

Beast Master 691

Chapter 691 Neko's Cat Cafe

Karl watched the cleric run back to her work, and then noticed a small stand at the edge of the financial sector of the job fair, as if it had been forced out by the more powerful conglomerates.

The operator appeared to be a Nature Priestess, or an Acolyte. Karl moved forward so that he could see the sign, while the operator nervously waited for someone to come close enough to call out to.

[Neko's Cat Cafe. Hiring food service staff and cooks. Willing to work with investors of all sorts.]

{Remi, bring Lotus to us. There is a cat café opening. I think she will love it.} Karl instructed.

{Alright. We are just chatting with the recruits. They're going to head to the train soon. Everyone is jealous of our group and their head start.}

Karl walked up to the bubbly young Acolyte, as he confirmed after he was close enough. She was Common Rank, and wearing nature Priestess robes, so she had to be an Acolyte, who was working on a project she thought would please her goddess.

"Good morning, Monarch, Princesses, High Priestess. Might you be interested in hearing about Neko's Cat Cafe?" She asked hopefully.

"Yes. I also have a Nature High Priestess on her way here, and I am certain that she would approve of your initiative."

The Acolyte laughed. "I somehow doubt that. Everyone says that my idea is dumb. Our dorm area is already filled with cats, so why would we go out to see them? But if you look at my business plan, and the carefully collected data, the company of friendly beasts of the furry sort is popular with over thirty percent of the population.

That alone is enough of a market share that I believe there is room for a cat café, and I have found a vacancy at the perfect location on the walking street near the Central Park, pending funding."

Karl waved his hand and created a stone chair with [Earth Barrier] to sit across the table from her, and the young cleric raced around to see what he had done.

"You have a free chair skill? That is wonderful. Does it make other chairs? Can it make more?" She gushed.

"It's an Earth Barrier defensive spell. It's not intended for making chairs. But yes, I can make multiple styles of chairs, or whole rows of them." Karl laughed, while Dana turned away to hide her laughter.

The acolyte slowly calmed down, while the nearby bankers shook their heads in dismay. She was making a pitch for funding by a Monarch, but she couldn't even remain serious for ten seconds. They saw no chance that she would actually succeed at business.

Once she was back in her seat, Karl started with the important questions. "Do you anticipate any issues getting permits to serve food and drink around animals? Quality products will be essential to the survival of your business. No customer will suffer bad coffee just to be with cats. After all, the Priestesses and other cat enthusiasts can chase Blink Cats all over the city."

Neko giggled and nodded in agreement. "I have the advanced food creation spell from my Goddess, though it's still Common Grade. Not really up to the standards of the higher Elites. But it allows me to make a full range of basic products and spices, and I am an excellent baker.

The products that are more difficult, as well as the specific brews of teas, I will have to order in. The predicted costs are in the business plan."

She was well-prepared, Karl noticed. She had a full menu, with all ingredients and costs listed. Time to make and prep the ones she was creating listed on a weekly basis, staff hours, animal maintenance costs, and all the other line items Karl would expect on an expense sheet at the mines.

Tessa was reading over his shoulder, as she was actually educated on the economics of feeding people, and she was making encouraging faces, so Karl assumed the numbers weren't outlandish.

The final page detailed what she needed. A total of one hundred fifty thousand credits in seed money for equipment and renovations, as well as the lease on the location. Karl inwardly sighed as he realized that the annual lease for the location was only thirty thousand credits, hardly more than a month's rent at his apartment. He really was living extravagantly.

"So, my primary concern is whether you will be able to find reliable staff, as well as suitably socialized cats. After all, ones with even a hint of a temper could be a problem in a cat café." Karl informed her.

Neko nodded in agreement. "Fortunately, we have a stable source. It's here on page seven. There is a shelter that is willing to work with me so that the cats can be adopted straight from the Café, should the customer be interested.

It's a win for everyone."

At that point, Lotus came running through the crowd, which was parting around her, as the Priestess was wearing Remi as a necklace in Spirit Snake form, with Cara chasing after her.

The sight was terrifying to the locals, as Spirit Snakes were venomous, and a Monarch Rank one thicker than most men's arms was no laughing matter if it was not a bonded beast of some sort.

The fact that it was draped around the neck of a Nature Priestess did not guarantee safety.

"What did I miss?" Lotus asked, puffing for air after carrying Remi so far.

"This lovely young Acolyte is working to set up a Cat Cafe, and I was considering helping her with an investment." Karl explained.

"Oh? Do you have interior designs?" Lotus asked.

Neko smiled and flipped open her binder full of exquisitely detailed drawings.

"Now, there are a few designs there, as I wasn't sure what facility I will be able to get. The landlords wouldn't hold them without payment, and I don't have any seed money yet." Neko explained.

"That won't be a problem. Someone here will surely be interested." Lotus dismissed the concern as she flipped through pictures of walls lined with climbing platforms and scratching posts for the cats, with tables covered in white lace cloths.

"Are you really going to fund a random café by a green dragon Acolyte?" One of the nearby financial service booth operators asked Karl as he watched the two discuss design.

Karl nodded. "The plans are for a quality bakery and a café specializing in desserts and exotic teas. The design even includes a pickup window, for those not interested in sitting with the cats."

The banker looked at him like he was crazy, then shook his head and turned away.

If the Elite wanted to waste money on charity, so be it.

The gathering of powerful Elites attracted the attention of a few of the students, which caused Cara and Remi to retreat to their spaces.

They didn't want to terrify the young jobseekers, and especially not if Karl was going to be investing in this shop.

Just the presence of the group who had been chosen to present the first opportunity to become Elites was enough to draw the young jobseekers to the booth, much to the dismay of other companies looking to hire them, and the delight of the nearby stalls that needed entry-level workers.

Chapter 692 Cafe Funded

"Princess, what sort of business is this?" One of the girls whispered to Dana.

At first, she was startled, not used to being called Princess so reverently, and Karl made a mental note to do it more often.

"It's a cat café. Nature Priestesses and Beast Masters seem immediately drawn to it." She whispered back.

"Like, a café with cats just running around to pet? That is great. Are they hiring, I would apply for that."

Lotus came over and hugged the girl from behind. "Yes, she will be hiring as soon as the talks are done. They have openings for ten servers and four bakery staff."

One of the boys who had come over mostly to just get a better look at the Elites turned to look at her in shock.

"They're going to bake everything in house? Most places order in their pastries." He commented.

"They will specialize in desserts and snacks, not full meals, so the Acolyte wants to hire staff to help her do all the baking." Lotus informed him happily.

"I will go get my friends. Their parents are bakers."

Then he ran off, leaving Lotus extremely pleased with herself.

It wouldn't take them long to get the Acolyte's goals filled this way. But even better, it looked like she wouldn't even have to plead to get someone to cover the funding. As a High Priestess, her earnings were for the good of the church, and she lived off a stipend. Well, in theory. Mostly, she lived off Hawk's meat pile and Rae's design talents. Even the Royal Priestess robes she was wearing were made by Rae and not the church. These ones were much more comfortable, and they smelled like Rae's silk, the same as Lotus' favourite hammock.

Finding applicants to become servers was far too easy, and Tessa had a list of over thirty within the next five minutes, before the boy came back with his friends. "Are we too late?" He asked Lotus after seeing the line gathered around Tessa.

"Not at all. There will be some interviews, but skilled bakers were expected to come later, so I don't know if there are any on the list yet."

That caught the attention of one of the bankers, who had scoffed at Karl's interest earlier.

It really looked like this business was going to get started, and he happened to know a master patissier who was out of work after her employer had shut down to sell the business to a real estate investor.

As crazy as the idea was, if they had a real master baker working with a nature cleric, there was no reason that they couldn't succeed, and his friend might be able to take over when the Acolyte inevitably flaked out in a few months.

He sent a runner to bring her over early. The event wasn't open to the public yet, but he sent the boy with a vendor pass to get her in. A little head start could make all the difference in the world when they were dealing with a Monarch's whimsy and wealth.

Karl vaguely noticed when Ophelia and Rae vanished, most likely with the use of [Shadow Step]. But he was busy finalizing the deals and signing the funding documents for the shop.

The master baker was there only minutes later, as she had been intending to attend anyhow, in search of an executive chef position. She approached on her own, but still wearing the vendor badge for the financial group.

"Acolyte Neko?" She asked politely.

"Yes?"

"I am Master Baker Genevieve. I would like to apply to become the head baker in your shop. I have decades of experience making exclusively baked goods, succulents and desserts. If you have time, could we talk?"

That made Neko extremely nervous. She hadn't been prepared for such a capable applicant, and now that there was one, she wasn't sure that her offer would even be close to enough to keep her interested.

"Uhm, yes. This is an excellent time, as we have a pair of baker apprentices present, and more coming. I suppose that we can start with the offer. Where is it? Here we go." Neko rambled, then gathered herself once she found the right page in her folders.

Genevieve took the two-page document and carefully read through it, then went over it again.

Honestly, the base pay was incredibly low by her standards. But Neko had offered a portion of the bakery sales to the head baker as an incentive. If she could build an independent reputation for fine sweets, even a small bakery could create enough revenue to make up for it.

The fact that it was also a cat café would be irrelevant to the sorts of corporate catering clients that would pay exorbitant fees to have custom platters baked by a master chef. Once the reputation of the shop's bakery was established, there was some hope that she could leverage that into far greater profit than a regular employment contract.

She was out of work, but not desperate, and the master baker wondered why she had been called. Then she noticed the man sitting on the magical chair across the table, and realized that it was a power play by her friend. The Monarch Ranked backer must be extremely wealthy, so the banker had thought that this was a safe investment for her. He hadn't had time to explain anything, but she was seeing all good things from the prospects being vetted by a Royal High Priestess.

What other sorts of hidden connections did this young Acolyte have?

"I have one condition. I want the right to all staff management in the kitchen. You can handle the front of the house as you see fit, but I want full freedom to set the menu and deal with my kitchen staff." Genevieve demanded.

"Put it in the contract. I don't have an objection to that."

The contract was amended and signed, then the baker turned to the boy and girl waiting anxiously nearby.

"You two. I know your parents. The bread shop on sixth, right?" She asked.

The two students nodded. "You will do. If you're not up to standard, I will take it up with your mother."

That made them pale. They might be the youngest in the family, but they didn't get enough favouritism to save them from their mother's wrath if they embarrassed her culinary skills.

A few more applicants came forward with their credentials as bakers, and four more were chosen, bringing the total kitchen staff to seven, nearly double what Neko had planned on. But that was her deal with the chef, and they had way more front staff than they needed as well. In the worst-case scenario, some of the hosts and hostesses could be part-time employees.

Then Ophelia and Rae returned with triumphant looks on their faces.

[We got the unit. Did you know that you can trade shiny rocks for a whole building?] Rae asked.

Karl rolled her eyes at her. [Did you buy the building that Neko wanted to rent a unit in?]

[Nope, Ophelia did. She reminded me that Hawk and I loot all the battlefields, so I really should share some wealth. Then she bought the building. It's pretty, and there are two other shops with apartments over them, plus this one and the empty unit above it.

Ophelia says that the price was good, and the landlord didn't argue at all with her offer. Does that mean I'm Neko's boss now?]

Karl laughed quietly, and resisted the urge to shake his head as he replied. [No, Ophelia is her landlord. You don't get to boss her around. But she is a nature priestess, so you can probably bring her to play with you and Lotus in the park later.]

Karl tapped the table to catch Neko's attention, as well as Genevieve's. "The building has been purchased by my associate, so the rental contract can be guaranteed, and the residential unit over the bakery is included."

Genevieve smiled, and Neko got up to hug the much taller woman around the waist.

"So, when do we start shopping for kitchen equipment? I'll take care of the front, and we will have all the funds we need for the renovation as soon as I process this funding document." Neko explained, holding up the papers Karl signed.

The banker next to them cleared his throat. "I have a mobile access terminal here. Would you like to open a corporate account with our capital branch?"

The faster everything was settled, the more secure his friend's new baking job was.

Neko's smile lit up her face. "Yes, thank you. That would be wonderful. Can you link it to my identification badge from here?"

Karl patted her on the head, then nodded to Genevieve. "It's been a pleasure meeting you all, and I look forward to seeing how your business does."

It might take years to get a full return on investment, but it was a big milestone for Karl. His first real investment as an Elite.

Chapter 693 Altruism

Now that the details were finished, Tessa handed over the short list of potential staff and their job was done.

The train would be here soon to pick the students up, and then there would be an escorted parade of sorts as it left the city. This was the first stop, and the others would be picked up later in the day, when the cars were transferred between locomotives for the final leg to the Academy.

"What is the plan for the rest of the day?" Tessa asked, as she carefully tucked the folder with the land deed documents into her coat. That little rental property would provide a nice, steady monthly income for her parents, no matter where she happened to be in the future as an Elite. Three commercial units with shopkeeper suites brought in far more than was necessary to be called a comfortable living in her neighbourhood.

Karl smiled. "Well, I should send a little something to my parents. I haven't heard from them in a while, and I missed them when we went on the mission to the area. I know my dad got promoted, and they're making good money now, but I'm sure I can do better than that for them."

Dana smiled. "Planning to bring them to the Capital?"

Ophelia nodded, while Karl shook his head. "Do you think I could convince my dad to leave now that he's one of the big bosses, setting company policy for his old friends down in the mines?"

No, he would rather stay there. But that doesn't mean I can't have them living a life of luxury while he works."

That would only take a few minutes at the station in the Cathedral, or any bank branch. His father made nearly fifty thousand credits a year after his raise, when he made nine thousand a year before it. So, even if Karl sent him a few hundred thousand, he would have more money than he knew what to do with.

Karl knew his father well. He wouldn't go for all the fancy stuff for himself. Instead, he would buy things that mother liked, and then sneak some generous donations to families in need at the mines.

Not enough to cause a fuss, but enough to solve the problem.

That was just the sort of person he was.

Then Karl gave Dana a curious look. "What about yours? Planning to send them anything? Money, an evening visit from Rae? A puppy?"

Dana snorted in amusement. "Depending on the day, all three of those feel like valid options. My father is allergic to dogs. But I set up a trust for my mother, so she has monthly money sent to her. Beyond that, I am not in any particular hurry to change things."

"Then I suppose we can retire for the day. We've all been busy for a while, either training younglings or keeping the Blue Clerics happy. A day or two of relaxation sounds like a good plan to me."

The whole group left together for the apartment, just as Karl got a message from Sybil.

{Did you know that they will give you as many cookies as you ask for on the train? This place is wonderful.}

Karl looked at the others to see if they got the message, but only Thor and Rae were laughing. So, the message was likely meant for Rae, but passed through him on the way.

Rae answered first. {As long as you don't eat so many that you get fat and slow. Don't forget, I will be doing unannounced readiness tests until you graduate.}

{Got it, Big Sister. I will keep myself ready. As soon as I adjust to these new ears. I swear they're broken. Even with earplugs in, it's still loud.}

In her space, Cara was laughing. Sybil's new ears sounded as if they weren't desensitizing as fast as the Rogue would have liked, and Cara hadn't even considered that Lotus' magic might duplicate her own so well that they wouldn't grow back in a proper human pattern. An ear was basically an ear, after all. It was the shape of the outer ear that made the most difference if you didn't have magic aiding your senses.

But that was a concern for later, and Cara had noticed that they were suddenly very popular.

The group had left the job fair, but people were waving at them, or even taking pictures as they walked through the city.

Now, some of that was understandable, as Rae's Princesses looked perfect in their outfits, and Dana had finally given up on her warm coat and embraced the sheer silk outer layers of her dress.

But now people recognized them from the ceremony, so the ones without magical affinity didn't have to guess at the power level or importance of the team. The locals had all seen the announcements, either in the auditorium or on the screen outside.

It would calm down in a day or two, but for today, they felt important.

Thor was loving it.

When they reached the doors of the apartment building, Niall was waiting to go training with Rae, who vanished along with the Rogue as soon as she was out of sight of the public. Much to the annoyance of the doorman.

That vanishing act creeped him out every time that they did it.

Lotus smirked as they got out of the elevator. "I will get the bubbles going. Who has the wine and the snacks?"

Ophelia wrapped an arm around her. "I have something better. While I was out, I got cream liqueur to mix with coffee."

"Not after six in the evening." Tessa insisted.

"Hear that? We need to drink it early. Then we can switch to wine."

The Red Dragon cleric sighed while Lotus ran inside to start the bubble bath, so Ophelia gave her a comforting hug. "Relax, between the alcohol and the warm water, the coffee won't even have time to hit before she's ready for a nap. Plus, I bought decaf."

Karl stepped behind Dana and wrapped his hands around her waist to whisper in her ear. "And what does this Princess want to do for the evening?"

Dana leaned back against his chest. "I say we put on a movie and cuddle on the couch."

Chapter 694 Movie Night Interrupted

As Karl had suspected, their night of relaxation was doomed from the very start. They had just finished the first movie when a knock at the door pulled Tessa away from her reading to let in their guest.

"General, to what do we owe the pleasure of your visit?" Tessa asked as she looked up at the unfamiliar man.

"High Priestess. I have come looking for Monarch Karl. There is an urgent matter that we require his assistance with." The General replied.

Karl sighed, realizing that his night was definitely not going to involve enough cuddling on the couch. But he stood up anyhow and headed for the door.

"General. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. Is this a confidential matter, or can you speak in front of the other Elites and High Priestesses here?" Karl asked.

The General shrugged. "It's not secret enough to keep it from the other Elites, as long as you don't mind them knowing your personal business."

Karl laughed and gestured to the table. "Come have a seat. The people here will all know in the next few minutes anyhow."

The General took a seat across from Karl, then cast a strange look towards the bath, where Karl could hear Lotus laughing at one of Ophelia's jokes and splashing in the tub.

"I will get right to it, as I can tell that everyone has better things to do. The Royal Family has requested your presence at Wenmouth Castle. They have received the news from the Blue Dragon Clerics about

the new advancements in Runecrafting that you have made, and as such you have been officially reassigned to Wenmouth University."

The Royal Family had technical leadership of all things secular in the Golden Dragon Nation, but their actual power was extremely limited these days. The President was chosen from among the Royal Princes, but that was about as far as their actual power went.

Karl strongly suspected that they hadn't had control of the military in generations, and most of the nation turned to the church to get things done before the Elites existed.

"Do you know how long they expect me to be there? As I recall, it's only a little over a hundred kilometres down the shore to Wenmouth." Karl asked.

"Indefinite deployment. I believe that they want you to work with the weapons teams after you speak with the King. Your ability to use Runecrafting has been deemed essential to the Overlord Rank Special Forces teams." The General explained.

"Oh, if that's the case, they could have just brought me stuff."

The General shook his head. "The University is trying to develop better equipment for them. They have also called in foreign experts with skill books that we are hoping you can use. I didn't get all the details, but apparently it relates to one of your skills, even if the skill isn't relevant to you personally."

Karl nodded. "I think I see where this is going. Well, that's a bit of a commute, but it's manageable if I travel with Hawk."

The General stared at Karl for a few seconds, hoping for an explanation. Then he realized that Karl was planning to come home to the Capital at the end of the workdays, and his pet was faster than a bus or car.

"There are accommodations arranged for you at the Royal Palace. If that is unsatisfactory, we can arrange some at the University, but security policy requests that you remain in the city." The General replied carefully.

He was not an Elite, but a political officer, and a man in his position had long since learned to be cautious in situations where a casual outburst could lead to his death.

Karl smiled at the nervous General. "If that's how it is, that's how it is. I'm not trying to make things hard for you, I simply didn't know about the security rules. A room at the palace should be fine. But there is one minor issue. You see, the group here has sworn a holy oath not to leave each other behind, and to please the Red Dragon God at a minimum once every three months.

So, going alone to the Palace could pose some issues. If we can all go, or if an apartment can be procured in the city for us, that would solve many issues."

Tessa smirked as the General tried to think of a way to make this work. With his current speed and strength, Karl could run back in under three hours. Or, if he rode Hawk, he could likely make it in thirty minutes. Unless he was going to be doing something to please the Red Dragon, that should be more than close enough to keep his oath. It wasn't as if they got punished if someone stopped for a shower before leaving for a mission.

But being out of the Capital for a while sounded interesting. None of them had never seen the Royal Palace before, other than in pictures. The only issue was that at some point a situation would inevitably arise where Cara and Lotus were left unattended in a palace full of ancient treasures and rare plants.

Karl was wealthy, but probably not wealthy enough to buy his way out of that disaster.

"I think that we can make it work. I will bring you all to the Palace, and we can explain the situation, then arrange a longer-term room in the city or the University compound. Unfortunately, there is no major Cathedral in Wenmouth, as it is the secular seat of the nation. But the Palace will gladly host the High Priestesses in suitable accommodations."

He was clearly mentally calculating the number of apartments that they would need, so Karl decided to cut him off before he got too far.

"We are accustomed to travelling together, so there is no need to arrange different units for everyone. One large suite with multiple bedrooms is fine." Tessa and Dana nodded in agreement, and the General sighed in relief. "That makes it a bit easier. I can arrange one of the foreign dignitary suites for you. They're set up for ten guests, and that should be enough for your group to be comfortable."

That was when Karl noticed that Thor and Rae were both in human form, and with the two voices that could be heard from the bath, the General was assuming they needed rooms for at least seven.

The fact that he hadn't asked about the obviously not human group members was startling, but perhaps it was just part of his job to not ask the awkward questions.

Chapter 695 Wenmouth Castle

The General nodded in satisfaction as the basic details were settled. "How long will you need to pack up for a week-long trip? We can leave later in the evening if you prefer. It is safe enough with your group in the bus." He offered.

"I think we should be able to get ready for a trip within the next hour. We all have a fully functional System interface, so we keep the majority of our stuff in our inventory. Other than the clothing and personal items we wouldn't want to take into combat with us, of course."

The General chuckled. "We can provide clothing for the meeting with the King. Nobody owns the traditional cultural outfits anymore, and they're still the dress code for the Throne Room."

Karl laughed. "You mean canvas pants and a miner's apron? I come from the Lithium Mines, our traditional wear is a bit unsuitable for court."

The General smiled. "I would imagine. No, the traditional Royal outfits are actually quite militaristic, from the founding days of the nation, when the entire territory was overrun with monsters and magical beasts."

Lotus and Ophelia came out of the bath in their armour, and went to grab a few items from the bedroom. Karl never left anything lying around, so he just activated [Bestial Raiment] to give himself a proper travelling outfit instead of his casual silk house clothes.

He stood to encourage everyone to get moving, and the General did a double take.

"That tabard. Where did you get it?" He asked.

Karl looked down. The spell had given him black drake scale mail armour under silver chest and leg plates, completed with the gold trimmed and tasselled Darklight Host War Champion tabard.

"Oh, it's actually a spell, not a physical tabard. It's supposed to pick what is best for the situation, and apparently the system thinks I need to impress someone. I got it during a little trip to the past when I fought a duel as Champion for the Darklight Host." Karl explained.

The man began to choke until Tessa thumped him on the back. "Thank you, High Priestess. I was somewhat unprepared for that answer. You see, we might have a small issue. The King himself wears a silver trimmed Darklight Host War Champion Tabard. I don't know what the policy is for wearing a golden one, it's never come up in the past."

Karl shrugged. "If it helps, I earned it. For a brief time, I was the Bunga City Champion, until I passed the title to the Bronze Dragon Orthos so I could continue on my mission."

Tessa thumped Karl on the head. "You can't just casually say things like that. Look, now you've broken him."

She wasn't lying. The man was simply staring straight ahead as he tried and failed to process the news.

After a few seconds, he slowly blinked, sighed, grumbled to himself, then shook his head and straightened his back.

"Well, we can sort it all out once we get to the Palace. The bus is waiting outside the building. Please follow me, if you are all ready."

Rae and Thor both returned to their spaces to rest because riding on a bus was boring and bouncy, which left only the humans to suffer.

The General didn't even seem to notice that they had vanished, and simply got everyone seated in the plush seats of the transport, which was set up like a tour bus, or possibly a high-end RV. Karl had seen videos where some of the Elite Idols lived and toured in vehicles like that while their shows were on tour, and that was what this interior reminded him of.

The bus began to trundle down the street and the General finally relaxed a little. His primary objective was nearly complete, and the requested Elite was on his way to the Palace. The rest was someone else's problem after they arrived.

A noise to his left caused Karl to turn, and in front of him was every young man and housewife's fantasy. A maid. An actual living, working maid in the Royal Palace uniform.

Oh, the number of times that he wished they lived a life luxurious enough to afford one so that he didn't have to do dishes or stand on the chair to dust the upper corners of the room.

Once they reached the edge of town, Hawk pushed the restrictions of his space to the limit to appear five hundred metres in the air. He could finally stretch his wings, and he was determined not to agree to remain inside and not scare the humans in the next city.

They could get used to him.

"Sir, I believe we might have an issue. There is a blue phoenix overhead, and the bird is definitely tracking us." The driver of the bus quietly informed the General.

"That's not an issue. And he's actually a Ghostfire Thunderbird. One of my bonded partners." Karl explained, shocking both soldiers.

"You can hear that?" The General asked.

"I can also hear the change in your heartbeat." Karl agreed, choosing the way that Sybil had described her overly sensitive hearing.

He could, if he paid attention, but Karl was much better at tuning out background noise than the formerly deaf Rogue.

While the General worked to come up with a response, the maid was scrutinizing their outfits. "Sir, you are suitably dressed, as are the Murim Battlemage and the High Priestesses. But might I ask the Titanic Berserker to accompany me to the back to change to formal armour?"

Karl nodded and gestured to Ophelia, right before Rae dropped a pile of silk in her arms, pure smugness radiating through her thoughts.

[They're going to make her wear a dress under her armour. This will be hilarious.] The Bloodbath Spider chuckled.

[And that's exactly what you gave her, isn't it?]

[Yep. It's pretty, and it will go well with whatever shiny bits of armour she has.]

Ophelia sighed, resigned to her fate as she looked at the lace sleeves visible on the black dress Rae had offered up for this fiasco.

Chapter 696 Rules and Customs

Dana leaned against Karl's side and smiled.

"I wonder how many people fall for the maid bit? Well, I'm sure she's actually doing the job. But even I can see through her power shielding." She giggled.

Karl shrugged. "Well, she's a Commander Rank Mage, which isn't too shocking. Aren't Ladies' Maids supposed to be like guards in cute uniforms, when soldiers or male bodyguards would be inappropriate?"

The General chuckled and shook his head. "How much do you know about the Royal Family that didn't come from a Palace Drama novel or movie?"

Karl thought about it for a second. "Add the four, carry the one... That would be precisely zero."

That didn't shock him. The Royal Family had been quiet for a long time.

"The current King is an Overlord Rank mage, classically trained. The Palace itself is more akin to a mage tower in function than the palaces in storybooks. You won't see any imperial harem, no gathering of useless fluff Nobles. Instead, Ranking is strictly power-based. While you are there, you will be accorded courtesy due your ranks as Royal and Monarch Ranked Elites, second only to the Elders and the Royal Family themselves.

Despite all our efforts, the Royal Family has proven to be incompatible with the System, with few exceptions. I believe you met Prince Axel, who is now an Overlord after advancing during the defence of Burlowbig."

Karl almost didn't recognize the town name. Nobody used the actual name of the Capital. Honestly, they really should just change it at this point.

The General continued.

"There are a few minor Princes who have System compatibility, but none of them have managed to make it past Ascended, which seems a waste at their age. So, without System links, it could be difficult to judge relative power rankings. Many struggle, so we are used to it. Very few will take offence if you get noble rankings a little wrong as an outsider.

If someone does take extreme offence for some reason, standard international rules apply. You can request a Champion to represent you in a duel to first blood. It would be unthinkable for the men to challenge one of the ladies, but attempting to flirt or pressure a pretty woman into a marriage contract does lead to the occasional fight.

It might seem uncivilized, but it is a time-honoured tradition to show off for their peers."

Dana laughed. "Oh, that could end badly. Are you privy to the events surrounding the first Commander Rank anomaly in Newbon?"

The General shook his head. "I have the clearance, but I am afraid I was never given a briefing."

Dana nodded in understanding. It wasn't that he wasn't allowed to know, it simply wasn't relevant to his job.

"Suffice it to say that challenging Monarch Karl to a duel will only lead them to crying bloody tears of rage."

Now both the General and the driver looked intrigued.

Karl winked at the General and shrugged. "The current strongest ability I have is [Nullify], and I have the physical strength to open-handed slap a Royal Rank Hill Giant to death in a single unarmed strike."

The driver began to laugh. "I can see it now. The mages would fail to do anything at all before they were slapped unconscious. Utterly humiliating, and it would crush their chances to impress the ladies."

Lotus giggled. "That's assuming that he gives them enough time. Compared to the rest of us, he is insanely fast. Not even my cuddle bear can keep up."

"I heard that!" Ophelia shouted from the back of the bus, presumably the bedroom where she was changing.

She came out a moment later with a golden chest plate over the black dress that Rae had given her, and golden Vambraces visible under the sleeves. Karl could see the outline of leg armour under the skirt, so there was a full suit of armour, not just the decorative bits, and her boots were similarly gold armoured with a low heel, though still taller than most riding or military boots.

Karl smiled because he knew that heeled boots with armour was a pet peeve of hers, and Ophelia had likely refused to wear this particular armour set for some time just on those grounds. The maid bowed to the General. "Sir, all guests have brought appropriate attire of their own. No distribution of assets was necessary."

Then she turned to Karl. "Sir, your party is ready for the meeting in the Throne Room once you arrive. Please maintain these outfits with weapons in your inventory or in their scabbards. Exposed weapon scabbards will be sealed at the gates with a ribbon, and checked on your way out."

That would make it obvious who drew their weapons, without actually stopping anyone. A sensible precaution, should there be some issue. Logic said that it would be prohibited to draw weapons under most circumstances in the Palace.

Karl smiled at the maid. "What might your specialty be? I am curious about the training you have had to qualify for such a position."

The phrasing was awkward, but the Maid didn't take offence. "I graduated from the Academy three years ago. Since then, I have served at the Palace. My specialty spell is invisibility. That is true of all the Maids, and a requirement for the job."

Karl nodded and activated [Follow Me Little One] at once to offer the mage [Silent Movement].

She slowly smiled. "That is quite the gift you have, Monarch Karl."

"It really is, isn't it. I just need to make time at a Skill Library to gather a few more spells, and it will really shine."

The General was lost, and looking expectantly at the pair.

"The Monarch transferred me a new spell. Silent Movement. Incredibly useful for my job."

The General sighed and ran his hands through his thinning hair.

"Great, just what we need. They already sneak up on me all the time," he muttered.

The maid winked at Ophelia, who was struggling not to laugh. "You will need to practice your poker face, Princess. Your hearing is far beyond average, and it's polite to pretend that you can't hear people talking to themselves."

The General harrumphed and then turned to look out the windshield, where Hawk had swooped low, nearly a kilometre ahead of them.

He was just terrifying mice for fun, nothing that might be a threat to the bus had been found along the route.

Chapter 697 Handoff

Hours later, Hawk returned to his space as the bus pulled up to the well-guarded walls of the Palace, much to the General's relief. He had been the butt of the jokes between the Princesses and that vicious tongued maid for most of the trip, and he was ready to get out and go to bed.

As soon as the bus stopped, he stepped down to greet the Captain of the Guard with a grateful smile.

"Captain. I have delivered Monarch Karl and his four Holy Oath bonded companions. They are required to work together, by oath to the Red Dragon. Please find accommodations for them, I will be retiring for the evening." The General announced.

The Captain was about to object that it was not his job to get guests settled, but the General was already politely retreating, and the two were old friends. He could do this much when the General was clearly stressed out by whatever had happened that day.

He stepped on the bus to find four Royal Rank ladies, dressed for their imminent meeting with the King, and a Monarch Ranked man that was dangerously close to becoming as wide as he was tall.

Whatever workout routine that Monarch was using, the Guard Captain wanted to know it.

From Karl's perspective, the Captain was entirely too tall. In a way, he was similar to Professor Tank, at slightly over 190 centimetres tall, and impressive in his armour.

However, he was much more slender, where the Professor's muscles seemed to have muscles of their own. With the pale blonde hair in a precise military cut, the Captain was basically the poster boy for handsome playboy guardsmen in movies. Karl stood to greet him, and the Royal Rank warrior nodded politely.

"Monarch, it's a pleasure to meet you. I am Guard Captain Scruggs, and I will escort you to your suite. We have been made aware of your situation, and a unit is ready for your team.

The bus is not allowed inside through this gate and will proceed to the parking area once you have all disembarked."

They stepped out of the bus, and Karl noticed that the guards all towered over the group.

"Man, what are they feeding them in the Palace." Lotus muttered, craning her neck to look anyone in the face.

The guards laughed. "It's a regional thing. My guess is that the three of you all come from the south, while the Red Priestess and the Berserker are from the west, correct?"

Karl, Dana and Lotus all nodded, while Ophelia shook her head. "I'm from the northwest, near the Hill Giant border." She explained.

"Ah, that makes sense. All the guards are recruited either from the Eastern Nations, or the Tundra region of Agelworthel, where the Hill Giant and Mountain Giant nations meet. It's not uncommon for men in either region to get over two metres tall. Do you know a Berserker named Tank? He's from my hometown of Manchescast, and he's a monster of a man."

Ophelia smiled. "He's still a Professor at the Academy, no matter how he claims it's just a part-time position."

That excessive size issue could be annoying, Karl decided. If he wasn't using a skill to make himself taller, most of the men in the Palace would stand a full head taller than he did. Fortunately, he still had Dana and Lotus around, and they were both struggling to claim that they were a metre and a half tall.

Dana poked Karl in the side. "You were thinking about activating [Brutality] so that you were taller than everyone again, weren't you?"

Tessa stuck her tongue out at Karl. "He totally was. He got spoiled in Newbon, with the skill up all the time, so he was the tallest person in the room."

The Guard Captain looked confused, so Karl demonstrated, growing to a little over two hundred seventy centimetres tall.

"Goddess, that is a terrifying skill. I don't know what they would mistake you as, but it wouldn't be human. Unfortunately, if you want to keep that active, we will have to change suites. You're too wide, and possibly too tall, to fit through the doors in the humans sections." Guard Captain Scruggs laughed.

Karl shrunk back to his usual size, and noted that his [Bestial Raiment] spell had become slightly more ornate as it adjusted. There were thin swirling gold patterns on the rolled edges of the silver plate portions now.

Two guards stepped up beside the Captain and nodded silently.

"The King is ready to see you. Please follow me, we will go directly to the Throne Room and then the maids will escort you to your suite after." Captain Scruggs informed them.

They were led through the winding corridors of the palace, which Karl noted were deliberately curved, though they were intended to look straight. Strategically placed curtains and drapery hid the effect from casual inspection, but he could feel the difference as they moved.

They had also gone down at least one level, though they hadn't crossed any stairs.

A pair of massive golden doors with a scene of dragons working to build a city barred their way after ten minutes of walking and dozens of turns. It was an absolute masterpiece, and six metres tall. "When you reach the entry, please place a bare hand on the door, and the magic will announce you automatically. It is a security measure." The guard escort whispered just loud enough for Karl's group to hear.

After a few seconds, the door was cracked open, and with a gesture to proceed by the guard, Karl stepped forward.

{Former Lord of Bunga City, Grand War Champion of the Darklight Host, Packmaster Monarch Karl, Bane of the Giant Nations, Hero of the Beast Gods and Orcs, has arrived.} Boomed through the room as Karl's boot heels clicked across the stone floor.

Everyone was staring at him, and Karl could smell the fear in the air as he made his way to the mark on the floor. There, he stopped to kneel before the King, mimicking the gestures of thousands of previous visitors over the centuries long history of the nation.

For the Nobles and powerful residents, greeting the King had become a well practised routine, to the point where the stone was worn with a single knee print and a boot mark at exactly the right spot.

Karl repeated the gesture as the General had explained, with a military salute, placing his fist to his chest.

"Your Majesty, I have come to your call."

Chapter 698 Throne Room

For a few seconds, the King just stared at Karl, wondering what this young man had done in his life to get a list of titles like that. The presence of the Darklight Host Grand War Champion Tabard unsettled him, but the other titles were no less fearsome.

"Rise, Monarch Karl. The Crown recognizes your contributions to the nation."

Then the King made a gesture, calling the others forward.

{Royal High Priestess of the Red Dragon, Tessa, Hero of the Piltash Satyrs, has entered.}

{Royal High Priestess of the Green Dragon, Grand Healer Lotus, has entered.}

{Murim Battlemage Princess Dana, Epic Summoner of the Golden Dragon Nation, Defender of the Borderlands, has entered.}

{Titanic Berserker Princess Ophelia, Champion of the Dire Bears, has entered.}

While everyone got a title, most of them weren't quite so grand as the ones that Karl had gotten. Well, grand sounding, anyhow. Most of the others directly related to recent events, while the majority of how it had introduced Karl had to do with his accomplishments in the distant past.

The ladies stopped one pace behind Karl, as they hadn't been personally summoned, but had accompanied him here, and politely curtsied for a moment before the King motioned for them to rise.

"Rise, Princesses and High Priestesses. Welcome to the Royal Palace. We appreciate your prompt reply to our summons, as this is a matter of most urgent national security.

As you may have been made aware, the level of our conventional weaponry has been falling behind, due to the resurgence of the System, which has so far proven incompatible with most technological weapons. Theoretically, there is no reason that the spells should not work, but in practice, there are many limitations, and the results have been less than favourable.

As such, we have summoned the Monarch Karl here to develop the practical applications of his Runecrafting skill, in order to produce a batch of weapons for our nation's most powerful Elites."

None of that was anything that they hadn't heard before, but to the other people in the room it was new information, and they all began to give Karl greedy looks, hoping to get something from him while he was here.

If he could make weapons suitable for an Overlord, then they could all benefit, as well as the factions that they represented.

The King continued. "Beginning tomorrow morning, you will be working with the Forgemasters and the Artificers to develop their project. But fear not, the crown will reimburse you handsomely for your skills.

The maids will show you to your suite, and we shall be looking forward to the reports of your success."

That appeared to be a dismissal of sorts, and Karl saw the guards behind the King subtly gesture that he no longer needed to remain at formal attention.

A group of ten maids came to escort Karl and his team to their suite, which seemed a little excessive. But if that was the way that they did things here, Karl wasn't going to complain. Half of the maids were Commanders, he noticed. However, the other half were not mages or system users at all. There was a clear distinction between the two, but not as if the less powerful ones were trainees. More like, the Commanders were hostesses in Maid uniforms.

"Monarch, Princesses. This is your suite. Please allow us to show you around." The Commander Ranked maid standing closest to Karl informed them.

The suite was on an upper level of the Palace, and Karl could see out the window that they had a great view of the courtyard. There were ten bedrooms down hallways off either side of the large main room. Three large ones on one side, seven smaller ones on the other.

The maids briefly hesitated, as if wondering how exactly this group should be split, then began to lead the ladies to the left, and Karl to the right, putting him in the furthest of the larger rooms.

It made sense, both with their Ranks and the gender split, but Karl waited to see what the others' reaction would be to their rooms as he was led to the end of the hall.

"Your suite, Monarch. Is there anything else you need before dinner? I can have a bath run, or perhaps you would prefer a bathing assistant? We also have trained massage therapists available any time."

[Bathing Assistant.] Cara mocked in his mind, leaving no doubt that she hadn't given up on her quest to make sure Thor was the next to find a partner.

Karl winked at the Maid. "I think that someone might object if I chose a bathing assistant, but I will have a bath run. What is the dress code for dinner?"

"Dinner will be in the informal guest dining room. Semi casual is fine. I will be back in the morning with your assigned Maid for the duration of your stay." She replied.

The Commander Rank mage in maid uniform left the room, leaving the unawakened one behind to run the bath and set out towels, slippers and a robe for Karl.

"Are you certain you don't need a bath assistant? It's part of my job, and not what you might be thinking." She whispered, blushing slightly.

Cara appeared on the bathroom floor and stared down the maid, who stared back in confusion, not understanding where the beast came from. Was she being attacked by the guest?

"Cara here is protective. She thinks I shouldn't be in intimate situations with women who aren't going to cuddle her."

The maid giggled. "Well, she is a beauty, I can see why they would want to."

Cara had lost interest now that her point was made, and was about to dump an entire bottle of bubbles into the bath when a voice from the other room stopped her.

"Don't even think about it." Dana's voice shouted from down the hall.

Cara froze, wondering how she had been caught. Then she smirked as she realized that it wasn't about her bath plans. The maids had just offered to help the ladies bathe.

There was laughter from the other rooms, and the maid bowed politely. "If the Monarch and his friends prefer privacy, we can wait outside."

Karl shook his head. "I am certain they will accept the help. That shout was for me, not for their assistants."

"The tribulations of a married man." The maid agreed gently, before relieving Cara of the bottle of bubbles to pour a measured amount into the tub.

Chapter 699 Bubbles

Once the bubbles were in the bath, Cara hopped in the metre square tub with a small splash. That was Karl's signal that it was safe to enter, and he settled in slowly, enjoying the scented bubbles.

"Oh, I forgot the washcloth." He muttered, annoyed.

"Here you go, Sir."

"Thank you."

Karl turned left and saw that Cara was floating belly up, splashing water on her belly fur and making happy noises that were making the maid laugh quietly.

"She really does love the bubbles. I almost feel bad about limiting the amount that I put in now." The maid commented.

Cara waved her front paw dismissively. She wasn't going to be in the bath long enough to run out of these ones, she just wanted to smell like the soap.

"I'm sure she will be fine. If the scent fades, I'll just have another bath run for her."

[Pure Luxury.] Cara agreed.

Of course, the tub in their apartment was a one touch operation, and it would fill with the preset temperature of water and selected bath products just by turning the tap on, but somehow it was more luxurious to order someone to press the button for you.

Before they got out, Karl scrubbed Cara down, and gently lathered her wings, soaking the smell of bubble bath into the Void Badger, who then ran off to the main room the moment that a towel touched her fur.

Karl accepted the bath robe from the maid with a bit of confusion, then realized that it was intended to be used as a towel, and they would pat you dry through it.

Very wholesome. Not at all likely to get him strangled in his sleep by Dana.

Once he was dry, he changed to one of Rae's branded polo shirts and silk house pants with slippers.

The maid stared at him in shock.

"You have a set of system linked and bonded casual wear? How does that even happen?" She muttered, mostly to herself.

"They're made by a Bloodbath Spider with her own silk. They naturally equip when they're worn for the first time. Tell me, have you been tested for system compatibility?" Karl replied.

The maid nodded. "Just last week they came around with system linked rings, to ensure that none of us would advance and become an internal security threat."

Which implied that those who did gain a class were sent somewhere else. Probably not fired, as they wouldn't want hard feelings or potential Elites running loose. But they were likely in the Academy or with the army instead.

There was a soft knock at the door, which was opened by one of the other maids to reveal a Palace Guard in full armour with his visor down.

"Monarch, you have a ... personal guest." The guard announced.

He was clearly unhappy about the situation, but there was resignation in his voice that said he had already tried and failed to stop it from happening.

"Please send them in."

An unassuming older man walked in behind the guard, and Karl instantly noticed the hint of blue scales on his pointed ears. Transformed Dragons and stronger Dragon Priests always had some sign of their nature.

Come to think of it, he wondered what had changed on Tessa and Lotus. It wasn't on their face or hands, so he hadn't noticed it, but they definitely had scales by now.

The man's face was unfamiliar, but his aura was not. "Librarian Gareth, I wasn't expecting to see you here." Karl greeted the Royal Rank blue dragon.

The visage of an aging man shifted back to the middle-aged librarian that Karl had seen last time, but dressed in a sharp blue business suit, and Gareth smiled at him.

"Finally, I found you. You wouldn't believe the route that these guards wanted to take me on. The exploration of the anomaly in Newbon was quite successful, by the way. I have the documents in my inventory if you would like to go over them tonight."

Karl shook his head. "Not tonight. But you're just in time for dinner. Guardsman, thank you for delivering the Librarian to me."

The guard nodded and closed the door as he left.

"What brings you here today? Surely, you didn't go to all this effort just to bring me a copy of the investigation records when I was at the Capital until today." Karl asked Gareth once the door was secure.

The dragon shook his head.

"No, I heard that you have a way of awakening a previously unknown System Function, and I wanted to know what the method was. But that's not the important part. I have assistants for you. Acolytes that don't have a trade skill yet, so you can teach them Runecrafting, and they will assist you during your endeavours here.

Can you believe that they wouldn't tell me what it is? I'm here to bring you assistants, and they wouldn't tell me what the project was on national security grounds."

The dragon was clearly pouting now, upset that he was so obviously being denied knowledge.

Karl gave him a sympathetic pat on the shoulder. "You will find out soon enough. Think of it like the anticipation before a holiday present."

From the hallway, Lotus began to laugh.

"Blue Dragons never wait to open their presents."

Gareth rolled his eyes at her. "We do so. We don't touch our solstice presents until precisely dusk on the evening of the solstice."

Karl nodded. That sounded about right. The tradition was dawn the morning after.

"You said you have Acolytes. I don't suppose you know where they might be right now?" He asked.

Gareth shrugged. "They were left at the University dorms. The building closest to the Library. That's where we came into the city. The Dean of the University promised he would ensure that they made it to work on time, but he wouldn't tell me anything either, so I came to see you."

"You know, if I tell you now, you're stuck here until the project is over so that the details don't get leaked. They won't even let me leave the city freely." He reminded the dragon.

Gareth sighed. "What a wasted day."

"It doesn't have to be."

{Pack Master Karl Offers Knowledge} Skill [Lightning Zone] will be transferred to the curious whelp Gareth.

Chapter 700 Chat Log Love

Gareth began to do a happy dance around the room, confusing the maids. Then they began to laugh as he took Cara by the front paws, and they began to dance together.

"What did you teach him?" Lotus asked.

"Lightning Zone. It's a great skill for blue dragons."

The maids did their best to keep their professional expressions at the sight of a dragon dancing with a Void Badger. The only thing working in their favour was that Cara was still wet and shaking drops of water on the stone floor as she was spun around the room.

Thinking about having to clean up that mess before someone tripped made it much easier not to laugh.

The happy pair stopped dancing, and Gareth sighed. "Perhaps I will stay for dinner, then. If I can't know what you will be doing here, then at the very least, I can get a meal for my trouble delivering the Acolytes."

{The Overlords will tell you when it's not a secret anymore.} Karl sent as a system message.

That had been part of Gareth's original purpose here, to awaken the messaging function. That was the only System Function that the dragon wouldn't have had operational yet.

"Oh, a new way to communicate. And it comes with a log. This really is much more convenient for research than talking."

Karl was afraid to find out what the chat logs of the Librarians would look like after even a single day of group discussions. They spent all day discussing the research subject, and without the need to wait for each other, they could just bombard the group with their thoughts in text form.

Tessa and Dana came out together, both in casual wear. For the Priestess that was a simple red robe, for Dana it was cargo pants and a hoodie.

Karl turned to Gareth, who was wearing a blue business suit in this form.

"I have wondered, what are the rules on Cleric outfits? Tessa and Lotus always wear robes, but you seem comfortable in a suit." He asked the dragon.

Gareth smiled at the two Priestesses. "There actually aren't any rules unless we're doing official work, or inside a cathedral. It's just a tradition that we always wear our God's colour.

Nature Priestesses usually change outfits under the robes for different situations, since they've got so many pockets sewn into their robes. But for the Red Dragon, the robes are official uniform in battle and at the Orphanages. So, they would normally be worn while travelling, in case there was a fight."

Tessa nodded. "And dragons tend to underestimate humans, so I would guess that bright blue suit was intended to be camouflage for himself while he was in the city, to appear more like one of the common people."

Gareth nodded happily. "Yes, it was quite effective. They even thought that I was a petitioner when I arrived at the gates."

Karl strongly suspected that they were humouring him, as Guard Captain Scruggs would have noticed instantly that it was a dragon in front of him, and not a human. But how could he say anything when the Librarian was so pleased with himself?

Lotus made her way over to the main room before flopping down on a plush chair. "Did you at least bring us cute acolytes? We were going to go to the Whiton Temple at the end of our last trip, but it got cut short by the Archbishop and his friend." She asked.

"His friend?" Gareth replied, unsure how to take that description. The Archbishop had subordinates, assistants, faithful followers. But he wasn't aware of any actual friends.

Karl smiled at the confused dragon. "She means Nacht, the Totem Rank Black Dragon."

Gareth snapped his fingers and waved his hand vaguely at Karl. "I knew it. I just knew it. They pretend like they just happen to be in the same city, but I knew that they were actually friends."

Karl chuckled at the dragon's overstimulated antics. "They've been travelling together and having daily meetings for over a month now. Ever since they were in Newbon. I believe you met them there as well. I seem to recall that Nacht said something about being given directions to find us, and only you would have remembered where we were going."

Lotus' maid whispered something to her, and the petite cleric moved towards the door. "Dinner time. You know, we really should have gotten those Acolytes from the temple and brought them with us. They could have done all the alarm clock work for us. This is very convenient." She declared, while her maid tried very hard not to laugh.

The stone corridors of the Palace were designed to be deliberately deceiving, and the entire complex was carved out of a mountain, giving many dozens of kilometres of tunnels for visitors to get lost in. But the maids knew the directions very well, and Karl quickly realized that the portions where they were intended to stay were close together, so that even if they wandered, they wouldn't actually get lost.

The informal dining hall looked more like the Capital Cathedral mess hall than Karl had expected, given the opulent furnishings of the rest of the visitors' section of the Palace. It was simple, with banners of past leaders and Generals on the walls, giving a sense of history to the room otherwise filled with long wooden tables.

Each could seat close to a hundred, but there were only a few dozen people in the room so far, all gathered in small groups and widely spaced.

That was fine by Karl. He had an early day tomorrow, and there would be plenty of time for socializing before he had to leave again.

Their dinner was served as soon as they sat, and Karl couldn't help but compare it to what he had gotten used to. It was similar to what was served at the apartment tower, but the chef had a distinct style here, with a preference for bold and spicy flavours.

It was definitely different, but Karl could see that Lotus was making mental notes, and there would certainly be some sort of spicy lentil dish in his near future.