

Beast Master 711

Chapter 711 Only Five?

Karl leapt up from the ground level to stand on the catwalk and inspect the new arrivals, who all waved happily at him.

"I thought that there were ten of you coming?" He asked.

"Security rejected five of us because of family political connections." One of the girls, a tomboy with a crew cut, replied.

Or perhaps that was a very effeminate boy?

Karl checked the system interface for the truth.

{Name} Marissa (Prefers Mark)

Well, that was easy enough. He should start just keeping the name overlays up over everyone. Oh, yes, that made his life so much easier.

"So, Mark. You're saying that they picked the five of you because nobody would miss you if you were stuck here for an indeterminate amount of time?" The Acolytes looked panicked for a moment, then shook their head. "No, the other five had high-ranking Ministers for parents. The Royal Security team was concerned that they might pass information back to their families that could be leveraged in Parliament."

One of the other girls, Janet the system said her name was, held out a tome as a peace offering. "We rescued the books they brought. All the Acolytes sent back had a few with them. We were supposed to give them to you as a goodwill gesture." She explained.

Other than Mark, everyone was short, dark skinned and had long black hair. Mark's was just cut differently, and Karl was beginning to wonder if the Head Librarian had chosen this group as a form of petty vengeance, knowing that Karl would find it nearly impossible to tell them all apart.

Then he noticed something else, a twitch under the robes of the short-haired Acolyte. Mark definitely had a tail.

Karl tried not to make a show of scenting the air, and found that they didn't have a scent at all. They were definitely disguised.

But Soul Sight showed pure and clear energy, no signs of the corruption that came with being a fake or terrible person.

[Do you want me to dispel them?] Cara asked.

[No, I think I know what happened. They're using a Human Transformation spell to make beastkin Clerics look like humans. The Librarian must be trolling the Royals with her choice of Acolytes.]

Remi giggled in her space. [I bet they annoyed her about something, so she sent them all demihumans. Aren't the Royals supposed to be like, 'rah, rah go humans'?]

Karl laughed to himself at the description. He already knew it was just a front, as so many of the ranking members of the nation were dragons, but officially, Remi was right. The Royal Family promoted the Golden Dragon Nation as a human nation.

That was about ninety-five percent true. But that last five percent had a unique knack for ending up in the same spot as Karl. Or perhaps it was the other way around.

Karl took the book from Janet before the hesitation grew awkwardly long, and admired the cover. [Introduction to Inscription] was the first book they had offered, and Remi was ready to come out and steal it from him if he didn't turn it over quickly.

"Thank you, Janet. That will be very useful in the future."

One after another, they handed him books. They were all crafting based, but Karl noticed that Janet had another one out, likely the book that one of the others was supposed to present to him as their welcoming gift.

He returned to the start of the group and picked up the book from her hands. {Learn Skill} [Smite]?

{Skill Learned}

Karl patted her on the head, and smiled as the Acolyte's cheeks turned bright red.

"Thank you very much."

He accepted the next book in the line, [Poison Arrow] from the Acolyte named Mabel and repeated the process. Only Mabel didn't have as much self-control, and when he patted her head, the disguise broke and her ears broke free, twitching happily.

"Unfair. You knew, didn't you?" She pouted.

They must have been wagering on who would be the first to fail.

"That you're all beastkin? Yeah. You forget that I am a Monarch-Ranked Beast Master." Karl agreed, before moving on to Rene, who handed him a book of [Life Leech].

"Now this will come in useful. Imbuing this on a weapon will improve the survivability of our Elites by a large margin." Karl thanked her.

The Acolyte known as Rene freed her ears before Karl even took the book, revealing fluffy black cat ears and the twitching of a tail under her robes.

She passed him a book of [Talisman], a Shaman spell that was essentially a devolved form of Runecrafting. But the knowledge that he gained from learning the skill added an incredible amount of

useful practical information to his knowledge base. Finally, Mark handed him a book of [Blessed Item], the skill that the Clerics used to create Holy Weapons.

"Seriously?" Karl asked.

Mark nodded. "The Chief Librarian herself wrote you that copy at the Archbishop's request."

Handing that skill to someone outside the High Priesthood was unheard of. It was not an Epic Ranked skill, but it was the exclusive skill of the Clergy, and it would never do to have someone passing out fake holy weapons that weren't aligned to one of their gods.

"I will use it well. And so will most of you." Karl replied with a smile.

"Sir, we don't know the skill." Mark reminded him.

"I will fix that later. First, say hello to Chief Engineer Fizzspark, who is responsible for ranged weapons, and Forgemaster Granite, in charge of melee weapons."

The Acolytes instinctively curtsied, before Mark caught himself and bowed.

Granite didn't miss the slip-up, but he didn't want them to be doing either on his behalf in the first place.

His gruff tone startled them all when he began to speak. "Right, good to meet you acolytes. Now, we have a lot of work to get done, so what are you all standing about for? Head down to the central clean room and get scrubbed in for your lessons."

The Acolytes ran off, used to being given orders, and the Dwarf smirked at Karl. "You're going to have your hands full with those ones, Monarch. They worship you like an Idol, and you haven't even started showing off yet."

Karl smiled. "I'm sure the novelty will wear off. But I should start teaching them the skills they'll need. There are only so many members of the Special Forces teams, and I will have to make their weapons personally. But these young ones will need to know the ways to make more flavours of weapons at lower Ranks."

Chapter 712 Blue Acolytes In Training

Karl joined the Acolytes in the central room and motioned for them to sit around one of the round tables.

"First up, you need two basic skills to be able to help with the job. [Life Leech] and [Holy Weapon]." He announced, then used [Follow Me, Little One] to transfer the skills.

He didn't have high hopes for Life Leech, but it transferred without issues. Blue Dragon Clerics had an affinity for knowledge, and even if it wasn't something that they would use, they had an easy time learning most skills.

Even when they didn't have Karl to just imprint it in their brain.

"That skill is spectacular. No wonder the Librarian likes you when she hates people in general." Janet whispered to herself, too low for the others to hear.

"You all can drop the disguise spells now. Keeping them active will use up energy that you're going to need by the time that we're done training you on these techniques." Karl insisted.

But before that, he had to try [Skill Merger] and see if he could come up with something.

If he combined [Runecrafting] with [Holy Weapon], what would happen?

It took an immense amount of focus to bring up two such technical skills at once, especially when he couldn't activate them in his mind to see the effect.

"Sir?" One of the Acolytes asked carefully.

"Give me a moment, I'm trying to mentally blend a pair of skills to teach you the basics because you can't use Runecrafting as a complete skill until Royal Rank. I don't know any of the subset skills that come before it, so I need to isolate a portion that will let you learn now, and not hinder your advancement."

Karl's answer had tails wagging furiously, and Cara was laughing so hard at the sight that Fizzspark nearly fell off her back.

Karl lost track of the time, but eventually, he had something workable. He had to eliminate ninety percent of the knowledge in Runecrafting, but with the knowledge from Holy Weapon, he had a new skill.

A skill he couldn't use.

[Trade Skill Already Known] The system informed him.

But he could visualize it in his mind, so he started with Mark. {Pack Master Karl offers Knowledge} Skill [Apprentice Runesmith] will be transferred to gentle pet Mark.

Mark frowned. "Why is the system making fun of me?"

Karl chuckled. "It does that to everyone when I use that skill. Did you accept the skill?"

Mark nodded. "Yes, it taught me Apprentice Runesmithing. It's incredible. This is precisely what we need to add Runes to weapons and make them better. Used with Holy Weapon or Life Leech to create a base enchantment..."

The Acolyte trailed off, seeing all the possibilities for future creations.

"Exactly. The smiths here are already turning out high-quality weapons. If you add Holy Weapon and Life Leech along with some enhancing Runes, we should have something that any Commander would drool over."

Behind Karl, Forgemaster Granite cleared his throat. "Before we get too far, is there some particular reason that the Church sent you a whole group of catgirls as Acolytes?"

Karl sighed and made a noncommittal gesture. "Yes and no. I am a Beast Master, so they're naturally drawn to me. But I suspect that the reason was more of a power play, a flex on the Royal Family.

They sent half the team away for being politically connected. But we still needed Acolytes, which left them no choice but to send the other five to us. The scans would have told them right away what the truth was, and it would have detected the transformation spell. Honestly, it's above our pay grade, and it's easier to just let them play their games while we make new smashing tools."

[Smashing Tools!] Thor cheered.

He really wanted one of those hammers. It would work great with his Gravity Slam skill in human form.

"Mark, can you use that skill you have to enhance bows? Or is it limited to metallic weapons?" Karl asked, changing the topic.

Mark thought about it for a bit, then nodded. "It should work fine on wooden weapons. It's more like I've got an introductory primer to the skill and basic runes. There aren't many restrictions, just a lot that I don't know yet."

"Well, if I can teach it to everyone, then we can start getting you all to work."

Karl sent the skill out to the other Acolytes, and the girls giggled as they read the message.

"Alright, we have more melee weapon users than ranged, so we will split the tasks. Who wants to do bows today? I need two volunteers?" Karl requested.

Janet and Mabel raised their hands. "Perfect, you two will do bows today. I wish I had a better written primer to help you get started, but I will write you out a handful of options for the base Runes. If I understand how this works correctly, you will need to add the Runes and the Spells as the weapon is

created, so you will have to work with the existing bowyers. They know how to actually make the bows, you know how to do the advanced enhancements. But because you're new, we will bring them in here where I can supervise everyone.

The other three of you will be with the smiths. Forgemaster Granite, if you would please pick someone patient for them to work with.

This is all new to everyone, but if they do it right, a Runesmith should be able to create magnificent enchantments."

Forgemaster Granite nodded.

"What is their path forwards after this?" He asked as he chose the three smiths for them to work with.

"Well, the advanced form of the knowledge should be a Dwarven Runemaster, but as none of them are Dwarves, I guess it's just a progression through the Ranks of Runesmith to Runemaster?" Karl guessed.

Mark nodded. "I think that's right. I can see the option in my system, and the next step is Journeyman Runesmith. But I can't buy it with skill points. It looks like the only option is to practice until this gauge is full."

Chapter 713 Hawk's Forge

At the mention of filling a set amount of progress, Forgemaster Granite began to laugh.

"So, it works like Blacksmith or Weaponsmith does as a System skill. You need a thousand points of progress to reach Journeyman. Not every creation will give you an advancement, but sometimes when you learn more than expected it will give you more than one point.

Now, it's all up to talent and time. If they're starting as Apprentices, it might be a year or more before they're Journeymen, and a decade before they are getting close to being called real Rune masters.

But lucky for us, the System will give them new bursts of knowledge when they advance."

That was the one saving grace for the new crafters of all sorts. If the system wasn't giving them knowledge, the entire craft that they had gotten a skill for might remain lost to time.

Before the Apprentices could head to their stations, Hawk came out to stand on top of the armoured glass enclosure of the clean room, startling everyone with his massive and majestic presence.

"What's up Hawk? Decided to say hello to everyone?" Karl asked.

[They don't know fire well enough.]

That explained it.

"My friend Hawk says that he's willing to help enlighten the smithy on the wonders that can come from Fire Magic." Karl explained, as Hawk began to draw mana into his body.

The fires of the forge began to flicker, then turn faintly blue as Runes appeared on the walls above the forge pits.

"What is he doing?" Granite gasped as he read what was appearing on the walls.

"It's something that I found written on the wall of a Dwarven Forge in a trial. He's improving the forges here with his innate Ghostfire ability. I don't know what it will do to the weapons, but you won't have to worry about the forges being hot enough for your alloys anymore." Karl joked.

But the Forgemaster was already out the door and headed for his forge station.

While there was no doubt that many of the others would be able to turn out high-quality weapons with a Ghostfire Forge, the Forgemaster himself could make a true masterpiece with this sort of quality equipment.

It was almost painful for a Dwarf to work with a human forge, no matter how much they insisted that technology made it just as good.

So, he happily tossed a handful of coal in the forge, not for fuel, but for the carbon that the steel would pick up as it was stuck in the ash bed to warm. One way or another, it needed to make its way into the alloy, and this was still the best way, even in a magical forge.

The blue light would take some getting used to, but the steel heated quickly, and the bellows kept the forge heat exactly where he wanted it to be.

"Monarch, how much of the Dwarven Forge did you record?" Granite asked as he realized the bellows were linked to the enchantment as well as the airflow.

"All of it, I hope. The city was damaged and abandoned, so there might have been more that wasn't carved into the building itself, but we got everything that was written on the walls and the forge base.

Is it working out alright?" Karl asked curiously.

"We will know in five minutes, but it looks promising so far!"

As the Forgemaster turned back to his work, Karl settled in to wait, and Hawk observed the smiths from the top of the clean room. They were so happy with his fire that the Ghostfire Thunderbird was beginning to see some logic behind Thor's 'help people all the time for no particular reason' logic.

The Forgemaster was making a mighty two-handed battleaxe, so Karl began to plan the Runic design to turn that weapon into a true masterpiece of their combined arts. One of the Overlord Ranked Berserkers would be over the moon with joy when they saw what Karl was turning out for them.

Life Steal would be the centrepiece of the effect, draining the enemy to restore their ally. Add to that some skill power enhancement, sharpness and a combination of reduced weight with increased inertia.

That would let the Overlord spin it like a toy, but the force behind the strikes would not be reduced the way that a lighter weapon would be.

The only issue was that Life Steal was ugly.

Not the runes for the ability. It was one of what the Runemaster's book had called the third path, unlinked runes. So, unlike the rest of the weapon, it was just a cluster of runes with no coherence or intricate patterning.

[Why not carve it into a gemstone, then put the stone in the axe? You can hide all the ugly that way.] Remi suggested.

Oh, that was a wonderful idea. If he just added a few more sets of Runes to link a gem setting to the rest of the inscription, it would be perfect.

He just needed to warn the Forgemaster.

"Master Granite. Please put a setting for a half-fist sized gem in the blade. I will need to set an enhanced stone to create one of the effects." Karl warned.

"Understood, Monarch. I know just how."

Karl thought about his pattern for a second. "Make that two gemstones, if possible."

If he put Life Leech on one side and Brutality on the other side, it would balance out the design, and an Overlord would get a seventy percent strength and size increase from the second buff.

Utterly terrifying.

Hawk dropped a few stones out of his space, and Karl showed them to Granite before he started the carving.

That part only took a few minutes a stone, as he wasn't trying to recreate the whole spell, only describe the effect well enough that it would merge with the rest of the Runes on the weapon.

"Runemaster, the axe is ready." Granite declared, half an hour after he had started to forge the axe.

It glowed faintly blue, the same colour as Hawk's flames, and there was a stone setting on either side, where he had embedded the two stones, ready for Karl's handiwork. Already, it would have three spell effects on it, from the forge and the stones. But they were just getting started.

Chapter 714 Berserker

Karl decided not to use tools, but to use a careful application of [Rend] on a pencil to carve the runes, in honour of Hawk's first skill. Somehow, it just felt right for Rend to make the first weapon that was imbued with Hawk's fire.

Hawk had chosen deep red fire element stones for the two spells, which should go well with the Runes when Karl was finished. The amount he wanted to add would stretch his skills to focus on all the effects at once. But with the gems completed separately, at least it lightened his load somewhat.

This might actually be why so many ancient weapons had enchanted gems. Purely practical reasons for the enchanter's.

With one long stroke, Karl wrote the runes across the entirety of the axe head, never once lifting the pencil, while continuously imbuing power and intent into them.

Then, with the last rune carved, he began to increase the energy level until he felt the two gems link at Commander Rank.

After that, it was smooth progress as the runes turned purple, before becoming a deep and rich ruby red.

The weapon gave off a sense of foreboding, as if simply looking at it threatened the life of the viewer. Most of the room was in hiding, only sneaking glances. But Blue Dragon Clerics weren't afraid of new knowledge, even if it did get them killed, and the Forgemaster was never going to be intimidated by his own weapon.

"Should we test this?" Granite asked reverently.

Karl shook his head. "If I do, it will bond, and I don't think that I will be able to break the link to give it away again. We need to call a Berserker Class Overlord in here, or bring the weapon to them."

Granite nodded decisively, and walked to the stairs, where a phone was mounted on one of the railings.

{Base Commander. We urgently need a Berserker Class Asset here at the Overlord Rank. We have a finalized product that needs to be bonded immediately.} He declared.

{Three minutes.} The voice replied simply.

Sure enough, three minutes later, a portal opened, revealing a massive Overlord that Karl suspected might be part Orc, with the strong jaw and the way that his lower teeth dented his upper lip, but didn't quite extend to tusks.

The face was wrong to be part Troll, but Karl supposed that he had only seen a small sample of Trolls, so it might be one of them as well.

"Garrick here." The burly Overlord announced as he stepped through the Portal.

"Thank you for your prompt response. I want you to pick up that axe and bond with it. for testing. It will be yours if it survives the tests." Karl announced.

The Berserker's eyes flashed green with magic as he smiled and stomped to the weapon.

At first, it flared with fire when he tried to pick it up. But the Berserker simply growled at it and grabbed it by the handle to hold it up and smile at it.

"Oh, we will be good friends, you and me." Garrick insisted, talking to his new weapon.

The portal was still open, and Karl gestured through it.

"Is there somewhere on the other side that we can test this? I don't think that the barriers in the room will hold up."

Overlord Garrick laughed. "Oh? You're that confident, are you?"

Karl and Granite both nodded silently.

"Alright, there is an empty valley by my house. We can test it there."

Karl motioned for the Acolytes to follow them, and Cara brought Fizzspark to watch the action from the back of the procession.

Karl wasn't sure where it had dropped them, but there were two more Overlord Ranked Warriors present, plus a Mage Karl didn't know, and a Royal Rank High Priest that he vaguely remembered seeing around the Capital.

"This is my team. We won the lottery to be first, apparently." Overlord Garrick explained.

Karl smiled. "Well, then I will make weapons for them all next. Just write down your wish list and I will see what I can do."

The mage chuckled. "Oh, we all get custom, but poor gentle Garrick gets what he's given."

The Berserker laughed and held up the axe.

"Don't underestimate the power of random gifts. This one is feisty. Can you believe that it actually tried to resist being bonded?"

It wasn't a matter of free will. The spells were in balance as they were, so it took an exceptional amount of willpower or magic to force them to bend to the point that the weapon would bond with the System.

The mage set up a series of barriers and target Golems for Garrick to test on, but the Overlord immediately went all out, buffing himself, then pouring power into the weapon, which activated the [Brutality] effect and increased his size.

He swung the axe down hard into the ground using [Earth Splitting], an Epic Grade version of Sunder that split the earth for two hundred metres in front of him and sent out a shockwave that shattered Overlord Rank barriers and Golems like crystal

statues.

Shards of earth, golem and plant life flew into the sky, hiding the area for a few

seconds while the Mage stared at Garrick in shock.

"What the hell is that thing?" He finally stammered.

"Bloody good axe, it is. It's even got Life Leech, I got a nice little trickle from the things hidden underground." Overlord Garrick declared proudly.

Karl and Granite stepped forward to examine the axe, ensuring that it didn't show any signs of damage, overload from being used by an Overlord, or magical stress from an improper rune.

Everything looked good, and the Axe's power felt more stable now as it adjusted to its

new owner.

"It looks like there are no flaws. You will have to test it in battle to be certain, so don't discard your old weapon. But I would say congratulations on your new weapon." Karl

insisted.

Garrick smiled as he returned to normal size, then tweaked his power a little and grew again, then shrunk. He had already learned to use the gem separately from the rest of the effects, and he was a very happy Berserker.

Who could grow into a nearly four-metre tall, very, very happy Berserker.

Chapter 715 Custom Orders

Forgemaster Granite handed out notepads and pencils to the other team members, then went to survey the damage from the strike.

"Don't forget to write your direct phone number so I can contact you when all your weapons are ready. They might be similar to this one, unstable until bonded." The Dwarf reminded the group.

"Gladly. If punctuality is all that it takes to get a Monarch Ranked class customized weapon, I will bring the team to you as many times as necessary," the mage agreed. The other warriors were crowded around Garrick, examining the tool work on the weapon.

"Are we allowed to know where this came from? Is there a resource that might produce more like it?" One of the warriors asked.

Karl smiled. "It's a newfound System Skill, and still under development. There are resources that can produce more of them, but they're extremely limited in quantity. Give it another few years, and we should be able to make dozens of Commander Rank weapons a week.

But until then, a slow production of these Monarch Ranked blades for the Overlord Ranked special forces teams will be all there is."

The mage smiled at Karl. "I think that I see now. The craftsmen can't make weapons above their own Rank, so the number is limited by the time that it takes the available crafters to make it, and we don't really have any spare high-ranked Elites who can be trained."

Karl winked and leaned closer to whisper conspiratorially. "If you don't have a trade skill, I might be able to sneak the knowledge to you!"

The mage whispered back. "I will have you know that Overlord Dallas might have been born at night, but it was not last night. If I knew what you do, I would be the one locked in a lab for national security reasons."

Karl laughed and raised his voice. "Well, if you change your mind, let me know. I can make it worth your while. Maybe sweeten it with an Epic Grade summoning skill?"

Dallas' eyes lit up with excitement, but Karl could see that he wasn't going to volunteer to change spots.

Karl tapped him on the head and activated [Follow Me, Little One]

{Skill Successful} Suspicious Fox Dallas has learned [Epic Guard]

That was a different message than it usually gave Karl for the skill. Maybe he was getting better at it?

Overlord Dallas gasped in shock, then summoned the new Guardian.

His Epic Guard appeared as a Wind Elemental with armour on. It was strange seeing a vortex with arms and a chest plate, but it was clearly an immensely powerful conjuration.

"Well, see you later," Karl declared.

"Oh no, you don't. You don't get to just teach him a new skill and run away without explanation, Who do you think you are, the Frost Faerie?" One of the warriors demanded, referring to the children's tale about a Fae who gave gifts to good kids on the winter solstice.

Karl smiled. "Just wait, we've got to make more weapons, so you'll see us again. That's two gifts in a day, I'm at my quota."

Overlord Garrick laughed. "You say that with such conviction that I almost believed it. But you should go. The others will need their weapons as soon as you can make them. This is too good to keep delaying you!"

Karl ushered everyone back through the portal to the lab, and once the portal was closed, Forgemaster Granite turned to Karl with an accusatory look.

"When were you planning to tell them it would take about four hours to make the rest of their weapons? We already have base stock under production with the new forge fire to fill all these requests except the wand," the Dwarf demanded.

"In about four hours. Wait, what time is it? It's got to be getting late by now. Maybe we should do them in the morning." Karl suggested.

Then he snapped his fingers and wrote another series of notes. "These are for another Special Forces team that I've worked with in the past. We will add their gear to the list and pass them all out tomorrow when the batches are done.

Ladies and Gentlemen of the archery team, Overlord Joram is an archer, and he will need the best bow that you can produce."

According to Karl's watch, it was getting later in the afternoon, but not quite late enough to be headed back to the Palace yet, no matter how productive the day was.

The other smiths were making great progress on their weapons with the new forges, though it was taking some adjustment for them. Forgemaster Granite had managed to adapt instantly to the new forge, but the others had repeated stages multiple times, trying to get things just right.

Once they finished, things would be greatly improved, though. The addition of Ghostfire flames to the forge only granted the Ghostfire skill to the highest quality of weapons, but the level of refinement made the alloys subtly different, and more mana compatible.

The only issue Karl could see was that nothing created here would be particularly amenable to being enchanted with the ice or water element.

There would be a few Warriors and Rangers who might be put out by that. But overall, it was an improvement.

Engineer Fizzspark gestured up the stairs toward the main door.

"Go, head home for the evening and come back early. We will have something suitable by then, and the workers will be less stressed without the extra supervisor." She demanded.

"Should the Acolytes stay?" Karl asked.

"We have rooms ready for them here. They're assigned here as long as you are, but they don't have rooms in the Palace." Granite interjected.

Karl nodded. "Alright. Make sure that they sleep so that they're not nodding off when I get back in the morning."

That made the Dwarf laugh. Getting Blue Clerics to sleep when there was not only new knowledge, but a new skill worth of knowledge that they could practice, making them stop might actually involve drugging them to sleep.

Locking them in their rooms for the night would only change the location of their

research.

Chapter 716 Infiltrators

Karl buzzed the security at the main door and informed them that he was headed back to the Palace for the evening.

The guards opened the door to let him out, then motioned for him to wait while they called for a security detail to escort him back out of the complex. Nobody moved alone around the complex, not even the guards, and Karl was the only real threat to the structure of the building.

Not that anyone thought he would be attacking anything. The guards didn't get any news about what was going on inside the labs, but when a portal had been opened from the outside, they had been scrambled, and had gotten some information that there had already been progress and that an item was being passed to an Overlord.

There were no security checks on the way out, only an escort until Karl was back in the main hallways and past the first security guard at the elevator that took them down from the standard levels of the University's underground labs.

From there, it was a short walk and a train ride back to the Palace after a half hour wait, but by then, it was getting close to the formal dinner time at the Palace.

Unlike most homes, the Palace served meals on a rigid schedule, unless you were eating in your suite, and as new arrivals, it was considered courteous to socialize to some extent.

The ladies might have done that for him while he was at work, but after weeks of daily training, he wouldn't blame them for simply resting in the suite, watching movies and snacking for a few days.

So when Karl got off the train and found the guards at high alert, weapons drawn and in defensive formation, it took him a moment to understand what was going on.

[Rae? Did something big happen while I was gone?] He asked, suddenly concerned by her silence.

[Not to us. The guards are all running about like someone stepped on an ant hill, though.]

Karl could sense that she was incorporeal and enjoying the comfort of a web set in the main room's upper corner.

The Guard Captain on duty nodded to Karl as he entered the Palace from the underground train station.

"Sir, there has been an incident. We have placed guards on your team, but we ask that none of you move about without a guard detail." The Captain announced.

"That bad? Can you give me details? I am quite capable of dealing with most threats." Karl asked.

"There were two attempts today to infiltrate the Palace with modified portal skills. We don't know who the target is, but the rest of the guests have been relocated out of the Palace, and the second attempt occurred after that time."

Karl nodded in understanding. "So, it's either us, or the Royal Family. I was hoping that it was something as simple as spies. I have an assassin on staff that would delight in ferreting them out."

The Captain smiled faintly.

"Yes, we were made aware of that. We were going to assign an infiltration team to covertly keep watch on your associates, but we were unsure where the Bloodbath Spider was."

The Guard's frustration made Karl chuckle. "Well, you made the right call. She's been in the suite all day, keeping watch over the ladies. Have you introduced the Guard team on duty to them yet? It would be best."

The Captain ran a hand through his short blonde hair and smiled down at Karl. "Yes. We made them lift their visors as well, so that they could be personally identified if they needed to interact during their shift. The Red Priestess insisted."

Karl considered that for a moment. "Well, we could relocate outside the Palace as well, so that we're not interfering with the workings of the Palace Guard, or reducing the number of available assets if there should be an attack."

The Guard Captain sighed. "We did consider that. But if your team is the target, which is possible given your recent visibility, especially in defence of the Capital, then it would put you all at excessive risk."

It might be your skills that brought your entire team here, but if something should happen to any of you while under our care, it would be a public relations disaster."

Karl sighed. "You have a point. I was going to say that I could leave more of my beasts with them, but if they went on a rampage against attackers, there wouldn't be a city left."

The Guard General laughed. "I don't think that it would be that bad. But I get where you're going. You have less to worry about than most. We're in a tough spot, but we can't afford not to have you at the research facility. Or so I'm told. How did things go today? Are they close to making anything?" Karl patted him on the shoulder. "I passed out the first of the new weapons to the Overlords today. They had a good enough base that I could just add to it to make functional Monarch Rank weapons. It will be a long time before the supply is more than a trickle. But we should be able to get a few dozen out to the Overlords in the next few weeks."

The Guard Captain smiled. "Well, once they're done with the Overlords, us Monarchs are next on the list, I would assume. Plus whatever the trainees can contribute to the mix."

Karl sighed. "Yeah, that could be a bit. The trainees they gave me are all Acolytes. Awakened Rank Acolytes. They're going to be a while before they can even turn out the Commander Rank mass-produced items we're hoping for. But give it a year or two, and we will get enough of them trained."

The Guard Captain chuckled. "Well, I hear that the Dungeon is giving a steady trickle of Commander Rank items as well, so we have a little something for the Elites until then. Getting good equipment is always the hardest part of preparing a force, even here at the Palace."

Chapter 717 But Why No Acolytes?

Lotus stared expectantly at Karl as he entered the room. "So, where are the Acolytes? Did they send cute ones? Why aren't they here?" Karl patted her on the head and gave the little cleric a pitiful frown. "I'm afraid that they sent all Blue Dragon Acolytes, and they couldn't be pulled away from new knowledge so easily. They're still at work, and they will be staying at the lab tonight. However, they are all beastkin Clerics. I suspect that it was a little prank played on the lab, as half of them were sent home, leaving only five Acolytes.

But they have all learned the basic skills that they are going to need, and from there, we can start building their skills."

Lotus frowned. "So, am I going to have to go there?"

"No, I will bring them back in a day or two, once they sort out the dangerous situation here. But one day I will have to bring everyone from the lab out to meet you. There is a Gnomish woman named Fizzspark there that you would get along very well with. She even rides Cara around the lab like a Cerro."

Karl realized when he finished speaking that the logical word would have been 'horse', but none of them had ever owned a horse as far as Karl knew.

Once he was in the suite, the rest of the team came back out, even Hawk, who had decided to use the transformation token to look humanoid again. This time he had a bird head and four wings, with long clawed toes on his feet. But his hands were very nearly human.

He flapped his wings and rotated his head halfway around to get a better look at them, which freaked out the maids. But he was satisfied with his transformation skills.

Four wings might actually be better than two.

"You decided to come out twice in a day. Aren't you feeling adventurous." Karl joked.

Hawk squawked in amusement. Then, he actually answered. "Someone dared to target our new nest. I can't let Sister Rae have all the fun."

His voice was raspy, and a few times, Karl was certain that he heard a keening cry in the undertones of the voice, which made him wonder if the System was translating for him.

But the Maids were smiling, and they didn't have System access. So, Hawk had finally made a head that could speak Common.

Or he had learned to speak in everyone's minds at once. Both were possibilities with Hawk's transformational limitations.

"Should we prepare separate rooms for the newly arrived guests?" One of the maids asked.

"That would be appreciated. Until they are certain that everyone is safe, I suspect that they will prefer to remain active in the outside world.

Remi, stop teasing Lotus, she just wants to pet the bird."

Remi had the little cleric wrapped right to her armpits, stopping her from running to Hawk.

Reluctantly, Remi let her go, and Lotus ran over to bury her face in Hawk's wings. For once, he wasn't covered in fire, and she could feel the soft feathers.

Ghostfire Body was still active, he had just pulled it back to a warm layer over his body, so he could move freely.

As an added safety measure, Karl called the Guardian and both Bodyguards. The Lamia pair glided across the room to bask in the late afternoon sun by the patio door, while the Guardian remained near Karl, her scaled and bark covered body barely visible to others as her Camouflage skill passively activated.

[Oh, that's a great idea. Anyone who comes to bother us will think that's me at first. Then chop chop chop.] Rae cheered.

She had a good point. Intruders would definitely see the Guardian first, and if they attacked her, they would be defenceless when Rae arrived.

"These new ladies..." Karl's maid asked.

"Are summoned. Like a living Golem. They don't sleep, so they don't need beds. But I am feeling a bit hungry. When is dinner?" He asked.

"Whenever you would like, Sir. The other guests have been sent away, so dinner will be here in your suite, and it can be ready in fifteen minutes whenever you request."

Dana nodded in agreement, and Ophelia gave them an enthusiastic thumbs up, so the Maid ducked her head out the door and had someone outside run with the message.

There was an underlying tension in the suite that was definitely coming from the maids. They weren't Elites, or even combat trained. Their job was to clean and assist guests. So, the day's news had them rattled.

The Palace hadn't come under threat since any of them had started working here, making this the first time that they had actually had to use the security protocols.

Even worse. While they were relatively safe for now, with the Elites, their friends were still at work elsewhere in the Palace, and nobody knew what the target was.

If they realized just how eager the beasts were to find out what the threat was, they might not feel as safe here with Karl's group.

But for now, the presence of so many powerful creatures in this one suite had put all thoughts of seeking safety in the bed of a Guardsman at the barracks for the night vanish from their minds.

That sort of protection came with not just a price, but implied future obligations. But staying here to watch over a group of monsters and Elites was just passively safe. Assuming that the monsters were actually safe to be around. It seemed that they should be, as they were summoned by a spell. However, none of the maids were familiar with intelligent summons, and there was nobody they could ask for reference.

The food arrived quickly, and the maids retired to the servants' quarters of the suite for their own meal, leaving only one behind to fill drinks and clear the empty plates.

Rae dropped from the ceiling to join them at the table for a strategic discussion, only appearing in humanoid form when she was already seated on the sofa.

"So, what are we going to do about the attackers?" She asked.

"Whack a mouse?" Hawk offered.

Smash them when they dared to poke their heads out? That sounded about right.

Chapter 718 Waiting For The Inevitable

There was a rather low chance that the enemy would actually attack during the daytime under normal circumstances, but what really got to Karl was that not only had they done it, they had done it twice after he had left for work.

Was it because they were waiting for the increased guard detail at night to relax and fall asleep? Or were they really targeting his friends when they thought he had left them unprotected?

The dishes were efficiently cleared once they had all finished eating, and Thor immediately began to redecorate the main room.

"What are you planning, big guy?" Tessa joked as Thor slid the sofa she was sitting on.

"Not all the spots can see the TV for movies. The last time got interrupted."

Lotus jumped at the chance, and Karl laughed as she immediately put on a nature documentary, where two clerics were exploring a forest, looking for a new species of magical fruit.

That wasn't quite what Karl had in mind for movie night the last time, but the plan brought the maids with a tray of snacks and drinks, while Tessa settled in next to Thor and Lotus used Cara as a pillow on the floor.

Dana pulled a blanket over her and Karl, then settled her head on his chest to watch the documentary, which was turning out to be a tragic comedy of sorts. Not intentionally, of course. But the duo seemed to be a magnet for all sorts of monsters and wildlife, and they had kept all the mishaps in the film 'as a warning to anyone who tried to emulate them'.

After a few minutes, everyone had changed into their pyjamas, settling in for the night while wondering just how long this documentary was.

The answer turned out to be four hours, though everyone but Karl, Rae and Thor were asleep long before that.

Karl didn't bother to move anyone, except to put Hawk back in his space, as the transformation spell was beginning to fade off without him awake to refresh it. Thor had already stopped using his amulet, and had managed to emulate the skill on his own, following the same learning pattern that Rae had.

As it was, they both found it easier to look just vaguely human, instead of trying to get all the features right. Rae looked scary, but the more that Thor practised, the more like an affable young giant elf he appeared.

In Thor's version of nightwear, just a pair of silk pants from Rae, Karl could see that the Cerro was mostly scaled across his back and shoulders, but that was all hidden in casual clothing, or his armour.

Once he was sure that Rae had slept enough to keep watch for the night, Karl fell asleep with Dana draped over his chest on the sofa. A deep sleep that ended suddenly when the first light of dawn hit their faces.

He kissed her forehead good morning, before sliding a hand up her back to pull the mage closer. Only, as soon as he did, he caught sight of the glare that Cara was giving him, while holding Lotus like a body pillow.

Karl looked over to Thor, who was similarly entwined with Tessa under a blanket on the other sofa, and the Void Badger laughed in his mind.

[That doesn't count.] She insisted.

[Still, I'm not getting a head start, Thor has a cuddle buddy for the night.]

Karl briefly wondered when Cara would give up on her mission, then realized that it was no longer about Thor's dating life. If it had ever been. The badger just enjoyed frustrating him.

[Any action during the night?] He asked Rae, while doing his best to avoid having to get up and give up the warmth of Dana's body against his own.

[A whole lot of nothing. Some of the stuffed suits say that it might have been a one-off incident, in their words.]

[Stuffed suits?]

[That's what the Guards call them. The useless ones with titles that make up reasons for everyone else to work.]

Karl understood that concept very well, and the name actually suited them very well.

[Am I on watch again today?] Rae asked.

[I think that is for the best. I will leave Thor here with you as well. He would never forgive us if he didn't get to play knight if there was an attack while we were in an actual Royal Palace.]

Thor rumbled with amusement, waking up Tessa, who simply looked around for a second, then closed her eyes again when she realized there was no danger.

[No better place for it. Princesses need knights, it's a rule.] The Cerro agreed.

Thor had put thought into this. Princesses needed Knights. Queens needed Knights. Overlords always had a most trusted Knight at their side. In short, there was never a situation where being the Knight was the wrong call.

According to Sister Remi's romance books, Knights even had good luck in love.

Karl extended his senses outward and found that none of the maids had returned to their rooms last night, they were all uncomfortably sharing the two small beds in the servant quarters of the suite.

They had already heard the talking, and were beginning to get ready for the day, if his hearing were right, so there would be food soon without having to make a request.

There was a soft knock at the door, which brought a maid running to answer, then hand the letter to Rae with a confused look.

Karl looked at the elaborate penmanship on the simple folded parchment letter, which had an old-fashioned wax seal.

"Oh, our lady Bloodbath is getting love letters so early in the morning?" Karl teased.

Rae smiled and nodded happily. "They really know how to sweet talk a lady."

The curiosity was too much to resist, and Lotus managed to haul herself to her feet without disentangling Cara. She giggled as she read the letter, then Rae handed it to Karl.

{Lady Rae bloodbath. His Majesty's Royal Guard would ask for your assistance should there be any further incidents in the west wing of the Palace during your stay. We will have agents in the area as well, and ask that you not eat them if you should happen to detect them.

If you have any questions about current deployments and situations, please feel free to contact me directly.

Guard Captain Scruggs}

Chapter 719 Rae's Reputation

Even the Maids got a laugh out of that. The spies and stealth agents of the Palace were supposed to be among the finest in the world, and regular attempts were made to poach them for elite foreign forces.

But the Guard Captain hadn't mentioned any chance of Rae being injured, only a concern that she might consider them a food product.

"It seems that you have a fearsome reputation, Lady Bloodbath." One of the maids noted, then slowly processed the actual name that she had spoken.

"Oh, you haven't seen me yet, have you? Just this human form." Rae noted.

The maids looked confused as Rae jumped back into an open area of the room and transformed back into her natural form, which brushed the ceiling with its back, even with her legs crouched at her usual standing height.

"Dragon Gods above, what sort of power is that?" One of the maids asked as Rae shifted back into her usual ebony skinned humanoid indoor form.

"I am a Monarch Rank Bloodbath Spider. This form is the disguise, but it's much more convenient for indoor pursuits. Lord Thor over there is a Divine Thunder Cerro, and he's three times my size. There is no way that he could transform indoors without knocking down a chunk of the Castle." Rae explained.

The maid smiled. "And we've seen Hawk's natural form when he first arrived on the balcony. Truly impressive, all of you."

Cara looked up, waiting her turn for praise.

"And then there is this furry bundle of joy.

I suspect that she is actually much more dangerous than she looks. Well, that is a given because she is adorable, but she feels powerful as well."

Thor laughed, and all the maids turned to look at him. "Void Badgers are basically indestructible. The guards could hack away at her all day with swords, and unless they used skills, it would only massage her." He explained.

Cara thought about it for a second, then nodded. None of them could do enough damage without skills, no matter what weapon they had.

"Well, then we're in the safest room in the Palace if something does go wrong. I will ensure that the maids gossip makes it to Lady Bloodbath so that she can be kept up to date on any strange happenings through the Palace.

Just in case there is a pattern that we might have missed." The maid agreed with a smile.

Karl sighed as he alternated between eating breakfast and feeding bites to Dana, who was still under the blanket on top of him.

"I suppose that I should go to work. This whole having a day job thing is highly overrated. Who wants to go with me today, and who wants to stay here and play with the ladies?" He asked curiously.

Cara looked deep in thought. There was a whole group, and maids, and a bubble bath here.

But there was a Fizzspark over there.

Flying around the laboratory with a Gnome was a lot of fun, and if they were attacked, she would have a tiny artillery piece. Well, if the Gnome actually had combat skills. She might just have a panicked Gnome on her back, which would be even more fun.

In the end, the higher chances of fighting if she remained here with the others seemed like the better option.

Now, where was that bottle of bubble soap?

Remi returned to her space, more interested in the research of Runes. She was learning a lot in the lab, and she didn't want to miss the second day of lessons.

So, it was only the two of them that went, along with the Epic Guard, who just silently followed Karl once it realized he was leaving.

Nobody else even seemed to realize that it was with him, other than the guards, who did a double take when they noticed it silently trailing him.

Karl got on the train, trying to ignore the eerie feeling that the abandoned station was giving him. It was morning, and there should have been workers on shift change coming and going. But there was absolutely nobody. Even the guard on duty gave Karl a confused look. There should have been workers for the day shift arriving, but he hadn't seen anyone.

[The train station is empty. I think that things are about to get spicy.] Karl's warning made Rae do a little dance in the living room of their suite, much to the confusion of the maids.

"Has anyone arrived?" Karl asked.

The guard shook his head. "The train was exactly on time, but empty. The driver is as confused as I am. There was nobody at either station waiting for the train."

Karl nodded and got on board, waiting until the driver gave him a nervous thumbs-up through the small window in the door to his compartment in the transit train.

The train glided out of the station toward the University, but didn't pick up its usual speed. The driver was becoming nervous that something might have blocked the tracks, or that there might be an ambush waiting for them. But there was nothing moving under the city except them.

Absolutely nothing, Karl noted, and that was not right.

There should be flowing water, rats and other vermin, insects in the stagnant water that gathered near the surface ventilation holes, or even maintenance workers.

But none of them was present today.

Karl focused on the area around him and cast [Nullify] at full output as an area effect.

He had fully expected to see something extreme, like a train full of corpses and a demon driving. However, what he found was that everything looked exactly as it had before, only there was now sound. Far too much sound.

[Rae, Thor, inform the others that there is a battle in the city. I can hear it through the ventilation shafts. Cara, remember to rinse the bubbles from your fur when you're finished your bath, or you will get itchy.]

Hawk laughed at the warning. He was also transformed in the bath, preening his feathers. But he didn't use soap, and he had fire to dry himself.

Chapter 720 Battle In The City Of Wenmouth

"Driver, there is a battle in the city overhead. I have enhanced hearing." Karl warned the only other occupant of the train.

"I will take you to the University, then I will wait for more instructions. I don't know what to do in this situation. All my instructions just say to wait for passengers unless I have a scheduled pickup." The driver replied nervously.

They pulled up to the train station at the University, and Karl reached out with [Nullify] again, using it to sense for magic in effect.

He didn't want to mass dispel the whole area, as there were labs above and below him that would be using magical barriers.

But he didn't sense anything on the platform, and Soul Sight didn't find anyone waiting for him.

Karl quickly moved down the hallway, wondering where the guards had gone. There should have been some on the platform, some at the first corner, and more at the elevator.

Karl cast [Nullify] again, targeting the hallway.

There was definitely a spell on it, but Karl didn't see any changes until he got around the corner and saw the next guard station.

All six were dead, hacked apart with dozens of blade strikes. Whatever had attacked them had to be close to or at the Commander Rank, as the guards had put up a vicious fight before they had fallen, and there was blood everywhere. But there were no signs of the enemy, and all the blood smelled human to him.

Some species had very distinctive blood, but there were no strange colours here, and no distinct scents like Orc or Ogre blood had.

Karl borrowed one of the security cards off a fallen guard, then noted that only one of the others was missing his lanyard. Whoever came before him had the same idea.

The elevator in the next room didn't just need a key card, though. It also had a passcode to call it. A small detail that the first group had failed to notice.

They had pried the doors apart, most likely using a spell, as Karl could feel the lingering magic in the air, and they were blown right off their rails.

With nothing to stop him, Karl hopped into the shaft and let his fingers bounce off the rungs of the safety ladder as he fell.

When he saw the open exit to the lab, and the rapidly approaching spikes at the bottom of the shaft, Karl grabbed the ladder and swung himself out onto the tile floor.

The security area was filled with blood and bodies, both guards and mages in Spellblade outfits. Karl kicked one to roll it over, but it didn't have any sort of insignia on it to identify the faction that might have sent them.

The robes were black, and enchanted with stealth spells, but not as good as what the Guardian was using. Even Karl could hardly see it as the construct landed behind him.

He activated [Silent Movement] and [Void Body] on them both, then moved toward the lab, where he hoped the blast doors were still holding.

There was noise ahead of him, frustrated orders, and the sound of some sort of fan, along with a crackling hum.

A sharp whistle let Karl know that they had seen him, so he summoned the Bodyguards behind him and warned Remi to stay hidden for a second, though she summoned her Bodyguards as well.

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. It seems you are determined to make my workday more difficult than it needs to be." He greeted the mages in front of him, then noticed that they had an Overlord with him.

In an enclosed space, this was going to be very, very brutal.

The Overlord didn't reply, and chose to charge at Karl, who hit him with a [Nullify] halfway across the gap, cancelling his movement skill and putting him off balance as he hit the floor.

The Maul came to Karl's hands, stacked with [Disintegrate]. The hallway rang with the displaced air as he swung, and the head of the weapon hit the mage's barriers.

The Overlord was flung two metres to the right, into the wall, which crumbled on impact, along with the barrier that he had nearly instantly replaced.

A flurry of blade skills flew in both directions as the Bodyguards engaged with the Spellblades, and the Epic Guard launched herself into combat.

Karl equipped the Haint Claw on the Epic Guard in preparation for the final ambush, and charged at the Overlord again, but the mage used a [Blink] type spell to appear halfway down the hall behind him, putting their fight away from the others.

All of the other mages were at the low Royal Rank, and they wouldn't last long against the Bodyguards, but they wouldn't last a single attack around Karl or the Overlord.

Karl attacked again, hurling [Disintegrate] at the mage, who countered with a rapid flurry of sword skills that knocked down the skill and then flew at Karl.

One of the Naga Warriors hurled a Spellblade between Karl and the spell, which simply cut through him without slowing as horror dawned on the doomed man's face.

Karl smacked the spell down with his maul, then reactivated the spells.

He was burning through a load of energy, but the Haint Claw that the Guardian was wearing was pulling energy from all around the room as the Spellblades died, and her innate skill shared it.

The Overlord was obviously looking to run, but a Portal wouldn't be fast enough to open, so he would have to make it up the elevator, or into a secure room.

Karl charged, and the Spellblade attacked again.

He was slower than Karl, in a purely physical sense, but his spell activations were nearly instant, and he had more stored energy.

But Karl had one advantage that the Spellblade didn't.

The Mage's attack tore through the Karl's barriers and his armour, leaving him bleeding from a dozen slices that crossed his entire body. But it didn't slow his swing, and the Overlord's barriers fell under the mass onslaught for a split second.

Karl could see the victorious smirk on his face, then the pain as the Shadow Drake Treant's long fingers pierced fully through his chest and tore apart his internal organs.

The Guardian seemed to absorb the blood from the body, while the Haint Claw tore the soul free of the corpse with a keening shriek, as if in his last moments, the mage realized the horror that awaited him.

His corpse fell to the ground, flesh shredded, with a look of disbelief permanently etched on its features. Remi snatched it up before it could be further mutilated. Rae would want whatever blood was left in there, as she was short on human varieties.

Then the Naga Shaman picked up the rest of the bodies, guards and Spellblades alike, and placed them in her swamp to keep until they could be sorted.

"Master, the job is done." One of the Lamia bodyguards announced from behind him as Karl dismissed his armour and stood nude, watching [Void Body] regenerate the torn sections of his flesh.

That process was exhausting, but he was as good as new in half a minute. Just in time to refresh his armour and smile at the Lamia before the tunnel began to collapse.