

Beast Master 401

Chapter 401 Cleanup Crew

As the other teams spread out and checked the corpses, they began to pile the Ogres into great mounds, preparing for either burial or cremation, so that the rotting Ogre flesh didn't attract swarms of scavengers.

They might not be brave enough to come too close to the Elites, but they would pick away at the edges of the battlefield, and gorging themselves on Commander Rank Ogres might be enough to increase a few of the lowest Common Grade monsters strength to the point that they might be a real threat to the villages and mines.

It didn't really take much for the average village to be threatened. An Awakened Rank boar would be a nuisance to outlying farms, but a Swarm of Awakened Rank rodents would be a nightmare to try to purge from the village.

The problem was that it was beginning to get dark already, which would make it difficult for the teams to work on the cleanup, and far too easy to miss valuables as they worked. Part of their job was to collect the magical items off the bodies and ensure that valuables from the anomaly were not left on the ground to be collected by other monsters, which the presence of multiple magical items would attract.

Karl watched the annoyed and dejected faces of the newly arrived teams, who were making a strategy to deal with the mess.

"Why don't I send my beasts to take care of it? They can sense magical items more easily than any of us, and they're strong enough to pile the bodies." Karl suggested.

[Oh, he's thinking ahead. We can take the really good bits and give them the rest.] Hawk replied greedily.

[Don't you have enough? Let the little ones get something. It's not like you actually need anything here. Rae already got the best stuff off them.] Karl sighed.

[Why don't we have Hawk and Rae loot, while Thor and Ophelia stack the bodies? Then, when we're done, Hawk can set them all on fire.] Remi suggested helpfully.

[Thor and Ophelia?] Karl asked.

[They're the two biggest.] Remi replied, dipping her head in the Remi equivalent of a shrug.

[I notice that you didn't include yourself in that deployment.]

Remi pouted at him. [I don't have hands, how am I supposed to loot anything?]

[You have water control. You can strip them of armour, rings and weapons as well as anyone else.]

Thor chuckled. [Oh, you got called out. Time to join the cleanup team, little sister. You three go ahead, and I will get the bear to help me pack the trash.]

The Cerro wandered over and gently headbutted Ophelia, who was talking to Bob, then looked at the Ogres, and motioned for her to follow.

"Did I just get drafted to help clean up?" She asked incredulously.

"Your bear form is second biggest on the team. Plus, now that you're fully bear, I can enlarge you without you having to rage." Karl laughed.

Ophelia frowned. "Why do I get the feeling that I just became an honorary member of the beast squad?"

"I mean, you are a four-metre bear in disguise. Thor thinks you're a big cuddly new friend."

Thor nodded happily and bumped Ophelia again, encouraging her to come clean with him.

"Fine, but I will have you know that I'm not a maid." She informed the Cerro, who promptly began tossing Ogre bodies on a pile.

She transformed and Karl cast [Brutality] on everyone, so they could toss about the Ogre corpses more easily.

The new arrivals seemed shocked to see them already at work while they were still making plans, but the last bits of daylight were already fading and Karl didn't know if anyone knew a good light spell.

The border forces would use them for night raids, but Karl had never seen anyone on his team actually cast one beyond the minor one they taught mages.

"Are they doing the work for us?" One of the government security guards asked.

"Yeah. They will load the bags on the Lightning Cerro with magical items, as they can sense them from a distance. Then they will stack the bodies and the Dragonhawk will light them on fire." Karl explained.

"Oh, that's a Dragonhawk? I thought it was a baby Vermilion Bird," the security guard replied, while giving Hawk a suspicious look.

"He has been evolving as he gained power. He just reached Royal Rank, and the change in coloration happened then."

The security team shook their heads at the thought of a Royal Rank Dragonhawk loose in the area, but he seemed to be quite tame, and wasn't getting aggressive even when he got close to the strange humans.

As they got into it, Ophelia was beginning to enjoy herself, scooping the bodies up with her claws and tossing them across the battlefield onto the nearest pile. She could see why Thor was so into it, and why he was using both his upper horns and his tail to swat bodies.

The answer to Karl's question about light came from the Bureau team. Jill cast a bright light above the battlefield to supplement the light coming from the newly formed dungeon entrance.

The work was going quickly, and Thor had already dropped off two sets of bags at the camp so he could continue to get loaded down with loot from the Ogres. Now that they weren't planning to keep or carry any of it, they were just taking anything magical and putting it in the bags. The others could sort it out and load it in a vehicle to take it away.

That was somehow satisfying even to Ophelia, who was doing her best not to laugh as the corpses piled up and Thor's loot bags filled again.

[Hey Boss, that's all the loot. Now, we just need to move the last bodies, and big brother Hawk can light them on fire.] Remi informed them a few minutes later, right before she came slithering into the camp, terrifying the workers who hadn't known she was here.

The squeals of terrified humans made the other beasts and the Nature Priests laugh, while Remi just slithered up Karl's back to look around with her head a metre above his.

"A little warning would be appreciated, man. You can't just surprise us with a venomous snake." One of the church's workers complained.

"There is a giant spider out there as well, kindly don't attack them as they're coming off shift, they put in significant effort to gather all that loot before they stacked the Ogres." Karl reminded them.

Colonel Valerie gestured toward the piles. "You can have Hawk light them up now. Just ask him to make sure they're burning hot and not billowing smoke. This is going to smell bad no matter what, and roast Ogre doesn't smell much better than day old dead Ogre in the sun."

One of the clerics chuckled, and a golden barrier surrounded the camp area, which was just outside the battlefield, where Karl's team had finished the fight. Anything closer would have been soaked with blood, so they had chosen to camp further from the Anomaly, instead of setting up a defensive perimeter around it.

The Cleric's spell took effect, and Karl noticed that the smell of sweaty bodies instantly vanished. That was a valuable skill for anyone to have in the field, removing scents from a camp. That was the easiest way for monsters to track you down while you were sleeping, but today, it was more important to keep the smell of burning Ogres out.

Chapter 402 Artwork In The Wild

It didn't take long for Hawk to have the piles cheerfully burning, with massive flames licking at the sky as the Dragonhawk swooped back and forth, adding fire to the ones that were beginning to smoke.

Despite the amount of fat on their bodies, they didn't actually burn all that well, and without Hawk or a Fire Mage, they would have had to dig a massive hole to bury them all.

The teams were setting up their tents, and the other response team was pulling a massive canvas construct out of a bag that the Church Team had brought. But Karl and his team had no intentions of sleeping on cheap cots or putting in all that work to erect a tent.

[Rae, would you like to make us a temporary fort?] Karl asked.

[Just us?]

[The Magic Knights as well. One fort big enough for us all. At ground level, but you can suspend hammocks for everyone in it.]

Rae got to work, using a number of downed trees as the base for her latest work of art and spinning a new fort that Karl could tell would top all that came before it.

At first, it looked fairly normal. Straight walls and a steeply sloped roof, then she began to add fake windows to the walls, and a large spire at the front.

She was recreating the Capital Cathedral out of silk, at the scale for a twelve-person tent.

She even went as far as to grab a crate with a camp stove from the supplies to put in the fireplace hearth she had designed at the base of the Cathedral's iconic chimney, which in reality led to the kitchens.

"You have got to be kidding me." Someone muttered from the far side of the group as Rae was putting the finishing touches on her masterpiece.

Rae had learned to make her silk quite stiff when needed, so the structure was most likely self-supporting, but she had still used a half dozen trees shaped into posts for the foundation, quickly carving them to the dimensions she needed with her limbs.

Karl heard Lotus giggle. "It's a masterpiece, a true work of art by Princess Rae. Now, it might seem a bit odd to have it placed out here in the middle of nowhere, but we can probably leave it for future visitors. They normally build a building over the Dungeon entrances, right?"

One of the government agents sighed. "While that is true, the construction normally doesn't include a scale replica of the Capital Cathedral made of Royal Rank silk. First off, do you have any idea what that tent is worth in raw materials alone? Second, why? Just why?"

Lotus' giggle turned to full out laughter from most of Karl's group, leaving Bob to answer.

"Rae likes to make a statement. There are new people here, and you didn't show her enough respect as a Princess, so she decided to show off a little and help you appreciate her." He explained.

The government workers needed a moment to process that bit of information. "We don't have an official protocol for that, do we? Are beasts bonded to an Elite considered an extension of their rank? Do we treat them the same? Is it based on their intelligence and species?" One of them asked his supervisor.

The man got a contemplative look on his face. "There is no unified policy, but I would say that when it's a Royal Rank Spider the size of a small car, it probably wouldn't hurt to be a bit more respectful."

The Magic Knights laughed as Rae put the final touches on her masterpiece and came to stand out front.

The flaps of the front wall fell closed around her, creating the false image of the front of the Cathedral, then she vanished into her space, ready for a nap after all that work cleaning and setting camp.

Dana stuck her head in the door, then turned back to the group, laughing.

"She even set it up like the Cathedral, the hammocks are upstairs, while the main floor is open with the stove. Plenty of room to set up tables for breakfast or hold meetings." She explained.

The upper floor also had a curtain at the back for a shower room, though the shower spell wasn't a Rae specialty.

The clerics could take care of that in the morning. Or, one of the mages. But as Karl thought about it, Remi had a Thunderstorm spell, so she could make it rain on command as well. There was no reason that his group would ever have to go without good hygiene.

"What is the watch schedule for the evening?" Prince Charles, the leader of Team One, asked as everyone gathered inside the glowing dome that was protected from the smell of burning Ogre.

"The night watches will be taken by the security teams. They have the rotation already planned, and stations set." One of the government representatives explained with a gesture to the edge of the camp, where men in black uniforms were stationed.

Karl wasn't certain that was going to be sufficient, but unless there was an attack by something stronger than what Hawk had detected in the area, it was as good as any other night watch.

[I will make sure they don't miss anything.] Rae added, as she prepared to head to the bell tower of her new fort. There were windows on all sides, so she could scout the whole area without moving much, and she would blend in perfectly with her own silk, so there was a good chance that nobody would ever know that she was up there, resting and watching for a chance to dice something into snack sized bits.

She was destined to be greatly disappointed, and even Rae knew it, but that didn't mean that she wasn't going to keep a diligent watch until the sun started to come above the horizon, and she switched spots with Hawk so she could get her morning nap in.

It was good to be outside in her web on watch again. In the army camp, there were so many people around that she wasn't really on watch, she was just observing the humans. Here, there was a chance, however miniscule, that something might actually stumble into the traps that she had quietly set around the fort as she built it.

For the Elites in the fort, it was a surprisingly peaceful morning, but the silence was such a stark contrast to the constant sounds of artillery, either nearby or distant, that they all found themselves unable to remain in bed.

Doug adjusted his robes as he stretched the morning stiffness from his muscles. "We will start on breakfast downstairs. I brought in tables and benches last night, so we can eat in the fort. Did you want me to grab something from the supply tent to add to it?" Karl shook his head, as did most of the others, but Lotus smirked. "I have found a good thing in their supplies. I will bring some over as long as it's not mislabelled." She announced.

The little cleric jumped out the window and slid down the sloping roof, then onto the ground, while Tessa laughed.

"You know, she did the same thing from her room in the dorms when we were in school? Nearly landed on High Priest Gerald one day, only centimetres from stomping his head." She laughed.

Chapter 403 Breakfast Of Champions

Lotus returned only a few seconds later with a large carton of liquid eggs. That was a true luxury in the field, as they had to be kept refrigerated or frozen, so they weren't sent to army units. Instead, you got powdered eggs, which were later rehydrated, and not nearly as good.

"Oh, Lotus found the good stuff. I'm sure that the government officials will miss that, but it's going to make for a great breakfast." Doug laughed as he started to cast nature magic to produce fresh ingredients.

Tessa brought in two large, flat rocks that were placed on a small metal table and gestured at Karl.

[Hawk, you're up. Just a bit of Flaming Body on the stones to get the breakfast started.] Hawk rolled his eyes. He did this nearly every morning, he didn't need instructions from Karl on how to prepare a stone to make breakfast. Having it up on a platform like that was different, though. Normally, they set it between two branches and he only heated the middle.

The tabletop was stainless steel, and Tessa knew that while it wasn't perfect, it wouldn't be injured by the heat from the stone. But the only folding chairs that anyone had brought were plastic, so they

weren't an option, and she didn't feel like going to get branches for a stand or having the nature clerics grow some.

Hawk heated their griddle stone, and the clerics got to work, while the rest of the team relaxed for a few minutes. Hawk even volunteered some of his precious stash of meats, though Karl noted that they were some of the last Awakened Rank stockpile, which didn't keep up with his nutritional needs anymore. They were a great help when he was young, but now they were essentially junk food. That was one of the drawbacks of a carnivorous beast, they needed meat to survive, and powerful monsters generally weren't a sustainable resource.

As they moved up the ranks, finding large amounts of food for growing high rank beasts would become increasingly difficult no matter what, but keeping the meat eaters fed would be much more difficult if they were the size of Thor.

The space made up much of their needs, but not all, and they needed the intake to help their growth.

That would be a consideration for Karl in the future. If he could find omnivorous monsters, it would make his life easier. Or perhaps he could find something esoteric, like a monster that ate rocks or something. No, that could be a pain as well, as finding magical resources was even more limited than monsters.

While Karl was distracted by his thoughts, Colonel Valerie came in with the heads of the other two teams who had come to secure and study the Anomaly.

A man in a suit that looked extremely out of place in a room with cloth walls and a grass floor started the meeting. "Good morning, Team Two. It is good to see you all up and cooking so early. We have a lot to do today, but the primary goal for now is to test the difficulty of the trial, and to check the nature of its rules.

Many of these trials have an entry limit, either a number of teams at once, or on the size of the teams, or the time between entries for specific people.

Those all need to be tested and catalogued, but the first on the list is team size. The most common limits are five, ten or twenty people, however twenty - person dungeons normally have a very distinctive entrance.

So, we will start you with a ten-person team, eight of which will be Elites, and two of whom will be researchers from the agencies."

Karl considered that for a moment. "Is it a matter of trust for the results, or a matter of specialized knowledge for the recording?" Karl asked.

"Specialized knowledge and recording equipment, I'm afraid." The man sighed, then smoothed his freshly ironed coat in a nervous gesture.

"That's alright, Now that I know that, we can arrange the members in a proper order to enter. If it splits the team in half, we should still be able to make two groups who can efficiently collect the data that you need." Karl explained.

"Oh, how is that?"

Karl gestured out the door in the direction of the anomaly.

"If that thing will only allow groups of five, it should split the team after the fifth member enters, correct?"

So, we will put four of our people in front, with a proper group composition and power, and then the two researchers in the middle, followed by another four Elites.

We might have to draw straws on who gets left behind, but it's easy enough to arrange the teams for the highest likelihood that we will have a safe journey."

The overdressed man nodded. "Oh, yes, I suppose that does work. We were going to recommend just coming back out if the team was split by the dungeon."

Karl shrugged. "Well, that would tell us how long it would be before we could enter again, but not much else. If the wait is excessive, for example, an entire day, we would be wasting time."

Colonel Valerie looked at the man in his expensive suit like he was an idiot who didn't need to be here, but that really wasn't much different from her usual glare, so Karl wasn't certain how many of the others could really tell what was on her mind as she allowed him to continue.

"Right. So, if the teams are viable once you enter, we will ask that you gather all the data you can about locations, vegetation, resources, monster power levels and equipment, as well as the environment inside the dungeon.

The researchers with you are combat - trained professionals, but they are not Elites, so don't expect too much of them. Other than that, can you create two teams of four that will be capable of defeating a low Commander Rank dungeon if you should get separated?"

Karl considered it, then nodded. "I think if we send the Mackenzie brothers with Morgana and a Magic Knight who can use Golems, they shouldn't have many problems. Commander Bob Mackenzie is very close to the Royal Rank as well, and he is a defence type warrior.

The second team would be me plus Dana as our Mage, Ophelia the Dire Bear Totem Berserker, and whoever wins rock paper scissors between the remaining pair of clerics."

Tessa and Lotus turned to glare at each other in challenge. If they were going to be one team member over the limit, there was going to be some competition for that spot.

Especially if Lotus wasn't going to be able to slack off and ride Rae around the woods while everyone else worked.

Karl turned to Bob. "Does that work for you? I know you won't have a Royal Rank attacker on your team, but Doug does have regenerating vines that are a pretty good crowd control spell."

Not to mention that the vines had thorns, and he was at Royal Rank, so they would likely do as much damage as either of the spell casters.

Ruth shook her head. "None of the Knights were compatible with the Golem Spell."

"Alright, then Dana with Bob, and I will take both clerics while the Knights have leisure time to take care of their other duties."

Ruth nodded. "That would be appreciated. There is always paperwork to do after this sort of mission."

Karl nodded happily, and the rest of his team tried not to laugh.

"Better you than us, Sister. We thank you for your sacrifice." Doug informed the Magic Knight with a glowing smile, while the Knights began to realize that they'd been duped.

Chapter 404 Honest Jobs

The government man took out a binder full of carefully typed pages, and checked down the list before speaking again.

"Right, that should work. The researchers are ready now, so we should get started as soon as you have eaten." He announced.

"Would you like to join us? We made plenty." Doug asked.

The man shook his head, while Colonel Valerie took a seat at one of the tables across from the silent church representative.

"We won't be more than fifteen minutes, if you would like to let the researchers know of the updated plan and the order for our entry."

They finished breakfast quickly, and found the two security guards at the entry to the dungeon, both equipped with some sort of fancy equipment in a backpack and clipboards.

With a nod, they fell into position, and the team entered.

Karl was the last to enter, and as he stepped through, he found himself with a much smaller group. The dungeon had split them into teams of five, as the government man had said was possible.

"Ew, it smells so bad in here. Like the laundry room of the boys dorms mixed with an overflowing latrine." Lotus complained before covering her face with a bandana.

"Thank you for that vivid mental image. But you're not wrong. The smell of an Ogre camp will not be at the top of my list of favourite memories." Karl chuckled.

Their researcher was already making notes and a light on the backpack was blinking, showing that it was doing ... something.

Karl had no idea what it recorded, but if the specialists said it was important, he would believe them.

"Do we have the manpower to clear this dungeon?" The researcher asked as he counted the five of them, which included two Clerics.

That was not usually the recipe for a powerful team when it was this small, but once Karl called out the beasts, things changed dramatically.

Thor bugled a challenge that had the nearest group of Ogres coming their way, Rae called out her Golems, and Remi crawled up the pole on the researcher's backpack, nearly toppling him over backwards.

"He's not an Elite. Regular humans have balance issues." Karl joked as he lifted the confused snake off the terrified researcher.

[He's bigger than Sister Morgana. Why can't I climb him?] Remi asked.

[Because regular humans are weak, and his backpack is heavy. Your weight was going to make him fall over on his back.]

Tessa ran up Thor's back and settled into position after Rae spun a quick web saddle for her.

The researcher looked shocked at the dramatic change in circumstances, and it was obvious that nobody had thought to inform him of the abilities of the team that he had been sent with.

To the researchers, it likely didn't matter. The Elites were here to gather data for them, and that was the extent of what they thought of the matter.

Karl watched as the metre in the man's hand went crazy and peaked out for a moment, before settling down again.

"What is the meter reading?" Karl asked.

"Energy signatures. It's like the testing device, it measures maximum energy output, but in a wider area. It's how we officially categorize the monsters."

"Then that first peak was from my team?" Karl asked.

The researcher nodded. "It's not designed for Royal Rank battles. I will have to sort out the data from the monsters later, but if you can try not to have your team use long duration spells, it will help my readings."

"Remi, avoid [Blizzard] and [Thunderstorm]. Thor, unfortunately, we will have to avoid [Circle Of Protection]." Karl instructed.

The Golems moved forward, and the Ogres shouted as they attacked, causing the metre to move up a bit over halfway. Then the Golems attacked, and the metre pegged the needle wildly for a few seconds before the Ogres were dead.

"What the hell?" The researcher mumbled.

"Oh, they're imbued with [Offensive Adaptation]. The skill must activate when they attack, and that will be what you're reading." Karl explained.

"I see. This could be difficult. I need to see every Ogre attack so that I can record individual power, but I'm not sure they all got a chance." He explained.

Karl considered the answer for a moment. "I can have the Golems hold back, so we can get data before they murder the Ogres."

"If possible, that would be wonderful. Also, the fewer team members attacking, the better. It makes it easier to sort the data. I know that sounds a bit insane, even to my ears, but I've never worked with a Prince or a spider who can solo entire teams of Ogres before."

He finished his notes about the area, and then nodded politely to Rae, who sent her Golems over to taunt the next group, who put up a valiant fight for about ten seconds before Rae decided they had waited long enough and had them attack.

There was only one Commander Rank Ogre in that group, and there were none in the next two groups, though the second one had a mage, who carried a long staff and repeatedly hit the Golems with [Fireballs].

There was some damage, which Lotus quickly repaired with a pair of healing spells, which seemed to work just fine, even though the Golems weren't actually living things.

Perhaps it was because they were made of a plantlike material, and she was a nature priest? Karl wasn't all that clear on how holy magic worked. Perhaps they were healed just because the gods agreed.

When they got to the first boss, a peak Commander Rank Ogre Lord with two massive blades in his hands, Rae gave Karl a look that said she had better be receiving some help for this one.

Karl knew that the Golems could and would kill it. They had already eliminated one of the bosses on their own when the teams first arrived, but Rae was becoming suspicious that they were just using her as their workhorse while everyone else slacked.

Karl turned to the researcher. "Will you be able to get readings if all of us go to deal with that?"

Reluctantly, the man nodded. "Yeah, that's usually how it goes, we have to pick out their data from the attacks of a whole group. This has been so much better that I wouldn't want to if I didn't have to, but against the dungeon bosses, it's inevitable. Plus, Only a few of your beasts will be similar in power output to the boss, so it shouldn't be too bad if they don't use channelled spells."

The Golems let the Ogre Lord get the first swing, and then he got one more in on Thor, before he was hurled onto his back and mangled by a combination of Golems, Fire and Lightning Magic.

Three on one, the Rank advantage made the fight short and brutal, but just long enough that their researcher could get some data.

Karl smiled as the Ogre Lord's body vanished, and a large chest appeared in its place.

"Now for the fun part, let's see what the dungeon rewarded us with for defeating the first boss." He joked as the furious scratching of a pen on paper replaced the sounds of battle.

Chapter 405 Points Of Reference

As Karl opened the reward chest from the boss, something flickered in his vision, almost like the notifications that appeared inside dungeons and trails, but obviously in his vision, and not in the air in front of him.

It was almost like the information was on a pair of goggles in front of him, but it vanished after a few seconds, and never got clear enough that he could properly read it. The lid on the chest flipped open, and a small pile of items were found inside. [Gained 1 Skill Point] appeared in Karl's vision, making him pause.

"Did anyone else see that?" He asked.

"See what?" Lotus asked, coming to stand beside him as Remi slid up his back to see what was in the box.

Karl looked through the items but didn't touch anything yet. There was a chance that it would bond to him if he picked it up, and this was a Commander Rank dungeon, and he had Royal Rank Armour as a skill. It would be better to let the others make up for any items that they might be missing.

There was a pile of cloth, some chain armour, a collection of Gems that Karl's [Identify] skill said would have no particular benefit to the beasts, but they were magical, and not just pretty.

Then there was a dagger, a wand and a square item wrapped in cloth that looked like a book.

Karl liked books.

So did Remi.

He carefully lifted it out of the treasure box and opened the cloth wrapping.

It was a book, bound in red leather, with a dragon head on the front. That was promising, even if it didn't have any words on the cover.

[Usable by Clerics, Red Dragons]

The words appeared in Karl's vision again. The strange goggle effect when this effect appeared was a bit disorienting, but the message was clear enough. He couldn't use it.

"Hey Tessa, I think this one is for you." Karl called as he held out the book.

Tessa leaned over, using the rough surface of Thor's scales to keep from sliding off, and grabbed the book before sitting back upright.

She flipped the book open and smiled. That wasn't the response that Karl was expecting, as the book didn't vanish.

"It's not a skill book, it is a hymn book. The pages are full of Red Dragon Cleric battle hymns, and keeping it equipped adds bonuses to my Holy Magic." She explained.

She let go of it, and it appeared in a smaller form, hanging by a chain from her belt. It was locked shut, but if it was just a hymn book, she didn't actually need to open it. She already knew the songs, and she wasn't a bard that needed to sing in combat.

Not that she didn't sing in combat on occasion, but that was more to keep Thor amused while they waited than because it helped with anything in combat.

The other items were removed one at a time, and none of them particularly appealed to the members of the group, but once the last item was removed, the box disappeared.

"None of us plan to keep this stuff, so we will put it in storage for later." Karl explained.

The researcher nodded. "That is fine. Anything you get from the dungeon is yours to keep, I'm just here to observe and record."

Karl scooped the spare items up and put them in the spider silk bags that Thor wore as part of his 'work uniform' that included Tessa's saddle.

They moved out to take on the next groups, this time sending Ophelia first, so she could practice her fighting skills in Dire Bear form.

Her toxic claws easily tore apart the Ogres, and even the blade wielded by the Commander rank leader of the group was no match for the [Refreshing Lightning] shielded claws of the Dire Bear.

Ophelia shifted back for a moment between groups. "Hey, that's pretty cool. In this form, it still counts my weapons as equipped, and I get the life steal from them when I kill things with my claws." She explained.

"That will be huge later. The more damage that you do, the more you will heal, and if you have poisoned multiple targets, you should get a steady stream of healing in return from the life steal." Karl replied, impressed by the utility of her new form.

Ophelia smiled as she transformed back and charged another group, testing that theory. Instead of focusing on one target, she used [Swipe] an innate skill of her new form that worked with [Toxic Claws], and black poison began spreading from the wounds on all four Ogres in the group.

They weren't breaking Thor's [Refreshing Lightning], as the massive bear was surprisingly agile, but Karl could see the pulses of magic flowing from them to Ophelia every second or so.

"That bear is a menace." Their observer noted.

"Yeah, Bear Totem Berserkers are beasts in combat, and that new transformation she got the other day is definitely not a Rank One skill." Karl agreed.

"Might I ask where she got it?"

Karl winked at him. "There was an advancement trial on the Hill Giant border, but you didn't hear that from me. I don't know whether it's classified or not."

The observer nodded. "It's been ranked as need to know, and I already knew about it. I just didn't know that it was your team. Was Team One the other one to enter?"

Karl shook his head. "No, they arrived in the helicopter for this response. I don't know where they were stationed."

"Still, two dungeons for your group so close together is huge. Not many Elites get that lucky with their assignments."

That made Tessa laugh as she looked down from Thor's back. "The World Dragon favours him. Everywhere that we go, things are destined to go wrong in all the right ways. Everyone who has been in his group has advanced as much in the last few months as they did in the earlier parts of their lives.

None of us were Commanders when the war broke out, and now look at what Ophelia can do to a whole team of Ogres."

Just as she spoke, one massive paw crushed an Ogre's face, shattering bone before the claws tore the flesh apart.

"You have a point. That's not low Commander Rank combat power."

The next boss was carrying a staff with a large jewel on top, and Remi was eyeing it with greed.

[I need the shiny stick. I can have the stick when we kill it, right?] She asked.

[If it doesn't vanish when he dies, you can have it.] Karl laughed. The bodies in the dungeon simply vanished after a few seconds, leaving piles of stuff on the ground now and then. Mostly it was just coins, but they had picked up a few pieces of cloth and leather armour and a few crude magical weapons as well.

The observer nodded, and the attack started, with Remi instantly going for the Ogre's neck from behind to poison him while she slid down his arm to attempt to steal the staff. One way or another, she was determined to have it, even if she had to bite his hand clean off with only two teeth to get it.

Unfortunately, Karl's attempt to be helpful was a bit too much, and the [Stun] enhanced maul strike crushed its skull, which made the body vanish a half second after Remi gained control of the staff. With the boss dead, the staff was also gone.

Chapter 406 Loot Goblins

The loot chest appeared again, and the system information flickered in front of Karl's eyes a bit more clearly.

[Gained 1 Skill Point] First Dungeon Clearance bonus.

So, he wouldn't be able to farm as many skill points as he wanted by simply returning here every time he was able. That was a bit sad, but he supposed that Skill Points shouldn't be too easy to get if they were a reward.

Inside the chest was a similar assortment of items to the first boss, but no book, and unfortunately no staff either.

However, there was a gem of Elemental Power that Remi was quite excited about when she took it in her mouth and sent it to her space.

[I need that for making a new Totem], she explained.

[Well, we won't refuse you the loot. You're the one most suited to it.]

None of the other items were something that they needed, so they were loaded into Thor's bags, and the Golems took over again as Ophelia transformed to talk to Karl.

"I think I'm really getting the hang of fighting on four feet. At first, it was strange, as I'm used to being upright in Werebear form, but with a bit of practice, I think this will be just as effective. I'm going to need to learn a few more ranged skills, though. Everything I specialized in applies to my weapons or body. But if I'm mostly using one paw at a time, it would be better to have some range when things try to run." She explained.

Karl nodded. "I will make you a [Rend] book later. As a bear, you are almost guaranteed to be able to use that. But you have [Rake] now, right? That's got a bit of range."

"Yeah, about three metres. It's good enough in melee combat, but chasing things that are running away is annoying." Rae laughed in Karl's mind. She also hated it when enemies ran away on her. Thor liked to chase them, and Hawk didn't have to, but she disliked all the extra effort when the target was just going to die anyhow.

It should at least have some dignity and not annoy her in the process.

Rend was a simple skill to make, as he knew it well enough. So, Karl made the book as they walked along after the Golems, who were showing off for the data man. Their enthusiasm brought the group to the final boss, a massive Ogre Lord in tarnished golden armour, the one that the Golems had brought out last night.

"Wait, Rae, don't send the Golems after that. The other group was hoping to recover the armour. I don't know if the body will stay, as this is now a dungeon. It likely won't, but some of it might be in the reward pile if we don't destroy it." Karl cautioned.

"You're going to deal with it personally?" The researcher asked as he prepared his recording devices.

"Yeah, I will sort it out." Karl agreed as he hefted his maul onto his shoulder.

The Ogre Lord sneered at Karl and hurled a boulder at him as Karl approached, but it simply shattered on [Refreshing Lightning], and Karl darted forward, swinging upward with five stacks of [Flaming Body] set to project out from his weapon.

The strike landed squarely between the beast's legs, and Karl saw the others flinch in sympathy as the Ogre Lord was lifted off the ground.

Then the flames of the ability came jetting out of his mouth as his body was cored by the skill.

The remains and the armour fell to the ground in a heap, then vanished to be replaced by a large golden chest, nearly a metre tall and three metres wide.

That was much larger than the others, but not so ridiculous as the reward chest in the trial.

[Gained 2 Skill Points] First Dungeon Clearance Bonus.

Karl had been looking forward to that, but the image in front of his eyes slowly cleared.

[System Rebooting. Interface Temporarily Unavailable.]

Karl took that as a good thing. Maybe he would be able to get additional information, or even more benefits, once the System was rebooted. If the system was fully active for him and the other Elites, the Golden Dragon Nation would gain the sort of benefit that hadn't been seen in generations.

Words appeared in the air above the boss. [Calculating Rewards.]

The researcher stared at them in shock. "Do you see that? What the hell is that? I've never seen anything like it."

Karl gave him a confused look for a moment before realizing that he wasn't an Elite.

"That is normal for Trials and other Instances. It's how the System informed people of important events and rewards. Give it a moment, and everyone here should get something." He explained.

[Updating rewards. Level 0 member detected.]

"Ooh, I can pick a random reward." The researcher mumbled, and before anyone could stop him, his uniform was gone, and he was standing in front of them in tight black leather pants and a pink floral shirt.

"What the ever-loving fuck?" He shouted, dropping his backpack full of expensive diagnostic equipment to check himself.

"Hey, calm down, it's a system reward. What did it say, and what did you pick?"

The researcher was clearly in shock as Karl grabbed him and shook him.

"Get yourself together. What did it say and what did you pick?"

The man blinked slowly as his brain stopped rattling in his head.

"It said 'would you like to randomize'? And I picked yes, and now it tells me that I am a Grand Sage, and I gain bonus starting power for every day that I remained a virgin."

The Clerics did their very best not to laugh, and Karl stared deep into the man's eyes, just to make sure that he wasn't joking.

"Thirty years, one day sixteen hours. Apparently, I'm Supposed to become an Awakened Rank Grand Sage?" The researcher continued.

Lotus burst into laughter. "It's real! Boys really can become a Sage if they remain a virgin to thirty."

"This is not funny, High Priestess." The Sage insisted.

"It is a little bit funny. I like the outfit, though. It's very... stylish." The little priestess added, not bothering to hide her amusement.

"What about the rest of you?" He demanded, unwilling to accept that he had been punked by the dungeon, but nobody else had.

Karl pointed to the message in the air.

[Level 0 Member condition solved. Calculating.]

[Reward Granted.]

Karl saw words appear in his vision again, the Interface he believed that the System called it.

Then there was a simple scroll in his hand.

Karl unrolled it and smiled at the fancy lettering on what appeared to be a coupon.

[Skill Master Rank 3 Single Use Token] Allows one bonded beast's skill to immediately evolve to a skill one Tier higher than their current Tier.

The full skill was in his Class Skills.

[Skill Master Rank 3 Available] 100 Points. Allows all bonded beasts' skills to evolve to a skill one tier higher than their current tier with practice. It might have been too much to ask for a hundred point skill from a Dungeon reward, but picking one skill to become a better version of itself was a huge bonus.

[Ooh, that is a good thing. Whose turn is it?] Rae asked as she sensed what Karl was reading.

[I just got a new book, so it's not my turn.] Remi sighed.

[I just advanced, and so did you, so I think it's Thor's turn.] Hawk reluctantly agreed. He really wanted to know what [Flaming Body] would evolve into, but Thor put in great effort every day without getting any special benefits. He deserved this one.

[Alright, big guy, are you ready?] Karl asked Thor, who had come over with Tessa still on his back.

She was also holding a scroll in her hand.

"What did you get?" Karl asked. She unrolled the scroll and smiled. "One Epic Grade, Commander Rank armour piece of my choice."

Tessa unrolled hers and then cheered and began a happy dance.

"We will get back to her. What did you get, Ophelia?" Karl laughed.

"I got [Toxic Claws] damage over time changed from one second per application to half a second."

They all turned to the researcher, who was looking grimly at the scroll in his hand. "I don't know if I even want to open this." He muttered.

Lotus stopped dancing and went to pat him on the shoulder. "Relax, these rewards are always good things. It's the random rewards that are more exciting."

"What did you get?" The newly promoted Sage demanded.

Lotus turned her scroll around with a huge smile.

[Skill Advance 1 Tier] Shock Heal ⇒ Revive

"Are you telling me that you can now bring the dead back to life?" The researcher demanded. "Yup. I am the perfect healing specialist now. I can do everything. Heal, area heal, long duration heal, revive."

Now Thor was excited. A Tier for a skill was a confusing concept, but it could be beyond anything he had been thinking. All you had to do was let Lotus pet someone, and they would come back to life now.

[I think she's got to cast a spell. She's not a healing ointment.] Rae corrected him.

[It's not a magic pat? That's sad.]

Remi giggled. [I think she can still pat you while she does it, she just doesn't need to.]

[Are you ready, Thor? I'm going to use the scroll.] Karl warned him.

[Do it. All my skills are worthy.]

[Skill Advance 1 Tier] Refreshing Lightning ⇒ Eternal Lightning [Eternal Lightning] Barrier type skill. Shields the target while increasing Defensive skill effectiveness. Regenerates health and stamina for affected targets.

The blue barrier of [Refreshing Lightning] changed blue to gold, and Karl felt the stress in his muscles fade away, as if he had just gotten up from a long night's rest.

Chapter 407 Thor The Eternal

"Did you give your reward to Thor?" Tessa asked as she examined the upgraded barrier.

"Yes, it's an upgrade of one Tier for [Refreshing Lightning]. [Eternal Lightning] is the new name, and while I don't have solid data on it, I can already tell that the stamina refreshing effect is much stronger than the original."

Tessa and the others nodded. "It is incredible. I feel like I just had a good nap, and we've been through a whole dungeon."

Ophelia laughed. "That's because you didn't even walk through it. You've been sitting on Thor all morning."

The researcher picked up his pack and settled it back in place. "I don't suppose that I can lie about my class, can I?" Karl laughed. "There should be a mark on your arm. If it's somewhat ambiguous, you don't need to give them the actual name that the System told you, just your skills and anything that you know about it."

If you try focusing on the words Interface, Status, or Skills, you might get a bit more knowledge."

"Interface!" Lotus cheered, then began swatting at the air in front of her.

"Did we damage her? She seems a bit off lately." Karl whispered to Tessa.

"I don't know. I will have to monitor her snacks for a while. She might have started taking hallucinogens to cope. Lotus isn't exactly the best suited person to high-stress situations, or the most mentally stable, you know?"

Karl raised an eyebrow, questioning that statement. "I seem to recall that she loves to pick fights, a little battle against Ogres shouldn't be an issue."

Tessa sighed. "Ones that don't involve real violence. But she's a nature priestess, they're almost always stoned anyhow."

If there was a chance that she was going to start screwing up because she was too high to function, they would have to deal with her. Doug was known to smoke a lot, but always after work. Not before.

"Interface." Tessa mumbled, then blinked in surprise. "You know, I've tried that many times before, but it never worked. I wonder if these last few instances have helped stabilize or unlock the System's features?" She asked.

"I think that is right. I was seeing the interface flicker on and off when we were doing the dungeon. I don't think we have everything that it used to have unlocked, but I think we're very close to having a fully functional version of the system."

The researcher was staring at the mark on his arm, which looked like an old man pondering his orb. Sage was a good name for it, but there was at least no negative connotation to the mark itself.

"When we get out, we should ask the Colonel if she knows about a mark like that. She might be able to tell you more." Karl suggested.

"When I said skills, I saw that I have spells available, and they seem like normal mage spells." The Sage whispered, just loud enough for Karl to hear.

"Good, then you're a mage class. That's easy. Now, you just need to know how to get points to buy the spells." The Sage frowned. "I'm afraid to learn how this class gets points. But I have fourteen right now, and that's not quite enough to get three additional skills."

Karl shrugged. "They normally come from accomplishments and feats. The more you challenge yourself, the faster you get them. I suspect that Lotus should have an awful lot of them. Nature Clerics tend to do crazy things. But Tessa should have a bunch as well."

Tessa shrugged. "Nothing happens when I try skill as a command. Clerics might just get what their Gods give them."

Ophelia came over with a frown. "It says that feature isn't unlocked when I try. All I can get from the interface is a bunch of stat numbers that mean nothing to me. Except health and mana. Those show as a percentage."

Karl hadn't been paying any attention to those. He could see them as a pair of globes, red and blue, at the edge of his vision when he had the interface active, but they were just full, so he didn't think about them.

Besides, it was usually pretty obvious when you got stabbed or beat with a club. Health was a relative thing. He didn't need a globe to tell him when he'd been getting his ass kicked.

But more interestingly, there were greyed out functions. There was some sort of money counter that was translucent and unavailable, and another function that had no label.

Karl focused on pressing the button, and found that he was in his own mental space, the one where he had formed the focus to meditate when he was working on improving the beast spaces.

That was pretty cool. Useless, as it was faster to access it directly, but cool as a feature.

There were more locked features in the Interface, but none of them had labels, so Karl didn't actually know what he was missing out on. He had the important parts now, though. He could bring up a list of his skills and skill tree, he could see a bunch of numbers for his stats, which he was slowly learning to interpret, and he could see the contents of his storage bag. He could even pull things out of the pocket of his backpack without taking the whole pack out, and he could put things back into the pockets. That was a huge improvement over accessing the bag directly in his mind.

"Should we head out and give our reports? They're going to wonder what we're doing if we linger in here too long." Ophelia suggested.

The researcher sighed and looked at his new outfit.

"Alright, let's get this over with. Please don't tell them any other details about my class." He pleaded.

"Don't worry. We can tell them that you're a Sage without any other connotations. But look at it this way, you have a more functional system interface than most Elites do, and you just awakened." Karl replied.

Ophelia smirked. "Yeah, and it's not like they didn't know you were a virgin until the weekend after your thirtieth birthday anyhow."

He sighed, and led the group out of the dungeon, where he nearly ran into a man in simple grey mage robes.

"Greg? Why are you dressed like a homeless mage?" The Sage asked.

"Dude, what the Dragon are you wearing? You don't get to criticize my outfit when you look like a sleazy pickup artist. I will have you know that as a reward for being the first group to clear the dungeon, I was granted a class marking. I am now a Sorcerer."

Karl's researcher laughed and turned his arm to show his friend. "Like this? I'm a Sage."

The other soldiers and researchers from the three study teams gathered around to hear the stories, and the rest of Karl's team gathered to share their reports.

Bob smirked. "I will go first. I believe we got identical dungeons, so I will just detail the loot. The first boss had nothing much of interest, but the second dropped a spellbook for Dana. It's hanging on her waist now. Apparently, it adds even more damage to her spells, when she already has [Destruction] as a skill boosting her output.

Then on the final boss, we all got scrolls, and the System Interface unlocked."

Karl chuckled. "On our first boss, Tessa got a hymn book that boosts Holy Magic. Then on the final boss we got scrolls. I got one that advanced a skill by a Tier. So, Thor's Refreshing Lightning is now Eternal Lightning."

Bob visibly lost much of his enthusiasm. "Dammit, and I thought I had gotten the greatest skill. I got [Titanic Slash] from the same sort of scroll. Slash upgraded one Rank, and now it creates a massive sword up to twenty metres long for the attack."

Ophelia smirked as she patted him on the shoulder. "Oh, he's not bragging. The best gains in our group were for Lotus, who had a healing skill upgraded to [Revive]."

The other group, and all the Magic Knights, went silent as they stared at the little Priestess, who had been doing her very best not to just blurt out her good news.

Doug sighed. "You've got to be kidding me. The little troublemaker was blessed with [Revive]? She's going to be completely insufferable once she gets back to the Cathedral."

"What did you get?" Karl asked.

Doug's face seemed to grow scales over the next half a second, and he pulled up his sleeves to show that they went all the way up his arms as well.

[Green Dragon Armour]

Chapter 408 Reports To Write

Karl's team sat down to write their reports on the trip into the dungeon, while the two researchers were intensely questioned about their experiences during the awakening, and the remainder of the research teams analyzed the data to confirm the power levels and create a basic guidebook for future visitors to the dungeon.

The actual report wasn't hard, they just repeated what they had seen and done in the dungeon, and most of them were just observers, as they hadn't fought anything but the boss.

"I hate that I'm actually starting to get good at these." Karl sighed as he finished the report only a few minutes later.

The recollection of the dungeon hadn't taken long, and Thor happily reminded him if he forgot anything or got an ogre's positioning wrong.

With that done, all that they had to do was wait,

Or, in Karl's case, wait and try to come up with a good plan for Dana's birthday. He hadn't expected them to get shipped off to the middle of nowhere in the last few days, and here he couldn't even bribe supply staff to help him with something fancy.

Instead, he was going to have to turn to alternate sources for help.

[Ladies and Gentlemen, we have an urgent problem. Dana's birthday is coming up very soon, and I did not prepare before we left the base. Now, we need to get her a gift, something that she will appreciate, and that she doesn't already have.]

[What's a birthday?] Remi asked.

[It's an annual celebration of the day you were born. Normally, your friends try to get you your favourite thing to eat, and then they give you a present.] Karl explained.

[Ooh, I can make her new robes.] Rae suggested.

[That's not a bad idea. Do you remember her size and what she likes from when you made the last outfit?] Karl asked.

[Yeah, I remember. I think I can do better this time. The other ones are good, but with some practice, I think that I can make a special outfit for her.]

Remi slid through her swamp for a while and then picked a plant. [Give this to Sister Morgana, and she can make a special potion for her. I saw it in one of the Witch Doctor's books.]

Thor made an annoyed noise. He had no idea about a tradition like giving gifts. He didn't collect things for giving away. [Don't worry about it, buddy. One good thing from all of us is enough, and we've already come up with two. But I bet that when it's Tessa or Lotus' birthday, you might be able to do something for them.]

Remi looked up at him from her space. [If you can spare a bit of that purple flower, that would be good. It also goes in the potion.]

Hawk chirped happily. [Then I will find a good thing to cook. You said special food was part of the day. We've got lots of food, even Thor has many good things to eat.]

Thor nodded happily. He might not collect as much shiny stuff as the others, but he had more types of good plants than Hawk had types of good meat. He grabbed them every time he saw them, and some of them would even grow for him.

Karl looked over at Morgana, who was arguing with Doug about something, and got up to hand her the ingredients.

"Morgana, I have a couple of plants here that Remi says would be useful in a potion. I didn't catch the name, so I'm hoping that you know which one it is." He explained as he handed the two items over.

"Ghostleaf and Magebloom? Did she say why she thinks I can make it?" Morgana asked.

"She said that she saw it in your book." Karl explained, then lowered his voice.

"As a present for Dana, on her birthday."

Morgana thought about it for a second and then took out a book from her storage and began to flip. "Oh, I see what it is. That's not a potion, at least not exactly. This book is for beneficial hexes, a specialty of the Witch Doctor Class. The one she is thinking of is body butter. It removes the wearer's scent and gives flawless skin. It will even remove most scarring. I wonder why Remi would have picked that."

[Because Ogres smell bad, and nobody wants to smell bad.]

Karl laughed as he relayed the message, making most of the room look over to see what he was joking about.

Morgana smirked and nodded. "I can make that. The other ingredients are all simple things that I can actually get right here. Those are the two active ingredients, and then they get mixed with water and some mundane oils for the base."

"Thanks. You're a lifesaver."

Morgana patted him on the shoulder. "Don't forget that she isn't the only one with a birthday coming up."

That was true. Lotus, Ophelia and Tessa were all in the next month or two. He didn't know the rest, but surely, he could come up with a gift for everyone. Or maybe he could enlist Lotus' help, and he could be that friend who always gifts clothes.

It was Royal Rank silk, it would actually be a very valuable gift, even if it didn't cost him anything.

Of course, for people who had all sorts of valuables, giving expensive gifts meant much less, and it would be the good meal that was likely to be the best remembered. He had grown up in the mines, and they didn't give gifts often either. But that was just because they couldn't afford it. The most common gift for kids in the Lithium Mines Village was for someone to cover their shift and clock in as them, so they didn't get a black mark for missing work and got a day off on their birthday. By the time they were adults, the tradition changed to putting them on the good jobs for the day.

Hawk flew out of his space to make a scouting patrol and look for good things to eat, while Rae started making plans for decorating her Dana.

They had been relaxing for most of the afternoon when the man in the expensive suit came over with a notepad. "Can we get a volunteer team to see if they can go back into the Dungeon? Six hours is normally the shortest time period, with one day being more common." He explained.

"Yeah, that's not a problem. Did you need a whole team?" Karl asked.

"Full enough to efficiently clear the dungeon and reset the timer if it does let you inside." He explained.

The Magic Knights laughed, and the bureaucrat gave them a confused look.

"He is a Royal Rank Beast Master. He could go in alone and clear out the dungeon. I guess you haven't gotten a chance to read the reports yet." Ruth explained.

"I normally don't. It's not like I will be able to make use of the information in them, and it's not my department to prepare the Elites. My team is here to arrange the infrastructure for the protection of the asset, and to deal with the scheduling.

For a Commander Rank resource that has stabilized, it is of critical importance to the nation that we allow access in as efficient a manner as possible."

That made sense. Sending Ascended Rank students and soldiers through here would be huge for them, as it gave Commander Rank rewards, and it would really help their growth rate. The difficulty wasn't high, and the bosses hadn't shown any particularly nasty tricks.

They might have if he didn't kill them so fast, but they all looked straightforward.

"Alright, let's get to work." Karl agreed as he got to his feet.

Dana and Ruth stood to join him, then Ophelia and Tessa. Karl had expected Lotus to be excited about a chance to play, but she must have worn herself out earlier.

Karl leaned over to speak with Doug. "Can you check up on Lotus? She's been a bit off, and we're not sure if it's something that she has been taking, or if the stress is getting to her. As a fellow nature cleric, we thought that you should be the best qualified to be able to help."

Doug nodded back. "I think I have an idea of what's going on. I will talk to her while you're all out. It's best that we talk in private."

Karl patted him on the back and led his team out of the tent.

Two runs a day wouldn't be all that bad.

Chapter 409 Dumplings

Karl led the team to the entrance of the Dungeon, where the members of Team Two had just exited, along with their researchers.

"Anything good?" Karl called as he led his team toward the entrance.

"Nothing like what you guys pulled out on the first run. We got armour and a skill book, though, so we can't complain about that. It would be nice if the book was a bit more rare than [Fireball], but you take what you get, and fireball is a pretty decent spell." Prince Charles called back.

Well, you couldn't get the sort of first clearance bonuses that they had found on every single run, it would just be ridiculously overpowered as a resource.

"Are we all ready?" Karl asked as he reached the portal.

"As long as you didn't leave the beasts behind, we're good to go." Tessa laughed.

Karl stretched out a hand, and felt it stop as it touched the surface, as if it was solid, and not just a portal to the dungeon.

"It looks like we can't enter yet. The portal surface is solid." Karl explained to the government minister, who was still tagging along behind them.

"Well, that is unfortunate, but not entirely unexpected. We will try again with team one at the twenty-four-hour mark. Your team is free for the remainder of the day as long as there is no emergency."

"Thank you, we will be around if you need us, and I have team members scouting the area to ensure it remains monster free." Karl agreed.

Hawk was actually looking for something that was more tasty than an Irontusk Boar, but there wasn't going to be anything too close, and everything in the dungeon was no good for eating.

Even the Giants tasted like a delicacy compared to the Ogres. [I think I found what we need. It doesn't belong in this area, but it looks tasty.] Hawk informed Karl a few seconds after he turned away from the portal.

[Oh, what did you find?]

[Um, a deer thing with wings and a weird tail, like a dog.] Karl had no idea what that should be called either. [What is it doing now ?] [Picking a fight with farmers. Can I hunt it? It's only Awakened Rank, but it looks tasty.]

[Alright, bring it back here, and we will see what we can do about getting it butchered and roasted.]

Karl could only imagine how terrified the farmers were when what looked like a baby Vermilion Bird swooped down to kill the monster attacking them, and then flew away with it, but he could tell that it only took a few seconds before Hawk had his prize.

He happily dropped the beast next to the cathedral fort for the others to prepare, and Morgana came out to see what the commotion was.

"That is the strangest looking Peryton that I have ever seen. Normally, they look like giant birds with antlers, but this one is almost all stag. Or perhaps it's not a Peryton at all. It is rather weak for one of their species. Where did Hawk find this?" She asked.

"A few minutes flight away, harassing some farmers. He said that it looks good to eat, so we were going to ask the Clerics to make up something good. A special celebration dinner of sorts." Karl explained as he placed an arm over Dana's shoulder.

"There's one more day." Dana reminded him with a smile. "It will take time to get a full deer ready and roasted. But don't worry, I have asked our resident Princesses to assist with the procurement of proper gifts."

"Princesses?"

"Well, technically Remi isn't a Princess yet, and neither is Morgana, but they're both cooperating on a most wonderful birthday gift for you."

Dana smiled. "And here I thought that you would go straight to Rae to make something."

Hawk laughed, a keening shriek that startled the workers and made the other team members laugh along with him.

"Oh, you did, but you thought it would be a surprise. I get it now."

"I guess I'm a bit too transparent. But Rae is really looking forward to giving you your gift, and we can't let her down."

Rae was very proud of what she had managed to come up with. She had based it on a blend of all of the fighters that she had seen so far, and made what she thought would be the very best outfit for her Dana.

It was turning out to be a masterpiece of fashion, in Rae's opinion, and it would give Dana an extra layer of light armour over her metal armour.

"Why don't we make a shredded meat roast? The sort so tender that it just falls apart with a fork? I can convince Doug to make fresh bread on the tent stove, and we can do a fancy dinner."

"I don't suppose that we have options to make chicken and dumplings, do we?" Dana asked.

Hawk searched his inventory for a while. There weren't any beasts that really tasted like chicken, and the Rocs were the only bird, but they weren't good.

"I can ask the teams if they have chicken. We haven't hunted anything like that so far. Or I could head to town and get a fresh one." Karl offered.

Dana nodded. "If you're going to go that far, get a turkey instead, if they have one. Turkey and dumpling stew is great."

"Alright, let the teams know that I will be back in an hour. I'm just going to head out and get some fresh ingredients."

Dana and Doug walked in as he was making plans, both looking much more relaxed and happy than they had for a while.

"Is there anything else you need me to get for dinner?"

Lotus nodded happily. "If you can get us some heavy cream, I want to make a cake. It doesn't work right with powdered milk."

"Get more butter as well. The stocks here are margarine, and it's not the same." Doug added.

Karl knew that the general store at the mines should have everything that they needed, but as he wanted both cream and butter, it would be best to stop at a farm, if there was one near the mines.

[Yes, the whole kilometre before the mines is farms. There were cows there and more animals I didn't care about. You might get a meat bird.] Hawk informed him.

It wouldn't have the nutritional value of the deer monster, but the nostalgia factor of a childhood favourite recipe couldn't be beat.

Now that he had all their requests, Karl took off through the woods, headed for the mines in the direction that Hawk had informed him he would find a farm. They likely wouldn't have a credit exchange machine, but he could give them coins and gems from the dungeon with an exchange note to take to the bank in town.

The exchange rate might be a bit hard to judge, but he had so much loot in his storage bag right now that it wasn't even funny. They had intended to split it as they did the items, but Karl had never gotten around to dropping it off for the agents to sort today, so he had half a chest full of loot.

Chapter 410 And Cake

Karl slowed to a stop at the edge of the farm to approach at a more human looking jog. He wasn't trying to terrify the people or their animals, and running across the field faster than anyone would dare to drive a car was likely to do exactly that.

As he jogged down the driveway toward the house, an older man, likely the father or grandfather of the current generation of farmers, came out to greet him.

"That's some mighty fine stamina you have, young man." He announced once Karl had come to a stop.

"Thanks. A long jog is good for the lungs. I came toward town looking for a few things to make a special birthday dinner for one of my team members. It's her birthday, and we're stationed in the wilderness some distance off, ensuring an Anomaly is dealt with." The man nodded. "If you need to commandeer some items, we will spare you what we can. There is more variety at the store in town."

Karl smiled and took a pair of gold coins out of his bag. "They might be from the monsters, but they're pure gold. The bank should take them in trade without an issue. All I need is a turkey, fresh heavy cream, butter, and some cake mix if you have it. It would be easier than making one from scratch."

The old man was looking at the two gold coins in shock. Sure, they were from the monsters, but that was still four ounces of gold.

A young man and woman came from around the corner of the house, likely from the barn, and Karl nodded to them, alerting the old man to their presence.

"Ah, meet my boy Gerald, and his bride to be, Roxanne."

Karl smiled. "Congratulations on your upcoming nuptials. Let me see here, I do believe that I have just the thing for a wedding present."

Karl pulled two items out, a simple gold chain with thick links in the style most men preferred, and a ruby pendant. Working men didn't wear a ring, instead they would put their wedding ring on a necklace, so it didn't get damaged. If tragedy or the plague hit and nobody was left to take care of arrangements, the chain holding his ring was supposed to be enough to pay for both of their funerals, so that a married couple always knew they would be taken care of and could be buried with their wedding rings.

The farmers stared at him in shock. "Sir, we cannot accept a gift like this. It is too much."

Karl laughed. "It's only right. I am a Royal Rank Elite, how could I give a wedding gift like I still worked the mines? Besides, I'm here on business. I need a turkey, heavy cream, butter, and cake mix."

"A Prince? Sir, we apologize, we didn't know." They all bowed in unison and Karl laughed. "Stand, stand. You didn't know because I didn't tell you. I'm not here to flex my rank, just to get ingredients for a birthday dinner. A special lady to me wants turkey and dumplings for dinner, and our Cleric wants to make her a cake."

The young woman ran inside, and came back out with a large wicker basket full of goods only a minute later. The pantry and the freezer must have been right at the door because she was fast, and there was a frozen turkey in that basket.

Karl added one more gold coin when he saw that there was not only cake mix, but also a bag of confectioner's sugar and a bottle of vanilla extract to make icing in there.

Those weren't items that most farmers kept on hand unless there was a celebration coming, so they were likely bought for the wedding.

"Here, take these straight to the bank and get them traded in." Karl explained as he passed the old man the money, then took out his notebook and wrote down some basic information.

[Prince Karl, 95988. Coins traded for luxury foodstuffs.] He wrote.

"That should be enough for you to trade them to the bank for a fair rate without being accused of anything. Now, I should get going back to camp. Good luck with the wedding, and I wish you all the best."

He turned and jogged back the way he came, but he could hear the family celebrating, along with a few other voices from the house, before the slapping of feet headed for town marked someone's departure.

By the time that he made it back to the camp, Karl could hear the confirmation on the radio that there was really a Prince Rank Elite in the area, and Karl's identity code. They must have taken his words seriously, and ran directly to the bank to trade in the coins before anything could happen to them.

Three gold coins wasn't a huge hit to Karl, not when he had a thousand or more of them in his bag. But it was likely to convert to an entire summer's earnings for the old man, far more than the food was worth.

"I've got everything that you requested, plus confectioner's sugar, vanilla, and premade cake mix." Karl announced as he reached the camp.

Then he took the basket out of his storage and placed it on the table in the kitchen area of the fort.

"You're back already, with a frozen turkey and everything else we asked for?" Doug asked, startled by the speed.

"Yeah, I stopped at a farm just before town and they had everything. That would be the bank in the mine village that we were hearing on the radio, verifying the Monster Gold that I traded was legitimate.

Nobody will miss a coin or two." Karl laughed.

Doug laughed. "Well, we were just going to turn them all in for credit anyhow, so I don't see any reason we shouldn't use them to barter. Clerics take a vow of poverty and charity, so giving it away every time we interact with others seems like the right thing to do. A few extra coins on a farm won't hurt the economy, but it will help the farmer."

While Doug talked, Lotus dug through the supplies to see what they had.

"Oh, you got really good stuff. This is even top quality sugar. Alright, we should be good to go for the birthday dinner. Now, are we starting first thing in the morning? Or did we have to work?" Lotus asked.

"I think we will have to do a dungeon run in the morning unless it rejects us again. They were saying the most likely scenario is one full day, so that means morning tomorrow we should be able to enter for a second time." Karl explained.

"Perfect, then we can do the birthday dinner after that, and then have some girl time. It's a thing that we used to do at the Seminary Academy. We would either make or acquire some makeup, and then we would give the birthday girl a makeover." Tessa laughed. "Oh, and some of them were terrible when we were in the early years. But we're pretty good at them now."

Karl could only imagine what a bunch of teen girls who had been raised by the church, who didn't advocate or even normally stock makeup, would have done in their first attempts at a makeover.