

Beast Master 961

Chapter 961 See The Truth

The new guests arrived all at once, and the city guard barred the door to the tavern, keeping everyone inside, and prying eyes outside.

Needless to say, Cara was quite annoyed when she got to the door, and they shooed her away.

She simply stepped into her space and then settled on the back of the booth's bench behind Lotus. But the audacity of those guards, telling her where she could and couldn't go.

Unacceptable.

The City Lord, a Mythic Ranked Dwarven Warrior, sat at a large round table in the middle of the room, and the Totem ranked Mage from the corner moved to join him and the other Totems.

"Alright, what is so important that I had to come here on my day off?" The City Lord demanded.

"Other than the fact that the entire city knows that the city was never renovated, it was just put under a cursed illusion that made it look new? Or that the curse applies to everything in the city, including the food and the people?"

Oh, the thousands of undead might be a good place to start as well. The people who have died since the renovation are all still around as Undead. I don't know how we missed that in the city census.

But with the illusion in place, nobody can see what food has spoiled, and now we have a cause for all the mystery illnesses that have been coming to the Clerics." The Dwarf who had been in the corner of the room demanded in a dry

tone.

The City Lord looked like a deer in the headlights, unsure how to respond to the accusations.

"That's not possible, it has to be a lie." He insisted.

Cara snorted in amusement, and Rae smirked.

"You know, we can prove it to you. Who here has a Totem Ranked or higher [Dispel] or [Nullify] ability? Even a perception spell to see through illusions should do." Rae insisted.

One of the Dwarves took out a magical device and activated it.

"Everything looks fine to me. What do you mean, there is an illusion?"

Rae gestured to the door. "Look outside. The interior of the building was renovated by the owner. Look at everything that was done during the renovation effort."

The mage stepped to the door with his magical device, then gasped as he looked at the market, and slammed the door shut again.

"What the hell? Why are there undead selling vegetables in the market?" He demanded.

"Because the curse keeps them looking just like new. They don't know that they're dead. If you go talk to them, they'll answer like normal. Until they can see through the curse, they won't realize that anything is wrong"

"How could we miss something like this?" One of the others demanded.

They were Totems, they should be able to see through any illusion that the spider did.

Rae shrugged. "You're likely cursed as well. Would you like to be Nullified? We have a Winged Void Badger, and she can disenchant most curses, at least for a while. The city returned to normal after she inspected it, so the curse has a core somewhere."

The City Lord went paper white at the mention of a core for the curse.

"I think that I know what it is. When I invited the Stone Lord here, he presented the city with a gift, a puzzle box with a magical item inside. I never opened it, just put it in the treasury with all the other random gifts the city has gotten." He whispered.

"So, we just destroy the core, or deactivate it, and the city will return to its real appearance?" One of the other Council members asked.

The Lord shook his head, just now realizing what Cara and Rae had been the first to conclude.

"If we do destroy the curse, all of the undead will die. The locals will think we murdered a quarter of the population. And then there's the issue of the other curse that was on the city, stopping it from raining."

The council member who had been sitting in the tavern from the start frowned and downed his ale.

"Well, we're going to have to do something about both before the end of the day. The curse that was stopping it from raining has been mostly taken care of, so that's just a public announcement.

But the state of the city is a whole other matter. Soon, the buildings will start collapsing if they're not properly repaired. That's why we authorized the funding to have it done the first time.

And that's another issue. We need to fix everything, and the residents will not be happy if we ask them to pay twice, after letting everyone be deceived the

first time."

One of the other councilmen laughed. "Well, it's not like we can call the Lord's friend back to come fix things now, can we? As he turned out to be a master illusionist and not an earth mage at all."

"Or a Necromancer. It's a bit hard to tell with what I am hearing from outside." One of the others insisted, then held up a stone tablet that had rows of text scrolling over it.

Karl was intrigued by the item. It looked like System Messages, but appearing on the tablet. The messages started with the same format for names, so it seemed safe to assume that it was a projection of his interface, and not part of a group of networked items.

The City Lord was clearly getting annoyed by all the jabs at him, but this debacle appeared to be completely a result of his choices. He had handpicked the contractor to do the renovations, and he had gotten the whole city cursed

and scammed.

What Karl was most interested in was the method he was going to try to talk himself out of this situation. From the look on everyone else's faces, it was not

going to be easy.

But so far, none of them had a viable solution, either. If they did, they would have put it forward just to make the City Lord sweat a bit harder.

Chapter 962 And Bring It To Light

While the city council had enough trouble on their plate just trying to sort out the issues with the curse, that was far from the only issue that they were going to face that day.

A pounding on the door, along with the sound of someone fighting the guards, turned into an irate Dwarven woman storming into the tavern, dragging a younger Dwarven woman by the hair while a young boy thumped at her back and shouted to let his mother go.

The City Lord went pale, and Rae brought out a bag full of the Guild kitchen's signature caramel popcorn and peanut mix.

"What the hell is going on now?" One of the Councilmen asked.

Karl grabbed a handful of popcorn and pulled Dana into his lap, so she didn't have to look past him to see the show. Then he slid his chair back so that Thor could get a good view as well.

"I will tell you what is happening. When that deadbeat went missing this morning during the chaos, I went looking for him, and what did I find when the Guards tracked him down? His side piece sitting in a room full of priceless gifts that belong in the City Treasury.

The City Accountant is there now to do a full inventory of the house. But if you will excuse us, I need to borrow my husband for a moment." The Dwarven woman explained between kicks to keep the mistress silent.

"Madam, kindly let the young woman speak. It appears that her son is quite distraught." One of the older councillors requested in a flat tone.

Nobody would mistake that as a request, and the City Lord's wife let go of the woman, who immediately crawled to the Lord, while the boy threw himself at the City Lord to hug his leg.

"Daddy, that evil woman is bullying us!" The boy wailed.

The only sound in the room was Rae and Karl munching on popcorn, and then the boy burst into tears as his father failed to respond.

"I believe that we should move this to a private venue." The Lord insisted quietly.

His wife placed her hands on her hips and gave him a challenging look. Despite the four Rank difference in their power levels, Karl suspected that was not a fight he was going to win.

The youngest of the Council Members, a Dwarven Cleric with his blonde hair in small braids tied back in a bunch, burst into laughter.

"Oh, I don't think that's necessary. We've all figured out what is going on. But your family drama can wait until we get past the important issues. Like how the hell we're going to keep half the city from dying when we remove the curse from the city."

The others sat silently while the City Lord's family stared each other down, and then the Cleric cleared his throat.

"I suppose that we could have every Cleric in town cast a mass resurrection ritual over the whole city. Most of the dead wouldn't even know that anything changed, but I'm not sure how many of them can be saved. Resurrecting the Undead is tricky."

The others understood what he meant without any more detail. If they'd been dead too long, or they had realized they weren't supposed to be alive anymore, using Resurrection would just free them from their undead bodies.

"I don't suppose any of the bystanders have a suggestion?" The City Lord asked, trying to ignore the drama going on in front of him.

Rae raised her hand. "I vote that we teach Supreme Lady Matilda the [Randomize] skill and see what happens when she uses it on the city."

That was one hundred percent a Cara suggestion. But Rae was bored now that there was no more fighting, and it sounded better than letting them argue for hours.

The City Lord frowned. "Do not speak that name aloud. It is against city ordinance."

The Council Cleric nodded. "You never know if she'll show up to see who's talking about her."

Cara perked up in her space. That was all it took? She could totally take advantage of that in the future. They could have so much fun together. Cara recalled someone saying that she could make new cities and dungeons appear, just for funsies.

How much better of a friend could a Badger ask for?

[Don't go causing troubles for an entire country just to see new things.] Karl warned.

[Just a little bit?]

[Don't bother the Ancient Dragon until we see her in person again.]

Cara smirked and hid her thoughts from Karl.

She had definitely seen something in that mirror which told her she would get

to see that dragon again.

There was a lot of quiet discussion at the table before the Councilmen sat upright again, and the City Lord motioned for them to speak.

"We will support having the Clerics gather to cast a Mass Resurrection over the whole city, right before the curse is broken. It will hide most of the deaths, and the rest can all be blamed on the curse." The Eldest of the Councillors

announced.

That was a bit diabolical, but it would work well enough. The Undead who weren't resurrected or destroyed would continue to be the same Undead that they were right now, until they realized they were dead and freaked out.

But with the curse gone, everyone would be able to see what was happening.

The one that was really going to pay for this was the City Lord, who would have to explain why the city wasn't actually fixed. He had been thrown under the bus, and at this point, he couldn't even argue against it.

Lotus rapped her mug on the table to get everyone's attention.

"If it suits the City Lord, we can offer you a portal out of town before the announcement is made. They will shame your entire lineage as cowards, and turn your name into an epithet, but they're likely going to do that anyhow. What I mean is, if you would like to run away, the Green Dragon wouldn't be opposed to your survival instincts." She declared.

The look on the Mythic Rank Dwarf's face was priceless. The tiny cleric had basically just told him that his life in the city was as good as over either way, so he could either face mob justice or be decried as a coward.

But after a moment, his expression steeled.

"I will make the public announcement in one hour. Have the Clerics ready to

cast the spells to resurrect right before the mages work together to dispel the

curse after I shatter the spell's core." He decided.

Then he turned to Lotus. "Can you send my wife away? She doesn't deserve the fallout that will come from this."

Chapter 963 Public Announcement

The group broke up, with plans to be at the stage in the town square in one hour.

That would be enough time to warn most of the people that there was

something to announce, as well as prepare for the spell. With the System Interface, all of the clerics already knew what they needed to do, and were presumably gathering to prepare, while the other City Councillors were making preparations for the fallout from the day's events.

Karl and the team found themselves a nice spot where they could see the stage, but wouldn't be in the press of the crowd. That was their waiting spot for the show to start.

True to his word, forty-five minutes after they split, the City Lord was on the stage, followed by the majority of the Council Members. Notably absent was the cleric, but the rest were there.

"People of Banar, I have tragic news for you all. We have been cheated and tricked by one that we should have been able to trust.

The renovation of the city was never done. It is nothing more than an illusion placed over the city. An illusion that hides a most terrible curse.

You might have noticed that your food lasts longer than you are used to. That your aging loved ones have pulled through longer than anyone could have expected.

But the sad truth is that neither is true.

The curse forces everything in the city to take on a pristine condition. The buildings, the trade goods, even the people.

Many of those standing among us today are long dead, and maintained by this necromantic curse. If they were to leave the city, the magic would fade, and it is believed that they would either collapse, or continue their existence as a form of Undead."

The Lord took a deep breath.

"I was the one who hired the contractor. There was no bid for the job, I accepted his proposal and paid for his services personally. This curse is upon the city of Banar due to my choices.

As of today, I will be stepping down as City Lord, and the King will be sending a replacement guardian for the people.

But first, the Forge Priests will cleanse the hidden decay of the city, and then I will break the curse placed upon it, allowing everyone a fresh start."

There was panic in the streets as everyone tried to understand what exactly that meant.

But the Lord didn't intend to give them time to worry, and the first half of the effort, the combined spell cast by the Clerics swept over the city.

Karl watched as the spell washed over the undead in the city, and most of them started to heal, becoming whole again.

However, contrary to his expectations, none of them collapsed, even the ones who were clearly not healing. Maybe this wasn't going to end as badly as...

Nope, there it was.

As soon as the resurrection spell ended, hundreds of city residents collapsed, and the City Lord gritted his teeth, then shattered a statue in his hands.

The illusion faded from the city as residents who had lost loved ones wailed in despair, and then the Mage from the City Council opened a portal for the City Lord to step through and moved to address the crowd.

"As the temporary head of the City Council, you have my condolences on your losses.

We will be starting an effort to actually reconstruct the city over the next few weeks, and city funding will be available for funerals. Rest assured, the cost of burying the fallen with dignity will not fall entirely on the people."

The shock was beginning to wear off as the people realized that their loved ones had been dead for quite some time. Once the resurrection had failed, most of the bodies had shrivelled to emaciated corpses, as you would expect of a body left in the desert's dry heat for months or years.

Looking at them that way, many realized that they had gotten far longer than expected with their loved one. But what they hadn't realized yet was that many of the illnesses they had seen lately were a result of bad food.

The Clerics kept most of those from being fatal, but there would surely be a few.

The outrage was beginning to creep into the crowd as well.

"Where did that no good Lord get to? He needs to face judgment for his

crimes!" An old Dwarven woman shouted.

The mage held up his hand to silence the crowd. "And he will. We sent him to the Palace, where he will be held pending trial for incompetence."

"Incompetence? He got our people killed. You might not have been on the council then, but I haven't forgotten the lies that he told us about the renovation before he cursed us!" The woman shouted.

The mage bowed his head to the Elder and raised his voice with magical augmentation.

"It will be one month before the trial. Until then, the former City Lord will be in custody. His wife has been exiled from the city, returned to live with her family. If you want to attend the trial, you have one month to get to the capital." He

declared.

That was acceptable to most. There was a portal platform, and more than enough Earth Mages in the city that they would surely be able to find someone to open a portal for whole groups of them.

The Capital was going to have a monumental crowd for the trial, but for now, there was more interest in what they were going to do about the situation in the city. Not only with the dead, but also the rotted products, and the dilapidated buildings.

It all needed to be handled before any of the buildings collapsed, and suddenly every Dwarven Earth Mage in town was incredibly popular.

One of the other councillors stepped forward to the enchanted microphone. "If emergency repairs need to be made, please inform the city guard, and the Captain will approve payment to a local Earth Mage out of the city budget. We are willing to clear the city coffers to make things right if that is what we need.

A few lean years for city programs are inevitable, but we have a plan to keep the city guard fully funded."

Chapter 964 No Longer Pristine

The speeches were interrupted by the sound of alarm bells being sounded all over the city.

At first, Karl thought that it might be about the people who had dropped dead due to the resurrection spell, but the alarms were continuing, and a secondary tone was introduced after the first few seconds, as if the situation had been upgraded.

The Councillor raised his voice. "Everyone, remain calm and prepare to defend yourself. The city is currently under attack, both internally and externally."

That did nothing at all to help calm down the crowds.

There were elderly and children gathered in the square. Both for their daily activities, and for the announcement that had just been made, so the "stay calm" recommendation was generally ignored.

Instead, everyone was trying to get the vulnerable ones, the children and the lower Ranked, to safe spots, while arranging for defence of those spots, but nobody in the area knew what the threat was yet.

Then a trio of Ogre Lords simply appeared in the middle of the market and began roaring and attacking.

"Fuck" Tessa breathed as she realized what was happening.

"Monster Spawn inside the city." Ophelia agreed.

Karl and Dana were already in motion, intending to intercept the attacks of the Ogres towards a group of Dwarven children who were huddled together in panic.

Dana called her Golems to block one Ogre, while it was faster for Karl to move himself than to activate a skill.

The sound of shattering stone told Karl that something was very wrong.

A single strike from the Ogre had shattered both of Dana's stone golems, just before Karl slammed into the second ogre with a shoulder tackle, taking it to the ground, but not causing any visible damage.

The Haint Claw equipped itself on both of his hands as Karl began to tear at the shoulder muscles of the downed Ogre, but even his claws were only making shallow cuts with each strike.

The breaking of the curse had triggered a Totem Rank Ogre Spawn.

How long had the curse of pristine appearance been holding off spawns in the area that this much magic had built up to be unleashed the moment that the curse was no longer in effect?

Karl called for the bodyguards to protect the group from the third Ogre, which was currently engaged by a humanoid Thor. Rae's Golems had taken over from Dana's which were now trying to attack the Ogre from the back.

The Dwarves weren't cowards, and a dozen Overlord Ranked warriors had charged the Ogres, screaming battle cries at the sight of their ancient enemies.

The Council had scattered, each taking a district of the city, but they had forgotten one important factor. The central district near the City Lord's manor was supposed to be covered by the City Lord.

He was gone, so there was currently no Totem Rank or higher defender for this district, where there would normally be the strongest fighter in the city.

Karl caught the Ogre's arms as it reached up to choke him, and the two became locked in a stalemate, while the Dwarven warriors began to hack the oversized monster apart.

Ninety percent damage reduction was a lot. But not enough when you were faced with dozens of Dwarves wielding axes, plus a Karl who was constantly bombarding the Ogre's face with [Void Blasts].

The Ogre to Karl's left, the one that was facing off against Rae's Golems, shrieked in pain, and Karl heard the spider laugh, a raspy whistle, as her natural form had no vocal cords.

[Oh, that's a good idea.] Cara realized, and another mournful howl filled the air, while the Dwarves cheered.

Karl looked up and found that Cara was attached to an Ogre's back by her claws, right in the middle of his back where he couldn't reach her. That would explain the frustration, and it was a pleasant change from all the things that Karl suspected that the Void Badger might have done to him.

The Dwarves had encircled the Ogres, and they were cutting them down with brutal efficiency, despite the Ogres thick hide and vitality.

Karl could see soft matter through the bone of the Ogre's skull, and one final [Void Blast] ended its struggle, as well as eliminating most of its head.

Then the body vanished from underneath him, and Rae transformed to help Karl to his feet.

"Good work, that one is almost intact." She congratulated him, then transformed back to finish off the one she was working on.

It wasn't giving up, and the Golems were being replaced every ten seconds or so, but nobody except Karl and Cara had an appropriate attack skill for dealing with a threat of this level.

Cara got busy making Ogre insides into Ogre outsides after she got through its hide, and Karl switched to his bow to effectively cripple the remaining Ogre

without getting in the way of the Golems.

The air cracked as Karl let loose the first supersonic arrow, punching deep into the Ogre's chest. The Dwarves turned to stare at him in shock, stunned at the pure physical strength needed to draw a bow that would fire that hard.

Karl frowned, and deactivated [Haste]. The bow was not intended to be

supersonic, but the spell effect increased his attack speed, which apparently included arrows.

Karl continued to fire arrows, now at slightly less than the speed of sound, while the Ogre struggled to swat away all the annoying summons that were continually harassing it.

They were never ending. The moment that he killed one, two more appeared.

The Ogre glared at Karl with unfettered hatred in its eyes. This was all the fault of that damnable cat demon. A mighty Ogre should be able to squish all this Dwarven filth. But that demon and his odd allies were here to torture it.

An arrow took the Ogre in the throat, and it collapsed, gurgling with rage and unfulfilled murderous intent.

[Hawk, what group is closest?] Karl asked, knowing that the bird was around somewhere.

[What? Oh, yeah. Just stay there, a pair are coming from the south toward you

now.]

Hawk was clearly distracted, but not by the Ogres.

[Where are you now?]

[Sand mice.]

Karl shook his head and turned to the south, where a running battle between a Totem Ranked Dwarf and a heavily armoured Ogre Lord was going on.

The Dwarf was doing his best, but the Ogre was more interested in keeping him

at bay while hunting civilians.

Karl's first arrow pinged off its helmet, and the Ogre Lord turned to see who

had the audacity to fire arrows at it.

Karl waved a greeting, and the Dwarf hacked a deep wound in the monster's already damaged right knee.

It was standard Dwarven tactics against Ogres, Hack them down to size, then fight them when they were easier to reach.

Now that the majority of the public space had been cleared of noncombatants, Thor transformed into his natural state and Tessa vaulted onto his back, prepared for the charge. That got the Ogre's full attention. The Behemoth was the first thing in the city that was larger than a Totem Ranked Ogre Lord, as Ophelia was fighting as a Werebear and not in Dire Bear form, which would have risked stepping on someone when the area was still packed with

bystanders.

From the east, an Ogre roared in victory, and Lotus whistled, indicating that

Karl should follow her.

[Good luck buddy. Ask Sister Cara to buff your horns if you need to stab him harder.] Karl instructed Thor as he turned to face the new threat.

[We've got this.]

Chapter 965 Rescue The Dwarves

Karl leapt over a ruined building and found two Ogres standing over a dead Dwarven Earth Mage. That should be one of the Council Members, and apparently no match for whatever groups of Ogres he had found.

But he was also fighting mostly alone, and not with a large group, as Karl had been.

Rae [Shadow Stepped] to the corpse, and hurled it at Lotus, then went incorporeal as a massive fist descended towards her.

The activation of [Leviathan] made Karl nearly six metres tall when fully buffed, and he smiled as he slung his sword over his shoulder, while making a rude gesture with the Haint Claw on his other hand.

"What do you say, gentlemen? Think you can take me two on one?"

The Ogres charged and Karl sidestepped as fast as he could, blurring in the monsters' vision as his blade cut deep into the side of the closest Ogre before he stabbed the clawed fingers of his free hand into the wound.

[Soul Steal] began to drain the monster's vitality as the Ogres swung backhanded attacks at Karl, who was still moving. He charged between them, focusing his attacks on the same Ogre over and over as his blade shrieked through the air.

To the watching Dwarves, it looked like a streak of blue fire in the air as the blade spun, parried and attacked, all too fast for most to accurately track.

Remi came over to watch the battle, and contribute a steady stream of [Chain Lightning] attacks to the effort. She needed a skill at Totem Rank, but she just couldn't seem to grasp the difference, even though she was looking right at it as Karl used [Void Blast] on every strike.

[Watch, Sister. This is how you do it.] Rae announced, then appeared behind one of the Ogres and began systematically dismantling its back muscles.

The Ogre was rapidly being flayed alive, and her bladed legs no longer seemed to have any issues cutting through the thick hide.

{Skill Master 5 Activation} [Offensive Adaptation] has evolved.

{Totem Rank Epic Grade Skill [Predation] Gained}

[Predation] Passive Skill. The user has become a natural-born predator of everything they see. Increases damage significantly with every strike against a known target type. Bypasses a portion of the target's damage reduction.

(Ooh, the Stabby sister learned a new trick. That's pretty impressive.) Remi agreed.

Unfortunately, it either didn't spread to her, or it only worked on melee attacks, and not skills. There was a good way to test it.

Remi sent her Naga bodyguards to engage the Ogres, and they landed a few strikes, which were doing increasing amounts of damage. But not nearly enough to think that they were ignoring the Totem Rank damage reduction. Rae laughed at the effort. Predation was only a melee attack skill when used by her. It was part of her body, so if she attacked with her limbs, it was a Totem Ranked attack. But it didn't apply to blades or skills the same way. So, for others, it was nothing more than a damage buff.

Even her Golems didn't get the full benefit. They weren't spider enough, she assumed.

Karl landed three more quick strikes on the Ogre, and the last one carved a deep furrow across its belly, and massive bleeding.

The Ogre retreated, and Karl turned his attention to the other, which was currently trying to catch Rae using some sort of flaming club attack.

Karl swung at its knee, and the Ogre turned to defend itself. But at the last instant, Karl changed his footing and launched at the wounded Ogre, who was caught off guard.

The blade sunk deep through its chest, and surged with power as the ogre died. Now it was two on one in the opposite direction, with Karl and Rae teaming up on the survivor.

Karl heard Thor laughing in his mind, but ignored it for the moment as he sent a flurry of attacks at the Ogre. It was left with an impossible choice. Karl's

blade to its vitals, or Rae's claws through its back.

It tried to spin with its club, but Rae used [Night Hunter] to simply step back through the wall of the building behind her, leaving the Ogre baffled as to where she went, while Karl was presented with the Ogre's shredded back.

A second precise strike with [Void Blast] punched deep into the beast's heart, and the second Ogre fell.

"Lotus, how is your patient doing?" He called to the large tree.

Lotus shook her branches happily, sprinkling golden dust all over the ground. The Dwarf was alive again, and recovering, but still in rough condition. Lotus was letting her long duration healing spells take care of his remaining wounds, but he was also out of stamina and mana.

He had fallen when the repeated attacks had burned through his mana pool, and his [Earth Shield] had failed him.

Karl patted the Dwarf on the shoulder as he passed by, and Remi grabbed the mage by the chin to dump a questionable looking potion down his throat. {New recipe for combined mana and stamina potion.} She explained.

The Totem Ranked Mage instantly looked better, and while it was clear that he wasn't at one hundred percent, he did manage to get to his feet and stretch some of the phantom pains out of his muscles.

"I will come check on you in a second. The others need a hand with their Ogre."

Karl explained.

The Dwarf grabbed his pant leg. "Go east. There is a whole other group over

there, and the citizens are on the run!"

Karl nodded, and motioned for Remi to follow him.

[Rae, help them out.]

[They won't need it for long. Cara learned a new trick.]

Karl turned to see what she meant, and realized the badger had a thin rope

made of spider silk wrapped around the Ogre's neck, coated in [Void Blast] that was pulsing like a buzz saw, or the world's most insane garrotte wire.

That was certainly one way to kill an Ogre.

Chapter 966 Move the Wounded

Karl ran off to the east, slowing his pace so Remi could keep up. It wouldn't take much to find the Ogres, he assumed. There was enough screaming to lead him in the right direction, even with the other sounds of battle.

But there wasn't one other group here, there were three, and another dead Dwarven Totem.

[Rae, you're up. Bring him to Lotus and then hunt for more defeated Totems. All the local clerics will be in one spot for the casting they just finished.] Karl instructed.

Rae darted off to claim the body, which she brought to Lotus, while Karl took a moment to decide how exactly he was going to make this work.

Nine really was a lot of Ogres when you looked at them all together, and they were all Totems. That old dragon wasn't joking, this place wasn't a safe one to be casually travelling around.

As one, the Ogres sensed his power level and turned to face Karl.

Karl focused on activating [Demonic Oppression], Rae's bloodline suppression ability, and the Ogres growled at him, but didn't make any attempt to attack.

[Oh, it's ugly out here. There are at least six Ogres left for every Totem.] Rae noted as she searched the city.

[Once you find the dead ones, go back and help the ones in the most trouble. I don't think they'll mind if you keep the bodies.]

That made for a happy Rae, and she was claiming every Ogre body that she passed. They weren't edible to Dwarves or Beastkin, and the Trolls were mostly vegetarian, so nobody should really miss them.

[Remi, you hide for a moment, and then summon the bodyguards at random spots to confuse and distract the Ogres. I am going to try to make them chase me around this open area with the destroyed buildings.] Karl instructed, and Remi quickly reached upward to pull herself onto the roof of a crumbling stone house.

The butterfly made her [Invisible], and Remi gave Karl four thumbs up to indicate she was in position.

Karl switched to his bow and took a deep breath, hoping that his idiotic idea actually worked.

Fully buffed, he unleashed arrows into the nine Ogres as fast as he could, while the monsters charged in his direction.

Just as they were about to make their first attack, Karl activated [Teleport] to the spot where they had started, and continued to fire. Ogres were dumb to start with, and being from a Monster Spawn, they were also enraged with bloodlust.

It had worked once, and hopefully would a few more times, as the arrows were doing an impressive amount of damage.

[We got the Ogre down. The area is clear.] Thor informed Karl just as he teleported again, this time to the top of a building at the end of the block, so he could see and hit more of the Ogres in the middle of the group.

[Good work. Keep the area safe, there are countless people hiding in the buildings there. I will catch up with you once we're done here.]

The Ogres were dumb, but they did understand some things. Like not giving the prey a place to run away to. So, when Karl began firing from the building, only half charged for him, and the other half spread out to cover the open areas, starting with the ones where he had already been.

That was when Remi summoned the bodyguards into battle. They distracted an Ogre at the edge of the battle and caused a few Ogres to think there were reinforcements.

Karl took advantage to move to another building and fire arrows into the one fighting the Naga pair, then two more close to them.

Three Ogres fell, and Karl had a moment of appreciation for the [Predation] skill. He hadn't put more than six or eight [Void Blast] arrows into any of them, but it was enough to take them out.

That had also made an empty spot in the Ogres deployment, and there was only one other near where Karl was standing. The brute charged, attempting to swat away the arrows with its club, and Karl held out to the last second, then switched to his sword and charged to run the Ogre through before teleporting again and returning to his bow.

He found himself on a rooftop only one over from Remi, who called a [Hellstorm] vortex into the Ogres, which caused chaos as the vortex multiplied faster than they could swat at it.

They didn't seem to know where she was casting from, so Remi continued her assault, and Karl dropped another Ogre with his arrows.

She couldn't use [Chain Lightning] as the spell originated at her, and would defeat the purpose of being invisible. But the Vortexes were quick to cast, and weren't giving away her position just yet.

Remi laughed as a group of five Overlord Ranked Dwarven warriors ran to the edge of the battle, then promptly turned around and ran in another direction.

Five Overlords versus one Totem Ranked Ogre was workable. Five on five? That was suicide for them.

Karl moved again, and put up a [Blockade] wall of ice to slow the Ogres as he continued to fire. It didn't slow them for long, but it was long enough for Karl to take out two more of the Ogres, leaving only three, all wounded.

That was close enough to defeated for Karl, so he summoned his Lamia bodyguards, as well as two Dire Bear Golems, and erected another [Blockade] in front of himself.

The summoned beasts only needed to hold the Ogres for a few minutes. That was all it would take to get enough arrows in them to finish them off. Stone spikes erupted from the ground, and Karl saw a battered looking Totem Rank Earth Mage join the battle from the street closest to Lotus. That should be the one that they resurrected, even though it was a bit early for him to be

fighting again.

But the intervention was perfectly timed. His stone barriers didn't just wound the Ogres, they slowed them down while Karl fired, and within ten seconds, it was all over but the cleanup.

Chapter 967: Sorting

Karl teleported to the mage and nodded politely.

"Thanks for the help. I was getting tired of running around trying not to get smashed."

The Dwarf laughed. Smashed by an Ogre Club is what happened to him the first time he engaged the enemy.

"How many of them did you get so far? Have you been luring them to this spot?" He asked professionally.

Karl shook his head. "I was with the group for the first few in the middle of the city, by the healing tree. Then the two who were at your body.

Then the nine here.

I'm going to have to move again, I can hear more Ogres nearby, but if you wish to lead the civilians here to safety in the middle of the city, you can.

I have assistance, as you can see."

The Mage shook his head. "Let them hide where they are comfortable. There are plenty of underground tunnels and boltholes in the city for them to escape through. It's better to let them stay in an area they're familiar with. It will increase their chances of survival if they're attacked.

The reports from the others say that the total number of Ogres isn't high. The City Guard has had some luck dealing with them, and most appeared alone.

I have no idea how I managed to get nine and then four together in my zone."

He must have killed the other two because Karl hadn't found them.

[Hawk, are there Ogres outside the city?] Karl asked.

[Nope, only inside the city. And most of them are gone. But I think that I found the portal. You know, the centre of the Monster Spawn.] Hawk replied.

[Where is it?]

[On the roof of the temple.]

That could make things interesting. If the centre of the spawn was over the Temple, then they were going to have to check it to see what sort of dungeon it was. But with all Totem Ranked Ogre spawns, there was a chance that it would have Mythic Ranked bosses.

It seemed unlikely, as Mythic would get the same sort of damage reduction against Totems that Totems did against Overlord and lower.

But it was possible, and Karl didn't know anything at all about this sort of powerful spawn.

"We could send someone in, one of the summoned creatures, and ask them what it is. There is a chance that it's not a dungeon, but a trial instance spawn.

If that is what it is, it might be a huge opportunity for us all." Dana suggested.

That was a good point. If it wasn't something they could handle, they could inform the City Council.

Assuming they weren't there already.

Most of the Ogres had been defeated by the city's residents already, and Rae was feeling quite smug about her collection of Totem Ranked Ogres.

Her next advancement bath would need a Totem Ranked base to go with the Mythic blood that she had gotten from the Dwarves. And now she had plenty, even if she didn't ask Karl to shrink her for the event.

Oh, that was a good idea. The bath could feel like an enormous swimming pool.

"Someone get Lotus and those under her care. Let's go to the Temple. Just have the wounded carry her healing totems so they can move without losing the effect." Karl decided.

There were two Totem Ranked Mages, plus the Earth Mage, a Ranger and a Bard among the rescued Totems.

Karl did a double take at that.

"Does a bard even have combat skills from their class? Or do you have to just hope for the best?" Karl asked as the middle-aged Dwarven woman got to her feet.

The Bard smiled at him and hummed a tune that made Karl's body surge with energy.

"We're not solo fighters. But a Totem Ranked Bard is one of the most powerful group combat classes. I know that your team has numerous group buffs, but so do I." She explained.

The motley group made their way through the streets, headed for the Temple. The city was getting quieter as they walked, the zone already cleared by the Clerics and their Paladins, whose barracks were right next to the Temple.

So, Karl didn't have high hopes for the situation until he saw where the actual portal was.

There was a statue of a Dwarf holding a sceptre placed on top of the dome of the temple, and the portal was above that.

Unless you were a Totem, or your species could fly, there was little chance anyone had entered yet.

Karl motioned to the Lamia on his right.

"Excuse the manhandling." Karl joked as he used [Unobtrusive Behemoth] to shrink the Lamia to the size of a python, then curled her in his hand.

An overhead toss sent the Lamia flying through the portal, and Cara's eyes went wide with realization. Sure, she could fly, but she could also fly. Karl could hurl her much faster than her wings would take her.

The Lamia vanished into the portal, and then came flying back out.

{Summoned Assistants may not participate}

Karl smiled. "Ladies and Gentlemen, we have ourselves a Trial Instance. The System just informed me that Summoned Assistants may not participate. So, we will have to see what it is for ourselves."

Dana gritted her teeth and ran up to the portal. If there were limitations on this trial, she was not going to hesitate and miss her spot in the quota.

She vanished inside, and Karl tried to send her a message.

{What do you see inside?}

{User Unavailable. Communications are Instance Locked.}

"We can't contact anyone inside. But I'm going. I will see you all on the other side."

Tessa cleared her throat.

"Oh yeah, not everyone can fly."

The Dwarves laughed, and the bard took both Tessa and Lotus by the hand.

"I will bring the ladies up. Your lot can bring the green-haired Behemoth and the spider lady." She insisted.

Rae laughed and simply leapt to the portal.

Then bounced off it.

[What do you mean ineligible?] She complained, then jumped at it again.

Again she failed to enter.

Remi transformed into a Spirit Snake, and waited as the Bard entered with Tessa and Lotus. They entered just fine, so Remi went to follow, only to run nose first into the portal.

"Oh, this is some bullshit."

"Just return to your space, and I will bring you in that way." Karl instructed the beasts.

Most of them did, though Hawk took a few seconds to finish bombarding one of the remaining Ogres first.

But Cara decided to try anyhow. She was all set up, ready to grab onto the portal with her claws, but it let her pass through.

"Well, that's our signal. See you when you finish." The Dwarf beside Karl announced, then they were all headed for the portal.

Chapter 968: Sholaha Trial

Karl stepped through the portal, and found Cara waiting for him on the other side.

An open field of stone, looking like the aftermath of a rock slide, greeted them. A massive golden temple stood in the distance, with two crystalline golems standing near the base.

Karl walked to the statues, not quite jogging, but not wasting any time, in case the instance was limited in duration.

{Greetings, adherent of the Old Gods. Welcome to the Sholaha Desert Trial Instance. You have been introduced to the Overlord Ranked Trial grounds. Please choose your challenge.} The Golem declared.

Words appeared in the air between Karl and the Golems, made of small stones from the ground.

{Option 1 ⇒ Attempt Advancement} Difficulty 10

{Option 2 ⇒ Attempt Class Change} Difficulty 5

{Option 3 ⇒ Attempt Status Optimization} Difficulty 7

{Option 4 ⇒ Random Bonus} ????

Karl grabbed Cara before she could immediately go for the random option.

"At least take three seconds to think about it." He reminded her.

[Thought about it, still want to know what they are hiding. Though... a Class Change. Would that give me one, as I don't have one? That could be fun too. No, I know what will happen if I do that. Randomness is best.]

Once she finished speaking, Cara vanished, and Remi began complaining in Karl's mind.

[This is discrimination. Just because I follow a Shaman God, I don't get to play? Even Brothers Thor and Hawk can't come out.]

Karl shrugged. [I guess it's an exclusive thing. They did put it right above a Temple.]

Rae considered the answer. [It said no to me, but the Spider Goddess is ancient. Does that mean that 'Old Gods' actually refers to a specific group?]

The Golem made a noise like grinding stone. "That is correct, daughter of the Spiders. The Old Gods are not the Beast Gods, not the Elemental Deities, not the Renegade Gods, not the Titan Gods, and not the Council of Divinity."

That at least answered her first question.

[But why does Cara get to play?]

"The God of Chaos is one of the Old Gods. His favour grants her entrance, as the World Dragon's favour grants the Karl's entrance."

[Haha, they call you 'The Karl' too.]

Karl rolled his eyes at her mockery, and focused on the options. Totem Rank advancement did sound like an incredible option, even if the difficulty was high.

But he was more intrigued by what a Status Optimization was.

Could that take him to the theoretical limits of his power? That would be flat out broken, assuming it was as good as [Predation] at increasing his damage.

He would make it to Totem Rank soon enough, that much was essentially inevitable.

Changing his class might be harder, but he had already seen the requirements to move to the next class in his current progression, and he didn't meet them yet.

{Requirements for Next Class Advancement}

⇒ Reach Totem Rank

⇒ Fill All Beast Slots or combine spaces to remove redundant areas.

⇒ Visit any Dungeon, Instance or Relic with System integration

Not only was he not yet a Totem, he still had one empty beast space formed. So the class change would have to be something other than the natural progression, unless it closed his remaining beast space and bypassed the rank restriction.

Karl pulled a bit of power from the Haint Claw and the Sword of Champions, and felt the state of his body. He was physically very close to Totem Rank. A bit more optimization from the weapons after this battle, and he should be able to push through no matter what.

A month at the most, and he would be a Totem. Two, if they were slacking.

Karl made his decision.

"I will take the Status Optimization."

The Golem nodded, and gestured toward the temple. "I believe that you know the basics. But this trial is integrated. Simply walk to the top within the next forty-eight hours to achieve perfect optimization. You may take any path, they are all equal."

Karl stepped to the temple, then walked around to his right so that the sun was at his back and not in his eyes. Sometimes the little things made the biggest difference.

Karl stepped on the first step and felt all the spells on his body, other than the [Beast Form] spell, shatter. So, he had to do this under only his physical abilities. With the Chaos Beast Constitution, it shouldn't be too difficult to walk up the first few steps.

According to the description, it 'removed physical limits on development'. That wasn't necessarily the same as removing limits on physical development, but Karl had high hopes for his gains this time.

The second step sent power surging through Karl's body, and in their mental storage his weapons buzzed with resonance.

Alright, he knew what to expect now. He had gone through it before, when his body was overloaded after the battle with the undead.

But the third step made his body burn like fire before leaving him slightly stronger than before.

The fourth step bombarded him with elemental energies, as if he were under attack by fifty mages at the same time. If he had thought that the fourth step was bad, it had nothing on this one.

The sixth step was all of the above, plus an oppressive force, similar to how the physical restriction of the first trial he had ever entered had tried to crush him.

The seventh step, everything increased. Then again on the eighth.

[Ooh, your fur is smoking. Nope, freezing. Freezing and smoking and glowing. Now I'm kind of glad I'm not out there.] Remi narrated.

[Thanks for the words of support.] Karl joked as he stepped up onto the tenth platform, and all of the effects all doubled.

It nearly drove him to his knees, but after a moment, his body seemed to adjust and Karl stepped forward again. Only to find that the rate of increase had also doubled.

Eleven steps down, nine hundred and eighty-nine to go.

Chapter 969: Optimal Options

In the Monarch Ranked portion of the Trial, Tessa, Lotus, Ophelia and Dana all stood in front of the statues, facing the same four choices that Karl and Cara had.

{Option 1 ⇒ Attempt Advancement} Difficulty 7

{Option 2 ⇒ Attempt Class Change} Difficulty 1

{Option 3 ⇒ Attempt Status Optimization} Difficulty 11

{Option 4 ⇒ Random Bonus} ????

"Status optimization is difficulty eleven?" Dana muttered as she read the options.

"And why is Class Change so easy?" Tessa agreed.

The Golem made a grinding noise as it prepared to speak.

"Difficulty changes with Rank and ability. Common and Uncommon Classes have little trouble advancing to a Rare Class. In contrast, reaching the peak of physical and metaphysical optimization is generally considered to be impossible for humans and dragonkin." The Golem insisted.

"So, it's eleven out of ten? Alright." Ophelia grumbled.

"What would it take to go from Overlord to Totem? Is that harder?" Lotus asked, now curious how the ranking worked.

"Overlord to Totem Rank advancements require a perfect completion. Difficulty, ten out of ten."

Lotus smirked. That meant Karl would likely choose one of the other options. Did that mean that if she was confident, she could catch up to him? That would be hilarious.

But her Dragon Guide, the juvenile Green Dragon who constantly watched the world through her eyes, wanted to know about class changes. It was a difficulty of one. But wouldn't that be even better?

Karl was broken because he had the good class. What if she could have the good class too? She could just have a whole set of beast spaces full of fluffy things and dragons.

Could Clerics qualify for that? It had to be an option for the Green Dragon Clerics, at the very least. The Goddess wasn't so cruel as to keep them away from the fluffy things just because they were faithful.

Tessa and Ophelia were both thinking similar things. The Advanced Classes were too powerful. If they were actually easy to get, but just didn't spawn for newbies, weren't they missing out on too much?

Dana was torn between the two obvious options. She could catch up to Karl and become an Overlord, but that wouldn't really be catching up, would it? He was far too powerful for an average Overlord. So, she could take a chance on a better class and leverage it for faster growth.

There was also a time limit on the trial, forty-eight hours. Presumably, it took most of that to get a perfect clearance, so she didn't have long to wait here and decide.

Murim Battlemage was already a good class, but it wouldn't hurt to ask the Golem about her chances.

"What are the odds that I get a better class than what I have if I choose class change?" She asked.

The Golem paused for a moment as it turned its head towards her.

"All Class Options will be an advancement from the Trial taker's current Class, assuming that they pass the trial to a sufficient standard for the desired class."

A difficulty one standard, yes. But from the sound of it, the better you did, the better the options. Perhaps she could get something like Beast Master, but for mages?

"What is the difficulty for the Beast Master Class?" She asked.

"The Beast Master is a Rare Class, Difficulty three or higher for a success."

What Dana had forgotten was that Karl had advanced to [Beast Master Packmaster]. So his standard was actually higher to get any sort of success.

Lotus got excited about the lore drop. "What is the hardest class to get?"

The Golem seemed to smile at her as it answered. "The most difficult to obtain class among the options in this trial is Ancient World Crafter. However, none of the applicants present have the prerequisites to obtain it, even with a perfect completion."

"What are the requirements?" Lotus tried.

"Demigod level power, a Divine Bloodline, and an existing Class in the Ancient series of Classes." The Golem explained.

Lotus frowned. "So, not me."

"Not you."

"I will take the class option, please." Lotus decided.

"So polite. Choose your path up the temple. They are all equal, so the route you choose will not affect the outcome."

Tessa and Ophelia nodded at each other.

"I will take the Class Change Option as well." They declared in unison, then began walking toward the temple.

"If I attempt to Optimize my Status, will I get any gains, even though it is not possible to fully complete the challenge?" Dana asked the Golem once the others had gone.

"I do not have the answer to that question. The outcome of a failed challenge is up to the Gods."

Dana nodded. Karl was the one with all the Divine Luck.

It was better to stay in her lane, and do what she knew that she could do.

"I will also take the Class Advancement option." She decided.

All she had to do was reach the top of the temple, and she should be able to get a class superior to Karl's. Something good enough to put her on the path to surpassing him.

Dana would not allow herself to be left behind as the 'damsel in distress' childhood crush.

The pain of the challenges seared through her body, but Dana kept her eyes locked on the top of the temple.

{Eyes on the goal. Eyes on the goal.} She muttered to herself, step after step on her way up the side of the temple.

Each of them had taken a different side of the temple, so they could not see each other, but each side was equally grim. As the Golem had promised, the trials were equal, and when they moved from the tenth to the eleventh step, it was nearly enough to make all four of them reconsider this trial.

But the simple math was enough to keep them going. One thousand steps. Ten levels of difficulty. If they couldn't make it past the hundredth step, they were likely to fail to gain a class advancement.

Chapter 970: Cara Won

While everyone else worked themselves to the bone, Cara floated in a pool full of chaos energy, watching them in a mirror made of pure energy.

As far as rewards went, this one was pretty good.

The energy was soaking into her body and doing something, but more importantly, she didn't have to do all that. It looked painful.

Look at Karl, he was literally on fire and coated in ice at the same time, while being electrocuted. They could miss her with that nonsense.

Cara cupped her palms and drank a bit of the chaos pool, then sighed in relief at the cooling sensation. She really did make the best choice.

Karl's mind had nearly gone blank as he stepped onto the one hundredth step of the temple, and suddenly, everything stopped.

Was this a safe spot? A moment to recover before going on again? A test of willpower to see if he would voluntarily continue, now that he knew what was coming?

Karl shook the lingering electricity from the fur of his beast form, and then checked himself for lingering damage that might still be healing. It looked like it was all repaired now, so he stepped forward again and realized just how devious this rest stop was.

The effect still doubled on the next step from what it had been, but now, he had been given time to get used to not being under the effect.

However, with the innate healing of his body, Karl was doing much better than the others. Tessa and Lotus had made it to the thirtieth step, while Dana was at the sixty-first step, but she had to stop and rest every step so that her body could adjust.

Karl trudged onward, hardly pausing at every step. He knew from experience that it was impossible to skip a step, even if you were large enough to make it possible, so he simply kept a slow pace and focused on the feeling of his body being refined.

It proved to be a good way to block out the feeling of how the refinement was being accomplished.

Karl wasn't the only thing being refined, Hawk noticed. That cracked dragon scale was slowly turning into a real treasure. If Karl made it to the one thousandth step, it might actually be shiny again, and Hawk could give it a place of honour in his nest.

It was also getting shiny faster with every step. This really was a good spot, even if Hawk couldn't come out himself. Who knew that it would give him free treasure?

In the Totem Ranked space, the decisions had been very similar to what the ladies had been faced with. With an advancement at difficulty eleven, it hadn't even been an option for most of them. But every one of the Dwarves who entered had a base class, and had never had a chance to advance it before.

So, they had eagerly taken the opportunity, with only one mage choosing to take Karl's route and try to optimize his status, hoping that he would get an Epic Grade Physique out of the deal. He was already an older man, so it would do him a lot more good than a new class right as he was getting ready to retire.

Time was hard to judge inside the trial, as the sun wasn't moving in the sky. It could have been hours, it could have been minutes, or they could have lost an entire day already. With the trial itself filling

everyone's minds, the passage of time was the last thing on most of their minds, except for Dana, who was focused on making as much progress as she could.

She had nearly wept tears of blood after she had passed the hundredth step, but she was still moving, and wondering how everyone else was doing.

The last time she had been in a trial like this, everyone had much different progress rates, but none of them had made it more than a few dozen steps up the temple before the trial had ended.

When Cara decided that it was time for a nap, Karl was at the four hundredth step, and the trial had changed the game on him. The refining effects had basically ceased to bother him, despite the increased intensity, but the trial had added hallucinations to the mix.

Images of failure, tragedy, the worst moments of his life, where weakness had overcome him. Then after a few steps, they would switch to moments of pride, arrogance, tyranny, where power had gone to his head.

There weren't too many of those in Karl's life, he realized. They were repeating much more frequently than the moments of weakness. But he was still moving upwards with the beasts as his guides, even when he was nearly lost in the illusions.

When Cara woke up from her nap, Karl was over three quarters of the way up the side of the temple, and Dana was past the two-hundredth step. That was better than anyone else was doing, but all of the ladies were past the first rest stop.

The mirror wouldn't let her watch the Dwarves to see how they were doing, but there was plenty of entertainment watching everyone else struggle while she sipped liquid chaos straight from the pool.

Just like the chaos dragon, it was both spicy and sweet, pleasant on the tongue, but without that uniquely dragon umami flavour.

Honestly, Chaos Dragon tasted better than pure chaos, but Cara had no intentions of becoming a dragon herself, so she would take the slightly less satisfying drink while she waited to find out what she was going to be rewarded with.

It had to be good with this much power available for the event.

Dana might have cried if she could see how the Void Badger was simply relaxing in the pool of power instead of trying to actively take it in and improve herself. She had put everything into her efforts, even transformed into beast form when her human body began to fail her under the effects of the temple.

On the other three sides, the clerics were also in beast form, with Lotus struggling to climb the steps in her tiny green dragon form, but also unable to fly under the suppression of the Temple.

Ophelia was in Dire Bear form, using the logic that tiny steps were less daunting, even if the change was the same, no matter what form she was in.

Unlike the others, who healed faster in beast form, Ophelia would heal the same in both Dire Bear and Werebear forms. So, it was a primarily psychological advantage to the choice, not a physical necessity.

Cara failed to notice the amount of liquid Chaos that she had taken in like juice as she watched the spectacle. She didn't even register the passing of time as she decided to take a second nap and fast-forward the show.

What she did notice was when the Trial gave a one-hour remaining warning while she was practicing her back stroke.

Was there something she was supposed to be doing here? Probably not. The show was still on, after all. One more hour and she would find out her reward.