

Beast Master 1241

Chapter 1241: Secret Is Out

Karl sensed magic from the yard as Cara used [Disintegrate] to remove all signs of dirt and icing from the playground, which gave him just enough time to react as the badger strolled back in with the wild haired girl on his back.

Flying made the little girl's hair turn into a tangled mass of wavy curls, but neither of the two little troublemakers seemed to care.

Cara let the little one down, then transformed into the same teen girl form she had chosen for the wedding, and grabbed Deve's wife by the hand.

"We've worked up an appetite, and I smell fresh tomatoes in the fridge." She insisted.

"What does that have to do with me?" Deve's wife laughed.

"Neither of us knows how to cook." Cara replied with a shrug.

The house's cook burst into laughter that brought curious onlookers from multiple doors.

"You two, come with me, and you can help with dinner."

Cara high-fived the toddler, and then pointed at Karl. "Teach Deve's cook the new skill, would you? I want Lotus' pasta, but it needs the skill."

"Seriously?" Karl asked.

Cara shrugged. "Lotus is busy."

The Alliance members stared at her. Was that really all it took to convince Karl that someone should be given a rare trade skill?

And if it was, how did they ensure that they were on the list the next time that the badger wanted something done?

Then, Cara's complaints morphed into a slow smile, and she placed one hand on the leg of the chef.

The Royal-ranked warrior found herself shoved forward by a disturbingly strong little arm, and nearly landed on top of Karl.

Dana intercepted the unfortunate woman and placed her back on her feet.

"So, that is what Cara is like when she's hangry and humanoid. She really is the demanding one, isn't she?" She joked.

Karl shrugged. "Cara has a strange relationship with time. You never know what she will view as urgent."

[Their house is about to get visitors, and she needs the skill to impress them tomorrow.] Cara added mentally, so only Karl and Dana would hear her.

Karl relented and patted the chef on the head as he activated [Follow Me, Little One]

{Champion Karl offers knowledge} Skill [Mythic Cooking] will be transferred to Sara the Second Last.

That was different. Normally, it placed the descriptor first. This was more like a title, and the chef looked vaguely insulted when she saw it.

It was a lifelong sore point. She was never the smart one, or the fast learner, or the athletic one, or the popular one. But she was never quite dead last. She worked hard to ensure that she was never the last one.

The System didn't need to rub it in.

At least now, she could claim to be first in the Guild for something. She wasn't even the kitchen manager, just the one that Cara had grabbed because she was doing prep work in the kitchen when the badger entered.

But that bit of luck had made her the first one in this Guild to get the Mythic Cooking skill.

Cara smiled. "Perfect, thank you. Now, Sara Chef, come with me. There is pasta to make."

They were about to continue the meeting when a runner from the compound's entrance burst in, breathing heavily.

"Sirs! Nobody is answering their Guild Messages, and we've got visitors at the door, demanding to speak with the Alliance Leaders!" He shouted over the noise in the front room.

"Who did someone piss off now? They'd better be important." Hugo muttered.

Then Cara shouted from the kitchen. "They're early! Karl, go bring them in, would you?"

Deve glared toward the kitchen, then turned to Karl. "If the badger is causing external trouble, I'm going to strangle her."

Cara made an insulted rumble. "Hey, I didn't do this. Well, not directly. Besides, they're not here to cause trouble."

Karl sighed, and walked to the door with Hugo and Raj at his shoulders.

Hugo looked back. "Deve, Dana, please remain here and explain everything to the rest of the Myths before we come back with the guests. I don't want anyone out of the loop if it's about today's events.

I strongly suspect that it is. Someone likely had a spy or a monitoring spell near the dungeon entrance and heard your conversation with the guards."

That was a distinct possibility. That, or the guards had continued to gossip after they left, and hadn't bothered to think that everyone passing nearby would be able to hear them, or that the moment someone mentioned Immortal Rank gear drops, it would cause them to immediately alert their Guilds.

Karl and the Guild Masters walked to the entrance of the compound, and found that they didn't just have one or two guests.

There was an entire Raid team worth of Mythic adventurers waiting at the entrance for them to arrive. Almost all of them were warriors, but Karl saw a few mages.

So, they were likely their respective Guild Masters.

He could see all that detail if he wanted to examine them individually, but it was easier just to look at the colour of their names using the System Interface, and make assumptions.

Fortunately, Hugo and Raj knew many of them.

"Guild Masters, what brings you by today? Did we forget about a holiday on the calendar?" Raj asked casually.

"We heard the most curious thing today, and it appears that your Alliance has been withholding many good things from the rest of us. Like, for example, the fact that you have managed to improve the loot in not only an Overlord Ranked Dungeon, but now a Mythic Ranked one.

That is the sort of thing that really should be explained to others.

We're all friends here, aren't we? Why not share a few of the secrets to success? It's not like your Guild will lose out, now that you've got a Mythic Ranked armourer and weapons maker in the Alliance." The leader of the guests, a Dragonkin Warrior named Paul, insisted.

He was the leader of the Crimson Tide Guild, which Karl was sure that he had seen somewhere before. But also a blue dragonkin, if you went by the scales visible on his neck.

It was understandable that he was absolutely livid about being kept in the dark when there was new knowledge involved.

Even if there wasn't a way to use it to make his Guild wealthy.

Chapter 1242: Visiting Myths

Raj gave Paul his best fake smile and patted himself on the chest. "I pride myself on my honesty and trustworthiness. We simply haven't finished our experiments yet, so we didn't share the news.

Can't risk messing up the control group for our experiments, after all."

None of the other Guild Masters were happy about being called the 'control group' for this particular experiment. They all had members who needed gear, and Raj was saying that they were being deliberately left to figure it out on their own, as part of an experiment to see if anyone else would manage the same feat.

"Why don't we step inside and discuss it out of the sun?" Paul suggested.

Many Alliances would refuse and request a neutral location, in case things got messy with the negotiations. But Raj recalled that Cara had mentioned that they had guests coming, not that there was going to be a big fight.

He wasn't well-versed in badger logic, but Deve would have said something if her attitude had suggested violence and not just chaos.

"Alright, come on in, we will arrange for refreshments to be prepared, and we can all discuss the events that led to this experiment, as well as our future plans." Raj agreed.

The newly arrived Guild Masters were a bit startled by the calm reaction and suspected that they were being led into a trap by the trio of Myths. But they were all Guild Masters, more than capable of holding their own if it came to a fight.

And none of them were willing to pass on this opportunity if it wasn't a trap.

Better loot from the dungeons, even if it came with increased difficulty, was more than worth the trouble.

So, nobody hesitated to follow them back to Deve's Guild House.

He wasn't here to say no to having his house used as the host location for these negotiations, and they already had a fancy meal being prepared there, thanks to Cara demanding that the chef be given a new skill.

That would help them impress the Guild Masters.

In theory, the Darklight Host house would be able to do the same thing, and it was less crowded. But there was no telling what sort of strange things they would come across in that house.

It wasn't out of the question for them to have portals to pocket dimensions or other continents open in the living room, or for the guests to be accosted by Griffin-pattern Gargoyles who wanted their feathers preened.

Definitely too strange to be exposing strangers to on the first day.

The first thing that Karl saw when they walked in was Deve glaring at Cara, who was laughing at him.

{What did you do?} The druid was whispering while Cara played innocent.

Twenty Myths, all from different Guilds, were quite the force to be arriving in his house unannounced.

"Welcome everyone. If you would like to discuss this in the other room, refreshments and a light lunch will be ready in just a few minutes." Deve greeted them.

The other Guild Leaders followed Deve's suggestion, but it was clear that everyone was beginning to wonder what was wrong with this Guild Alliance.

Their sensibilities were all wrong, and everyone was wearing exceptionally expensive accessories, even though they weren't in combat. It was just a fashion statement for them.

What they couldn't know was that most of those items were Royal Rank Mana Jade, which looked much more expensive than it was, and the runes carved on it were all for housework or life skills. Only a few would wear their combat accessories all the time.

Hugo sat down near the head of the table, but not in the main seat.

"Everyone, make yourself comfortable. You're going to want to be sitting down for this part. How about we have Dana lead this meeting? She was the only one there for both events." He suggested.

"So, it was one of your Myths who found the secret?" The Crimson Tide Guild Master asked, preparing his notebook.

Karl made a noncommittal wiggle of his hand. "Well, yes and no. During the first event, she was an Overlord and accompanied the usual Overlord Dungeon raid team just after the Darklight Host joined the Alliance. This time, she is a Myth, and we were celebrating her advancement."

The dragonkin made careful notes, then stared at the page.

"Pardon?"

Dana laughed as she took the spot at the head of the table.

"That's the usual response. I only just got married to Karl, the Cat Demon on my left. Supreme Lady Matilda hired a Fae Priest to do a Soul Bond ritual during our wedding, and that pulled me up to his level." She explained.

A few of the others slumped into their chairs. She wasn't lying about needing to be seated for this explanation.

Dana tapped the table, considering where to start and how much to tell them. The Overlord Ranked Dungeon was an open run, so in theory, anyone in the city could do what they did.

If they just knew how and had the skills.

But that was the sticking point. They needed the skills to be able to actually accomplish the feat, and as far as she knew, nobody had.

Ever.

"I will start with the most recent one first, as the explanation is simple. We set a new kill time record for the first boss. The System rewarded us with the option to increase the difficulty, which increased the quality of loot drops.

That might be harder to replicate if it doesn't start giving the option to everyone who enters.

However, the Overlord Ranked Dungeon is an easy one.

All you need to do is send in an all Overlord team, and have them take zero damage during the boss fight.

Not finish it at full health, have them bring up barriers and cleansing spells so that nobody leaves full health for the entire fight."

The Guild Masters stared at her, in awe.

It was so simple. And yet so utterly implausible as to be practically impossible.

Yet, their team had done it.

It had to be a matter of group composition.

Chapter 1243: All The DPS

Karl relaxed in his seat as Dana and the visitors discussed the intricate details of the tactics and skills needed to accomplish the feat.

The consensus was that the two best ways would be a Druid Tank with [Limited Invulnerability] and a white dragon Cleric who took a barrier specialization, or multiple Golem Mages and Rogues for crowd control, so that the boss didn't damage anyone else.

All of the above was also an option if you had the people.

"What sort of group combination did you have to set the new Mythic kill time record? That might also be possible to top." One of the mages asked.

"Well, Karl is short on damage because he's a Beast Master who advanced before his beasts. But we've both got three Golem type spells, plus some extra summons for bonus damage. Then Deve as our tank, a Warrior and our healer."

The mage looked confused at her answer, so Karl clarified.

"We both have Golem, Greater Golem, and Epic Golem spells. Plus Golem Duplication. So, we have a rather formidable summoned force. Enough that there is no need for either of us to get into melee combat most of the time, though we are both melee capable classes." He offered.

"So, Beast Master is a Warrior Type Class?" The dragonkin Guild Master asked.

"No, not at all. It's really more of a support type class than a directly combat oriented class. Normally, I fight with a group of bonded magical beasts at my side and share skills with them. But if I need to go into close combat, I have a transformation spell to become an Avatar of the World Dragon." Karl explained.

The Guild Masters chattered quietly as they tried to decide whether that was an improvement or not. Some classes offered buffs, like the bards, but they were generally useless in combat.

That clearly wasn't the case for the Beast Master class, but that might only be because of the transformation and summoning skills that he had gained.

Even a bard who could turn into a Mythic Dragon would be at least half decent in combat, just based on his physical prowess. In fact, for the pure-blooded dragons, their class was more of a bonus to their abilities at lower levels, unless they were a cleric.

"So, if I understand this right, your skills allow you to buff the damage done by your whole group, and when your beasts are on your level, they accompany you into combat, effectively increasing the numbers of the party members?" Paul, the Guild Master of the Crimson Tide, asked.

Karl nodded. "That's exactly it. I didn't have the beasts today, but if you ask Lars, I believe he will be a big fan of the barrier spell that I use, which was gained from Thor, one of my team members.

Most of my offensive bonuses are granted to my own summons and bonded partners, but the defensive ones I can spread across the whole team."

The white dragon nodded happily, and Paul frowned.

He hated not knowing things.

"So, what we need to try to set a new record will be a group that does more damage than the one you went with. In theory, that should be possible. Most groups don't really try to maximize damage dealing. Instead, you send a group that can do it safely, so you don't risk lives on trash loot.

And that's all we will get if we don't beat your time and trigger the change." He sighed.

Karl nodded. "There is a chance that we will be able to use it again when we go back. Sometimes the System is good like that, and makes it a permanent bonus for the ones with the achievement."

The assembled Guild Leaders began to discuss the issue, and Karl waited for them to form more questions.

Fortunately, Deve's Guild cook saved them with a timely intervention in the form of small plates of pasta, served with assorted dessert squares and wine.

The scent of the pasta, a Royal Rank Mythic Cooking creation, was enough to distract everyone, and completely derail the interrogation.

"What is this? Is it a rare plant you found somewhere?" Paul asked Deve.

"It's actually normal ingredients. One of our cooks learned a cooking related System Skill. This is her first attempt at making a fancy dish." The druid announced proudly.

Technically, there was Royal Ranked cured ham in it. But in Zilaz, that was considered a common ingredient, and it was sold at nearly every butcher in town.

"An advanced System Skill for cooking. Now that is quite something. I know a few who have cooking as a skill, but it's nothing like this." One of the mages noted.

"It's called Mystic Cooking. An entirely different thing than simple cooking proficiency." Deve agreed.

But that did not have the intended result. It actually upset the assembled Guild Masters even more.

"So, not only did the Nara Guild Alliance have the secret to improving dungeons for better loot, and multiple rare crafting skills, they were also keeping an entirely new cooking method to themselves?

You guys are just too sneaky." One of the warriors complained.

Deve raised his hands. "It's not like that. The cooking skill is just as new as the improvement to the Mythic Dungeon. We haven't had an opportunity to even build a cookbook from it yet."

"So, it was a Dungeon Reward?" The warrior asked, realization shining in his eyes.

But when Deve hesitated and looked at Karl, everyone's attention shifted.

Karl just shrugged. "It's new to his Guild, they got it about an hour ago. The Darklight Host has had it for some time now. But we do like to keep some of our creature comforts to ourselves as special techniques to impress higher ranking guests."

The Guild Masters grumbled out half-hearted objections. There wasn't much that they could do to the Darklight Host as a whole without upsetting Supreme Lady Matilda.

So, even if they were shady and hiding skills that the rest of the world would kill to get their hands on, only a madman would try to take that knowledge by force.

Chapter 1244: Transparent Plans

After a few seconds, Karl relented and smiled at the other Guild Masters.

"Give it another week or two, and I will have a Skill Book for Mystic Cooking ready to give to the Blue Dragons for their Libraries. Then, they can spread the knowledge far and wide." He suggested.

Letting the Blue Dragons be the ones to explain to the world that the skill had some random hidden restriction that Karl hadn't come across yet would be much easier than telling hopeful chefs himself.

Let the Librarians spread the bad news when they found out what it was.

The room was quiet, except the clinking of cutlery, as everyone sampled the new dishes. And, when they finished the pasta, their mood was much better than it had been.

When they arrived, every one of the Guild Masters was irate, ready to demand that the Alliance turn over the secret and share the wealth. But now, they were much more willing to accept that it wasn't a deliberate conspiracy to hoard wealth and keep the rest of the city struggling.

They weren't exactly wrong.

Karl had every intention of keeping the good stuff for himself. But the big bosses agreed with his strategy to keep most of the benefits in house so that he didn't completely upset the markets.

Paul drummed his fingers on the table, and then smiled at Deve. "Why don't you lend us a member for the day tomorrow? Perhaps it's related to their particular Class? You went with four Rare Classes, right?"

Deve looked at the others. Paul had a point. He was an advanced form of Druid. Karl and Dana were both very rare classes, and Lars was now an Archpriest, which was considered a Rare Class.

Only Abel still had a normal class, and that wouldn't last long. He was just waiting his turn for Sapphire to get him a Crusader Class upgrade.

She wouldn't do it before she finished with her experimental groups at the lower ranks.

Karl nodded at Deve. "I will go along with another group if they need. No harm in an extra run or two for the week so we can test ways to activate more rewards. The chances might be low when we're doing Mythic Dungeons, but it's worth trying."

Paul frowned. "Why do you say that?"

"Well, what are the odds that we can break records for multiple dungeons or beat the same one that we just set? Finding a more efficient group for any given dungeon than anyone else has ever tried before is no small feat.

Even if both me and Dana join to bolster the group with Golems, there is no guarantee that will add up to more damage than any other group has managed with a well tailored group." Karl explained.

The Guild Masters frowned. He had a point. If it was that easy to set records, surely someone would have noticed and started to try speed running every Dungeon they could buy access to.

Or, it might be that every dungeon had a specific trigger to activate its difficulty settings, and they had just gotten lucky while stumbling on two of them.

That was less likely, but some people just had too much luck.

"Well, we need to work out some sort of arrangement, and I don't think that we're going to be the only groups that come looking for answers once the gossip spreads." Paul informed them.

Deve sighed. "I'm going to whip whoever spread the news so fast. They could have at least given us a few more days to test before saying anything."

One of the visiting mages laughed. "Don't blame them too harshly. We've got listening spells near the exit of all the dungeons, in case someone mentions getting good things. They usually do the formal recording silently, just keeping a note. But people can't resist celebrating."

Deve nodded in understanding. They had been caught the moment that the gate guard spoke about them getting Immortal Rank items.

And no Myth would pass up the chance to get in on that.

"So, if we come by tomorrow morning, that should be fine for the reset of the dungeon, right? That is a midnight reset instance, as I recall." One of the mages asked eagerly.

Deve smirked at him. "It is also only a five-person instance. I don't know how you want to organize things, but if Karl is willing to go with a group, I don't see a problem having our Alliance members accompany your teams for the day."

That was a good point. There were twenty Guilds represented in the visiting group, and only five who had entered from the Nara Group Guild Alliance.

Not exactly a small number, and they were just the Guild Leaders, not a cohesive dungeon team.

If they were going to make multiple groups, they would need to call in more healers, the best damage dealers that they could find, and then work the group around who would be with them.

It sounded like only the ones known as Karl and Dana might be willing to go with them tomorrow, so they would have to provide the rest.

But that could be arranged.

Paul got a suspicious look, then turned to the others who had come with him.

"We should arrange a schedule to attempt the dungeon. Clearly, the damage dealers from the Nara Group Alliance are top-notch. So, if we bring a high damage tank, another mage and a healer, we should be fine, right?

That would be me, Jimmy and Cleo.

If you want to rest at home, we will prevail upon Guild Master Deve for a room tonight and report back when the run is finished." Paul suggested.

"Convenient that you're all in the same Alliance, isn't it?" The mage who had just been speaking commented.

Deve chuckled. "If you're going to try to scheme, you have to try at least a little bit harder than that. You didn't even make them think about it this time."

Paul shrugged. "It was worth a shot. But I'm not wrong, we might actually be able to set a record with that team."

Chapter 1245: Send Terry

One of the other Guild Leaders, a massive Berserker whose name plate said "Grok", smirked at Paul.

"Why don't we just go all out? Get a self-healing tank, and then send me and one of the Rangers? They do great damage in the Ape dungeon."

Most of the others laughed, but a few of them gave considerate looks like it might actually be a plausible idea to just send five damage dealers to do a Mythic Dungeon with the intention of setting a new kill speed record.

"Oh, send Terry. He's a Blood Knight, and the self-healing is remarkable. The Beast Master has a barrier spell, and with the Golems, they should be fine. Worst-case scenario, they send someone out and replace them with a healer."

Deve considered mentioning that Karl actually had a beast who could heal as well, but decided to keep his mouth shut in case they thought that they could do away with the tank entirely.

He did consider whether it would work. They had those Epic Golems, which appeared to be patterned after Dungeon Bosses. So, they should be able to take as much beating as any tank type class.

But he wouldn't say anything that would make his own role sound redundant.

Especially not when it was something that all mages might be able to learn.

They were insufferable enough with just basic golems.

The Alliance members waited while the visitors argued among themselves about who would go on the next day's dungeon run. It was a hotly contested point because none of them knew if it would be able to be done again.

If it only worked when you set a record, what would happen the next time? You couldn't just keep finding better and faster teams when you'd already optimized your group that far.

So, there was a very real chance that only a few out of the twenty of them would manage to get the better rewards, and perhaps only once in a lifetime.

The final decision was to send Terry the Blood Knight, a Shaman named Mars, and a Ranger named James along with Karl and Dana, who were deemed to be the most likely keys to the win, as they could flood the dungeon with Golems to boost the damage output.

The theory was that if you had more than just one or two Golems, you could treat it as multiple groups in the same Dungeon, and speed run more efficiently.

That was how everyone would do it if they had ten people instead of five, just leapfrogging until they got to the boss.

"I don't suppose that you have rooms at the house for everyone? I don't think that anyone wants to head back to their Guilds tonight without answers." Paul asked.

Deve chuckled. "There is an entire empty Alliance House in the compound still. It's no trouble if you rest there, and we will send someone over to clean it and make breakfast for you all in the morning."

Deve motioned to one of his Guild Members, and Karl saw them send one of the staff out to go clean the spare house.

They were left fully stocked, but as Karl had learned when they moved in, most of them hadn't even been inspected by the other Guilds. They had just been left sitting empty until there were enough Alliance members to need them.

However, for a group of Mythic Guests, they couldn't just stuff them in the smaller guest rooms at Deve's house.

It wasn't exactly a long walk, there was an empty house only two buildings over, and everything in the compound was under a minute away if you rushed.

"First thing in the morning works for you?" Terry, the Blood Knight, asked Dana as they prepared to head to their rooms for the evening.

Dana smirked. "I'm sure that we can make it work. You know how it is with newlyweds. If we don't have a schedule, we might not get out of bed until noon."

The Blood Knight chuckled. "If you're smart like me, you marry a succubus, and then it's that way every single day. But since I'm sleeping alone for the night, I'm sure that after breakfast should be fine.

But congratulations on your wedding. Who might the lucky gentleman be?"

Dana pointed at Karl, who bowed elaborately and kissed her hand, which made the others laugh.

"Oh, a power couple. Well then, at least I'm not tearing you apart, just making you get out of bed early." Terry joked.

Dana laughed. "Well, that's one way to look at it. Now, we will let everyone rest, and see you first thing tomorrow."

That was Karl's cue to start shaking hands and saying goodnight so that they could escape for a little while, before another argument broke out about the 'what if' factors.

They were greeted at the door of the Alliance house by Button and Lotus, each holding a stack of cookies.

"You need to solve this for us. We're taking votes on which one is the best." Lotus explained.

Button nodded. "On my side, we have cranberry almond coconut peanut butter cookies. On her side, we have the clearly inferior chocolate chocolate chip cookies."

Lotus stuck out her tongue at the little dragon, who just smirked at her while Karl took one of each cookie to taste.

Button gave Dana a suspicious look as she also selected one of each.

"I don't know if we can trust your vote. You like Oatmeal Raisin cookies."

That made Dana laugh. "And what is wrong with oatmeal raisin? Sometimes a nice chewy cookie is good."

"Raisins. Raisins are what is wrong with oatmeal raisin cookies." Button insisted.

Dana smirked and took a bite of each of the cookies, then gave the one Button had selected a curious look.

"There is so much going on in this cookie. Multiple textures, fruits, nuts, chewy crunchy. Not bad, though. But double chocolate chip is a classic. It's hard to argue against a timeless cookie recipe." Dana explained.

Lotus smirked, certain of her victory. Now, she just needed Karl on her side.

Karl called Cara and Tian out, and let them each take a bite of the two cookies, so he could get their votes. But that didn't help at all. Cara wanted to smush them together, so she could get all the flavours in one, and Tian refused to try the chocolate cookie, insisting it didn't smell edible.

Though, for him it might not be. Karl seemed to recall something about dogs not being able to eat chocolate, and wasn't sure if that applied to foxes as well.

Chapter 1246: Back To The Dungeon

The next morning, they had three guests for breakfast, all eager to get going for the Dungeon run.

"Is Rae ready?" Tessa asked as she settled into a chair beside Thor.

Karl shook his head. "Not yet. She's perfecting her bath, and will likely reach the peak of Totem Rank later today. She's very close, but not quite at the bottleneck, and she's convinced that it will be better if she pushes the bottleneck a bit before trying to advance."

Tessa sighed. "That's a shame, the run would go faster if she was at Mythic Rank."

Karl nodded. "Well, there's always another attempt. After all, now that the experiment is public knowledge, every Alliance is going to be trying to find ways to unlock new difficulty levels for every Dungeon.

But that reminds me, has the Overlord Ranked team asked any of you to accompany them on their runs since we returned?"

Tessa nodded. "Yeah, we will all be going with them today. It took some convincing to get Lotus to do something other than argue about cookies with Button, but we put them both down for a nap before the dungeon after lunch."

Terry, the visiting Blood Knight, chuckled.

It made them both sound like small children, but he had been accosted about the cookies when he first arrived as well. He wasn't sure if they were sisters or simply kindred spirits, but there was definitely more than a decade between their ages.

That also explained why Lotus was missing breakfast.

She had been up all night eating cookies.

She could dress it up with any sort of excuse that she wanted, but the fact remained that she had definitely eaten enough of the cookies to put her and a small dragon into a sugar coma.

In fact, Karl wouldn't be shocked if they were both in dragon form right now, sleeping it off. Lotus' Beast Form was a small green dragon, roughly the same size as Button's Forest Dragon form.

One day, he would have to find out why she didn't get a humanoid beast form transformation the way that everyone else did.

She was a cute dragon, though.

In preparation for the trip, Karl formed the Group, with himself as the lead, just in case that made a difference in whether they would be offered the chance to do the higher difficulty again.

There was a large crowd gathered in front of the dungeon entrance when they arrived, including a few that Karl was sure were reporters, taking notes and using a System Skill to record the group entering.

"We're not exactly subtle." Mars, their Trollish Shaman, joked.

"Well, we are pretty awesome. Hard to ignore." Karl agreed.

The Troll chuckled, while Terry rolled his eyes.

"I can see why you are Deve's friend. That man is pathologically incapable of taking anything seriously."

Dana giggled, and Karl noticed that many of the young men in the crowd blushed the moment that [Fox Charm] hit them.

"You should have seen him when the dungeon difficulty increased. We've got a Chaos Badger on the team, and he's absolutely sure that the whole thing was a divine cosmic joke, some sort of secret Badger plot to mess with him."

Mars nodded and stroked his beard with a sage expression on his face.

"Given his history, I agree. It is possible that the Laughing God and the Beast Gods have teamed up to turn his life into their own personal entertainment channel. All it needs is one more badger and a Green Dragon Cleric."

Karl smiled. "Both of which we have in the Darklight Host. They get along famously with his children."

A few of the bystanders laughed at Karl's joke. Deve was somewhat famous in town, thanks to his many outings with the children, and those who had gathered here today were all aware of the basics about the situation and the Alliance.

"Mister Karl, is it true that your group believes they can set a second kill time record in one week?" One of the reporters called.

"These fine gentlemen aren't from our Alliance, but we have optimized the group for maximum damage, so there is a good chance that we will be able to beat the time that the Alliance group set yesterday." Karl replied.

At the very least, they wouldn't have a white dragon hanging out at the back with nothing to do.

The onlookers would naturally assume that the Shaman was their healer, with a side of extra damage to try to increase the total. And that Terry was their tank, as the Blood Knight was an excellent self-healing tank class, with better than average damage output.

From the outside, it looked like they had a reasonable, but damage optimized group.

However, for those who knew, it was obvious that they had simply sent their four best damage dealers with a tank who should be able to keep himself alive.

Karl led the group inside, then prepared to give one last warning about the plan.

That was when the System brought up a new message.

{Group Leader has enabled difficulty settings.}

{Please Choose Difficulty} 1 ⇒ 5

Karl smiled. "Well, gentlemen, how brave are you feeling today? The System says that we get to play on hard mode."

Tian laughed as he came out to sit on Dana's shoulder, and Cara exited her space to fly around their heads.

They had ten seconds to choose, or she was picking six again.

"What level did you pick last time?" Terry asked.

"Yes."

The Blood Knight laughed. "I thought that might be the case. Why don't we try level three and see how the loot is? If nothing else, it will satisfy the others' questions about other options."

Karl nodded and called out his golems, along with the Spectral Knights.

"System, we choose level three."

{Level three Difficulty chosen. Dungeon timers set to forty-five minutes.}

Totem Ranked Apes appeared all over the Dungeon, and the closest ones began to charge straight for them, having a much larger aggressive range than the standard groups.

"Alright, go time. Tian, look after the Dana Mage. Cara, don't let Tian fall on the ground. Rae, when you have a moment, there's plenty more blood here for you."

The others ignored Karl's habit of talking to beasts who clearly couldn't speak to answer him, and prepared to meet the rush.

They only had forty-five minutes to complete the run before the Enrage Timer peaked.

Chapter 1247: Everyone Can Play

Rae came out instantly, along with her full force, and Dana sent her Golems to handle the Totem Ranked group, while Karl went for the others.

But this time, he didn't use the Myceloid Kings. Instead, he chose clones of the Dark Elven King, which had incredibly high damage output, and the ability to move more smoothly through a crowded jungle fight.

They looked somewhat mundane, and blended well with the Lamia Bodyguards as well as the Epic Guard.

But this time, they got Totem fights from the start, so even Remi came out to play.

And taunt Hawk.

The air filled with fire and ice, the competing effects of two opposing forms of [Apocalypse] causing a nearly blinding haze of snow and embers. The fighting style confused the new group members, but they all followed Karl's lead into combat, intending to eliminate the Mythic Ranked Apes as fast as possible.

Hawk and Remi rolled forward with their effects while Rae cleared the leftovers, then Dana charged past Karl, carving her way through the Apes to send her Golems to engage the second group of Mythic Apes.

"That's the rhythm, everyone. Keep moving forward as they die. Even if we end up with some Totem Ranked apes behind us, the beasts will clean them up." Karl directed.

"This difficulty is insane. We're not even five minutes in, and already the difference is noticeable." James noted as he fired arrows into the Mythic Apes.

"And it only gets worse. If we don't beat that timer, they will reach the Immortal Rank, and then we will be here all day." Karl agreed.

Terry laughed at Karl's tone.

If they failed the timer and ended up surrounded by Immortal Ranked apes, they would be here much longer than all day. They probably wouldn't come back out again.

"I like your optimism. We will keep pushing forward. If you're confident in engaging the boss, go ahead, and we will finish the second group with Miss Dana." He agreed.

"No, it's better if we clean this up and help him clear the last before the boss. Karl, go get the next group, we will finish this up." Dana instructed.

Karl nodded, then leapt over the Apes and directed the Epic Guard, the Haint and the two Dark Elven King Epic Golems to join him. The others could work on the other group.

Seeing Karl going for the next group, the Totem Ranked Apes hiding in the forest charged out, and the rest of the group realized why she sent Karl ahead. They weren't going to be able to leapfrog without pulling dozens of additional monsters, including a half dozen more Mythic Apes.

The numbers weren't quite as large as the last time, Dana decided. But the enrage timer was much slower.

Five minutes in, they were going to reach the first boss, and they had forty-five minutes to finish.

The Elven Kings filled the air with blade attacks as the Apes charged out, then laughed at the carnage.

{You made the right choice, Cat Demon. There is no King better to kill apes than us. Hairy ones, hairless ones, demonic ones, they're all good practice to sharpen our blades.} One of the Epic Golems joked.

Karl smirked at them, knowing that they weren't speaking of actual Ape species. But they weren't wrong. Until Rae reached the Mythic Rank, there was nothing that Karl had ever faced which could keep up with the Dark Elven Kings in pure damage.

If they hadn't managed to wrap him up in silk and keep him from fighting properly, it would have been a much more difficult fight in the Bara Dungeon at Overlord Rank.

The Haint and the Epic Golem both nodded in eager agreement. The Elves were good at their work.

Spined fingers from both the evolved Haint Claw and the Shadow Drake Treant patterned Epic Guard tore through Ape flesh, and the deceptively delicate constructs slammed their targets to the ground, giving Karl more room to fight while the Elves dealt with the trash.

[Brutal Pugilist] stacked very well with their combat abilities, giving them the edge over even the Epic Golems when Karl used them.

Cara joined them only seconds later, assisting the Elves, and then the rest of the group was with them.

Remi and Hawk moved their area effects forward, bringing the rest of the Apes between them and the boss to the fight, where they could all be dealt with at once.

That accelerated the process, and the barrage of skills was quickly whittling away what little defence even the enraged Apes could put up.

"As soon as they drop, we're on to the boss. Save your mana." Karl instructed.

"Got it. Who has the healing effect?" Mars asked.

"That would be either Remi or Tian. The Naga has healing totems up, and the fox can heal." Karl replied between attacks.

"Then, we've definitely got this." The Troll chuckled, becoming eager to see how this boss fight would go.

The Ape was about a third of the way through his enrage effect, by Karl's estimation. They were only about five minutes into the dungeon, so they should have plenty of time, but at the speed that the boss was enraging, there was no way that it wasn't going to hit Immortal Rank by the twenty-minute mark.

Perhaps that was the trick?

Karl activated [Avatar] and charged into combat as soon as the last of the guardian Apes were dead, ready to test a theory.

The theory that forty-five minutes was actually two sections of just over twenty-two minutes each. If the second boss' enrage timer reset when the first one died, he would have his answer.

"Goddess, was he still holding back?" Paul asked as he followed Karl into combat.

Dana laughed. "Not really. That form is too big for the other fights, he couldn't move properly in the jungle as a dragon. But the boss is much larger, and it's easier to fight him when you're huge."

The Blood Knight made a mental note of that for future reference. They would have to try to find mages with oversized Golems for future attempts.

Chapter 1248: Unacceptable Reduction

The first boss was being rapidly disassembled by the combined efforts of the group, while Rae and Cara raged in the corner about the lack of damage that they could do to it.

Ten Percent damage taken was completely unacceptable.

They were only a little bit from the bottleneck. But the dungeon wouldn't let them go forward until the boss fight was over.

If it did, they would have just taken some of the Golems and cleared the trash during the boss fight, and then the Karl and his friends could just do the second boss after the first.

Worse, the Ape healed even though it was bleeding heavily, and that was making it take even longer.

Dana had to fight not to laugh as the annoyance of the two bored beasts flooded her mind, followed by the amusement of Remi and Hawk, who were competing to see who could better predict where the boss would be pulled next.

It wasn't pulled into their vortexes, and setting them right on its head was too easy.

Plus, the Totem Ranked Vortex didn't actually do much, and space was limited.

The moment that the boss gasped its last, and collapsed to the ground, Karl turned to see what happened with the other boss.

No change. So, it wasn't a split timer.

But did that mean it was still going to hit Immortal halfway through the failure timer?

Or would it stop just short?

Terry checked his watch. "We're fifteen minutes in. Plenty of time for this group, but the amount of damage you need to do to that boss is insane. If we're going to do this with a normal group, we will need better gear."

Karl transformed back and nodded. "I'm more concerned about how fast that enrage timer is advancing. We already know that level six will cap out at Immortal. But I don't know what will happen on level three."

The Blood Knight shrugged. "As long as it gives good loot, I'm putting my faith in you this time. That dragon form is by far the best tank I've ever fought beside."

The beasts were already off and running, clearing the Totem Ranked Apes.

"They sure are energetic. We should get going. But does the Naga have a skill book for those flaming totems? They're adorable." Mars asked.

Remi had patterned her [Burning Poison] Totems after herself, and they were designed to look like three entwined Naga Princesses that spit poisonous fireballs at every enemy in range when they were active.

"I will get you a copy later if you want one. It's a fairly standard Shaman spell, she just modified the appearance." Karl agreed, as Remi couldn't hear them.

That was good enough for Mars, and he led the charge toward the next group of Mythic apes, eager to get to the end of the dungeon and see what sort of loot they would get.

They were really getting into a rhythm now, efficiently working together to kill the monsters, but the monsters were getting stronger by the second, and the enrage timer appeared to be stacking, increasing the speed that their buffs were improved.

They had also learned that it was not a great idea to try to dispel the Mythic Apes, as it increased the enrage buff when it returned.

"Maybe we're supposed to bring a berserker, something that enrages to offset the dungeon? If a berserker tank got enrage buffs every few seconds, they would be monsters in here." James suggested as he fired off another volley of arrows.

Karl shook his head. "No, we have an enrage effect as well. It's active on Cara, but she's not improving, she's just extra badger today."

The Ranger sighed. "Improved difficulty is no joke. Good thing we didn't pick the maximum level."

Pushing through the packs in between bosses as fast as they could, they arrived at the final boss just before the enrage effect peaked.

Dana snapped her fingers and pointed at the boss. "I get it now. It's not on a timer! The enrage effect increases as you complete the dungeon, so it's always at the maximum when you fight the final boss."

Karl finally understood how the System had set things up, and smirked in satisfaction when he realized that the final boss would not reach the Immortal Rank this time.

It was very close, and the boss was definitely near the peak of what could be believably called Mythic. But it did not have the extra damage reduction effect unique to Immortals.

That gave them a simple solution to killing the final boss. All Karl had to do was use the Amulet to improve the [Undead Army] skill to Immortal Rank, and it would be all over.

Not much was going to defeat a dozen Immortal Spectral Knights.

However, he held off on that this time, as they had more than enough time to finish the fight, and he didn't need to reveal that bit of treasure to these outsiders. They could keep that an Alliance secret for later.

"Well, it's not an Immortal. You know what to do, gentlemen." Terry joked as he moved into position to take up his role as the main tank.

The Dark Elven Kings thought that it was adorable that the Vampire thought that he could be the main tank when there were Epic Golems present, but they didn't stop him from trying.

Terry opened with [Sunder], hitting the Demonic Ape in the chest and making it stumble back a step. Then, before he could follow up, it was on him.

But the Earth Elemental Lords that Dana used as Epic Golems were beside him, and [Auto Parry] kept the flurry of blows from landing. It was a marvellous tactic, as the Ape tried to get past the Golems, which blocked all its attacks.

That left the back open for the rest of the combatants, who immediately tore into it.

Karl knew from experience that this last boss took as long as the rest of the dungeon, thanks to the increased enrage.

Or, it did last time.

Chapter 1249: Inquiring Minds

{Dungeon Complete} Calculating Rewards

The three invited group members sighed in relief.

"That dungeon is insane with the difficulty turned up. I've never seen a boss take that much punishment before, and Terry's still limping from that hit, even after being healed." Mars grumbled.

"But it will all be worth it. Trust the process." Karl agreed.

Mars smiled as the rewards were handed out, then he got immediately protective of his reward.

"Don't worry, we won't try to force anyone to reveal what they got, but we will ask what Rank and Grade it is, so we can tell the others how much the loot improved." Karl assured him.

"Right, I forgot that we need to tell those greedy bastards.

Well, then no point in hiding it, or they'll just give us headaches." Terry agreed.

Then he took out a pair of fur covered bracers. Mythic Rank, Epic Grade. Plus, they gave a large bonus to strength. Excellent for a tank.

"The trash loot is all common and uncommon, Totem Rank." He added.

Karl nodded, and made a note of it while the others took out their best gain.

"I got a Mythic Rank, Epic Grade Amulet of [Healing Beacon]. Tian is wearing it right now." Karl explained, while the tiny fox showed off the bright silver chain around his neck like a collar.

The Amulet wasn't an item that created a spell effect, in the traditional sense. Instead, it granted a portion of all healing done to the healer as an added effect. So, the cleric of the group, in this case the fox, didn't have to cast heals on himself. He would just get it passively.

The others envied the ability to just keep himself healed. But more than that, they envied the level of confidence needed to give an item like that to your pet fox.

While Tian was Karl's primary healer, it was difficult to take him seriously when he was two kilos of fluff and happiness.

Dana held out a headband made of vines. "Mythic Rank, Epic Grade. Optimized for a mage, but nothing outstanding. I also got a bunch of Totem Ranked uncommon and common magical items that will likely get broken down for materials."

Mars held out a book. "Perhaps asking was prophetic. I got a book of [Greater Poison Totem]. Shaman exclusive, and an Epic grade skill. I'll loan it to the blue dragons first, so they can copy it if anyone wants it."

Remi nodded happily. She definitely wanted more shaman totems. The two that she already had were pretty good, and Karl's new [Mana Pylon] was almost a totem type spell, since it made a crystal that caused an area effect.

James held up a crude looking wooden bow, that was actually a Mythic Rank item, but the more that Karl looked at the bonuses, the more impressive they really looked.

"Mythic Rank, Epic Grade bow of Sharpshooting. There is an exceptional bonus to accuracy and firing rate, but it also has a chance to fire a duplicate effect on attack. This should be a huge increase in damage for me." He announced proudly.

"Well, I suppose that we should go tell the others what we found. That's five for five with the epic grade items from a level three difficulty, and we finished with over ten minutes left on the timer.

That might be a tight schedule for most groups, but not impossible." Karl calculated.

No, that was definitely impossible, Terry knew. Most groups didn't have enough combatants to easily deal with the additional groups, so they would get mired down in bodies and end up running out of time.

However, that just meant that they needed to improve their group composition, and add a few more specialized skills so that they could properly deal with large groups.

It wasn't a concern for most Dungeon Raiding teams, as the groups were always fairly small, and at your own Rank.

There weren't any other known dungeons in Zilaz that made you accomplish a feat like this one, where you had to fight a hundred enemies a Rank below your own, while on a timer.

"Well, it looks like we've all got some recruiting to do, and perhaps some skill shopping at the Blue Dragon Libraries as well." Terry decided.

Even a mage or Shaman like Remi, who could use multiple overlapping area attacks, would go a long way toward clearing this dungeon within the time limit.

"How did it go?" Deve asked as they exited the dungeon.

"As soon as we entered, it gave us the choice to choose difficulty. We picked level three, and it was similar to the first run. But we learned that the enrage increases with completion, and at level three it caps out as a very powerful Mythic boss.

It also had a forty-five-minute success timer.

I made a list of the major rewards, and they're definitely worth it." Karl explained.

The other Guild Masters shared excited plans to loot this place clear, once they could get one of the Alliance members who could trigger it every visit to join them.

Paul frowned. "Now, I suppose that the issue will be that it is likely only the record holders that can trigger the dungeon's difficulty settings. Unless one of us can beat the record, it won't become a shared effect."

Karl shrugged. "It is possible that it will. Check tomorrow, and one of these three might be able to activate up to level three, as that is what they've accomplished."

The dungeon didn't say anything about it, but for the Overlord Ranked Dungeon, everyone who has done hard mode once triggers it when they go in again."

Paul nodded. "We sent an Overlord Raid in today, with one member from the Alliance. They will report back soon to let us know how it went. We have high hopes that they will expand the better loot to my Guild's whole Overlord Rank Raid Team."

One of the other Guild Masters snorted in amusement.

Paul's Guild Alliance was similar to the Nara Group, in that they had numerous Overlords training up to become Totems. But most of the other Alliances had smaller numbers and only took powerful members or those who would serve the Guild.

Chapter 1250: Rae Needs To

When they returned to the house for the evening, Karl and Dana relaxed on the sofas, while Rae immediately went to her space and began to prepare for her next advancement.

She might not have quite everything that she had wanted to prepare, but she had just enough of it that she was certain she would not miss out on any of the essential benefits to her advancement.

This latest run, and the extra understanding of the art of stabbing things that just wouldn't die, had helped her reach the peak of Totem Rank abilities for a Blood Destruction Demonic Spider, and now she was ready to head for the Mythic Rank and begin her work on trying to slay the Immortals.

Nothing was more important in her mind than learning how to kill the things that were openly referred to as Immortal.

Now, she did understand that it meant functionally Immortal, in that they would live forever if not killed. But that didn't matter.

The mere word "Immortal" was offensive.

Dana did her best not to laugh at the single-minded focus of the spider, who was currently mixing herself a bath with all the culinary flair of an executive chef, and the precision of an Alchemist.

Both arts should have called to her, Dana thought. But it was her overwhelming love of fashion that had won out in the end, and left her as a Tailor.

[I should have asked Nacht if he could get me a bit of blood from his Mythic Friend. I am missing a bit of strength with the darkness element.] Rae sighed.

[I can likely get a Totem Ranked black dragon over to donate if you need.] Karl suggested.

Rae considered it, then shook her head. [I will forego the darkness element in favour of more destructive energies this time. Less stealth, more stabbing.

Heavy Stealth.]

Dana frowned in confusion, then giggled as she understood. There was no failure of your stealth skills if there were no survivors to report it.

Rae mixed up the combination of Mythic and Immortal Rank bloods, then carefully heated them to her desired temperature before nodding happily and taking out a small vial from her hidden storage spot for annoyingly shiny rocks.

The perfect hiding spot, where nobody ever looked.

What she had was a bit of Immortal Ranked Treant sap, and it smelled suspiciously like the Fae realm.

How she had managed to get it without alerting anyone else was a mystery, but she definitely had it, and the mixture added a hint of woody overtone to the blend, like a deep forest after the rain.

If that forest had just seen a massacre. Because the smell of Mythic and Immortal Ape blood was strong.

Dana watched quietly as Rae first scrubbed herself perfectly clean, then transformed to her natural state and entered the bath, before shrinking herself to the smallest possible size with [Unobtrusive Behemoth].

She would have been smaller in humanoid form, but the risk of advancing in an unnatural form and losing a bit of favour from the Spider Goddess just seemed too high, even if it would let her run a greater volume of blood through her body, relative to her own.

Once she was settled in, Rae began scrubbing herself as she drank in the bloody mix, letting the power seep through her entire body.

To Dana, that was an oddly disturbing bath routine, especially the way that she simply absorbed the life force from the blood. But to Rae, it was no different to how she absorbed the life force from blood wine, except in much larger volumes.

She had seen the things that people did at the pleasure houses run by the Obsession Demons, and this wasn't even on the scale of weird things to put in a bath.

Even the vampires liked a bit of blood in their bath.

Though, Mick was happier when she didn't know what sort of creature it came from. She might be good with ape, Rae thought. They weren't sentient. Unfortunately, it would make lousy blood wine, the flavour just wasn't right.

Dana rolled her eyes as Rae sunk to the bottom of the bath and rolled on her back to blow bubbles up to the surface, enjoying the warmth.

She should get a circulation pump like they had in hot tubs.

This bath would be even better with bath jets and a massaging action to really work the old chitin loose.

Still, this wasn't too bad, with all that Immortal Ape blood that she managed to source at the last minute. It was more than enough energy for a smooth advancement, and the apes didn't have any weird abilities that were incompatible with her own skills.

They were a bit heavy on the earth magic, but with the bit of Fae blood she obtained, that twisted into something a bit more like nature magic, and that should help with her Golem spell and her earth walls when she needed to make hiding spots again.

The level of energy in the bath was draining quickly, almost too quickly, Rae decided.

She might have drawn too small of a bath.

Fortunately, she had reserves.

As the bath drained, Rae added a new collection of Mythic and Totem Ranked blood to the mix. Not as potent as the main bath had been, but a nice smooth finisher with just the right blend to relax her muscles as she surged into the Mythic Rank and the advanced blessing settled into her cells.

Late into the evening, she had drained every bit of vitality from the second bath, and Rae stepped out, then called her Spectral Knights into her space to buff her body to a high shine.

It was absolutely perfect, and the new [Mythic Blessing] made her feel invincible.

Rae laughed at Dana's confusion when the mage saw that the spider hadn't visibly changed at all, other than the fact that she had somehow managed to polish the layer of blood on her skin like it was body oil.

That was how Rae normally looked when she was clean, though. She let the shine fade for covert operations and daily use, instead of polishing herself like a good pair of boots.

[Did you gain any new abilities?] Dana asked curiously as Rae picked out a dress for the morning.

Rae shook her head. [No, I balanced everything to improve what I already had. Once I get to fight, I might advance a skill now that I'm a living Myth. But spiders are already awesome enough that we don't need to evolve, we just choose to.]

Dana smiled at the smug spider. [Alright, excellent work. I will get a bit more sleep and see you when the sun is up.]

[I will go find my vampire. He promised me blood wine flavoured ice cream when I advanced.]

Someone should warn Nilla that he had been chosen as a favoured pet.

But he would find out soon enough on his own.