

Beast Master 991

Chapter 991: Cara Has Been Parried

Karl raced through the darkness, following the sounds of snarling and crashing towards the heated battle. Then skidded to a stop when he saw the situation.

Cara was squared off against a tiny ball of glowing fur, with a large shining rock in its paws.

She cast [Void Blast] and the fur ball surrounded itself with a rock shield, then pelted her with spears of holy light, which she blocked with a barrier of [Disintegrate].

That made the spears explode, and the cavern trembled.

They were attacking multiple times per second, and the whole cavern complex was trembling.

Karl shaped a [Bulwark] to trap the furry creature, cutting through the stone to put it in a full bubble, and the battle stopped.

"Cara, what is that?" He demanded.

[It stole my rock.] Cara complained.

Karl paused to take in the room. There was a nest of soft dirt, the body of a long dead white fox, which felt as if it had been incredibly powerful when it was alive, and then the furry thing with the shining stone.

"Are you sure it was your stone, or was it in the nest with the furry thing?"

[I saw it first, it's mine.]

Karl sighed and rubbed his temples. That tiny furry thing could stand toe to toe with Cara in a duel. Whatever it was, it was not weak. And it was probably the offspring of that dead fox.

"I think you might have tried to rob its nest while it was watching the fight." Karl explained, wondering if the creature was intelligent enough to know that he was advocating for it.

[It wasn't here.] Cara insisted.

Then the creature stuck out its tongue at her, pointed fox ears visible now that it had lifted its head from the defensive position it had held around the stone.

It definitely heard her and understood.

At somewhat less than the size of his palm, this had to be a newborn fox. Of whatever insane species that dead one came from. Just the fact that it was willing to fight with Cara over a stone was impressive.

The fact that it hadn't immediately lost was even more impressive.

Karl stepped through his [Bulwark] and knelt down.

"Hello, little one. I have spoken with Cara, and she will refrain from taking your precious stone." Karl gently greeted the fox.

The creature gave him a skeptical look, and Cara shrugged. The battle was fun, and she didn't really need one more shiny stone if it meant that much to the little furry thing.

[Who are you?] A childish male voice asked in Karl's mind.

"I am Karl. Cara is one of my bonded partners. I apologize if she was mean to you."

[It was mother's. She can't have it.]

Now Cara felt bad for bullying the little thing.

She reached into her space and pulled out an Overlord Ranked Earth Stone as an apology, and rolled it across the floor to the little fox.

The creature looked up in shock, but didn't let go of the stone in his hands as he pulled it in with his tail.

[Thank you.]

The fluffy thing stood up to pull both stones close to its body, and Cara smirked as she had a great idea.

[Why don't you join us? It's not safe here without your mom, right? Well, we've got a Karl. The Karl is very safe, and he helps everyone grow up nice and strong.] Cara offered.

The fox was naturally leery of trusting the word of a bully who had tried to steal his family heirloom right out of his hands. But this creature known as 'The Karl' seemed like a reasonable person.

"There are more siblings. Not all of them are obsessed with shiny things like Cara is." Karl quietly informed the small fox.

[Trustworthy ones?]

Karl nodded. "There is an evolved former Lightning Cerro named Thor. He's very trustworthy."

The fox looked around at the empty nest, where its family once lived. It wasn't suitable to live in any more, and the young one knew that it would have to leave soon, but it couldn't carry its treasures, so it had been delaying as long as possible.

[Only if I can keep my mother's belongings.] He insisted.

"I will make you your own private den to keep everything in." Karl agreed easily.

The white furred creature was already a Totem, though only in power output. In body, it was immature and fluffy, too fragile to be out in the world alone.

[What do I do?] The fox asked.

"Just two simple things. When I try to move you, you accept the link. Then you need to pick a name, and we can collect anything that you don't want to leave here." Karl explained.

The fox nodded, and Karl placed a hand on him to move him into the remaining beast space, which instantly began reshaping to become a large hill full of caves, with long grass on the slopes.

{New Partner Gained} Stonefur Divine Fox

{Name} [Undecided]

The little one had gotten completely sidetracked by the space, which had adapted to his will to make what he viewed as the perfect den, and hadn't chosen a name at all.

Then, he popped back out into reality and ran off down a small tunnel to start loading all the things he had moved from this nest to a safer one.

The big things couldn't get at them in that tunnel, but most of what he brought back were random dried herbs, a few elemental stones that had been etched with crude drawings, and then one scroll tube that was sealed with wax.

Added to the stone he had been protecting, and Cara's apology gift, it wasn't much. But the fox was very happy to have it all somewhere safe as he returned.

[This is a good den. I can come and go so easily, and it holds everything.]

"Wonderful news. Did you decide what we should call you?"

The fox smiled at him from its new den. [My mother called me Tian Qimao. You can call me Tian, I like Tian as a name.]

Chapter 992: Tian The Fluffy

Karl nodded in satisfaction. Tian was a good name for the Holy and Earth element fox.

He noticed that Tian had also collected his mother's body, and had made a stone coffin to lay her in, along with most of the treasures that he had gathered.

[Can we go do something important? There were other treasures here, but they were all used up or destroyed by the monsters that killed my mother. She wanted a Tribulation Lightning stone, and a Mythril coin as well. Can we get her all those things so that she can rest in peace?] Tian asked.

Thor recognized most of the plants that had been taken. They were all holy element items, and he had most of them growing in his space already.

"Brother Thor will give you most of the plants, and I can make the Tribulation Lightning Stone. The Mythril Coin, I already have. Here you go." Karl agreed.

Thor returned to his space and passed over the plants, then returned to his natural form for a moment, so that the new brother could see what he looked like.

[Ooh, Behemoth Thor. You're a good brother to have.] Tian cheered.

A small fox could hide dozens of times behind a brother that large.

The others all returned to their spaces to meet Tian, who was happy to find that he now had a huge family. He was the only son of his mother from this birth, and the Stonefur Divine Foxes usually had small litters.

[Should we tell Lotus about the new brother?] Hawk asked as he settled on a perch in the massive ironwood tree that marked the centre of his space.

[I think we should give it a day or two for him to adjust first.] Remi suggested.

[Or we could get the trauma out of the way first.] Rae offered.

[Trauma? I don't like trauma. Why do I have to meet this sister Lotus?] Tian cried.

Rae gave him a gentle smile in her humanoid form. [She's not a mean sister. She's just very excited about all things fluffy. And scaly. And beasts in general. She's a green dragon priestess.]

The little fox giggled. [Oh, like that. Mother warned me about the Green Dragon Clerics. How they would try to keep you forever and make you fat on snacks until you forgot about growing up big and strong.]

The others shared an amused look. The deceased fox had been a sage, for certain.

As if thinking of her had summoned the priestess, Lotus came running into the room, with Dana right behind her and the others trailing.

"My patron says there is fluff." She panted, winded from the sprint.

Tian took a deep breath, and exited his safe space, then hopped up to land in Lotus' arms.

"Oh my Goddess! He's so soft and adorable. Fluff, fluff, fluff." Lotus cheered.

She rubbed her face on Tian's back, taking in the softness, and did a little happy dance, which made Dana laugh.

"And who might this be?" Dana asked.

[I am Tian.] The fox informed her, spreading his mental voice to everyone in the room.

It was an advantage of his species, part of their divine lineage, and today it saved him from being mistaken as a simple fox.

Or, so he assumed.

Dana didn't miss that the tiny thing was Totem Ranked, despite its size.

"Was he alone in this cave?" Dana asked.

"It was his mother's den. But she was attacked and killed some time ago." Karl explained gently, not wanting to bring up bad memories for Tian.

[Our territory was taken by bad monsters.] Tian explained, then sent the mental image of a group of undead, led by a Mythic Ranked shadowy figure.

That was more alarming than being attacked by something in a monster spawn. That implied that there was a Mythic-Ranked leader of the Bomgon invasion force, and they were trying to turn the region's powerful monsters into undead.

Karl suspected that the reason they had failed in this case was because the Stonefur Divine Fox had so much holy magic that they couldn't be made undead. But the fact that she had been defeated must have been a tragedy for the region's balance.

Now that he thought about it, could this have been the start of the invasion? The mother had been dead for some time, unless the body was drained and desiccated by the attack. But the protection of a Divine Beast should have prevented the undead from cursing the cities to the southeast of here.

It was over a hundred kilometres to the edge of the affected area, but that wasn't far for such a powerful beast.

Finished with Lotus' incessant petting, Tian turned his fur to stone, and then leapt over to Ophelia's shoulder, using the logic that she was also furry, and therefore both camouflage and a distraction for the green robed Priestess.

"Nice to meet you as well, Tian. I am Ophelia, that is Tessa, and the mage is Dana." She greeted her new guest.

[It's a pleasure to meet you all.] Tian laughed as Lotus stood at the Werebear's feet and pouted.

She could reach Ophelia's shoulder easily enough, but the fox had made his fur rock solid.

Then Tian yawned, and his head tilted sleepily.

[I used too much energy, I need to nap now.] He explained, then vanished back to his space, where Rae had dropped a thick silk comforter for him.

The defensive spell vanished, and the fox was asleep the instant his head settled on the cushion.

With Tian asleep, all the other beasts, even butterfly, turned their attention to Cara.

[Hey, how was I supposed to know that he was so adorable? He blocked my attempt to examine the stone, then I just couldn't stop poking. It's not my fault.] She defended.

The silence dragged, and Cara huffed in annoyance. [Fine, judge me. But that's a really nice stone.]

She wasn't wrong. It was a very nice stone, of both Holy and Earth Elements, perfect for the development of a Stonefur Divine Fox.

[As long as you can learn to get along. I don't want any hard feelings just because you met on bad terms.] Karl warned.

[I helped convince him to join, didn't I?] Cara replied.

[Besides, if I can't have the stone, taking the whole fox is just as good.] She muttered, not quite managing to keep the thought to herself.

Chapter 993: So Many Spawns

There was a pause as everyone tried to remember what they had been doing before they got sidetracked by a fluffy little fox.

A Totem Ranked fluffy little fox.

"Are we still going to hit some more of the spawns today?" Nachtia asked, bringing them all back on task.

"Right. More spawns. We got the first few out of the way without any issues, so we can look for more. Did you want to go back and let them know these are complete, then get official orders?

Or did you want to just hunt for some more targets and return in the evening?" Karl asked.

"We should let them know that this spot has been cleared, and that the anomaly collapsed, then gather more sheets.

That way there won't be any chance of overlap or confusion when we go to hunt more monsters.

Though, we could go back by wagon, and just kill anything that bothers us on the way." Nachtia offered.

That method sounded pretty good to most of the group.

Thor was concerned that someone would attack his wagon, but he had an alternative.

"Why don't we skip the wagon, and the ladies can ride my back? Nachtia and Hawk can scout, and Karl can walk along with us?" He offered.

"That's not bad. It would give them a chance to see us coming.

If they were spawned monsters, they would surely attack anyhow. If they were not, there is a good chance that they won't attack a group of our power level. That should help sort what needs to go from what belongs in the area." Nachtia agreed.

Everyone loaded up to travel, and Rae wandered off to do some scouting of her own. There were some strange creatures in the grasslands, and she was curious what they were.

Not because they were powerful, or worth killing. Just because she didn't have any mental records of most of the strange things she was seeing.

The Bloodbath Spider was not native to this island, so there was no memory of anything that she was finding stored in her genetic memories, which were normally the basis for all of her combat techniques.

There wasn't much to see on their first few kilometres towards the camp. But after an hour, it became clear that teleporting here had saved them many hours of issues.

"We're being charged?" Thor asked, confused.

Indeed, they were being attacked, he could see the whole horde of Satyrs running their way with weapons. But since when were Satyrs a hostile species? Sure, they were technically demons, but they were more like a herbivorous beastkin in personality.

These ones were frothing at the mouth and charging with improvised weapons.

[Could they be sick?] Rae asked, just as confused about their behaviour as Thor was.

[We could try cleansing them. My healing skill cleanses mental and physical diseases and curses.] Tian suggested.

[Come with me, and we will try.] Rae agreed.

The tiny fox exited his space to land on her back, and Rae rushed off to stand near the charging Satyrs while camouflaged.

They waited in the long grass for the Satyrs to approach, and Tian covered the whole group with a circle of bright golden light, but they just kept running, with no visible changes.

[Nope, they're broken.] The tiny fox sighed, then returned to his space and fell asleep.

Remi laughed. [Now we have two sleeping beauties. I guess we need a Totem Ranked Karl so that they have enough mana to actually supply themselves and do more than one thing per day.]

Tian opened one eye. [One day, when I'm big, I'll be able to cast countless spells. Mom told me so. But I'm still small, and my body doesn't hold much mana.]

Remi giggled. [Here, I have a book for you. It's an introduction for mages, but it teaches about mana control. I think it's important information you should have learned from your mother soon.]

Most of her mana use didn't come from inside her body anymore. She would wear herself out far too fast if she tried to cast [Apocalypse] that way.

Tian flipped open the book, then promptly fell asleep with his head on the pages.

Well, maybe he could learn by osmosis, Remi decided.

Lotus, unaware of what Rae and Tian had tried, also cast a cleansing spell on the advancing horde, with similar results.

Nothing.

But they were all Commander Rank and lower.

Thor sighed as he sent [Bulwark] in lightning form to form a wall in front of himself, then charged through them. It wasn't intended as an offensive spell, but the brute force of a charging Behemoth, coupled with the shock that the Lightning gave them, was enough to wipe out the entire group.

"Well, that was depressing. Let's keep going, I don't want to fight more of those." Lotus insisted.

Thor nodded in agreement. Fighting things that were usually friendly was not fun.

[There are more weird things ahead.] Hawk warned.

That was his code of the day for all species that he didn't have a good description or name for. So, it was likely one of the strange local species or Chimera that lived on the Northeast Island.

Tian looked out of his space as the commotion of everyone getting ready roused him.

[Those are Pigbears. They only come from the bad mana places.] He announced, then adjusted so he was properly on his pile of blankets and not sleeping on the book.

Karl wasn't sure how they were supposed to be a pig or a bear. Though they had a vaguely bear shaped body, and piglike tusks pointing upwards from their lower jaws. But their bodies were covered in patches of scales with fur tufts between them, and they had six legs.

These, they could happily eliminate.

They were also Overlord Ranked, and there were a few larger ones in the mix that Karl suspected might actually be Totem Ranked.

It was hard to tell with the monsters grouped together like that, but they were definitely a monster spawn group. They were even attacking the ruins of a wagon that had been abandoned years earlier.

Chapter 994: Unstable Karl

Karl took out his bow and immediately felt his power destabilize.

No matter what skill he tried to activate, his power quality was fluctuating wildly, and his body was surging with power, but not in anything resembling a smooth transition, the way he had every other time he hit a Rank change.

Tian woke up as the power levels in his space became unstable, and looked around for the cause. It appeared that the Karl was advancing, but he didn't actually know anything about that, as he had been born at this Rank, and his mother hadn't gotten a chance to explain all the little things to him.

Butterfly worked to build a mana barrier around her space, stabilizing the fluctuations that were making her seasick as she floated on the mana currents. But the others were all out for combat, and willing to wait until Karl got his act together.

{Just focus on yourself, we've got this.} Remi insisted.

"Thanks. I don't think that I could use a skill right now anyhow.

Though, the way that my body is, I might not have to if the goal is just to defeat these things." Karl replied.

Remi laughed. {You know, that sounds like bragging. Only a Karl would consider taking on enraged monsters with his bare hands and no skills.}

Karl sat down and closed his eyes, focusing on his advancement, while Tian used [Earth Manipulation] to create a dome of stone over him, safe from attackers.

Karl began to purge all the stored mana from his body, moving it into the spaces in preparation to refill himself with Totem Ranked power. In theory, that should be the nudge that he needed to make the transition between Ranks, as long as he hadn't hit a bottleneck.

With Tian here, Karl was fairly sure that he wouldn't be hitting a bottleneck right now. However, he couldn't rule it out. Everyone else had hit one at some point, so he would have to get to one eventually.

Karl focused on growing his power, and felt the moment that it shifted. The unbalanced state was changing, and the influx was beginning to stabilize at Totem Ranked, but there was still something missing from his advancement.

Like Tian, he was Totem Ranked in power control, but that wasn't enough to truly complete Karl's advancement.

{Totemic Advancement Initiated. Calculating Comprehension.}

[Oh, you're so screwed.] Cara laughed.

[Hey, I've got this. We just need to know what it's expecting me to have comprehended. If it's skills, we're miles ahead of the competition.] Karl argued.

Cara paused. The Karl had a point. If it just wanted him to comprehend a skill at the Totem Rank, he had met that standard months ago.

{Verified} [Fundamental Rule Compatibility] Chaos

{Verified} [Fundamental Rule Compatibility] Fire

{Verified} [Fundamental Rule Compatibility] Mana Manipulation

{Path to Immortality initiated. Step 1 Totemic Advancement Successful}

{Totemic Blessing} active

{Totemic Blessing} Reduces all damage done by attacks and skills under Totem Rank by 90%

[Skill Master 5] 1% Rule Bonus

[Ghostfire] 2% Rule Bonus

[Void Blast] 2% Rule Bonus

Hawk smirked as he attacked the monsters. His fire was just as good as Cara's Void Blast, even if it hadn't gotten a Totem Ranked bonus. Hopefully, the Rule Bonus was something good.

Then power suddenly began to infuse Karl's body, pulled from the ambient mana, the Sword of Champions, and the Haint Claw, all at once.

[Oh, the Karl is a big boss.] Tian cheered.

Karl heard a rumbling from outside his stone shell, and then cursing. But he couldn't tell what was going on out there, and the influx of power was drowning out even the voices of the beasts.

So, he had no idea that Cara had opened the [Tiny World] and led everyone inside to hide while the world went crazy around them.

From a distance, a half dozen Mythic Ranked powerhouses watched the advancement of the newest Totem on the continent. It had touched off a minor Divine Storm, not nearly as bad as the tribulation that the Immortals went through, but it was likely to send down at least a few lightning strikes to test his durability.

'Why is nobody approaching? The Lightning won't hit anything but the target.' A young Divine Fire Dragon asked the juvenile Phoenix beside him.

The creature had surely been reborn recently, but the Divine Phoenix lineages always knew more than others, as they didn't forget just because they were in a new body.

"That one belongs to the Chaos Dragon. They're in the same Guild. If we all stand over here, she can't accuse us of trying to bully her junior." The Phoenix whispered back.

The Dragon nodded in understanding. She wasn't a Divine Dragon lineage, but if she ever left this world for the Immortal Realm, she would almost certainly advance from Supreme to Legendary status the moment that her power stabilized.

At that point, she would be second only to the Demigods. And nobody wanted to be on the wrong side of that.

The mention of Supreme Lady Matilda caught the attention of the other Mythic Rank beings nearby, and many made a warding gesture, using passive skills to attempt to avoid her attention.

Normally, under these circumstances, someone would come to claim him. Every Totem on the continent was under the protection or guidance of someone. Or, at the very least, under the supervision of their home nation's leadership.

Once you got far enough up the power structure to matter, it was best to eliminate the real psychopaths from the general population, from a social cohesion standpoint.

That hadn't been done in the distant past, and it had come back to haunt them.

A Lightning strike hit the stone shield, and a large black Demon stepped out of a portal next to the Divine Fire Dragon.

"Who is advancing?" Lord Drodh asked.

"Oh, there you are. This one is from your city, I think. His title said he is from the Drodh Branch of the Darklight Host." The dragon explained.

"Wait... Karl? Is his name Karl?" Lord Drodh asked.

"Yeah, that's the one. Did he come up here looking for stronger enemies to help him break through? Cat Demons are a bit odd like that. They enjoy playing with their food." The Phoenix asked.

Lord Drodh gave a bitter laugh. "I don't think that even the Cat Demons can account for all that is strange about that man. He only reached Overlord half a year ago. Not even a reborn minor Phoenix grows that fast."

Tiffani stepped out of a portal beside Lord Drodh and glared at the stone dome.

"That thing isn't a Cat Demon at all. It looked like one at first, but I fought him, and there is no doubt that he is a being of the Chaos Plane." The Vampire insisted.

Lord Drodh did a double take at the Totem Ranked vampire, who was in a black toga, studded with diamonds to emulate the midsummer night sky. But it wasn't the dress that caught his attention, it was the conspicuous collar around her neck with a [Property of Matilda] label.

"It seems that you have a long story to tell. Perhaps we can gather for a nice chat after the advancement is over?" Lord Drodh asked.

Tiffani nodded. "That would be best. He is a resident of your city, after all."

Chapter 995: Totemic Karl

The first blast of Lightning shattered the stone barrier over Karl's head, but he didn't even notice. He was so caught up in his transformation and power adjustment that the tingle of the strike was lost in the background noise.

In fact, he didn't even notice the next two strikes in rapid succession as he got to his feet and stretched his revamped muscles to ease some of the cramps from the transformation.

The Sword of Champions felt oddly hollow, nearly drained of the excess life energy that it had been storing as long as he had wielded it. But the Haint Claw felt oddly revitalized, as if his advancement had made the adaptive weapon a bit more complete.

Karl opened his eyes and looked out toward the Mythic Rank creatures in the distance. Many of them were Dwarves from the local region, but there were Dragons, Demons, and a few Monster species as well, including a Naga Queen who looked a lot like Remi after her most recent advancement, except that her white scales had patterns that were silver, not brown.

Karl nodded to Lord Drodh and Tiffani, who he recognized. Then to the former Lord of Barukth.

Now that he was up and finished with his advancement, the Myths came forward to greet him. Then paused when they got close and realized that there was something off about this new Totem.

"He's an Elite Spawn. How does that happen to someone linked to the System? Isn't that reserved for Dungeon Bosses and such?" One of the Trollish Mythic Warriors asked.

Everyone looked for answers, but nobody had them.

Karl shrugged. "I got an upgraded physique from a trial not long ago. It optimized my body, and the tags on my nameplate were the result. I don't think that it changes much, it's just a marker that I have an excessively large mana pool and great durability."

"Like a Dungeon Boss." Tiffani added helpfully.

Now that Karl was a Totem, it wouldn't even be a competition. He would have crushed her in a fight. In fact, he could likely take a five on one fight of trained Totems if they weren't organized.

Without using his beasts.

Those who knew Karl were the only ones truly concerned about his status. The name adornment itself was enough to warn others not to mess with him unprepared. So, while he was definitely powerful, it wasn't a big deal to them.

Tiffani gave Karl a suspicious look. "That same thing didn't happen to the insane Badger, did it?"

Karl chuckled. "Cara only wishes. No, she got something even better. She evolved from a Winged Void Badger to a Chaos Badger."

The vampire looked horrified, while the Dwarves let out a sigh of relief. Chaos Badgers must have a better personality than the Void Badgers were known for, right? Chaotic was better than greedy.

"What were you planning to do now that you have advanced?" Lord Drodh asked, thinking of city politics.

"I'm here with a group of Dragon Clerics, helping to clear some of the excess monsters from the spawns, on behalf of the Black Dragon." Karl explained.

The Dragons in the crowd nodded happily. That was a noble endeavour.

Cara wandered out of her space, and looked up at all the Mythic Dragons. She knew most of these species already.

But there were a few...

The Divine Fire Dragon, transformed to appear to be a two-metre tall and muscular human with glowing eyes that flickered like the fires his species was named after, picked her up to examine the strange creature.

He was still young, barely old enough to be called a young adult. So he didn't even notice when Cara subtly bumped him with her snout, and just assumed that she wanted to be carried in a different way.

"I will have to inform my tutor about this. It's not often that I find a species he hasn't mentioned before." The young dragon bragged, while the Phoenix beside him tried not to laugh at the naive boy.

Cara spread her wings and glided around the area, memorizing the feeling of power that she was getting from these people. Knowing the details of the Mythic Rank was essential to advancing her powers, she assumed.

Maybe not right now, but some time soon.

"Where are you off to next?" The Phoenix asked.

"Back to talk to General Omar, of the 7th Narazir Regiment. We took on a mission from him, and need to report back on the success, then get more targets from his list." Karl explained.

"You keep saying 'we', but I only see you and the badger." The Phoenix stated, confused.

"Oh, the others stepped out for a moment, so that the aftermath of the advancement didn't injure them. They're still mostly Monarch Ranked, except for the Black Dragon."

The other Mythic Ranked leaders quickly congratulated Karl, then nodded to Lord Drodh, who was unofficially in charge of keeping track of him, as the new Totem was from his city and none of them were insane enough to think that Matilda would actually improve anyone's behaviour if she were left in charge.

"I will see you when you get back to the city. Come visit me at the Castle when you get back. We have much to discuss." Lord Drodh insisted.

"Of course. We shouldn't be too much longer. A month or two at the most." Karl agreed.

That wasn't long, in the extended lifespan of the higher Ranks.

He was about to say something else, when a portal opened, leaking Chaotic energy that immediately drew Cara's attention and made Tiffani sigh.

"Lord Drodh, Gentlemen, would you like to join me at home for that conversation? It appears that I have been summoned." The Vampire explained.

Karl smiled. "Please greet the Supreme Lady for me when you see her next. I will remain here with my team."

The others looked leery of entering that particular portal, but they also didn't want to anger Matilda when she offered hospitality. It wasn't often that she was awake and in the mood for guests, so this chance to meet her might not come again for quite some time.

Chapter 996: Durable Karl

With the area now quiet and clear, Thor led the rest of the team out of the [Tiny World] to inspect Karl's changes.

"You advanced well. Much more durable than I had expected." Thor commended Karl as he checked the area for hidden dangers.

"Thanks. Now, we just need to get you up one more Rank, and you'll be the truly indestructible Behemoth." Karl joked.

Nachtia laughed as she joined the group. "Well now we're going to shock the General when we return. Leave as Monarchs and Overlords, come back with a Totem."

"That's what I call a productive day." Dana agreed.

The spectacle of Karl's advancement had cleared everything from the area. Nothing wanted to hang around once the Mythic group started to show up, and it made for a very smooth trip back to the 7th Narazir Regiment.

The Regiment saw them coming, and even sent out an escort to lead them back into the camp. Karl would have thought that it was a kind gesture for a returning Mercenary group, but he had a feeling that they were warned to be nice.

The courtesy was just a little too much, and a little too forced to be natural.

There were other Totem Ranked Mercenaries in the area. There had to be if they were going to take on the sorts of threats that this area had to offer.

General Omar came out to greet Karl as they approached the Command tent area, and the General looked much happier than he had this morning.

"Welcome back, and congratulations on the advancement. Tell me, did you perhaps gain an option for a new Class when you reached Totem Rank?" The Dwarf greeted Karl.

"Sort of. There is one more step that I have to take before I can change my class. I got the notice from the System some time ago, and now that I meet the requirements, I just need to find a System Linked trial or Dungeon to enter.

Once I do that, I can change my class and see what comes next in the progression." Karl explained.

General Omar nodded. "That makes sense. Do you know what sort of class it will be? Your abilities already seem to be well beyond the average. If you manage an even better option at Totem Rank, they might start offering you special bonuses for your assistance."

Karl smiled. That was the part the General was most interested in. Getting Karl and his group to stay longer and help him clear out some of the excess monsters.

"Well, we got all the groups of Rock Goblins. They were coming from an anomaly within the spire, and it's closed now. Then we got some Pigbears on our way back as well. Those were wiped out, and we didn't see anything else between them and the camp." Karl explained.

The General nodded, and removed the markers from the map.

"Your group is a bit of a mixed bag right now, with everything from Monarchs to a Totem Ranked leader in one spot.

But there are still some targets that are appropriate for you, and not a waste of a powerful mercenary. For example, this group is mostly Monarchs with a group of Overlord Ranked elite forces, and a Totem Ranked leader.

That's only thirty kilometres from here, so you could get there and back in a day again if you wanted.

It's better to be at the camp overnight unless you're going to set a strong guard, as there are still random Monster Spawns in the area." General Omar suggested.

Karl nodded. "We have a good system set up for overnight journeys, but it's always good to have company who will keep night watch."

It didn't really matter as much to them as it would to any other group. With the Tiny World and Rae, they were pretty well set for nighttime security. If they were truly concerned about security, Karl could even just close the Tiny World's entrance and only a few creatures of his level would even be able to find out it existed, much less how to enter it.

"Will you be continuing in this region for some time then?" The General asked cautiously.

Now that Karl had advanced to Totem Rank, there were political considerations for him when he returned home.

On this island, there were enough Totems that they didn't all control a region of the city, but they were all top forces of whatever city that they lived in, and there were expectations of them if there were to be trouble while they were in the area.

"We will be here for some time, yes. Not only because it's the will of the Dragon Gods, but I also need to consolidate and stabilize my advancement.

The more practice that I can get, the better.

So, a week or two worth of adventures is likely to be the bare minimum, and that's assuming that we can find a proper fight where I can flex my abilities enough to test them. Just clearing out easy fights isn't going to help me at all." Karl explained

The General looked at the markers on the table. "Well, that limits the number of missions that will be truly beneficial to you. But I still see three that are appropriate for your team, and might give a Totem a good enough fight to at least get to test his skill advancements."

Karl nodded. "Sorry to make excess trouble for you."

General Omar laughed. "We've got plenty of trouble of our own. Finding missions for an oddball group is a relaxing pastime in comparison. Now, did you want a visitor's tent in the camp? Or did you prefer to set up your own?"

Karl looked to the others, who all just shrugged.

Dana smiled. "We might as well use theirs. I think we will all step out for the evening anyhow."

That didn't directly mention the Tiny World, and the General already knew that they could use a [Portal] to come and go as they pleased.

"Consider it done. The Lieutenant will lead you to the tent, and you can take this mission sheet with you. It's the closest one that suits your group."

Chapter 997: Check and Test

Thor and Tessa decided to stay in the actual tent, in case someone were to come looking for their group. But Rae also remained outside the [Tiny World], also hoping that someone came looking for them in the middle of the night.

Rae was nothing if not optimistic.

But in the middle of an army camp that had been long-established, there were no attacks, roaming monsters or traitors to bother them.

When Karl got up in the morning, everyone else was up and working on breakfast, after which the plan was to have the ladies ride on Thor to the mission location.

That gave them a chance for bonus fights, which would make the Black Dragon happy. It also gave Hawk time to scout more of the area than simply flying in a straight line would.

"I wonder just how fast Karl is now that he's advanced? All that extra power, and the physique boost, has to have made him pretty powerful, right?" Lotus asked, waving her fork for emphasis.

Karl shrugged. "We can test it once we find something for me to fight. But I should be about half again as strong as I was before the advancement. I don't know how that will translate to speed, which is more dependent on reflexes and muscle something."

Lotus laughed and nodded.

It was surprising that Karl actually knew that much about anatomy to start with. Half of the Elites in the Golden Dragon Nation only knew that the body worked, not how it worked. It was the clerics that took most of the Biology and medical courses.

Thor shrugged. "We can test it here. Well, the strong part. Just jump straight up, and let yourself float when you reach the highest point."

Karl crouched and launched himself twenty metres straight in the air. With a running start, or not going straight up, he could most certainly do better, but the power in his legs had noticeably increased.

While he was in the air, Karl took a second to scout the region around the camp, and Hawk emerged from his space to start his morning routes. If he found a good fight, more Stone Rats, or anything else of interest, he would be sure to relay the message.

Karl let himself fall, then slowed his descent just before landing.

Lotus gestured to a pair of footprints on the ground, where Karl had sunk ten centimetres deep when he launched.

"You've got to be heavier than you look. I've never seen a human leave footprints like that in packed dirt before." The little cleric noted.

"It would certainly make me easier to track. I think it was mostly just inefficient technique on my part. But now I've got a good idea of what my legs should be capable of." Karl agreed.

[I have found our target. There is a Totem Ranked Giant leading what looks like his whole Clan. Definitely Spawned, they've got that crazy eyes no talking thing happening.] Hawk updated.

Thor turned toward Hawk's current location, as the target had moved overnight, and increased his speed to a trot. That made for a gentle swaying of his back, and it would bring them to the target in less than an hour.

The Giants wouldn't run into anyone else from the Army camp during that time, so it was still their target for the day. There wasn't anything likely to pick a fight between them and the Giants, but that wasn't a big deal.

Thor hadn't gotten to fight Giants since he evolved, and it would be a fun challenge to see how they could be smashed without his defensive ridge.

In his new form, he had to be a bit more careful about the back of his neck, but most things didn't get past his horns anyhow. The Giants did have a long reach, though. There was a chance that they could attack past his horns to try to get to his back, or to Tessa.

That would be a factor he had to consider, for the safety of his Knight.

Karl casually jogged alongside the Behemoth, letting his excess strength throw him into long leaping strides. The Dwarves would certainly be envious of their travel speed, as even with their impressive strength, short legs made thirty kilometres an hour a difficult speed to reach.

The Giants saw Thor about the same time that Karl saw them, and the whole tribe turned to face the incoming threat.

Ophelia patted Karl on the shoulder. "Brings back memories, doesn't it? Hill Giants everywhere. We all know the routine, go have fun with the Clan Chief."

Karl buffed the group, then rushed off to circle to the left of the Giants, as the leader was at the back of the group, giving instructions of some sort.

The System didn't translate their words, and Karl didn't speak Giant, but he was fairly sure that some of those words were about ways that Thor could be roasted. The way that the Giants were responding to the enormous Behemoth was definitely hunger.

The leader didn't seem interested in a duel, and brought two strong Overlords with him when he moved to face Karl.

Not that they would be expected to be able to do any sort of actual damage to Karl, but if they could keep him off balance, it would be enough for the Giants' leader to get in a few extra hits.

It was an excellent technique in theory. But when Karl opened the battle with [Gravity Slam], the two Overlords were hurled from their feet and crushed into the soft grass.

That left the two Totems alone to face each other for the next few seconds, and neither was planning to hold back.

Karl coated the Sword of Champions in an oversized blade of Ghostfire, while the Giant created a massive club of stone, using an unknown earth type attack skill to extend his reach.

The two oversized weapons collided with a flare of elemental power that blasted outwards in a ring of destruction that made Remi curse and Rae laugh.

{Now you're just making a mess.} Remi yelled at Karl as he locked weapons with the Giant.

Karl couldn't see it, but Remi wasn't joking. That first strike had levelled everything within twenty metres, including a half dozen Monarch Rank Hill Giants.

Karl and the Giant disengaged, then clashed a half dozen times in the next few seconds, testing each other's strength.

Satisfied with the results, Karl smiled. He was stronger than the Hill Giant, physically. But his power level was still a fair bit lower.

Chapter 998: Poke The Giant Totem

Remi stared up at the Giant in front of her. It had managed to sneak through the lines of Golems and fighters to make it to her and Lotus in the back lines. That alone was enough to be impressed with its ingenuity.

But in her usual form, Remi was much too small to be fighting the Giants head on.

Instead, she transformed into Spirit Snake form and struck out at the Giant, which rolled away, flailing with its blade to keep her bite away.

Remi's head darted forward as the Giant swung wildly, but too slow to stop the attack.

Half the creature's body was in her mouth when Remi bit down, sinking her fangs deep into the Giant and flooding it with venom.

With its arms trapped to its side by her mouth, the Giant flailed wildly, and even tried coating itself in stone armour, but the skill failed to force Remi's fangs from its back, and it remained trapped.

A few seconds later, its frantic struggles ended, and Remi instinctively swallowed. Then she realized that with a full Giant in her Spirit Snake form, she wouldn't be able to transform back for a while, and she would be slow moving until she finished digesting.

Worse, Lotus was giving her a disgusted look.

And the little cleric was right. The Giant didn't even taste good.

4/10 Mediocre and inconvenient.

But she had an idea. If she shrunk, the food should shrink with her. Yes, that worked wonderfully, and now she was a small snake with a full belly, but she could move easily.

She didn't lose any strength when she shrunk, but both her body and the Giant lost weight. It was the perfect solution to a problem that she had created for herself, and it came with the added bonus of completely confusing the other Giants.

They couldn't find Remi in all the chaos, but even under the influence of the Monster Spawn, they hadn't forgotten that there was a venomous Spirit Snake here somewhere.

She couldn't have gone far. The aftermath of the battle between the two Totems had made it impossible for the Giants to retreat, and Remi had been at the back of the battle to begin with.

They just needed to find her.

Karl and the Totem Ranked Giant had no idea what was happening on the other side of the battlefield, they were too engrossed in their own battle.

This Totem was one of the strongest Karl had seen, and the durability of his species was incredible. Like Karl, he had Totem Ranked defensive barriers up, and the Earth Element was known for its durability.

Unlike Karl, he healed at a more normal rate.

So, the wounds were slowly building up on the Giant as they battled, and his energy was running low, while Karl regenerated stamina, and he was using less mana than he could regain.

Then Karl got a brilliant idea. Hawk had [Purgatory Flames]. An enormously powerful fireball that would burn all of his mana in one shot. He kind of wanted to see what happened if he used it, with the difference in their mana pool.

The Giant's expression changed as Karl smirked, and then the fireball was launched, burning easily through not only the creature's barrier and body, but the weapon it had made as well.

Nothing was left of the Totem Ranked Giant but ash, as the spell exploded on impact.

The blast, on the other hand, was significantly larger than Karl had anticipated.

When Hawk used it, the ball was just fire, and if you weren't set aflame, you were generally alright. This time, the blast was like artillery exploding, and even from fifty metres away, Tessa was nearly thrown from Thor's back before [Eternal Lightning] caught her.

Mana flooded back into Karl's body, making his limbs tingle with the imbalance as they struggled to return to their default state.

But there was nothing left to fight, and the last of the Giants had been killed by the overflow of the final blast.

Tessa straightened her robes and glared at Karl. "You could have warned us before you did that. What sort of insane power was that, anyhow? It nearly knocked me back to the Goddess, and we're in the same Guild."

Karl shrugged. "It's [Purgatory Flames], a super fireball skill that Hawk has. I didn't think that there would be a blast like that, it had to be a result of the Hill Giant's Earth Magic collapsing. Is everyone alright?"

Tessa nodded, and Ophelia transformed back to give him a thumbs up.

{Well, that's the first target of the day down. Should we head on to the next one?} Nachtia asked, still in dragon form.

Dana landed gently on her back. "We might as well. The day is still early, and we have four targets on the list. The next one doesn't have a Totem Ranked leader, though.

Why don't we split up for efficiency? All of us can go to the next one on the list, and Karl can take his own."

As she finished talking, Dana stuck her tongue out at Karl, then pulled her curls back into a rough ponytail, as they had already escaped the loose braid she wore that morning.

[That's not a bad idea. Their target is five kilometres northwest. Yours is fifteen to the north.] Hawk offered.

"Hawk has the target in sight. Follow him northwest, and you'll find it. Then we can both meet at the fourth target for the day." Karl suggested.

"Oh, not a bad idea. If things go smoothly, we should be done by lunch, and we can go together back to camp." Ophelia agreed.

Remi giggled as she climbed up one of Dana's Golems for a better view in her reduced snake form.

{This should be fun. We can have a competition. And then we can make a wishlist of things to have for dinner.}

Everything was huge again in this form, and she had just remembered that she never did get to try all the sweets she wanted to when she learned to shrink.

Chapter 999: Boss Raid

Karl waited for the group to leave, then took a running leap into the air, so he could teleport toward the target in a couple of long jumps.

If they were going to compete, he wasn't going to waste twenty minutes running over to the target.

The group that Hawk had identified for him was a group of Ogres, one Totem, with thirty or so Overlords. Workable, but he would have to see how difficult of a fight it might be.

[What did you find for the others?] Karl asked Hawk.

[The mission is a group of grass trolls with four Overlords and many Monarchs.] Hawk explained.

That explained why he didn't think that Karl would have to assist. Most of that group would be unlikely to ever break Thor's barriers.

Karl landed near the Ogres, who immediately charged, only to be met with a barrage of [Void Blast] enhanced arrows.

The skill had already been at Totem Ranked, but with the extra spell power that Karl had obtained, and whatever hidden bonuses came with being a Totem, the Overlords were completely unable to take a hit.

Ogres weren't the toughest of opponents, as they had no magic of their own, but still, the casualty rate was impressive.

Karl was about to turn his attention to the two leaders of this Ogre tribe when a sudden blast of Unholy Energy vaporized them, and a group of gaunt looking humanoids with no noses on their faces stepped from a portal.

"Well, what do we have here? The meddling Beast Master, away from his pets, too far to recall them to his side, and away from the influence of the Dragon Gods." One of them cackled gleefully.

Karl looked over the black robed figure, which reeked of death magic, and then smiled.

"Did my old friend from Bomgon send someone to play with me?" Karl asked slyly.

The man laughed, and equipped a shield and sword.

"Oh, he set the bounty, alright. But don't think that we're some weakling Necromancer group. We know about your particular skills against mages." The man announced.

Karl checked their System Status for the names, and found they were in a language he couldn't read. Possibly, a disguise spell. But the colours were clear.

One Unholy Paladin type class, two Rogues, a cleric, two mages and five warriors.

All Totem Ranked.

"Wait, did I really get a whole adventuring party, just for myself? Cara will be so jealous." Karl laughed.

He tried to inform the Void Badger that they were missing out on the fun stuff, but found that he could not connect to her mind.

That shouldn't be right. He could normally contact Remi in her lab from halfway across the continent, and the others were only a dozen kilometres away. There had to be a barrier of some sort.

The mages began casting buffs on the group, and Karl called for his summoned helpers.

Two Lamia and a pair of Dire Bears, his usual combination. Plus the Epic Guard, who was equipped with the Haint Claw.

Once the force was ready, Karl didn't hesitate and went straight for the cleric.

The Paladin cursed as a Lamia blade intercepted his attempt to block Karl's advance, allowing the first strike to hurl the shocked adventurer twenty metres, before he hit an invisible wall and slid down, lightly wounded, but unconscious.

Skills flew at him from all sides, and Karl aimed for the closest Warrior, using his larger size to his advantage to force the man back.

Or, he assumed it was a man. The way that these attackers were all identical suggested that either he couldn't tell them apart, or it was all a disguise that he was unable to see through.

The warriors moved to encircle Karl once a mage managed to petrify one of the Lamia, so the Paladin could escape to engage the Epic Guard, who had already disabled one of the spell casters.

[Void Blast] in a dome around himself gave Karl room to work and caused the magical barriers on the warriors to dim, even as their attacks crashed against Karl's [Eternal Lightning].

{That thing has insane damage reduction. Hit it with big spells every time.} The Paladin warned his group members with a System Message, so that Karl couldn't hear their conversation and adjust his strategy.

{It's not just reduction, he's got a base ignore amount as well.}

{Did someone wake the Cleric?}

{He's up. Moving slow, though. Whatever status effect is on him wasn't cleared by the potion.}

It wasn't just a magical status effect, the Cleric had suffered internal bleeding to the head when he hit the barrier, and only after he managed to properly heal himself did his mind begin to clear.

Karl used [Gravity Slam] to knock down a pair of warriors, then charged through to engage the Paladin and call a new pair of Lamia Bodyguards to replace the wounded and petrified pair.

Then, Butterfly and Tian worked together to create a small army of illusionary Dwarven warriors with stone hammers and armour, as Butterfly activated [Illusionary Domain] over the battlefield.

It looked just as it did before, but now she had much more influence over the space, and her illusions were more convincing.

"Shit, incoming. He's summoned Dwarves." The Paladin shouted, and the warriors immediately moved to defensive positions, surrounding the mages and the cleric in a well-rehearsed formation.

Karl had no doubt that this was a dungeon raiding team. They had tactics and strategies for all the common tactics that he had come up with so far, and they had brought a proper group, with every needed role.

The Epic Guard fell as the Rogues cut her down, and the Haint Claw returned to Karl's hand.

He could summon another, but that took a few seconds, unlike the bear golems or the Lamia.

Seconds that he didn't have when defending himself against two Rogues and a Paladin.

Pain lanced through his back as a dagger bypassed his barrier and found a weak point in his armour, and Karl lashed out with his clawed hand, raking deep furrows into the Rogue's face.

The spell on his body shattered, revealing a very normal looking human face, staring blankly at the sky with its one intact eye as the Rogue died.

That gave Karl a few seconds of breathing room, and he called a new Epic Guard to the battlefield.

[Go get the cleric. Don't let him cast a resurrection.]

Chapter 1000: Healer Goes First

The Epic Guard flickered out of existence, using the Haint Claw's movement skill, and then reappeared to stab the Cleric in the back before being forced to retreat again before the mages could blast it out of existence.

But the task was complete.

The spell had been interrupted, and the Cleric was bleeding heavily and wheezing with a punctured lung. He would have to take care of himself first, and speaking the words to a spell would not be easy.

"You cowardly bastard!"

The Paladin shouted in frustration as he charged for a [Shield Slam], which Karl met with [Bulwark], sending a wave of dissipated energy to both sides as two monumental forces met.

The illusionary Dwarves were falling fast, lacking skills, while Tian lacked the mana to constantly refresh so many barriers.

Karl never heard the chanting as a pair of mages completed a ritual spell, [Dread Blast]. But he felt [Eternal Lightning] shatter, then [Ghostfire Body], before his left leg was coated in a black energy that caused pain to shoot through his body.

[Nullify] dissipated the effect, but the ritual was successful.

His barriers were down.

The Paladin managed to keep Karl's blade busy while the Rogue found a chance to strike at his back, poisoning him again. But this time, the Rogue darted away before Karl's blade could reach him, and Karl was forced to retreat a few steps to keep the pair in front of him.

All of the summoned creatures were now busy with the Warriors and the mages, who were fighting desperately to keep the Epic Guard away from their healer, who glowed with golden Holy Magic as he tried to keep the group alive.

Then, the formation collapsed as one of the warriors was defeated, and the Lamia pair was suddenly together in the tight formation around the mages, gleefully hacking away.

The Rogue peeled off the battle with Karl, leaving him to duel the Paladin while the agility specialized teammate rescued their physically weakest members.

Then, tragedy struck the adventurers.

With the lines in disarray, the Epic Guard made it through the defence again, and the Cleric's head rolled free of his body.

It was only a matter of time now.

Karl was certain of it.

The distraction cost Karl dearly, and the Paladin's blade found home, deep in his side.

But a [Void Blast] infused fist shattered the Paladin's shield, and the fighter was flung to the ground as the black mist of [Void Body] healed Karl's wounds.

Weariness crept into his body until he brought [Eternal Lightning] back up. But even with the extra stamina regeneration, he couldn't do this forever.

He had burned through two thirds of his mana already, and half the attackers were still alive.

The fact that they were down their healer would help, but Karl couldn't be sure how much of their mana remained.

[Rend] saved some mana, and forced the warriors into defensive positions as the Rogue finished off the Lamia pair. But the warriors couldn't hold for long as Karl battered them with his most mana efficient attack skill.

A spell hit Karl without warning, and the mage collapsed in exhaustion. However, the others smiled as if it were all worth it.

{Negative Effect Applied} Skill Lock (15s remaining)

It didn't sound long, but with only [Eternal Lightning] active and no ability to refresh it or parry with skills, fifteen seconds might as well be eternity.

The warriors charged Karl, leaving only the Rogue and the Paladin to work with the last surviving mage against the two bear Golems.

Three on one, with the warriors still able to use their skills, Karl was able to do nothing but parry and hope that [Eternal Lightning] held out long enough that the Blade of Champions wasn't damaged during the battle.

Fortunately, he was not truly alone.

The bear Golems had thick stony fur, courtesy of Tian, who was also using [Earth Manipulation] to attack the final mage.

The mage screamed in agony as he was impaled by a stone spear, and Karl's fist ended a distracted warrior.

"How is he still using skills?" The Paladin shouted, well aware of the timer on [Skill Lock].

"He's not. I think it's the damned Golems." One of the warriors fighting Karl shouted back.

They were certain of it. He hadn't used so much as a flicker of power in the last five seconds. But still, something had been using Earth Magic to kill their mage. It couldn't be anyone but the Golems.

Karl's other summoned assistants could use skills, so it made sense that the bears could as well, even if they looked like regular Golems. It had to be an ability that his Class granted.

The Paladin nodded decisively, and then took an item from his inventory.

It was a simple ivory horn, but the Paladin sighed as he raised it to his mouth.

A moaning wail came from the horn, and Karl prepared to be hit with something nasty.

But the expected strike never came.

Instead, the whole group began to fade from sight, while with the vaguely familiar feeling of the [Recall] spell permeated the area.

They had taken their fallen and run away.

Bastards.

[Do either of you have a timer? Did we hold them here for long enough to get a confirmed kill?] Karl asked.

Tian just shrugged. He'd never seen a clock before in his life. He understood the concept of time, but he had no idea how it was measured.

Likewise, Butterfly did not have a clock, but she had a better grasp of how time was measured. So, she summoned an illusionary Dwarf to speak on her behalf.

"Approximately seven minutes from the first death." It explained, then vanished.

Not long enough.

But Karl had bigger concerns, now that he had realized he was being targeted. What if a similar group had come after the others? He couldn't contact the rest of the group, so he couldn't even warn them that they might be in danger.

At least not until he [Nullified] the barrier, and all the links came flooding back.

[Test, test. Anyone home?]

[We finished our group, and we're heading to the fourth point. How is your fight going?]

Remi's mental messages made Karl chuckle, but he decided to send her a warning before getting side tracked by banter.

[I finished my fight, and then I was ambushed by mercenaries sent by Bomgon. Keep an eye out for the others, they might be targets as well.]