

Beast Master 981

Chapter 981: Wagons In The Sand

The shopkeeper grabbed the wagon by its drawbars and rolled it so it was facing the open gates, then followed Karl back in so he could help Rae fix the building.

She already had it nearly finished, it only took a few more finishing touches to get it just right.

"We did the floor between the levels, as it was damaged, but I wasn't sure how polished you liked the surface. I just reset it to the slightly textured tiles that I am used to. It prevents slipping on wet stones after a shower." Karl offered as they completed the work.

"That will work just fine. I don't actually live in the apartment over the shop, I live across the street with my wife and in-laws." He explained, with a gesture towards the back alley, away from the gates.

"Ladies, our ride awaits. Thor, you can go check out the new carriage now. It's ready whenever you are. Rae might have to make a custom harness for you, but other than that, we can leave any time." Karl instructed.

Thor smiled and jogged out back before transforming into a reduced size version of himself, suited to the carriage.

Everyone else climbed inside, while Karl took a seat on the driver's bench and opened the sliding panel into the carriage.

"Do we have enough seats for everyone?" He asked.

"More than enough. There are even folding tables in here so that we can work as we travel, as long as we don't mind the bouncing." Dana called back.

Thor nodded in satisfaction and pulled the carriage out of the yard and to the gate, where the guards waved goodbye to them before returning to their inspections of the incoming wagons.

Thor carried on up the road for most of an hour at a casual trot that was just slow enough not to severely jostle the ladies on the road. This carriage was better than any of the wagons they had bought before, and he could make excellent time without causing anyone discomfort.

[There is a path here, I can sense the beasts that the army took this way. We should follow this path.] Thor announced as they topped a ridgeline.

[Follow your instincts. We should find something good if we follow the army.] Karl agreed.

The wagon paths were clear to anyone who passed by. The long grass had been damaged and torn from the ground by the army's passage, a column of recovering destruction surrounding deep parallel ruts from the wagons.

Once they were off the road, the Butterfly decided that they needed a bit more of a visual impression, and summoned illusions of ten giant mountain goat riding Dwarven soldiers to serve as the escorts for their carriage.

It made them look more like proper merchants, or perhaps some sort of dignitary, as there was only one wagon. But it also let the butterfly see more of the world directly through her illusions, instead of from her space.

She still wasn't speaking, but it was the first time that Karl could recall her taking an active part in their daily activities, without any sort of threat or prompting.

It was a good sign that the evolved Glasswing Illusionary Butterfly was beginning to stabilize her power.

The skies turned shockingly clear and blue as they moved away from the city, and the grassland gave way to sand and hard packed clay, baked by the sun. If it ever rained here, this whole region would become a soupy nightmare to travel over, but for now, it was almost like travelling over a developed road.

Then, the sand got softer and deeper, and it was time for modifications.

"Lotus, can you make covers for the wheels? Something half a metre wide, with a ridge down the middle, so the wagon doesn't slide sideways too badly." Karl requested.

That wouldn't work on a regular road, but out here in the sand dunes, it would keep them from sinking their wagon to the hubs.

Lotus climbed out of the wagon, then shielded her eyes from the sun while Dana closed the door behind her. Remi had made ice for them, to keep the interior of the carriage cool, though she had retreated to the [Tiny World] to work in her lab.

She was way ahead on the orders for the store, but as they were headed north, they would likely lose access to the Guild functions soon, due to distance.

Karl spotted something on the horizon. Many living creatures, all at the Royal or Monarch power level.

"Thor, turn that way and see what we find. I can't tell what they are from here." He instructed.

Hawk exited his space to fly over and start scouting for them. If there were snacks on the horizon, it was time to get out of bed. He was pretty well stocked on mice for now, but they had mentioned something about juicy water element buffalo yesterday.

The heat of the desert was comforting on his wings as he soared over the sand, but what he found was highly disappointing.

[It's just Dwarves. It looks like they're stuck in the sand.] Hawk complained.

Karl laughed, and encouraged Thor to keep moving. They could get some information about the area from the group, and if Thor couldn't pull their wagon from the sand, nothing could.

Thor stopped at the top of the dune, in case there was a hidden oasis or something at the bottom, which would lead to them also getting their wagon stuck in the sand.

Karl stood up on the seat so that the Dwarves could see his bright white and black fur outlined against the blue sky.

A young man was sent up the hill to greet them, and Karl noticed just how rough they all looked.

"Merchant, thank goodness you stumbled across us. We were attacked by a Sand Worm, and we lost half our beasts. We've tried shovelling the wagons up out of the sand, but the remaining mountain goats don't have the power to get them across the soft sand." The young man explained.

That was precisely why Karl had asked Lotus to widen the wheels.

"Well, we can help you pull them free, but where were you going? Those wagons aren't going to do well in the soft sand." Karl asked.

"East to the road. Normally, this path is pretty good, but we were chased south off the rocks, and now we're stuck."

Karl nodded in understanding. "So you came from the west? How are things that way?"

The young man shook his head. "The army is low on supplies. We are the backup supply caravan because the regular run didn't return last week."

"Alright, give me a minute to get set up, and I will get you back to the stones."

Thor took that as a good sign, and called Rae out to untie him, so he could use his harness to pull the whole caravan out of the sand. He could see the path that they must have been following, and it was only a few hundred metres away. Still too far for the four surviving mountain goats to pull the linked wagon train.

Twenty wagons at once. It was a good day to be Thor.

Chapter 982: Sand Worm

Rae brought out a rope to attach Thor to the front of the caravan, which was already hooked to the goats, with two thirds of the harnesses empty and stacked in the bed of the front wagon.

Everything was empty, so once they were out of the sand, it would be easy enough for them to simply roll their way back to the city. But sending a group like this with no proper guards seemed like a highly questionable choice to him.

"Where is your escort?" Karl asked as Rae got Thor set up with a tow-rope.

The young man gestured vaguely. "Inside a Sand Worm somewhere. They sent us with a five-man squad of Overlords, but the worm caught them by surprise, and they were gone before we knew what was happening."

Eating worms seemed like a bit of a step down from mice to Hawk, but technically worms were bird food. He would reserve judgment until he had tasted sand worm.

Rae whistled to get everyone's attention, and the wagon master brought the beasts to readiness, taut against their harnesses.

Then Thor simply stepped forward, and the entire row of wagons bounced out of the ruts they were in.

It was laughable how easy it was for the behemoth, even at his reduced for transit sizing. His paws barely slid as they sunk in the sand as he pulled, and the wagon team struggled to keep up with his walking pace.

The ground rumbled beneath them, and Rae smirked.

The sand worm was back.

But it didn't go for Thor and the wagons, it went straight for Karl. The sand vanished beneath his feet, falling into a giant maw filled with rings of razor sharp teeth as he activated [Swims Through Air] to keep himself from falling.

Then the Giant Sandworm burst up out of the dune, an Overlord Ranked monstrosity that made even Thor look svelte and slender.

Karl quickly equipped his weapons to attack, but Rae was already on it, tearing at the outside of the creature's thick hide. The wounds leaked yellowish blood that smelled heavily of sulphur, and made the sand bubble where the droplets landed.

[That's definitely not edible. It smells terrible.] Hawk complained.

He had gotten his hopes up, only to have them crushed by this disgusting thing. It would pay for that.

In order to express his frustration with the inedible nature of the Sandworm, Hawk began to bombard it with rapid fire [Fireballs], but they mostly just fizzled against the hide of the beast.

[It's resistant to fire magic. Fire and Earth Elements combined.] Rae noted.

That was why the blood sizzled on the sand. It wasn't acidic, it was boiling hot, like molten sulphur.

So, Hawk switched to [Rend] which cut through the beast easily enough, now that it was most of the way out of the hole, and Karl's retreat had drawn it out onto the sand.

The ladies began to unleash attacks on the gigantic monster, and Thor lamented that he had to move the wagons out of the way before he could join the fight. Especially when Tessa's new [Holy Slash] was so effective.

Karl launched a full output [Void Blast] down the beast's gullet, and the Sandworm began to turn black from the inside. A second and third attack in rapid succession turned its whole skin black, and the creature slumped to the ground.

But the Blade of Champions said that it wasn't dead yet.

The whole team continued to hack and blast away at the creature, but from the outside its damage reduction was truly impressive, and the blackness from the [Void Blasts] was beginning to fade by the time that Rae managed to cut through to a vital spot and the Blade of Champions pulsed with the absorbed life force of the defeated monster.

The young Dwarf who had been standing near Karl stood up out of the sand and dusted himself off with a reverent look on his face.

"I can't believe that your team took that thing out so easily. An Overlord Ranked Sandworm is a menace, and it usually causes at least a few casualties before even a full army unit can take it out." He gushed.

Karl laughed. "Most Dwarves can't fly, so when it bursts up from under them, I can see how they would end up swallowed into that nasty maw. Fortunately for me, I didn't have to fight with those rows of teeth, and I could fight from the outside."

The Dwarf shook off his fear and straightened his uniform. "Thank you. That thing's trap would have gotten us for sure if a less powerful rescue team had come for us. But now I need to get to the wagons before they run away without me."

Karl laughed as he realized that was actually incredibly likely.

The moment that Thor was unhooked from their wagon train, they were going to take off as fast as the remaining beasts could take them, and most of the supply team were strapping up their boots for a long run, intending to make the load as light as possible, or even help them pull.

Rae untied Thor, and sure enough, as soon as the round of thankful praise was over, the wagons were moving, leaving some of the slower preparing Dwarves to chase after them.

Fortunately, the convoy moved slower than a Dwarf's running speed, so it wasn't impossible to catch up, just tiring.

The incident did give Karl and the others one important bit of information, though. They were now aware of the route that the army had used to acquire supplies, so they could follow something close to it and most likely find the problem areas with little difficulty.

Driving over the sand was not only smoother but faster, as Thor didn't have any problem walking on soft ground and Lotus had modified their wagon wheels for them. Plus, driving near the ridgeline of the dunes also gave them much more visibility, and might help pull hidden monsters out of the sand for Rae to play with.

Chapter 983: Thor In The Sun

The afternoon sun in the desert was blistering hot, and the dry wind had picked up, turning the whole region into a crude facsimile of a blast furnace.

Karl considered calling a stop so that they could rest in the cooled shelter of the carriage, but Thor was loving the heat and sun on his scales. To the Cerro turned behemoth, this was as good as a spa day.

He was even singing to himself, a warbling bugle of happiness, as he trotted along the sand.

Only when the sun started to go down did Karl instruct him to pull into a relatively sheltered spot for the evening, so they could rest.

Once it was dark, Rae would take over the watch, and until she was ready for her evening duties, the Lamia Bodyguards would keep watch. Their species also liked the heat, and weren't as inclined to wetlands as the Naga were. The Naga, Remi included, did fine in the heat. But the sand irritated them on a deeply personal level.

"Do you think it was so quiet today because of the Sand Worm? Normally, any wilderness area at least has some roaming monsters." Lotus asked as they sat down for dinner.

Karl nodded. "That sounds likely. That thing was huge, so it would have a big appetite. Once we're out of its territory, we should start seeing more monsters. Maybe we will find a desert cat."

Tessa burst into laughter. "Don't encourage her. Now that she has a Class Skill to make animals not run away from her, she's definitely going to go after the first fluffy thing that she sees."

Karl shrugged. "I do still have one more beast space open. The power level out here is supposed to be the highest we have seen so far, so we might luck out and find another sibling."

Rae tapped the table. "I will have you know, we have standards. We're not taking in just any fluffy creature."

[Yeah, it has to be Fluffy and Powerful.] Cara agreed.

[And we need a brother. We can't just let the sisters overwhelm us like this.] Hawk added.

[Oh, we should find one with healing skills. An extra healer would be good now that the Lotus Tree keeps getting stuck in one spot.] Thor added through the mental link.

Dana poked Karl. "You're talking to everyone in your head again."

Karl shrugged. "They're discussing what sort of sibling they want next. There isn't a consensus yet. But they have some standards."

Rae nodded in agreement. "We need to find something that is preferably Totem Ranked as an infant. That way it can grow up to be Mythic, and we can all follow its lead."

Dana smiled. "You think that we're going to find a Totem Ranked infant here? And how do you propose that we get it away from its mother?"

Rae smirked. "Let me worry about that part. First we need to find one."

Lotus was riveted to the conversation. "Totem Ranked infant? Does that mean we get a dragon? Another dragon, I mean."

Nachtia laughed. "I suspect that there would be severe fallout if Karl stole a baby dragon.

Well, left with a baby dragon. Because I can guarantee that the hatchling would likely agree to follow us just to see what happened. Baby dragons are curious like that."

Lotus nodded in agreement. She had a baby divine green dragon staring through her eyes all the time, and giving her fun advice. They were definitely curious.

Ophelia looked between Thor and Rae. "I don't even know what sort of new friend you would need. The group can already do nearly everything that they need to, and your regeneration speed is insane.

If anything, you need a second voice of reason, so someone is there to give good advice while Thor is asleep."

Rae giggled and stuck out her tongue at the Berserker.

"I give good advice." She insisted.

Ophelia just stared at the spider, and Rae shrugged. "Well, I enjoy my advice."

Everyone but Karl and Dana moved to the [Tiny World] to sleep, while they took the folding bed in the carriage, with Rae incorporeal on the roof.

They were going to leave as well, but then there would be no bait to lure in monsters during the night, and that seemed much too dull for Rae's liking.

Thor was up and ready to move before it was fully light outside, so Rae got him hooked up, and the Lamia took the guard spots on the side runners of the carriage, the way that the Naga Bodyguards did when they were playing merchant.

Because the carriage was moving, Tessa made breakfast in the [Tiny World] and brought food out to Karl, who was pretending to drive the wagon.

"Thanks. It looks like the speculation was right. Now that we're further from the Sandworm's territory, there are plenty of monsters in the distance.

Nothing that has tried to approach us so far, but I can see them every once in a while between the dunes." Karl greeted the war cleric as she came to sit beside him.

"Anything dangerous?" She asked.

"Nothing yet. There are some scorpions off to the north of us, about a half kilometre. Then there is a lone Royal Rank monster off to the south, but I couldn't make out what it was."

Tessa looked at the rising sun and sighed. "It's actually really nice out here in the desert. At least first thing in the morning. Much less humid than in Drodh. But I get the feeling that whatever the Undead were doing in the cities isn't going to just go away because we moved away."

Karl nodded. "I expect that we will be seeing more of them soon. The monster spawn felt like the start of something. Like it was just the opening act to something much larger, or a side effect of whatever else was going on."

I think that it might be possible that the System Stones everyone has been looking for might be similar to the ones we found back home. Stuck in a Trial Instance, or a time warp, where they fade in and out.

It would explain why things have gotten so strange here, and why Lord Bomgon has been sending troops."

Tessa frowned. "Like how Monster Spawns intensified around areas where Dungeons and other major Trials formed. You might be onto something. Not something good, but something important."

Chapter 984: Found The Narazir

The two sat in silence for a moment, then Tessa's eyes suddenly shone red, and she stood up on the ledge in front of the seat.

"There is a battle ahead. Thor, can you move faster without disrupting the carriage?" She demanded.

Thor snorted, and moved from a casual walk to a trot.

In the soft sand, the carriage was still gliding fairly smoothly, and Thor increased his speed a bit more, until the wheels began to slide on the sand instead of rolling smoothly.

It took a few minutes before they got close enough that Karl could sense the battle, but Hawk had flown up to scout.

[Dwarves and Beastkin on one side. I don't know what the other things are, but they don't look tasty.]
Hawk updated.

That didn't help much, but as they approached, Karl noticed something very strange. The army was clearly fighting what looked like a Monster Spawn, centred around an anomaly ten kilometres from the battle, but the monsters they were fighting were all Undead.

Not species that would normally be seen as undead, and not zombies. Just undead versions of strange monsters that weren't native to any region that Karl had visited before.

That was unusual, but Karl assumed that the spawns could include undead. He didn't see any reason why not.

However, Tessa had reacted to the battle, which meant there was more to it than a Monster Spawn. Those were random, and the enemies were insane and untargeted. That wasn't even close to the definition of a war.

If the Red Dragon noticed this battle, it had been orchestrated between two intelligent powers.

Having a War Cleric along in a situation like this was better than any other early warning system, as anyone could tell you that there was an enemy there. But Tessa's reaction could tell you that they were a targeted force by a hostile nation, intended as a military force.

Karl instructed the Lamia to get the others, so they were all ready when they approached the battle. If nothing else, Hawk could confirm that the power level of the combatants was mostly at or below Overlord Rank.

That was perfect for their group, even if they didn't have any sort of vested interest in whom the winner would be.

Thor slowed on the final downhill portion of the dunes, and then took the carriage into the [Tiny World] as soon as the ladies got out.

A tall beastkin man waved at Karl from the back lines.

"Adventurer. Are you here to assist?" He called.

"Might as well, as we're here. What is the situation?"

"Don't get too close, I'm in zombie quarantine. Bloody Undead turned an entire Scorpino Spawn into undead. Now we've got to clean them up, but nobody can find the bastard who started this mess." He explained.

That would explain why it alerted Tessa. This really wasn't a spawn of undead, it was a bioweapon attack.

"Alright. There is a chance they might be in the anomaly on the far side of the battle. Do you want us to fight alongside your troops, or go to the flank and take some pressure off?" Karl asked.

The soldier thought about it for a moment. "We're right in the middle of the fight. Might as well just pick a weakened spot and join them. Nobody will mistake you for the enemy."

That was true. The undead were some sort of hybrid mix of a giant scorpion and a Locust. The proportions were all off and unnatural, but the powerful rear legs let them leap dozens of metres at a time to land in close combat, where they could attack with powerful front limbs and a deadly rear stinger.

[Those would make terrible siblings. They're not even cute.] Cara noted as she came out to join the fight.

Lotus transformed near the triage centre where they had arrived, and set up her totems scattered through the Triage group, so she didn't break their quarantine.

Karl gave the Haint Claw to the Epic Guard, and took out his bow. It would take out more of the creatures at once than any melee attack.

The Gabilese Army was in bad shape, with most of the fighters infected already. Every scratch spread the undead curse, and it was nearly impossible not to get at least a little wounded when fighting an enemy like this, who could launch themselves into the battle lines and ignore the shield walls.

"Who are you?" A Dwarf in gilded armour asked as Karl joined the archers.

"Karl, from Drodh. We came to hunt monster spawns, and it seems you have found one. I've got healers at the back."

The Dwarf nodded, then smiled as Karl used a large scale [Void Blast] explosion to clear out a patch of enemies that were staring at the archers a bit too intently.

"I recommend that you have the lines split. The Behemoth is going to charge right through them if they don't." Karl warned.

The archery division's leader turned to watch where Thor and Tessa were preparing for battle after Tessa buffed the front lines.

The Dwarf blew a series of short blasts on a horn trumpet, and the line parted just enough to let Thor through.

The undead saw that as a chance, but with [Bulwark] active, the pair simply smashed through the bodies of the undead, while [Consecrated Ground] burned everything that tried to attack their flanks.

The holy light of Tessa's attacks and Thor's defensive zone were a shining beacon in the middle of the fight, and the undead began to back away, causing them to cluster more tightly. Tighter groups made life easier for Karl and the archers, while Dana was flying directly over the duo, with her Golems now helping protect Thor from attack.

Then, Karl saw the strangest sight.

Lotus had discarded her Tree of Life transformation, and she was riding Ophelia's enormous Dire Bear form into battle, with healing totems strapped to the Berserker's back.

[I think she was jealous of Tessa.] Hawk noted as he bombarded the undead.

Remi began to prepare [Apocalypse] as she watched them charge.

[Definitely. Look how happy she is. I don't think I've ever seen Lotus that happy in battle before.] The Naga Queen agreed.

Today's [Apocalypse] was light on the flaming blizzard, so that the army could see to fight. But Remi increased the number of [Meteors] in the spell to compensate.

They crashed down into the [Hellstorm] vortexes that Hawk had created in advance, and the Army began to celebrate.

"Does nobody use large area spells?" Karl asked the Archery group's leader as the soldiers pushed forward.

"Why don't you just use army sized spells instead of infantry tactics?" The Dwarf replied sarcastically.

"Don't you think that we would if we could? How many classes get one of the lost grand magics as part of their skill tree? Even the Mage class gets a single meteor as part of their repertoire.

One Meteor, not a whole battlefield worth of them at once.

Asking us to just coat an entire battlefield in hellfire and meteor strikes is like asking for a Death Dragon to show up to cheer us on."

Karl laughed, and pointed to the sky, where Nachtia was flying with Hawk, keeping her distance as she used Shadow Magic to disintegrate the Undead without interfering with the area spells.

"Smartass."

Chapter 985: Scorpino Spawn

The battlefield was quickly clearing under the effect of Remi's bombardment, and Karl could feel the massive amount of mana that she was drawing flowing from her space, as energy from the Mental Formation Karl had built circulated to help balance the drain.

The energy flow was still much higher than what Karl could cover, but she wouldn't need to keep it up for long.

However, compared to how things were before the White Dragon had shown him the trick to improving the single dragon scale focal point into an actual array, it wasn't nearly as lopsided. Karl's mana regeneration was actually getting closer to being able to keep up with the sort of destruction that Remi could cause in a large battle.

Karl was a bit distracted with the mana flow issues, and he nearly missed one of the undead insects flying his way. Instinctively, he responded when it was metres away, launching himself upward, and punching with his empty hand.

With a disturbingly wet crunching noise, the creature simply shattered under his fist, and Karl hastily extended [Ghostfire] out around him to keep the aftermath from infecting the nearby soldiers.

[10/10 Good hit.] Cara laughed as the viscera splattered far beyond Karl's hasty barrier, and the soldiers cursed.

[Haha, very funny. Remi, can you put some healing totems next to me?]

Remi created the Totems, which cleansed the soldiers with the first pulse, but they were still filthy, and shocked by the mess that Karl had managed to make with a single barehanded strike.

"What sort of skill was that?" The archery team leader asked.

"A passive combo that I have. [Shatter] and [Crushing Blows]. They add damage to barehanded strikes and blunt weapons. It might be a bit too effective." Karl replied in an apologetic tone.

The Dwarf took off his helmet to rub his temples. "I swear, cat demons are allergic to common sense."

Karl shrugged. Maybe they were. But he wasn't a cat demon.

Across the battlefield, the back row of monsters began to explode, and the Dwarves turned to give Karl suspicious looks.

"Hey, that time it wasn't me. Besides, those ones aren't close enough to splash on anyone, so no harm done." Karl argued.

Incorporeal at the back of the battle, Rae laughed hysterically. [Blood Destruction] worked beautifully on these things.

Karl continued to fire arrows into the insectoid undead, but as he advanced in front of the rest of the archers, he noticed that they were retreating from him in a semicircle.

Now, he did have damaging area effects available, but not at that distance.

[I think you managed to scare the insanity out of the undead.] Thor joked as he plowed through their ranks with [Bulwark] in a wedge in front of him.

That might be an overstatement, but the undead were definitely retreating from Karl.

They were also losing numbers fast, and the army was pushing forward as Remi pulled back the effects of [Apocalypse].

Heavily wounded, the undead insects were being quickly overwhelmed, forcing the area spells to end. But in only minutes, the swarm was surrounded and the last remnants of the threat were being herded into the encirclement by Thor and Tessa with [Bulwark].

"Boss, I think you should send a team into that anomaly to see what it is. Sometimes they begin to destabilize once the spawn is gone." Karl reminded the archer group's leader, who had come to fight near him.

"Already on it. We've sent four dungeon teams that way." He explained.

Above them, Hawk glowed with power as he prepared to finish the battle with [Purgatory Flames]. He was behind in the kill count again, but he could even those odds quickly at the end of the battle.

The massive fireball slammed into the hapless group of undead, who nearly all turned to ash the instant the spell hit them.

All that was left was a small ring of insects around the outside, where they were fighting the team and the Army, who he didn't want to hit with the spell.

[Still a few hundred short. You waited too long, brother.] Remi calculated.

[Close enough.] Hawk replied, satisfied that he had come close.

These things weren't even edible, he was only barely interested in them. Fighting inedible enemies was boring when they weren't a water element creature.

"Everyone advance. Surround the anomaly." The army unit's leader, a Totem Ranked beastkin Warrior, ordered as the battle ended.

Karl's group hung back to let them do their thing, but the Totem motioned for Karl to join him.

"Overlord Karl, it's a pleasure to meet you. I am Axel, leader of the 11th Narazir Regiment. I have reports from the teams that we sent in that the anomaly is empty, everything has been pulled out already.

However, they found traces of Bomgon agents, including spell circles created by a Totem Ranked Necromancer. If you're going to keep travelling the wilderness, you need to be careful." He warned.

Karl shook the man's hand. "Well met, General Axel. After the recent incidents in Banar, it was already clear that the Bomgon Army had spies in the region, but a Totem Ranked Necromancer this far inland is a bad omen.

Is there anything else around here that might have drawn them?"

The General shook his head. "Unless you head east back to the road and follow it, there are no towns through the middle of the nation until you get nearly to the coast. There are a few small villages and isolated farms, but nothing large and permanent enough to mark on a regular map.

If you keep going northwest, you'll run into the Seventh Narazir. They're a larger Regiment than we are, with a couple of thousand Dwarven Cavalry among their ranks. But after that, there is a whole lot of nothing to see.

However, the land can be unpredictable.

The Desert ends in a few days walk, near where the men of the Seventh Regiment are stationed. Then you've got grassland and Swamp ahead, depending on how close you get to the rivers."

Karl nodded. "Alright. We've come here on behalf of the Black Dragon, to deal with some of the excess monsters that are wandering the continent. I don't think the terrain matters much, as long as we can find them and thin the numbers some."

General Axel smiled. "In that case, you definitely want to go find the Seventh Regiment. They're doing the same thing, while we hunt for new spawns to keep the numbers down closer to the cities. If the Seventh doesn't need help, then the Tenth Narazir should be doing the same somewhere to our west."

Chapter 986: Unfortunate Limitations

Karl's team gathered, and Nachtia transformed back into a human so she could hear all the gossip.

"Well?" She asked.

"Northwest of here is another Regiment. They're hunting leftover monster packs. That is where we will head, and we can attack any groups we find between here and there." Karl explained.

The black dragon nodded happily. "That is perfect. Much better than hunting fluffy things."

The fur got stuck in her teeth.

The unit was packing up to get ready to go, and Lotus had set up her healing station to ensure that there were no more lingering effects of the Undead Curses. So, Thor took his time getting the carriage out and getting set up to travel.

The Regiment began moving as soon as their gear and supply carts were loaded, so Karl hopped in the driver's seat and let Hawk lead them northwest towards the next group of monsters that he had found, while the Regiment headed east.

[These ones are alive, and there is no spawn point. Just a whole group of thingies.] Hawk explained.

The bird was completely lost on this continent. He really needed to read a book to find out what the names of all these creatures were, but he never seemed to get around to it.

Plus, they all looked like a blend of multiple animals, and it was just weird.

[Describe them as well as you can.] Karl suggested.

[Horses with horns and wings and flaming hooves?] Hawk tried.

Not even Remi knew what that was. There was a similar demonic monster known as the Nightmare, but it didn't have wings.

[Maybe they'll be friendly? They've got fire magic.] Hawk suggested.

[What are they doing now?]

[Just standing around an oasis between sand dunes.]

That sounded like an ambush, waiting for someone to come to the oasis for water.

Thor led them to the oasis, and Karl knocked on the carriage to warn the ladies that there were monsters.

Lotus hopped down, and saw the creatures, then cheered and began to run down the hill.

Karl cast a barrier over her, just to be safe, but the beasts showed no sign of attacking as she approached. However, they backed away as she approached, unwilling to let her pet them, even if they weren't feeling hostile.

Her [If not Friend, Why Friend Shaped] skill was defective, Lotus decided. It only negated the hostility, and she still couldn't pet the fire ponies.

"Lotus, leave them alone. They clearly don't want to cuddle." Karl joked.

Lotus sighed and headed back up the hill, and one of the beasts came up to bump her with its nose, then nuzzle her face before running back to the herd.

"I take it we're not attacking the monsters?" Ophelia asked.

"They're not hostile to the rest of us, so I would say that they can stay. We will look for ones from the monster spawns to eliminate." Karl agreed.

Hawk didn't mind that. They were flying fire horses. It was hard to dislike them.

Thor led the way northwest as Hawk spotted a group of monsters that were clearly behaving irrationally, attacking the ground wildly.

The beasts sensed them even before Thor brought the carriage to a stop, and he had to put up a [Bulwark] to keep them from charging before he could store the precious wagon.

These looked like someone had managed to make a Rhino bipedal, with three fingered hands, but the same thick hide and head shape.

They didn't use any weapons or equipment, and the moment that Karl leapt over the wall of ice, they attacked as a group, crashing into each other to get to him first.

The Epic Guard appeared behind the group, and Karl realized that he never removed the Haint Claw from the summoned protector.

They were much better at working together now, and the odd teleportation ability that the Haint Claw granted was being used in conjunction with the advanced combat skills of the Epic Guard, instead of emulating Cara and just jumping the monsters to beat them to death.

That was a huge improvement in the combat power of the Epic Guard, and the Rhino monsters were briefly confused as they were attacked from somewhere that they had just passed.

Karl hacked into them with the Blade of Champions, and the Overlord Ranked hide split smoothly, while the resistance made Karl strain to keep up his blade speed. A kick sent a beast flying backward to keep his left side clear, and then Ophelia and Thor were at his sides.

With Karl and Rae both emitting [Oppression] effects with their aura, the two massive combatants were tearing apart the Rhinos, which left Hawk with nothing to do but scout for more of the creatures.

There were thousands of these upright rhino monsters over the surrounding hundred kilometres, and the sand was ending, replaced by dry yellow grass. That should mean that they were close to the other army people, too.

Army people meant big battles. Big battles meant lots of practice with his fire. Better fire meant chances to advance. Hawk was still determined that he was going to manage to trigger a [Skill Master] activation and get himself Totem Ranked fire in advance.

Karl cut down the last of the beasts in the group they had encountered, and Rae cleaned the battlefield. Just in case the blood was good for something. It smelled sweet and earthy, it might be good for the vampire.

But that reminded Rae. She had promised to check up on her baby Rogue. She had been slacking on her responsibilities.

[Karl, can you make a tiny portal back to the Academy?] She asked.

Karl considered that for a moment. It shouldn't be a problem if the portal was small. He had an absolutely enormous amount of mana, and items for mana cost reduction.

[How long will you be?] He asked.

[Give me like fifteen minutes. If my math is right, it should be just after midnight there now.] Rae decided.

"Everyone, we're taking a break. Rae needs to go do a thing, and I will hold a portal open for her while she does it." Karl informed the group.

Karl focused on the Academy, using the most familiar view that he could think of. The one from the Gazebo overlooking the courtyard and the front gates.

The Portal was only the size of a baseball, but Karl could see that it was on the patio of his old room. Exactly where he wanted it.

[Alright, go do what you need to, and then come back.]

Chapter 987: Baby Rogue

Rae stepped through onto the balcony of her old room and found that her hammock was still hanging there. Recently used, but empty. The plants were all in great shape, showing that someone was taking proper care of them, and there were schoolbooks on the table in the Gazebo.

It all smelled like her baby Rogue, so Rae activated [Night Hunter] and stepped through the wall of the room to see who was in the bed.

Sure enough, the little one was sleeping soundly, splayed out across the bed on a diagonal, and laying on top of her blankets.

Rae switched to humanoid form and deactivated [Night Hunter], then carefully laid out the armour she had made for Sybil on the bed. That clueless little Rogue was still sleeping, and Rae sighed.

She really had been slacking. There was no sense of danger at all.

In a moment of brilliance, Rae decided that she would teach her baby Rogue a lesson in practical jokes.

Piece by piece, she fit the armour on the sleeping Rogue, careful not to wake her up. When only the boots were left to go on, Rae stopped and took out some silk string. A quick slip knot tied the Rogue to the bed, and Hawk helpfully donated a feather to her cause.

The moment that the feather touched her foot, Sybil was awake and going for her daggers. But she was already tied, and unable to escape the tickling.

"Gah, no! Please not the feet!" She pleaded, as Rae laughed quietly.

"Didn't I tell you that I would be checking up on you? Look at this, so deeply asleep that you didn't even notice that I got you dressed." Rae scolded Sybil, trying not to let her get used to the sensation.

[Shadow Step] briefly got Sybil free of her restraints, but Rae caught her in midair and fit the boots to her feet.

"Alright. Now, here are a pair of daggers, keep them safe. Your progress looks pretty good, not quite as fast as I had hoped, but not terrible. So, we're going to do an exercise, and then we're going to play a game." Rae instructed.

Sybil didn't quite understand what she meant until Rae put a hand on both of Sybil's shoulders and flooded her with mana at Commander Rank quality. The Rogue squealed in pain as the mana in her body was forced out, and she tried to attack, but nothing a low Ascended Rank Rogue could do would injure Rae in the slightest.

The process went on for what felt like an eternity, but was actually only about five minutes, then Rae nodded in satisfaction.

"There, now your body knows what it feels like to be a Commander. Even if it doesn't stick with that when you burn this batch off, you shouldn't have any bottleneck to advancement.

Now for the fun part. Run away. I will give you a treat for every minute you can keep me from catching you."

Sybil leapt through the bathroom door and [Shadow Stepped] into the gymnasium, while Rae activated [Night Hunter] and followed along.

She created a Golem to let Sybil know that she was there, and the Rogue vanished again, with the spider in hot pursuit.

The Golem was dismissed as they played their game, but the skill had alerted a number of the teachers whose rooms were near the indoor training areas, and they were now on high alert against invaders.

Sybil ran, teleported, even used a glider that she had acquired for just this sort of situation to try to outrun her mentor, but every time that she thought she had escaped, Rae would let a bit of her aura slip, and send her fleeing again.

Mindful of the time that Karl was keeping a portal open for her, Rae only chased Sybil for about five minutes before catching her halfway through a [Shadow Step] and bringing them back to the Rogue's bedroom.

"Not bad, you have been training your skills. Just not your situational awareness. Ask the teachers to show you the trick to being alerted the moment that something moves near you in your sleep." Rae ordered.

"So, you're not mad at me for being slow? When will you come back full-time?" Sybil asked hopefully, and Rae patted her head.

"I will be a Totem soon, and there is no good food there for me here anymore. Well, not enough of it. So, I will stay here, but I will be sure to check up on you more often now that I have an easy way to get back to you.

I expect you to make use of today's bonus and make it to Commander Rank by the end of the semester." Rae instructed with a stern tone.

Sybil giggled. The new Semester had just started, she would be able to make Commander right away, and then when her mentor came back, she would be ready for anything.

Rae nodded in satisfaction, and then used [Shadow Step] to move through the portal and back into the carriage.

"I appreciate your patience. We can head out now."

Karl closed the portal, and Thor started heading to Hawk's next waypoint, while Sybil stared at her new gear in wonder.

She hadn't had time to inspect it before, but this was all master crafted leather, made by Rae, and Epic Grade at the Overlord Rank.

But so were the daggers.

They were beautiful, dull black with a poison effect on them, though entirely made by Ashbringer, and not as powerful as the set that Karl had upgraded and Rae had kept after they taunted the item collection person in Drodh with them.

Fully Overlord ranked gear, and she was about to make Commander Rank. Sybil was still in shock at how suddenly things had changed after Rae showed up again. But if she could do all that in one day, couldn't she have done that for her weeks or months ago?

Maybe she would have broken all the records for progression, and not just the ones to Ascended Rank.

But Rae would be a Totem soon, so Sybil was convinced that she might be able to make her a Royal if she was a strong enough Commander the next time the spider arrived.

She was going to have to work harder.

Chapter 988: Wine Or Potions

Rae was in a glorious mood now that she had fulfilled her promise to Sybil.

There were also many upcoming battles with the strange rhino things, and they were fun to pick on. But the real moment of glory came from Remi.

[You know, making wine is a bit like making potions. I bet that I could brew you some blood wine out of that if you think it smells good. Just put it in one of these large jars and I will get it started.] Remi offered.

[How long will it take?] Rae asked hopefully.

[According to the book, it takes a month for wine to be ready. I don't know if blood wine is the same, but it should be something like that. Then it can be aged to mellow the flavour. If you have enough, I have an empty ale keg in here, and we can age it in the charred wood like a fine liquor.]

Rae thought about that. A smoky, woody flavour might be nice.

[Let's do it. I've got enough bodies for a barrel already.]

With so much to do, researching blood wine, crafting the first batch, and trying to balance the flavours while guessing what both Rae and Mick would like, Remi sat out the next battle, and just sent her bodyguards to help out on her behalf.

There were only like fifty of the monsters anyhow. Five on one was easy work for the team.

The monsters had been out of the spawn area for quite a while, and they had mostly split up into smaller groups. So, while there were hundreds or thousands of them in the area, they only had to fight a few dozen at a time.

The real question was: Where did they come in from? Normally, a number of monsters would stay near the anomaly, and there was a chance that the anomaly would produce more of them over time if it didn't destabilize.

Tessa hopped up onto the bench beside Karl. "Why don't we switch? I will watch Thor and you can rest."

Karl smiled. "Alright. I need to meditate and work on my power level. Enjoy your ride. Just remind Thor that he has to alert the rest of us if there is trouble."

Then, he went to the [Tiny World] where everyone else was relaxing, and settled into one of Rae's hammock swings to work on his power growth.

Dana came over to join him, and the two spent the rest of the day side by side, focused on growing their power.

Karl wasn't sure if he should move beyond the stage of the mental formations that he was on right now. The dragon visualization had worked so well that he didn't want to mess it up when he was so close to the Totem Ranked advancement.

His power was right on the border between Ranks now, and if he had a Totem Ranked repository of power, he could purge his power again and step right through. But he didn't have one, so he was working on condensing the power in his body, hoping to force a quality advancement.

After the prolonged battle with Tiffani, the Totem Ranked Vampire, Karl knew just what the power should feel like. He just couldn't quite get it right in practice.

However, leaning against Karl as he worked was an incredible benefit to Dana. Not just because she could use his power as a guideline to help advance her own, but because the process of trying to advance his power caused a small amount of power to leak, so there was more ambient mana in the area when he was meditating.

As the afternoon faded to night, Dana realized that there was something distinctly different about Karl's current physical status. Not only was his mana pool enormous, but his presence gave a feeling of otherness.

When you stood near a powerful being that was hiding its nature, there was usually some indication, and Karl gave that same sense, but she knew that he was still an Overlord. So, it had to be something related to that silver bracket that appeared around his name after the last trial.

Nobody seemed to know for sure what it meant, or it wasn't visible to everyone that they met. But Dana's suspicion was that Karl really had managed to evolve himself into the living equivalent of a dungeon boss.

They had red icons at their names in the system, but if they weren't hostile, wouldn't it be possible that their name markers were the same as his?

She had completely lost track of time until Remi came to shake the two of them out of their trance.

"It's time to get up. Thor found the 7th Narazir Regiment, and they've missions." She instructed.

"Missions? That sounds interesting." Dana agreed as she stretched, then flopped back against Karl.

He chuckled and put an arm behind her thighs to pick her up and carry her on his hip.

"Alright, let's go see what the Dwarves have in mind for missions."

The General laughed as he saw the furry white demon come out of the carriage with a much smaller, apparently human, mage on his hip.

Karl set Dana down once they were out of the wagon and went over to greet the Totem Ranked Dwarf.

"My people tell me that you have some missions available to help with the clearance of the excess monsters and related issues." Karl greeted him, skipping the formalities.

"Indeed. What sort do you prefer? Combat, rebuilding, supply runs, or did you have something else in mind?" The General agreed.

"I think Combat is about right for our group. We do enjoy a good fight now and then. Plus, the black dragon asked her Cleric to come here and help with the overpopulation issues." Karl explained.

"In that case, I have exactly the sort of missions that you would enjoy. Come with me to the command tent and I will explain the situation."

The General turned to leave, and the officers nearby motioned for everyone to join him, not just Karl.

That was unusual. Normally, they would want to keep people out of the Command area, so only one would be allowed to accompany the General.

Chapter 989: 7th Narazir

The 'Command Tent' as the General had called it was more of an art gallery of mission posters, Karl realized. Every surface was covered with reports, each of which had a bounty amount listed on the bottom, or a military strategic points value.

Karl wasn't sure what that meant, but assumed that the reward would come directly from the military for those missions that were closest to the populated areas.

"You can choose what you like from anything on the walls, that's all nearby, within two hundred kilometres. The map contains more incidents and suspected spawn points, if you want to go further afield and sate the Gods' bloodlust that way." The General explained.

Nachtia stared at the sheets on the walls. "This is all within two hundred kilometres? Most of these are military Company sized elements, headed by Overlords or Totems."

"I am well aware of the situation, thank you. This is what we're working with. There's fifty of them to every man in my Regiment, and even the cavalry can't move fast enough to deal with them all.

Every time that you remove one group, another comes to claim its territory." The General grumbled.

Nachtia turned to Karl, but he gestured for her to pick. This was her God's mission, so she should be the one who knew best what was important.

The black dragon's eyes seemed to absorb the light in the tent as she reached out and grabbed four papers off the walls.

"These four should be all close together. We can start with these, and then come back to pick more." Nachtia decided.

Karl looked at the sheet and saw that they were all related, but they had been spotted at different locations yesterday.

All four of them detailed groups of small monsters, Mostly Royal Ranked, but with Overlord Ranked leaders.

That seemed like an odd choice for the Black Dragon, but maybe that was a balance thing?

There should be nearly a thousand of the creatures in the groups, as opposed to five or ten per group for most of the Overlord Ranked threats. By pure numbers of excess, these were the largest that Karl could see among the sheets.

"Starting off ambitious, are you? I will warn you, the Rock Goblin Spawn was a nasty one. They're not normal Goblins, they can use Earth Magic." The General informed her.

Nachtia nodded. "The Black Dragon insists these need to go."

She turned to leave, and Dana took one last look before following. Now she understood why they had all been invited into the tent.

If you didn't see firsthand, you would never believe or understand just how bad the problem was.

Even the four sheets that Nachtia had pulled off the walls hadn't made a clear spot, just a few gaps between the sheets they had been partially overlapping.

"The location is close, and back to the east. Do you remember that pillar of stone that looked like a phallus? That's only a few kilometres from where they were seen this morning." Nachtia explained as she read the details.

Karl nodded. That stone was hard to miss, even from the wagon. Plus, Hawk had relayed details to him all morning, but hadn't seen the groups.

What he had seen was a number of cave entrances near the base of that stone.

"I think that I know where they are hiding. They were called Rock Goblins, and there are caves at the base of that stone. They were all seen near it, within a kilometre or two. So, they might be one colony, hunting at night." Karl offered.

Tessa poked Thor in the side. "Tough luck, bud. You're going to have to fight in human form if we go into a cavern system."

Thor snorted in amusement. "I will take the left, and you can take the right."

Karl smiled at their banter. "I will head there now, just wait for me to open another portal. The first one won't be human-friendly."

From the ground, he couldn't see the base of the rock pillar, and Hawk didn't currently have it in sight to relay the information. So, he would open a portal to the top of the stone, then open another at ground level.

Karl moved away, and the military mages all snapped their attention to the group. Someone who could open portals was incredibly valuable to their efforts, and if these mercenaries could, then they held a much higher worth than their Ranks suggested.

A few Overlords and Monarchs weren't much of a military asset, by standard calculations. But a mage that could use [Portal] was worth more than dozens of mercenaries who had to travel by land.

A second portal opened a metre away from the first, which then faded away.

Karl was standing on the other side, holding a small black monster corpse by the neck.

"Found them. Come on, let's get to work." He laughed.

The General's aides shook their heads in dismay as the group charged through the portal and into combat with the Rock Goblins.

"General, did you get a good look at that Cat Demon?" One of them whispered once the portal closed.

"The one with the enhanced physique?" The General asked.

The advisor nodded. "Is it wise to trust him? I've never seen those system markings on anything but a dungeon boss before. If that thing is some sort of wandering boss spawn, who knows what it's likely to do once it establishes a territory."

The stout Dwarven General laughed. "With three different Dragon Gods supervising? No, I think that it's more likely he's a favoured champion of the Dragon Church, and he's got some sort of skill that turned him into an actual monster.

Trust in the Old Gods, they would have sent someone to handle him if he was a threat."

The advisor wasn't sure about that. The Old Gods were entirely too hands-off in their management of worldly affairs. If someone managed to sober up a Dungeon Boss and bring it outside, they would likely just laugh and watch.

Chapter 990: Rock Goblins

A few minutes and countless dead monsters later, Karl coated [Rend] in [Void Blast] and cleaved through dozens of Rock Goblins in a single swing, then realized that targeted attacks were a waste of time against a horde of Royal Ranked creatures.

A dagger wielding Goblin leapt at him, and Karl backhanded it in the chest, sending the creature flying twenty metres before it splattered against the nearby cliff face.

As he was two full Ranks above them, this fight wasn't even a challenge. The Rock Goblins were durable, and plentiful. But they were still Goblins, and would never be known as one of the most physically powerful Monster Species.

The only thing that brought them up to the Royal Rank standard was their defensive magic, and their ability to make Earth Magic weapons.

Even Thor's [Lightning Zone] was stunning entire swathes of them to death, nearly as fast as the others could attack them.

Everyone had come out to play, and Remi was carefully stripping the corpse of one of the Rock Goblins of its accessories before swallowing it whole.

[Not bad. Rich and soft, like a sweet potato.]

Hawk swooped down to test one, and then nodded happily to himself as he found that Rock Goblins were not nearly as disgusting as normal Goblins.

They weren't mice, but they were alright.

He would save some for Remi.

"The cave entrance." Nachtia called, drawing everyone's attention to the cliff face.

There were no more enemies coming out, but ten metres into the cave, where one would normally expect it to be pitch black, the distinctive shimmer of an anomaly was visible.

The Rock Goblins had come from right here.

An Overlord Ranked Goblin Shaman appeared from a cave further up the cliff face, and cast a spell that increased the speed of the warriors.

That should be their leader, Hawk decided. A stream of flame roasted the creature, and Hawk saw the anomaly change as he circled back for another attack. Had that one attack been enough to defeat the Shaman?

From the cave, Goblins swarmed out, ten wide, in an unending stream. The death of their leader had alerted all the others that something was seriously wrong, and they had all left the safety of the anomaly to come and seek revenge.

The air on Karl's left shimmered, and he prepared to attack, until he saw the old man with jet black hair and eyes step through the shimmering air.

He was wearing the cleric robes of the Dragon Church, and he nodded politely to Karl before folding his hands in front of him.

"Let the children fight. They need the exercise. You and I will wait here for them to finish." The black dragon insisted.

Karl shrugged. It wasn't like anyone in his group would be injured by the Rock Goblins, even without his interference.

"To what do we owe the pleasure of a visit from the Church?" Karl asked.

The cleric smiled and nodded towards Nachtia. "The Death God favours that one today. It caught our attention. But that naturally brought you into our sight, which raised some questions.

Questions like what Supreme Lady Matilda's Guild is doing in the middle of nowhere hunting Goblins."

Karl laughed. "Different branch of the Darklight Host. But we are here because the Black Dragon said that these particular Goblins needed to die. In my experience, when the Dragon Gods offer a suggestion, it's best to go with it. It's never backfired on me before."

With brutal efficiency, the group hacked their way through the Rock Goblins, and the swarm parted to try to surround the small group.

Unfortunately for the monsters, the amount of damage that the beasts and the ladies could do was far beyond what the Goblins could survive, and none ever managed to make it to the back of the group, where Remi was repeatedly tossing Lotus in the air, so the Nature Cleric could see what was going on for once.

The Naga Queen didn't need her hands to cast spells, and tossing Lotus only took two out of four anyhow.

The anomaly shimmered as the last of the Goblins exited, and then vanished as they died, leaving the tunnels into the mountain dark and silent once more.

"Very well executed. Now, I should return to my duties. Send my best wishes to the Black Priestess." The old man whispered, then simply vanished.

That was an interesting skill. An illusionary clone, perhaps? No, that should be the [Recall] ability, taking him home to his temple.

Dana waved to Karl. "Care to explain what's going on over there? I know we're good, but it's a bit rude to just sit out a battle."

Karl jogged over and wrapped a hand around her waist before kissing her on the forehead.

"A representative of the Black Dragons came to see what we were up to, as Nachtia had gained favour from their patron, and that brought our group to their attention. I'm not trying to make life hard for you." Karl promised.

"Well, the anomaly collapsed, so that should be all of the Rock Goblins defeated. That's four quests done in the first hour of the day. Where to next?" Dana asked, turning her attention to the black dragon.

Nachtia shrugged. "I made note of three other good quests nearby, but none of them were of particular importance to the Death God. I wonder why this one was? The battle was so simple that it hardly counted as a fight. One good stream of dragon breath into the anomaly would have wiped out their reinforcements before they even came outside."

She had a point. If it interested the Gods, it was normally something big or spectacular.

And that was when the explosions started.

"Head count." Tessa called.

"Where is Cara?" Lotus asked, after quickly mentally calculating who was not here.

The whole stone pillar shook, and the familiar magical signature of [Void Blast] caught Karl's attention.

"She's in the tunnels."

Everyone froze for a split second. Fighting in a tunnel was a nightmare, especially ones that looked like they were about to come down at any moment.

"Everyone wait out here. I will go assist Cara. Just keep back, so if the pillar falls, you don't get crushed."

Karl ran into the tunnels. What was the Void Badger up to? She was shielding her thoughts, and not answering his messages.