

Beast Master 241

Chapter 241 On Repeat

The Red Goblins were surprisingly well-equipped, for Goblins. Each of them had an enchanted crystal dagger, and Rae noticed quickly that the magic on them was the same as the glowing moss in the room.

"I think we need to gather some of this moss. It has the same aura as the enchantment on their weapons." Karl informed the others.

Lotus nodded, already inspecting the moss to see what was special about it.

"You're right. There is something special, and it's not a moss I know, either. This place is strange, there are so many things that I don't know, when I should know almost all plants and animals." She complained.

Her voice held a pouting tone, but her face was hidden by her hood as she kneeled on the moss to inspect it more closely.

Then she began to gather it, carefully pulling it up by the roots and holding it up in the air.

Karl laughed and took it from her to place in Thor's space, where it would be safely stored until it was needed.

While it was there, Karl decided to take a good look at it using his Identification skill.

[Underworld Moss] Usable by: Karl, Rae, Hawk

[Combines with Underworld Crystals, Commander Rank or higher vital fluids, Core of Frost] Potion grants a chance at the [Paralytic Strike] skill.

That sounded pretty good if he could gather the rest of the ingredients. The crystals might be nearby, and the Core of Frost sounded like something they could find outside, so there was a good chance.

Karl looked around the cave and realized that the crystals were closer than he had thought. They were what the daggers were made from, and there were dozens of them along the walls, embedded in the moss.

Rae took that as her cue to go gather a few dozen of them, just in case the potion didn't work the first time. Then she realized that they were also good for weapons, and stuffed even more of them into her area.

The glow was actually quite pretty, sparkling like a field of stars, so she added even more, until all the ones she could conveniently reach were picked and half her space's floor was filled with a layer of crystals and moss.

[If I hang the bodies upside down, it will look like the night sky is above them once again.] Rae declared proudly as she began to plan how to rearrange her trophies.

[I'm glad you like them.]

"Is Rae planning to clear the entire room?" Lotus asked as the Bloodbath Spider finished her work.

"She's got all that she wanted. She is making an art installation in her space, and it needed something to sparkle like the night sky." Karl explained.

The Spellblades looked a bit confused, but Dana reached over to brush moss off Rae's back, where it had fallen while she was gathering crystals.

"I'm certain that it is lovely. You'll have to show us sometime." The mage joked.

Rae considered that for a while. She couldn't bring Dana in, but she could put some in the gazebo roof when they got home, and that would be good too. Hopefully, someone was taking care of their plants while they were away. There were plenty of pretty ones that should have fruits and flowers soon.

The group got ready to move, and Corbin motioned for Karl and Rae to head to the front. They could see best, and again there was only one exit to the room, headed back not far from the direction they had entered. Rae went in front, not as concerned about threats now that she had Lightning around her.

The Spider Golems took up the rear of the pack, and they walked down the hallway, careful not to make any excessive noise that would echo in the tunnels.

Karl could still hear them moving, so any beast with sensitive ears would as well, but it was better not to advertise their presence.

Another room lit with braziers was ahead, and Karl became suspicious. Something was up with this place, and he wasn't certain what it was.

[It's the same.] Rae noted as she inspected the room.

[It is.] Karl agreed.

Everything was the same. Size, shape, brazier placement.

"There's another room." He whispered to the others.

"Situation?" Alice asked.

"It's identical to the last brazier lit room."

Alice called Corbin up, and the two discussed the plan for a moment.

"We want to try something new. Would you be willing to enter with Lotus and Tessa, then close the door behind you?"

"Go with the group that's the strongest at their level and see if it triggers the same sort of trap?" Karl asked.

Alice nodded gravely, and Karl turned to the clerics.

Lotus shrugged. "I think it's for the best. If it works, we get loot. If it doesn't, we just open the far door and have you stand in the doorway while everyone else passes through. Last time it didn't do anything until we were all fully inside."

"I would appreciate it if you could leave one of the healers here." Rose muttered, as she realized what the plan was.

Corbin sighed. "She has a point. If we're attacked while they're gone, it would be best if we had a healer with us."

The two clerics turned to face each other, and then began playing rock paper scissors. The first to win was Tessa, who smirked at Lotus.

"I will go with Karl, Lotus will stay with the rest of the group in case you're attacked. We will call for you if nothing happens."

Karl called Rae into her space, in case there was some issue with her being Commander Rank to his Ascended. The previous trial instances had recognized the beasts as individuals, so these traps might as well.

Karl led the way, with Tessa right behind him. She closed the door once they were through, and they waited for most of a minute before she sighed and opened the door again, only to find that there was nobody there.

"I guess that means it worked. Now, where is the writing, let's see what is going on." She announced.

The letters appeared only a few seconds later.

[Welcome to the mixed group challenge.] Tessa read, then laughed.

"This one, we could have all entered together, and fought together, but now they're going to either be short the two of us, or they'll be waiting for us to return."

Karl suspected that the stress might have cracked the War Priestess, but she actually looked overjoyed.

"It's a mixed group event, you can enter together." Karl tried calling out to the group, in case they could still hear him, though he couldn't see them.

Then he found himself standing on the front lines of a massive defensive battle, with Tessa right beside him. There were thousands of soldiers around them in the formation, humans, beastkin, and even ogres.

Charging toward them was a tide of elves, trolls, faeries, dryads and creatures Karl had no name for.

"Mixed Group Battle." He muttered.

"It seems so." Tessa agreed.

The surrounding soldiers gave them strange looks, and someone shouted as they moved forward to set a shield wall.

"Crap, they don't speak our language."

Tessa just shrugged. "War is war, we don't need words. Bring out the beasts, so the others have time to get used to them, and prepare to fight."

Karl called everyone, and the soldiers smiled. It looked like beasts in battle wasn't that uncommon to them, and even when Rae called her Golems, the soldiers didn't panic.

The leader of this force called something, and the rank behind the shield bearers hefted spears, setting them on top of the shields as a brace against the impact of the incoming trolls that made up the front rank of the Fae force.

The front lines were about to crash together when suddenly Karl realized they had reinforcements. The rest of the group had entered, standing behind him and Tessa.

The sound of snapping wooden spears filled the air an instant before the sound of trolls hitting shields, and a battle cry that sent the humans' allied forces forward.

Rae sent her Golems, while Hawk took to the sky, but Thor stayed back, waiting for the first of the Trolls to breach the line, so he could plug the hole.

"What is going on? We heard you call for us to come in." Prince Corbin called out.

"Humans and allies against Fae group battle." Tessa yelled back, trying to be heard over the din of the battle, as Karl began to hurl attacks at the taller Fae.

"I guess we're doing this then." Prince Corbin sighed.

Chapter 242 Three Hour Completion

Three hours later, Karl sat with his back against Thor in the ruins of the battlefield. The humans had won a Pyrrhic victory at best, and with the losses that they had suffered, if there had been any Fae left alive, it might have been counted as a loss.

The town that the humans and their allies were defending had been half razed, and most of the civilians were presumed dead, less than one in fifty of the original thousand or so warriors were still alive, and all of them were currently catching their breath.

The battlefield smouldered where Hawk had bombarded it with fireballs to prevent the trolls from regenerating, leaving acrid smoke hanging over the plains, which were now largely devoid of life.

After meditating for the last ten minutes to recover some strength, slowly spreading the energy from the focuses in the beast spaces to improve their quality before rebuilding the focus to improve everyone's strength, Karl opened his eyes and decided it was time to get back on his feet.

Karl looked out at the massive number of bodies, and slowly got to his feet, ready to go check them for loot and valuables. With that many, there had to be some good stuff there somewhere.

However, as soon as he got up to go check the nearby bodies, those familiar magical words appeared on the ground.

"Trial successfully completed. Time two hours forty-seven minutes." Tessa read.

Then they all waited to see what the next message would be. Would it send them to another round? It hadn't said failed, it did tell them that they were successful, despite the heavy casualties and the damage to the town behind them.

[Rewards Granted]

Everyone waited to see what they would get, but there was no sign of prize boxes, no additional notification, and then they were back in the plain room with the braziers again. That was when the prizes appeared. One small box in front of each of them.

There were three silver boxes, three gold boxes, two platinum boxes, and one that looked like it was made of pure ruby.

Prince Corbin looked at the boxes. "Well, I think that we can guess how they're supposed to be distributed. Now, you just need to pick one from your group."

The three Awakened Rank members all looked wistfully at the boxes with other colours on them. Dana certainly had experience with these reward boxes, and the better your rank, the better the box's contents.

However, there wasn't another mage in the Ascended group to plead with, and Alice was unlikely to give up her loot for an Awakened Rank box after spending three hours keeping up barriers and eventually being held upright by archers who ran out of arrows so that even when she was too exhausted to stand, she could stay within the protective circle around Thor and regain her stamina.

Dana and the two Awakened Spellblades went first, then traded boxes until they got one that they could open.

Both Spellblades got new swords in a similar style to the ones they were using, while Dana got an ornate wooden wand with golden patterns down it.

"Not bad, the wand is rechargeable and casts magic missile up to twenty times." Dana informed the group.

That wasn't too bad at all. It would save her a bunch of mana during fights that she could consume when they weren't in danger.

She already knew Magic Missile, so her proficiency with the spell would extend to the wand, allowing her to split the magic missile into multiple missiles, though the damage would drop. That would give her an advantage against weaker targets, and help with the rapid clearing abilities of the team.

Lotus handed out the next round of boxes, and surprisingly, none of the three needed to be exchanged.

Karl opened his reward box and found a beautiful crystal bow inside. Strangely, it had no string, but when he held it, he instantly understood the concept. If you made the motion to pull the nonexistent string, intending to fire it, the bow would create an arrow and fire. There was no mana cost, and no listed capacity of charges, it was just a magical bow.

However, he could attach skills to those magical arrows, and send them to a much more distant target. The range on Shred and Rend wasn't bad, but that was for the average battle. Anything beyond twenty metres, and they began to lose power. But attached to an arrow, they could fly two hundred metres, and they would still be fine.

"It looks like it's weapons day." Lotus laughed, waving a carved wooden staff around.

"It doesn't have to be a weapon." Tessa disagreed, holding up a red and gold metal shield that matched her robes.

"Smashing tools are still weapons." Lotus shrugged.

Larry laughed and passed a box to Alice, while Corbin moved to the ruby chest.

All three took out weapons, a gold wand with clear crystal inlay for Alice, and swords for both of the others.

"It looks like the reward system is judging us for our low damage output." Karl noted.

"It definitely is." Dana sighed.

She had [Destruction], plus two heavily upgraded golems and multiple attack spells, and it had still given her a weapon. Though, it was one to save mana, so perhaps that was the issue with her combat skills that it was concerned with.

Prince Corbin looked at his watch and frowned. "That took longer than I expected. We should head back to the entrance, where we know it's safe to rest. We will call it an early day because none of us will be up for another one of those trials today."

There were no objections to that. They had three solid hours of combat in that second room, and another long fight would simply be too much for them.

It was only when they reached the first room that they realized going back might be as much trouble as going forward. The door leaving the first room, that they had very deliberately left propped open, was closed again, and they were looking at the same scene that had triggered the last two trials.

"Alright, we will set up camp for the night in the last trial room in case the Goblins in the larger cave aren't the only ones around. They have a way of finding a way through the smallest cracks, and who

knows what's hidden under that moss. If the way back is sealed, we're as safe here as anywhere, but we will keep watch, in case the trials reset and not just the doors to the rooms."

"What is the watch schedule?" Karl asked as he prepared to head back into the second trial room.

Prince Corbin gestured to Karl. "We will use a two-person watch, so one can defend while the other wakes the group. One Commander with someone else. Karl, you and I will take first, who wants second?"

Alice nodded. "I will take second with Rose."

"And that puts me and Darryl third." Larry agreed.

"Everyone else has the night to rest, and we will cycle partners tomorrow if it's reasonable. Nobody wants the healers to be overtired."

Karl couldn't argue with that logic. When things were bad, it paid to have the clerics on your side fresh and ready to work. So, he set down his pack and took out his sleeping bag, wanting to have it ready to crawl into when he finished his watch.

Dana set up next to him while the clerics prepared dinner.

The Spellswords were about to take out ration packs when they noticed that there was a rather surprising amount of food available.

"Where did all that come from? Do you carry a whole kitchen?" Rose asked.

"No need for that. We can both use advanced food creation blessings. This is all magic, it didn't exist two minutes ago. Just get comfortable and it will be cooked in fifteen minutes." Tessa explained.

They were making some sort of stew with the ingredients they had conjured, so Karl offered up a large chunk of meat from one of the Awakened Rank reptiles they had fought that morning. Hawk had claimed the body, but it would take him forever to get through it all.

"Here, cut this thinly, and it should cook quickly enough." He offered.

Prince Corbin looked dubious about the mystery meat from nowhere, but he didn't say anything, and decided to just trust the clerics not to poison them all. Even if they did, they were the ones with the cleansing spells, so it was in their best interests to be safe with the food.

But they seemed to trust Karl's food supply, and as soon as he passed it over, Lotus began to cut paper thin slices that would cook in seconds in the stew pot.

Chapter 243 Corbin's Wisdom

After the meal was finished and the supplies were packed away, Karl sat down next to Prince Corbin, but facing the opposite door, so they could start their watch, which Karl honestly didn't expect to be anything but dull.

They were inside what appeared to be an enchanted tunnel system, and the only other room down the hall was sealed. If anything happened, it would be this one resetting, and if it happened on his watch, it would be a real pain, as they were still exhausted and mentally drained.

At first, neither of them said anything, they just silently watched their doors while everyone fell asleep. They had all zipped their backpacks into the sleeping bags with them, in case the trial activated, so they didn't end up leaving anything they might need on the outside.

This one had been a three-hour-long nightmare, and they had nearly depleted their water and snacks before the clerics had restocked everyone at dinner.

Once the others were asleep, Corbin turned his attention to Karl.

"You know, you're getting incredibly close to the Commander Rank, and I'm certain after that last instance that your spider is already there. Are you sure that you want to report that to the Church?"

They're the masters of guilt-tripping people into doing their bidding." The Prince whispered, knowing that Karl's hearing was extremely sensitive.

"Do you actually think that they won't know? There are two clerics with us that are moving through the Ascended Rank at breakneck pace, and last I heard the High Priests were considering having an Oracle look in on us." Karl whispered back.

"Good point. Just saying, there are other factions to consider other than the Church."

Karl smiled. "Like the Bureau of Elite Development? Who do you think Alice works for?"

Corbin sighed and shook his head. "You grew too fast, and you likely haven't even learned the polite and effective ways to say no to them yet. Commander is a big change, and if you don't stand up and demand the respect that goes with the rank when you get it, you'll find yourself in the suck, on terrible borderline suicide missions until one of them really is a suicide mission."

Karl nodded. "I'm bad at saying no to people when I get the puppy eyes from them. I will have to work on it, I guess. I just didn't expect everything to come at me so fast, you know? I'm still in my freshman year, it's only been a few months since the Divine Injection."

Corbin did a double take. "You're a freshman? I thought you were a baby-faced Junior, a Third Year student."

Karl shook his head. "No, both me and Dana started school at the same time."

The Royal Rank mage looked between the two and nodded. "Her I could see being the prodigy of the first year. She's at that mid to late Awakened Rank point that comes with a load of resources at the start of the freshman year.

I will talk to her later as well, make sure she doesn't fall for the big push that burns potential for speed. She's got it in her to go far if she just keeps grinding at it.

You two are good friends, so you might be able to look out for her after you advance again."

Karl nodded. "I will do what I can."

The two fell into comfortable silence, and when Corbin's watch blinked a few hours later, he went to wake up the next team.

Karl was awoken some time in the early morning by a gust of warm air on his face that had him instantly opening his eyes and preparing for battle. But it was just a gust of hot air from the morning meal being prepared, and he relaxed again, then summoned his armour to instantly get dressed.

The morning meal was oatmeal and diced fruit, which was absently devoured while everyone discussed the plan for the day.

"It seems likely that every major room we come across is going to have a challenge in it, so if one of them takes an inordinate amount of time, we will call it a day, no matter where we are.

We got through three rooms yesterday, and ideally, we would be able to do that again today, but I'm not willing to have anyone overextend themselves and end up dead." Corbin announced.

His team, himself included, had taken multiple beatings yesterday, so his cautions made sense, even if it meant that they would be exploring the area at a crawl.

"Aren't we going to try the first fight over again and get out of here?" Darryl asked, somewhat sullenly.

"With the rewards we got from that last battle? I don't think so. We will search this place, fight as much as we must, and perhaps you can go home Ascended. This isn't the sort of resource that comes along often, with multiple challenges all giving rewards.

It's somewhat like gaining access to a dozen challenges at the same time, we just have to fight our way through.

There is also a major source of magical energy somewhere in this mountain, and after what we have seen, I have reason to think that it might be one of the lost Divine Dungeons, the original repeatable challenges that the World Dragon set up for the first people to train."

Tessa and Lotus looked shocked, while the younger members just looked confused, other than Karl, who knew the history already.

"Aren't those a myth?" Rose asked.

Corbin shrugged. "Maybe, but I can say for certain that they exist. It's just not clear where they came from."

A trial dungeon more intense than what they had found? That last fight yesterday had been intense enough. Or perhaps it just gave better rewards. That would be nice.

Karl led the group out of the room this time, and everyone was a bit more relaxed with Thor covering them all in Refreshing Lightning. Not only for the defensive benefits, but for the fact that it kept their stamina refreshed and their minds relaxed.

The hallway wound down through the mountain for some time, with no sign of other rooms, until Karl heard an echo below them.

"There is a cavern beneath us. We're nearly underneath where we started. Somewhere between the first and second trial rooms. If we keep following this tunnel down, we should end up in the cavern soon." He quietly informed the others.

"Alright. Are you certain about the positioning?" Alice asked.

"I grew up in the mines. I have an excellent sense of direction underground. With the curve in the tunnel and the slope, I say two hundred more metres." Karl replied.

The echo and the sound of something banging became audible to everyone over the next hundred metres, then the faint blue bioluminescence lit up the mouth of the tunnel as it reached the cave.

Karl dropped to the ground and crawled to the last corner, with Rae hovering above him. The tunnel opened fifteen metres up the wall of a massive cavern, complete with its own biome full of fungi, grasses, and some sort of bipedal creature.

Karl focused on them, and did his best to get perfect details.

They looked like elves, but with ashy black skin, white hair, and glowing violet eyes. They had a whole city down there, made of the black stones of the cavern, and on the far side from where the tunnel ended, there was a massive glowing portal twenty metres tall.

Karl went back and relayed the information to the others, who were even more concerned than he was. They sounded like elves, and the species was known to be temperamental at the best of times, but if they were some sort of mutated monster version of the Elves, like the Red Goblins were to regular Goblins, they could be in real trouble.

Their group certainly wouldn't be able to take on a whole village, and they didn't want to leave that portal behind.

"So, what do we do? Is there a chance we can sneak through the less populated areas?" Karl asked.

"They're Elves, they will know right away if someone touches their plants. I doubt it will be possible to sneak past them." Lotus sighed.

"Then what do we do?" Alice sighed, looking toward the end of the tunnel. If that really was a dungeon portal, she wanted to go in.

Chapter 244 Find A Way

Karl considered the options for a moment. "I think that we might have missed a side tunnel. Do you remember how the other one was hidden? There might have been another like it. The city down there has dozens of tunnels leading out into the mountain, so what are the odds that the one that leads outside doesn't have a single branch?"

Alice smiled as she considered the options. "Well, it's worth checking before we try sneaking to another tunnel and hoping that it heads in the direction that we want."

The closest tunnel was only fifty metres away, but at ground level, and it had fairly regular traffic through it. That clearly wasn't an optimal choice.

But there was one about seventy metres to their left, and that one was halfway up the wall and also looked abandoned. It was also slightly lower, so he could have Rae make them a zip line and everyone could slide over.

Prince Corbin looked back down the tunnel. "Let's check all the walls back to the last room. If that doesn't show us any missed branches, we will try for another tunnel. I know Darryl and Muffin don't really understand how valuable that portal is, but we absolutely need to find our way to it."

Rose bristled at being called Muffin, but she fell into her position in the middle of the pack as Karl led them back up the tunnel, using his swords to check both walls for anything that wasn't as solid as it looked.

But after only a dozen paces, he paused.

"The tunnel isn't the same. We're headed down again." He informed the others.

It took them a moment to realize what was wrong with that statement. They had been on a steep decline all the way to the chamber, so they should be climbing back up the ramp now, but according to Karl, they weren't.

Corbin cast some sort of elementary spell, and a handful of marbles appeared in his hand. He scattered them on the floor, some in front, some behind the group, and they all rolled away.

"Both sides are downhill. We're definitely in an illusion, or the tunnel was changed." He agreed.

Karl closed his eyes and whistled softly, letting Rae's echolocation tell him what was around them.

"This way. Behind us is still the chamber, but the real upward tunnel is on our left. In front of us is solid rock. Everyone hold hands and follow me for a few steps." He instructed.

That sounded a bit foolish to the others, but they followed the instruction, and when Karl got four steps through what had looked and felt like solid rock, they were in a new tunnel.

He took a few more steps, then pulled everyone to them, and called Rae to her space, then brought her back out again. She couldn't close her eyes, so she was unable to get past the illusion on her own, even though she could clearly tell that what she was seeing was not right.

Once they were all in the new tunnel, Karl took out a strip of cloth from his bag, intended to be a bandana or dust mask, but it would do as a blindfold.

He needed a bit of eyesight to use Thermal Vision, and the folded over cloth made a hazy, but not completely impenetrable view, though he couldn't see anything in the dark with normal vision.

"Alright, illusion resistant eyewear engaged. I will lead us forward, just warn me if there is anything strange going on with my actions so that we don't get separated." He informed the group.

There was a short pause, and Karl turned back to the group, only to find them staring straight ahead. There wasn't anything there by his vision, though.

[Rae, what are they looking at?] He asked.

[No clue. They all look pretty freaked out, though. Maybe swat at the air with your sword or something.] She suggested.

Karl did, and everyone started moving again, looking around as if expecting to be ambushed.

"I'm pretty sure we're still in the illusion. I didn't see what you do, and when I waved my sword around, you all came back to me." Karl explained.

"If it even got Corbin in its trap, perhaps we should find another alternate way." Larry suggested.

"It does seem as if they put in significant effort to trap this tunnel, doesn't it?" Karl agreed.

[And there are elves in the tunnel behind us, I can hear them.] Rae added.

"Going back is no longer an option, there is someone in the tunnel we came from. Stay close, and ignore anything that you see. Close your eyes and hold on to someone's clothes if you have to, just keep following me." Karl ordered.

He led the group down through a set of winding corridors until he sensed a door on the left, then he pulled everyone inside and closed the door behind them.

They were in another of the brazier rooms, and everyone was giving him strange looks.

"Sorry, the Elves were catching up to us, and this was the first door I found." He whispered, motioning for silence.

But they continued to wait, and nothing happened. There was no magical writing, and the sound of running footsteps and swearing in the corridors faded after a few minutes. Then it returned, as the patrol retraced their steps, but they didn't stop outside the door, and just kept moving back toward the tunnel mouth that Karl's group had stopped near.

"What do we do now? There's no second exit from this room, and there's a whole city of them out there." Dana asked.

Prince Corbin sighed, then smiled. "I have either the dumbest or most brilliant idea ever. When the guards passed by the second time, I managed to record them for my disguise spell. I can disguise everyone as the patrol, and we can just walk through to our goal."

Alice chuckled. "Definitely one of the dumbest. How are we supposed to get back out once they notice we've gone through the portal? You know they will have it under security, and the disguise spell doesn't last long, so we won't be able to spend time scouting, even if we spoke their language."

"How about we use the disguise spell to look for a way out? At the least, they wouldn't attack on sight if they mistook us for guards." Larry offered.

Corbin raised his hand, and suddenly, everyone looked like the dark skinned Elven guards. They were all the same height, with the same hairstyles as they had before, but it was at least enough to get them through a cursory examination.

"Alright, let's go see if we can find a way to the portal." The Royal Ranked mage instructed.

Karl sent Rae back to her space to help with the disguise, and opened the door, only to find that they were no longer in a hallway, but a large courtyard in the middle of a fantastic city.

His first instinct was to close his eyes, and let echolocation tell him the truth, but when he did, it still seemed to be real.

He turned back to the group. "What do you think the chances are that we stepped into a trial and didn't notice? We didn't get a notification in here, but what if that was because I was leading us blind through the illusions when we entered?"

Prince Corbin stepped up beside him and looked out at the city, which was made up of twisted black spires, with a bright blue sky overhead, and alien looking plants growing everywhere.

"Well, we aren't in the underground city, that's for certain. Let me check with a locating spell." He whispered, in case something nearby could hear them.

He cast the spell and shook his head. "We're definitely inside a trial. Either that or we're more than a thousand kilometres from where we were yesterday. I can't locate any of our other Clansmen, and there is nothing coming in over the radio."

Alice took a device out of her pack and nodded. "We're not in contact with any government signals. I would say that we're almost certainly inside a Trial of some sort. What does the outside of the building we're in look like?"

Karl stuck his head out, and found that the door was black oak on the outside, and they were in one of the many black spires.

"The same as the ones you can see across the road. We're on the main floor of a spire." Karl explained.

Alice nodded. "Which means if we leave, this entry point will probably vanish, and we will have to complete whatever sort of trial we're in before we can exit. This sort of situation matches with the reports that we got from other Elites, but they reported losing huge amounts of time while they were in strange trials, or simply didn't remember anything."

"Great. So is there any way to see what sort of mission we're on?" Larry asked.

There was one sure way to tell.

[Quest status]

Chapter 245 Enter The Dungeon

[Quest Status]

[1 ongoing quest] Find and enter the dungeon portal.

[Conditions] Survival

Karl looked at the simple listing from the System and frowned. Find and enter the portal without dying. Yeah, that was basically what they were trying to do anyhow. There wasn't much of a reason to issue them a quest for it.

Unless they had been in one all along, and misunderstood, thinking that they had exited. If they had entered a trial when they left the last room, or worse, hadn't left the first one that they had entered at all, and were simply moving around areas of it, their entire experience could be an illusion.

Karl looked outside, using every form of vision that he could, but found that the only people around were a scattering of the dark-skinned Elves.

[I can still sense the portal, even if the city changed.] Rae informed him from her space.

"Rae says the portal is still nearby. Should we get a move on and see if we can make it there? I don't know what happened to the city, but I believe we're in a Trial, and it's still the goal." Karl whispered.

There were some shared looks of concern, but after a moment, both Alice and Corbin motioned for him to lead the way out of the room and through the city toward where he thought that the portal should be.

Their disguises weren't perfect, but they blended in well with the locals, who had a very eclectic fashion sense, with the only rule seeming to be that it must be black clothing with white hair.

They didn't speak as they moved through the city streets, headed for the centre of town, where everyone could soon see the glow of the immense portal. There were more people moving their way by the minute, as if there were some type of big event going on, and Lotus was getting excited.

"I speak Elvish, and while their accent is archaic and harsh, I can hear them saying that the portal is open. That must mean they're going to let people through." She whispered.

Alice laughed softly. "If we can just walk through the portal, I am throwing a party when we get back. How well do you think you can emulate the accent?"

"Well enough to get us in. Trust me." Lotus replied as she came to walk beside Karl at the front of the group.

They just followed the flow of people to the portal, hoping that the disguise spell held and wasn't seen through. Everyone in town was going the same way, toward the man in the black and white patterned robe that was shouting something in ancient Elvish.

"He says they're an outreach program, and they are looking for volunteers who are willing to risk their lives to prove that they have what it takes to be the champion of the Dungeon. I don't know what that means, but I'm going with it."

Before anyone could speak, Lotus threw her hands in the air and waved at the man in the black and white robes. He smiled and pointed at her, while the Elves all looked stunned that someone was volunteering without asking for any more details.

Lotus made a gesture that they were all together in a group, and the man motioned them up onto the platform where the Dungeon Portal was.

[Only nine you? The options are five or ten.] The man asked Lotus in Elven.

[This will be good enough for the ten-person challenge. Have faith.] She replied.

The man in the odd cleric robes, black on the left, white on the right, smiled and patted her on the head, then gestured to the portal for them to enter.

[The first volunteers for the new Dungeon are now entering. May the blessings of the Ancients be upon them.] The man announced as they walked inside, and Lotus almost stopped to ask him questions, but didn't want to give herself away with her foreign accent.

Lotus and Karl led the group through, and they stepped into a strange swamp with crystalline trees, and groups of snake monsters with vaguely humanoid torsos.

"Naga." Lotus announced in awe.

"Are they powerful?" Karl asked.

"They can be. They're semi-intelligent, brutal, and they use magic."

Hawk looked out over the surroundings from his space and gave a squawk of pure hatred in Karl's mind.

[Evil, they're pure evil. Nothing but swamps and water magic. This place should not be allowed to exist.]

After his close call with the Yeti Clans, Hawk's hatred for water magic seemed to have gotten more intense, but as Karl looked out over the swamps, he saw potential.

There were leaders at the Commander, and high Commander Ranks, countless Awakened Drones and Ascended warriors, as well as lesser subspecies that Karl believed were common grade and may or may not pose a threat.

Lotus was the only one of them that knew much about the species, and she hadn't mentioned the others, so Karl assumed that they were most likely common grade creatures, though he could see them using simple water magic, so they weren't completely harmless.

The scaled, almost human - shaped upper bodies of the Naga were throwing Karl's sense of scale off. Most of them only had two arms, but some had four, and they all had fully reptilian heads, like a Cobra's, with the widened hood. Only, theirs didn't only flare as a threat, it was held wide all the time, either on purpose or by evolution.

They came in a huge variety of sizes, from torsos the size of a child to as large as that of an Ogre. The Naga also wore some clothing, and jewellery, while carrying weapons as needed, which convinced everyone in the group that they were indeed an advanced species.

Karl didn't want to send Hawk up and draw the entire area toward them, but from the entrance, they could see quite a bit of the village.

Karl focused on the Quest Status again, now that they were inside, and found that it had updated.

[Clear the Naga Dungeon and eliminate the Naga King.]

That would definitely have to be done in order. But there was something strange about this place, other than the fact that it was full of Naga, or that it shouldn't exist in the location where they found it, or the weather in the Swamp.

Dana was the first to put it together.

"They can clearly see us standing here. Why haven't they attacked?" She asked.

Corbin smiled at her. "It's a unique feature of the Dungeons. I've been in a few before, and as long as none of your group leave the starting platform, nothing will attack. Once we move forward, they will engage as usual, and we will have to remain out of sight of patrols and other groups, while preventing them from calling for assistance."

[See, this place is evil.] Hawk reminded Karl.

[Actually, I have a great idea. Why don't you stay on the shoulder of one of the mages, which will keep you away from the fighting, and then you can throw fireballs at all the water magic users without attracting too many?] Karl suggested.

[Oh, that's good. I will stay with the Dana Mage. If I stand on her head, I will be the same height as everyone else.]

[Maybe just on her shoulder. Your claws are sharp, and she's not wearing a helmet.]

Hawk agreed to compromise, and went to stand on her backpack to look over her head.

Karl called Rae and Thor out, and the group prepared to move forward, to where the first group of Naga were waiting for them.

As Corbin had said, the moment that they stepped off the platform, the Naga took action, shifting into an attack formation and preparing to engage the group.

The creatures didn't seem to know what they should do with the presence of a Lightning Cerro. If snake faces could look confused, that was the vibe that Karl was getting from them as Thor charged, then horror as they realized that he didn't have to spear them with his horns to cause damage.

The Naga twisted in between the large upper horns on Thor's head, but the Cerro just violently shook his head back and forth, whipping the unfortunate warrior from side to side and leaving it unconscious on the ground.

The others tried to restrain Thor to rescue their teammate, but they were only Awakened Rank fighters, and a pair of fireballs from Hawk took them out before they could even get close.

Corbin nodded in satisfaction. "Everyone stay close, and try not to make any noise. We will grab the groups one at a time. There are no noncombatants in a dungeon trial, they're all here to fight, and the normal standard is to eliminate them all and see what sort of rewards you get.

It can be quite extensive, but these instances are rare."

Chapter 246 Loot Now?

Karl touched the first body, intending to roll the creature over to check if it had anything decent. But as soon as he touched it, the body vanished, and a small stack of coins was left on the ground.

"What the hell was that?" He whispered.

"Oh, it's one of those dungeons. This will be spectacular. Touch every monster that we kill, and try not to kill any of them out of reach. It will give us loot as we go, and we can split it how we want. The reward could be money, items, clothing, nearly anything, I've even heard of them turning into food. So don't miss any, the item is usually based on the power of the monster." Corbin informed them.

Dana whistled softly as she followed the Prince's instructions, and held up a blue coral ring.

Hawk grumbled in discontent, and Karl was almost certain that it was a water elemental buff.

"Does anyone know how to identify these?" Dana asked.

Tessa held out her hand, and a golden glow surrounded the ring for a moment before the cleric looked startled.

"It's a Common Grade ring of pure water. Like the spell that we use to make water with meals, but anyone wearing it can use it if they have the mana." She explained, then handed it back to Dana.

It wasn't like the cleric needed it.

Dana took off her glove and slid it on her finger, then replaced the glove as the Spellwords gave her envious looks.

"It's just the first fight, and a common grade item. Just wait, we're bound to get all sorts of good things out of here with the variety of classes in our group." Prince Corbin promised.

He threw a spell at a nearby group of Naga, killing one instantly, and making the others run toward them. It was brilliant, and almost as if some of the intelligence of the monsters had been removed to make them respond in a predictably aggressive manner, even when they should have been smart enough to just run when someone was instantly decapitated.

The Spellblades and Karl were on the group the next second, cutting them down, then tapping the corpses to see what happened.

More coins, and a pair of black leather gloves that certainly weren't anything the Naga had been wearing were the results, leaving everyone impressed by the level of magic that it must have taken to create something like this.

"I believe that these Dungeons are a creation of the World Dragon, a form of Divine Magic. The risks might be immense, as the enemy groups will contain opponents that can challenge Corbin because he's with us, but the rewards should be similarly great, as the World Dragon took care of the people." Tessa informed the group in a serious tone that reminded them she was a Cleric first, and knew all the essentials of Church Doctrine.

"Step back into the long grass." Lotus warned quietly, sending everyone scurrying for cover.

Fortunately, there were no bodies left to give them away because there was a patrol of larger, four-armed Naga coming, and by Karl's guess there were four Commanders and either a high Commander or Prince Ranked leader.

Corbin gestured that he would take the leader with Alice's Golem as his guard, which left Karl and Thor to hold off the others while the ambush worked its magic.

Of course, Larry and Alice were going to have to help with the leader, but with Rae and her Golems on the team, they weren't completely outmatched by the other four guards.

The Naga were scaly, but not hard scaly like Thor, they were supple and flexible, meaning hard to hit as they avoided Karl's strikes.

These guards also had a water barrier around them that had enraged Hawk, who was furiously hurling fireballs at them as his Flaming Body surrounded both him and Dana.

Karl didn't think that Hawk had even realized he could do that, he was too focused on eliminating the water magic from existence, working through his trauma one charred corpse at a time.

At this point, even Rae felt bad for the angry bird, and did her best to let him get the last hit on a failing shield, before having her Golems ambush from behind to take out the targets.

The Golems were also subtly different than he remembered, Karl noticed. They had plates of black metal armour on their torsos, and encasing their already dangerous forelimbs like blades. That had to be Dana's Golem Armour type ability. [Durable Constructs] he believed it was called.

Combined with the Lightning, it was incredibly effective, and the Naga were being decimated by the two Golems. The agile warriors that Karl had such a hard time hitting were no match for the eight legged Golems, and Karl wondered if he should invest in [Haste] when he had enough skill points.

For Commander Rank Rae, that would be forty percent more speed, and that should nearly eliminate the chance that the Naga would be able to dodge them.

It might not be the optimal choice, but it probably wouldn't be the wrong choice either. He would get more points as he adventured, and now that he had a taste of it, Karl fully intended to keep going.

Bob Mackenzie had the right idea. It was better to be free out here than under someone's supervision. But unlike Bob, Karl was happy to have a reliable group with him.

Karl kept the warriors occupied while the Spider Golems went for their backs, and the two Awakened Rank Spellwords hesitated. They couldn't take one of those hits like Karl could.

Though Karl was parrying the majority of the flurry of attacks while the beasts took care of business, and Dana's Golems did their best every time they were resummoned after taking enough damage to have their combat ability reduced, the two boys didn't dare approach and risk a misstep that would mean instant death.

Tessa couldn't even hold out against the Naga patrol, and had been forced to retreat from Thor's back. The Spellblades had a Commander Rank barrier over them, courtesy of Alice, but that wouldn't last long against opponents with blades in all four hands and magic on their side.

The mages did throw some spells, but Awakened Rank magic against Commander Rank beasts didn't do much.

The leader of the patrol fell just before the last of the patrol team, and Karl took a moment to tap the Commander Rank corpses.

"Oh, there are more leather gloves. Tessa, what are those good for?" He asked, tossing them to the Cleric.

"Awakened Rank gloves of watery death. Enhanced water magic damage." She replied, then carefully patted Hawk's flaming head as he glared at the item.

"They're just gloves, they don't make their own water magic. Relax." She consoled him.

Hawk was feeling better after killing a bunch of water magic users, but Tessa was pretty good at preening his head, so he kept up the act just a little longer.

Karl suspected that he was learning bad habits from the others.

"This is pretty good stuff." Dana noted as they prepared to move forward.

Corbin shook his head. "That's the Dungeon equivalent of trash. It's two full Ranks below the monsters that dropped them.

When these were originally made, the System Users who fought in them would have had full sets of gear at their own Rank, and they would be looking for rare items, and specific benefits.

Times were different then, and everyone was so much more powerful."

After clearing three more groups without gaining anything but a water orb, which was a basic magical crafting resource, and some coins, the path led them to a large open area where a massive four - armed Naga was standing.

It was wearing strings of bones and shells, and it carried a staff with a glowing blue crystal in one hand, with trinkets in the others.

Some sort of Shaman, Karl decided.

It was also at the Commander Rank, and the lower ranked members of the team sighed. They would be basically sidelined again, and the best rewards would predictably go to the strongest among them.

"Alright, we know how to fight together. Dana, keep your golems back to protect the others, just in case." Prince Corbin announced as he activated a spell that let him leap into battle with a single stride.

Karl and the beasts were a step behind him. Hawk had moved to stand on Thor's back so he was closer to the action, and so he didn't draw attention to Dana.

Rae was blended into the lichen covered crystalline plants around the platform, and circling behind the Shaman when the first strike landed, and the enormous Naga leader activated a spell that called out a dozen ethereal Naga spirits.

Karl swiped at one, and it dissipated when it was cleaved in half.

"Dana, you guys are on the spirits, they're Awakened Rank." He called as he sent a [Shred] toward the shaman.

Chapter 247 Shaman Champion

The Naga Shaman was hopelessly outmatched, Karl thought as he moved to surround the creature, letting Corbin take the front, while he and Thor took opposite sides. It was six Commander Rank attackers, including the Golems, and one Royal Rank mage against a single Commander Rank Shaman, but the creature didn't seem as concerned as Karl thought it should.

Instead, it surrounded itself with a vortex of water, forcing Karl and the beasts back, then created water tornados that moved erratically around the platform.

Hawk saw that the attacks were only about six metres tall, so he took off from Thor's back and began to bombard the Shaman inside, while the others hurled spells at its protective barrier while dodging the swirling water attacks.

The entire battle was chaos, with everyone running around, attacking the spirits when they got in the way, as the three Awakened Rank members couldn't control them all, and doing their best to land a hit on the Shaman.

The spell would fluctuate with every attack from Corbin, but it wasn't falling, and Karl was unable to tell how effective Hawk's fireball attacks were.

Darryl failed to notice an attack and was hurled most of the way across the platform before catching himself on one of Thor's horns to prevent being thrown down the cliff on the far side.

He wasn't seriously injured, but he was now surrounded by a water barrier that was slowing his actions, and threatened to leave him in the path of more vortexes.

Then one of Karl's strikes managed to cut a notch in the protective spell, leaving the Naga momentarily visible. The next attacks by Corbin and Alice did the same, and they were back in the fight as the barrier fell.

The Spider Golems were on the back of the Shaman the second the barrier fell, and Karl noticed that there was still a faint water barrier over the Naga, which had been whittled away by Hawk's dedicated efforts.

Having to go through those two barriers, one after another, would have sucked, and Hawk had saved them a lot of headache, with the Shaman now hurling offensive spells at them, both water and Ice Magic types.

It was definitely Commander Rank in maximum power, but it didn't seem to run out of mana, and it just wouldn't die.

Over the course of the next minute, the Shaman was hit dozens of times while its barrier was down, and while it was bleeding heavily, it was still fighting. They were doing damage, that was clear, and it wasn't healing unnaturally quickly, but it just wouldn't die.

It was beginning to slow down, and the spells were coming more infrequently, but Karl got the feeling that this was not the end, but the buildup to a larger attack. So, when the creature's mana surged, his first instinct was to order everyone back.

"Big attack coming." He called, unsure what it would look like.

The mana buildup turned into a surge of water, first spiking out, then rotating around the room in curved waves.

Karl began to move, avoiding the waves, which were pulling away from the Naga Shaman as they travelled.

He could see everyone going in, but Hawk and Rae were both thinking the same thing.

[Trap]

"Get clear of the waves, then back away. It's a trap." Karl called as the Naga sent out a shotgun blast of ice pellets around itself.

Karl tanked it with Flame Body, while Alice and the other Commanders absorbed it with their shields. The Awakened Rank fighters hit the ground to get under the attack, while Rae used her golems as a shield and Thor turned his head down so it didn't hit his eyes.

Then the Spider Golems were on the Shaman's back again, and Karl drove his blade deep into the creature's belly as Corbin leapt over him to go for the creature's throat.

The Naga Shaman fell into a slumped pile of coiled body, with its arms toward Corbin in one last desperate attempt to grab and strangle him.

"Well, that went as well as expected. Are there any injuries?" Karl asked as he realized the monster was truly dead, and wasn't reacting to the Golems continuing to stab it.

Rae eventually called them off, and Corbin tapped the body, making it vanish, and a small pile of items appear on the floor.

Tessa stepped up to cast her identification magic, but there was one item that caught Karl's attention.

[Core of Ice]

It was a small crystal, unassuming among the dozens of other small gems, but it was one of the items Rae needed to make a concoction with the moss and crystals she had gotten earlier in the Goblin Cave.

There were multiple piles of cloth, a staff with a blue orb that looked like the one that the Shaman had been using, and an assortment of coins and gems.

Alice picked up the staff and frowned at it.

"That's odd, I can't use it. I can use water magic, though." She muttered.

Then she handed it to Dana, who also frowned and shook her head. She passed it to Lotus, whose eyes lit up with excitement.

"Oh, this is pretty good. I like this stick." She announced.

Once she realized that everyone was waiting for a description, she continued.

"It lets me use the shaman's signature water vortex spell, the wandering tornado things."

The other items were all Ascended rank cloth armour, but the fashion wasn't bad, and the enchantments on them were strong, so they were split between Dana and Rose, who were the only ones who suited the fashion. It seemed that either because it was a female shaman, or the Naga didn't have legs, the armour was created with a long skirt.

When they put the armour, which was a significant status improvement over what they were wearing, which was mostly common and Awakened grade cloth, which was all that the mage class could wear, Karl couldn't help but do a double take.

The Naga style was somewhat modest and elegant, with full flared sleeves, but covered in gold and jewels for decoration, and the robes gave them both a regal look that made them seem more like fashionable debutantes and less like students on a mission.

Rose's was shorter, and slit up one side for mobility with matching cloth pants, while Dana's hung well past her knees, but was folded in the front of the skirt like a Kimono, so it would expand as her legs moved.

"Wait, there's more." Corbin laughed as he held up one last piece of cloth.

Dana laughed as she saw it, but Karl didn't realize right away what it was. An ancient style cloth chest binding, the precursor to the modern sports bra, and it was enchanted.

Corbin was holding it out to Rose, so it must be good for her stats, but Tessa was snickering.

The Spellsword put it on, hanging the cloth over her neck to let the item equip if it was able, and her chest went as flat as a board.

"The chest binding of smooth movement. Now, isn't that better than having to wear an uncomfortable binding and having your chest in the way of your swing?" Corbin teased.

"Darryl has bigger breasts than I do in this thing, do you have any idea what that will do to my fragile pride?"

If it didn't add melee range attack damage, I would trade with you. You're getting a bit spare in your old age, you could use it as much as I can." Rose retorted.

Karl walked over and picked up the Ice Core for Rae, and quickly assembled the ingredients needed into a bowl, being careful not to mess up her art exhibit on the floor when he stole the moss and crystals.

It could be used by her, Hawk and Karl, with the chance to grant them a new skill of [Paralytic Strikes], which Karl was eager to find out about.

As the three ingredients settled into the bowl, they quickly turned to a paste, dissolving the moss and the crystals on contact. So, Karl split it into three portions. Each was a large vial, so it should be enough, he hoped.

"We will take a break here and regain some stamina and mana. I suggest eating some trail mix and getting a drink while we have time." Alice announced once everything from the last fight had been distributed.

They were going to need the rest after that strangely durable shaman.

Chapter 248 Stunned

Once everyone sat down to rest, the three beasts returned to their spaces, where they would recover the fastest, and Karl began to meditate, recovering his energy and mental focus, though his stamina had been recovered by the refreshing lightning.

Hawk and Rae both immediately downed their potions, before Hawk began to splutter and curse in Karl's mind as the cold liquid reached his stomach.

[You fed me Ice Element] he complained.

[It has a chance to teach you Paralyzing Strikes.] Karl explained, hoping to mollify the angry bird.

The mixture did seem to have some effect on him, and Hawk's claws became a bit more crystalline and his body a bit more powerful, but it seemed he didn't gain any skills from it.

Rae didn't complain about the potion, it had the comforting feeling of natural darkness, but she also didn't gain the skill.

Karl considered giving her the last dose, but it did say that it was good for him as well, and there was a chance they could get more of the Ice Cores now that they knew what it looked like. They might even get another in this dungeon, as it was an Ascended Rank ingredient.

So, he downed the potion, and felt the cold flow through his veins, and then merge with the [Refreshing Lightning] that he had gained from Thor.

[New Skill Gained: Stun]

That wasn't what the Identification skill said, but he would take it. A stunning strike was something that the group lacked, and as he was the one who knew it, he could use [Skill Book] to record it and earn himself some brownie points later, when he had gotten himself in trouble and needed a way out.

It would also change his combat tactics. [Stun] was a melee range skill, which wasn't a big deal, but if he led with it, then switched targets, the Spider Golems could ambush the helpless target. He didn't know how long it would last, or how well creatures would resist it, but even a few seconds under their not so gentle ministrations was enough for the Spider Golems to take out most targets.

After a few minutes' rest, Alice and Corbin prepared to move out again. They would be leading the group, to attract the groups of Naga with their longer ranged attacks, but Alice had an extra instruction this time.

"Let Thor rest for a bit. We're going to need to sneak through a few areas, and it's not going to be easy for him. It's swampland, and while a Lightning Cerro has no problem moving through that, it's far from a silent process." She explained.

"Alright, he can take an extended rest. I will leave Rae in there as well, but she will call her Golems out when we need them. If we're going for stealth, the smaller the group, the better." Karl agreed.

After that, all the Golems were dismissed until the next fight, and the group began to make their way through the dense foliage of the swamp, following a Naga patrol route, but staying out of sight among the taller plants that grew between the crystalline trees.

The next group was standing in a clearing beside the road, and Karl checked in with Rae to be sure that she knew what the plan was.

She was safely hid in her space, away from the swamp water, but Hawk came out to use Dana as a mobile fire platform. She would be well away from the actual combat, and her backpack put him at just the right height to see over her head.

Corbin nodded, and the fighters spread out to ambush the enemies, one Commander Rank spell caster and four Awakened warriors.

On his signal, Karl charged into combat, leaping silently out of the water and hitting the spell caster with [Stun] before it could even react.

There was no visible effect, but it wasn't moving at all, even as Alice's wind blades and Corbin's enchanted sword sliced it apart.

The Spider Golems went straight for the warriors when Rae summoned them out, and the entire group was eliminated without a sound.

That was how the next hour worth of fights went. A quick ambush from the swamp, and then loot the bodies and retreat out of sight before the patrols noticed and raised an alarm.

Then they found themselves at a crossroads. There were two patrols, both coming their way, and another platform with another oversized Naga.

"We will split. The patrol on the right is all Awakened with an Ascended Leader, so Darryl, Rose and Dana, you're on that with Thor. The other is a Commander with Ascended members, so the rest of us will focus on that until Thor returns.

Once those are done, we will deal with the oversized Naga. I don't see any other Naga in the area, so this might be the end of the Dungeon. Some of the dungeons are massive, others are small like this." Corbin explained.

Karl nodded. "Make the call, and I will charge one group with the Spider Golems while Thor goes for the others."

"Wait just a little, we want them all to be within range of the clerics. It will be two fights, but I don't want to split the group completely." He replied.

Prince Corbin was a careful strategist, and Karl could tell that his caution was beginning to annoy Alice at some points, but she agreed on this one. Sending the lower ranks too far away could put them in danger if there was some ambush that they had missed.

Corbin counted down from five on his fingers, and Karl called Thor out in front of the second group as he launched his attack.

The Commander in the patrol didn't seem too surprised to see him coming, but when the Spider Golems suddenly appeared at his shoulders as Rae left her space, it was certainly caught unaware, and reeled back, coiling its long body underneath itself for balance.

Not far enough, as Karl didn't care if his first strike was to a vital area. [Stun] hit the lower body of the Commander, and it went lethargic for a moment, just long enough for the Spider Golems and Rae to swarm it.

The Commander had four arms, but the upper two were quickly immobilized as the Golems stabbed at them and used their multiple limbs to pull them back at an awkward angle.

Rae was more practical, and went for the long tail, slicing it as many times as she could with [Lacerate] to make the creature bleed profusely.

It was still trying to parry Karl's blade with its lower arms, and Karl mentally calculated that [Stun] was only of limited effect on creatures above his rank, slowing them, but not completely immobilizing them unless he got a solid hit.

He had expected the other patrol members to be coming for him by now, but they were occupied with Alice's Golem and Prince Corbin's blade.

Karl briefly wondered where Hawk was in all this, and then recalled that he was perched on Dana's backpack and not given explicit orders, so he was probably still there. That should be more than enough damage to deal with the second patrol.

Karl didn't push for more attacks, he only kept the Commander busy as Rae and her Golems tore it to shreds, letting it collapse into Karl's arms and vanish into a pile of gems and a chain mail armour piece.

The Awakened Team had no problems with their group, and they were only seconds behind on the kills. That probably meant that Hawk was slacking, as there was only one Ascended member with the patrol, but there were no injuries, so all was well that ended well.

Everyone turned to where the oversized Naga was standing on the platform. There were tents around the perimeter, which suggested it might not be alone, but their fight hadn't attracted any of them, and only the one was out in the open.

"Do we have a plan? Those tents are making me nervous." Tessa noted as they checked the loot.

She had just identified the armour from the Commander, and she was looking at the chain mail coat in appreciation.

"It reduces casting cost by fifteen percent while wielding a shield, it's perfect." She noted.

"Very nice. I don't think that any of us will begrudge you." Karl replied.

"Even when it's a Commander Rank armour piece?" Tessa asked, looking around the group.

Prince Corbin chuckled. "You're the only one of us that even owns a shield."

She had gotten it yesterday, but he had a point. None of the others had a shield or any intention to use one.

"Alright, up armoured Cleric it is."

Karl smiled at her enthusiasm. "That's probably for the best if you're going to keep riding Thor into combat."

Chapter 249 Naga Dungeon Complete

Prince Corbin moved forward to scout the area around the final oversized Naga in the dungeon. This was likely to be the hardest fight of all, and it was almost certainly designed for ten fighters of equal power, but none of them really knew what quality of fighters the black and white robed man at the dungeon entrance meant.

The fact that they didn't recognize those robes or the God that they belonged to concerned Tessa, as they looked like a cleric's robes, but in the middle of a city full of potential enemies, they weren't going to start asking questions.

Corbin returned to the group and made a quick diagram in the dirt. "There is a Naga of some sort, oversized like the last one, and at a similar power level. The tents around the Naga boss are empty, but I suspect that won't be the case once we attack. Either there will be Naga summoned into them, or portals will open to bring in assistants.

The outfits make the oversized Naga look like a Royal, and this one seems to have male anatomy, a more muscular upper body, wide pecs instead of rounded breast analogues. So, I would call it a Naga King.

I don't know what it will do once we're in combat, but there are weapons all over the platform."

Karl nodded along as he took in the information. "So, it sounds like it's a melee combat type of opponent. Avoidance will be key in taking it down. With four arms, it will be able to fight like multiple opponents, and the tail is likely to be dangerous as well.

That shouldn't be anything that we can't deal with if it's near the same level as the last one. But the issue will be when more Naga show up. We should try turning it around so that the mages and less armoured combatants can stand near the stairs, away from the tents."

Alice drew a mark on the diagram. "If we're here, it should be good, provided that the Naga King can be turned around. We just need to worry about the reinforcements coming down the road instead of from the tents.

But will the two of you be alright at the far side?"

"Three of us. I will take Thor with me and Corbin. That should be enough to keep it facing us, I hope. If the reinforcements come from behind you, withdraw your Golems to hold them off." Karl suggested.

Corbin smiled. "Good planning skills. I hope that your skills match up to your confidence."

Karl chuckled as he looked at his skill points. He had enough for another upgrade, so if things got really bad, he would grant himself another skill to make up for what he was lacking.

Alice looked toward the sky. "We should send Hawk up to scout the area and make certain that we didn't miss anything. Now that we're almost out of enemies, it should be safe enough."

Karl motioned for him to comply, and Hawk took off, circling the swamps searching for opponents.

[Nothing, just that big one.] He confirmed.

[Stay up high, and you can join the fight after we get him turned.] Karl replied.

"Hawk says we're good."

Karl and Corbin rushed past the King, like they were going to attack its back, and Karl summoned Thor from his space once they were in place, getting the fight started with the King facing away from the ramp.

The others joined from the steps, with Rae's Golems moving forward to engage from the sides, far enough forward that the King wouldn't have to turn around to look at them.

That made it look like a five on one from its point of view until the mages and lower ranked Spellswords began their ranged bombardment.

The wounds stacked up at an insane rate as Corbin focused all his energy on parrying all four swords and keeping the King from landing a single strike.

It was becoming a lopsided battle, and Hawk's fireballs were searing away scales all over the creature's body.

As they had expected, the King eventually cast a barrier over itself and let out a battle cry that made dozens of Naga appear on the path toward the platform and from the tents.

The Spider Golems turned to face the ones from the nearest tents, while Karl dealt with the few that were behind them.

The mages would be engaged for a while, but between Rae and the Spider Golems, the Naga Warriors who were summoned weren't a major threat. It was the steady stream of enemies coming up the ramps that was the real issue.

At the moment, Corbin was stuck on defence, so the only ones landing any hits on the boss was Rae, while Thor and Karl dealt with the additional fighters.

Lacerate was doing its job, and the floor was covered in Naga blood, but the boss wasn't showing many signs of weakening as it threw down its small swords and grabbed two larger ones from the ground, holding each in two hands from the same side of its body.

Even Corbin couldn't properly parry those with the brute strength of the much larger Naga King, and Karl was forced to roll out of the way of a downward slash.

The moment that the last of the warriors from the tents fell, the tents were blown back by a wave of water magic as a spectral version of the shaman boss joined the fight.

[Take this, evil water snakes!] Hawk called happily as he dive-

bombed the platform.

It took Karl a second to realize what he meant. There were what appeared to be Naga eggs in one of the tent sites, and Hawk was going for them.

[No!] Karl called out an instant too late, as Hawk tossed his prized snack into the mental space.

It landed in the fourth beast space, which immediately filled with the strange swamps and long grasses of the Dungeon, while the egg sunk into the mud and waters.

[MY SNACK!] Hawk wailed as he realized what had happened.

[Get your brain back in the fight. We're not done yet.] Karl reminded him. He would remove the egg later, and the space should reset.

Or at least he hoped that would work. He managed to take Thor and Rae's eggs back out after putting them in the space.

But now the ghostly Shaman was building up to their wave attack as the spectral form entwined itself in a defensive formation with the King.

Karl launched himself forward, narrowly avoiding an incoming strike from the King, and hit the Shaman with a [Stun] attack.

The building attack stopped, and the mages unleashed a wave of attacks on it, accompanied by Hawk's frustrated fireballs.

With its major attack interrupted, the spectre needed time to recover, and this form was far weaker than its original body had been. It was already beginning to become incorporeal under the weight of attacks that the Spider Golems were sending its way.

The King slammed the ground with its blades, sending an Earthquake in all directions as the spectre was eliminated by the concerted efforts of the group.

Karl jumped, and Thor counterattacked with his own Earthquake to keep himself stable, but the others were thrown to the ground as the King was surrounded by a red barrier.

It was going berserk, and its attacks were increasing in speed, shattering the barriers over Corbin, who was on one knee. Karl attacked from the other side to draw its attention while the Spellblade recovered, but even his magically enhanced strength and large blade were no match for the enraged boss, and he was tossed to the ground on the third strike.

He threw himself to the side to dodge and continued his defence, keeping the King facing away from the mages, who were slower to recover, and who had taken a fair bit of damage from the Earthquake.

The bleeding was taking its toll on the boss, and the red barrier was fading, along with the King's attack power, by the time that it turned back to Corbin.

Karl had bought enough time for the Spellblade to find an opening, and he drove his blade deep into the creature's chest, where a human's heart would be.

Blood flew everywhere, coating Corbin and the platform around him as the boss collapsed, and then the corpse vanished, leaving behind a large golden chest.

[Dungeon Complete] a haunting voice spoke through the area, leaving everyone relieved and panting for breath as they stared at the chest.

"Who do we choose to open it?" Tessa asked as she cast a [Refresh] spell on the group.

"I say we let Prince Corbin. If it's going to go by who opens it, he's the best choice. He's the highest ranked, plus he's both a melee fighter and a mage." Karl suggested.

Corbin shook his head. "They're based on luck. Who here has the most luck, or favour of the World Dragon?"

The others pointed at Karl. There was no doubt that it was him, the spell that the High Priests had cast had proven it.

"The High Priests had him tested." Lotus explained to the confused Spellswords.

Chapter 250 Bonuses

Karl reached out and touched the chest, which swung open.

[Rewards are being granted.] The same voice announced.

[Most Damage Dealt: Rae. Bonus Award Granted.]

[Most Healing Done: Lotus. Bonus Award Granted.]

[Under Level Completion: Dana, Darryl, Rose, Remi. Bonus Granted.]

Everyone looked around at each other.

"Whose real name is Remi?" Lotus finally asked, confused.

Nobody seemed to know, but in Karl's mind, the egg that Hawk had thrown into the fourth space began to tremble and crack.

"You've got to be kidding me." Karl muttered as the mottled blue egg began to hatch.

[Send it out. Stupid water snake.] Hawk demanded.

[It's too late, the bonding is complete, and they've gotten an award from the Dungeon.] Karl informed him.

Now, he just had to find out exactly what sort of Naga creature he had gained as his fourth companion.

"Remi is a hatchling in my fourth mental space. Hawk threw an egg from the boss platform in, intending to eat it." Karl explained.

Lotus burst into laughter, which only grew in intensity until she was holding her middle and rolling on the ground, tears of mirth running down her face.

"Hawk picked a Naga as your fourth partner? Oh, that is priceless." She gasped.

Hawk hurled a fireball at the laughing cleric, but the [Refreshing Lightning] barrier around her stopped it without damage.

"Sorry Hawk. But that really is too funny." Lotus finally managed to apologize.

They were so distracted by the addition of a team member and Lotus' response that everyone nearly missed when the Spider Golems began firing spears of wood into the grass.

[I got a new skill. Spear. Look, I can do it with my silk as well.] Rae informed them, then sent out a burst of silk shaped like an arrow that impaled a tree just away from the platform.

"Well, Rae got a new skill as a bonus. What did Lotus get?" Alice asked.

The nature cleric did her best to stop laughing before Hawk came down to attack her in person.

She cast a spell, and her body was surrounded in water, brushing away all the dirt and wounds from the battle.

"I got a new healing spell. Revitalizing waters." She explained.

Then everyone turned their attention to the other three that the voice had named as getting bonuses. They were still in shock, and hadn't examined themselves, but to the others it was obvious that they were all freshly Ascended Rank mages, or Spellwords.

A gentle, slightly terrified voice entered Karl's mind.

[Evil bird can't get to me here, can he?] Remi whispered.

[No, he can't get to you. That's your space.] Karl assured her.

Remi, as the Dungeon had called her, was a small blue snake with shimmering crystalline scales, a black swirling pattern on her back, and golden belly scales. Her head was hooded like a cobra, similar to the Naga, but she was definitely all snake.

[Yes, safe!] She exclaimed, then cast a minor spell that created four tiny water tentacles, which she swung wide in the same motion that a baseball umpire used, and Karl wondered where she had learned that.

A baby Spirit Snake, as Remi appeared to be, wasn't a humanoid creature, they were a magical water snake that existed in the Golden Dragon Nation. Karl was only vaguely familiar with them from his research, but they were a strong Commander Rank threat, and could grow to ten metres long.

But what Lotus knew was that they were considered one of the Spiritual Beasts, as they were known to develop advanced magic of various sorts, and when they matured after they reached adulthood, they would naturally evolve into one of three directions.

They would either become Naga Warriors, Naga Workers, or Guardian Spirit Snakes. The third sort never gained the humanoid features or extra intelligence, and instead focused on growing its reptilian body.

Karl focused on the new addition, doing his best to see what he could tell about the team's newest addition

[Pet added: Remi]

[Shaman Princess]

[Rank] Ascended

He hadn't been expecting that. She was tiny, but apparently, she was born as an Ascended Rank Shaman. The inspection didn't tell him what skills she had, but they would logically be water related, as she was somehow related to the Naga.

A tiny blue Spirit Snake with black patterns on her back, a pale golden underside and a wedge shaped head.

Corbin reached into the golden treasure chest and got a confused look on his face.

[Member Reward Granted to Corbin.] The voice of the dungeon announced.

"I guess we can't pick what we want from the box? Well, we could likely trade afterwards, I suppose." He commented as he looked at the golden bracers in his hands.

They were intricately carved with images of Naga on them, and looked like they should have some sort of worthwhile magic imbued into them. The most powerful stuff was always the coolest looking, in Karl's experience.

Thor stuck his snout in the box, trying to see what was there, and came back with a necklace on.

"Thor gets bling too? That's wild." Lotus laughed as the voice announced that Thor had received his reward.

Hawk took his cue from the Lightning Cerro, and came back out of the chest with a large red gem in his mouth. A gem which he promptly ate, causing himself to flare with magic.

[Come on Commander. You can do it.] He cheered himself on as power surged in his body.

Just when Karl thought he was going to fail, [Flaming Body] surged with power, and Hawk's eyes flickered to a bright glowing blue that shimmered like a flame.

"That's a Commander Rank advancement for Hawk." Karl stated the obvious as the others cheered him on.

One after another, the others reached in to grab their rewards and came back out with gear. Rae got a shadowy gem that she also ate, though it didn't propel her through an entire Rank.

Karl was last up, and Remi appeared on his hand as he reached into the chest.

[Member Reward Granted to Karl.]

[Member Reward Granted to Remi.]

Hawk screeched in annoyance. [She didn't even do anything. She wasn't even born when the fight ended!]

Karl sighed. [Look, you two are going to have to get along. I also know that you ate the other eggs from that nest already, so don't pretend like you lost something precious.]

He sensed Remi's smug attitude. Hawk had eliminated the competition for her. Now, she just had to eliminate the Hawk, and she won. Won what, Karl wasn't certain, but he mentally chastised the baby monster.

[That means you too. Get along with the others.] Karl made it an order and felt the two beasts' wills bending under his order as they reluctantly came up with ways to do the bare minimum to comply.

Remi now had a spear in two of her four water tentacles, while Karl was looking at a simple golden coin.

[Skill Token] Grants one random Skill.

"What is that? It feels like Holy Magic." Tessa asked.

"It grants a skill when used." Karl explained.

"Wow, so like a skill book. What skill?" She replied, eager to see what new power Karl would gain.

"It, uh, doesn't say? It says it grants a random skill."

Corbin whistled in appreciation. "That's quite the find. It could either be the most valuable item you'll ever hold, or the most disappointing bonus you'll ever get."

"I've seen something like that before, and when it says random, it means random. Completely random."

"In that case, should I hold off?" Karl asked.

"I don't think it matters when you use it." Corbin shrugged.

The only problem was that Karl didn't know how to use the coin. He only knew what it did, the magic of the coin told him that much.

"Flip it." Tessa suggested.

If it was random, a coin flip made sense, Karl supposed.

He looked at the coin, which had the World Dragon logo on both sides, so there were no heads or tails. He just flipped it, and caught it, then flipped it onto the back of his hand, the way you always did for a coin toss.

[Skill Gained: Silent Movement] The dungeon voice announced.

"Not a bad ability for a scout." Alice congratulated him.

"Agreed." Tessa informed him with a satisfied nod.

Prince Corbin looked around at the group, who had long since reverted to their natural human forms.

"I should cast the spell on us all once we get to the entrance, then we will have to find a way out of that city, and the trial that it was in. We did well here, but there will still be challenges ahead of us." He reminded the others.

Karl put all the beasts away in preparation to head out, and Corbin prepared their disguises.

"Lotus, you're up at the front again. If they have questions, you're the only one likely to understand." Corbin instructed.

With a nod from the Spellblade, the group made their way through the dungeon, retracing their steps. They stopped at the entry platform to check their gear and make certain they hadn't dropped anything, before stepping through the portal in a group, and directly out onto a snow-covered hillside.

They were out of the mountains, near the edge of the abnormally cold anomaly zone, nearly fifty kilometres from where they had started.

For a moment everyone's expressions went blank, while [Refreshing Lightning] surged, as if they were under attack, and then they recovered.

Alice looked around them. "How did we get here?"

Karl shrugged. "When we left the Dungeon, this is where it brought us."

For a second, the others looked confused, and then realization came to their faces as [Refreshing Lightning] fought off whatever status effect was placed on them, and their memories returned.

[Nice save, Thor.] Karl congratulated his partner.

[I told you I was the healer now.] Thor declared, which made Remi giggle.

Prince Corbin snapped his fingers. "I get it now. That's what happened to the others. They entered an instance, and when they finally escaped it, their memory was wiped. But we were all under the same protective spell when we left the dungeon, and we managed to remember."

Larry patted him on the back. "Good work, boss, we couldn't have done without you being mauled by a Naga King for ten straight minutes. But we've got more to celebrate. There is a new Commander in the group."

Corbin turned to Karl. "So there is."