

## Beast Master 371

### Chapter 371 Rae's Priorities

Rae's real concern was not how to make sure that everyone knew which kills were hers, that was already fairly obvious to everyone.

What was really weighing on her mind was the fact that she was about to become Royal Rank, and she didn't feel impressive enough. She was a goddess of the night, a divine blessing come to reap the tasty and unwary. But soon she would be a legitimate Princess, and her only real skills were stabbing, and making things that stabbed for her.

How could a Princess of the Bloodbath Spider species only be good for assassination? Wasn't that just too sad? If she couldn't even do something cool, wouldn't she be no better than a Giant? She had stabbed thousands of Giants to death, but Rae suspected that the humans didn't fully appreciate how much of a difference existed between an elegant being such as her and some stupid Giant.

She was so lost in despair that her abilities weren't visually impressive that she almost missed the fact that she already had the answer.

She had been watching the humans all her life, and there was no way that she couldn't learn the basics of their skills. No human could be as smart as her. Not even her Karl was immune to her trickery.

What she needed to do was focus on the learning skill and a person with a cool ability. There were countless cool abilities, and really flashy ones. Remi had gotten an overdose of luck on that front, and all her abilities were flashy. But none of them were really appealing to Rae.

She wanted something that people would associate with her.

Then she recalled a skill she kept seeing the Commander Rank Rogues using. They just vanished into a shadow and appeared somewhere else to attack. It didn't seem to go far, but she could totally learn that. Shadows were her Element.

So, Rae sneaked out to observe the Rogues practising, revelling in the fact that half the camp didn't even see her passing by them.

Of course, a huge spider sitting at the edge of the training area in the middle of the afternoon wasn't exactly stealthy, even if she blended with her surroundings exceptionally well. So, the most powerful Rogues knew that she was watching them, and wondered what she was doing.

Then, when the sun shifted and moved her into the shadows, the Bloodbath Spider vanished, only to appear behind one of the Professors and rub a mandible against the back of his neck before making a quarter turn and vanishing again.

"Did we just accidentally teach a Bloodbath Spider to Shadow Step?" One of the students asked as the teacher stood frozen in horror.

"We totally did. Holy shit, that is terrifying. I'm glad we're not Professor Fingers right now." Another Rogue agreed.

"She was terrifying enough before. Did you know that she can see in absolute darkness, track you by noise, and she has built in thermal imaging? It's basically impossible to hide from her. Now, she can shadow step, so she can just appear anywhere and attack. That's just disgustingly unfair." One of the boys that Rae had embarrassed in class ranted.

Rae, who was hiding in a tree nearby, waiting to see how long it took someone to find her, preened at the praise for her skills. That was what she wanted to hear. Her new skill was called "disgustingly unfair". That was perfect.

With that settled, she returned to her space for the evening, and worked on adapting her shell so she could be a proper Royal Rank Bloodbath Spider.

She had been neglecting her skincare routine, but tonight, she had brought out all the good stuff. She had a scrubber made from moss in Thor's space, and a bath full of Royal Rank blood, both human and Giant. She had ground up a number of stones that seemed like they were beneficial to her to mix into her scrubber, and she was ready for a long night in for self-care.

Thor approved to this method of advancement. His pool was comfortable and soaked him with Holy energy constantly. He would make it to Royal Rank eventually, he was certain. For now, he was more focused on his endurance. The more recent fights had been exhausting, trying to shield a whole bunch of people at one time, while fighting and working on his own defence, with Circle of Protection active.

Normally, a Lightning Cerro Pack would all have their own barriers, so he wouldn't need to extend them over everyone. But Karl was the only one who could do it, and he couldn't extend it the way that Thor could.

So, he had to work on his stamina if he was going to keep up his position in this growing pack.

From what Thor instinctively knew, the stronger a leader, the larger the pack. So, when Rae reached Royal Rank, and the rest of them began to advance, the humans would bring more people for their pack.

When the herd was small and without a powerful leader, they needed as many bodies as they could get. Then as they grew up, they would start a small pack that they could protect. But as they started to get more powerful, they would attract more young members who needed safety to form a powerful herd.

That's the point in the cycle of pack growth that they were at now. Once they reached Royal Rank, everyone would know that Karl's pack could protect them, so they would flock to him.

It was inevitable in Thor's mind, and he just needed to make sure that he could protect them all, since he was the pack's defender.

That made Thor wonder if he was second in command. In a Cerro Pack, the Guardian was the strongest warrior other than the pack leader, and he defended the weak while the leader and the rest of the strong fighters chased off the threats.

Some herd animals would just run and save as many as they could, while the predators picked off the weak and the young. But the Lightning Cerro didn't operate like that. For one, they could heal broken bones in a day or two, they weren't a crippling injury like they were to many animals. Secondly, they had powerful horns and tails. If they defended in a group, they could save more of their own than if they ran.

If there was a Lightning Cerro who got too old and too injured to heal, and they were dragging the pack down, they would lead the charge during the next attack. That way, they could help the pack one last time, and the predator would get what it came for and leave the others.

Only an insane predator continued the fight once it had its food.

He didn't think that humans operated like that. He had already met a number of useless human pack members and troublemakers that should have been left for a predator by their packs.

Hawk considered putting in an opinion on the topic, but it was better to just watch Rae and take notes in case she came up with something that would help him. It wouldn't be long before he was going to be advancing as well, so he needed to prepare in advance.

## Chapter 372 Blood Bath

All evening, Rae soaked in her bath, periodically scrubbing herself against the walls of the tub that she had lined with ground gems and moss. She was polishing off the outer layer of her chitin and sharpening her legs.

That was general maintenance for a bloodbath spider, and she had been neglecting it for some time, but now that she was about to advance, she had to look her very best. She couldn't have flaws and imperfections marring her beauty when she made her first appearance as a Royal Rank beast.

She was pulling in the blood from the pool and holding it in her mouth to let the nutrients soak through the membranes of her cheeks, pulling the energy and essence from it, then spitting the drained blood to the side of her pool so she didn't have to swallow it and feel all bloated from overeating.

The absorbed blood infusion was slowly transforming the energy in her body, following the instincts of a Bloodbath Spider, and while Karl was sleeping, she was making great progress.

Her size wasn't changing, she was already full-grown, but the density of her chitin had skyrocketed, and the energy of her body was taking on aspects of the primarily Hill Giant blood she had used. There wasn't much of a choice, for Royal Rank, she only had blood from one Frost Giant and a bunch of humans other than what she had gotten from the Hill Giants. The humans didn't hold much, and the Frost Giant blood was cold and blue. That did not sound like a pleasant bath at all, so she had skipped it.

However, a Bloodbath Spider held significantly less blood than a Hill Giant did, so she had plenty left over even after her bath was done, and she had polished herself clean again, ready to present her advancement to the others.

Karl's mental spaces were shifting their power as he slept, spreading the focused energy from all the spaces into Rae's on their own to adapt to the standard that her body now demanded.

Nobody minded, Karl could fix it in the morning, and it was giving them all ideas on how their own advancement was supposed to go.

Hawk was pretty certain that Rae had the right idea. Even if you feel the pull to advance, as he was beginning to, you needed to find a cool new skill to learn. Advancement made it much easier to learn a new ability, and he didn't want to leave it to chance, he wanted the demoted Commander's Flame Golem things, but as birds.

That shouldn't be hard. He already knew how to make fireballs of many kinds, and Rae could make golems, which he had been watching constantly. If he combined them, he should be able to have firebirds.

But actually making Golems out of the flames was proving elusive. He should understand it, he had seen it so many times. But no matter what he was trying, they just weren't sticking around as birds.

He could make very effective self targeting bombs, but not proper Golems.

So, Hawk changed his tactic. If his fiery creations didn't want to stick around, he just needed to make them more effective while they were present.

Instead of flying around the Elites looking for ideas, he headed to the artillery lines, looking for clues on how more effective explosions should work.

That was all the Artillery did, it flew over and blew up. That was what he wanted out of his dive bombers, so Hawk spent most of the night watching them work. It proved mostly useless, as the artillery projectiles weren't as impressive as his fire, but he did get some insights into the ways that the dive bombers should explode for maximum effect.

The sense that something was wrong within his mind as Rae's space tried to pull more than the other spaces had to spare woke Karl up before dawn.

With few other options, he began to meditate, focusing on the flame in the void of his mind to pull as much energy into his body as he could, feeding it all to Rae. While he drew energy from outside, the Vampiric blade was donating some of its stored energy, though most of it had already been used to bolster the spaces during the past few days.

The changing beast space was happily drawing everything that Karl could give it, and Rae's sleeping form was beginning to shimmer with black energy as her progression finished, and she fully integrated the power she had absorbed.

Normally, she would have been in the equivalent of a food coma for a few days after her advancement, but with Karl's help, she was beginning to stir before the sun was fully over the horizon.

[How is your day going, Rae?] Karl asked as the spider began to move about, shaking her web to ensure everything was where she left it.

[Did you realize that Hill Giants can make their own portable shadows?] She replied.

Karl thought about that for a moment, but had no idea what she was talking about.

[I will show everyone when they're awake. We've got a shift on the line this morning, right?] Rae asked.

[Yeah, right after breakfast. I'm sure they'll all be super excited to see your new abilities. Congratulations on the advancement.]

[You found out this fast?] Rae pouted.

[It woke me up so that I could add energy, instead letting you sleep for days to finish the process.] Karl explained.

Rae nodded her head. [It would never do to sleep for days. What if something happened? I could miss a chance to show off.]

But that Hill Giant blood was a great bath, we should find a Monarch Rank Hill Giant, so I can have one even better. I learned all sorts of things from advancing that way.]

Karl wondered how much you could learn by bathing in blood, but given her name, there might actually be some connection between that and her ability to gain new skills.

Karl was the first one up, so he changed into his Commander Rank suit with the new set of armour underneath, then headed to make the first pot of morning coffee and wait in the living room for the others.

The first ones up were Doug and Morgana, who both stopped to stare at Karl as they entered the room.

"There's still most of a fresh pot on the counter." He greeted the early risers.

"There's something off about you this morning." Doug noted.

Morgana inspected Karl, and gave Doug a suspicious look when she couldn't detect what it was that he was noticing.

Doug poured two coffees and passed one to Morgana before lighting a smoke. "Have you figured out what it is yet? Is it bothering you that you don't know?" He asked.

"I swear you just like my annoyed expression. I will figure it out soon. There is something, but I just can't tell what has changed about his presence. He's still a Commander, so it's not an advancement." Morgana replied as she sipped her coffee.

One by one, the others filed in, and Doug shushed them when they wanted to ask what was going on, but he directed them all to the fresh pot of coffee brewing in the kitchen to replace the nearly empty one.

Finally, Lotus couldn't take it anymore.

"Are we just going to wait for it, or can I just tell them now?" She pleaded.

"Alright, you can tell them. We've had our fun."

### Chapter 373 Poof Giant Spider

Lotus smirked at the group, sure that she was one of the few who could actually tell what had happened.

"He's got Royal Rank [Offensive Adaptation] active on him. Rae advanced, right? That means Rae advanced, it has to. Can we see her now? Did she get big? Is she shiny?" The little Cleric rambled.

Karl held up his hand for a high five. "Right on the first try. But she is still the same size, and I'm not sure why you would think she became shiny. But she did do a fine job grooming her carapace, so her fur is in pristine condition, and her legs are an extra bloody red."

[I want to do my grand reveal on the line.] Rae informed him.

"Rae says she wants to show everyone at once, so she's not coming out until our shift starts. That way, everyone can see how glorious a full-grown Bloodbath Spider can be."

Doug laughed. "Well, at least she didn't lose her sense of drama when she advanced. It would have been a shame if Rae became all boring and serious just because she was the only Royal Rank around at the moment."

Bob snorted in amusement. "I'm just glad to hear that she's the same size. I've gotten used to that level of Giant Spider, I'm not sure my heart could take an even larger version."

That morning, they decided to eat in the fort and let the clerics cook for them so that they could surprise the others when they got to the line and brought Rae out.

Everyone knew that Lotus was not built for keeping secrets, and if she had to sit all the way through breakfast, she would totally blurt it out.



So, they left just in time to head to the line for their shifts, while doing their best to avoid attracting attention from those with sharper senses until they arrived.

[Offensive Adaptation] was a passive skill that Rae shared with Karl, and he couldn't really turn it off. But that meant that it was pretty obvious that he had a Royal Rank skill to anyone who was around him and paying attention.

Heads turned as they approached the line, but Karl didn't say anything as he walked to his spot and relieved the team on duty, who didn't actually leave, they just stepped back a bit so he could take his spot.

Only once they were in position and the whole section of the line was watching did Karl call Rae out for everyone to admire her beauty and glory.

As soon as she appeared, the whole line went silent, before the Command Channel of the radio began to blow up with panicked comments.

[Who has eyes on the Royal Rank Threat?]

[No Threat Detected.]

[Nothing on the scope.]

[Fuck, it has to be close, I can feel it. Right flank, do you see it?]

[Right Flank reports no incoming threats.]

[There is a Royal Rank beast here, we can all sense it.]

[Copy that. Royal Rank Beast located. Currently, playing kickball with the clerics.]

[Gods Dammit. KARL!]

The absurdity of the radio confusion broke the tension, and everyone on the right flank turned to watch Rae playing with Lotus and Doug.

Karl could see the teachers storming their way, intent on chewing him out for not informing them that he had advanced. But the joke was on them, he hadn't advanced yet. Only Rae had.

"Do you enjoy causing chaos on the lines?" One of the warrior class teachers was shouting as he approached the spot where Rae was playing with the Nature Clerics.

The Bloodbath Spider nodded emphatically, and the students burst into laughter.

He hadn't been speaking to her, but Rae was so clearly proud of her prank that nobody had the heart to tell her they should have at least warned the people in charge.

The teachers had gathered around, trying to decide what the actual situation was, and if Karl could be considered to be Royal Rank, which would require a notification to the government, as he would need to be reassigned to lead a more powerful team, or join another team of Royal Rank and higher combatants.

Most of the strike team who had faced the last assault had come running, in case there really was a Royal Rank threat here, and Karl could see that most of them were amused to see that it was actually just Rae.

They had all suspected that she was halfway into the Royal Rank during the last battle, with some of her skills already advanced, but now they had clear evidence that there was a Royal Rank monster on Karl's team.

But that was the problem. The Elites were measured by their own power. Rae was Royal Rank, but that didn't mean that Karl automatically was as well, unless he could exert that level of power without relying on her.

"When were you planning to announce this advancement of the Academy?" One of the Professors demanded before Karl could reply to the first one.

Karl shrugged. "I thought we just did announce it to the whole Academy at once. I mean, everyone knows, so mission accomplished, right?"

Doug and Lotus nodded in agreement, while Dana looked over at Morgana. "Remind me again, what was it that made you want to be a student advisor?"

The Witch Doctor sighed. "I don't recall students in my year being this problematic. They were kind of douchebags, and liked to form cliques, but I definitely don't recall us giving teachers this many headaches."

Tank looked back and forth between Rae and Karl. "It looks like you've got at least one of her skills. Did you gain access to any more of them as she advanced?"

That was an excellent question. [Status] [Name] Rae

[Species] Bloodbath Spider

[Rank] Royal

[Shared Skills] ⇒ [Offensive Adaptation] [Lacerate] [Earth Shield] "Rae, when did you learn Earth Shield?" Karl asked out loud, startled.

[Watch this.]

Rae encased herself in a dome of stone, then suddenly appeared right behind Tank, with her mandibles resting on top of his head.

"Dammit, I knew the students weren't just messing with me. She learned how to shadow step, and she learned to make her own shadows to step into." A Rogue Class Professor cursed.

The other Rogue in the area laughed. "Oh, that is priceless. I didn't know that she learned to make her own shadows. I was teaching the class yesterday when she vanished for the first time. She went from the edge of the training grounds up into the trees."

[He saw me? Oh, he's good. I totally thought he didn't notice.] Rae informed Karl, then vanished again to reappear standing on top of her stone dome.

Tank tapped his fingers on his chin. "Can someone explain in a way that a Berserker can understand why Rae is using Earth Magic? The vanishing act makes sense, but not that."

Karl smiled at the huge man. "Her advancement process includes cycling a lot of higher rank blood through her body, a literal bloodbath. She used Hill Giant blood, and they can all use Earth Magic. So, she gained an ability from them during her advancement. If she had used something else, it would have been a different ability."

"So, she learned to make stone shields? That's impressive as a defensive ability, but she's an assassin type attacker." One of the warriors asked, confused.

Rae threw a stone baseball at him.

#### Chapter 374 Earth To Rae

Karl laughed. "I gained access to the Earth Shield. But she can use that and [Boulder Toss]."

"How does that mesh with her other abilities?" Tank asked, not quite following how the ability was relevant to her.

Rae summoned a large stone in the air, then hurled it into the distance. When it was a hundred metres away, she appeared underneath it.

"Portable shade for her movement abilities. Plus, she had a spear ability before that she used at short range to apply [Lacerate]. Now she can throw big things at people. It might not be sharp, but I bet it will make them bleed." Karl guessed.

[And now I can use Crushing Blows. That's all the bonuses for me.] Rae added as she came back to her dome.

[Smashing Posts.] Thor muttered reverently, staring out of his space at the dome.

[I will make some for you after our shift.] Karl agreed.

"How much do you think that her damage has increased?" Tank asked curiously.

He had seen her up close in combat, and had a good idea what she could do two days ago, so he would be one of the best to judge how much her improvement was from the advancement.

"Do we have high a Commander Rank barrier mage nearby?" Karl asked.

One of the teachers stepped forward and created a solid wall of magic in front of the students.

"Rae, if you would kindly stab that one time." Karl requested.

Rae moved so fast that half the students couldn't even follow her camouflaged form, and the barrier shattered as her stone covered leg shot forward. There wasn't even any resistance, the barrier just shattered at the first hit.

The teacher just stared at the spot where his barrier used to be. It hadn't even held long enough to slow down Rae's advance. That was the barrier they relied upon to defend against the attacks of the Hill Giants, and while it was supported by others, it hadn't fallen often during the time they had been here.

The teacher shook his head, clearing his thoughts. "That's not low Royal Rank damage. I am guessing that Karl has a number of passive buffs active on his beasts, but I would say it is a little over twice the minimum standard for Royal Rank." He explained.

Karl nodded. "Yeah, there are a number of abilities that are always active on them, but I can still increase their speed and damage a bit more."

Tank blinked slowly as he did the mental math. "Does all of that apply to the Golems as well?"

"Yes, but they were already advanced, so they might not have gotten as big of a jump as Rae did. Now that she's caught up to the rank of her Golems, we will need to wait for the skill to advance them to the Monarch Rank before they are that far ahead of her again." Karl explained.

A few of the students shuddered at the thought. Royal Rank was a dream for most of them. Monarch Rank Golems were the sort of thing that they made horror movies about. Well, they actually didn't usually make horror movies about things that scary. Most movies used threats that were more relatable, but the idea was the same.

All of the others were resting in their spaces as Karl worked to rebuild the energy focus that Rae's advancement had depleted. It was taking longer than expected, as the energy kept leaking out as the spaces tried to balance with Rae's which wouldn't reduce.

It was already at a much higher energy level than theirs, so the energy just kept pouring from the transfer to the space itself, the same as had happened at the start before Karl had created the energy focus points in the first place.

"Well, if there is an attack, I daresay that this flank is now ready to repulse it. But I think we're all eagerly awaiting the results of Commander Karl's imminent advancement. His whole team is showing signs of advancing already, way ahead of schedule. Tell me, is there some secret to it? A hidden skill, a gift that you were given?" The barrier mage Professor asked.

Karl shrugged, while Tessa waved her hand dismissively. "Nothing tangible. The oracles said that we had the World Dragon's luck when we stuck together, so we signed a contract to spend a year working as a team. Ever since then, things have been both progressing well and becoming increasingly dangerous for us." The teacher nodded in understanding. "The Oracles have a way of messing with us all. But if they said that it would help you, then it must have. But I could swear that you've got an untested High Priestess in the group."

That last comment was directed straight at Tessa, who smiled but didn't confirm or deny anything.

The students were a bit more eager to see what would happen next. The Hill Giants did have more Royal Rank Giants to send at them, but most of the time, they avoided the most dangerous spots along the line, and attacked the weak spots in the human defence. Now that there was a Royal Rank defender here, would they actually get even more days off between attacks?

That felt like too much to ask for, but there were no signs of an attack today, so perhaps they were going to get a reprieve long enough for them all to recover from the lack of sleep they suffered while the walls were being torn down.

The Mage Class teacher turned to Karl. "Can you show me the Earth Barrier that you said you gained from Rae? I would like to see how strong it is."

Karl brought up a wall of stone, placing it in front of the line so that the mages could attack it at will. It wasn't quite as strong as he could make it, closer to eighty percent power, which wouldn't strain his capabilities, but when the mages began to cast, their spells were only creating chips in the stone, hacking away at it dozens of times before the barrier actually broke.

"That is truly impressive. How much energy were you adding to that to keep it active?" The teacher asked.

"None. I just created it and left it there. I can put energy in it if you'd like, but I thought that we shouldn't burn too much in case all this showing off attracts trouble." Karl explained.

"Well, if you can create barriers like that without actively feeding them, I don't think your group has much to fear at this point. Can you create them as an armour layer around someone?" Karl cast the spell on Tank, who flexed and struggled for a moment, before Raging and blowing the stone apart.

"I will take that as a yes, but also no. It's certainly not an Earth Armour spell, it's just a static barrier." The mage laughed.

Karl had an idea, though. He created a shield out of the stone, and handed it to Tessa, then adjusted the back slots to fit her arm over her armour.

"If I'm right, a magical stone barrier doesn't have to weigh anything." Karl explained.

Tessa nodded. "I can feel it on my arm, but it can't weigh more than a quarter kilo. If I was using this as a shield in combat, it would really reduce arm fatigue, and it's renewable, so I wouldn't have to extend a barrier over it to protect my gear."

Or Karl could cast it over her shield when he had a moment, so she would have a shield in her hand no matter what.

Bob was thinking the same, as he was a defensive warrior, and having a layer that durable over his shield would save him a ton of mana on [Guard], which was not nearly as mana efficient as higher Rank skills like that.

From what everyone could tell, the Earth Shield was a Tier 2 ability, with the added benefit of being an innately Royal Rank skill, with the mana efficiency and durability to match.

It was far superior to a Common Tier 1 ability used at Royal Rank, as most Elites would do unless they happened to learn an upgraded version.

"We will have to add it to the tactics for the team. Perhaps you could even make a new helmet for Thor, so he wouldn't have to risk his Lightning to headbutt people." Bob suggested.

That sounded great to Thor. Everyone loved a good hat. Bob had a very good hat, it even had nice long horns on it. He had to be an expert, in Thor's mind.

## Chapter 375 The Way Of The Monsters

The shift was a quiet one, with no attackers in sight, but the moment that Karl and his team left the line, things began to get chaotic. Every teacher wanted to know if there were more spell books that Karl could write for them to copy, or if he could teach the skills that Rae had learned directly to other students, the way that the teachers at the Academy did for the basics.

Karl checked the [Skill Book] description for [Earth Shield] and frowned. [Book of Earth Shield] Usable by (Monster) (Giant) (Earth Element) recipients. Requires 1 Earth Element Gem at Commander Rank or higher, ground to dust, mixed with powdered gold and Commander Rank or higher Hill Giant Blood.



That was far more detail than he had ever gotten from the ability before, but the book looked like it was far more restrictive as well. Or perhaps it wasn't as he didn't know the restrictions on the book of [Refreshing Lightning]. But needing all three of those keywords essentially narrowed it down to Rae, who was a giant monster, and had gained the Earth Element when she advanced to Royal Rank using Hill Giant blood.

"I can make it, if we have a powdered Commander Rank Earth Element Gem, and powdered gold to mix with Commander Rank Hill Giant blood, which I have in reserve. But it can exclusively be used by those who are giant monsters with the Earth Element." Karl explained.

Someone behind Tank began to curse, and Karl distinctly heard the words "I'm not going through that again" before the man stomped away.

"Well, that gives us the answer we need. You can wait on the book until you really don't have anything better to do. But if there are other members of your group who can use it, we can get you the supplies." The big Berserker suggested.

"The closest would be Ophelia, but I don't know if she would count as a Giant, or if she has any Earth Element skills, much less an Earth Element aspect." Karl sighed.

Ophelia shook her head. "I'm average sized for a Werebear, and that's a Nature Element transformation, not Earth Element. The number of people who can use that book will be really limited.

I would guess that not even Thor could use it, and he's considered a Giant Monster, by reptile standards. He's more Lightning and Holy Element than Earth."

It was a shame that they wouldn't be able to share more skills right now, but in the future, Karl would certainly have to donate a copy to the Inscriptionists. If someone else got his class, it would be wonderful for them to start with something, even a few skills that were tailored to beasts, so they could get started on the right track.

The students from the line sat down to dinner, and the teachers began to filter over to talk to Karl.

The same thought was on everyone's mind. "How long would it be before the Academy had a Royal Rank student?"

The government had only ordered the students and faculty from Ascended and Commander Ranks to come here to the Hill Giant border, so there was a chance that someone might try to steal him away the moment that word spread, but there was also the factor of actually getting to have a Royal Rank defender on their lines for some time. It would give everyone so much more peace of mind that they might actually start sleeping properly between shifts.

Far too many of the students were overtired and strung out from lack of sleep, but too nervous to allow themselves to fall into a deep slumber when there could be an attack at any minute.

Even if they were off-duty.

The Royal Rank aura seemed to make many of the Ascended Rank students nervous, so Karl didn't hang around the dining hall for long. Instead, he led the teachers to one of the classroom tents, where they could ask questions to their heart's content.

"Let's start with the important topics. How is Rae's role in combat going to change with her new abilities?" One of the Professors, whose voice Karl recognized as the zone Commander on the radio, asked.

"It won't change much. We will have some extra defensive power, and Rae will have more ranged attacks, but her primary duty is usually the defence of the casters, while her Golems go forward to fight. Now, if she's not pressed to defend, she will be able to offer more fire support to the team, but her essential role hasn't changed." Karl explained.

"Will your team need to change tactics to properly work with the new Earth Shields?"

"Most of the time, no. We can have Rae create barriers with gaps for them to attack out of, while still being shielded from hostiles. Or, she can grant it to an actual shield, if we're going to do a shield wall formation for them in a larger battle."

The zone Commander made a quick note and nodded. "So, you're thinking of having her create either portable shields or a simple structure with a roof to block attacks from above? That should work, and it would keep the mages safe enough while they fought."

Lotus giggled. "It would also cut down on sunburn."

Bob nodded. "She's got a point. They could fight in the shade. Maybe we could get Rae to make them some benches as well, so they could sit and relax as they fired off their spells."

A few of the mages laughed, while others just rolled their eyes. "Is that how you think of the casters in the back, just lounging around in the shade, firing off spells in support?" Morgana asked.

"Of course not. Right now, you have neither chairs nor shade. But if you did... no, that wouldn't work, would it? You need to make gestures and movements while you cast. It wouldn't be as effective from one of those comfy swinging chairs." Bob realized.

Doug shrugged. "The swinging chairs would be great for other activities, though. I will have to get Rae to let me have one of them before we change stations."

"So, we can expect similar tactics from your group, but with some additional defensive capability, and more attack power? That is wonderful. Is there any hint as to when the others might advance?" The zone Commander asked, bringing them back on topic.

"It should be soon, likely within a month. It might even be within the next few days, but I don't have the experience to say for certain." Karl shrugged.

"That should be good enough for the evening. We will be in contact tomorrow before your shift, in case we need to balance the forces along the line." The zone Commander informed them, then got up and left the room.

"Forget about that. What's more important is that you can make Royal Rank defences for the front line. How many shields do you think that you can do at once? Is there a time limit on the spell?" One of the warriors asked.

"I honestly don't know yet. I haven't had an opportunity to do any experimentation at all, since we got all distracted and just watched Rae show off for our entire shift. It doesn't look like it expires, as Rae's dome of stone is still standing out there in front of the line. But it might be gone by morning, and I don't know how many separate spells I can keep active." Karl explained.

"Well, we will have to test that tomorrow. The sooner, the better. Preferably before the Hill Giants show up again."

## Chapter 376 Flag Set

Someone's red flag comment the night before had definitely been at fault for this morning, Karl decided.

He hadn't even gotten to have a morning coffee, much less breakfast, when the alarm sounded with the additional urgent tone that said Hill Giants were attacking and closing quickly.

Everyone was headed out at the same moment, running across the camp, or riding on the beasts to save time.

A lot of time in the case of Lotus and Rae, who had just realized that she could continually shadow step with an attached cleric, as long as Lotus didn't fall off. The basic requirement for Shadow Step was that at least half of your body had to be in the shadows. Most Rogues accomplished that with a swirl of their cloak, Rae accomplished it either with Earth Magic or with Lotus' cloak billowing across her back.

It worked out splendidly for them, and they were in place within seconds, shocking the Elites who were already in place.

Only, it wasn't the same group they were used to. Their shift was mostly there, but both of the other shifts had been cut by over half and replaced with regular infantry, guided by White Robes from the church.

Lotus realized immediately why that would be. They had Rae here now, and Karl was getting very close to advancing. So, they didn't need as many strong Elites on the right flank anymore. They did get Bob and Doug as permanent additions, as far as Lotus could tell, as they were still headed in her direction, and Morgana was coming as well. But there were far more white robes in the pike line than she remembered.

Lotus waved happily at the nervous soldiers, who calmed a bit upon seeing the strange duo behind their ranks.

Everyone had heard the rumours, and if they had a Royal Rank beast with them, then they should be fine, no matter what was coming.

Karl arrived thirty seconds later, to a smug smile from Rae and Lotus, and a warm welcome from the other Elites, who were eager to see the new and improved Rae in action.

Karl jogged in front of the line and turned back to address the new arrivals.

"I see plenty of fresh faces in the line today, so this should be easy. I need everyone to raise their shields." Karl called out.

Those who could hear him responded immediately, and Karl split [Earth Shield] over fifty tall metal kite shields, giving them all a layer of Royal Rank Earth Magic. Then he repeated the task as he jogged down the line to the end of their sector, where another team's defensive magic took over.

"Perfect. That should take the first few hits for you, just trust in your shields and keep your pikes up to halt the charge." He shouted.

"Sir, yes Sir." The soldiers responded in unison.

Tessa and the others on Thor arrived soon after. The War Cleric assessed the enhanced shields with a trained eye and then cast her combat buffs, bringing the telltale golden glow to the pikes and the armour of the soldiers and Elites on the front line.

It was only a small change from the usual routine, adding Karl enhancing the shields, easily completed before the Hill Giants were in range.

Hawk could see them, though. They were charging forward, and there was a large group of Commanders coming toward the right flank, the same sort of tactic that Karl and his team used to take down Royal Rank Giants in the past.

If they were as good at assassination techniques as the humans were, Karl would be concerned, but an extra twenty Commanders wasn't a huge deal.

They were more than a little short on teachers as well, Karl noticed. The three with his team were the only ones assigned to this whole section, when normally there would be at least six or seven.

Then one last team came jogging their way, gunblue armour highlighting the white of their church robes. Like Bob, they were all heavily armoured warriors, and like Bob, they all had magnificently ridiculous helmets on.

"Princess Rae, Commanders. We have been sent here by the clergy to ensure your safety. Special Forces Team 808 reporting." The man in the lead position announced.

There were three men and two women in the team, all nearly identically dressed. Or perhaps one was an exceptionally slender male? It was hard to tell with the robes and the practical armour. But one was clearly female, as her chest plate's curve made it very evident that she required additional clearance.

"What is your specialty? We will get you placed." Karl replied while Rae strutted about in joy.

They had addressed her first. Not only that, but they had called her Princess. These were obviously the Elite of the Elite, with their impeccable judgment and refined tastes.

"We are all Magical Knights. Commander Rank Mages trained in heavy combat." The team leader informed them.

Dana gave them a curious look, and the woman on the right flank lifted her visor to give her a wink.

"Why would you train mages in heavy combat?" Dana asked curiously.

"We've got the best barriers, we've got offensive magic, but what is the weakness of the average mage? They're squishy and don't do well in close combat. Our training negates that disadvantage. Would you like to learn it? I read in your file that you have a nullification barrier, and an advanced barrier skill is one of the application requirements to be considered for a placement." The special forces woman replied.

"Hey, no stealing my Dana Mage. But I do agree, it could be useful to her to learn your techniques." Karl replied, half jokingly.

"Then watch and learn. The first thing will be learning the sword, which takes time, but we have a cheat for that if you're serious about learning. You can decide after the battle whether you want to try." The woman replied, ignoring Karl to talk to Dana.

The sound of Hill Giant war horns sounded in the distance, and Karl saw a group of thirty Commanders break off, moving further from the flank and separating themselves from the main charge.

"That looks like they're challenging you. One hundred percent." Bob noted.

"Yeah, I suppose that we should go give them what for. Rae, why don't you show off your stone throwing here while the Golems come with us. Small stones at high speed should either break or stop the incoming boulders." Karl suggested.

[Anti Aircraft Spider?] Rae replied confused.

[Anti Aircraft Spider. Then you can stab whatever makes it to the lines.] Karl confirmed.

Karl led the group out from the flank, accompanied by the Special Forces team, to add some numbers to their eight-person squad.

With the Golems, it was fifteen, which was a nice round number. Half of what the enemy had sent, and enough that they could hold a defensive formation.

The Special Forces team moved to the front, and Karl watched as they extended their blades into long-bladed spears with a spell. That was a handy ability, and it gave them the additional reach that they

needed to fight a target as large as the Hill Giants. Karl brought up his full suite of buffs, causing Thor and the Golems to surge in size, while increasing in speed.

"On my mark." Karl called as he prepared [Earth Shield] on the last few shields, as well as Thor's head, and added five layers of Flaming Body to his maul.

Using his enhanced strength, he lunged forward, over the heads of the Magical Knights, and shattered the club of his targeted Hill Giant. The Maul was still moving forward, and Karl reactivated the spell stack as he slammed the oversized hammer down on the Giant's shoulder.

The Hill Giant crumpled to his knees, and the Spider Golems leapt into action, starting toward the back flanks of the attackers.

Before Karl had even landed, the Knights were in combat. They had used a movement skill much like the Spellblades did to compensate for their lack of supernatural strength, and their blades were a blur as the spears tore into the Giants.

Thor charged beside Karl as he rode the wounded Giant to the ground before using [Rend] to slice its neck open with a wave of his hand.

Then it was on to the next one as the warriors pushed forward, and Dana's spells whistled overhead.

The Knights were using mage spells, Karl could see, but they were using them at point-blank range, as a counterpoint to their weapon attacks. It was an incredibly aggressive fighting style for a defensive warrior, but their enhanced speed was making it work.

## Chapter 377 Fighting Blind

Morgana's corruption spell was rotting away the attackers and slowing their movements, while a sudden blizzard turned everything more than twenty metres away to a wall of white. That might be a lot for humans, but for the Hill Giants, who were all over five metres tall, it made actually fighting more than a little problematic.

They could only see what was happening to the fighters closest to them, and those further away were blurry, making it hard to pick out the targets.



Karl caught on quickly and equipped his furry white cloak, causing the outline of his form to appear blurry in the snow as he continued his assault.

The Special Forces team were already in white, but the change made Bob stand out even more in his silver and black attire.

Fireballs shot up from totems placed on the ground to the side of the group, where the Giants would have to expose their flanks or backs to get rid of them, and Remi slithered out to wait between Lotus and Dana while she fired her [Chain Lightning] and alternated locations for her Totems.

"Surge attack." The Knights' leader announced as they moved in unison to retreat within the team's formation.

Karl wasn't sure what that meant, but he brought up a lattice of [Earth Shield] as a dome over the Elites anyhow. A barrage of boulders slammed into the stone, which shimmered with magic as the Knights added their shields to the mix, and then the stone crumbled, allowing the boulders to bounce off the magical shields. Karl didn't wait for the barrage to finish. He switched to his blade and moved back into the fray, slicing into the Giants as the Golems kept up their attack speed. They were so nimble that the Hill Giants hadn't managed to actually kill them or even seriously injure them yet, despite trying to surround them.

The increase in combat power shouldn't have been all that large, Karl thought, but Rae had gained a level, and that increased the bonus from the buffs she got from Karl. Those buffs passed along to the Golems, and it was definitely noticeable.

They also seemed to be a bit smarter than they were before, and their techniques were evolving. They were not just attacking, but they were also darting between legs, climbing up armour to jump between targets, and generally acting more like spiders. They were not just a menace, but a nuisance, frustrating the Hill Giants with their erratic movements and their tactics that seemed to have no rhyme or reason.

A spider's primary goal was not to deal maximum damage at all times, as the Golems had been doing before. A spider's primary goal was to not get squished while they were hunting.

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Don't put your webs where they will get directly rained on, and don't get squished on your way to the food. That was the spider way.

So, they crawled from target to another, stabbing, biting, and occasionally even killing.

Karl thought that the total damage they were doing wasn't any lower, but the chaos that they caused among the Hill Giants was much higher now.

He couldn't even blame them. A giant spider with razor blades for legs running under your groin or crawling up your back had to be nerve wracking.

"Isn't he afraid of anything?" Karl heard one of the Knights asking as they rejoined the battle.

"Certainly not the Hill Giants, that is for certain." Dana laughed.

The Knights laughed as they surged forward around Karl to engage the Hill Giants. Most of the Giants were already wounded and bleeding profusely from the [Lacerate] enhanced wounds inflicted by the Spider Golems.

Fighting against the unconventional tactics of the Elites was forcing the Hill Giants to get creative with their magic. Just like Karl had done on the pike line's shields, they were reinforcing their armour with barriers. That forced everyone to aim for the joints, which couldn't be armoured over with an inflexible layer of stone.

It was slowing the casualties, but the Hill Giants were slowing with pain and blood loss that was faster than they could heal.

Karl switched back to his maul. If they were going to put up barriers to frustrate the arrows, he would just have to use his handy dandy barrier removal tool.

A Giant went flying off into the blizzard as Karl's hit struck the centre of a Giant's chest, shattering the Commander Rank barrier and the armour plating behind it with a stacked [Chain Lightning] attack that spread through the remnants of the force.

The Blizzard tore at every barrier and bit of exposed flesh, slowing the Giants even as the Lightning burned through their nerves. The Hill Giants were losing the battle, and they hadn't even realized yet that they were being corralled. The Spider Golems had moved to the back while the Knights went left, and Ophelia joined Bob on the right. None of them could see far enough to realize that they no longer had any way out, and their instructions to each other were directly contradictory, as every Giant was facing a different direction.

Dana and Morgana cut down the two in front of Karl, and when he advanced, he found himself in the middle of the Giants' circle, with every back to him.

A maul strike to the back of a skull set him up to leap across to another unprotected head, then a third swing down onto a shoulder, causing a third Giant's axe to fall to the ground and leaving it defenseless.

"Remi, you can end the snow storm, they're all dead." Karl announced once nothing was moving, and he could see all of his team's melee fighters.

The blizzard faded, and they were treated to the spectacle of Rae in full anti-projectile mode, shooting down every boulder within a hundred metres of her position. Not even the anti-aircraft guns were that effective, and her small stones were hitting the larger stones hard enough to drop them to the ground short of the pike line, while the Ascended Rank boulders shattered outright.

She was standing on top of a plinth of stone, clear for everyone to see, and taunting the Hill Giants, whose ranged offensive had been completely nullified on this flank.

"Has she always been that dramatic?" One of the Knights asked.

Lotus giggled and Doug rolled his eyes. "You haven't seen anything yet. Just wait until she really gets rolling. Right now is like the preview to Rae being dramatic."

Tessa nodded. "You weren't here for the day that she strung up and crucified a Royal Rank Hill Giant to taunt the rest of the army into attacking, were you? That was dramatic.

Or the day that she sent the Spider Golems through the Ascended Rank Giants, maiming hundreds of them in fifteen minutes without killing anyone."

The male Knight nodded. "Got it. Rae likes to make a statement. Are any of the others quite so fond of attention?"

Karl looked back at where Thor was getting his head ridge scratched by Tessa and Doug.

"Yes and no. Thor loves attention. All the attention, all the time. But not in a dramatic way, he's just a people person."

Lotus nodded in agreement. "A Lightning Cerro is a pack animal, and he doesn't like being separated from his makeshift pack. Thor is definitely the cuddliest personality in the group."

#### Chapter 378 Are You Done Showing Off?

Karl turned the group toward the rest of the Hill Giants, which were forming up for a charge on the humans now that Rae had blocked their boulder barrage. They weren't going to sit and wait for the humans to compile a full attack force like the last time they were here. So, they charged, but so did Karl, which forced the end of the line to turn and face him instead of the pike line.

He could feel the power building in the air as he attacked, but Karl dismissed it as something that the Hill Giants were working on. If he could kill enough of them, the group spell would collapse, and that would be the end of it.

With [Haste] activated, Karl left the rest of the group behind, except for the Spider Golems, which accompanied him into the Hill Giant lines. The trio hacked limbs off the Ascended Giants and left them wounded as they headed for the Commanders.

It was the same tactic that the Spider Golems had used, but plus Karl, and the Hill Giants still had no good answer for it.

They threw up spikes of stone, but they moved too slowly, and Karl either stepped around them or cut them down as he passed by. They threw stones, but Ascended Rank attacks only bounced off his barriers if they even hit their target.

The rest of the group was shouting something, but Karl couldn't make it out over the sound of combat. They were close, and his peripheral vision said they were holding their own with nobody injured. He would just slow down a bit and let them regroup.

Then Rae was beside Karl, adding a fourth member to their team, and making him jog to keep up with the tide of casualties caused by the trio of spiders.

[You couldn't hold back any more, could you?] Karl laughed.

[They stopped throwing rocks.]

In the distance, the Hill Giants broke and ran as another group charged forward of the line. It looked like Karl's aggressive tactics were rubbing off on some of the other Commanders, and the Hill Giants were not happy about it.

But even though the Hill Giants were retreating, the sense of growing power around Karl wasn't subsiding.

"Karl, stay exactly where you are and don't move." One of the Magic Knights warned.

Karl stopped, wondering if he had triggered some sort of magical trap, maybe a landmine.

But when he did, he saw what the others had been trying to warn him about while he was fighting.

There was a swirling in the air, a distortion caused by some sort of magic, and it wasn't anything that he recognized.

The effect was beginning to condense, making it impossible to see out of the distortion, but from Hawk's information he knew that there was a small group of Commander Rank Giants rushing their way.

Even if he was trapped in this spot for a second, the Golems could handle that in under a minute.

Then, reality seemed to twist, and Karl felt like he was falling, being thrown through a void that none of his enhanced senses could penetrate, a space where even time didn't seem to exist.

Then it all stopped, and he found himself looking at his own image standing in front of him, perfectly lifelike, but frozen in time.

[Welcome to the First Advancement Trial. Please select your desired reward.] Appeared in the air over the mannequin of himself.

It was creepy. The image even had the small tear in his white cloak and the fresh blood that he had gotten during the fight.

Six boxes appeared on the ground around his image. Three of them silver with diamonds, two larger golden boxes studded with rubies, and one tiny closed chest made of rich purple crystal. That one was wrapped in black chains that gave off a soft shadow, as if actively restraining the contents of the chest.

Karl circled the ring of chests to see his options.

The three silver chests all contained simply bound skill books sitting face down on stacks of coins.

The golden chests both had multiple ornate skill books with their spines up, so Karl could read them.

[Divine Nullification Barrier] [Titanic Wrath] [Tectonic Shift] [Rebirth]

Each of the spell books was an upgraded version of a spell that either one of his beasts or someone in the group specialized in.

Under the books were bundles wrapped in cloth, and hints of golden coins and gems.

There had to be a catch. Nobody would choose a lower reward without an excellent reason, so why give the choice?

Karl got the sense that he was being watched as he stepped up to the last box. It was pretty, but tiny. What could it contain that needed to be chained up like that?

He definitely shouldn't want that reward. He didn't even know what was in the box.

But if he didn't know what was in the box, it could be anything, right?

The announcement overhead said that this was called the First Advancement Trial. So, the rewards should be related to improving the power of the System, and advancing his skills.

Which made it seem a bit odd that the rewards didn't seem to be for him. They were mostly for his group members. Perhaps he was choosing for everyone on the team? Trials and Dungeons were supposed to be grand group adventures, where everyone got rewards, but they were done as a team.

Karl had never heard of them listing rewards in advance, but most of the real information was classified, and what was spread was rumours and bard stories.

If he was choosing for the whole group, then none of the chests was perfect as an option. Five of them didn't contain enough for everyone to get an equal share, while the last one had unknown contents.

"Is there some sort of guide? Can I learn if I'm picking for everyone or just for myself?" Karl asked, speaking aloud in the strange staging area, but nothing answered. Well, there wasn't anything else to go on in here, so Karl closed his eyes and focused on the mental flame in the void, as Brother Chen had taught him to meditate and clear his mind. Once he was certain he was thinking clearly, Karl opened his eyes again and examined the boxes once more before rubbing his dragon scale pendant for luck and touching the purple crystal chest.

[Choose Tier 3 Difficulty for Epic Rank Reward?] Y/N

The words in the air helped set Karl's mind at ease. Perhaps the rewards weren't a direct choice, but a representation of what you might get upon completion.

That meant that there were three difficulty levels to the test, and this should be the highest.

"Yes."

[Beginning Stage 1: Epic Rank Individual Trial]

The scene changed again, and Karl was standing on what looked like the battlefield that he had just left, only both armies were gone, and it was just him plus his beasts.

Thor stomped around the battlefield, happy to be returned to Karl's side after an extended stay in the void, while Rae quickly summoned her Golems and prepared for a fight.

Randomly showing up in new places had to mean a fight. It wasn't like she needed to be rescued, so it must be a reward for being the killiest.

[I don't think that is a word.] Karl informed her.

[It should be.]

Chapter 379 First Advancement Trial

[Trial starts in 5 seconds]

In the distance, the battlefield began to change, and a horde of violet skinned Demons formed, with one massive four-armed leader standing among them.

[I wonder if they taste good.] Hawk wondered. [The small ones are kind of skinny, I might be able to eat them in one piece.] Remi agreed.



They were only a metre and a half tall, half her length, so in theory it might be possible, but even then, that would be a huge object for a snake her size to try to get in their mouth.

The demons were already in motion, and they were insanely fast, nearly twice as fast as the [Haste] enhanced Spider Golems.

Karl quietly cursed and wondered why he had picked the Epic difficulty. That trial announcement wasn't kidding. If he defeated this group, it was going to be Epic, and it was only stage one.

Karl was about to issue orders when suddenly the largest Demon appeared in front of him, all four arms swinging blades at him. He brought up [Earth Shield] as a wall of stone and jumped backwards as the blades cut deep into the obstacle.

A kick from the Demon shattered the damaged barrier, and it came after him again.

[Rae, send the Golems to assist me while the rest of you take care of the little things.] Karl instructed.

Remi climbed up on Thor's back to take Tessa's usual spot and began to hurl [Chain Lightning] into the crowd.

The small demons scorched black with the damage, and when Hawk sent his fireballs after the Lightning, multiple Demons died, stumbling and falling face down as their momentum carried them forward.

[We've got this.] Thor declared, confident that they could keep the large numbers away from the leader.

[Yeah Boss. We will fry the purple food, while you argue with the guy who thinks he can be as Stabby as Rae.] Remi agreed.

Karl spun his blade, parrying a round of attacks as the Spider Golems attacked.

One landed a solid hit on a shoulder, but the other took a blade across a leg for minor damage.

Then, pain seared through Karl's arm, and Hawk screeched in annoyance.

[The damage spreads. If it hits one of us, it hits everyone.] The bird complained.

That was the most brutally overpowered skill that Karl had ever heard of. Area attacks were bad enough, but they usually spread their damage across a large area, doing a little to many targets.

This skill appeared to deal full damage from a sword strike to everything nearby.

The big demon smiled as it realized that Karl understood the effect of its skill, then launched a flurry of attacks at him, just aiming to do a little damage with every blade, not to land a single hit kill.

It didn't have to. If it wounded him a little bit every time, it would wear the whole team down. The Demon was double-jointed, and it could attack behind its back nearly as well as towards its front, leaving it with a minimal blind spot and no real defenseless side for the Golems to take advantage of.

But [Refreshing Lightning] helped Karl's team heal, and the damage was already fading.

Four more strikes made their way past Karl's defence in the next two seconds, and he realized that [Refreshing Lightning] wouldn't be enough for long.

[Skill Points] 11

That was enough to get something, Karl hoped. There were attack skills, but that wouldn't help much in the race to defeat this insane Demon, and they might be too expensive.

{Defensive Skills}

{10 Points} [Barrier] Erects a barrier over the caster or targeted beast

{10 Points} [Bestial Regeneration] Increases the target's healing rate to the level of a Tier 1 regenerating beast.

{10 Points} [Refresh] constantly restores stamina

That was better than nothing.

{10 Points Spent} [Bestial Regeneration] acquired

Karl quickly cast the spell on every member of his team as he retreated, and the Spider Golems did their best not to take additional damage.

{Tier 3 Defensive Skill Available: Trollish Regeneration} 20 Points

[Tier 3 skills activate on Beast Master and all active Beasts]

If only he had the points available for that right now.

Karl missed another parry and a blade cut through both barriers to sink into his side, but the wound closed within seconds, and the pain vanished.

That was much better, but Tessa was going to murder him when she saw his armour after this fight.

The Spider Golems attacked low, aiming for the leg joints, and the Demonic Boss stumbled. That was Karl's opportunity. He let his blade vanish into his mind, and leapt forward to pin the Demon's upper arms under his own as he wrapped his legs around its chest.

The creature's face showed pure shock, and then something that was almost rage, but with a heavy dose of admiration as Spider Golems hammered deep holes into his back.

It spat up purple blood, then tossed Karl across the battlefield with its lower arms before dropping its blades and turning on the Golems.

It was faster with its claws than it had been with the blades, and even if the scratches mostly weren't getting through the [Earth Shield] on the golems' limbs, it was still doing fairly steady amounts of damage.

But it was also bleeding heavily from its back, and [Lacerate] was preventing it from healing normally.

Karl used every bit of his enhanced strength as he launched himself back into battle with his Maul in his hands. It might be impossible to land a proper hit with the oversized weapon, but he didn't need to. Any contact would activate the layered skills, so he just needed the Demon to catch the head of the weapon.

Karl made his first swing, which the Demon easily dodged, then he kicked the haft of the maul, changing its direction and sending it toward the target.

The Demon laughed as it caught the slow-moving weapon with a black barrier over its hand.

The barrier shattered as flames spread out from the maul, burning the arm to a charred husk, burned nearly down to the bone.

It howled in rage as it retreated, arm hanging limp, but slowly regenerating.

The Demon was slowing down, but Karl didn't trust that. It had intelligence in its eyes, it could be placing a trap, looking for a sudden reversal.

The Golems circled behind it again, forcing the target to watch three directions at once, then they all attacked in unison.

This time, it took three of its blades out so it didn't have to block Karl's weapon with its hands, but Karl stopped the strike short and hit it in the face with a cast [Chain Lightning] instead.

The change startled the monster so much that it turned its head away, causing its block to miss a round of attacks from the Golems. That distraction cost it another arm, plus a deep slice across its throat.

It was now pouring blood from both new wounds, and the Demon stumbled a little as it turned to fend off the Golems.

That put its back to Karl, who pounded the maul into its spine, leaving a deeply burnt crater in its back and causing the Demon to collapse into a pile of motionless limbs.

As Rae had trained them, the Golems relieved the Demon of its head, which immediately vanished as the scenario ended, leaving Karl standing in an empty field again.

Chapter 380 Stage Two

[First Advancement Trial] Stage 1 Complete

[Stage 2 Begins In 10 Seconds]

"Seriously?" Karl muttered as he saw the notification.

But the notification seemed to be serious, as the world around them was changing, morphing into a large cavern, similar to the one where the Dark Elven City had been located, except that it was filled with glowing green pools of what Karl could only assume was toxic goo.

[This place does not look fun. Not even being green makes it look better.] Thor noted.

At first, there didn't seem to be any opponents here at all, they were just standing in a toxic field.

Then the monsters began to appear, walking up out of the glowing pools, a shambling wave of toxic sludge covered zombies.

Hawk immediately began pelting them with fireballs, while Remi brought up a [Blizzard] hoping to freeze them so they would stop advancing.

For a moment, it seemed like it was going to work, and the zombies ground to a halt before a new boss appeared in the centre of the largest puddle and began to cast spells, causing the downed zombies to regenerate while summoning more of them.

The boss didn't look all that impressive, just a sludge covered zombie woman in a black dress, but the shining black eyes weren't vacant, and everyone in the group could feel the power of its magic.

[Those pools will be an issue. Rae, can you send the Golems to deal with the boss? Either kill it or lure it out into the open where we can fight it properly.] Karl instructed.

Ice didn't seem to kill the zombies, they just froze for a bit and then started moving again. Setting them on fire was much more effective, whether it was fire or lightning that burned them.

Once their head was destroyed, they would die, Karl noticed, right before Rae came up with a zombie hunting strategy.

Firing small stones, half the size of their heads, caused the skulls to burst like melons, and killed the zombies reliably in a single shot.

They were weak, but it was beginning to look like they were endless, and they just kept coming out of the pools as the old bodies vanished.

The Golems reached the boss, lunging forward with their forelimbs, but the creature simply dove into a pool, and appeared from another.

For a split second, the Golems were confused, then they began to chase the boss around, hunting it relentlessly as it continued to run away.

For a while the game of whack a zombie seemed pointless, then one of the golem's limbs managed to catch on the zombie queen's dress and throw her away from the pools.

The panic was immediate, as the zombie forces turned to rush at the Golems, and the zombie queen tried to make it to another pool.

Rae [Shadow Stepped] closer and surrounded the boss with a circular wall of stone, then repeatedly smashed the contents with a boulder from the top.

[Well, that's a bit messy.] Remi noted when she realized that the Spider was essentially mashing the zombie queen.

[Hawk, go light the remains on fire, just to be sure.] Karl added.

The tube was engulfed in an inferno as Hawk burned the remains, and the zombies lost their guiding force, returning to a shambling horde that was more interested in the living things at Karl's end of the instance than defending anything.

[First Advancement Trial] Stage 2 Complete

Karl sighed in relief as he realized that this instance had actually favoured his team. If he was a warrior who had to chase the boss through the toxic sludge, or a mage who had to dodge the Zombies, it would have been a nightmare. But being able to control the zombies while the Golems hunted the boss made it a relatively painless experience.

For some time, the instance didn't change, and Karl just waited. A bit of time to recover between fights seemed like the reasonable thing for a trial to provide, but it was unlikely to give him long.

Five minutes was what it granted this time, and then Karl found himself standing in a sand floor coliseum.

This time he was not alone, the rest of his team was standing with him, including the five Special Forces Knights.

Only, they were all transparent, as if they were the mannequins that he had seen at the start of the trial.

Two minutes later, Tessa's placeholder turned solid, then became rather battered and covered in green blood before there was a flash of golden light, and it began to move.

"Dragons, what the hell are we going to have to do now?" She muttered.

"I'm not certain, but it's good to see that you made it." Karl replied.

"Oh, is that really you? Why are you here first?" Karl shrugged. "I guess I finished the first two trials fastest. What did you get?" "A massive black skeletal knight and a horde of Orcs. I picked one of the silver chests, what did you pick? Let me guess, you kept closing the Gold Chests until you got a set of skills you liked?" She replied.

"Closing them to get a new set of rewards was an option? I picked the purple one."

Tessa rolled her eyes. "Do you not remember the last trials we were in? Picking the easiest option is the safest way forward. But how did it never occur to you that you could close the chests?"

"The first one I touched was the purple one, and it asked me if I wanted to start an Epic trial."

Tessa nodded. "That must have been a Tier 3 Trial, with a random set of rewards. Of course you couldn't resist the urge to touch the box that was clearly and obviously not meant to be safe to handle."

One after another, the others arrived, none of them looking too badly injured, and in Dana's case, she even had [Refreshing Lightning] still active.

The only one missing was Lotus, and Karl began to wonder if something had happened to the little Nature Priestess.

For half an hour, they waited, with no sign of her hologram changing.

Then, it suddenly shifted, and a startled Lotus was in front of them, sitting cross-legged on the ground.



"Oh, hey guys. What's going on?" She asked.

"We've been waiting on you to finish your trials." Karl reminded her.

"Trials? Oh, they're starting already? I was playing with the box. Did you know that the contents change if you close the lid?"

Tessa stared at her for a few seconds before anyone spoke.

"Are you saying that you've been playing with the box for the last hour, and you never did the first trials?" The War Cleric asked her lifelong friend.

Lotus just shrugged.

"Well, that's one way to do it. I guess there is a time limit. But the rest of us are on trial number three." Tessa explained.

"Oh, sorry. I didn't realize it was a group thingy. Alright, what are we doing? Is it a gladiator tournament?"

Karl shrugged. "It looks like it, but I don't know yet. Nothing was happening while we waited for everyone to arrive. There were just those transparent mannequins holding our places until we all finished our trials."

[Team Trial Three Begins In 10 seconds]

[Modified Difficulty Increased For Incomplete Trials]

[Epic Difficulty Chosen]