughed. "What exam? The teachers are all Commanders, remember? A Royal Rank Mage would destroy the testing equipment, and it wouldn't hold up any better to whatever you've done to yourself."

Karl shrugged. "Skill based physical enhancement. The System calls it Iron Within Rank Three. But that isn't a primary enhancement. It's something that developed because I was accidentally injuring myself with physical skills."

Chapter 590 Time Distortion

Lord Nacht, the black dragon, was the only one unconcerned about missing multiple months of time. After all, he was a venerable dragon of the Death God. He had taken naps longer than two months.

"How are things going politically? I should have been more careful." The Archbishop asked.

"Everything is stable for the moment. The White Dragons sent a Totem to keep things running smoothly within the church, while the Army has been learning to play well with the civilian government and the Elites.

Overall, it has been as smooth as possible, and your subordinates have proven themselves quite capable.

However, the same is not true of the situation on the continent in general.

The Orb Incident, as it has been named, was only the start. We have nine more stable dungeons on the continent now, all appearing and stabilizing within the last two months.

Eight of them are Ascended Rank or lower, one is Commander Rank.

However, that is not the problem. The new Commander Rank dungeon is also randomly awakening party members who finish the challenge with a group that has never entered before.

We know of eighteen cases so far from four different nations."

The Archbishop took a deep breath. "And where might this new Commander Rank dungeon be?"

Colonel Valerie hesitated before responding. "The Newbon Capital. Newbon City. It appeared over an ancient monument in the middle of the city. That's two stable Commander Rank dungeons in the same nation now, and we have no way of verifying how many Monsters have gained access to the System.

However, with the restriction, and the fact that it doesn't appear to be a guaranteed awakening for a single member, as we have observed at the one in our Nation, it shouldn't be too far from our estimate.

It has been open six days now."

Of course, they couldn't verify the numbers. If they didn't have someone there to inspect them with the interface on the way in and out, the Monsters would look the same on the way in and out. It wasn't like they immediately gained a Rank when the system activated.

However, having a Commander Rank dungeon right in your capital city would be a huge advantage once the chaos of other nations trying to gain access ended.

Nacht rumbled in annoyance. "How many of the other confirmed stable dungeons are in Newbon?"

Valerie shook her head. "None. There is an Ascended Rank Dungeon in Baria, near the Divine Beast Nation border, but all of the other new dungeons appeared along the coast or on islands, so they're all nominally under human control except that one and the one in Newbon City."

Nacht frowned. "Baria is a human nation. Or do you just mean that it is the only one that didn't appear near the coast?"

"It is twenty metres from the river that marks the official border. However, there is a Phoenix nest in the ruins where the portal opened, and the Matriarch won't let anyone near her clutch."

Karl perked up, and Colonel Valerie laughed.

"That includes you. In fact, it explicitly includes you. I don't know where you met, but she called you out by name as someone to be kept away until her eggs hatched.

Lord Nacht, you are on that list as well, as are Orthos, Librarian Gareth, Doug Mackenzie, The King of Creliston, a Succubus named Marie, and Overlord Leafa of Newbon.

The rest of the continent was just warned away in general."

Karl and Nacht shared a confused look. They didn't know what they had done to the Phoenix, but it could have just been a premonition. Basic visions of the future could be unclear, and the Phoenix might have just blanket banned everyone she saw in the visions.

The Archbishop shrugged. "That's not our problem, though it is odd that all the dungeons are appearing at the edge of the continent. I will have to find out what is happening in the rest of the world. Lord Nacht, if I might prevail upon you to ask some of your overseas contacts as well. This might be a worldwide awakening."

The Archbishop opened a portal, and the two stepped through, but before anyone else moved, the portal closed, and Karl was left staring at a very dismayed Overlord Joram.

"Did they just?" He asked.

"Yeah, they're like that. I think they're actually old friends, they are so in tune sometimes that it's scary. Now, do we have a way to get picked up, or are we going to have to run away and leave you here with the Colonel while we go looking for fluffy beastkin?"

Lotus laughed and gave a fist pump of appreciation for that idea, while Colonel Valerie sighed and gestured at the ground near the base of the temple.

"There is a helicopter right there. If we follow the river north to the lake, we can fly over the water and be back in the capital by morning." She explained.

Karl looked down, and a vaguely familiar pilot waved up at him.

He waved back, then smirked at the Colonel. "I hope your legs are feeling good. It's a long way to the bottom."

"Like hell. I'll call the helicopter to come to us instead. How do you think we got up here? You really were out of it, weren't you?"

"New skill. I was absorbed in the details. Still, I'm surprised that nobody warned me about the helicopter."

Rae thought about it. [You know, one moment they weren't here, then they were rappelling down to the platform. Time might still be strange here. I don't remember the helicopter coming at all.]

Karl motioned for the Colonel to call the helicopter. "I think that time is still strange here, not just inside the trial, but also right here on the top of the temple. If we wait much longer, we could end up missing for weeks or months again."

That got things in motion, but even as they were stepping into the helicopter and leaving the temple, Karl could see that the formerly midday sun was fading to the horizon.

"Well, it looks like we will be flying all night, but we can still make it to the Capital in time for breakfast. How are your rations holding out? You've been in the field for quite a while." Colonel Valerie asked, noting their lack of packs.

Ophelia chuckled. "We're more than good. With the two clerics and Karl's meat hoarding tendencies, we've not had a bad meal yet."