

Beast Master 971

Chapter 971: Top Step

Karl stood at the top of the temple, and looked down into the half empty pool of black energy where Cara was napping peacefully, mumbling about loot and cupcakes in her sleep.

Of all the things that he expected to find at the top of the temple, Cara was not one of them. It was clear that she hadn't taken any trials, and she had been here the whole time, just watching. The pile of cloth bags that the kitchen staff kept the snacks in told him that much.

Karl sent the empty bags back to the Guild Store inventory, so they could be cleaned and reused, then placed his hand on the stone plinth at the top of the stairs he had arrived from.

{Congratulations. Maximum Reward Achieved. Calculating}

{Status Optimized. Adjusting Interface.}

Karl wasn't sure what that was about, but suddenly, there was a wealth of new information available in his System Interface, including icons for his group members, which were all currently in a yellow status.

{Physique Optimized. Epic Grade Physique Active. Upgrading.}

{Chaos Beast Constitution} Tier 2 active. Improved Growth speed versus Tier 1.

{Class Status Optimized} Remaining Skills Unlocked

{Packmaster Skill Tree}

[Follow Me Little One] Directly teach a known skill to a compatible target.

[Pack First] Removes the usage and targeting limits on {Evolution} but adds an increasing materials cost every time it is used on a bonded beast.

[Territorial] All attacks by the Packmaster have a chance to cause {Intimidation}

{Hidden Skill} [Home] One Time Use Skill. The Packmaster may designate a target location as their permanent home, granting various bonuses as the location is improved. Home location may be periodically changed, but never disabled.

[Pack Affinity] The Packmaster has an affinity for all skills that any of his bonded beasts have an affinity for, and may learn them as normal.

[Dominating Power] The Pack Master's Aura gains a {Mental Domination} effect at will, requiring weaker minds to submit to his will. Hypnosis type ability.

[Benevolent Elder] Unbonded Upgraded beasts gain the ability to form a [Contract] with eligible targets before the target's initial Class Selection

[Limitless] Passive Skill. Beasts Evolved by the Packmaster have an increased chance of surpassing milestones in development.

Karl already had most of the skills in the Skill Tree, but [Benevolent Elder] was a big gain, and [Dominating Power] would be incredible in combat, even if it did still feel a bit creepy.

{Finalizing Optimization}

{Nameplate Updated}

{2% Physical growth remaining to next advancement}

That was a new announcement. Karl had never seen a distance to his next advancement measure before. But when he looked through his interface, he couldn't see anywhere that a progress metre might appear, so it had to be a one-time System Message related to the optimization.

He did find the group settings, and realized that there were new functions there. He could form a party or a Guild Party, which seemed to be the same thing, but with a bonus to group buffs.

Then there was an option to set allied parties by group leader.

That one should be incredibly handy in the near future as they were working with various military groups to defeat monster spawns.

The only question he had left was what did his nameplate look like now? He couldn't see his own, and he hadn't seen any that looked out of the ordinary. Or did it give him a new title?

He didn't see a new title in the options.

Cara opened her eyes and smiled at Karl.

[Oh, you made it all the way up here. That was a good nap. You should taste this water, it's spectacular.]

Karl chuckled and reached down to grab the errant badger from the pool of Chaos energy, but found that they were separated by a barrier. Though she was here with him, he couldn't interfere with her event.

Cara shrugged and pulled an empty barrel from her space, then dunked it in the pool to fill it with liquid chaos.

Only, once the barrel was full, she was unable to put it back in her space at all.

"So, you can drink as much as you like, but no looting? It seems the Gods prepared an anti badger countermeasure before you arrived." Karl joked.

"The joke is on them. Once I get my rewards, I will be the strongest of us all.

Ooh, notification. That's new. I never get system notices, since I don't have a class. I hope I get a class. I want to be a berserker. Berserker looks like it's fun."

Karl couldn't argue with that. It might prevent some of the looting, but a Berserker type class did suit Cara pretty well. If you got her emotional now, she tended to fly into a rage and rip things apart with her bare hands.

{Evolution Complete} Winged Void Badger ⇒ Chaos Badger

{New Skill Gained} [Chaotic Foresight] Reveals one random insight into one random target per use. Insight may apply to any point between the present moment and the collapse of the Realm, so long as the random target exists at that point.

"I got the mirror spell! Oh, this will be good. Butterfly is going to love this new skill." Cara announced, as Karl read the notification about her new ability.

It would likely need to be levelled up with [Skill Master] to give her the full overview of someone's life, the way that she had seen it with Supreme Lady Matilda, but it was going to provide endless entertainment for the Badger either way.

"Have you seen how the others are doing?" Karl asked as Cara began chugging chaos from the spigot of the barrel.

Cara gave him a thumbs up, but waited until she had to come up for air before changing her focus to answering.

[They're all still climbing. The Dana Mage might make the fifth resting spot, and Ophelia is just now reaching the fourth. But the other three are going to come up short. I don't know what their difficulty level was, but if it was three, they should all be fine.]

Chapter 972: Timer Expired

Dana watched the countdown timer as she forced herself onto the fifth resting platform with every muscle in her body screaming in agony.

{5 Seconds until trial completion}

She had made it. The fifth platform was her goal, and while she desperately wanted to go one more step, just to be sure that it counted, her body would not allow that. Certainly, not within the next five seconds.

Perhaps one hand. Just a hand on the next step should be enough to ensure that the fifth point counted.

There was no reaction from the step when she put a hand on it, but Dana was satisfied as she lay on the five-hundredth step.

She had made it halfway up.

So, there was a chance she could get a class that was halfway up the range of Class Advancements.

The world around her faded to the familiar scene of the Class Advancement options, and Dana found herself looking at one single option.

{Mystic Blademaster} Rare Grade Trial Reward

Dana looked at the class, whose aesthetic appeared to be very similar to how the Murim Battlemage class made armour look when she wore it. That was a good start.

But when she looked at the skills, Dana was blown away.

[Auto Parry] Passive Skill. The Blademaster will parry all incoming attacks when equipped with a blade, within physical limitations.

[Blade Dance] Passive skill. The Blademaster's attack speed triples.

[Lady General] Blade wielding constructs under the Blademaster's control gain the effect of passive class skills.

Dana smiled at the described passive skills, and accepted the advancement so that she could see the Skill Tree.

The skills were all blade based, but all ranged magical attacks, other than one new shield skill that she could pick in the first rank of skills.

It was a bit of a shame that her Greater Golems couldn't benefit from the [Lady General] skill, as they didn't have opposable thumbs to hold blades. But two Golems with [Auto Parry] and [Blade Dance] would be a monstrous increase in her damage output.

Not only that, but they would be so much harder to destroy in a fight against physical enemies. There was no shortage of quality weapons with Karl and Ashbringer around, so they should be able to parry even the attacks of the Totem Ranked Ogres for a while.

Picking a new class really was the right choice.

However, if she could get Karl to teach her that undead summoning that Rae learned, she could have a whole army on her side. Well, if she could actually use it. They were undead, and she wasn't a necromancer, and certainly not a Shadow or Death Element specialist spell caster.

But there had to be something that she could do to increase her number of summoned supporters.

Dana realized that her [Epic Guard] was going to love the new skills. She was an agility type fighter, and this new class was perfect for her.

On the other sides of the temple, similar scenes were playing out, with equally enthusiastic responses.

Tessa looked at the heavily armoured knight image standing in front of her.

{Dragon Crusader} The Dragon Crusader is a chosen knight of the War God, blessed with holy magic and the physical skills to enforce the Red Dragon's will.

[Compliance] Creates an area of {Oppression} 10 metres per User Rank, and grants the Dragon Crusader the physique of a Red Dragon at their own Rank.

The skill tree had healing, buffing and combat skills, all more powerful than any that she already possessed.

[Holy Slash] was a particularly impressive one. 200% of weapon damage as holy damage, and functionally identical to the warrior's Slash skill, but with a much lower energy requirement.

With that, she could effectively fight from Thor's back in a crowd, instead of simply throwing spears at the enemies a few at a time.

Tessa used some available skill points to choose the skill and sighed in satisfaction. This was a good class, and she didn't truly lose her status as a Holy Warrior of the Red Dragon.

She briefly wondered how Thor would respond to her having a dragon's strength, but quickly realized that he would just be even happier that she was both powerful and scaled.

Thor was easy to please.

Ophelia had a few classes to choose from, but the final decision was an easy one.

{Ursine Avenger} was an oddball of a class, but somewhat in line with the previous berserker classes she had used. The skills were all combat and regeneration skills, as well as personal damage buffs.

But it had more of a group focus than before, with a taunt skill, and a damage transfer skill, to absorb a bit of what was done to other group members.

That wasn't really necessary in this Guild, but Ophelia could see how it would be a godlike ability for an average group to have the fast regenerating tank absorb damage done to weaker members.

It also included [Bestial Regeneration], a skill that Karl used to grant them, before he got a stronger version in [Trollish Regeneration] and then [Void Body].

While the others considered the combat implications, Lotus was thoroughly enjoying her advancement screen.

{Nature's Helper} was basically a more powerful Green Dragon Cleric. She got a more powerful area healing spell, mana reductions to her healing abilities, and one truly awesome ability.

[If Not Friend, Why Friend Shaped?] Negates hostility from wild beasts and magical creatures as long as the Caster does not instigate any hostile actions.

This was quite simply the best class ever.

There were some other skills, like an even more advanced food creation spell, better plant growth abilities, [Incubation] to protect pregnant beasts and fertilized eggs, but that all paled in comparison to a spell that let her hug all the fluffy things.

Though, when she thought about it, she used less mana and regenerated more now. She could do all sorts of extra things while she was in [Tree of Life] form, and not just focus on sending the healing birds to the most wounded.

That would be great. She could do something like grow vine beds under her branches, so the wounded had places to rest. She could be her own mobile triage centre.

Further down the Overlord Ranked temple, forgotten by Karl and Cara in the excitement of their completion, Nachtia smiled as she saw the new Class Advancement.

{Junior Reaper} Cleric Class. Black Dragon exclusive.

{Class Skill} [Reclamation] Increases all Death Element damage done by 50% and reduces healing received by the target of Death Element attacks by 50% for 10 minutes.

That would make it nearly impossible to resurrect her enemies, unless the effect was cleansed first. But it would also reduce their ability to fight back, while boosting her own damage.

An improvement in her Goddess' favour with no visible drawbacks.

Chapter 973: Not Finished

The Trial faded as the last of the choices were made, and Karl found himself standing on the roof of the Temple, surrounded by dozens of Dwarven Clerics.

Then, the rest of the group appeared around them, both Karl's teammates and the Totem Ranked Dwarves they had brought.

"Did everyone get what they came for?" Karl asked, looking directly at Lotus, who was the most likely to have flaked out.

The little cleric gave him two thumbs up.

"I got the perfect new spell from my new class. I shall be unstoppable." Lotus declared proudly.

"In combat, or while searching for friends and snacks?" Tessa asked seriously.

"The second one." Lotus replied, not at all concerned that she wasn't aligned with her friend's priorities.

Karl turned to Dana, who beamed a smile at him. "I got the Mystic Blademaster Class, with auto-parry and increased attack speed. Very combat focused, and it will buff my Golems blade skills as well."

"Oh, very nice. I will have to see if I can find another Golem type spell that will work for you. Like Ahmad, the more Golems you have, the better." Karl agreed.

Beside them, a Dwarven Cleric cleared his throat. "If you don't mind cutting the reunion short, there are still some Ogres in the city to take care of, and we are hoping to get the remaining Totems into the portal before it closes."

That made sense. The primary advantage to the trial was the ability to upgrade a class. Most of the Dwarves still had the one that they got as children, and they would have long since capped them out by the time that they reached Totem Rank.

Most of them would have had enough Skill Points to get the whole Skill Tree by somewhere in the Royal Rank at the latest.

"Alright, we can take this group to try out their new skills, and relieve the others. As long as we don't kill the last Ogre before the Totems are all in the trial, there is only a small chance that they won't all be able to try." Karl agreed.

Usually, the trial or dungeon would stabilize for a period of time after the monsters were gone, but this one was stable enough to enter now. So, if they got everyone in before the state changed, then they could let the rest of the population argue about who went next afterwards.

It was a good system, as everyone with power would be available to mediate, and they wouldn't have much personal interest in the outcome.

There were sure to be some conflicts of interest. Family members, staff, old friends. But those were normal and expected. With so many there, and in public, it would be hard to push for an exception without raising the ire of the people.

One after another, the group hopped down from the roof of the Temple, with Lotus opening her arms to throw herself at Karl. He caught the much smaller cleric, then spun her in a circle before setting her on the ground.

"Alright, we're all here. Let's go find some Ogres."

Dana moved her Golems to run at the front of the pack, an odd tactical choice, if she had not just gained a new defensive skill for them which may enable them to survive against the Ogres.

How well it would work was questionable, as they were still bound by their own physical limits, but they would find out soon enough.

The first battle was only a few blocks away, and with Karl's entire group, plus two more Totems, the fight would not take long.

The other Totems had spread out in pairs, intending to form a trio when they found the other defenders, and then relieve them, so the other could go to the Trial.

The Golems engaged a pair of Ogres who were fighting with a Dwarven Warrior, who had a large group of children behind him, rescued from a destroyed building.

Steel rang against hardwood as the Golems parried the first attacks, marking the longest that they had survived against a Totem Ranked threat so far.

"Warrior, take the children to the Temple. There is a trial there, and you need to enter it as soon as possible." Karl instructed as the other Dwarves ran up behind them, cursing their short legs.

The newly arrived pair of Totem Ranked warriors nodded, and the rescued warrior left immediately with his young charges.

Karl took out the Blade of Champions and the Haint Claw, and charged one of the Ogres.

"Dana, have your Golems tag team the other, see how they do." He instructed.

One on one was too much to ask, but if they could back each other up, they might actually survive a little while with a two Rank disadvantage.

Karl knocked the Ogre's club to the side, and the giant monster lashed out with its other fist.

Karl punched to intercept the strike, with [Void Blast] on his hand.

Two booms in rapid succession shook the already damaged buildings, and sent out a shockwave that cracked one dilapidated wall.

But the match was not equal.

Karl was stronger now, and [Void Blast] mangled the Ogre's hand.

The other matchup didn't go nearly as well for the defenders. The Ogre knew just how to deal with [Auto Parry]. It put both hands on the club and simply smashed it down on the Golem's head.

The mismatch in strength was too high, and while the club was slightly deflected, the force shattered the Golem's arms and then crushed the entire right side of its body.

There was still one more Golem, though.

It might not be a lot of defence against the Ogre, but it was enough time for everyone to get in position, including Cara, who had a new technique for dealing with the Ogres. Just like the Dwarves were doing, she went straight for the back of the knees, then tied their ankles together with the chunk of silk rope that she had been using as a garotte wire.

When the Ogre tried to move, it collapsed and left itself vulnerable to Karl's attacks.

Between Karl, Cara and a few hits from one of the Dwarves, the fallen Ogre was finished in under a minute, only seconds ahead of the one that the rest of the group was focused on.

Chapter 974: Relief Efforts

"Let's move on and help clear the other spots as well. Most of them should be covered by now, but there is no telling if there are still Ogres roaming loose in the city at this point." One of the Dwarven Warriors suggested.

Karl gestured south towards the closest sounds of Ogres and battle, and the Dwarf quickly led the way through the side streets.

Unlike most cities Karl had been in, the streets were winding, but not random. They were designed as defensive fortifications, so there were deliberate dead ends, and the roads all bent around the central circle, so it was easier to sneak up on invaders if you knew the layout of the city, and started at the middle.

They turned a corner and found that an Overlord Ranked Beastkin mage group was following the same tactic that Karl used, and had encircled the intersection, trapping the lone Ogre in the middle as they bombarded it with spells, then teleported out of reach when it charged them.

Rae leapt an entire city block to land on the monster's back, and began punching holes in it as if the Ogre had no damage reduction at all.

"What sort of skill is that?" The Dwarf on Karl's left whispered.

"Predation. She gets a larger than usual bonus from it, and it basically ignores their damage reduction." Karl replied quietly as he took out his bow.

The Ogre wasn't going to last long now that Rae had it on the ground and tied up, but he should at least put in a bit of effort to help.

The arrow landed in the Ogre's neck with a heavy thunk, and the creature gurgled on blood, thoroughly defeated.

The mages cheered, and Lotus set up her healing totems, just in case there were wounded.

"Do you have someone who can resurrect?" One of the mages shouted.

"We do. Bring them here and we will help." Lotus replied, then turned into the Tree of Life.

That would let her find any hidden wounded or dead nearby who could still be resurrected, and it would save time if they were buried under rubble. Of course, they would still be trapped under the rubble, but they could at least call for help as they were continually healed.

The mages brought out the body of a Totem Ranked Mage, as well as a half dozen more Overlords. They were likely all from the same faction or group, but the casualties today were horrendous.

Fortunately, it appeared that the losses were recent, as Lotus had them all breathing again within a few seconds, and they were working on the healing process.

That made Karl question what had been going on since they entered the trial.

"How long has it been since the battle started?" Karl asked.

"Almost an hour now." The mage closest to him sighed, then slumped against the base of Lotus' tree.

That was the realization that Karl and the others needed. Their forty-eight hours in the trial had been mere minutes outside. It hadn't been days of grinding battle while they were in the trial with a handful of the city's strongest defenders.

In hindsight, it was likely a tactical mistake to take them into the trial before the Ogres were dealt with, as if they were really gone for two days, things could have gone very poorly for the city of Banar.

But that was the last of the concerns on the Mages' minds.

"Banar really is cursed, isn't it? First, it was cursed with drought and famine. Then with the illusion that created undead and a false facade. Then we find out that the city lord was incompetent.

Now we have a monster spawn inside the city walls.

This can't be a coincidence. Something has been messing with the mana flow in the region and affecting probability." The Totem Ranked mage that had just been resurrected insisted.

The other Dwarves nodded. The odds that all that would happen to one city in rapid succession were astronomical.

Karl was about to comment, but decided not to raise new red flags while they were still fighting the Ogres.

Instead, he went with, "We will wait here until everyone is mobile again, then you can join the group as we clear the remaining Ogres. The Totem should head for the Temple, though. There is a trial there, and the Council wants all the Totems to go through before it closes.

There is a chance for a Class advancement."

The aging mage smiled. "A class advancement, you say? Well, I can see how they would want to make sure all the Totems made it through first. Do you think they would be offended if I brought my students with me?"

Karl turned to the other Dwarves, who simply shrugged.

"There's only one way to find out. Go ahead, there is safety in numbers, even if they make the Overlords wait until the Totems have gone through." The Dwarven Warrior insisted.

Karl was fairly sure he was on the Council as well, but at the moment he wasn't really concerned with making decisions that could easily be countermanded when the group reached the portal.

Karl gestured to another group, and Lotus transformed back to her natural form.

"Good luck, try not to get clubbed on your way there. Just go straight to the Temple, we have groups out hunting the remaining Ogres." Lotus instructed.

Once they came back with improved classes, they would be more powerful and more capable, so it was better not to delay.

The next Ogre already had a pair of reinforcements, and it was nearly dead by the time that Rae [Shadow Stepped] over to deliver the coup de grâce.

The Dwarves nodded in thanks, and joined the growing army of Totems moving through the city at a run, looking for leftover Ogres.

[Turn right. There is a wounded one hiding.] Hawk instructed.

"This way. One escaped from a fight, and it's trying to lie low. Our flying scout found it."

The group turned to find one heavily wounded Ogre and a trail of blood leading off toward the wall. The Dwarves dealt with the wounded one as soon as they arrived, and Karl led the way down the trail of blood to see what was at the other end.

It might be a wounded Totem, or there might be more Ogres fleeing from battle.

Chapter 975: An Emerging Artist

Karl frowned in confusion as he saw the scene at the city walls.

[Rae, were you already here?]

Rae walked over to admire the work, then transformed into her humanoid form.

"They've got great taste, but this isn't my work. I left one like this on the east wall, maybe they're copying me?" She replied as she inspected the Ogre corpses pinned to the wall with large metal spikes.

There were two bloody spikes with no corpse attached, marking the spot where the Ogre had escaped from.

"Sloppy, not making sure they were secure. I know this smell, though. It's a Vampire, likely a System User with Earth and Shadow Magic." Rae explained.

"There just isn't any good news today, is there?" The Dwarven Warrior sighed.

Rae shrugged. "Maybe it's on your side?"

The mere thought of that made the Dwarves laugh. The Undead were never on anyone's side but Lord Bomgon's. There were no native Undead clans in the region, they had long since been eliminated, so any Undead that you found here were all invaders.

Lotus sniffed the air. "There is only Ogre blood here, though. I can see the damage from the fight, but there is no Vampire blood."

The Dwarves frowned. "So, whatever vampire did this, managed to do it without suffering any wounds?"

Lotus shrugged, but Rae had an idea.

"They might be the sort that regenerates and pulls their blood back in. I have a skill like that, to empower myself with blood. They might have just cleaned up some of their mess."

The Dwarves turned to each other and shrugged. "Well, let's go look for living Ogres. The faster we find them all, the faster we can get back to the tavern to celebrate."

However, the sounds of fighting were dying down all over the city, and Hawk's updates mostly covered Ogres being engaged by multiple pairs of Dwarven Totems. There were now more capable Overlord and Totem Ranked defenders than Ogres, and the fights that remained were on the far side of the city.

So, Karl's mission turned to rescue.

As they passed by the damaged buildings, everyone listened carefully for anyone who might be trapped or wounded, and Lotus kept her healing totems active at all times, just in case they needed a little help to make their presence known.

She could also feel the condition of everyone that they healed, but so far, none of them were in critical condition.

The spell covered a city block on either side of their route, but the actual destruction was more limited in scale. The Ogres had mostly been engaged near where they had appeared, unless they chased a group of Civilians. So, entire blocks were destroyed, and then for dozens of blocks around them, there was little to no damage.

The remaining durability of the Dwarven stone structures was quite impressive. Karl had expected the aftermath of the battles to cause more destruction than one city block at a time.

The Dwarves led them through the city, searching for damaged sections, and making notes of what parts of the city were in the worst shape, in need of immediate repairs. That data would all be added to the battle damage, as the entire city would need renovation after this.

Realistically, it would make more sense for this to be a historical site, not an active city, but Dwarves loved places with loads of history.

"The state of the city is even worse than I remember it. With the illusion in place, nobody was doing the essential repairs and maintenance. This could be the end for the city, at least the above ground portions.

The underground and tunnels weren't part of the spell, so they're all still in good shape, but I'm not sure that anyone but the Dwarves would want to live down there.

Can you imagine a whole city of subterranean beastkin?" One of the Dwarves joked.

Cara shrugged from her spot on Karl's shoulder.

"Oh, right. Some of them share the genes of burrowing animals, don't they? I suppose that we might not lose everyone else, but we are going to have to relocate a large portion of the city until the repairs can be made."

Dana gestured toward a building that looked pretty good.

"You might be able to get away with fewer relocations than you expect. The buildings that aren't going to fall down at any moment can remain occupied. Were there many vacant homes in the city?" She asked.

The Dwarf laughed and shook his head.

"None. New arrivals all have to move to the underground. So, we don't get many new residents. Homes on the surface only come vacant a few a year, as our slums and low-income areas are all subterranean.

It's not lost on me that the slums are the one part of the city that didn't take any damage in the attack. I saw the reports when the monster spawn started, and there were no Ogres underground, even in the areas where they could stand upright.

That tracks with the history books. The Monster Spawns are always on the surface, and there has never been one inside a buried Dwarven city, even when the entire mountain they were built on was besieged."

Dana smiled. "So, there is a way to make this painless.

You can remind the city of that fact, and point to it as a safe place to wait for renovations. Those whose houses have been lost can be encouraged to move below ground for safety while the city is rebuilt, and then back into their homes when everything is fixed.

I don't know what sort of arrangement you've got for the rebuilding, but it should work well enough that you won't lose too many of your skilled craftsmen.

That will kill a city faster than anything else."

The Dwarf gave her a surprised look. "Wise words, young lady. There is a renovation fund because all the buildings are historic, and the City Lord put rules on changing them. I don't know if there is anything left in it at all, but it is supposed to take care of fixing things as the buildings age.

It is part of the taxes that everyone pays every year, like a Condo Fee, if you come from somewhere that is familiar with the concept."

Karl chuckled and wondered who might be living in his condo in the GDN capital right now.

Dana nodded. "Yeah, we're familiar with the annual fees. Bunch of vultures, always easy to collect, slow to make any repairs."

The Dwarf snorted in amusement. "Sounds like you know exactly the issue we're about to face. Bureaucracy."

Chapter 976: Mobile Healing Station

Karl folded his hands in the symbol of the Dragon Church. "I feel for you, brother. Facing the full terror of bureaucracy alone. I will send prayers your way."

The Totem Ranked Dwarf gave Karl a suspicious look.

"What do you mean, alone?"

"Well, we don't live here, now do we? So, the whole aftermath is really a 'you' problem, not a 'me' problem. So, while you work out all the details with your fellow Totem Ranked leaders, I will bring my group back to the tavern, and we can help them patch up a few of the larger problems with our limited Earth magic." Karl explained.

The Dwarves frowned. They had forgotten that he didn't live here. His team had made quite the name for themselves today, with multiple over Rank kills. But they had only just arrived, and they would be heading out again in a few days.

"Well, we could ask you to be an advisor, but you have a point. A combat specialist isn't likely to be necessary for a policy meeting. No matter how little we want to go." The Dwarf agreed with a slight sigh.

Karl shook hands with the Totems, and they all went their own way to look after their own affairs.

The group's progress was slow, as Lotus stopped every time she felt someone in need of healing in range of her spells. Some were injured in battle, some were just sick. But Lotus waited for the effects to help everyone they passed.

At that pace, it took them an hour to get back to the Inn, and they had a whole entourage of old ladies and children following them by the time that they made it to the town square, but the battle was over, and most of them just wanted a safe escort to see how bad the damage was.

The centre of the city near the tavern was in rough shape, but the streets were wide, and the battles had been over fairly quickly. Karl and the majority of the city's warriors had been gathered nearby for the announcement, so the Ogres hadn't had time to rampage.

But the buildings were still in bad shape with the illusion gone.

"Would you like us to give the building a bit of a facelift and fix the roof?" Karl asked the Innkeeper, who was looking over the area outside his Inn with deep concern.

"You have Earth Magic?"

Karl nodded. "Not much. But we can reshape stone easily enough. That will eliminate the cracks and crumbling bits. The whole place is made of stone, so a bit of revitalization is all that it will take. After all, you already did the inside."

The building would end up a few centimetres thinner in the walls when they were done repairing that much damage, but they were most of a metre thick now. It shouldn't be a problem.

The innkeeper nodded, and Rae coated the building in magic, fixing all the cracks in the stone, and the worst of the crumbling outer sections. She left the aged patina, but now it was as solid as the day it was carved.

The Dwarf smiled as he ran his hand over the building. "That is perfect. Not as pretty as it appeared before, but now it doesn't feel like it might fall apart."

Then he paused. "If only it was still a metre thick."

Rae's confused look made Karl laugh. "Dwarves are sensitive to stone. He can tell the difference between a metre of stone and ninety-nine centimetres of stone over his head. It's like a painting that has been hung slightly crooked."

The nearby Dwarves nodded. "It's hard to explain. But knowing that the roof won't fall on our head is a good start until we can find a talented enough Earth mage to get it just right."

Rae had a realization. "If you can feel the depth of the stone, then the stone relief carvings of Dwarven architecture are more than just visual preference."

An old Dwarf nodded. "The volume of stone left, how thick it is, how far from the floor, how much of the stone flows across the surface. It all lends a particular feeling to the room. Dwarves can literally feel the difference between an amateur, an imitation and a true master's work."

Rae nodded. She was good with Earth Magic, but not that good. Maybe she should work on it? She could add it to her art portfolio.

A few more locals came over with hopeful looks, and Karl waved them over. "Lady Rae and I can both use some level of Earth Magic. So, if you would like your buildings patched, we can fix the structure for you.

As you saw, it takes some time, but we will try."

Karl did his best on the buildings on the surrounding blocks, and while it wasn't pretty, he did manage to make them all structurally sound again. Following Rae's lead, he didn't change the exterior much, other than to make sure it was solid stone again.

But that was becoming the aesthetic of the city now, as involuntary as it might have been.

Every Dwarf with enough magic was doing the same thing, just patching buildings to make them solid instead of spending the hundreds of hours it would take to make them perfect.

However, his instincts for stone were a bit better than Rae's, and he adjusted the walls to be ninety-eight centimetres. That left enough stone that the roof could be returned to one hundred, so that the 'just slightly wrong' feeling faded.

He took a break for dinner, and returned to the Inn, where most of the group was waiting for him.

Karl took a seat in the crowded booth and wrapped his arm around Dana.

"Well, that was an interesting day. Does everyone want to leave in the morning? Or should we stay for one more day and see if there is more we can do here?" He asked.

Tessa smiled. "I think that we can leave. There has been enough chaos in the city for one day. There is no way to prove it, but I am starting to suspect that our presence affects probability, and that feeling got even stronger after whatever happened to Cara in the trial.

But why didn't the others change?"

Karl shrugged. "The trial is supposed to be for System Users, but apparently Cara has the favour of an Old God, while the others are under the jurisdiction of the Spider or Beast Gods. So, she could participate, but the others could not."

Tessa nodded. "That makes sense in a way. But her chaotic aura will be a problem."

In her space, Cara snorted in amusement. She didn't see the problem.

Chaos was fun.

Chapter 977: Chaos Magnet

Dana sipped Dwarven Ale, then tapped the table to get everyone's attention.

"I think that Tessa is right. We are literally attracting Chaos to us at this point. Whether it is Cara or that old dragon as the focal point, it might be better if we spent some time in the wilderness until it calms down." She suggested.

Karl had considered that before they left Drodh, but he didn't think that it could get so extreme that it might touch off a series of events like this.

Matilda would be rolling with laughter if she knew.

Ophelia nodded. "We might still be on the weaker side for the region, but I think that we should be alright wandering the wilderness. Or, at least, less likely to get stuck in the middle of a tragedy than hanging around the cities."

Karl changed the topic as the waitress came over to their table in the mostly deserted Inn.

"As a thank you all for your assistance, I dug out the good whiskey from the cellars. There will be more people here soon, they're just checking on all the houses, now that the head count is mostly complete." The waitress explained as she set a gallon sized wooden cask on the table.

She was right. Within an hour, the place was packed, and the boss was bringing out dinner for everyone, in celebration of winning the battle within the city.

"Have you heard? A lot of the bodies went missing. We have confirmed kills all over the city, and plenty of signs of battle, but the corpses have vanished." One of the Dwarves was attempting to whisper to his friend.

Attempting, as he was quite drunk, and shouting in what should have been a whispered tone.

"Were the bodies supposed to be left for cleanup crews?" Karl asked a wolf-eared beastkin at the next table.

"No, it's just strange that so many of them are missing. I can see them being looted clean by the street kids and scavengers, but who would take a whole Ogre? They're certainly not edible." The man explained.

"Well, some of them were claimed by Lady Rae. She has uses for them that don't involve eating Ogre flesh." Karl offered.

The beastkin looked at the transformed spider, who waved at him. "Oh, that makes sense. Magical beasts often gain power from their kills. I will explain that to the Totems when they come asking around."

Rae giggled. "They should already know. They were there for a number of the battles where I claimed the corpses. It's not really a secret, and I let them loot what they wanted first."

The tavern got more packed by the minute as the repairs to the nearby buildings were finished, and everyone started to look for somewhere to spend the night.

"The Council Members say that we can take rooms in the underground city. They haven't been used in centuries, since the population shrunk. But they're safe enough. That's a good start, but getting them clean and safe to sleep tonight could be an issue." One woman complained loudly from the far side of the room.

"Well, we're Dwarves. We can just drink until we pass out at the table and sleep here." A man at her table announced, clearly intoxicated.

"David, we have the children with us."

"What? I'm already too drunk to walk that far. One night sleeping in the tavern won't hurt them any."

Karl chuckled, and gave Rae a questioning look. The spider nodded in agreement, and Karl went to talk to the Innkeeper.

"I can have Lady Rae make cots or hammocks in all the rooms, enough to sleep twenty in what is now a twin bed unit. It'll be cramped, but it should be fine for the kids for the night, and you can keep the hammocks." Karl offered.

"You would give up your room?" The Dwarf asked, startled.

"I have a separate space where my people can rest. It's no real hardship for me and my team."

The Dwarf nodded. "If you've got something set up, that's fine by me. Did you need anything?"

Karl shook his head. "I will open the separate space from a safe location so that we don't accidentally get trapped in it and have to blast our way out. But other than that, we have what we need.

If the number of people who can't find a place to sleep gets too high, we can start setting something up outside as well. Like, a large tent or something."

Karl turned to go back to the table, but bumped into a small catgirl who was standing right behind him, staring up and waiting.

"Sorry about that. Can I help you, little one?"

The girl smiled. "I got my System today. You've got a funny name."

"Karl is a funny name? I suppose it's not so common everywhere."

The girl shook her head. "There are lots of Dwarves named Karl. But your name has pretty Silver decorations around it. I don't see those on anyone else."

Karl shrugged. "I can't see my own nameplate."

The conversation made the rest of the room turn to look at Karl's name on the System interface.

"She's right. What is that? It's nothing I've seen for a Guild Leader or a War Champion." One of the beastkin asked.

"Yeah, I don't think it's to do with his class either because the name itself is still a dark red. What is with the decoration?"

Lotus poked Nachtia. As the oldest and wisest of them, she should have some answers.

But she had never seen anything like it either.

The locals all discussed it, but nobody had seen a name decorated like that before.

"I wonder if it's a reward for doing fun things? Like a special sticker for having a good day at school." The little girl suggested.

That was as good of an explanation as anyone else had come up with.

Karl suspected that it was actually to do with the advancement of his constitution, as someone would have mentioned it earlier if it had been active more than a day or two.

Most of what happened in the Trial Instance was just optimizing his constitution, so that had to be the change that had triggered the nameplate change.

Maybe he really was a boss monster now? Like a whole quality Rank higher than normal people?

Chapter 978: Focus On Growth

The locals turned out to be exceptionally organized, and when Karl stepped outside to check on the state of the city, hundreds of tents had been set up, a fire was going to replace the streetlights that were destroyed, and someone in the distance was calling out to come to the soup pot if you hadn't eaten.

"It looks like they have everything taken care of well enough. If you want to start sending the sleepy patrons to the rooms, Rae is finished setting up hammocks along all the walls. She made frames of Earth Magic, so you can just take them down in the morning by untying them." Karl explained as he came back in.

The Innkeeper nodded in thanks. "Alright everyone, listen up. The rooms have been made communal for the night, thanks to our Demonic guest and his team. There are hammocks hung in all the rooms. If you're tired, just find somewhere to sleep for the night."

Most of the younger ones, and the single parents, went up to the rooms, where Karl could hear laughing and cheering from the kids. Swinging in hammocks was fun, and there were soft blankets.

The parents who didn't go up to the rooms early just kept drinking, as did Karl's group, until Lotus began falling asleep at the table.

Karl opened the [Tiny World] against the wall by their table, and the ladies all filtered inside. Today had enough excitement already, and they had no intentions of passing out at a table like the Dwarves were.

The Innkeeper looked inside the dim space curiously. All that he could see that was it looked like grassland, but he couldn't tell how large it was.

"I will move the entrance, that was just more convenient to let everyone head for bed." Karl explained.

The Innkeeper motioned for Karl to follow him.

"If you set it up here, in the keg room, nobody will bother you. I've got all I need for the evening, and the staff won't be in here until breakfast tomorrow. That entrance isn't large, it should fit along the wall." He offered.

"That would be greatly appreciated. I will leave it open in case of emergency, but warn your server not to enter without knocking. Lady Rae will likely be on guard all night, and she's been known to eat intruders."

The old man laughed. "In that case, I can think of a few people who I would love to send to get you for breakfast, if I could trust them in the keg room."

Rae poked her head out the entrance, which was near the Guild House replica, but facing the grassland.

"I don't mind, really. But I'll be in spider form. I don't like sleeping as a humanoid."

The Innkeeper turned to listen to something from upstairs, then nodded. "Alright, I will see you all for breakfast. The door is kept latched, but you can open it from the inside if you need out."

Karl nodded. "No worries, I can open portals as well. If there wasn't a good spot here, we would have just moved to somewhere in the wilderness to set up camp."

The Innkeeper shook his head. "That's even less safe than staying in a crumbling city. The wilderness has some truly devious sorts of beasts in it."

"Oh?"

The Dwarf shook his head at Karl. "Perhaps that was the wrong thing to say to a Monster Man and his band of feral adventurers. But we can talk about it in the morning, I need to get upstairs."

When he left, Karl entered the Tiny World and mentally scanned for Dana. He should meditate for the night, to help integrate some of his new power and try to push towards Totem Rank a bit faster. But meditating alone was boring.

Unfortunately, Dana already had a sleeping partner, and moving a sleepy Badger was incredibly difficult when Cara locked her claws through the hammock.

However, there was a backup plan.

Instead of meditating in bed, he would have Rae make him a swinging chair, and he could sit under the branch of a large tree, facing the entrance, so he would see what was happening if Rae alerted him.

Once Karl was settled into his swinging chair, he called the Lamia bodyguards, so that Rae could get a bit of sleep.

She had a busy day, and a spider needed her beauty sleep, so she could dream of all the glorious carnage of the day.

And Rae had inflicted a lot of carnage to dream about today.

Rae slept in the tree that Karl was swinging under, while Karl focused on his work. His adapted body seemed to absorb power without any obstacles at all, and it was growing steadily as he drained the day's influx from the Haint Claw and Sword of Champions.

He wasn't the only one that had changed, though. Karl could feel the beginnings of a separate will in the Haint Claw, which was technically a sapling of a full-grown Haint.

Most likely, it was supposed to take decades or centuries to grow into a fully sentient weapon, like Leafa. But with the extra feeding and the advantages of Karl's Class, it wasn't going to take much longer, and it would be awakened.

The Blade of Champions was showing no similar signs of sentience, but the power level from multiple nearby Totem Kills was absolutely ridiculous.

While the combat power difference between the Overlord and Totem Rank wasn't all that large, if you didn't consider the damage reduction, the purity and potency of the soul and life energy was on a whole other level.

As Karl understood it, Totems were expected to live many times their standard lifespan, and that was reflected in the energy that had been collected from them.

The Tiny World was quiet through the night as Karl focused on adding energy to the nine stars in his mental space, and to his body. Between the two, he could force his power to grow smoothly, and while he briefly considered moving on to another pattern, this one was working so well that he didn't want to mess with it yet.

Chapter 979: New Nameplate

Rae woke up just before breakfast, after a much longer nap than was usual for her.

Like Karl, her growth speed was unprecedented, and the extra power that he was pouring into everyone's spaces had the comforting feeling of a warm blanket, which made it rather difficult to want to get out of bed.

It took her a while to determine what the change was that was making the power so comforting. But once she did, Rae silently celebrated.

The energy quality had changed, coming in straight at Totem Rank, though Karl hadn't actually advanced. It was simply that his mental power was so high that he didn't have to refine the energy downward to be able to store it.

So, the stored energy from the weapons was passed around, forcing everyone's level upwards as their bodies adapted, and the feeling was incredibly pleasant.

A soft bell rang at the entrance to the Tiny World, and Karl's eyes shot open.

An elderly Dwarven woman was standing at the portal, on the keg room side, waiting for someone to answer with a shocked expression. Now that the sun was coming up in the Tiny World, it was obvious how large this pocket dimension was, and she had not been prepared to see anything like it.

"Good morning. You must be the Innkeeper's little sister." Karl greeted her, and the old woman laughed.

"A natural flirt, you are. I'm his mother, and breakfast is ready, if you want to gather your ladies to eat before it gets too crowded. The overnight crowd are already up and about, but we've reserved your table for the morning."

Karl sent a System Message, and a mental note for Cara and Thor to wake everyone up to eat, then waited as the sound of movement came from the house.

"The ladies should be along shortly. Ah, there they are. We will be right up."

The Dwarf nodded and grabbed a barrel of ale. "Grab two more of those on your way up, would you? You're a strapping young lad."

"Of course. Where do you want them?"

"Behind the bar. I've already cleared the racks for them. To think that brat managed to go through three kegs in a day. How much work was he planning to make for me and his father?" She grumbled as she stomped up the stairs.

Rae transformed and straightened her black lace dress. "I have a good feeling about today. There is a freshness in the air, like everything has been reset and anything is possible."

Karl had no idea what she meant by that, but the atmosphere in the tavern when he brought the kegs up to put behind the bar was lively and hopeful. A far cry from what he was expecting of a city full of Dwarves whose city had just been crushed by a Totem Ranked Ogre spawn.

"Morning, Monster Man." One of the Beastkin greeted Karl as he took his seat at the large table with Rae.

"It seems everyone is in a good mood this morning." Karl replied smoothly as the waitress brought out mead instead of ale to go with their morning meal.

The Beastkin nodded. "We got our newly assigned City Lord about an hour ago, and it's got everyone in high spirits. They sent us a Druid, but she's got Stone Magic."

Karl smiled. "Mythic Ranked Stone Magic? Now, that sounds like exactly what the city needs today."

The beastkin's round ears flicked in amusement. "And as a Druid, they can help deal with the crop issues. The curse might have been broken, but the fields are still in bad shape, and the big storm didn't quite reach us. The irrigation channels are starting to run low already, but it was enough to get the crops growing.

With a Mythic Ranked Druid, we should be able to lean on the new leader for the essentials to keep the city on track. Plus, she's a hybrid. Part Fox, part Dwarf."

Rae smirked at the man. "We should keep the Nature Priestess away from her, then."

The man laughed and nodded in agreement. "Definitely. She's short and stout, but she's got that fox cuteness that makes her look like a young woman, even at a hundred years old. We're all going to have to watch ourselves to avoid a beating."

Breakfast arrived just as the ladies got seated, and Tessa gave Karl a strange look.

"You feel odd today. A bit more monstrous than I remember. I wonder if that change to your nameplate is more than just a cosmetic effect?" She suggested.

Karl shrugged. "I also made great progress with my meditation last night. The energy stored from the Ogres is excellent for my progress."

Ophelia tilted her head as she examined him. "Your aura has improved as well. I think that's from the gains at the Trial, though. The new skills you got. Why didn't you choose to upgrade your class? Something better than you've already got would have to be absolutely monstrous."

"I agree. But I was already given the requirements to upgrade my class to the next in the series, and I have to be Totem Ranked, with all my beast spaces filled or combined to remove the empty ones.

I didn't want to change the progression path without a good reason, so I went for the status optimization. I can't say that it was the wrong choice, I've definitely gained power. But we will still need to find a Dungeon or Trial after I advance so that I can complete the Class change." Karl informed her quietly, so he wasn't giving all the details to the whole tavern.

Dana speared a chunk of potato with her fork. "How about we travel on the ground for a while? We're headed inland anyhow, so we might as well as see if we can trigger any lucky encounters that we wouldn't have if we just flew over, looking for the big events."

Thor perked up. "That's not a bad idea. We could have a wagon. A wagon trip would make travelling much more fun."

Chapter 980: Return of the Wagon

Tessa laughed. Of course, Thor would be all in on any plan that involved him pulling a wagon. It might not be the most practical way, now that he was huge, but he could shrink his size to something appropriate for the task, and it would keep him from getting bored during a long trip.

At the next table over, a young Dwarf with an odd gold medallion around his neck raised his mug to toast them.

"We could use more adventurers in the wilderness. I'm with the 11th Narazir Regiment, stationed a hundred or so kilometres northwest of here, near where we have had an outbreak of desert monster spawns lately.

A few more wandering groups with your power would do a world of good in both reporting and controlling the problem." He announced.

"That could be a good spot for us to start. Are they Rank appropriate for our group, Monarchs and Overlords?" Karl asked.

"A bit heavy on the Overlords, but I haven't seen a Totem Ranked spawn in the region until now. Most of the problem now isn't even the new spawns, it's the thousands and thousands of monsters left over from old ones.

They just wander the region, insane and causing chaos.

Most of them are at least desert creatures, but you will find some that are truly out of place in the dry environments. We fought a group of Water Buffalo not too long ago."

Karl gave him a confused look. "I thought water buffalo lived in arid regions?"

The Dwarves nearby all laughed. "Different Water Buffalo. These ones are the Monarch Ranked water magic wielding version of the common animal, which is now extinct in this region."

That made sense. There wouldn't be many common Rank creatures left with such powerful and hungry monsters, and certainly not ones from large prey species.

[Does that mean they're extra juicy?] Hawk wondered.

"How large are the monster versions?" Karl asked.

"About five metres tall. Solid muscle too." The Dwarf replied with a shrug.

[Definitely sounds juicy.] Hawk sighed.

"Well, perhaps we'll see some on our trip. A tasty monster never goes wrong in the skillet." Karl joked.

The Dwarves laughed, then one of them pulled a stool up to the end of the table to speak with Karl's group.

"If you're going on a road trip, I suppose that you'll need a wagon, won't you? Or do you have one in storage?" He asked.

"Actually, we will need one. A fairly large and sturdy one. Not just because we have a group travelling, but for bulk trade goods, should we find the right opportunity.

Past experience tells me that even if we don't intend to, it's better to have the ability to move bulk goods than to put the ladies in a packed carriage.

We have often used a farmer's cart in the past, with a hoop canvas cover." Karl explained.

The Dwarf nodded. "I have one like that in my shop's yard. The traders and farmers hate to wait when a wagon gets destroyed by monsters, so I keep some inventory. If you want to swing by on the way out of town, I can get you set up.

I recall that you have a few large beasts in your group, so you should have something to pull it, yes?"

Thor nodded enthusiastically. "We are certainly not short on beasts to pull the wagon."

The Dwarf finished his ale, then stood and straightened his beard. "I will be cleaning up the shop. The front room took some damage, but I'm right at the north gates if you want to stop in. The wagons weren't damaged at all."

Karl shook his hand, and saw that the team was all ready to leave already.

"We will accompany you. We're headed north into the wilderness, and as the soldier suggested, we will head off to the northwest to see what we can find. Combat is the best way to advance the skills of an adventurer, and these ladies all stand a good chance of making it to Overlord soon." Karl explained.

The Dwarves in the tavern raised a toast to them as the team followed the carriage maker into the streets.

It was already packed in the city, with everyone scrambling to get essentials, find someone for urgent repairs, or even loot damaged buildings while nobody was looking.

Opportunistic thieves always did well after a tragedy.

Well, the ones that were good at their craft, anyhow. Karl could hear the public flogging of at least one person caught thieving from the damaged buildings. Whether that would be the end of it, he did not know. But there was definitely whipping and a crowd denouncing a thief.

The front of the carriage maker's shop was just as heavily damaged as he had suggested, and it had obviously been bashed in by an Ogre during the fight. However, the blocks had been roughly refit, with only a few open chunks where stone had been crushed to powder.

"Two of us have some Earth Magic, would you accept repairs as part of the payment? I can't say we're as good as a Dwarven Master Stonemason, but we can keep the elements out of the shop, and ensure it won't collapse." Karl offered.

The Dwarf stroked his beard as he thought. "If you can patch the front wall and the roof, it will cover a farmer's cart or half the cost of a merchant caravan wagon. Let me show you the one."

Karl followed him out back, and saw the difference. One was roughly hewn wood, with a canvas hoop roof. That would not be an expensive wagon by any means. But the other was a masterpiece. Polished and varnished wood making up the carriage front half of the wagon, with a folding sided back half, topped by a canvas covered hoop cover.

Twice the value of a standard cart for that would be a steal.

It had a living space for the merchant and likely his guards, with room for the more expensive trade goods behind it.

It even had spring steel mounts for the seat instead of the usual leather suspended bench.

That wagon had potential.

They were all a standardized width, to fit the ruts of every other carriage that had passed down the roads. But it was longer than even the bulk farmer's wagon, and Karl was certain that he could magically enhance the interior.

If he took a few days on the road, and a Totem Ranked elemental stone, he should be able to create an [Illusionary Domain] spell item.

Though, that would alert the monsters with the continual spell effect. He could just open the [Tiny World] inside the carriage portion, to give everyone more room when they needed it.

Nobody would question people going into a carriage and remaining there all day.

"How much on top of the repairs for the merchant carriage?" Karl asked.

The Dwarf smiled. "Only one hundred more gold coins. It's got Royal Rank running gear, no wagon rut will break a wheel, and the wood is Dwarven Ironwood. Monster resistant up to Commander Rank."

Karl nodded, and opened a trade window.

"Thank you for your business. I do hope that we see you again one day, perhaps under better circumstances."