

Reincarnated With A Summoning System

- Chapter 257

Chapter 257

“That Aura is ridiculous. I mean, wow. Just wow.” Mythryll has been reduced to incoherent ramblings by the aura given off by Misha’s [Apostolic Form]. For a good reason, too, 50 percent more spell power is completely broken. Her entire armor set barely gives that much in additional spell power bonuses.

Cain looks over the Apostolic Form closely, noting that it still seems to be half Misha, not a completely different species. Like it’s a personal blessing more than a regular transformation spell.

“Should we go see how everyone is doing, learning to surf?” Misha asks, her voice unchanged despite the beaked transformation.

“Sure thing. I wonder if I can use the exit portal as a Dragon or if I’ve got to change back?” Cain tries sticking his enormous paw through the portal and finds himself transported to the other side without incident.

“Well, that solved that.” He says happily as Misha and Mythryll follow him after transforming back to their standard forms, hiding their laughter at his idiocy.

The Elves in the area are freaked out, not expecting an enormous dragon to appear in the village. Fortunately for them, the beach is nearby, and the Dragon researchers have spotted his golden scales shimmering in the sunlight.

“I knew it; they were Armored. And look at those tail spikes.” One of the Elves cheers, running over the second Cain lands on the beach. In moments they’re climbing all over him, pulling on scales, measuring, and taking notes.

“I guess that kills the theory that they evolved up from smaller flying lizards. Or maybe it’s only the Gold Dragons that started so large? We’ve got a real live Proto Dragon, and we still don’t have enough information.”

Vala comes over to see what the Elves are up to, seeing them climbing all over Cain, one even trying to polish a scale to see if it’s really metal. “What are you now, a jungle gym?”

"If he extends his tail out flat, I bet he'd make a great slide down into the water." Mythryll points out, and a few of the Elves look at him hopefully.

Cain obliges, the top of his tail ending in waist-deep water. The first Elf sliding down his tail tickles, making it twitch and throwing the Elf a dozen meters out to sea.

"Sorry about that. The tail is ticklish." Cain laughs, the rumbling noise shaking the sand around him.

"Noted. Tail too dangerous to use as a slide."

They've had their fun studying him, so Cain transforms back into the Waves Rider male Form he was using earlier, equipping a set of swim trunks to relax on the beach.

"Your species says Ancient when I do a full inspection of you; what does that look like? It's not a form of Dark Elf, is it?" One of the researchers asks, and it finally dawns on Cain that he's never actually seen his default Ancient Form. He started in human shape, and it just slipped his mind.

Cain opens the transformation screen of his interface, searching for Ancient appearances. Only the default Ancient Form is available as he hasn't seen another member of the species. And it's definitely not the sort of thing you can just show people at random.

Ten meters tall, bipedal with a long whip-like tail and enormous leathery wings. One arm splits at the elbow into three giant tentacles that easily reach the ground, while the other ends in a clawed hand. The head looks like an Octopus has been set on the shoulders, with six eyes giving it a strangely human appeal. At least until it lifts the front webbing between the tentacles in what he assumes should be a smile and reveals a mouth with three rows of sharp teeth, long and spiky like a Dragon's or an Orcs tusks.

Forget showing others; that thing would give him Nightmares if it weren't his own body. What sort of Lovecraftian horror has he become?

"No, it's not a Dark Elf. But I don't think it's wise to change into that form in public." Cain explains, hoping they'll drop it.

Fortunately, they do, under the mistaken belief that he keeps his proper form hidden so he can't be recognized later. It doesn't look like Misha and Mythryll will accept that answer forever, though, so Cain is going to have to come up with something. Maybe he can modify it to be a bit less terrifying?

In the interface, Cain can modify small features of the form he wishes to shift into, though he had found it's easier to do them after transforming. He focuses on making the Ancient Form less intimidating, finding that he can shrink it to just over 2 meters tall, nearly human-sized. Like that, it's almost friendly looking.

They've relaxed, napped, and snacked the afternoon away when bright gold sails nearly block out the sight of the setting sun over the water on the horizon. The locals seem ecstatic, but Cain has no idea what army that is.

"The Serrah Woods Royal Navy," Sven whispers to him, and Cain watches in awe as they come towards the village in a perfect formation.

"I wonder what they're here for? Are they headed for the border to prevent the Landis Civil War from spreading south into Elven lands?" One of the researchers ponders out loud.

The Elves will get their answer soon enough; two vessels have broken from the armada and are coming in to anchor close to shore. They appear to be the flagship of the Elven fleet, plus another ship with three decks of guns, their hulls made of some unidentified composite material and not wood or metal.

The older man from the surfboard shop is the one headed out to meet them. Cain doesn't bother to move from his spot in the setting sun, knowing his hearing is good enough to pick up on most conversations even from this distance, as long as those nearby are quiet.

The old surfer is met with four well-dressed Elves and twenty guards in full ceremonial regalia, medals and all, but only turns to lead them back to the beach silently. The honor guard marches right up to Sven and stops with a polite salute.

The group leader nods to Sven, who bows in return, so whoever it is outranks him at the moment. "Prince Sven, I'm sorry to say that we bear ill tidings. Landis has fallen; your father's attempt to appease the mob failed. New Senators have been appointed, and as of now, the entire county is a human-only territory."

"What of my family?" Sven asks sadly, and Laura, in a Neko transformation, moves to hold him from behind so he doesn't collapse.

"Your younger sister, Gurda, still lives. She was rescued by Knight Commander Lancelot, who still had trained Gryphons at his farm in the countryside, and Royal Blacksmith Lukas. Our informants tell us they're headed northwest into the desert to hide. The rest of the Royal Family, as well as all other noble branches with a possible claim to the throne, have been eliminated. Most of the nobility has fallen, and nonhumans are fleeing the country as fast as possible, but the revolutionary army kills them if possible whenever they find them."

"Should have let us call the Dragons and burn the place to the ground," Mythryll mutters, and the Elven Royal smiles at her.

"We suggested the same thing, but until the very last, the Landis Royal Family still believed the people were on their side. The mob killed the King while he was giving the

public announcement of Sven's death. It wasn't until our retired Royal Seneschal recognized him here that we realized Sven was alive and diverted the fleet to see to his safety."

The Elf turns to address the Foxkin directly. "With your leave, we will escort you to the capital, where the Queen has a marriage proposal in mind for you. Princess Lauren, I believe."

The note of amusement in his voice can't be hidden, and even Sven gives a small smile despite his distress. "After fifteen years of begging her grandmother to give her the fluffy tails, it seems she's won the argument."

The leader of the Elven force laughs at Sven's announcement. "She's been obsessed with your tails since she was a little girl. But she does like you, and her territory is near the middle of the Serrah Woods. You would be safe there, with many other Foxkin around you."

Laura nods in complete understanding of the obsession, rubbing her face in his tail as she hugs him, and Sven sighs.

"I accept your proposal, General Pew. Darklight Host, thank you for all your kindness and hospitality on our journey, and feel free to come to visit me anytime. I'll send you all invitations to my wedding. By tradition, it will be in four months, during the first full moon of spring."

General Pew? That's an odd name for an Elf, so Cain inspects the leader of the Elven forces, finding that his name is PewPewDie. An actual transfer, not an Elf born in this world.

"What of the armada? Surely it's not all necessary to escort a single willing husband home?" Cain asks, curious.

"Border forces. The humans have gone berserk and are attacking all up and down the border, chasing demihumans into our lands, but they're not stopping there. The Queen believes they might try to take over the Eastern half of the continent."

If that's the case, they'll likely head into the desert eventually, even as bleak and barren as it is. Lukas should be warned if he's still alive and on the run.

[Lukas, if you need refuge, come to Blood Sands Castle. We've got a sizeable underground fortress there, perfect for hiding away from any type of search, as outsiders are not allowed anywhere near it.] Cain sends the message to the Smith, along with a set of directions.

[We had thought of messaging you for assistance. Most of the castles and cities in the desert have either aligned Wave Rider or Human at this point, and we're not particularly

welcome in either. Only Assah and Behar are still open ports in the desert east of the mountains. We were running out of options, thank you.]

Cain informs Maggie and Sora to expect the visitors and hide them away along with their Gryphon, not telling anyone but trusted Guild members that they'd seen them. The underground might not be finished, but it's a good hiding spot for fugitives, and once things calm down, they should be able to return to nearly normal everyday lives under new identities. Their names aren't too unique for that, other than Lancelot.

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

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General Pew and the second vessel that came to shore with him leave immediately with Prince Sven, rushing back to the capital so that they can drop him off and rejoin the armada.

Cain watches the graceful exit of their ships, how they tweak the water and wind magic to maneuver in close quarters, the smooth way they build up the speed and how their crews adjust the sails so precisely to gather every bit of the wind and save on mana usage.

It's extremely impressive, and really highlights how a well trained crew can get so much more out of a ship than a bunch of amateurs, as Cain's Puppets are. Sure, they have Apprentice sailing skills, but that's really only enough to know their way around the vessel without getting lost on which line is which.

Even the Supporters from the Wave Riders that control their spells aren't as graceful, though much of that is likely due to the slight design differences and material changes between the warships and the merchant spec Queen Rose.

"Who would have thought the Monarchy would be overthrown? What sort of people would do that?" One of the Elven Dragon researchers asks sadly. He's a younger Elf, one that wasn't alive during the Great War between species, and having lived in this peaceful communal lifestyle since birth, the idea of wiping out entire bloodlines was foreign to him.

"Angry ones. Appeasement never works in the long run; it only encourages your opponents. The more you give, the more they take. The Landis Royals gave them everything they asked for and the revolution took the entire country as a bonus. It

happened many times in my world after a charismatic leader whipped the population into a fury. Kingdoms, countries, even entire Continents fell before the revolution was stopped, either because the leader obtained absolute power or they were stopped by force.”

The Elf nods along with Cain’s explanation, taking notes. Many bystanders look deep in thought, including Misha, but Mythryll understands his point right away. It’s easy to forget that although their old worlds were pretty similar and they’re all here now, they’re not all from the same world or time. Because of that their experiences and values can be somewhat different.

With all the excitement for the day having drained everyone’s energy, an executive decision is made in favor of relaxing at the hot springs before bed. There aren’t many visitors there this evening; only the Darklight Host, the Dragon researchers, and a handful of older Elves who were also there yesterday. The hot water is pretty relaxing; it must soothe the aches of old bones.

The conversation isn’t as relaxing as the water, unfortunately. The visit from the Elven armada had turned the talk to war, and many of the older Elves, even the middle-aged ones, were alive when the last great war happened. The humans might have forgotten the horrors of the vast war that spanned all five Continents over these last few hundred years, but here in the Elven kingdom, they still have soldiers serving that fought in it.

The consensus among the local Elves is that the Elven Kingdom should hold their Forests and let the humans fight among themselves. The Green Orcs will be happy to give them the fight of their lives without bothering anyone else, and the Orcs have a good chance at winning the continent outright if they go on the offensive.

According to the locals, the Orcs might have a smaller and landlocked empire, but they outnumber the humans and Elves on the continent, thanks to their propensity for multiple births.

Cain also knows they’re always up for a good fight, and a mob of humans invading their kingdom would be a cause for celebration.

Going back to the ship doesn’t happen that night; exhaustion wins out over the allure of soft beds, and everyone ends up sleeping in large hammock beds that the Elves string up in the cavern. The old folk insists that the heat and humidity are good for preventing illness, and Cain is far too tired to argue the point, joining the others in a big tangle of bodies for the evening.

Fortunately, both the waterfall and the hot springs are steps away when it comes time to freshen up in the morning before everyone gets dried off and dressed to see what’s for breakfast and decide what they’re going to do next.

Touring the continent still seems like a lot of fun, and the Castle should be able to defend itself with the guards that are there, but at the same time, they don't want to abandon the Guild. They're higher level than the average of the Eastern side of the continent, and have the ability to Summon Dungeon Boss level monsters to help them fight, but there's only so many of them in total, and having Cain's ability to call on huge numbers of additional summons could save a lot of lives in a siege.

They've been on the lookout for a Guild item or skill that can call members to a specific location as well. None of them are sure such a thing exists, but it sounds reasonable, so it might. After the Ogre war in Sunnybrook, the ability to gather everyone quickly caught Char's eye as something that would be incredibly useful to have, but now it's become a much higher priority.

Guild messages are exchanged over pancakes and fruit, with the ultimate decision that coming back through a war zone would be a huge mess. From what the Guild has heard, most of the Navies along the coast have joined the revolution, and the nonhuman island kingdoms have locked down entry and called for support from other Continents.

RhickJaymz has declared Assah an open port and called foreign enforcers to see that it stays that way. A ship full of fourth advancement fighters from deep in the Northern Continent's frigid mountains have answered his call in exchange for knowledge from the Library, and they have Dragon Riders among them.

Their Dragons are allies, not a summons, so transfers more than a hundred levels below them will do nothing to the mounts themselves. Even if they were taking damage, Dragons of that level would destroy any Central Continent fleet that tried attacking them before they could even fire a second volley from their Cannons, so the port should be safe for now.

RhickJaymz has reportedly put multiple quests out for materials as well, since providing books to the mercenaries nation is the deal, and most of what they need are class exclusive or high rank skills that require multiple rare ingredients to inscribe. The Darklight Host is gathering what they can, since they're spread out enough to have access to many different dungeons, but some of the items simply don't come from this side of the continent.

They have the house in the Demon Capital now, home to no fewer than six different dungeons, but they're all over level 200, so the number of members that can do them is limited. Char has trained up two full groups of First Advancement fighters though, and with the Epic Quality [Personal Guard] summons available they can do content a good bit higher level than themselves, racing through the levels compared to any other guild they know of.

They're still picky about new members though, as they don't want fools or treacherous sorts messing up the family vibe of the Guild. The higher level core members almost

feel like family Elders to the newer members, and Char and Cid have gone to great lengths to see that they're held in high esteem as the founders who provide strength and stability and not an old generation to be replaced in all but name.

Char informs them that the Quest scrolls that begin the quest chain to enter the Beginners Valley while over level 100 have all been brought to Graska, essentially locking all elite forces out of the Valley, and the northern pass is being heavily guarded by an alliance of Fae, both light and dark.

They would also have to get through Montauk to attack the valley, and it's pretty well fortified, as the defenses were upgraded after the attacks by the former Guardians to include traps, siege weapons and additional defensive spells. The fighting is still a long way from there at the moment, focusing near the coasts and only having moved inland inside of Landis.

With that in mind, and an estimate of two months before any significant force might come for either the castle or Montauk, the decision is made to carry on instead of going back. It's almost the same distance to Assah in either direction from where they're sitting anyhow, and there's hope for them to save time going home through the Demon Kingdom.

Dimnys does have some good news for them on that front as well. If Blood Sands Castle is attacked, the Demon King is willing to send them multiple battalions of Demonic mercenaries. For a price, of course, and the Dwarven Master Smiths will equip those who are going at a discount.

That's enough to put Cain's mind at ease. If the demons are going to help them, they shouldn't have to fear much from an army on the East side of the continent thanks to the level difference. Lancelot and a few others are over level 200, but more than one such person per army is remarkable in that region.

Without that fear of imminent danger, they decide to carry on past the mountains, towards what the Elves inform them is an unstable kingdom called Skyview. The leader there is uncertain, as the local Elves' information is limited, and the Skyview Kingdom has been fighting about the rights to the throne, but the royalty was or are humans, while most of the Kingdom is Beastkin. The two species mixed freely in the kingdom the last time the Elves heard news of the commoners, so it should be fairly comfortable for the Darklight Host.

They restock the ship with wine, tea, and fresh fruit before plotting their course. As is the case with most smaller coastal nations, the capital of Skyview, Karrack, is a Port city. The Elven capital is well inland, reflecting their love of the Forests, so they won't be visiting it this trip, and Cain wants to get past the mountains to look for a place to the purchase as a Guild House, which will give them Guild bank access in most of the Southern Ocean.

They're bound to run into Elven Navy patrols along the way if they stay near the coast, which might be able to give them more information about current events at their destination. With that in mind, they don't want to head too far out and risk missing them all, causing them to go in blind.

Nila has laid out a plan that should be easy sailing, avoiding the known hazards, and still close enough to land that they'll likely meet a coast guard patrol. The route she had planned will be three days to the border and a half-day to Karrack if they hold their usual cruising speed.

With magic involved, sailing is now like a bus tour. You can make your way across the continent in under a week, a much different experience than Mythryll recalls sailing to be. Her family used to rent small boats to sail on a nearby lake, and a complete circuit of the lake could take all day if the wind were low.

On the first night, the Giant Armored Octopus manages to find something to fight. An Epic Quality Leviathan at level 175. The leviathan of this world is not classed as a whale or squid but as an aquatic Dragon. It's still got clawed front legs, but it has adapted to have large fins instead of wings the membranes much thicker and the wings smaller than those of flying Dragons. The rear legs are more like tentacles that end in long webbed toes that can either claw enemies or spread and be used for propulsion. The tail likewise has top and bottom fins, fully adapting the Dragon for life underwater.

The fight took place far beneath them, but Cain noticed it in the logs and recorded the Leviathan to add to his slowly growing collection of sea creatures. With the leviathan to make up his legendary summons and the Giant Armored Octopus, he now has a pretty solid Naval force for most situations, they're just not matched to be conveniently tripled with Ancient Resistance.

When they do finally meet with the Elven Navy, the ships are on high alert and nearly to the border with Skyview. According to them, only one Skyview Royal remains and has been appointed to the throne. A thirteen-year-old human named King James.

The kingdom is still welcoming to all races as far as the Elves are aware, but things on the land have started getting bad, with Goblin and Groll attacks being widespread all across the country, thanks to the depleted state of their military and the less populated state of their wilderness.

The capital has quests up for them, which is good news to the Darklight Host. They all love hunts, especially with Cain around. It's even better when it's quests to play hero and rescue low-level villagers. Those ones just always make you feel good inside.

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

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Everyone is expecting a Naval patrol once they reach Skyview waters, but there's none to be found. They should have crossed the border just before dawn, but they didn't see a single ship, merchant, military, or otherwise.

Even when they approached the Capital city, there was nothing but a handful of merchants already at the long concrete pier. The Elves said this country was in rough shape, but having nothing to guard your capital is downright reckless.

The young King should have advisors of some sort. Someone, to assist him and point out when things need to be done? Even the local Nobles and merchant groups would be fine, since security and stability are in their own best interest.

Nila brings the Queen Rose to the pier, a single block of stone and concrete long enough to dock a dozen vessels the size of the Queen Rose down either side, where the other merchants wave a friendly greeting, but they're the only ones in sight.

The closest buildings to shore are a collection of brick warehouses. However, a neighborhood of pink Adobe houses is visible in the distance, and a downtown core of very modern looking high-rise buildings, glass walled office buildings, and balcony covered apartment buildings alike, reaching for the skies.

Besides the lack of sheet lights, the capital of Skyview could pass for a modern city from their past lives. Perhaps it's an advantage of higher level areas? Advanced spells from life skills and mage-type classes would explain what they see here. This city doesn't feel crude and medieval at all, not like the human cities they're familiar with on the other side of the continent anyhow.

The Elves lives were deliberately rustic and in tune with nature, so they can't really be used as comparison, though they had a high level of comfort where it didn't interfere with the surroundings.

There are still no mopeds or other vehicles, though, so they haven't found the reclusive gnomes. Not that high agility transfers can't run at an impressive rate of speed without them, but a motorcycle will always be a better option than running in Cain's mind.

"Some welcoming committee." Nila jokes with the captain next to them, gesturing to the empty docks and the brick storefronts with no pedestrians visible.

"They'll come out once they see you've got goods to trade. Karrack isn't currently charging a customs fee so you most likely won't see any officials." The other Captain,

an ebony-skinned human with multiple golden nose piercings, shrugs as if he's gotten used to this state of affairs.

Now that he mentions it, there are large wooden carts set out by each berth to load goods. They're not particularly clean, though, and all Cain has to trade in is silk. It would take a particular sort of fool to drop bolts of cloth on that weather-beaten deck, even with a drop cloth to protect from the dirt.

Cain decides the best way to get things done is to take most of the crew into the city and explore. He's more interested in finding the quests and gaining experience than selling his silk anyhow.

Everyone gathers on the top deck, all the Companions except Nila merged with their twin, as on Wave Rider plus the Supporters and puppets will be staying on board today as usual. Mythryll has changed into a dark blue tunic dress and leather pants with boots that closely matches Nila's style, while Misha picked a light yellow sundress with comfortable low heels, this world's equivalent of runners.

Cain looks her over for a second, giving her a little spin before adding a black shawl to her outfit and braiding a yellow ribbon that matches her dress into two small braids that hang over the front of her shoulders. He steps back to admire his handiwork before giving a satisfied nod and changing his shirt to match her dress.

Vala smirks at the display, before her experts turn to a full on smile as Cain extends his arm for Misha to take as they leave the ship and Nila mimics his actions, escorting Mythryll for their walk down the pier.

Once they're off the dock, they're on gravel streets with familiar concrete paved sidewalks. They must leave the streets soft for the sake of the animals, but they look out of place in an otherwise very modern city.

Past the warehouses, they pass through a community of single story adobe houses with wooden fences and chickens in the yards. The occasional store and apartment building in the same adobe finish breaking up the uniformity. Along with chickens, Cain notices some have rabbit like creatures with small antlers in cages, another form for him to record, but he's not sure what their purpose is. They don't seem to be just pets, left outside in cages like that.

Cain also notices several miniature Mole Dogs, long-nosed furry things with hands made for digging. At the size of a corgi, they're cute—a stark contrast to their violent larger kin. Those ones are definitely pets, and many children, both Beastkin and human are playing with them as the Darklight Host group passes.

The houses suddenly give way to a shopping district that mimics Cain's nearly forgotten memories, rows of glass storefronts for blocks and blocks. This arrangement seems to

be a strange one to Misha and Mythryll; they're debating why all the stores look the same but with different signs.

The city is lively once they get this far; almost every business is open, and locals are going about their days dressed in the usual eclectic fashions of transfers, where the outfit reflects their class. At this level fashion items are definitely available, and popular with the wealthy, but displaying your armor with your weapons put away seems to be the fashion of the Skyview commoners.

It's everything you would expect of a modern capital city, if you ignore the lack of government officials at the pier. The locals seem to just treat the docks like a cargo facility, ignoring their existence unless they have personally ordered something.

The Darklight Host are looking for the Quest Hall equivalent in this kingdom when they come across a peach skinned noble boy with Dark curly hair crouched down in the loading area between a clothing store and a bookstore that caught Vala's attention. At best estimate, he's in his early teens and ineptly attempting to hide from someone.

At least his brightly colored silk and leather clothes are fancy enough for Cain to assume he's a noble. He's certainly not used to hiding in alleys, or he wouldn't have matched gray leather pantaloons with red knee socks, gold ankle boots, and a red and gold coat with puffy sleeves.

He does look like he knows his way around the city though, so Cain stops to say hello. The youth has his title hidden, but his name is James; a simple name and easy to remember.

"Lord James, I'm Duke Cain from the Great desert of the central continent. I find myself in need of a guide, and you look like you could use a disguise. Care to make a deal?"

The direct offer startled the youngster, staring blankly at him and blinking before extending his hand. "Deal. I will be your guide as long as you can hide me."

What he's hiding from really doesn't matter to the group, he's not high enough level to threaten any of them, and he doesn't seem hostile. More like an overdressed kid worried about getting in trouble for sneaking out of the house against his parent's wishes.

Cain sends James a group invite, which he accepts in seconds, then motions for Nemu to transform their newly acquired guide. Her [Troubadour's Transformation] ability turns him into Gerald, a Lynx type Beastkin man in his senior years, showing multiple combat scars and time-honed muscles under a dark green leather vest with black cargo pants and worn-out work boots.

The permed mullet completes the look of an aging enforcer, giving the Lynx a look that says he'd gladly stab someone for drinking his last beer.

"I hope you know how to handle yourself. Your new form is known as Gerald, and you look pretty tough. A standard scan will show you by that name with no Guild. It doesn't hide your class or level, but it's pretty good as far as disguises go." Cain explains as James inspects himself.

"I've been trained in swords since birth. Plus, I'm a Paladin. It's a much better disguise than I expected. I thought you might dress me as a page or a beggar."

"Too easy. If someone is looking for a hidden target, they ignore clothes and check nameplates and faces. We're looking to take care of some of the monster quests in the area and need to find where they're handed out. You're welcome to come with us if you like."

"A day or two would be good if you have time. I needed to get outdoors and see the state of things. I suspect many of the problems around here are caused by those who are supposed to prevent them." The body of Gerald has the voice of a fifty-year-old chain smoker, raspy and deep. James isn't quite used to it yet, but he's doing his best to hide his crisp noble accent under a nasal drawl.

"Someone hired a washed-up old goon like you to investigate the city's state? I will give you some advice, old man; keep your nose out of Duke Archibald's business if you don't want to lose it." A knight in polished armor, praying by them into the clothing shop sneers, having heard a bit of their conversation.

"Don't get us wrong, young lad. The Duke hired us to find out who in his employ might be betraying him and messing up his plans. You don't know anything about that, do you? There's a handsome reward for information."

Gerald flashes a yellowed and toothy smile at the guard, improvising.

The Knight shakes his head in disgust, almost gagging at the stale beer and cigarette smell on the Beastkin's breath, and leaves. "Noble politics aren't my business, and they shouldn't be yours. Just keep my advice in mind."

The moment the Knight is gone, Cain hands a mint candy to the transformed noble, who looks much less pleased with the thorough details Nemu put into his disguise than he was a moment ago.

Cain and James, or Gerald as he appears to be now, share a smile for the information they gained about Duke Archibald being in de facto control of the area and join the others inside the book store. Vala has found a few fiction novels, and Nila has a plain white covered book she purchased tucked in her jacket, saving inventory space.

"The quests are available near the east gate. We could get to Long Fang City by dark if we leave now. There should be a quest for that region; they've reported many attacks by Goblins and Gnolls lately." James explains, and everyone gets ready to head out,

with Cain taking Misha's hand in one of his, the size difference making her seem smaller than she is, before whispering something the others can't hear that makes her blush.

The city of Karrack is fantastic, but they want to get closer to level 200 and find a spot for a Guild House before they return to relaxing if that's even going to be possible in a country known to be politically unstable with a monster problem.

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

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James leads them through the city, slowly explaining the state of things as he knows them as he points out various landmarks.

"As you might already know, there has been a lot of fighting over the throne. Only one Royal is left right now. So he's been named King. Duke Archibald, whose estate you can see on the left is the head advisor to the King, a powerful and respected man in the city. Even if many vicious rumors have been spread about him lately, some going so far as accusing him of failing to produce an heir because he prefers young boys.

In practice the Skyview Kingdom has always been run by the oligarchs, the last dozen kings, going back a thousand years, have been under their control. The new King started out differently, having obtained a radical idea from a new arrival. He implemented a document called the Magna Carta, which granted a set of basic protections to the commoners. It made him immensely popular among the masses, but upset many Nobles who preferred to exploit their workers beyond what most would deem socially acceptable.

Here, nobility is hereditary, but conditional. If a family falls from wealth they lose their titles. Likewise, if a family gains great wealth, they gain esteem and titles. If you could prove to the Dukes you hold sufficient wealth, you could have your Duke titles recognized as a Duke of Skyview as well as your home nation. It's all very official, and grants a number of benefits.

We will be passing the monthly nobility allocation fair in a kilometer or so, it's being held to our left and up the hill in the palace courtyard. Most of the ranking Nobles will be there for the day, welcoming wealthy visitors to the nation."

Misha interrupts his narration to find out more about these wealth based Nobles. "What sort of benefits do Nobles gain?"

“They can buy land and rent it out, commoners and foreigners cannot. They can lend money for a fee, create employment contracts and enforce debt bonds on those who fail to pay or break a contract. They’re allowed in the palace if they reach Earl or greater rank. Then of course there’s the limited ability to levy taxes on their renters beyond the base rate charged by the Kingdom itself. It’s all formalized through the system.”

To the members of the Darklight Host, that all sounds extremely sketchy, like the worst aspects of the Guild System on a national scale. But if that’s how things are here, it’s better to flaunt their wealth a little to avoid issues later.

With this new information, the fashion sense of the country becomes much more obvious. In other places they’ve been, fashion is the primary concern, everyone wears casual clothing they think looks good. Here, a large number of people wear mismatched armor everywhere. They’re not planning on fighting, they’re showing off their high level equipment, as proof of wealth to separate the low level nobility from the commoners.

Legendary Armor pieces are the Luis Vuitton handbags and Louboutin shoes of this world, a status symbol intended to set the wearer apart from those without them. Cain suspects if he were to see the status bonuses on many of those items they would be ill suited to actual use by the class wearing them, but it’s more important to them that the item is high level and Legendary.

Cain considers changing outfits, but the suit he’s wearing is quite stylish, one of the many clothing items they picked up in Tortuga, and somewhat distinctive, as the cut of the shirt and coat are not something Cain has seen anyone in this country wearing.

They actually are still armor pieces, which can be worn without a disguise. Cain no longer suffers that restriction, as every form he uses is a transformation, which can wear whatever he likes. But, since these were made to have a wider audience, they are considered by the system to be chain mail, with platinum threads woven through them.

He could also pick a transformation with clothing included, as this Mafia Don appearance defaults to when he’s in armor, but visualizing a new form with appearances for all the gear he’s wearing is more work for him than simply picking an outfit, so he will save the effort for when he changes into new armor which disrupts his fashion.

“How about we go visit the event? We were hoping to get a Guild House on this end of the continent, and it sounds like I will need to be a local noble to qualify.”

“You will. A knight can own an acre, you’ll just need a platinum bar in verifiable wealth and a gold bar for the registration fee.” What a scam. The whole country sounds like a ponzi scheme run by the oligarchs.

Cain tries the Guild Bank again, gaining access this time. The Demon Kingdom Guild House must be within bank range of Skyview. That's good news, it saves him trying to get equipment valued to prove his wealth.

The event within the palace grounds looks much more like a garden party than anything else. Both visitors to the nation and local Nobles have gathered here in high spirits, enjoying the atmosphere, as well as the food and drinks. A band is playing from somewhere nearby, an upbeat tune that a number of the young Nobles are dancing to on a patio.

Listening to the conversations, Cain learns that the monthly event is not only for new nobility, but also for those looking to upgrade their status, and those whose ranking has been called into question. They're not the only ones here, of course. The abundance of Nobles also attracts those who aren't intending to change their status but who enjoy a good party.

The actual ranking takes place to one side in a series of square pavilion style tents. The retainers of the wealthier nobility have gathered near here, along with many of the Knights and some others looking to make business connections or strategic alliances to solidify their own position.

In Skyview, most nobility are the equivalent of a CEO from Cain's old world, so their close Companions and Assistants are usually the upper management of their organization. By comparison, Cain is more of the Mafia boss that the system named his appearance. A leader with trusted Lieutenants and Commanders running a diverse organization instead of an organized and focused company.

Gathering two Mythrill bars and a chest of gems from the Smithy stockpile plus a gold bar to register his application, Cain steps towards a tent labeled "Upper Nobility". The bystanders look nervous, but don't say anything, assuming Cain knows what he's doing.

"All of you can wait out here and enjoy the party. Gerald shouldn't do anything to draw attention and I can handle a little paperwork." The Companions can't help but snicker at that. Cain does exactly zero of the Guild paperwork. The Companions themselves do more of it than he does.

Those that overhear the conversation assume that the Lynx eared Beastkin is the criminal he looks like and may have offended someone important, bringing him looks of sympathy. Even if he has the money the Dukes won't approve him as a noble if he's offended them. Without a noble title, you can't buy anything larger than a house in the city, and any store you open would have to be leased. A serious limit to the advancement minded group gathered here.

Cain is about to head in when one of the Dukes comes out, escorted by a messenger and five scantily clad women. Inside the tent Cain can see everyone has an entourage.

Going in alone would just be too plebian for that group, Cain realizes.

“On second thought, a bit of grandstanding is important if we’re going to impress them. Evangeline can you undo the Merger? Four identical Seraphim should do the trick. In full armor please.”

James looks a bit perplexed, but that quickly turns to shock when he finds himself looking at identical quadruplets. Before he can recover enough to speak, Cain strides forward into the Upper Nobility tent with an easy grace, muscles rippling under the yellow shirt he chose for today, matching Misha’s dress.

The oligarchs look to the well dressed man that has entered their territory, judging his worthiness, then doing a double take when four identical Epic Quality Seraphim women follow him in, wearing full battle regalia. As far as shows of status go, he’s doing pretty well.

“Greetings. What might we help you with? Mr. Cain is it?” A portly Duke doing his best to hide an extra fifty kilos under an expensive suit asks.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you all. I am Duke Cain of Blood Sands Castle in the Great Desert. My travels have brought me here and I wish to register my title as local Nobility in order to obtain a summer home.” The Dukes nod in understanding. Skyview is a tropical country, not as wet as the Elven Kingdom to their east, but far from the scorching arid desert Cain called home. With their Royal Succession issues solved, the country is again becoming attractive as a vacation spot.

The next to speak is a distinguished looking gentleman in his eighties, by apparent age of course, as actual age can be deceiving with transfers. He’s chosen a heavily embroidered set of black Taoist robes that compliment his prodigious goatee. It’s pure white and nearly reaches his waist, contrasting vividly against his clothing.

“As I’m sure you’re aware, impressive allies alone aren’t enough here in Skyview. Do you have the documented proof of your wealth?”

Cain sets a solid Mythril bar on the table between the plush leather chairs set up for the tent’s occupants. Then another and a small chest of gems, then a gold bar.

“I have had the good fortune of mining out a Mythril deposit you see. When it comes to raw wealth, my military might pales in comparison.” The assembled Nobles look suitably impressed. Mythril Armors are paper thin, the strength of the metal making bulk unnecessary. Mythril weapons are usually forged over a core of lesser materials, or Elemental energy friendly metals to influence their bonuses.

Entire bars of the precious metal, much less an entire mine full of it, are an incredible amount of money. Even a single coin of the precious metal is worth a platinum bar and would earn him a spot as a Knight, who could buy an acreage here in Skyview.

One of the Dukes uses an ability and then nods to the others, verifying the authenticity of the precious resources in front of them. Satisfied, the goateed Duke motions for Cain to put them away and takes out a long tobacco pipe.

“It seems fortunes favor you. Where might your nearest property be?” The Duke, ChenWu42 asks between puffs.

“The closest to here should be the Keep in the Demon Kingdom Capital. A recent acquisition, but well appointed.” The questions now feel more like a formality than anything, they’ve already made up their minds about the young looking Noble in front of them.

A narrow faced assistant with what looks to be a painter’s easel bows politely and sets up his tools. “Last up is the official recording. But you must be in your original form. My skill says your human skin is an innate transformation.”

Cain considers the shock factor of a ten meter tall Ancient appearing in the tent, which is his natural form, but decides to go for the human sized version. They look the same anyhow, just in different sizes.

When Cain shifts the suit changes to a complex garment of layered cloth, he would still call it a suit, though in a fashion he’s never seen before. The change is unexpected, as his Ancient Form is still vaguely bipedal, close enough to a human physique that it could wear the other style of suit if you ignored the wings and tail.

“Is this close enough to my true form for your skill?” Cain asks, realizing that his voice is not a sound but a power that feels as if the entire world is bending to his will, depositing the words directly into the listener’s mind and overwhelming their thoughts due to his lack of experience.

[Mental Projection] is an always active ability of the Ancients in their true form, which lacks a conventional vocal cord. Their innate magical power is immense, even without training, and Cain can feel his potential skyrocket as he tries this form for the first time. Perhaps a class with more magical ability might be an option for him during the next advancement. He certainly feels like it would be a good fit.

What Cain doesn’t notice right away is the aura of Existential Dread that an Ancient gives off. Because he doesn’t notice, Cain also doesn’t turn it down until Evangeline pokes him and sends a message that his aura is turned up to the maximum, the same as hers was when she first arrived.

The painter taps the canvas on his easel and a lifelike image is captured of Cain with a swirling black background that gives off a sinister feeling. Even an image of his Ancient Form carries a hint of the aura.

Cain shifts back and the Dukes are finally able to take a proper breath. “My apologies, the aura can be a bit intense. I don’t use my default transformation much.”

“So that’s an Ancient? I think I saw one in a nightmare once.” The portly Duke is doing his best to sound composed, but Cain can see his knees shaking.

“The pictures of the Dukes are hung in the palace, but we’ll give the visitors a heart attack if we hang this. Even the painting feels like it could eat your soul. Why ain’t we just go with something human?” The painter suggests.

“That’s the miniature version. That form is actually ten meters tall, but the tent isn’t suited to such a thing, so I shrunk it to fit the room.” Cain explains, back in his previous Mafia Don disguise, the soft color of the yellow shirt seeming incongruous now that the others have felt Cain’s Ancient Aura.

The big man shudders again and makes a cross gesture in front of himself, perhaps he really did have a nightmare about Ancients. The painter is more composed, making an image of Cain’s human form and passing it over to ChenWu42, or Duke Chen as he prefers.

“Welcome to Skyview Duke Cain. Your name is now registered as a noble of the realm with all associated rights and privileges.”

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 261

If the Dukes were terrified, the others waiting in the garden went well beyond that. The aura of an ancient is one of pure predatory power, but most species don’t feel it as a danger to the body. Instead, to most species it feels like a threat to or suppression of their life force. Only the higher beings, the Seraphim, Greater Demons and most powerful of Fae and Dragons can be even remotely comfortable under its influence.

It didn’t help that Cain hasn’t learned to control his mental voice and simply broadcasted it to everyone in the courtyard. The applicants and the Nobles running the event were all left in a state of confusion at what just happened, which inevitably led to gossip.

The aura seemed to come from the Dukes tent, and the last person to enter was a young Noble with a group of Seraphim, so the gossip naturally turned to the Nobles needing an evil being exorcised. That soon turned into speculation about an attack against the oligarchs and a hidden challenger to the throne.

Inside the upper nobility tent, Cain and the Dukes know nothing about the chaos outside, and are spending a moment happily chatting with their peers. Everything from the state of trade in Skyview to manufacturing, labor rates and problems finding workers to train for less desirable industries. Someone needs to clean the sewer drains when they clog, but as the wealth of the capital has increased, money is proving to no longer be enough to get someone to do it. They're considering having the very worst jobs turned into prison work programs, a deterrent to repeat offenders.

Here in Skyview there's no law against that, and many of the prisoners are debtors who will be released when their debts are paid, so having them work more makes perfect sense to the Dukes.

It is much more a meeting of powerful CEOs than anything else. In this country the title Duke is no more meaningful than calling them Billionaires. Their true power isn't political but economic and most of them are very crafty businessmen. Duke Chen, who runs a chain of alchemy shops that export potions and ingredients over three Continents, takes great pride in the fact that both of his senior managers in the Capital are now Knights. Both have managed to save an entire Platinum bar over their extended lives working for him.

In his words, money doesn't buy loyalty, but employee loyalty requires remuneration.

Each Duke and Dutchess in Skyview has the economic might to topple a small nation. Even Cain could with the mountain of gold and the tons of Mythril available in the Guild Bank. Though using Dragons would be much more satisfying than wasting money.

On the western side of the Central Continent, large nations are rare. Most are little bigger than the city states in the Great Desert where Cain built the Guild castle, unable to hold anything their guards couldn't get to within an hour.

One such region is a war zone the Dukes call the hundred warring states. Roughly a hundred castles built on a round plateau two hundred Kilometers across. It has an incredible abundance of precious metals and a perfect climate for rare and valuable plants, which has caused the greedy city states to be at war continually since the last great war two centuries ago.

Skyview is one of the larger nations, over three hundred Kilometers across in either direction. Their winding border is shared by seven nations in total, with the unclaimed wilderness of the mountains left uncounted.

Cain explains to those present in the tent that he was looking for a country home large enough to serve as a Guild House, as well as a bit of adventure and they immediately had a spot in mind. Long Fang City.

The Duke that controlled it recently died in the power struggle for the throne, as did so many others, spreading their wealth between their surviving children, but leaving a

number of properties empty due to casualties. That particular Duke left no heir and the territory is being held by the crown until someone fills the conditions to claim it.

In real estate terms, it's a buyer's market, but the whole of Long Fang City and the surrounding farms is intended to belong to one Duke, and it's all up for grabs to the military minded person with the management skills to secure and renovate the territory for the benefit of the nation.

The Dukes here in the tent are the ones that stayed out of the Royal power struggle, choosing international business relationships over political power. Others might have more influence over the affairs of the nation, but they've done particularly well for themselves on the business front. In better times they might be called war profiteers, but when the wars never end, they're just businessmen, the oligarchs the world doesn't realize they rely upon.

They're not counted among the King's close advisors, but they do have influence and regularly attend court. It's held every week for two days, and the rotund Duke insists Cain simply must attend and show off his Seraphim. Cain makes no promises for this week, but once he's found a suitable property here, he promises to attend and meet the rest of the oligarchs.

Mostly, he wants to get to level 200 before getting involved in any sort of power games. It's the low end of the standard for the region and Cain expects they will find many more second advancement transfers here. With entire teams of Second Advancement classes a possibility, being a Puppet Master isn't as big of an advantage or as secure of a safety net as it was when he first started out.

But if he can get something good from the Unique Class Advancement Token he's got waiting, he might still hold onto his edge through level 300.

A number of messages have been sent and Cain can feel Vala poking at his mind, telling him to attend to issues outside. Every message is different, but they're all in the same theme. The aura of an Ancient is called [Existential Dread] and it caused a panic outside. The presence of some sort of authority figure is required to calm the lower Nobles and prevent things from getting out of hand.

"Since it's my fault, should I be the one to give the speech?" Cain asks the other Nobles in the room, but the painter waves him off.

"I'll do it. It's best if they see a familiar friendly face. We'll explain it as a dispute over business techniques and brag about the might of the Dukes. Trust me, they'll buy it."

The Young Noble walks out to where a podium is set up and has a guard use an ability that amplifies his voice, the system equivalent of a microphone. "Hello everyone, as you may know, I'm Menno the third son of Duke Luther. I have come with additional information to help quell the rumors and fear I sense in the area.

First, we're not under attack. We welcomed a new Duke to Skyview today. Duke Cain, originally from the Great Desert on the Eastern side of the central continent. He would be the one many of you saw come to visit us with a group of Seraphim.

Secondly, the intense Aura you all sensed was not hostile to the nobility, nor was it an attack against the Dukes. Duke Cain was demonstrating a non violent technique for dealing with unruly commoners and we quite forgot our surroundings. We do apologize for any inconvenience our conversation caused."

It looks like they've actually bought that load of nonsense. There's a lot of talk about what skill that might be and how good it would be for clearing protests. That's not what Cain had in mind, but the Nobles seem highly impressed and they're no longer in danger of panicking.

Menno starts speaking again. "Those of you who attend court will get a chance to meet him in the next few weeks, as he does intend to attend once he's suitably settled into his new vacation property here in Skyview. Please continue the festivities and the Upper Nobles will be available this evening to approve candidates that pass the screening."

With the crowd settled and the formalities taken care of Menno returns to where Cain is relaxing outside the tent, sparing an appreciative glance for the rest of the group before giving James in his rough looking disguise a double take.

"Our local guide. I found him in an alley on my way here and he's agreed to accompany us for the next day or so." Cain explains and the young Noble nods in understanding.

"I'm certain you won't have any troubles, given your unique talents. I will accompany you all to the East gates, as my home is just outside the city limits. You mentioned wanting to take up some quests for a bit of adventure, and the extermination quests are available right beside the gates."

Menno knows a lot more about the city than James does, knowing most shopkeepers by name and having his artwork decorating dozens of buildings between the courtyard where they met and the gates. It's not much of an exploration of the city, the main street leads directly there and it's one long modern shopping district, mostly with townhouses above businesses where the shopkeepers live.

Brick buildings with somewhat modern looking glass storefronts make up the main road they follow for almost three Kilometers. Unlike the dock area, this street even has street lights on poles, regularly spaced to give adequate lighting all night long.

Few carriages travel the main shopping district, due to the crowd of pedestrians all going about their daily business, so the smell is better than usual for a major city in this world. Cities as Cain knows them here are places where animal droppings in the road are a constant nuisance, both to the nose and the feet.

As Menno explains, this district is also open all night long. Not every store is twenty four hours a day, but the essentials, plus the bars and restaurants and a few others who found their clientele is still active at night will all be open whenever you arrive.

The idea is that keeping everything open encourages workers to accept night shifts at the factories and warehouses, so deliveries can begin early in the morning and production never stops. If they lose too much quality of life, it's hard to get good workers in the Capital, so the oligarchs encourage business owners near their busiest facilities to stay open, in some cases even buying out taverns, grocers and general stores between the factories and residential district in order to cater to their workers.

The whole situation just screams of interference by the values of transfers. Big cities in Cain's old world were exactly the same, though they often cared less about workers because of the abundant supply.

"They didn't think this through did they? The boulevard is so busy you can hardly move." Evangeline grumbles, her wings tucked tight to her back.

"On the contrary, it's deliberate. If the city is attacked by enemies or monsters the main streets are crowded with potential defenders and no enemy can make rapid progress. The lack of cross streets helps funnel them to one location for defense, which limits damage to the city itself." Menno explains.

"A handful of Dragons would absolutely annihilate any army trapped in these boulevards." Mythryll agrees and Menno shudders.

"Quite true. Fortunately, we've got enough second advancement classes on this side of the continent that an aerial battle isn't usually one sided. While inquiring about your background, I heard a rumor about how your home came to be called Blood Sands Castle from a friend who was recently in Tortuga. The story has become urban legend there already."

Cain frowns, concerned at the lack of anonymity and the repercussions of being recognized everywhere they go. "I'd say it's all exaggeration and slander, but the last version I heard was actually pretty accurate. Battles in the area can quickly turn lopsided with only a few powerful transfers."

"So I hear. But we're at our first stop, the Guardian Towers both assign new and accept completed quests. The design of them all is identical, so if you see a stone tower like this on your travels, that's what it is." Menno explains, leading them inside the round cinderblock tower.

"Hey Button, Duke Cain is looking for some quests around Long Fang City." Menno greets a petite badger type Beastkin woman in the gray corseted dress and black apron of a tower worker, who blushes before a huge smile takes over her face.

She runs over and gives him a kiss in the chin before poking his chest. “I told you not to call me that at work. But I’ll go get those quests right away.”

The words Duke Cain were enough to draw the attention of the tower workers and adventurers who were in the tower at that moment, most of them looking startled but not surprised by the well dressed and tattooed mobster that was announced as the man who terrified the Nobles only an hour ago.

The general sentiment seems to be positive, with some whispering that Cain looks down to earth and not stuck up and elitist like so many of the oligarchs are. The tattoos don’t bother them much, even if a couple wonder what sort of criminal enterprise he’s into, and if it will be paying recruits well when he starts operating here.

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 262

Button comes back in under a minute with the quest scrolls for Cain to accept. She holds them out for Menno to take, then ducks under his outstretched arm with a laugh when he reaches back to give them to Cain.

“I take hugs in payment.” She giggles, looking at where Cain has moved to place a hand on Misha’s waist. He’s got the [Warming Hug] ability active, and the jealousy of the badger girl is visible. It’s clear she doesn’t want Cain, but she’s unwilling to accept that another woman is receiving affection while she is forced to work with her beloved right in front of her.

“You just had to hug her, didn’t you? Badgers are intensely territorial; she won’t be happy until she gets a better hug than your wife.” Menno laughs, failing in his attempt to sound exasperated.

“You’d better work hard; he’s got a skill for better hugs.” Button announces, curling into his side while her coworkers watch their interaction with amusement, used to such behavior from the pair.

The two are evidently deeply in love, which is a bit of a culture shock. Cain had taken this country to be stratified by wealth, with the nobility and the commoners keeping to their own circles. The tower caters to mostly commoners, and customer service jobs aren’t exactly glamorous, so the pairing startled him.

Not only that, but the people of Skyview are incredibly accepting of inter species romance; not a single person in the tower seems to object to these two lovebirds, which is refreshing to see.

After the debacle in Landis, Cain had started to assume that racial purists were the norm for this world, but it seems that they're regional at best. Here in Skyview, Beastkin and humans get along very well if Button's wandering hands are anything to go by.

Menno gives her a squeeze and a kiss on the forehead. "Proper introductions are in order. This is Belinda, my fiancée, daughter of Earl DontCare. Belinda, this is Duke Cain, accompanied by the Ladies Misha and Mythryll, plus their entourage."

Cain smiles happily at the pair, now realizing she is indeed nobility, despite holding what looks like the very commonplace job of Quest Clerk. She is so far from the stuck-up heiress stereotype that it's still hard to imagine she's an Earl's daughter at all.

"It's a pleasure to meet you all. Thank you for taking care of my Menno. He gets lost and scared easily. Has ever since we were children." Belinda smiles, ignoring the incredulous look her fiancé is giving her.

"The pleasure is all ours. Seeing someone else as disgustingly affectionate as those two is refreshing." Mythryll laughs, causing Button to place a string of happy kisses across Menno's face.

Menno takes the opportunity to change the topic before it turns to gossip and teasing him about his love life. "Here are the quests. Defeat the attackers, save the farmers, and an undefined one from the acting administrator that should let you claim the manor and territory if you would like. They currently have no guards, but a Puppet Master should be able to take care of that."

Yes, assigning guards shouldn't be a problem. Cain has a Commander clone from appointing Cixelcid, and two Lieutenants left to choose from. Then at level 190, he will either have smarter puppets or a second Commander to help out where needed.

Cain accepts the quests, finding they're open-ended, with a reward for every fifty Gnolls or green-skinned Goblins killed. The money attached is a pittance, but the quest grants bonus experience. Exactly the sort of quest that Cain loves to exploit. It's also a level 215 quest, so young James is in for a big surprise once they find targets to kill.

The guards don't give them any trouble on the way out of the city, and Menno stops to say goodbye at the driveway to his acreage. "Duke Cain, Ladies, it has been a distinct pleasure to meet you all. Your highness James, be safe and remember to be home by the day after tomorrow. If the preparations for court start and you're not there, it will be chaos."

"You rascal! How did you know it was me?" James calls, startled. His accent has slipped and he sounds exactly like the noble youth he is, despite the change in body.

"A Paladin your exact level, with that face? You tried too hard to hide. Or Duke Cain didn't think he'd meet anyone who knew you. Plus, your commoner accent is atrocious. I've known you since before you could walk. Do you think I wouldn't know?"

Cain smirks as the Lord teases his King. "Plus, he can see through disguises with a skill. He knew my human form wasn't real."

"Dammit, we were so close. We order you not to tell anyone and we will be back for court." James insists in a dignified voice that doesn't match his body.

"I'll cover for you as long as I can now that I know where you'll be. Be safe, Your Majesty." With that, Menno turns and heads back into his house, a plantation-style manor with white wooden siding.

"Will you send me back now that you know?" James asks, and Cain shakes his head.

"It wasn't too hard to guess, and we had a deal. I'll keep you disguised until we return. I'll even get you some levels doing these quests. Young doesn't have to mean weak and easily manipulated."

The trip to Long Fang City isn't a long one, not on a typical day. But does the Darklight Host ever have typical days? Of course not. Not even an hour out of town, they come across a group of roughly sixty Gnolls with an average level of around 205 attacking a merchant wagon.

Forgetting that King James hasn't seen them fight before, Cain activates [Ancient Resistance] to multiply demons, which changes his form to that of a Demon Progenitor, as the Demons called the Proto Demon. Lamia, Wrath Bringers, and A handful of Oath Breakers plus three of the four Seraphim Inquisitors Cain was merged to flood the area, charging the Gnolls in total silence until blades meet blades the screaming starts.

Nemu grabs the shell shocked King and holds him upright while Vala and Evangeline charge, wagering candies on who can kill more Gnolls. Winning will be tough; there are fewer than fifty of them left and many more summons.

Cain is happily watching the two Companions attempt to win the wager when a growl comes that sounds much closer than the others.

"No, baby Progenitor will ruin my plans." The Gnoll Commander roars, charging for Cain.

Cain doesn't wait to be attacked, drawing his spear and Pestilent Scimitar while using his black feathered wings to counter charge. The speed assisted first strike of Cain's

spear shatters the blade of the sword the Commander raises to block it as the Gnoll narrowly dodges.

The battle moves immediately to close combat, neither fighter is interested in ranged attacks at the moment, and the Gnoll Commander is forced back by Cain's following blade. The next thrust of the spear lands true, straight in the Gnoll Commander's stomach, but fails to dig in and barely moves his health bar, even with the stacked damage of Might of Many applied.

Cain checks the monster's details as he keeps up the pressure, preventing the Gnoll from landing a solid blow against him.

Gnoll Commander, Epic Quality, level 281. That's 99 levels above him. Of course he's doing a lot of nothing. Their first battle on the continent, and they've come close to being so outmatched that they're entirely unable to damage the enemy. It's a good thing the main force of Gnolls is much weaker.

The Commander is quickly healing what little damage it takes, leaving the two at a stalemate as the rest of the Gnolls die. Cain sees the hyena-headed Commander notice he's now alone, but the bandit doesn't try to run; it gets an evil look on its face and rushes for Misha, trying to take something valuable from Cain even in defeat.

That proves to be a mistake, though, as it hits a vine trap set by Mythryll as it leaps, getting tangled and immobilized instantly. Cain uses this chance to strike with [Decapitate], trying to take the monster's head off and nearly succeeding before the Commander escapes the Vines and rolls away with a deep wound in its neck.

It is already starting to heal, but the sound of charging hooves is getting closer, and the Commander decides that discretion is the better part of Valor, fleeing into the woods at a rate Cain would have trouble matching even if he wanted to. And he most certainly does not want to.

The hooves turn out to be the sound of a guard patrol from the Capital who came to investigate the complaint about bandits. Cain dismisses the summons, calling the extra Seraphim into his Merger and ending Ancient Resistance to appear human again before they come into sight.

James has finally regained his senses, no longer absorbed in the sword fight between leaders that mainly was too fast for his eyes to track. This might be the first real battle he's seen, despite the wars for the succession. From the stories Cain heard, he was away at a training academy when the fighting broke out and was ushered into seclusion so he couldn't be assassinated, leaving him the last living Royal.

He received a dozen or more level-up notices as well, just from the fight, which he cleared as fast as possible, so he didn't miss the battle between leaders.

Internally, the King is overjoyed. At home, he's prevented from rapidly leveling to keep him under the thumb of the oligarchs. But then, Cain is one now too, isn't he? He was officially named a Duke of Skyview, after all.

"Perhaps I have finally obtained a reliable ally?" The Young King thinks to himself before an additional flood of notifications causes a wave of dizziness so strong he collapses.

[Quest Partially Complete]

[Bonus Experience Awarded]

Cain smiles as he sees he's gained two more levels just from those fifty Gnolls and the quest. Technically one and a little bit, but that last percent counts the most. That makes level 184, and he's looking forward to the rest of the journey. At this rate, he'll be halfway to his goal before even reaching Long Fang City.

The guard patrol comes upon them at full gallop seeing James passed out. "How long has he been down? We have a second advancement healer with us who can resurrect."

"Oh, he's not dead; he was level 47 when we attacked a group of Quest objective Gnolls over level 200," Evangeline informs him with a straight face, and the Captain does his best not to laugh at the unfortunate King.

"He'll be fine then. When the time comes, tell him to exit the advancement screen and choose when he's working with a clear mind." That might be the best advice they've gotten in a long time. After level 100, you can always go back to the screen and choose. Mythryll did precisely that when she wanted a better class option.

James is a King; his class might matter to someone other than himself in the future.

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 263

While they're talking the others go check on the merchants, healing those who are still alive, but returning with bad news about the others.

"The Gnolls mangled the bodies too badly. No point in resurrecting a body missing vital organs." The primary Healer for the patrol announces upon his return to the group.

There is a gap in what healing spells can do. While alive, they can regrow lost limbs, organs and much more. But after death, regular healing has no effect, only resurrection. So if a body is missing essential parts necessary for life, they can't be resurrected in the conventional sense. Cain had heard and seen that the undead don't require all their organs, so they could be brought back that way, but not to true life.

Some species like vampires also have the ability to function without parts of their body for a time until they can be reattached. Even that has its limits though.

The patrol doesn't stay long, leaving behind the Darklight Host as well as one young Beastkin merchant with a very battered wagon and two guards. The guards are both second advancement warrior types, just over level 250, while the merchant is level 108.

Goods are scattered all over the ground, while the young Rhino type Beastkin frantically tries to salvage what he can, the two guards engaged in a futile struggle to get the wagon repaired. There were thousands of small jewelry pieces in the cart, putting them in inventory would separate them unless you had a storage bag like the cosmetics bags that the ladies got from that shop in Tortuga.

None of them are Guilded, standard for mercenary guards and not uncommon for merchants. Guild names makes them easy to distinguish, and a target for bandits if their Guild becomes well known. Only those with confidence in their strength join a Guild and not a less formal merchants association. The drawback is the lack of a Guild bank for essentials you don't want in inventory.

Sure, you've got over a hundred spaces, but the system still applies a portion of the weight to you, so having a heavy inventory can make it impossible to stand without great strength. Cain's Companions don't worry about that, their whole inventory is bags of candy and food with a few pieces of spare armor. They're not trying to bring a whole merchant wagon with them.

"I've got a Guild Bank available. If you'd like I can have a member send a spare wagon." Mythryll suggests softly and the young merchant's eyes light up before dimming again.

"I would appreciate it, but I have no coin. Everything was on my parents and their business partner, but none survived. Plus, we have nothing left to pull the wagon." The Beastkin tips his nose horn in the direction of the wagon, where a set of four horses lie dead and partially eaten.

That's the other downfall of being unguilded or carrying a lot on your person. If you die, most of what's in your inventory will be lost. It's safe from theft in there, but it leaves nothing for an inheritance and it seems this merchant just lost his whole family.

What should have been a simple trade route between the capital and a nearby city, one that dissension of travelers take every day, turned into a full on tragedy with the appearance of the high level Gnolls. Normally Cain would wonder how they got here

undetected, but in Skyview, most of the army is gone, as are many of the Nobles who took care of the lands, so there was nobody to raise an alarm.

If things are like this all over the country, it might be even more unstable than Cain had first thought. But it's also a suitable level for him to hunt and train towards his next advancement. With that in mind, it's more than worth it to help King James start to get things stabilized where they can.

It's not obvious if this tragedy was neglect or as James suspected, someone deliberately destabilizing the country, but it didn't need to happen.

[Can someone put a merchant wagon in the Guild Bank? Use the Guild Funds. There is a traveler in need here and I'll pay it back in a few days.] Cain sends out to the Guild.

[On it, I'm near the wagon maker anyhow. Does anyone need more ale?] Gramps sends back. The moonshiner that the Graska Dwarves usually order from is not far from the Wagon maker, that must be where the old Dwarf is hanging out this afternoon.

More messages are exchanged, ordering Ale, whiskey, meatloaf and a variety of other things for the Guild, but Gramps gets right on the wagon request, having a stout, wide wheeled ore cart sent within the next 5 minutes.

"Everyone gather what you can from the bodies, return the personal effects from his family to the merchant. But be discrete, then give them a proper burial. I'll help the merchant load up the cart and Summon some Nightmares to pull it." Cain whispers, sending the group out to clean up the battle field.

The wagon the Beastkin was using looks to have been much more luxurious than the one Cain procured, but the new one is larger and stronger. "I found you a spare ore cart. Please accept it with my condolences on your family and friends. I'll help you load everything up and I've sent the others to give your people a proper burial."

The two guards look relieved, only if they make it to Long Fang City with the goods will they get paid, and they've also lost most of their team today. Money won't make up for lost friends, but no friends and no money is definitely the worse option.

The cover to the old wagon ends up being salvageable, and transferred to the new wagon, covering only the front half of the length. But it has their association logo on it, so when they get to their buyers, they have proof of identity. By the time everything is sorted and loaded, the graves are dug and it occurs to all present that none of them know who preferred what ritual.

The Beastkin are content with just a burial, but the guards are a bit religious, Wondering if anyone knows a Cleric. Misha might not be one anymore, but the rituals are still in her memory, so she digs through her inventory for a suitable set of robes. It's been a while

since she needed to wear them, her best gear no longer looks very priest like, giving more of a dark Wizardly than Clerical vibe.

It's enough for the survivors, who are thankful just to be alive at this point, and Cain has Mythryll carve up a stone with the name of the mercenary and merchant groups on them, placing it on top of the filled grave before they leave.

"We've got the cart ready to go now, I don't suppose you'll give us a hand pulling out would you?" The guard asks hopefully, looking to the hulking human form of Cain, which would usually indicate many points were put into STR.

"No need, I'm a Summoner, finding a wagon team is easy enough." Cain summons a team of four Dwarven Mountain Goats, brown haired Beasts with curled horns, much larger than the diminutive miners they usually serve. Four is the standard team for a loaded Dwarven Ore cart, so they'll have an easy job of it today. They're not particularly fast, but they're strong and they can walk for days without stopping.

The daylight is starting to fade already, but nobody wants to be near a corpse infested battlefield overnight, so they start off towards Long Fang City, deciding that they can make it there for first light if they take turns driving the wagon while the others sleep inside. It's slower than walking at their level, but there is safety in numbers, and the prospect of having a good sleep instead of traveling on foot all the way to Long Fang City is appealing.

An enchanted lantern survived the carnage, which the guards hang on a long pole between the front Nightmares, lighting up the road in front of them. It's made of flattened rocks and quite well built, with no signs of major ruts or potholes along this stretch, reducing their concerns about nighttime incidents. The wide wheels of the Dwarven cart also help. They are heavier and harder to pull, but don't sink into soft ground as badly, or get stuck in the ruts made by the traditional narrow wagon wheels.

Cain needs very little sleep, so he takes both first watch with the merchant and last watch before dawn, leading the wagon into the open ground around Long Fang City just as the sun comes up.

It's a beautiful place, though very rustic. The word City in the name is being very generous, Cain would be surprised if a thousand homes are built in the valley, and most of them are widely spaced log cabins giving room for a garden to be tended by every family. The variety of crops looks good though, so the city might be self sufficient for food, even without too much from the surrounding farms.

There is a small village core, with pagoda style buildings, painted white with rusty red clay tile roofs, made from the local riverbank which Cain can see is the same color. The Manor is built in the same style, with a stone wall surrounding it and large gardens full of fruit trees and berry bushes. In fact, very few plants in Long Fang City don't provide food or medicine of some sort.

Cain isn't sure who came up with that idea, but if they're still alive, he intends to thank them if he can get his hands on that Fortress of a Manor.

There is no city wall to the sprawling village, but many locals come out to see the merchants arrive, looking confused at the lack of guards and seeing only one young but familiar face.

"Take the main street to the building downtown with the wagon wheel in the sign." The Young merchant, whose name Cain learned is Jeff, instructs, trying to swat Laura away from his nose horn.

While the unfortunate man was sleeping, the mischievous Dragon polished the horn to a high shine, blinding him when the sun hits it, but it turned out so well that she doesn't want him to dull it back down again.

Jeff sent the association a message last night, letting them know what happened and that they were still coming with the goods, so they've gotten space set out for him in a shop that they control.

According to Jeff, everything in town belonged to the last noble, as there are no other Nobles in town who could actually buy the larger plots he preferred all the homes be built on. The Duke died along with his family in the succession battle, so it's all under the administration of the former Seneschal, Damien.

He proves to be a very large werewolf, well past his prime, with neatly trimmed gray hair and a butler's suit, but it's clear to see that the locals respect him, by the friendly greetings he gets as he comes to meet the wagon.

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 264

Damien is still wearing the black and gold livery of his former employers and carries a large briefcase with him. Cain can see the emblem of the tower embossed on its surface, so he must be in charge of quests and the city itself. Cain doesn't see the actual tower though, so either Long Fang City doesn't have one, or it's not near the downtown core, as small as it is.

“Greetings, and thank you for your efforts. I’m informed the merchant association has a quest for Gnolls to turn in?” The neatly dressed old werewolf greets them, all business from the start.

“No, that would be the Darklight Host; they got most of the kills. We didn’t manage to get fifty.” Jeff says sadly, shaking his head.

The lower levels of the group members seem to startle the old werewolf, but he recovers quickly. “And what might have brought you fine folk out this way in time to save our friends from the merchant association?”

“Duke Cain recently had his title recognized here in Skyview, and he’s looking for a summer home. I pointed out that the Manor and grounds here were available, with some conditions, and he’s agreed to help clear and maintain the area while completing quests to earn the right of purchase.” James says brightly, his disguise as Gerald having caused him to be overlooked.

That declaration brings a mixed reaction, some hopeful, most skeptical about getting a new Duke. Cain will have to work to earn their trust if he wants to truly take over the region and not just occupy the Manor.

“I can offer full-time guards, Assistants to help manage the region, and the efforts of my Guild to clear the area of hostile forces. We’re quite capable of taking on Gnolls by the hundred lot and value a peaceful existence over anything else.” Cain declares, getting no more than a raised eyebrow from the Administrator in response.

“We will see. First up, your reward for the first fifty Gnolls you killed. The quests are ongoing, so I won’t close them out, only reward you as you earn it.” Damien clarifies, but Cain holds up his hands to stop him from taking out the quest scrolls.

“Keep a running tab. There will be many more over the next few days, and collecting the reward after every fifty Gnolls and Goblins would be a pain. Instead, count the rewards towards my purchase of the Manor. Who might that be paid to, by the way?”

Damien smiles a little at Cain’s attitude. “The grounds were left in trust to the crown. Only a Duke can claim this much territory, but the conditions aren’t easy. A thousand hostile forces to be cleared from the river valley and surrounding farms, two major improvements to the Long Fang River Valley and a full-time defensive force are required to claim the deed to the lands; no cash is involved.”

“Do we have any intelligence on the location of the hostiles? Or will I be hunting them blind?” Cain asks, mentally noting the conditions. They don’t seem too difficult, but he’s not certain what the residents would want in the way of a major construction project.

They’ve gathered a significant crowd now, the word of a Duke arrived to attempt to claim the territory having spread across the merchant quarter already. The composition

of Cain's group gives them hope that he would be a good Duke for them, though his low level doesn't inspire overwhelming confidence among the shopkeepers.

"I've got a map of all the attacks and possible locations for encampments. What is your plan of attack?" Damien asks while he pulls out a map and places it on the empty surface of one of the merchant association stalls.

The details are impressive, as is the size of the Valley, and the fact that the river is noted to be dredged all the way to the coast to move large shipments by water, a full merchant vessel at a time. But what surprised Cain was the level of the attackers. There have been a handful of level 200 or higher attacks, but most are under level 50 and in large numbers. Especially the attacks by green-skinned Goblins.

From what Cain recalls, they're the less civilized Goblin kin. The Red skinned ones are often Mole Dog Riders, have classes, and live in cities. The Green ones are little more than mindless monsters, killing and destroying. Even the other Goblins exterminate them on sight. The quest counts them and the Gnolls the same, though, and doesn't differentiate by level, so Cain notes where they're likely to be and all the places that would probably have Gnolls instead.

"Gnolls are mostly active in the day while Goblins are nocturnal, correct?" Cain asks, formulating his plan.

"That's right. Are you planning to go after them separately?"

"Yeah. I'll hit them while they sleep, if possible, for maximum casualties. As the day just started, we will leave you all to your work and go clear a few of the Goblin Dens while they're still tired from their evening activities."

The crowd looks startled that he's headed out so soon after arrival, and even more so when he calls for two copies of Danni to come to give them a ride.

"Memorize that map, especially the Goblin dens. We will be clearing as many as possible of them this morning," Cain instructs before the chatterbox Dragon can start speaking.

"Got it, boss. I have them down now, I won't forget. Are we headed out right away, then?" There is no time like the present, so Cain doesn't answer, simply jumping up on the Dragon and helping the ladies board in front of him. The two Legendary Ice Dragons are in the air moments later, leaving the population of Long Fang City in shock, wondering what exactly they just witnessed.

The Goblins live in caves, either natural or ones they've dug themselves using their very limited earth magic and crude tools. Dragons and large demons really aren't suited to the tight confines of a Goblin cave so Cain decides to try something new.

“There’s the first one; I see the guards. Laura Frost them up and fill the cave with Ice Fog. I’ll transform and call the summons once we land.” Cain’s idea for the day is spiders. The Spider Queen loves underground tunnels, and she excels in large numbers of low-level summons. They’re stronger than Cain’s Puppets, a fifth of her level, not a tenth, plus they’re poisonous. Perfect for clearing caves full of low level Goblins.

Cain didn’t bother to explain the plan, he simply dismounted and activated [Ancient Resistance], choosing spiders, then Summoned eighteen spider Queens using six of his available Supporter spots. That should be more than enough to do the job.

He can feel his body enlarge and lengthen, the feeling of extra legs and multiplexed vision becoming natural as he transforms. The others see Cain growing into a twenty-meter-long arachnid, gigantic pincers in front of its mouth, a black Armored carapace with light brown bristly hair all over the body, and vicious spikes ending every limb. No trace of humanity is visible in this form, just a spider the size of a dragon.

The Spider Queens stare at him in awe, chattering happily at the sight of a Spider Elder. Like his Ancient Form, this one also communicates mentally, and when Cain forms the intention to speak, he finds he can sense the presence of every arachnid for Kilometers around. Even the little ones living in the trees are under his purview and will obey his orders.

Cain instructs the Spider Queens to call all their summons and wipe out the Green skinned Goblins wherever they find them, plus any Gnolls they happen across but focusing on the Goblins. They’re happy to comply, sending dozens of Spider Kin guards and hundreds of tiny spiders into the cavern.

The sound is horrifying, a continual stream of screams overlapping and echoing through the tunnels as the spiders attack the Goblins, coming out the exit as one long shrieking wail. Cain looks over the group, and their disgusted looks, before noticing that James is crouched against a tree, covering his ears and muttering something to himself repeatedly.

The noise has brought back traumatic memories for the young Royal, a factor Cain overlooked, being so used to how the System dampens his emotional response to horrific acts and brutal deaths. It’s the same for Misha and Mythryll, who suspect it’s the System’s way of helping transfers adapt to their new surroundings without questioning too much or going insane immediately.

King James was born here and enjoys no such protection, much to his own detriment.

It’s not long before the noise stops, and Cain calls the spiders out. Once they’re all at grounds level, sends two Dark Acolytes, minor feathered demons who specialize in fire, the same one Misha keeps as her companion, into the caverns after anything that might have survived, with orders to use Holy Fire to cleanse the caverns themselves of all remnants of the Goblins.

“Good work, everyone. It’s only a kilometer to the next location. Instead of flying, let’s just run over and clear it out. Spiders, no need to stand on ceremony.” The unusual form of communication isn’t helping James’s mental state, but Mythryll has wrapped him in a blanket and passed him to Danni, who is making comforting noises, calming him down.

Cain decides it’s better if they hang back a distance. The spiders can take care of everything, he only needs to direct them and the demons between possible nests all day and keep the others out of earshot.

“How about we take a look at the farms and talk to the locals? They’re bound to know more about the state of the country.” Cain suggests, and James perks up a little. That’s why he came out of the castle after all. Well, that and avoiding the threat of assassination.

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 265

They can see the potato fields from where they landed at the edge of the river valley, near the rocky hills that the Goblins call home, so they start walking, with Cain giving the Spider Queens and demons directions to all the locations he hopes for them to secure today.

Being so far away will affect the other group members’ experience gain. Still, unless they find a bunch of high-level goblins, only James would be getting a noticeable amount from them anymore. Being more than a hundred levels above the target is the opposite of a hundred under them. Experience per kill drops to a single point before Cain’s abilities modify it.

They’re almost to the farmhouse when Cain notices he has been receiving system messages.

[Quest Reward Held at the request of Party Leader]

The administrator must have put a hold on more than just the monetary rewards, even the bonus experience for completing the quests is on hold. James is definitely going to be knocked unconscious after those all hit him at once.

The potato farmers are a young Wolf Kin couple with an excessive number of pups running around the yard. All have variations of the same gray-blue hair and fur, with matching gold eyes, just like their parents, who give the approaching group, especially the Giant Spider, a worried look.

Cain would smack himself for the mistake if he weren't so concerned about the damage it would cause, changing back to a human form, but keeping [Ancient Resistance] active. The skill transforms him when he uses it, but being an Ancient, it's no big deal to shift back if he's not fighting.

"Sorry to alarm you all. We're clearing out the goblins today and wondered if you had a moment to talk." Cain greets the farmers as the others are swarmed by Wolf Kin children. They seem to be from two pregnancies, now aged two and four, by Cain's estimation, and there have to be at least a dozen in total, though it's hard to keep count with how they're moving around and climbing on people.

"If you can keep the kids entertained, we're all yours. Dash and Amethyst at your service." The mother laughs, pulling a child off Nemu's head where it was going for her ears.

"As I'm sure the whole valley will know by the end of the day, my name is Duke Cain, and I've come to clear the valley and claim the Manor and Territory. The issue is the actual finding all the monsters to clear them part. From what I can tell, there are thousands of low-level goblins, plus a handful of high-level Gnoll tribes. I'm assuming they're all hostile, but if they're not, I should know."

"They're all hostile. We've been at war with the Gnolls for generations already. They originally come from a kingdom far to the East of Skyview, but they breed so fast they can't stay there, so they constantly send raiders to the surrounding nations. It's all most of us can do to keep their numbers down; they're worse than locusts." Dash sighs.

"The Gnolls have been a problem forever; I'm more worried about what a new Lord might mean. What are your plans for the territory? Will you be making any big changes?" Amethyst asks, ignoring the two boys that have climbed into her lap to watch the conversation.

"I don't know how things are being run right now, but everything seemed to be pretty well organized under the Administrator. Was there anything that needed changing?"

Cain can see the unpleasant memories flash through Dash's mind before he answers. "Not from what they are now. But the old Duke used to like random tax levies, plus he had a few policies we'd rather forget. The administrator doesn't enforce them, thankfully."

"Such as? It clearly bothers you, so I should do away with it entirely instead of having everyone hope it gets ignored."

“Well, you see, we’re almost all Wolf Kin, werewolves, and Kitsune in the valley, so we have large families. The Duke insisted that was too much of a burden for the commoners, so he claimed one daughter and two sons per family once they came of age. The sons for the army, the daughters for his harem, or the army if they weren’t pretty.”

Misha hides her laughter, and Mythryll giggles at the look on Cain’s face. “We can officially remove that once I’ve claimed the territory. I do not need a harem, and I don’t see a need for a standing army.”

“Oh, not for the territory. The Skyview army pays Nobles for recruits from their territory. So the previous noble family sent as many as they could without causing the commoners to flee. We never really had a defense force. The farmers band together to deal with anything that attacks.”

“Don’t you like Wolf girls? Or is your harem already too big?” One of the pups in Amethyst’s lap asks, bringing Cain’s whole group to open laughter.

“You could say my harem is already as big as I want it to be.” Cain laughs, petting the boy’s head and making his leg shake.

“Oh, you’re good. You’ve practiced that.” The boy’s mother laughs as Cain finds just the right spot on the first try.

“You’d think it’s a skill. He gives amazing headpats.” Nemu agrees, not looking up from the tickle fight she’s holding.

As they chat about crops, the neighbors, the joys of large families, and the threat of attacks, the Spiders clear one Goblin den after another, each one taking half an hour or less until every spot that was marked on the map is clear of goblins, as well as some that weren’t. Amethyst has put an enormous pot of stew on the stove, much to everyone’s delight, and Cain has brought out a smoked Dwarven Goat brisket and a wheel of cheese to add to the mix.

Meat is a Wolf Kin favorite and inevitably in short supply in the valley, thanks to the Goblin attacks. They’ve still got some animals, but they’ve taken heavy losses.

“Did they soak this in Ale? This brisket is amazing.” One of the boys cheers, sneaking a bite early while his mother is distracted by pulling bread from the wood-burning oven.

The kitchen is not technically inside the house. Instead it has been built under an awning outside. It’s an excellent idea, in this tropical climate, indoor heating is not a good thing, especially during the daytime. Neither can use fire magic, both being from warrior classes, so wood is their only real option.

Neither one looks to be more than twenty years old, though the system does slow aging, which gives Cain the impression they were childhood sweethearts.

Dash's mostly furred form gives the impression of a plain faced fellow, his gray and brown fur lightened a little from a life spent outside, the sort of man that blends into the background. At 180cm he's neither short nor excessively tall for a Wolf Kin, calm and steady like he was made to be the perfect fit for everything around him.

Amethyst is the opposite in almost every way. High energy, short and slender with striking amethyst eyes that match her name. Cain watches as she flits from task to task, multitasking and always at something new, while Dash somehow manages to finish every task she started then abandoned without seeming to move from the table much. For a young couple, they're very in sync with each other.

The cabin itself is well built and even better maintained, Cain notices. The furniture also looks handmade, but not by this generation of occupants. The only real hint at the struggle of the tenant farmers is the uniform clothing, which Cain almost missed until Misha pointed out that the floral pattern of the girl's dresses matches the design on the flour bags.

Wolf Kin tend to be light on clothing anyhow, especially the fully furred ones like this family. They're warm enough naked, so it's just there for modesty.

"What is the going rent for a tenant farmer?" Cain asks, knowing that they'd need at least a Baron-level title and associated wealth to be the actual owners of their farm.

"Twenty percent. Plus ten percent of the crop as tax to the crown and another ten in tax to the Duke, plus any other levies during the year." Dash informs him, pointing at the farm's generations of stacked records on a bookshelf.

They said the previous Duke did like his taxes, so that's half the crop gone before anyone eats anything.

James leans over to whisper in Cain's ear. "That's correct for the Kingdom; the tax is ten percent of crops or a flat fee for noncropland. The Duke was right at the legal maximum even before his additional levies."

"Farmlands are only taxed on the crops?" Cain verifies.

"By the Kingdom, yes. The Nobles charge farm rent as their own source of income, not to pay the crown. City residents pay rent to the crown based on the size of the house and the Nobles are taxed on their personal estates."

Cain decides he's keeping the administrator around. He didn't like doing his own taxes, much less being responsible for doing taxes for a thousand others.

The neighbors from all three sides come over after lunch, hoping to meet the group that is supposedly clearing out goblins. The idea that they were doing it with summons while chatting with the locals came as a shock, but any method that ends up in fewer goblins is a good one for them.

The simple fact that the prospective new local Duke wanted to get the commoners opinions of how things were run on his very first day has given the farmers a good impression of him, even without knowing his intentions for the land.

Most of the villagers have a system, but a third of adults don't, and neither do any young children or livestock, so even low-level goblins are a real threat to the outlying farms.

Everything is going smoothly until nearly dark when the Spider Queens who are looking for new targets start dropping dead. Cain is out of communication range, so all he has to go on is the combat log.

[Gnoll Commander killed Spider Queen]

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 266

Gnolls are more active during the day, according to the locals, and they've encountered a few already, but the Commander must have healed up and gathered a new group of warriors to help him.

If he's rampaging through the spiders, that's Cain's cue to switch tactics and go after him with something more durable. But first, they should go to town and collect some of these quests. A few more levels would do him a world of good in bringing that thing down.

"If you'll all excuse me, higher-level Gnolls are rampaging through my summons outside the valley. I'm going to have to take care of that in person." Cain informs the farmers, hoping that they'll take it as him being conscientious about their safety.

"Should we gather the warriors? We've faced plenty of Gnolls in our time." Dash says, getting to his feet.

"No need; they're well away from the farms. I had my summons hunting for any more hidden goblins, and they must have stumbled across a Gnoll Commander and his

group. Nothing that I can't take care of, in fact, it might be the one that ran away after the attack on the merchants, and I've got a bone to pick with him."

The farmers are happy to let Cain take care of the threat, though they still gather weapons and alert the neighbors, just in case.

Cain runs into the city as fast as he can, the rest of the group following behind him. Cain makes a point of calling fresh spiders outside to maximize their experience before barging into the Administrator's office without knocking.

"My apologies for the haste and rudeness, but I've found a high-level Gnoll Commander, and I could use the experience from the partial quest completion right away. A couple more levels should reduce the damage reduction enough that I can take him down." Cain explains while Damien looks startled.

"That's fine. You found more than fifty Goblins and are close to leveling up?"

"You could say I found more than fifty, yes." Cain laughs, wondering just how many goblins the spiders managed to kill today. It was a lot for sure; they were just so low level that it didn't make much difference to him.

Damien hands him the scroll to touch to complete the quest, and Cain's interface is flooded with notifications.

[Quest Partially Complete]

[Level Up]

[Quest Partially Complete]

[Quest Partially Complete]

[Quest Partially Complete]

[Level Up]

...

The list goes on and on, as the quest description is listed every single time, but when it finishes, Cain feels much better about his odds against the Gnoll hordes.

"Thank you for your understanding. We're off again to go hunt Gnolls. Someone, please pick up Gerald; he's passed out again." Cain calls as he rushes back out towards open ground.

Spiders aren't cutting it today, so Cain decides it is time for old faithful. More Dragons. Once they make it out of sight of most of the city, Cain recalls all his summons and transforms into the Golden Proto Dragon. He calls upon a dozen copies of Kone, having them each call all six possible copies of Su, plus every drake they can Summon.

The sight is sure to panic at least a few farmers, as a horde of Dragons and Drakes fill the fields and sky around Cain when the summons are all active, but he will deal with the fallout later. They're not moving around too much, and this is a pasture, so the damage to the land should be minimal, plus he's got Mythryll here to repair the damage to the plant life if needed.

Cain releases the Seraphim Inquisitors he was merged with, so he can call more copies of Danni, thinking that Ice Dragons are less likely to cause unwanted collateral damage than fire, poison, or corrosion, though, with Su, they have a lot of the last one present.

The sudden appearance of a mighty flight of Dragons over the Long Fang River valley would be the talk of the region for months to come, the mass of wings blotting out the sky as everyone mounts a dragon and they take off to hunt the Gnolls.

Each time a group of them is spotted, a wing of Drakes and their Summoning Dragon dips down to take care of it; calling a second wing if the Gnolls are particularly tough. They've entirely circled the valley once, and Cain is beginning to think that the Commander fled the area when the Dragons showed up, but then a signal fire is lit at one of the outlying farms. They're under attack.

Cain orders the Dragons to spread out over the valley, checking everywhere to ensure no more stealth forces have slipped through their patrols while he heads to the signal fire with a few copies of Danni.

The farmer there, a werewolf berserker, is engaged in bloody close combat with the Gnolls, who are doing their best to get into his house. Cain calls Lamia as his lesser Golems, since he has no Dragon-type Lesser Golem summons that both qualify and are a combat threat. The snake-bodied demons tear into the Gnolls with savage efficiency, taking the hyena-headed and furry monsters by surprise.

For a moment, Cain wonders what separates Gnolls from Felians or similarly furry Beastkin, but has to put the thought aside as the Gnoll Commander has started throwing some form of Bola at him, trying to bring him out of the sky.

Cain sends a fiery breath down towards the Gnoll Commander, careful to keep it away from the house and where the Lamia are helping the farmer fight. The Gnoll has almost entirely avoided the attack and the molten ground it created when a flash of white scales hits it from the side, dropping it back into the lava before Laura seals the surface with her ice breath.

Cain is about to comment on how anticlimactic that fight was when the Commander bursts through the solid rock, fur burning, armor melted, and gasping for breath. Neither Cain nor Laura will give him time to recover, though. While Laura claws at the wounded Gnoll, Cain melts the ground around it again, letting it sink into the magma before it can get its balance to dodge.

This pool isn't nearly as deep, coming only to the monsters knees. Still, the continual burning damage is significant. The Commander is also slowed by the thick molten rock, causing it to take several hits from Laura before Cain drives his claws into the creature's back, shredding the Commander's armor and digging deep into the flesh.

With the extra levels, the damage reduction isn't as severe, and Might Of Many is fully stacked from the ongoing fights. The unfortunate beast never stood a real chance.

Cain's claws have him dangling in the air while Laura attacks. Then, when he's almost recovered enough to counterattack, Cain gives him a full dose of Dragon Fire before dropping him in the fresh lava and having Laura seal the surface.

This time the monster is too injured to make it to the surface, its battered body unable to swim through the molten rock. The mighty Gnoll dies the most ignoble death of any that day, drowned in a pool of magma.

[Level Up]

Cain smiles at his interface notifications, he's almost to his goal already, and they still haven't turned in the final quests.

After a few more minutes of fighting, the others have gathered around him, and Cain dismisses all the Supporters after giving each copy of Kone a Warm Hug and a pat on the head. They might be Summoned clones of her, but they deserve to know they did a good job.

That leaves just the usual crew, plus the Lamia, who seem popular with werewolf children. Cain shifts back into a human form, the mighty Proto Dragon takes up too much space, plus it's deafeningly loud, and the body is entirely incapable of an indoor voice.

Though they do seem particularly fond of Lamia, werewolf children don't seem to be afraid of anything. Cain even saw them trying to escape their mother to join the fight. The sight of Dragons fighting Gnolls ten times their childish size in the yard wasn't enough to dissuade them from entering the fray.

Evangeline is helping Vala clean Gnoll blood from her wings and armor, since the Seraphim doesn't get dirty. In a fight like this that's a particularly helpful racial passive to have. Nemu is playing with the children again, while Laura is holding up fence boards

for Nila to nail back in place and Mythryll is using narrow magic on the yard, attempting to repair a bit of the damage that the fight has caused to the farm.

There is a glowing holy light flashing in the house as the wounded locals are healed, so the Darklight Host waits where they are in the yard while Laura takes the time to freeze all the lava Cain created during the battle into a smooth sheet.

“Sorry about the yard. It was the best way to get rid of that pesky Commander. I can Summon an earth mage and turn it back to topsoil if you need.” Cain tells the farmer, looking over the destruction.

“That’s alright, My Lord. My oldest son is an Earth Mage, and the wife should have him up and mobile again in just a few minutes. You lot arrived just in time, the Gnolls didn’t get a chance to mangle the bodies, and my wife is an Arch Cleric with the ability to resurrect. She’s also the City’s finest midwife, should you find yourself in need.” He’s rambling a little, but Cain isn’t going to stop him. He’s doing better than James, after all.

The young King has lost consciousness multiple times tonight, both from the levels and the high speed acrobatic flying in combat and vomited at the smell of scorched Groll. The last one is understandable, he’s not used to the sharp Beastkin sense of smell, and lava burnt Groll smells terrible.

“If everyone’s alive and well, we should call it a night. I do believe that Damien arranged a hotel room for us somewhere inside the city.”

The group waves goodbye to the farmers, who are now all utive again, and Mythryll takes a few seconds to grow fresh flowers and herbs in the planter boxes by the door of the house that were damaged during the fighting. She can see that the locals are used to losses and damage from the frequent attacks, especially with nobody to defend them, so she wants to do what she can to at least make their lives a little easier.

The residents of Long Fang Valley that they’ve come across all seem to be good people, helping their neighbors and working together to not just stay alive but to thrive. Cain decides that they simply couldn’t have found a better place to settle on this side of the continent, a more friendly bunch more deserving of help are unlikely to be found anywhere they’ve been.

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 267

"Everyone is staring at us." James says uneasily as the group enters Long Fang City after the battle.

"We called hundreds of Dragons and Drakes right on the edge of town. Of course they're staring." Nemu points out to the panicking Royal.

"You get used to it." Nila adds with a smile, making James shake his head as if to refute any such possibility. The idea of getting used to days like this just doesn't compute. At least at home, with Nobles trying to assassinate him he knew what was going on and could process it.

"Look on the bright side, you're bound to get even more levels, and you've already made first advancement. Not bad for a day away from home. We'll sort this out then fly you back to the Castle in the morning before anyone misses you at court."

"Can we not fly?" James begs, not looking forward to doing that again.

"How about on a Dark Phoenix next time? They fly through the void and not the air, maybe you'll like that better?" Cain suggests with an evil grin. The void is even more unsettling than the heights in his opinion.

James gives a noncommittal noise Cain takes as a maybe, so he lets the topic drop while they walk the rest of the distance towards the town center in silence.

"Welcome back Duke Cain. That was quite the show you put on. I take it the Gnoll threat has been taken care of?" Administrator Damien greets them outside his office.

"That it has. We should have a few more completions of the Gnoll killing quests as well. Plus, with the area clear and over a thousand dead, I believe we're close to the Territory quest." Damien looks a bit startled at that, but quickly recovers his composure and double checks the quest requirements in his documents.

"Just the defense force to be stationed and two major improvements, a condition that the locals must agree had been completed. Did you have anything in mind?" Damien asks, putting the documents back in his ever present briefcase.

"Not yet. I was wondering what the people needed? The valley is in pretty good shape, so the answer wasn't clear right away."

"The top complaints are usually about the road out of the other side of the Valley, headed towards the farming villages inland of the coast. It's no more than a dirt double track that the wagons have carved. The next would be a dam for the river to reduce spring storm surge, or a Master Smith to upgrade tools, if you can attract one to such a backwater place. The locals really don't expect much other than that, they're used to living simply."

Those things are all worthy tasks, and sound complex, but they might all be possible for Cain, and in a short time frame. Being able to use a load of summons to accomplish a task instead of needing to hire multiple specialists that may not exist locally puts Cain on an entirely different level than a standard infrastructure contractor.

“Do you have a topographical map of where they want the dam to be built? If I’m going to do that I need to make sure it won’t flood anyone out or block any roads.”

The river comes down out of the hills to the east, through a bowl shaped valley and then into the river bottom where Long Fang City is. Building it would cut down on rainy season flooding by a lot, as well as provide more reliable water in the dry season, increasing crop yield. Cain just needs to check the affected area for residents.

“How about we get everyone settled in for the night and I’ll go take a quick look at the necessary upgrades?” Cain suggests and Damien smiles at this new Duke’s enthusiasm.

“Certainly, I’ve booked the entire top floor of the hotel for you and your entourage. Feel free to pick any room you like, we don’t have any other visitors today since the Merchant’s Guild provides a room to their members.”

The Inn is an interesting place, a three level pagoda style building, with a large swimming pool in the back, but to everyone’s disappointment, no hot tub. The beds are comfortable though, and the walls are thick, so it should be good sleeping.

At first James thinks he’s going to get a room to himself, a change from his usual life where staff constantly barges in to take care of something or another, but that dream is quickly squashed. Nemu and Vala declare that they will be guarding him tonight, while Mythryll is bunking with Nila and Evangeline is with Misha while Cain and Laura head out to inspect the work to be done.

Cain decides to leave right after a local vegetable heavy and exquisitely spiced dinner, before the King finds out that Nemu doesn’t do personal space and fully intends to cuddle. He’s also reasonably certain that Vala is only on guard duty in his chambers for the entertainment factor.

Cain transforms back into the Golden Proto Dragon once Laura and him clear the edge of the town and reach the open space of the fields, the three Dragons taking to the sky with a causal grace.

“Alright, the plan is to scout the road to the next village over, then I’ll glass the path on the way back and you can cool it. That would give them a smooth, even surface for the road, with no more mud and ruts.” Cain suggests and Laura thinks about it a while.

“That might be too smooth. We should get some gravel to drop on it as it cools, give a bit of grip and texture so it’s not like walking on ice.” Laura has a point, Cain decides. But neither of them know where to get large amounts of gravel.

The next solution they come up with is Cain’s [Acid Rain] Spell. The impact of raindrops on the cooling stone should give the surface a nice dimpled texture. It would be better if they could create a hailstorm though. Certainly one of the many Shamans Cain can Summon has one, but it would take ages to find the right Shaman if he’s unlucky, and if the Acid Rain doesn’t work, Laura has a variety of Ice magic.

It’s a short flight to the next village, only ten Kilometers away. They don’t see a single traveler along or even near the road, so they decide now is as good of a time as any to terrify the villagers and get right to work upgrading the road.

Cain ends up needing to make a very slow pass, with his breath near minimum output, creating a meter thick layer of molten rock, with three copies of acid rain active plus Laura’s Ice Fog Breath to give the new road a non skid texture. Not as fast as he had hoped, but a very good surface.

The ten Kilometers that took them minutes to travel takes them half the night to resurface on their way back, but by midnight the road is done right to where it turns to cobblestones inside Long Fang River Valley.

That’s one project done and they’re off to check the canyon the city would like to flood for the dam.

Cain can tell that idea is a no go even before they cross the ridge where the dam should be built. Multiple lights, filtered through windows and hung in trees are visible from the night sky, scattered all over the valley. Building a dam would flood them all out.

So, they keep going, checking the next valley, one that was beyond the edge of the map Cain looked at. It’s similarly suitable in shape, a hole between rocky hills that slopes downward towards the valley. But this one is destroyed, every tree is cut down, the river is full of debris and trash from a large army sized camp is everywhere.

That doesn’t seem like something the occupants of the first valley would do, they’re very much in tune with nature from what Cain can see. The scene below becomes clear and easy to understand at the Dragons descend on the valley though. The long term camps were all on one side of the river, but a monumental battle took place here recently. Among the debris and destruction are tens of thousands of bodies, all stripped clem of weapons and armor but many of the flags and pennants remain.

The bodies are a mix of Beastkin and humans, with one army aligned to a pair of Nobles that Cain doesn’t recognize by symbol, while the other bears the Royal crest. One of the more influential Royals fell here, and it wasn’t easy to take them down. Going by the destruction, they likely spent half a year in this valley a day’s march from

the Capital before the final battle. The duration seems odd, but Cain decides he can ask the King about it later if they get the chance.

There aren't any caves or other features that might let the water escape, this really is the perfect spot for a dam, so Cain calls on the Kone clones again, bringing an army of Dragons to the valley and ordering them to move all the bodies out of the Valley to a sheltered spot in the hills. If they see anyone who looks like he might have been important, they're instructed to keep them separate for future identification.

They might not have relatives left, and the bodies have been mostly picked clean, but if anyone's coming looking for them, he doesn't want to make it too hard to identify their lost allies and loved ones.

Moving them all out of the Valley so they don't spoil the waters takes until sunrise, but now all that's left is a bunch of rags, broken spears and tent canvas. He can build the dam with that all there and just send a crew to clean it up once the waters start to rise.

The team of Dwarven Earth Mages plus the Granite Elementals are called for this job, their skills in stone buildings and architecture coming in handy once again.

By their determination, the dam should be no more than thirty meters high, any more would spill from one of the low points around the valley. They quickly design a structure, complete with adjustable gates made entirely of stone and local copper found under the valley floor.

With those in place, the water level can be properly controlled once the reservoir is full. For now, the setting reduces the flow to two thirds of what the river banks can hold, only a little lower than the current height of the river, and definitely not low enough to cause a drought on the other side.

It's done, and now that they've gotten both projects for Long Fang City complete, all that's left is to inform the residents of the first valley about the new water feature, so they don't misunderstand and tear it down.

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 268

Telling the residents of the first valley about the dam will have to wait for at least a little; showing up before dawn isn't likely to win you any friends, at least not in Cain's opinion.

He does take a slow flight over the valley, though, checking if anyone's awake, but the place looks deserted. The lights that were on earlier are all out now, and nobody is outside yet.

The river's flow is a little down from where it was yesterday, no longer threatening to breach the banks, instead safely within their confines, but still moving quickly and most of the way up the riverbanks. The administrator is up already when they return to the Inn, and Cain can see him working in the office.

"Administrator Damien, I managed to complete the tasks you set me last night. The dam was placed one valley further away since the one closest to us is occupied," Cain explains, and the man looks shocked.

"No, the first valley has been empty for centuries. The next one has a large village, and it's part of the Arch Duke Ferdinand's holdings. You didn't flood a village on his land, did you?"

"No, the second valley was destroyed, not a tree left standing. We removed the bodies from the battleground to higher places to avoid fouling the water. If there was a village, you couldn't even tell now, but the valley closest to us had lights through windows visible when we flew over. Is it possible the villagers moved to avoid the battle? These were the pennants of the forces involved." Cain sets the banners out on the desk between them.

Damien thinks a while, then nods. "If those were the armies, then the Archduke is likely dead and not still in hiding. Goddess only knows what inspired him to come out and fight. If that's the case, nobody will know the difference if that valley floods, except anyone who moved closer to us.

I'll send some locals out to meet them since they're now living in the lands allotted to the Manor here in Long Fang City. I'll need to have them check the dam to verify that it meets the standard. What was the other project?"

"We put a hard surface on the road to the next village. I think the Dragons scared them a little, but it should be a smooth and solid surface all year round now. Easy to drive a wagon down and free of muddy ruts."

If Damien is startled, his face doesn't show it; he only makes a note in his logbook. "I had reports of that already. Not the road, but Dragon Fire and unnatural rain. The farmers from the next village should be here today on their way to the Capital market, and they can tell us how the road was when they arrived. When might you be able to get guards brought in to protect the region?"

That's a question that requires actual thought. Cain wants to put a Commander here since he would be in charge of a whole river valley full of people. One Lieutenant seems like it wouldn't be enough.

But the Commander can call a Sub Lieutenant, which will get cloned by his skill. Three of them, with their summons, should be more than enough to take care of the Long Fang Valley. As long as what Cain gets for a Commander is Suitable to the task, since he doesn't get to choose them or their personality.

It's still relatively early, so Cain and Laura duck back into the hotel for a bit of sleep, checking in on the team as they go. James has changed back into himself and is securely cuddled by Nemu while Vala reads in the corner.

Nila and Mythryll have their door locked, but Evangeline and Misha are tangled up together. Cain picks an empty room for a couple of hours of sleep, joined by Laura, who makes herself comfortable with a blanket from her inventory and one of the pillows shared between her and her clone.

Needing only a few hours of sleep a night is working out well for Cain; he got everything that urgently needed to be done finished and still made it back in time to sleep all he wanted. Nobody else wanted to get up before mid-morning, so Cain got four hours in and woke fully refreshed to see what the Inn had for breakfast.

Oatmeal with toast and slabs of roast meat is the breakfast, but most of what they're serving today is gossip. The merchants from the next village arrived a few hours ago with a tale of a magical obsidian road that appeared overnight between the villages.

They left before dawn and insisted it was still warm, creating a light fog in the early morning air.

The farmers from the outlying properties back them up, telling tales of Dragons building the obsidian road last night, the retelling getting more embellished with every repetition. The proof they say is in the merchants. They usually wouldn't be here until almost dark, needing all day to make the distance between villages with heavy carts. But today, they're here only a few hours after dawn.

The next village specializes in woodcarving, creating elaborate wooden dishes, utensils, etc. Long Fang is just a stop on their way to the Capital, usually arriving in the evening and setting up for a few hours before leaving in the morning. If they've got extra wagon space, they'll pick up produce from the valley to sell as well, but this trip, they're almost completely full. Despite all the horrors to the succession war, it was a bumper crop.

The lone Beastkin merchant that Cain donated a wagon to will also be leaving with them to travel in the safety of their guards back to the capital. Once they're gone, Cain and company will be the last outsiders in the valley, and they might not even count as outsiders for long. The thought is relaxing to those locals who know about Cain's plans; they don't particularly care to get visitors, preferring to be left alone.

King James will need to be brought back to the Castle tonight, so Cain intends to get everything finalized here as soon as possible. Returning to the capital with a good home

in the country, plus a travel circle linked to the Demon Capital and through that to the rest of his Guild Houses and the Castle, would feel more like a victory than just bringing the King back home.

King James hasn't forgotten his mission though; he's spent his time back in the form of Gerald the Beastkin, eagerly sharing gossip and drinks with those gathered by the market, guarded by Nemu and Vala. He's learning all sorts of things about his country today from a viewpoint that isn't usually allowed in his presence.

It's after lunch, and the merchants have left already, hoping to get to the capital before midnight, when an alarm bell is sounded from the outskirts of the Valley. This time Cain has Laura transform to give everyone a lift to the attack scene, as the area is too crowded for his gigantic Dragon form.

Surprisingly, not only Evangeline but also Vala chooses to transform back to her natural winged form and fly over on her own. She's always been able to, sort of. But at Epic, her flying speed and maneuverability weren't great, so she preferred to walk. She's still not as agile as the Seraphim, but she's much faster than Cain had expected.

A second Gnoll Commander has come to avenge his fallen friend today. Only, this one isn't nearly as impressive. At level 230, with a force of Gnolls numbering two hundred but mostly all under level 190, they shouldn't be a problem. Cain calls all Seraphim, with Initiates, short sword wielding unarmored Seraphim with a single set of wings as his Lesser Golems, the Tank Type Crusaders as his Greater Golems, and Inquisitors to finish out the numbers.

His belt doubled their numbers beyond the already impressive baseline, giving him 72 Lesser and 48 Greater Golems without activating Ancient Resistance. Along with the Eight Inquisitors, or six after Cain merged with two for the battle, they've got more than enough numbers for the fight even before the Companions call their Bonded Forces.

The flying forces throw themselves directly into the Gnolls, not fearing death or injury, and Cain jumps down from Laura to face the Commander before ordering her to take King James back up out of arrow range.

The Commander narrowly dodges Cain's downward thrust as the Puppet Master falls from the sky, the spear grazing the tarnished Pauldron of the cobbled together set of plate armor it has amassed. With the Merger in effect, the Gnoll Commander is hopelessly outmatched, both in speed and strength.

That's not going to make it give up, though. The Gnoll combat style is all heavy, brutal slashes, and the Commander is willing to take a few hits to land a blow. It throws chop after chop at Cain, who parries most with his Scimitar before a low strike digs deep into his side but leaves the Commander open for his spear.

The gleaming tip of the Five Tiger Spear goes effortlessly through the thick metal of the Gnolls armor, punching a hole in its chest and leaving behind a slowly closing fountain of blood as Cain retracts the weapon.

Two-thirds of the Commander's health was depleted in that strike, and now the panic is beginning to show in the monster's eyes. It becomes desperate, attacking with all its might and shouting in the Gnoll language, trying to take Cain down.

The shouts were for assistance, which isn't coming, as the Darklight Host has fully engaged his forces. The wild looking strikes are more effective than the previous attempts at a human combat style and the Commander manages to land a few more glancing blows on Cain, which Misha is healing as they fight, bringing him almost back to full health while the Commander's life slowly drains away.

A desperate flurry of attacks pushes Cain back as the Commander yells something that signals a full retreat, turning to run before Cain can recover his footing.

Cain sees the Gnolls are about to get away and orders the Seraphim to pursue the fleeing monsters. Unable to catch up on his own, Cain opts for using [Judgement], the Holy attack skill gained from his Merger with the Seraphim Inquisitors.

A mighty bolt of holy light streaks down from the sky, causing the fleeing Commander to glow a bright white before turning to ashes. The Seraphim are much faster than the Gnolls are, blocking their escape and eliminating them before landing and waiting on new orders.

Silence falls over the battlefield and Cain looks around to make sure nothing was missed, finding only his own forces and the valley residents left standing.

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 269

Cain surveys the area to see if there are any other threats and finds the Beastkin locals on their knees and bowing before him.

"Holy one, forgive us for our rudeness. If we had known the Goddess sent you, we would never have spoken so informally." One of the farmers begs.

“No need to kneel. Everyone, please stand. I’m not a holy person, it’s just a class skill.” Cain tries to explain while Evangeline tries not to laugh at him.

“We see the heavenly host, Your Grace. What mere Mortal could call on such a thing? The system holds no power over the Divine Beings.”

Cain shares a confused look with Evangeline who just shrugs. “I’ve never seen a transfer Summon actual Seraphim either, but that’s not saying much.”

“I’ll find a way to explain this properly later. But please believe me, I’m just Duke Cain, the Puppet Master.”

The local farmers share an odd look before standing and bowing to him again. “We understand, your holiness. To the world you are Duke Cain and we shall treat you with all appropriate reverence for your station.”

Cain shakes his head, they clearly don’t understand. Not at all. He had been warned in the past that Beastkin are often superstitious sorts, so it’s likely his own fault for calling so many Seraphim and using Holy Magic when he’s not a Cleric type class. But this is a fixable situation, he’s certain.

There are a wide variety of farmers here, nearly every able bodied person in the valley showed up with either weapons or supplies of some sort, so Cain gets to recording everyone. Those with a class mostly record as Supporters, though there are a fair number of Greater Golems from the subspecies that don’t get transfers, giving him a wide variety of Second Advancement classes to choose from, even if most have only a few skills from their newest class.

Those without classes record as Lesser Golems, giving him both more options if he needs them, and a variety of new possible disguises to use.

The administrator has just joined them, briefcase full of Quest Scrolls in hand. They haven’t turned them in since before the first battle with the Gnolls, and Cain is looking forward to the experience gains. But first, he calls as many Spider Queens as he can into the treeline and orders them to call every Summon possible.

In total, there are thousands of little spiders in the woods now, and hundreds of very scary ones, but that’s exactly what Cain needs, along with the Seraphim Host, to make full use of the Quest Rewards. They’re high level quests, but they only give so much base experience per completion.

“I am willing to take that as your guard force assigned to the region, as long as you leave something behind when you go. It’s certainly capable of defending us, even a mighty Gnoll raiding force was eliminated without any loss of life. As such, I will call the Manor Acquisition Quest Complete, as well as the held rewards awaiting you for the Gnolls.”

[Quest Partially Complete]

[Quest Partially Complete]

[Level Up]

[Quest Partially Complete]

[Quest Partially Complete]

[Level Up]

...

[Quest Complete: Claim Long Fang Valley Territory]

[Experience Awarded Exceeds Maximum Due to Skill]

[Multiple Levels Awarded]

[Advanced Classes Available: Choose Now?]Y/N

There it is, Level 200. The final breakpoint that he was aiming for. But Cain doesn't intend to choose a new class yet, he still wants both of the final skills from the Puppet Master class.

Fully intelligent puppets will be a huge help in running the Guild Properties, and an extra Commander would be a great assistant. He currently has one available, the clone for Cixelcid, who he appointed, but Cain intends to use that one to guard the Long Fang Valley, as his contract states he must leave a proper guard here.

Neither of the others seem lost in the system, so either they didn't make Level 200, or they canceled out the notification to select later.

The unfortunate King James is out cold. Again. But on the bright side, he's Level 167. The extra bonuses for being so far under Quest Level must have had him hit the experience cap with every partial completion.

"Is your guide alright, sir?" The administrator asks, poking James with his toe.

"Very much so. We're in a group, so he's just been overwhelmed with notifications from the rapid level gain. It overwhelms the senses and often knocks low level transfers out for a few minutes. He'll be overjoyed when he walks up again and sees his level." Cain assures the man with a smile.

“But more importantly, I just got the notice of territorial transfer. Would you like to stay on in your role? I need a man who knows the city and knows what he’s doing, both to keep things running smoothly and to implement the changes I have planned.”

The big werewolf gives a happy smile. “I’m at your service My Lord. Just name your desires and I’ll see them done.”

“I’ll start with the little things, so you can inform the villagers right away. Their rent is now equal to the tax charged by the crown, with no extra taxes, and they can keep their children, I won’t be claiming any. If they want to join the Army they can, and I’ll have you arrange it and give the fee paid for recruitment to their families.

That will give me sufficient income from the valley, and we can make a few changes in crops next season to increase revenue. Food sells well, but the valley is fertile and Duke Chen mentioned that he’s still short on Alchemy ingredients to fill orders.”

The farmers eyes light up at that. “You would help us trade with the other Dukes? They usually see each other as competition and try to prevent that.”

“I don’t see it as a problem, more of a business collaboration. I also have a few connections in the Demon Kingdom, who might be interested in items from Skyview. But we can discuss that later. First, I’d like to get a good look at this Manor.”

Cain dismisses all the summons, leaving himself with just the two merged Inquisitors and they begin to make their way through the farms and back to the Manor.

From the outside it’s impressive, over five acres enclosed in a high stone wall. The ground look a little overgrown, since nobody has trimmed, weeded or mowed anything since the last Duke died, but they’re still in good shape and the fruits are abundant on all the bushes and trees.

“It was a paranoia of the previous Duke. He feared famine spreading, so he instructed all homes to be self sufficient.” Damien explains.

“It works out well for us. More food is never a bad thing, and it makes life easier on the working folk.” Cain sees that the Manor grounds hold everything from oranges and blueberries to peanuts, potatoes, tomatoes and even rice growing in the flooded terraces that make up the outer defenses of the compound.

The thought that went into this is impressive, they’ve covered almost every essential while still making the grounds look like a proper Noble’s gardens. Even the grass of the lawns is mixed with a variety of low growing herbs, such as the chamomile that Misha is picking as they walk by.

The Manor itself might as well be a castle. Well over two thousand square meters of floor space and four stories tall in the Central pagoda building with large two story tall

wings off the sides in an L shape. The Manor has balconies all around, making it not only an incredible home, but a defensible position.

The walls are white, with gray clay tile roofs, making a striking visual contrast against the trees in the courtyard. In the spring when everything is flowering, Cain suspects it will look magnificent.

Inside, the floors are all dark stained hardwood with cream colored walls in the common areas. There is a large ballroom plus a dining hall, offices and sorting rooms on the ground level of the East wing, and Damien says there are Guest Bedrooms taking up the second floor, which doesn't link to the central building, keeping guests from wandering the Manor.

The central building is all open, each floor is a single room. The previous occupant used them as viewing platforms to look out over the valley, but they were otherwise left empty.

In the West Wing, the scene turns to pure luxury. Past the front room, a living room which seems intended to catch and deter visitors, is a fully equipped spa. Swimming pool, multiple herbal baths, stations for massages and other spa services fill the opulent area, decorated with huge amounts of gold and marble. It even has a large steam sauna and a collection of changing rooms, should you need to go straight from the spa to a meeting.

Upstairs are bedrooms, eight in total, each with their own ensuite and separate sitting room to greet visitors or enjoy a meal, should you not feel like going to one of the dining rooms in the East wing.

"Where are the kitchens?" Misha asks, confused at the layout of this enormous building.

"All kitchens, storage rooms and servant quarters are in the basement. I'll show you there next if you care to see it." Damien explains.

"We've got a number of chefs in the Guild, the kitchens are an important part of every building." Cain explains, thinking how they're more often used for making sweets than actual meals.

The kitchen itself takes up the entire basement under the main building, and Cain can see a secondary kitchen under the East wing for catering large parties. That's perfect, they will have room to cook when they get the entire Guild together for special events.

The servant quarters are predictably depressing, in Cain's eyes they're not much more than prison cells with carpet and a wooden door. But no natural light and stone walls. They're comfortably cool in this tropical heat, but that's all they've got going for them.

Administrator Damien insists it's to help night shift sleep, but still these rooms are awful. At most, Cain might assign them to the puppets, who don't actually need to sleep. They can use them for storing their changes of outfits and personal effects if they collect any.

The laundry is at the far end of the East wing, and Cain wonders briefly about the size difference between East and West before realizing that it's just because of the pool and baths set into the floor above them, as well as the furnaces that heat them. Every bit of space in the underground level is fully utilized.

"I think we've seen everything there is to see. Now, I should drop Gerald here back in the Capital and check on the crew of our ship that's at the port. But first, I'm going to Summon a full time Commander to work with you and protect the valley."

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

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"A full-time Summon? Is that a thing that Puppet Masters can do?" The big werewolf asks, looking to the Darklight Host members for answers, not realizing most of the people he sees are summons.

"Indeed it is. It's the class specialty if you don't count the actual puppets. I've currently got one full-time Summon left, a Commander, who will be able to Summon Sub Lieutenants and temporary summons to assist them. The system decides what it will be and what specialties it gets, though, so I can't guarantee it will be exactly what you'd hoped for in a Guardian for the valley."

Cain can feel the excitement building among the Companions as they get ready to meet the newest addition to the family. He might have said that it was random, but the system optimizes them to the situation. The optimization gives Cain hope that the system won't mess with him too much, so far every permanent Summon it has generated has been both suitable and competent.

For example, the Lieutenants that Cixelcid got. Succubus combat maids when Lickity had just given birth to triplets. If that's not proof they're far from random, Cain doesn't know what is.

"We need the perfect spot for this. How about the top of the tower, overlooking the city and the valley? That should give the right mood." Nemu suggests.

By the time they ascend the tower, everyone is excited for this new Summon to appear, even James and Damien, who don't know what will happen. Cain steps into the middle of the room that is the top floor of the central pagoda, an open walled space with hardwood floors and wooden shutters that can slide to enclose the area and keep it dry in wet weather.

After a few moments to enjoy the view, everyone gathers in a semi-circle, leaving the side towards the city open. They can almost see the gears turning in the werewolf Administrator's mind while he wonders if this is some ritual, his fluffy gray ears flicking in an eager nervousness. He's otherwise hiding his anticipation well, managing the valley can't be easy alone, making him the one with the best reason to be excited right now.

Then Cain summons the Commander, and with a flash of white light, their new friend appears. 180 cm tall, not counting the long fluffy ears, and almost impossibly slender in a white and red Shrine Priestess outfit. The Commander's back is to everyone, the face blocked by long white hair with golden tips, but the three fluffy white tails and pointy ears give the species away. A Fox Kin, or possibly a Kitsune if they've naturally got an entirely animalistic form.

The Commander stares over Long Fang City before turning around, and Laura cheers. "It's Prince Sven! But better."

Indeed, the facial features bear an uncanny resemblance to the former Prince of Landis. Regal and dignified, a flawless fair canvas that needs no makeup to look ready for Royal Court. It's a more feminine type of beauty, where Sven was merely graceful and delicate, the Commander is most decidedly female as well.

Curvy in all the right places despite being so narrow at the waist, Cain could wrap his large hands fully around her; the sight severely affects King James, whose feline features show nothing but pure longing. Even the somewhat elderly Damien coughs to hide his gasp at her appearance.

While they're reacting, Laura has dropped her Merger, sending both Pixie-sized copies of herself burrowing into the fluffy tails. The Commander giggles, a soft sound that barely carries across the room, before swatting the two tiny Dragons with her third tail and pulling them out to sit in her hands.

"Hasn't anyone told you it's polite to ask before fluffing someone's tails, little Dragon? I'll forgive you this time, but be sure to mind your manners or I'll transform and hide the tails away." Now that's a threat that Laura will take seriously.

"Very sorry, miss Commander. I saw the fluff, and my mind went blank. Please forgive me?" Laura begs, and the Commander laughs again before setting the Dragons on Cain's shoulders and patting their heads. Cain shakes his head and sighs at the diminutive Companion, Laura never did have much impulse control. Perhaps they should work on that later.

“You are forgiven. Duke Cain, my name is Svetlana, and I will be your Commander from this day forward. What task do you have for me?”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Svetlana. I’ve called you to guard Long Fang Valley, as well as the city within it, from attack and help with the day-to-day management. Damien here is the Administrator and will be taking care of most of the paperwork.

You will represent me in my capacity as Lord of the territory and announce my intentions or even make decisions on my behalf when I’m not around. What might your specialties be?” Cain greets the beautiful Beastkin, and Misha makes an unhappy noise before tucking herself under his arm, much to Svetlana’s amusement.

Cain pats Misha and kisses her forehead, calming her down as the new Commander explains her abilities. “I am a Kitsune Spirit Singer. I specialize in illusions and fire magic. I am also trained in several instruments and singing since my class requires them.”

This news makes Nemu very happy. None of her tone-deaf friends can sing, but she’s finally found a kindred spirit. The Felian is already making plans for a song and dance routine at the next festival they get a chance to attend together, and she doesn’t even know if they’re staying here in the valley for any significant amount of time.

“Damien, you might as well greet your new coworker; you’ll be working together quite a bit in the future since she’s in charge of security.”

“Welcome to Long Fang City, Miss Svetlana. I look forward to getting to know you. But Duke Cain, is one Summon enough to secure the area? No offense, but it took many Seraphim to succeed last time.”

“Fear Not, my friend. I can personally call on thirty-six Lesser Golems and Twenty Four Greater plus a small force of Bodyguards. With a security force of sixty even before I call on my Sub Lieutenants, I’m certain we can take care of most threats.”

Damien looks a bit startled at that news. An illusionist and fire mage that can Summon? Cain notices his confusion and decides to give him a bit more information.

“Commanders gain the use of my basic Summoning abilities. They’re both powerful and versatile well beyond the baseline of their class. So even when I leave the area, she will remain, and my summons will still be available for defense. Her level is also tied to my own, so as I get stronger, Svetlana will, too, the same for the summons she can call. By the time I reach level 300, this might be the safest valley on the continent, or at least in the Capital region.”

King James takes all this information in with a deep concentration, then tilts his head as if an idea just occurred to him, the action looking perfectly normal in his body of Gerald.

“You mentioned Sub Lieutenants; what are those?” James asks curiously, still looking a little too intently at the slender form of the Youkai.

Svetlana looks to Cain, who nods his approval. “They’re permanent summons like myself, a cloned pair. They’ll be randomly created based on what the system believes is most necessary at the time of their creation.”

“So, will they be Beastkin?” He asks, not quite following and not understanding the difference between Beastkin and Youkai.

“Not necessarily. The other Commander is a Vampire, and the system tells me that his Sub Lieutenants are Succubus Royal Guards. They just happened to be what the system thought he needed.” Svetlana explains.

“Might as well call them now so that you can meet the townsfolk together. I need to run off to the capital tonight, but I’ll come back tonight or tomorrow morning.” Cain suggests.

Svetlana calls her Lieutenants, and two small balls of white fur appear on the floor, yipping happily and running around the room. It seems easier to examine them than wait for them to calm down, so Cain opens his interface.

[Name] Gwen

[Race] Kitsune

[Class] Ghost Maker

[Level] 201

[Lieutenant to Svetlana]

“Gwen, I know you’re happy to be here, but calm down and say hello.” Cain laughs, and the two foxes stop to look at him before turning into petite dark-haired Fox Girls with black ears and tails. That’s unique. Usually, the transformation matches the coloration of their animal form. Both are wearing black leather pants with calf high boots and black crop tops under a mesh shirt with a long black coat that they quickly unequip in this heat.

“Hi, we’re Gwen. As Ghost Makers, we specialize in assassination, bodyguard duties, and illusions. Umm, what else should I say? I like Pie.” Laura looks like she won the lottery. Fluffy tails and new friends with a sweet tooth? It’s a good day to be Laura.

“Good to meet you, Gwen. What’s your favorite Pie?” James asks before anyone else can.

“Pumpkin. But sweet pumpkin, with whipped cream. Or maybe Strawberry Rhubarb, with vanilla ice cream.”

James nods in understanding. “Good choices. If we get the chance to meet again, I think we could be good friends. I believe everyone needs a reliable pie lover around. There’s nothing worse than having to snack alone.”

James’s joke gives Cain an excellent idea. If he sends one of the Lieutenants to the Castle, he could not only obtain inside information about the happenings in the country but also help keep the young King safe. They’re about to head back to the Capital, so there’s no time like the present to ask.

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

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“How much do you trust me?” Cain asks King James, who immediately looks dubious. In his experience that phrase very rarely leads to anything positive.

“A little. What did you have in mind?”

“I would like to reveal to the people in this room who you are and make some arrangements for after your return to the Capital,” Cain suggests, and James nods.

“That shouldn’t be an issue; the rest of your inner circle already knows.”

Cain has Nemu transform the King back into his own young teenage human appearance, complete with the Red and gold fancy outfit they found him in and Damien gasps in shock, recognizing his liege. On the other side of the transformed King, Svetlana is just waiting on the big reveal, as she doesn’t know who he is.

“Gerald was indeed King James. We brought him on a little adventure to get some levels and meet the common people. He has to return tonight for court tomorrow, so I need to leave with him, but I would like to send a clone of Gwen with him. Both as a bodyguard and a trusted companion.” Cain tells the shocked administrator.

“I’m desperately short on people I can trust in the castle. My family is all dead and the staff was almost entirely replaced with those loyal to various oligarchs. Most of my advisors are actively working to make things worse and encouraging attacks throughout the country in an attempt to incite a popular rebellion to have me overthrown and let one of them ascend to the throne. Even if it’s just one pie loving Kitsune, it’s an improvement.” King James explains as if he didn’t have the authority to command Gwen

to be sent with him. Cain was sure he wouldn't, or he would have kept his idea to himself.

"Is this because of what you did for us? Because of the Magna Carta?" Damien asks, almost too shocked to speak at all.

"No, it started before that. It didn't help, I'm certain, but the goal for many oligarchs during the succession struggle was to replace the Royal line with a new one completely. We had hoped that the Royal Uncle Archduke Ferdinand might be able to counterstrike and bring things back under control, but a little over a month passed while we waited, and then we received his head by messenger. He was one of the staunchest supporters for reform despite running his own territory in a rather old fashioned manner."

"He was a good neighbor." Damien agrees.

"So, what's the plan? If you fly back with the King, the other Dukes will lose their minds." Svetlana points out.

"The palace is protected against teleportation-type abilities, and disguise abilities don't work in the Royal Quarters." King James adds. That definitely adds a layer of difficulty to the whole endeavor.

"How about we fly in on a Dark Phoenix? I will drop you and shift back into the void, then Gwen can use an illusion to get you close to your rooms? I'll fly back here and return the conventional way with the others later?"

"That's acceptable to us. It seems We shall be in your debt Duke Cain. Both for the insight into our country and for a loyal protector."

"Don't worry, your Highness. Once we get you home, I'll weed out all the treacherous servants. Hiding emotions and intentions from a Kitsune is nearly impossible. They might be reporting to the Dukes, but they won't all be traitors." Gwen actually seems eager to take in the task, despite the impression of being an irresponsible and fun loving furball she gave when she first arrived.

They're running low on time; just before dark, the castle staff will be expecting King James to come out and get the briefing for the next day's petitions. The day starts with six hours of the King listening to the Nobles, followed by a luncheon, then commoner petitions for four hours after lunch.

The mornings are often ultra-wealthy men talking to hear their voice, not suggesting anything productive. The afternoon is the opposite, hectic and rushed. So many commoners line up to be heard that each only gets a single minute to make their case. If they do, they're referred to a bureaucrat who will get the details.

King James didn't particularly enjoy either portion of the day, but until he managed to sneak out and meet Cain and his Companions, it was his only contact with the ordinary people.

Cain calls the Dark Phoenix to take them to the capital, and one copy of Gwen transforms into her bright white fox form. Like this, she will pass as a pet until someone thinks to scan her while she's somewhere that she can't hide her status with an illusion.

King James looks a little extra pale at the sensation of flying through the void, so Cain provides a distraction, telling the King to think about what skills he wants to learn to influence his class selection.

He randomly rolled as a child when his system activated to get the Paladin Class, but there are several directions he could go from here since he has so many skill points and should be able to gain access to a variety of skill books.

The Skyview Royal Family has an extensive skill library and an inscriptionist on staff, so whatever he needs, he can get made for him in short order.

"I think I want to be a Crusader. So if I choose the offensive skills and have them make me some healing and combat skills, it should become available, right?" James asks.

"I'm not an expert, but that sounds right. Maybe get them to make you a couple of debuff style skills as well, to be safe." If nothing else, the variety of non damaging skills should keep him from getting stuck with a selection of warrior type classes instead of a Paladin successor.

The Dark Phoenix signals that they're at the castle and ready to transfer, so Cain warns the others. "You'll be dropped as close as possible to your rooms. Then, I'll have to run. See you in the morning, Your Majesty. Keep him safe, Gwen."

The Phoenix doesn't even fully enter reality, only flicking Gwen and James off its back and onto a balcony outside the Royal Quarters. The workers feel a hint of the Dark Phoenix's aura of dark magic in the levels below for a split second, but discount it as one of the castle's many magical classes at work.

They arrived within the spells, out in the open for anyone watching the palace from that side to see, and James panicked about causing a wave of rumors. That's the last thing he needs, rumors run wild within the nobility, and can be incredibly damaging when manipulated. Fortunately, Gwen has used an illusion to hide them from sight, it's simply not visible from the inside, so King James couldn't tell.

To those watching the King's quarters from afar, it only looks like the wind blew the curtains of the open patio door apart as the two enter the palace, bringing them safely inside the Royal Quarters, where none without Royal blood can enter without

permission. At least in theory, the servants seem to find a great many tasks necessary to complete within the Royal Quarters. Far too many in James's opinion.

Gwen transforms from a Fox back into her humanoid form once they're out of sight, using a flick of magic to close the doors.

"You should order the skill books now to use them after the evening meetings. If they don't give you the class you want, you can order more to use in the morning. What's for our midnight snack?"

James smiles at the Kitsune and sends a message to the kitchen, asking for a special treat before stroking the tails of his new friend. "I've got the ultimate midnight snack coming. Twenty different kinds of pie and dessert squares. A sample of every flavor the kitchen has in stock."

James orders the skill books he needs, startling the inscription team, who hasn't seen a Royal Procurement in months now and settles in with Gwen and the snacks to mentally prepare for the evening briefing.

Meanwhile, Cain had safely made it back to Long Fang City on the Dark Phoenix. The next order of business is to find a welcoming gift. Preferably an item made by the Guild that is Suitable for a Crusader Class King. It at least something that might be useful to the young regent.

They don't have much on hand, focusing on random things and skill gains lately, but Dimnys assures him that she can have something ready for the morning to give to the King whenever Cain gets the chance.

The next item on the to do list is to modify the transport circle in the outer gardens of the Manor. As the cornerstone building of a noble territory, Cain can't assign it to the Guild, but it has a link to the capital in the yard. It takes a few minutes to understand the system menu for the territory, but after that, it's a simple process to add more locations to the spell.

The only Guild location in a range that he has a link to is the Keep in the Demon Capital, but that's enough to connect the Long Fang Valley to the rest of the Guild Properties.

That circle is also in the yard and locked to Guild Members only, a setting that Cain adds to the one here at the Manor so there are no worries of unwanted visitors at either end, but now they can freely walk between countries.

The news from the east side of the continent is getting worse and worse, with even more cities falling, but they finally learned what the King of Behar wanted with that special silk. He's made himself a [Cloak of Monstrous Control], an item that targets one specific species for mind control to follow the wearer's commands.

Only, he wasn't satisfied with just any monster; he managed to modify the recipe to target humans. All human visitors and hostile forces entering Behar have been enslaved or massacred by the King and his forces. An incredible bit of evil genius.

Assah has been doing well, still maintaining its open port status, essentially a Pirate Port now, and business is booming.

There have been a lot of new arrivals at the castle, two dozen of Lancelot's Knights and a few of Princess Gurda's warriors. They haven't been advertising their location, but when a familiar face shows up, they have the castle defenders bring them into hiding and swear them to secrecy.

Other than those deliberately looking for Blood Sands Castle, as everyone now knows it, they don't get many visitors. The brutal reputation of the Darklight Host and remote location is enough to discourage any of the forces active in the war from attempting to conquer the fortress.

There have still been a few small-scale attacks, but nothing that Maggie and Sora couldn't turn away quickly. Unlike Companions, Lieutenants' summons aren't restricted to one category, so far they've managed to stage a very effective defense against anything that came at them without involving the rest of the Guild.

They're also exceedingly happy with the recent level-up. Being even a handful of levels higher gives them a comfortable advantage against enemies in the region.

Last on the list for the night is for Cain to finish out his skills and see what might be available for advanced classes. A moment he's been dreading all day.

"What if they're no good? What direction should I even be trying to go? Should I pick a Summoning class again?" Misha listens to Cain ramble for a few minutes before dragging him to bed and thoroughly taking his mind off system related issues.

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 272

Cain wakes up well before dawn, well-rested and clear of mind. The perfect state to make decisions. First, he puts his remaining skill points into [Commander] and [General Staff], completing the entire Puppet Master Skill tree and making his puppets intelligent and autonomous, within the limits of their orders.

The change is evident right away; not only do the Puppets say good morning when they see him, but they also notice that he's distracted and take over making breakfast without orders.

[Hidden Skull Unlocked]

[Blessed Summoner] A fully skilled Lord General of the Puppet Master class may Summon one target of base Legendary Quality.

Cain gasps in shock, startling the Puppets who have begun serving breakfast, their maid uniforms rustling from the brisk efficiency with which they perform their daily chores.

[The Puppet Master is a broken class, but isn't that a little too much? Many of the Legendary Summons can nearly match me on their own; adding them to my summons is just insane.] Cain thinks to himself, making the merged Seraphim Inquisitors laugh.

[Just wait. You've got a new class coming. If the Laughing God favors you, it might be even more ridiculous.]

All sorts of incredible opponents flash through Cain's thoughts as he eats breakfast. Every one of the Legendary summons has a situation where it would definitely be beneficial; there are no bad options among them.

The rest of the group filters down over the next few minutes, awoken by the maids for breakfast. Even Damien leaves his office downtown and joins them after a while, making sure Cain isn't going to be late to court. Officially it's a Regency Court, as King James is underage, but as the only surviving Royal, he has the only say in who the Regent will be, and he appointed himself as Regent until his Reign is no longer contested and he is officially Coronated.

In Skyview that is no less than six months from the previous King's passing, so he still has nearly a month to wait. In practice, he's already the Monarch, and has been for a while, but according to Damien some of the Nobles are sticklers for tradition, and others simply want the time to attempt to have him dethroned.

[Truly living up to the reputation of the chaotic nations.] Cain sends to the others in party chat as the old werewolf finished his explanation of the state of Royal affairs. Since things are beyond his knowledge, but he does get all the official messages intended for the rulers of territories, so he's managed to keep fairly well informed.

Although it's acceptable to show up at any point in the morning, it's considered polite for new Nobles to be there before the proceedings start, so they can meet and greet the others and get acquainted with the subtle details of etiquette that remain unknown to those outside the nobility.

"I'll be ready. I want to take a minute to look over my class options before going. If there's a suitable option, I'll upgrade before I leave."

"Excellent idea. A third advancement class is always impressive to see. But who will you bring? The custom is the Noble plus two, usually their consort and an assistant." Damien points out that Cain doesn't make a social faux pas.

"I'll bring Misha and Mythryll in with me. The other Companions will be otherwise occupied." He's planning to merge with all of the Companions, but there's no need to explain that to the administrator.

Damien bows in acquiescence and the maids usher him into a chair and serve him breakfast. Despite their appearances, the scene somewhat reminds Cain of his grandmother's house in his later life. Nobody leaves without being fed. Damien looks pleased with the arrangement as well, werewolves are always at least a little bit hungry, and the sight of cute Elves in maid costumes is much better than the stack of paperwork on his desk.

Having Svetlana around has made his life much easier today, she's currently working through the monthly accounts, and she's much faster at math than he is. That will take half of his daily work away even if she doesn't do any other paperwork and focuses entirely on the budget and the Valley's security.

Cain opens the class change menu and finds he has a variety of options to choose from, with the default Avatar for each lined up in a row in front of him. He immediately dismisses the two highlighted in green as life skills classes after a cursory glance. He doesn't intend to be a full-time inscriptionist or a bureaucrat.

That leaves him with four valid possibilities.

Cain starts from the left, the Avatar has been portrayed as a tackier version of his human appearance with a lot of flashy gold jewelry.

The class is [Enslaver] and comes with an innate ability for mind control, skills for various mental magics, plus up to six more Lieutenants. It's not a bad option, and a very powerful looking class, but not Cain's style.

The second class shows his human form in a crown and a brightly colored royal outfit complete with a fur-trimmed cape. The [Puppeteer Monarch] class has a skill tree that's very similar to the General side of the Puppet Master Skill Tree all over again.

Almost every skill grants increasing numbers of summons, but with the addition of a damage buff and two Dukes, who would have most of his abilities, even the ability to Summon Supporters.

It's noted as the direct progression path of the Puppet Master, and Cain can see why. He could create an actual army with that class. By nature, it looks like the most probable upgraded class for him to take.

The third is noted as a hidden class [Risen Overlord]. The class upgrades all [Puppets] to his current level by default, and the skill tree is a combination of offensive skills, both magical and melee, as well aura abilities. It's a pure damage output class and a nearly perfect one.

Towards the top of the tree, his summons would gain access to the new class skills, letting all of them use the high damage melee abilities and spells. That would be an incredible buff for his Puppets.

Between that one and the Puppeteer Monarch, it's a pretty close call; they're both fantastic in their own way. But there's one left. This one doesn't show him in human form but the miniaturized version of the Ancient Form.

The Avatar has a sinister look to it, like this class is innately evil, but given the nature of the Ancient species, that might be unintentional.

[Ancient Flesh Crafter] is the name of the Unique Class generated by the advancement token and it is every bit as ridiculous as he had hoped.

Cain can't help but laugh in shock while reading the brief description, [The Ancient Flesh Crafters are the pseudo scientists responsible for the creation of most of the planet's sentient species.]

That did nothing at all to dispel the impression of unfathomable evil the default Avatar gives off; it just adds overtones of a mad scientist.

Looking through the class abilities, the innate class skills seem simple at first glance but Cain is certain they are far from mundane in practice.

[Modify] reshape a living being or create a Unique Puppet. Can be used to grant the target one ability known by the Flesh Crafter or his active summons other than [Malleable Form]

Simple in theory, but in practice, he could modify Mythryll to breathe fire or Misha to teleport like the Oath Breaker. The second of the innate class abilities is similarly deceptive, and just as unbalanced as the first.

[Primal Echo] Summon a shadowy assistant that can use the Flesh Crafters abilities and spells at half power.

Other than the two innate skills, the class only has five more—four that can be freely chosen and one that requires all the others.

[Ancient Wisdom] lets Cain give a skill known by an active Summon to himself and his entire party. It has stages of upgrades, from lesser through Legendary summons abilities.

[Useful Dolls] upgrades Puppets to his level. Simple, but powerful when combined with the other class abilities.

[Living Dolls] resurrects a target into the body of a Puppet under his control and traps their previous body in a stasis gem. There's nothing in the description about what happens if they're killed again, or the spell is ended, which Cain finds a bit concerning.

[Greater Merger] would allow him to gain all the spells and abilities of one merged target.

Once all of those are at their maximum rank, a skill called [Ancient Horrors] is unlocked, increasing the quality of his Golem Type summons by an additional level and renaming the spells.

If these are the sorts of abilities the Ancients had before the system existed, it's no wonder that the other species felt threatened by them. The ability to create life or reshape living things into new hybrid species is incredibly extraordinary and equally morally questionable.

Cain assures himself that he will use it responsibly, but there's still that bit of self-doubt that tells him he's going to abuse that ability at some point, and not just a little bit.

It's by far the best of the options by the time he gets to level 300. The single skill of Ancient Horrors is enough to put it over the top. Sure, he doesn't get many more summons, if you don't count the fact the Primal Echo can use all his skills, but the abilities of the ones he does have will skyrocket.

Puppeteer Monarch and Risen Overlord aren't bad options, though and deserve a bit of consideration about the path Cain wants to follow in the future.

Cain carefully weighs the options and decides that the ability to give every one of his summons and party members an extra power wins out over numbers. Cain chooses the [Ancient Flesh Crafter] class and waits for the notifications.

[Abilities Gained]

[Class Changed]

[Welcome Flesh Crafter]

Cain is eager to try out his new abilities, dismissing the Seraphim Inquisitors and trading them for the Legendary Seraphim he faced inside the dungeon. The two girls said it was

synthetic, but the system recorded it as the real thing, so he hoped his experiment would work.

[Might I ask what you are planning on doing, Ancient?] One of the cloned Seraphim asks in his mind.

[I'm teaching Puppets to Summon the Heavenly Host.]

[Please don't. Do you know how hard we've worked to maintain the balance between the species? Having constructs calling forth Holy Armies will end very poorly for us all once the greedy ones find out.]

[Well, they don't have combat skills, and they have lousy mana reserves, so the options are rather limited.] Cain explains.

[Why not Dragon Breath? Everyone is impressed by Dragon Breath, and you've got two of them right over there, bothering the Werewolf.]

That's not a bad idea, Cain decides. He should have thought about that right away. Cain inspects a maid-type Puppet working in the kitchen and uses [Modify] to give her Laura's Dragon Breath. The puppet's eyes change slightly, becoming slotted like a cat's, but otherwise, it looks the same.

[Modification Successful]

Oh, very nice; he's got an ice-breathing Maid Puppet here now. Cain does the same to another one and finds that the first one reverts to normal.

[Modification Successful]

[Puppets Cannot Interact With The Interface]

Oh, maybe that's it. They can't select to keep the ability, so the next time he uses it, they revert. That's a bit of a bummer. Maybe it's different if he makes a brand new one with Dragon Breath by default?

This unique ability will need some practice, but he's running short on time; they've got to get to the Capital and meet the Oligarchs.

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 273

After eating, Damien takes Svetlana and Gwen on a tour of the Valley to help them work out a defensive strategy. The valley is quite large, unlike the Guild Castle, so simply placing a few guards in stationary locations isn't going to work here. Instead, they're planning to call their bodyguard and sorcerer summons, an ability that was shared with Lieutenants and Commanders beginning when Cain reached level 180 and tripled all his summons.

Split into four teams of four; they will patrol the territory in a loop determined by their survey today and call for reinforcements if they find an issue. They'll also be able to serve as city guards, though the locals have that taken care of on their own.

The Long Fang City's answer to a public security force was to have the sanitation and maintenance department do it. They're always out and about, and it's a pretty low-crime area.

With the prying eyes gone, Cain asks the Puppets to watch over the Manor for him and releases the summons from his Merger. He then brings all the Companions in, except the clone of Nila that is back on the Queen Rose.

"Alright ladies, have you picked an outfit suitable for the Royal Court? We've got to leave right away." Cain informs Misha and Mythryll, who are still in casual armor but with their hair and makeup beautifully done.

Mythryll gives him a big smile while Misha looks nervous. "We're all ready, but they wouldn't be comfortable for the journey, so we will change when we get there."

Cain considers using the transport circle in the yard, but it leads to the one in the shopping district of the Capital, which is a fair ways from the palace, so instead he calls them each a Dark Phoenix to travel back to the capital, the lack of wind in the void saving the elaborate hairstyles from destruction.

The moment they land in the open courtyard where the ranking fair was held, the two ladies change to their choice of elegant gowns. It's not often they have a genuine excuse to get all dressed up, and they both look unusually excited for the opportunity.

Mythryll picked an elegant sleeveless cheongsam style floor length dress with a keyhole neckline showing off a little cleavage, dark green with golden embroidery, and a matching jacket in light silk, worn open.

Misha picked a Spanish flamenco-style gown with a plunging neckline and open upper back in white with green flowers and embroidered lace at the collar, making fluffy short

sleeves and ruffled layers upon the skirt, which parts at her right leg when she walks to show a matching green silk layer underneath.

Cain admires the effort the ladies have put into their appearance for a moment before choosing a black three-piece suit with a green tie and pocket square. A gold scarf hung over his shoulders, mostly tucked under the coat, adds a flash of color to the outfit, and Cain crooks his arms for the ladies to take as they walk up towards the castle.

If anything, they're still underdressed for the occasion, as they see many bright colors, huge ruffles, wide boned skirts, and flowing trains among the lady's wear. The men are a bit more conservative, with a mix of brightly colored suits and formal black wear being the norm.

The Beastkin men are all wearing hats, perhaps trying to look more human, but the Beastkin ladies have a wide array of jewelry and shining glitter adorning their ears. The variety of styles is stunning, covering a thousand years and a whole world of historical fashion, but in every case, they're dressed to impress.

One thing they notice is the gloves; everyone wears gloves. Misha and Mythryll hunt for a set to match their dresses as they walk, while Cain equips a set of soft black leather gloves to hide his hands. They forgot to ask King James about the dress code, and nobody else they've been around would have known for sure. The fact they caught on to this much was pure luck.

Cain introduces them to every friendly face they meet, learning that those arriving this early are almost all lower nobility. As it is with new Nobles, it's considered polite for them to come before the proceedings start. They're all eager to meet the new Duke, especially after learning that he has taken over Long Fang Valley, one of the most fertile areas near the capital.

As a hub for a variety of high-quality food, having it left unattended concerned the lower Nobles of the capital very profoundly. Any interruption to the valley's farms had the potential to directly impact their diet.

Mythryll fulfills her supposed role of assistant well today, taking notes in who is who among the lower Nobles and setting up a few meetings for Damien with ones that wish to make business arrangements with the new Duke.

It might be more work for the already overburdened Administrator, but it's still his job to determine what deals and with whom it is in the Valley's best interest to agree to. Once the meetings are over, he will pass the information back to Cain for a final stamp of approval.

In all honesty, Cain intends to let Svetlana have the final say on most of the small details, but he will instruct her to pass it off as his decision if it makes Damien happier.

Before entering the Palace itself, the trio finds Duke Chen waiting for them, with a raven haired preteen human girl in a fluffy pink princess dress. The Duke is again in the same black Taoist robes as Cain saw him at the fair and smiling warmly in their direction.

“Greetings. I came to make sure you didn’t miss anything important on your first visit. This is my granddaughter Penelope. She has just turned twelve, and it’s custom among the Nobles to start arranging marriages at her age, so there are no complications when it comes time for them to be wed.”

“Greetings, Duke Cain. Welcome to Skyview.” Penelope curtsies politely, and Cain smiles.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Penelope. Duke Chen, I do hope we didn’t make any serious mistakes. It looks like we might be a bit underdressed, though.” Cain replies with a polite nod of his head.

“Ignore them. They’ve got people to impress. Dukes don’t dress to impress others; others dress to impress us.” Chen informs them, and Cain relaxes a little. At least it’s not just Chen’s style that’s more relaxed than the lower Nobles.

“For the Noble ladies it’s a bloodthirsty competition to outdo each other as the most beautiful, elegant or refined looking. Not just here, but every single time they meet.” Little Penelope whispers to Misha, but loud enough for the whole group to hear.

[That girl is wise beyond her years.] Misha sends in party chat. But outwardly just smiled and nodded in thanks for the advice as the girl scalpers back to her grandfather.

Cain and company follow the Duke through a series of corridors and away from the others before coming to a large ballroom used as a sitting room by the Earls and Dukes.

“Everyone, may I present Duke Cain, now Lord of the Long Fang Valley and our newest member,” Chen announces to them as they arrive.

“Ladies, you might as well split off to go see the vultures; Cain has a lot of people to greet. Penelope, why don’t you go visit Julia?” The long-bearded Duke whispers before turning a polite smile to the room and beginning to introduce Cain.

Technically it’s not necessary; he turned on nameplates in his interface before they entered, but meeting everyone is an essential formality even if you know their names.

It’s not long before the division in the nobility becomes obvious; on one team are the second and third generation young masters, the political elite focused mostly on maintaining their status and political power. During these pre Court meetings they have very little interaction with the other faction, the business-minded Dukes. They’re the

ones who focus on growing wealth, providing services, and advancing their economic interests away from the palace.

The fact Cain is in the second group is unquestioned. Even before Duke Chen introduced him in a friendly manner, the fact he chose a suit and not a flashy and impractical court outfit determined his mindset.

The political faction is mostly made up of high-paid bureaucrats who run the country daily. The conflict with the business people, who see them as somewhere between parasites and a necessary evil, was inevitable, really. Not that there aren't friends across faction lines, but there's definitely a friction between them.

"Duke Cain, I am Duke Archibald, Defense Minister and administrator of the capital region." A particularly pompous middle-aged noble introduces himself. Even for the political faction, he's gaudy, his outfit covered in jewels and gold. Ignoring the horrendous fashion sense he looks to be a well-built man, though, 185 cm tall, with broad shoulders and a trim waist.

"It's a pleasure to meet you; I heard your name many times after arriving here in the Capital." Cain replies, shaking his hand.

Archibald sniffs and turns his nose up a little. "Inevitable, as defense minister, my work never ends. Especially with lazy border Barons allowing all sorts of riffraff through their lands."

Cain nods in understanding. "The soldiers of the capital speak highly of you, though, so that I wouldn't take the criticism too much to heart."

In his mind, Vala is laughing so hard that she would be in tears if she had a body. [Oh, he should take it to heart. The man doesn't have a clue, much less a plan. Some Defense Minister]

Duke Archibald drags a young woman over to them with a gesture, a young man of the political faction following her like a lost puppy. "I would like to meet my niece Aprilia, and her husband Earl Gibson, the internal affairs Minister."

"Duke Cain, a true pleasure. I hope we get the time to know each other better in the future." Aprilia gushes, rubbing up against Cain while her husband looks down with a defeated frown on his face. Cain could swear he hates Duke Archibald tell him to grow a backbone, but he might be mistaken.

Cain thought he knew much of the Dao of Shamelessness, but this woman, flirting with him so blatantly in public and front of her husband, is a true master. Even her uncle has the grace to look embarrassed on her behalf before discreetly pulling her away from Cain.

"I'm certain you're a busy woman; being the wife of the Internal Affairs Minister, I wouldn't want to keep you too long from your duties." Cain does his best to be polite, but he can see her face darken at his rejection. Politics are never going to be his strong suit.

A group of other ministers pulls Duke Archibald's attention away, and the Duke pulls Aprilia away with him. Once they're out of earshot, a young Hippo-headed Beastkin Cain recalls as being Earl Millsap comes over with a smile.

"Nice deflection. She threw a fit and several glasses and plates when I turned her down. She's a favorite toy of the Political faction at their private parties if you're actually into such things." The big man whispers.

"I've got my fill of that at home. One woman is enough for my tastes." Cain smiles back, and the Earl pulls a smaller version of himself out from behind him.

"This is Marshall, my oldest son. Like Duke Chen's granddaughter, he's also twelve, so I've been bringing him with me to court. It's a valuable experience and helps him get his nose out of the books and meet new people."

The Young man manages to bow politely without looking up from the book he is reading, and Cain chuckles. "Education is important, but don't forget to spend time with others. You can't learn everything all by yourself."

The boy gives him a confused look, contemplating the information before turning back to his book. "I can't verify the veracity of that statement until I have tried."

Understandable, books are much easier to get along with than most people.

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 274

After an hour of socializing, a horn sounds from somewhere else in the palace, and Duke Chen comes over to escort Cain and the ladies to the Throne Room. While they didn't really enjoy the enforced time with the ladies of the nobility, they did manage to gain two new friends, a pair of twins. Both are tall and muscular wolf kin women of the Shaman class. They're wearing smart skirt suits, not fancy dresses, so Cain assumes they're someone's clerk, here to bring notes and help with a proposal.

As they walk, Cain overhears them talking about the imminent annual flooding of the Long Fang River, one of the three dredged canals that lead near the capital and the one

that flows through Cain's new territory. Their boss is looking for funding for the repairs that must be done afterward, so Cain decides to give them the heads up.

"Before he died, Archduke Ferdinand built a dam at the border between his territory and mine. It will absorb the overflow coming down my branch of the river, so you'll only need to worry about the other two canals flooding." This news takes them both by surprise, and one runs off to get their boss, a human Dutchess with her gray hair pulled back into a tight bun.

"He built a dam, you say? That old codger fought the idea for a hundred years. Said it would ruin the property value of his territory. What sort of shape is it in?" The old Dutchess asks, getting right to business.

"Solid and well gated for flow adjustments. The downstream side is right at my border, so I can adjust it to keep the levels safe." Cain explains.

"Excellent. I might not know what made him change his mind and flood that worthless Valley, but I am glad he finally saw sense for once in his life." Her piece said, the older woman turns and leaves, her Assistants smiling sadly at her back.

"Don't mind her, they're former lovers and even afterward were once very close, but that dam project was a point of contention for a long time. I know she secretly misses him but doesn't want to say anything that might upset the hidden Anti-Royals." One of the twin's whispers before the other pokes her to make her shut up.

Duke Chen leads them to one side, where many business faction members gather, and the twins break away, waving goodbye to Misha and Mythryll.

[This place is full of two-faced degenerates. I think those three were the only decent women we met the entire time.] Mythryll sends in a party chat, and Cain smiles at her.

[The political Nobles seem to be clueless hedonists. One of the Minster's wives even tried to proposition me right in front of her husband and uncle.] Cain adds, and Misha frowns, stepping closer to him.

The throne room is completely full now, with everyone settled into their places. Another series of horns sounds, and Duke Chen leans over to advise the newcomers. "Ladies curtsy until your thigh is parallel to the ground; Dukes bow 45 degrees at the waist. The lower ranks will be kneeling."

Even the Greetings for the King have rankings in this country, it seems. The doors open moments later, and King James enters in full regalia, a wand of office in one hand and a bright white Kitsune in his other. Gwen has disguised herself to look like just a puppy, showing no signs of ability to transform or having a system.

It's a masterpiece of illusion, because it doesn't alter her form at all, only hides her status. Casually sitting with the King and mostly disinterested in the proceedings, she seems happy with her assignment.

The assembled Nobles are gushing over how cute the King's new pet is, and Cain smiles. It's good to see that they're getting along. The King makes his way gracefully down the red carpet to his throne before turning back to greet the room.

"Arise. We have arrived, and Court is now in Session. Bring forth the first petitioner."

First up is the Dutchess, worried about flooding in her territories. Her property sits southwest of Cain's, between him and the capital, but south of the road that they took to Long Fang Valley. The river they dammed won't directly flood her property, but it tends to mingle with the overland flooding of the other canals during a particularly wet season.

She gives a rather long-winded but passionate presentation about the need for improvements, a presentation which she's clearly done many times before. But this time, she's giving it to a new King. One who hasn't lived his entire life under the thumb of the oligarchs, one who just got back from a trip to the outside world and saw how such a project made the locals happy. A King who knows firsthand that it will be good for the nation.

"The Crown has heard your pleas, Dutchess. From today it is ordered that the interior ministry formulate a plan and have the two remaining uncontrolled canals dammed and their flow prevented from breaching the banks this rainy season. For the good of the nation and the nobility as a whole, this infrastructure project must be done." King James pronounces, and Cain can see one faction congratulating each other while the interior minister and his allies look more than a little panicked.

All the responsibility is now on them, and every noble whose land they might flood for the project or whose land gets flooded because they completed it improperly will now be looking to them for compensation.

Though his title is minister, the man is much more of a Project Manager in practice, overseeing construction and maintenance that involves multiple Nobles. In the past, the Kings were so compliant that the upper nobility essentially self governed, as well as running the country by proxy.

As he waits for the excited chatter in the room too quiet and the assembled Nobles to be ready for the next petitioner, James reaches for the food and wine next to him, thinks better of it, and gestures someone forward. A wolfkin that Cain recognizes as a Shadow Stalker, and a Bodyguard Summon created by Gwen, emerges from the shadows and samples both the fruit and the wine, lightly sniffing over the plate before taking it away and handing the King the wine.

It's only seconds later when the Beastkin returns with a plate of pie samples, but that simple action causes more commotion than the construction project. Both Cain and King James note the Nobles who look exceedingly nervous, and Cain can see many others doing the same.

Outright replacing the Monarchy wasn't the majority opinion among the Oligarchs during the war. For the most part they simply wanted the one they controlled to be on the throne, which led to almost all of them dying. King James doesn't yet know it for sure, but from Cain's observations, and the deductions of his merged Companions, his Reign has solid support among the assembled Nobility.

The group that was introduced to Cain as the Royal Advisors appear to revel in chaos and looked the most nervous when the food was taken away, presumably poisoned. But the less political faction, led by Duke Chen, the rest of the business faction, and most of the middle nobility appear to stand on his side.

Duke Chen moves over to talk to Cain while the next petitioner, an Earl from the border regions, comes forward from his place towards the middle of the room.

[I see you gained influence quickly. The System might have hidden their allegiance, but the Financial Faction has realized that they are most likely your loyalists. None of the others have a training program like that for Beastkin Assassins. With them watching the King, it will upset the Anti Royals, so be careful.]

It's sent in a private message while Duke Chen whispers to Cain about the Nobles who will be most affected by the dam project, giving him the look of a polite senior statesman helping the newbie.

This Earl that has come forward with a petition is part of the Business Faction, in a sharp gray three-piece suit with a purple shirt and bow tie. He's come to ask for Royal assistance with the Gnolls. Cain can see the quest is nationwide and still active, presumably Neverending if the farmers reports of constant attempts at Groll territory expansions are believed.

"The Crown Sympathizes with your plight, and that of all Border Territories, our front line of defense against invasion. Would any present offer a force from their lands to quell the current threat?"

It's an excellent platitude, but that's all it is. Few of the Nobles will risk their forces these days.

"Duke Cain has a mercenary force that can be tasked to assist with your emergency. Four Dragons and a wing of Drakes with their handlers." Cain offers graciously, and the Earl's face lights up as he bows deeply to Cain.

Two Supporters aren't a significant loss, and he will still get some experience from their adventures. Despite the distance, they still count as part of him.

"As your neighbor, I shall send assistance as well."

"And I."

"I shall mobilize the regiment as soon as We return."

The surrounding Nobles, who would have helped him anyhow, out of concern for their own lands, add their voices to Cain's, bringing the numbers up to a reasonable sized force.

The King makes a complex hand gesture to the announcer, and the man steps forward to bring up the next point of business. "The Crown thanks its loyal Nobles for their support of those in need. Now before we call the next petitioner, an announcement must be made.

Our beloved King James will be celebrating his Fifteenth Birthday next month, the marriage age for Skyview Royalty, as all here are aware. But as our King's betrothed perished during the fighting and with her the monogamous marriage contract, a new announcement will now be made regarding the security of the Succession.

During the birthday festivities, all unbetrothed daughters of the nobility are invited to attend, regardless of standing or title. A Royal Harem will be formed from those who catch the King's eye."

That's an announcement that shocks the nation's nobility. Not just human daughters of high nobility, but every noble daughter without a betrothed has a chance at the harem?

Duke Chen explains the situation as the throne room turns deafening with chatter and multiple Nobles start sending messages to spread the word. When they're born of a harem without a named Queen, the sons will all have the opportunity to ascend to the throne by order of birth. A large part of the Anti-Royal faction is Beastkin, who have always had their influence limited with no chance at Royalty.

This could be life changing for them, completely flipping their stance on the Monarchy should any Beastkin daughters be chosen. Of course, many Anti-Royals want unfettered power and see it as necessary that the Royal Family is gone entirely, but if King James's plans work out, they'll be a fringe extremist group, small enough for the other factions to wipe them out with ease.

It's a genius political move, despite the fact that it further alienated many of his advisors, a faction who have continued to sow dissent and chaos in the kingdom since he took over the throne. From the content way James pets Gwen though, Cain suspects the reason is only 70 percent political and 30 percent love of fluff.

Maybe closer to 50/50.

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 275

That announcement and the ensuing chaos were enough to take up the entire morning, and Cain noticed that many of the King's closest advisors had disappeared from the hall.

He assumed that was a regular occurrence at first, but by the time the break came around and the Nobles were getting ready to gather for the banquet, it had become clear that their faction was wondering where they went.

Cain took a seat between Duke Chen and Duke Archibald, as Duke Chen instructed him to, keeping with the Palace's strange teired and factioned arrangement. The Upper Nobles sit at one table with like minded Nobles near their rank, with their Companions behind them at another.

Archibald might not be much of a Defense Minister, but much of that is due to his focus on capital politics. He's snobby and arrogant, but after talking with him for a while, his military tactics are superb. The problem is that he only cares about the capital region's safety and views the nation's problems as a nuisance.

He is the majority of the reason King James lived long enough to ascend to the throne, and he's still a staunch loyalist. He's also deeply ashamed of his daughter and keeps trying to introduce her to better influences, but she keeps trying to have sex with them instead.

The Julia, who Duke Chen sent his granddaughter Penelope to see, turns out to be Duke Archibald's youngest daughter, who is also twelve this year. They're seated at the table behind the trio with Misha and Mythryll.

While they eat and share talk of what to expect this afternoon, Cain scans the room for developing political intrigues and finds the Internal Affairs Minister Gibson swarmed by Nobles with demands and plans for the dam project, but Aprilia is missing. Cain thinks she might be coming this way again, bothering him under cover of visiting her father, until he sees her come in from a side room with her hair tousled, escorted by six noblemen. That woman really does have no sense of propriety at all. Nor do the majority of the noblemen it seems.

Cain raises his eyebrow and looks from her to Duke Archibald, who shakes his head in disgust. "There's no hope for that one. It would take an Incubus to bring her back under control, and even then, she might seduce it. But her husband is a pushover with strong family connections, which were very useful during the succession."

So a political marriage then. Bit of a shame, when his wife isn't around to embarrass him, Earl Gibson seems to be a somewhat competent man.

[If only he had a better wife.] Evangeline sends the thought through to Cain. So very true, Gibson deserved better.

When dinner is over, the missing Nobles still haven't returned, causing rumors to spread through the dining hall. Duke Archibald is also beginning to panic, but for a different reason. Earl Gibson has almost finished taking notes from everyone who might be affected by the project, and Aprilia is missing again. If she's late arriving at the afternoon session, it will be another embarrassment for him as her father.

Upper Nobles arriving late is one thing. But Aprilia has no great wealth or political power of her own; coming in without her husband would make her look unfashionably late.

Cain can see there are hundreds of commoners lined up in their very best. A winding column of freshly patched or newly made pants and freshly dyed shirts in bright colors are lined up outside the door, and the two Dukes look over at Cain with matching smiles.

"Ready for the circus? If the petitions are good, any of us can be chosen to hear them out and report back to the King. We're standing close to the front, so we'll likely get chosen near the start."

That sounds like a lot of fun, and it gives the King an excellent excuse to talk to his favored Nobles in private later.

The first few complaints are so petty Cain can't believe they were brought before the King. Grievances between families, accusations of stealing clothes from the line, pleas for funds to upgrade the homes they're renting. All are told to take their problems up with the magistrates, local guard, or landlord.

The first to get a referral is one with a request to have fish stocked in an irrigation pond. Their local noble denied the request, but the farmer has documents on how it might help food supplies and water quality. It's referred to one of the Business Nobles with a fish on his family crest.

That's one thing Cain hadn't made yet, a family crest. As a noble, he will be expected to have one soon to fly on his land, but that's a project he will have to refer to the artists.

The next worthy request is a claim of over-taxation. That goes to Duke Chen, who catches the King's eye first, and the Baron in question looks livid. If he really has over taxed his tenants, he will face a huge fine, possibly enough for the Baron to lose his properties and noble status entirely.

After that, they go a while with the supplicants being sent away before a long-necked Wooly Beastkin woman claims that her neighbors are getting unlawfully imprisoned for refusing to give up the properties they've rented in the Capital when their landlord finds human tenants. She's speaking on behalf of a whole building and has lease agreements and written statements from the Capital police.

Duke Archibald volunteers to take this one, as their landlord is under his supervision as the capital administrator. Nobody is surprised by his actions, he takes his job very seriously, and now Cain is left standing alone. The others don't move forward to take the empty positions, knowing the Dukes will be coming back, so Cain has ample space all around, giving him the feeling of a nonexistent spotlight shining on him.

The line grows shorter as the day progresses until the last hearing of the day enters. It's a ragged Beastkin girl, not yet old enough to have undergone puberty, wearing a stained sackcloth dress.

"Your Highness, King, Sir. I want to petition to stay in the kingdom. I plus ten others escaped a slave convoy in the Niman territory to the east and fled here. We would ask for legal status and not to be deported."

King James looks like he's had a great idea and turns to Cain. "Duke Cain, as our newest member, and since the interior minister who usually handles refugees is busy, I shall refer this petition to you. Hear them out well; the crown is feeling generous."

"Yes, your Highness," Cain answers, bowing and motioning for the Beastkin girl to follow him out of the room.

[I could use some loyalty in the palace] King James sends in private message, and Cain understands what he wants.

"Have someone bring in the rest of the escaped slaves," Cain instructs the guards outside of the hearing room closest to him, and the man salutes, before his eyes go vacant as he sends a message.

The young one who petitioned the King is the most presentable of the lot. They're all scarred, branded, and haggard-looking. All are female, but none are adults, and it doesn't look like they were expected to live that long by whoever runs the Niman territory. Cain gets their essential background and then makes a decision.

They've all got domestic experience, serving and cooking for their former masters, so Cain decides they would do well doing the same for the King.

They've all dressed the same, ragged dresses made from used bulk bags, with a collar on their necks. Hardly suitable to present to the King alongside his findings, but the hearing room has a bathroom with a shower. Whether it's for making commoners presentable or for extracurricular activities is questionable, but today, it's going to be very useful.

"Go wash up, get as presentable as you can, and I'll ask the King to take you in as Palace servants. The palace is understaffed; a few more bodies wouldn't hurt anything." That's more than they hoped for, and they are about to rush off when Cain decides to remove the slave collars.

[Devotion Ring Supersedes Collars of Command]

[Claim Item or Transfer Ownership back to Original Party]?

There's no option to remove them? Since it's an equipped item, it will be hard to break them, and they might just come back again; jewelry often self-repairs. The collars are still claimed, which would give their old owners rights over them, a dangerous inconvenience since the collars allow for commands to be enforced.

[All Collars of Command Claimed]

Cain looks at the options he has for them. [Appearance Change], [Set Rules], [Transfer Ownership], [Set Duration]

The last option looks promising to Cain, so he opens it on all eleven collars at once, only to find that the minimum duration is ten years, and they're currently set to life. Ten years it is then.

A knock at the door interrupts Cain's exploration of the menu, and a severe-looking human woman in a chef's outfit enters with an armful of cloth and a put upon expression.

"I'm told you require eleven female palace uniforms, my Lord? I know it's not my place, but if you could refrain from damaging them when meeting with the servants, it would be appreciated."

"What do you take me for? They are for new arrivals. The King wants them as his maids." Cain states, indignant at the accusation.

Cain sees a small set of ears poke around the bathroom door frame, listening in, and sends the chef to the bathroom. "They'll be all clean now; get them dressed and bring them out."

The scars and brands on the skinny bodies are extra noticeable now that they're clean, and the chef gasps in horror at the sight, which the girls ignore and happily grab the

dark gray uniforms with white aprons. The color combination matches the palace's stone remarkably well, blending them with their natural surroundings.

Cain switches to the appearance portion of the menu, taking mental notes about the appearance of the Customized Royal Crest on the Chef's outfit. Once he's sure he has it down and everyone has assembled in front of him, waiting for his final verdict, he changes the collars to a simple metal band with the Royal Crest front and center.

"Did I get that right? I'm guessing that you're the King's personal cook."

"I am, and yes, that is the correct mark for the King's own Servants. It allows entry into the Royal Quarters and most of the Palace." The chef informs him, still with the same disapproving look.

"You can take them to my quarters and assign them servants' rooms, Margaret. They will be the Royal Quarters' official servants from now on. They are only to leave the quarters on errands with an escort. And along with you, they are the only ones to be sent in to the quarters unless I request another." King James says, striding in and closing the door behind him.

"You don't want to call me Nanny anymore? I'm hurt, Your Majesty." The chef's stern and angry look melts to fondness when the King walks in, and the girls all hit their knees, bowing face down to the floor.

Cain selects [Transfer Ownership] and picks King James, making him their new master.

[Add Final Command. Effective until reversed by new Owner]

Cain decides to use this unexpected option and give James precisely what he needs.

[Command Registered: Absolute Loyalty to King James and his secrets will be enforced.]

"They all have experience, I asked. They're pretty battered now, but they're all mobile, and they'll be completely loyal to you." Cain smiles at King James, who looks startled at the notifications.

"I don't need slaves, Cain. I banned the practice." James insists.

"The collars have a ten-year minimum, Your Highness. Until that time, you could only transfer them or kill them to get rid of this type of enslavement. There are still a few hundred in the kingdom that weren't sold away and are waiting out their timers. The chokers look good, though; I'll give the young Duke that much." Margaret says, and King James takes the time to inspect them.

Usually, palace servants wear a bracelet or necklace with their identification to access magically locked doors. These aren't too out of place, and they have the crest, so they should work now that King James has claimed the items.

"Ten years paid service it is then. Welcome to the Skyview Palace ladies. You have my word you'll be well treated here. "

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 276

While the King was occupied reviewing the successful applications, the Anti-Royal faction was in an uproar. No fewer than eight of their most prominent members were now missing when they should have been in attendance at court putting on a good show. It was no big deal; upper Nobles ditched it all the time, but tomorrow morning their absence would be noted, as every one of the missing Nobles was either a minister, advisor, or deeply politically involved in the Kingdom.

"What was that new Duke's Class again? Flesh Crafter? Isn't that a life skills class? Like a cosmetic surgeon?" One of the Nobles asks his compatriots.

"Yes and No. I have heard it's a successor to the Necromancer class. They make zombie puppets and give undead buffs and their reshaping of faces. His Status said Ancient Flesh Crafter, though, so that it might be a bit special, but most of them end up working as underground surgeons for assassins and debutantes."

"Don't underestimate them; they've still got a full suite of Horrors in stock, and I've heard this one can Summon Dragons as well, but they're very nearly a life skills class."

"Not the sort of class that just makes half a dozen people vanish into thin air in the middle of a dinner banquet." Another one speaks up with a tinge of sadness.

"So it must be one of the other loyalists. But who could it have been? If we can't find them soon, the King might appoint new advisors." The first Anti-Royal noble, an otter type fully furred beastkin, moans, pulling at his hair in frustration.

While they're out in full force looking for their missing allies, Duke Chen has invited Cain and Duke Archibald, as well as their Companions, back for tea. Archibald declined, as his daughter is still missing, and he intends to do something about her blatant disrespect. What she does in private is one thing, but today she acted out in public, and that's not acceptable.

Two more of the Business Nobles join them at Duke Chen's home in the city, a Manor at the edge of town that is only slightly less impressive than the palace itself. Unlike the Long Fang City Manor, Duke Chen tiled his courtyards, and many youths are receiving martial arts training outside as the Nobles walk by.

"My contribution to the city. This might not be the cultivation world I dreamed of being transported to all those years ago, but I've begun my Sect for Monk and other unarmed combat style classes. I've run it for eighty-six years now, seventy-five of them at this location.

I've watched seven Kings rise and fall from these walls, but I have high hopes for this one. He might be squeamish about just about everything, but he's got backbone hidden in there somewhere. I can feel it."

The other two businessmen nod along in agreement, seeing the same potential in King James, and the older of them speaks up. "His escaping act did him a world of good as well. My informant in the Palace said he came back a hundred and Twenty levels higher than he left and ordered a set of books to begin the changeover to the Crusader Class before locking himself in his rooms."

"A Crusader as King. What a sight that will be. One of their class abilities lets them detect lies and betrayal. The moment the Anti Royals find out, they'll be forced to act, or they'll be condemned as traitors. It's going to be an interesting week." The other smiles.

"Perhaps they already know. That could explain why so many fled the Palace during the banquet. If they learned the King would become a Crusader, they might have fled to gather their forces or turned tail and ran to save their hides." Duke Chen suggests. That sounds like a very probable reason to Cain.

"Going into hiding until they can gather enough forces to strike sounds likely to me. I might not know much about politics, but I know about not getting my ass kicked." Cain tells Duke Chen, who chuckles at his joke.

"Since we're here, I have a business proposition for you Duke Chen. Long Fang Valley is quite a fertile region, and the locals grow a variety of medicinal herbs, more than they consume. I have not invested much in retail property, but I'm told that you have a fine collection of Alchemy and magical reagent shops." Cain suggests as the servers bring them tea.

That has Duke Chen's immediate, complete and undivided attention. "You're planning to expand the reagent output of your territory?"

"Yes, and I'm looking for a reliable business partner with connections and the capacity to make good use of it all. What do you say?"

The other two thump the table simultaneously, speaking in unison. "Don't you dare cut us out."

"Duke Cain, you should officially meet my two senior managers. Sir Rapha and Sir Will. Of course, you two will get part of this deal. The same as always, ten percent of the value added by your Alchemists on top of the standard rates." Duke Chen agrees.

"We started our own small guild full of alchemists, and we all work for the Duke. The kickback goes into the Guild Funds, so we can all live better than simply selling our potions wholesale." The Knight known as Rapha informs Cain.

With commerce tightly controlled by the oligarchs, breaking into the retail market is impossible here, so that's a pretty good deal for them.

Back at the palace, King James had finished getting his new servants oriented, while Margaret reorganized the others and informed everyone of the new rules in the King's quarters. No entry to the general staff; the lock spells have been updated to only allow personal Servants through the door. If you have something for the King, give it to the servant on duty at the entrance to his quarters.

They're not happy about it, as it prevents them from snooping and eavesdropping on their bosses, but they've still got hope that whoever he hired can be turned.

Inside the quarters, King James has just finished healing the last of the newly arrived Beastkin, removing their injuries and leaving only the scars that his spells can't remedy.

They're also more than adequately fed and familiar with their routines for tomorrow, thanks to Margaret, his former Nanny, personal cook, and Head of Staff. The woman has far too much responsibility, but with these new trusted servants available, James hopes to let her relax a little in the future.

He's about to call for Gwen, who has been absent all afternoon, when the Kitsune walks out of his bath in a towel, drying her fluffy black ears.

"Did you have fun this afternoon?" James asks, turning her around so he can brush her hair.

"So much fun. Everything you wanted has been taken care of. There won't be any evidence." The Kitsune says happily, mewling in pleasure as the King starts to brush out her tails.

"Such a good girl. You should sleep early, we will have a long day ahead of us again tomorrow, and I'm not sure there will be time for a break." He's done brushing her tails, so Gwen Jumps into his bed, transforming back into her snow-white fox form before landing directly in the center and curling up on his blankets.

The towel falls in a pile on the floor where an amused maid picks it up from and brings it to the hamper. At the same time, the King heads for the dresser where pajamas are laid out for him and another Beastkin helps him change for the evening.

Ready to sleep, he picks up the fluffy Kitsune and moves her to one side of the bed, crawling in himself and opening up the Class Change menu. He's learned every skill he will need and more, so it's time to become a Crusader and see how bad his situation within the Palace truly is.

With any luck, his invitation to all levels of Nobles to have their unwed daughters try for a spot in the harem might have brought a few wavering souls back to him. With a little more luck they'll bring him someone as fluffy and cuddly as this Kitsune, but one who sleeps in humanoid form.

Gwen is utterly unconcerned with the effect she has on the King, happily snuggling against his side as she sleeps, while the other girls sneak peeks at the two while they finish their evening duties. The looks are mostly amusement at the amazingly bold Kitsune, but there's a hint of envy in some of them.

Non humans getting to share the King's bed is unheard of. Perhaps they too could have that honor? They'll ask Gwen when she's awake, surely she's not too protective of her position as bed warmer.

Morning comes early to Duke Chen's Manor, and Cain is out in the courtyard, practicing his sword work while the students train their martial arts. The better he gets at actually using the sword, the more effectively he can use the combat skills he knows. Knowledge and muscle memory are two different things, according to Duke Chen.

Misha and Mythryll have joined the students for morning calisthenics, everyone wanting to be limber and ready for the day, as they've been warned to expect trouble.

Word came in today that none of the missing Nobles returned to their homes yesterday, and no troop movements have been seen. Aprilia, the daughter of Duke Archibald, was found by her husband on the steps of his family home, passed out drunk. At least that's what the rumors that Duke Chen's informants overheard are saying.

Her husband, the Interior Minister, must attend all days that the Royal Court is in session, but it's presumed that she won't be there today. And possibly not at all in the future if the anger on Duke Archibald's face last night is anything to go by.

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 277

Cain and Duke Chen make their way to the Palace again, leaving Chen's Granddaughter at home and bringing two well-trained female fighters from his Sect. The news has been disturbing all morning, scandals, missing Nobles, and hints of the Anti-Royal faction getting ready to make their move.

Add to that the fact that both men know that the King is about to become a Crusader, who can sense deception and betrayal, and the day is looking like it will be very, very violent.

Cain wishes there was time to level up Misha and Mythryll, both are at level 199, so close to using their unique class advancement tokens, but today's events aren't going to wait.

Today they have chosen to travel to the Palace in Duke Chen's carriage, an elegant and enclosed wooden vehicle drawn by a pair of jet black horses that match both the carriage and Duke Chen's preferred outfits. The Duke's emblem on the side lets everyone around them know who it belongs to, and that alone helps clear the street much better than traveling on foot in a fancy outfit would, making for a smooth trip free from interruptions.

As they approach the palace grounds, showing to fall into line with the other noble carriages, they find Duke Archibald walking dejectedly along the road, staring at the cobblestones.

"Driver, we will get out here and walk with Archibald," Chen announces, and everyone piles out, the two Dukes from the carriage moving to either side of the depressed noble.

"I take it you've heard?" Archibald asks when he notices them flanking him.

"About Aprilia showing up home drunk in the late hours? Don't worry, that too will blow over. The Nobles understand how she is." Duke Chen says softly.

Archibald shakes his head and whispers back. "I guess we did keep the lid on it then. Aprilia had a breakdown; she came home covered in blood, raving about a nightmare world full of vampires and demons inside the Palace.

The strangest part is she insists she was mind-controlled to take a group of Nobles to a back room for some fun before it happened, but since when did she need to be mind controlled for that? The whole thing is insane, and nobody can find any of the Nobles she claims to have gone off with."

“So if word gets out, she will be suspected of their murder unless they are found. Do you think she was controlled? There are several Nobles with the ability to do it, though none within the loyalists could give her such a vivid fake memory.” Duke Chen adds, seeing a world of potential troubles ahead for both his unlikely friend and the wayward daughter.

“We can help spread the word that she was drugged at the party and got lost in the palace, then showed up drunk at home early morning. It’s easy to believe, it accounts for why she won’t be in public for a while and will help dismiss any strange things she might say in front of unwanted listeners.” Cain suggests.

Duke Chen strokes his long beard in contemplation, “But who would take the fall? She’s been with so many noblemen that someone will get curious and protective of their favorite toy. No offense Archibald.”

“I will take the blame, of course. Just a little prank from the new guy that she annoyed. We’re all Dukes, and I have less of a reputation to uphold; accusations of drugging a socialite and letting her run wild at a party won’t hurt me too badly.” Cain shrugs.

“We could insinuate he might be covering for his wife as well. Both were highly visible together all night long, so they’ll be immune to accusations of any further involvement after the fact.” One of the female fighters Duke Chen brought suggested.

“Not bad. Everyone knows their part now. We need to find out what happened to the Anti-Royal faction leaders. If they’re gone, we need to work on replacing them. If they’re in hiding, we need to find them before they act.” Duke Archibald whispers again since other Nobles are getting closer as they approach the palace grounds.

They don’t even make the gates before the first questions about Aprilia begin, posed by a seemingly well-meaning Count with a besotted look on his face when he notices all the ladies behind the trio of Dukes.

“Duke Cain, it’s good to see you making such a wide variety of friends. We didn’t get a chance to meet yesterday; I am Count Dufas, owner of one of the city’s finest produce markets.” Cain shakes the man’s hand in a friendly greeting.

“A pleasure to meet you as well. If I get some time in the next few weeks, I will seek you out, the Long Fang Valley generates a good variety of produce, and I lack the former owner’s business connections.”

“Stupendous. I shall await your call. Duke Archibald, I do hope your dear daughter is alright? I heard she had a rough evening.”

The time has come to begin their deception and Cain catches the Count’s attention again. “It seems that was my fault as well. I obtained a lovely product from Tortuga that creates the most vivid dreams, but it seems young Aprilia had a harsh reaction. I’ve sent

my apologies to her husband as well as a good team of doctors to assist her this morning.”

The Count smirks, assuming Cain drugged the woman so she would make a spectacle of herself in public, then looks to Misha, who is looking away, and the other ladies doing their very best to hide their laughter at Cain’s noblemen impersonation.

He might be one, but the intonation is all wrong for Skyview. The accent Cain got from the system on his arrival sounds incredibly out of place here.

The ladies behind Count Dufas notice the laughter as well. Various rumors about the situation begin, from Duke Cain punishing Aprilia with a nonlethal poison to an aphrodisiac-related incident involving unnamed Nobles leaving her unable to walk, forcing the new Duke to cover for her wantonness to save her father’s reputation.

Gossip and rumors spread faster than anything among the nobility, and soon so many stories were floating around that even the truth would never be truly believed.

The morning assembly of the upper nobility is notably missing many advisors, ministers, and influential figures from the Anti-Royal faction. The last the Dukes had heard, the total was eight people missing, but many more than that are not at court today.

“They better show up. The King will be livid if none of his advisors are present. My lands can’t afford any more hostilities.” One of the Earls is whispering to a hippo-headed man Cain is sure he met yesterday.

“One is still here. Two if you Count the Interior Minister.” Cain whispers to the pair, indicating the spot where Duke Archibald talks to his son-in-law. The man looks somehow less haggard and run down today as if something changed to help his confidence. Though some of that is just the fact that his wife isn’t here to embarrass him.

“Two of twenty. That’s not exactly a great turnout.” The human Earl says quietly, shaking his head.

“Do you think they could have been hiding debts from the Succession Struggles and fled the country? Is it been about three months since things were settled, right? That’s about when debt collectors would start to come calling.” Cain suggests, and the two look panicked. So, it is a possibility that the Nobles might owe huge sums to lenders who financed their failed attempts at the throne.

That would explain the ongoing hostility, as well as why the less political business people have become so influential, even making up the entire group deciding this month’s promotions.

The entire hour before the hearings start is tense with rumors, and the consensus is that the Court Nobles will petition for an inquiry into the missing Nobles. At the same time, the Business Nobles will seek to have those among them who are Ministers and Advisors, positions who are required to attend every day that the King hears petitions, penalized for dereliction of duty.

Multiple horns sound, indicating that it is time to enter the throne room, and they all file out, eager to get things started. But when they arrive, things are not as expected. Every noble who attended today is being brought in at the same time instead of by rank. All three main doors to the room are open, and the nobility works their way in as quickly as possible. It might be unorthodox, but those were the Palace Guards' directions.

Cain gestures for Duke Chen and Duke Archibald to join him close to the throne, choosing the furthest forward positions that the nobility is allowed to stand in. This places them both in a position to defend the King and in a position to move the spellcasters with them behind the throne to a safer and more defensible position.

At first Cain thinks he might just be feeling paranoid, but the others seem to sense that there is something wrong today as well, and they're definitely on edge.

Once the nobility is all in the throne room, the guards step back outside, closing and barring the doors behind them. That has everyone in the room nervously checking for traps and ambushes, and Cain sends a party message for Misha and Mythryll to do their best to avoid being stabbed in the back.

Cain notices King James is already present, hidden in the shadows of a pillar by a Felian Assassin. By his count, the whole two dozen that Gwen can Summon are scattered around the room, invisible to most. They might be guarding the King, but they're still Cain's summons and therefore visible to him.

King James takes his throne before many have realized he is present, relaxing with his leg over the arm and Gwen in his lap, in Kitsune Form. He's not dressed in his formal robes. Instead, today he has chosen the Royal Family's signature enchanted plate armor.

Anticipating trouble, Cain calls his Primal Echoes into the very back corners of the room, behind a curtain that hides the King's entrance. He might be in trouble for that later, but he suspects King James will be understanding.

As the commotion starts to rise, both about being locked in and from those who have realized the King is now a Crusader, an aura settles over the room, everywhere except for an area around the throne.

"It prevents skills and spells from being activated. Only abilities that were already in use will work for those who are away from the throne. One of the many defensive measures put in place to guard the Royal Family." Duke Chen whispers.

“Greetings, Nobles of Skyview. Fear Not, we shall get to your petitions today. But first, we require one simple task of you all. A statement of Loyalty needs to be given to the Crusader King of Skyview. A simple affirmation of your loyalty is all it will take and we can get on with our business.”

That was Anti-Royal’s worst fear come to life. The King will ask them to state their loyalty, and he will be able to tell if they’re lying. The question everyone else has on their mind is if they’ll attack, or if they’ll try to bluff their way through, now that so many of their senior members are missing.

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 278

The tension in the throne room is palpable. Giving the luxuriously decorated throne room, with its polished marble floors and rows of elaborately decorated pillars an atmosphere more suitable to a back alley before a gang fight than a Royal audience.

Cain quickly searches through the Guild Bank, finding the item that the Guild made for King James. It’s a simple-looking pair of black iron gauntlets. Legendary Quality of course, and they give a bonus to all healing done and received. But more importantly, they’ve got a Crusader Exclusive ability on them.

[Forced Confession] increases the chance those under the effect of the Crusader’s truth detection ability will give more complete and truthful answers.

Dimnys understood the assignment when she made these, they are exactly what King James is going to need today.

Being the closest to the King, Cain steps forward and drops to one knee, holding out the gift. “I, Duke Cain of Long Fang Valley, swear that I remain loyal to King James. Your Majesty, Please accept this gift as a sign of my dedication.”

Gwen makes a noise that Cain takes as laughter before running to him in her fluffy white fox form and gathering the Gauntlets. King James looks down at them, noticing the ability imbued on them, and quickly equips them, replacing the golden gauntlets of the official Royal armor.

“The Crown thanks you for your thoughtful gift, Duke Cain. Rise, and make way for the rest of our loyal subjects.”

Cain steps back beside Archibald and Chen, who both give him a strange look, wondering what he's playing at. Traditionally the advisors would go first, and Archibald is the only one present, then the few ministers here today, before Dukes like Cain would pledge.

"They have an effect that helps force people to speak the whole truth," Cain whispers, and the two men hold in their laughter while Archibald steps forward to make his uniquely pompous declaration of loyalty.

"I, Duke Archibald, Administrator of the Capital Region, Lord of the North Valley and Royal Advisor, do at this moment swear that I am a loyal retainer of King James."

After Archibald, things start going smoothly, with the majority of the room stepping forward to give honest pledges of loyalty. They're two dozen noble pledges in to the process when the bravest of the Upper Nobles in the Anti-Royal faction attempts to skirt the issue.

"Earl Mooney remains loyal to my nation of Skyview." The man pledges, and King James lifts a hand to stop him from retreating away from the aisle.

"To the nation, but not to the King? We require an answer, Earl Mooney." King James insists.

Those with keen eyes can see him trying to formulate a half-truth before his mouth seems to move involuntarily. "I shall never be loyal to a crown that doesn't sit upon my own head."

He looks just as horrified as those around him by his outburst. Before he has a chance to speak again, a Shadow detaches itself from the roof and drops down, injecting the Earl with something that knocks him out before the Felian Assassin binds his hands and moves him to the middle of the aisle.

That's the last straw for the Anti-Royal faction, and they all draw weapons, nearly a fifth of the assembled Nobles charging towards the throne. Cain steps forward into their line of attack, his Scimitar and spear in hand, confident that since everyone is without their combat skills, and because he has almost all of his Companions merged with him, that he will be able to hold this position.

Then the Aura of the two hidden Primal Echoes flares to full power. The sense of Existential Dread stops many in their tracks, where they're grabbed and either restrained or executed by the loyal Nobles. Those that keep advancing meet a wall of raised blades before the assassins begin to come out from hiding, picking off one after another until the red carpet down the aisle in the middle of the room is littered with bodies and drenched with fresh blood.

Though the area is quickly subdued, that's not enough to end the threat, as several Upper Nobles did not attend Court today. Their intentions in being absent today have already become clear, though. Even as the traitors inside attacked, a force assembled of the Rebel Nobles' armies has begun its advance on the palace.

Shops lock their doors, residents run inside to hide, and over the course of the next few minutes, the city changes from bustling activity to nearly abandoned except for the thousands of transfers advancing on the Royal Compound.

Reports from the Palace Guards and informants in the city begin to filter into the throne room. The numbers of transfers aren't as bad as many had feared. Roughly fifteen thousand first and second advancement fighters and two thousand summons, mostly Elementals.

There are no signs of undead, but the Noble Registry says there should be at least two Necromancers among their numbers. Of the loyalist Nobles here in the palace, only Archibald has a significant force already in the city. Duke Chen has nearly two hundred, but many of the others that live in the Capital only count a dozen capable transfers among their guards.

When word of an attack came, the palace guard locked down the public transport circle, but many still have them at their homes, as Cain does. Allies for both sides are rushing to their Lord's aid already, giving the King only a minute or so to make his decision and battle plans.

"Guards, imprison these traitors; we will hold a trial for them later. All loyal Nobles to the Palace walls and call your armies for the defense of the crown." James declares.

With so many transfers, this fight could be gruesome, so Cain decides it would be best to try out that [Modify] skill properly.

The most vulnerable among them is definitely Mythryll, who cannot Merge with a Summon for safety. If he could give her a good defensive skill, it would put his mind at ease.

Laura is an Ancient Dragon with an impressively effective Ancient quality version of [Draconian Resilience] which reduces all damage done to her and caps the damage she takes per hit. No Ancient Quality Summon is easy to kill, but Laura is extra durable even without armor, just what he's looking for.

"Mythryll, do you mind if I use my new skill on you to grant you a defensive ability? It will probably change your appearance a little, though." Cain asks the elegantly dressed Elf.

"I don't see why not; I'll just revert when it wears off, right?"

“Maybe? It doesn’t state a duration. But when I used it on a second Puppet, the first one had to choose to keep it or not.” Cain shrugs, still unsure how exactly it works.

It takes Mythryll a few seconds to decide, but she eventually nods her agreement. “Let’s try it then and decide if I’ll keep it or not based on what happens.”

Cain activates [Modify] with Mythryll as the target and grants her the [Draconian Resilience] ability. At first, nothing seems to have changed, so both Cain and Misha look her over carefully, finding no visible changes. She’s still the same short, blonde Elf.

Even when Misha finds her hands over Mythryll, checking if she’s gained scales or a hidden tail or something, there is nothing to find.

Cain sees an option to revert the modification when he scans Mythryll with his interface, checking for more significant changes. But more notably, he also notices she is no longer an Elf but a High Elf.

[I have the option to revert the changes, but I noticed that it also changed your species to High Elf. Maybe you should step into a private room and check more closely before you decide?] Cain sends a party message, not wanting that particular aspect of his ability to become public knowledge at this moment.

Granting buffs and temporary skills isn’t unheard of and will help his reputation, but changing someone’s species entirely is incredibly useful for infiltration, among many other things. Especially since, as he suspects from the skill description, those changes can be permanent.

Misha drags Mythryll back into a meeting room like the one where Cain interviewed the Beastkin yesterday, locking the door before ordering the Elf to strip. What she finds is all Elf, though—no signs of scales, leathery skin, discoloration, or anything out of the ordinary until Mythryll smiles at the news and Misha notices she’s got fangs. Six in total, two long and two short ones up top, and two short ones on the bottom jaw.

The round and pointy shape looks more akin to a Dragon’s teeth than the narrower fangs of a vampire, which gives Misha an idea.

“Can I check your blood?” She asks Mythryll, seemingly out of the blue. There is no reason to refuse, though, so the Elf holds her arm out, and Misha nicks it with a dagger.

A thin line of deep blue blood, nearly black and the same shade as Laura’s, appears on her arm before the wound closes underneath. That answers the pertinent questions. High Elves have more carnivorous teeth than Forest Elves as well as Dragon blood. But other than that, the changes seem minimal and unobtrusive.

“It’s Laura’s blood; I’m not going to get a horrendous sweet tooth, am I?” Mythryll jokes as they leave the room to rejoin Cain and catch up to the other Nobles.

They follow Dukes Chen and Archibald across the courtyard as they waited with the King and were among the last to leave. The three Nobles plus their four Companions surround King James, who begins sending out raid party invites to all of the senior Nobles.

Most of the people they brought with them were arm candy, not combatants, so the majority of the Dukes and Earls all get into one Raid group, with a few left broken off to lead their own.

Archibald was one such case, but Duke Chen has his Assistants lead the two raid groups from his Sect, who have assembled just outside the walls. Archibald is still standing beside the King on the walls, while his forces have joined with Duke Chen’s, forming the central bulwark of the troops, while all other reinforcements have fallen to their flanks in the open gardens that surround the palace compound.

Misha moves behind the King, causing James to turn and see what she’s doing, rightly concerned about betrayal.

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll watch your back because I’m immune to all forms of mind control abilities and spells. That way you don’t need to worry about your enemies turning your defenders and getting you stabbed in the back.”

King James looks highly relieved at that news and focuses on the reports coming in from the city about the approaching forces. There are still a few minutes before the two forces engage, and the final pre-battle orders are going out, shuffling units around to better balance classes in every area.

Thousands of loyalists have already arrived to aid in the defense, but the Rebel forces still outnumber them three to one. More forces for both sides will be arriving in the city at the battle goes on, changing the balance, but currently the defenders are outnumbered three to one.

They have kept most of the spell casters and archers on the walls for line of sight and extra range, but the melee classes are outside. At this level, no siege weapons are needed to breach a castle, only a number of transfers with an appropriate skill. Because of that, it’s unwise to let an attacker actually reach the walls.

“You three, stay here by me. Duke Cain, hold off on your summons until I give the order; I want them fully engaged when your summons appear.” That’s the last direction the King gets time for before the first sounds of battle start.

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 279

The armies of the Anti-Royal faction have now moved into sight, and Cain recognizes a familiar flag at the back. It matches the crest Earl Millsap was wearing on his chest when they met yesterday. It's a bit of a shame they're on opposite sides today, as he genuinely seemed like a good person. Cain even added him to his friend's list to talk business later. Catching sight of each other through the crowd, the two lock eyes and Cain gives Millsap a disappointed frown.

[Duke Cain. Please understand that things aren't always what they seem. When the attack starts, watch for the flags to switch.] Millsap does an excellent job of sending cryptic messages, but Cain can follow this one well enough. The hippo species Beastkin is going to turn on the Anti Royals.

Quite a few Beastkin that were expected to desert in favor of toppling the Monarchy honestly swore loyalty to the King today, thanks to his declaration that he would bring Beastkin into the Royal Harem and give them an equal chance at birthing the next Monarch.

"King James, I have a word of a loyalist among the Rebels; they say they will act when the time is right. With permission, I'll send some forces to assist them when and if they do."

James nods in agreement, but Duke Archibald snorts in derision. "Cold feet is nothing new for those glorified peasants and nouveau riche. Make sure they've made up their mind before you lose good men helping cowards."

The Duke then turns to King James. "I have five thousand men from the outer territories coming to my Manor in the next ten minutes. Fear Not my King; the Capital shall not fall while it's under my watch."

[Such a noble sentiment. If only he cared about the entire country as he does in his hometown. He might be a decent Defense Minister then.] Evangeline replies in Cain's mind with a heavy dose of sarcasm.

[Does anyone else thinks he's only Loyal because the Royal Palace getting destroyed and the Monarchy falling would decrease his property values?] Nila jokes. Well, maybe it's a joke. It seems pretty accurate for the pompous Duke.

While they traded barbed comments, Duke Chen noticed something odd among the defense force. "My liege, shouldn't we order the Nobles with Tank role capable classes forward? Most are hiding behind the lines."

Specifically, it is the Court Nobles that are hiding. They almost all picked warrior classes so they could participate in exhibition matches, but at heart, they're far from being warriors. True to form, they're hiding in the back, while the lower Nobles and war-minded local businessmen are upfront.

"Excellent point. Order all geared warriors to the front to take the impact. Spearman behind them. It's no time to be afraid to rub shoulders with the common soldiers."

The palace staff will gladly pass on that order, long since having gotten sick of the way the Court Nobles treat them. The actual fighters in the defense forces are simply happy to see more shields up front to take the charge before the spears drive it back.

Of course, for a battle like this, the first wave of attackers won't be transfers but summons and spells. The casters at the palace will defend against magical attacks and place what barriers they can against arrows, the tanks just need to keep the first rank from opening a gap for the attackers to exploit.

As they had feared, just as the Rebels get in charge range, a horde of undead nearly a thousand strong appear along with six Legendary Bone Dragons. At that exact moment, a cluster of banners in the back of the army drop, and the National Flag is raised. That must be Millsap, but he hasn't drawn the support he had hoped.

Only about three hundred troops went with him, and they're immediately set upon by those around them, who seem to have been aware of their intentions.

"Duke Cain, we need to deal with those Dragons," James commands, gritting his teeth as the two armies come together in a roar of clashing weapons, mixed with screams of bloodlust and agony.

They need numbers, so Cain shifts to the silver skinned Ancient Seraphim Form that Evangeline mocked as looking like an old man and Summons twelve Ancient Quality Seraphim to the air above them.

"Rescue the loyalists in the back and form a semi-circle on the right and rear flanks," Cain calls, and they race away.

Duke Chen and some of the surrounding Nobles look confused until the sky fills with Seraphim Summoned by the Ancient ones, and Divine Host humans start charging from every side street and alley. Each Ancient Seraphim can Summon an entire dungeon full of them, and in seconds the defenders are no longer outnumbered.

Cain takes to the air, coordinating his summons and ensuring they leave the enemy a way out. A trapped enemy can't break, only fight to the death, so leaving one side open will minimize casualties among the commoners.

Fighting against transfers is a whole different experience than monsters, and within a few seconds, they've discovered that the hovering form of Cain is the real threat.

"Dragons, kill the Flesh Crafter." He hears one of the Necromancers shout, sending not only all six Legendary Bone Dragons, but a wave of spells and arrows his way.

Cain fills the air with Ice Fog Breath courtesy of his Merger with Laura, weighing down and slowing the arrows and letting him dodge the flying spells without the casters being able to easily adjust their aim. The Bone Dragons prove undeterred, simply taking the damage and surrounding Cain.

The Dragon below him snaps at his feet, and Cain uses the mighty wings of his Seraphim Form to spin on the spot, driving his spear into the Dragon's snout. With Might of Many stacked up to a level Cain isn't sure he's ever seen before; the spear shatters the Dragon's Skull, sending bones collapsing to the ground.

The rest attack in a well-trained pattern, one after another, forcing him to dodge constantly and preventing Cain from launching an attack. He can see that two of his Seraphim are already down, and more are injured, so the enemy understands the target priorities and are doing a decent job of taking out the biggest threats.

As Cain moves to his left and under the belly of a bone dragon to dodge an attack from above, two opportunities present themselves at once. The first one is a solid strike upwards, battering another Bone Dragon.

The second is a glimpse of the Necromancers physical location. They're standing together in a circle of undead, creating themselves a safe spot near the middle of the battle. Cain calls for Wrath Bringers to appear in their midst and then summons a dozen copies of Kone close to himself.

That was a bit too long of a distraction, and Cain feels agony shoot up his leg as a Dragon claw rakes down it, pulling his attention back to the imminent threat, narrowly avoiding jaws intent on biting him in half.

The clones of Su that come with the clones of Kone twist to fly underneath the falling Spirit Folk Girls, letting them mount and calling for their Drakes, while Kone follows Cain's mental directions and calls the Snapping Turtles into the Enemy Army.

Facing Ancient Seraphim didn't break their will, and the Rebels are gleefully attacking the Dragons as well as all the other summons that have been sent from the loyalist forces. However, the Legendary Beastkin are visibly affecting morale. Many traitors joined this attack because they felt that their kin were treated as second-class Nobles, and a battle against the Legendary Beastkin was not what they expected to find here.

Still, with the higher level Transfers, even those walking tanks are slowly falling to the mass of attacks they're facing. The situation is frustrating Cain, who hasn't faced a

stalemate or truly drawn out battle in a long time, but today, all he can do is avoid being eaten. It's hard even to get a chance to call a fresh batch of Seraphim to keep up their numbers.

On the bright side, he's got the attention of the enemy's most dangerous forces on him instead of on the King.

The attackers have begun to cluster in the large park outside the west palace walls, moving closer to stay within the range of their healers and auras. The Guards around the Necromancers have finally taken care of the Wrath Bringers, letting them recover mana and call the undead to encircle their army as a shield, closing with the forces of the Seraphim.

Speaking of mana, even with his Mana Flood Totem up, Cain is starting to run low. That accursed spell to Summon Legendary base Quality beings is charging him per Seraphim and it is not cheap. Without anything in Merger, he might only be able to call them one at a time.

We would spare a breath to insult the system's sense of humor, but the defeated Bone Dragons are back, and he's back to an avoidance only fighting style while trying to turn a parry into a strike or two.

The situation on the battlefield can change in the blink of an eye though, and today it does, as half the Bone Dragons suddenly disappear.

Duke Chen has left the wall and made his way through the fray to kill one of the Necromancers. He's currently hard-pressed to stay alive in the middle of an enemy army, and both of the students who followed him in appear to be dead already, so Cain calls the next Seraphim plus the Wrath Bringers to the Duke's location, flatlining his own mana, but giving Chen an army to work with in the center of the enemy force.

A flash of holy light strikes their location, forcing the other Necromancer back as the Ancient Seraphim Appears, killing much of the undead guard force and resurrecting the two fallen students of Duke Chen.

The loss of half their Summoned undead barrier has been a massive blow to the rebel army, and the weakest willed begin to flee, surging out of the open gap deliberately left by the Seraphim armies.

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 280

Despite the turn in the tides, most of the Rebels still hold firm, doing their best to eliminate the Loyalist leaders.

Cain can hear the calls of an attack on the King's position, but even with only the three Bone Dragons left, he's in no state to assist, so it will have to be left up to the others.

On the ground, Misha and Mythryll are hard-pressed. Misha has her companion Demon out, as well as Lamia Scourge Casters and Shamans as her Summons from being Cain's Lieutenant. She might not have wanted the title, but it's become essential to their survival today. Both ladies have called on Record Keepers, the giant feathery demons with immense magical knowledge, as their Guild Skill summons.

The King wasn't too shocked at the news that the big Summon was a Guild Skill, having already seen how overpowered Cain is, but Duke Archibald gave them a look that said an endless stream of marriage Alliance requests were in their future. Epic summons are too good of a bonus for the greedy Dukes to pass up. They'll have to warn the other Guild Members later.

The Record Keepers have put up a magical barrier around their group, keeping them relatively safe from spells and projectiles, but a large group that arrived late managed to sneak around the primary battle and up the palace walls to come close to the King.

Being Merged with her bodyguard and Sorcerer category summons has given Misha a much larger mana pool, but the rear lines are still very short on healers. The majority moved forward to save as many Nobles as possible in the primary battle, leaving just her and two others from the Palace Staff here next to the King and his top Commanders.

The force attacking them is heavy on warlocks, who used a Demonic gate to get themselves on the walls close to the King once they heard the basic layout of the battle. Since neither of the ladies had called any summons yet, the attackers were taken off Guard by the Lamia and suffered multiple casualties at the start before they could get organized. Still, after that, they began to overwhelm the defenders.

Misha doesn't get all of Cain's buffs to the summons, so even ranked up by her Skill, they're not as overpowered as his are, and the snake girls with their light armor are repeatedly massacred.

She's used to healing, not calling and coordinating summons, so Misha hasn't discovered the issue with her deployment yet; the issue being that with the caster-type Record Keepers, and no Kone Clones for Snapping Turtles, they're short on tanks.

The Lamia have a mobility advantage, though, and when they can get past the front lines of warriors, they do an incredible amount of damage to the warlocks and healers. So far, not enough to kill many, but the healer's mana is dropping steadily.

All of the Kone clones and their Dragons have been trying to target healers or the Necromancers. It's been working reasonably well, and they've managed to mangle a number of them, learning from the fights against Gnolls that bodies need to be intact for resurrection.

Up above, Cain had found himself in hand-to-hand combat with a winged Beastkin Paladin, who flew up to challenge him when the Necromancer stopped Summoning Bone Dragons and started to focus on saving himself from the Wrath of Duke Chen and his monks.

A thrust of his spear is turned aside by the Paladins shield. Then, the counter thrust is knocked aside by Cain's Scimitar while he throws a kick towards his opponent's face. In mid-air, it's awkward but unexpected, and the Paladin Turtles behind his shield to save his beak while Cain goes on the offensive.

A flurry of jabs fails to make it past his opponent's defenses, and the skilled fighter recognizes [Shield Breaker] in time to dodge and save his equipment. Though physically outmatched, the Paladin has fought against poor odds all his life, unlike Cain, who has had an easy ride with the overwhelming might of his summons.

His reverie about the unbalanced nature of the Summoning classes in group combat is interrupted by an agile flip of the green-winged avian, trying to get behind him to attack. The Paladin is treating him like a Raid boss and not a Transfer, doing his best to avoid being hit, having seen that a solid blow from Cain's spear can one-shot many fighters.

Cain parries the flurry of blows, circling high to get the Paladin back in front of him in this three-dimensional dance. He very nearly loses his Scimitar to a masterfully executed disarming technique. Still, He manages to catch it again as it falls, putting a bit of distance between himself and the Paladin as they both regroup.

The Paladin goes for a shield slam, but in the air, it's much easier to dodge, with Cain twisting under his feet and aiming an attack up at him that forces Paladin away again. That gives Cain a precious second to call back the copies of Kone that have fallen, with instructions to send two of their wings to reinforce Misha's position.

The Snapping Turtles that they call into the fray almost instantly change the balance of the fight near the King, panicking his enemies and putting them into a full retreat, running from the battlefield while they still have their lives.

Their retreat signals a turning point in the battle. The Necromancer uses some emergency token to escape the battlefield, leaving the Rebels with very few Summoned defenders to take the brunt of the damage and they start blowing a repeating pattern on

their horns that Cain assumes mean an order to surrender, which is followed by the sound of weapons being dropped ringing through the city center.

"I surrender." The avian Paladin says sadly, wisely placing his weapons and armor in inventory instead of risking dropping a sword on someone's head.

"I accept your surrender. Tell me, are you a noble or an enlisted soldier?" Cain asks, curious who he was facing. Though seriously outmatched in stats despite his slight level advantage, this Paladin was an outstanding opponent. The fact he is still a Paladin at level 230 and not a second advancement class suggests to Cain that he's enlisted and lacks access to the skills to obtain the type of Class he would like.

"I'm a Captain of the border guard working for Baron Cohen. Far from wealthy enough to even be a knight." The man laughs, his wing feathers ruffling with the changed motion as he hovers.

"Then what possessed you to come here, risking your life to continue the Succession wars? I've only recently arrived in the country, and I can't seem to grasp the finer points."

The Paladin shrugs, then shake his head as if the answer is impossible to explain adequately. "Everyone can be noble with enough wealth. The lower nobility doesn't mean much more than property owners here in Skyview. But the Advisors have shuffled everything around since the King fell.

At first, they ran things unattended because the Crown Prince died with him. They put all the Beastkin armies on the front lines, then removed the Eastern and Northern border guards to let the Gnolls rampage through our lands. Your territory is three-quarters of the way across the country from the border, and you still get attacks, don't you?"

At Cain's affirmative nod, he continues. "It's far worse near the borders, and nobody has done anything to stop it. The few Nobles we still have after all the fighting told us that our territories are deliberately being left leaderless until the locals are dead so that humans can move in.

It whipped the commoners into a frenzy and convinced them to join the fight. Instead, what we found here was just another political play for power. But we were already moving, and it was too late. All we could do was hope to win and put a Beastkin on the throne."

Cain considers what he's heard for a moment before summarizing it for the King, sending it in Raid Group chat for all to see and learn the tactics used to bring the army here. He claimed to have gotten it from mental interrogation, saving a bit of face for the Paladin and possibly his life should his traitor friends find out he was the source of information.

“I’ll assume they didn’t tell you the latest proclamation then. Any daughter of a noble that doesn’t have a betrothed or a husband is now eligible to be considered for the Royal Harem. There is a good chance that Beastkin Royals will walk the palace of Skyview within the next few years.”

The Paladin smiles at the good news, though it has nothing to do with him directly. “Do you think things will change? Or will we be going home to a future of the same thing we’ve been facing for the last year?”

“It’s changing. Only two advisors remained loyal, Archibald and Chen. I am not sure who the King will pick to replace the others, but he’s already begun to become aware of the problems they’d been causing around the country. I will personally ask him to move forces to secure overrun areas around the border, but at the moment, I’m not even sure anyone alive knows what needs to go where.”

Cain looks over the battleground, where hostilities have mostly ceased. Nobody is stopping the healers from resurrecting as many as possible, and the Seraphim are doing the same for the loyalist side, bringing those who can be saved back to life. It’s been far too long, and the wounds are too severe to save many of the fallen, but they all do what they can to minimize needless loss of life.

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.