

The First Legendary Beast Master

#Chapter 1: No Second Chances - Read The First Legendary Beast Master Chapter 1: No Second Chances

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Today was the day of the tenth annual elite recruitment drive, and every graduating student at Lithium Mine Middle School was gathered in the gymnasium, waiting for the elites to arrive with the medicine that would decide their fate.

The elites were the idols of the Golden Dragon nation, super humans with magical abilities that were born from the Divine Injection that the students were going to receive today.

None of the children of the miners had ever seen one before, unless you counted the Mayor, who gave speeches a few times a year, and the excitement of having them right here in their school had been all that the students could talk about for months.

So, one could imagine the disappointment they felt when it was not some famous idol, but a group of elites from the military that showed up to perform the injections.

But although these weren't the singers or movie stars that they all knew, it was no secret that these military elites were saviours that protected their nation against hostile armies and the ever present threat of magical beasts. The television in the café and the teachers at the school both told them so.

While they had never seen an elite in person, they had seen magical beasts, and quite often. There were earth mice hiding all over the mining town, and the farmers nearby had been raising monstrous boars for generations.

But until very recently, it was only the power of technology and the holy magic of the church's High Priests and Priestesses that could keep the wild beasts at bay.

However, when the more powerful monsters came, you hid, or you died.

That was the way of life for the humans of the Golden Dragon nation, and indeed, most of the humans of the world.

Karl fidgeted in his seat as he waited for the nurse to come and administer the serum shot.

Today was the biggest day of a young student's life, the day that they would be administered the Mana Awakening Serum, better known as the Divine Serum, and find

out if they would gain the sort of abilities that could change their lives, or if they would be stuck as common workers in a lithium mining town for the rest of their lives.

This was also Karl's last day at the government run school before he either started working full-time, or with any luck, left this decrepit mining town. If he was compatible with the Serum, he would be off to the Golden Divine Academy tonight, and ready to train his new skills as a defender of the Golden Dragon Nation.

They had already sat through an hour of speeches by the Principal, reminding them of their duty to the nation, the glory of the Elites, and the importance of this chance that they were given. After all, they were just the children of common mine workers, dirt floor poor and unlikely to ever be anything else.

Karl closed his eyes as the nurse rolled the cart with an open briefcase on it next to him, and then a violent pain shot up his arm and the world briefly went blank. Agony spread to every cell in his body, like he was being torn apart from the inside, and blood clogged his lungs, leaving him drowning while sitting in the metal folding chair of his school's auditorium.

This was wrong, the shot was only supposed to hurt as the needle poked you, not like this.

As his consciousness faded, Karl realized that he was likely to be the one in a hundred, the rare fatal reaction to the shot which sorted out the defenders of the nation from the common people.

But after a few seconds, his breathing cleared, the pain began to fade and his eyes fluttered open. A few seconds after that, Karl regained consciousness, with pain still coursing through every cell of his body. The nurse's deep crimson eyes, a side effect of her own Serum injection, were staring directly back at him, and a slight smile was on her face.

"There you are. I thought that we lost you there for a minute. It's a good sign, zero casualties at this stop always means there is a powerful one in the bunch."

The woman moved back, and Karl took in the smartly pressed green military uniform, pencil skirt and heels. It was all familiar, but all wrong. Did he lose some of his memories after the injection? Or was there something wrong with his eyes? On second thought, there was definitely something wrong with his eyes, the world was still a little blurry when he didn't have someone to focus on.

He flinched as his head began to pound again and a new wave of pain wracked his body, but the military woman with the strange red eyes seemed unconcerned as she stepped to a chubby young girl near him and took a large needle full of a glowing golden liquid out of the briefcase on her cart. Without a word of warning, she jabbed it into the girl's arm, and the young girl directly fainted, then slowly recovered her composure.

A quick glance down at his hands showed Karl a familiar bronze tan, but the scars and peeling skin from a childhood spent working in the mines after class were mostly gone, replaced with a deep red mark that looked like three long claw marks running the length of his forearm.

As he silently stared at the marks on his arm, they became more pronounced, and more realistic, as if the flesh had just been torn open, but the skin was smooth and undamaged under his fingers.

After a few minutes, the sound of frightened children fell silent, and Karl looked up at the front of the room, where an officer in the formal military uniform was standing behind a podium, waiting patiently for the process to end.

The red-eyed woman joined him, along with the six men in doctor's coats, before he began to speak.

"Thank you all for your cooperation. This year's choosing trial has completed, and those of you without the mark may return to your classes as usual.

But for the rest of you, congratulations. You have been chosen as the prodigies of the Golden Dragon Nation's new generation. The Blessed ones who will lead us to victory over our enemies, with the benefit of supernatural powers bestowed by the Divine Serum."

Soldiers poured into the room, twice as many as there were children, and Karl began to panic. His mind still hadn't quite grasped the fact that he was one of the fortunate ones yet, the children who were compatible with the artificially induced superpowers, the ones who would become mages, mighty warriors who could split a mountain apart, or even legendary healers that could even raise the dead.

At first, the children resisted the idea that they would be grabbed and taken away by soldiers, especially the ones that had failed the choosing. The problem was that they actually needed the help to walk after the injections. The situation was only making Karl more confused, but he didn't dare ask what was going on with his body, in case they determined that something had gone wrong with whatever the Serum did to the newly awakened elites and disposed of him.

Or worse, sent him back to work in the mines.

According to the lessons that they had been taught in class, he should be a mighty hero by now, not a below average sized teen boy wracked with pain and so weak that he couldn't get out of his chair.

"You look a little disoriented, kid. Just let us carry you, and you'll be right as rain after a few days sleep. Just don't forget to do the homework before we arrive." One of the soldiers who stepped up beside Karl instructed.

That was how he found himself carried into a luxurious train car and placed in a private room complete with its own desk and a call button on the wall that was marked with "Room Service".

Unfortunately for his plan to understand why this process was so painful, the moment that his head hit the pillow, Karl was asleep.

How long he was out, he had no idea, but when he finally awoke, there was a stack of papers on the desk, along with a small textbook waiting for him to read it.

[So, you've awakened your powers] was the title of the book, and the cartoonish cover made it clear that it was aimed at children.

Not that he was old, he would only be fourteen this year, but being the last in his class to hit puberty, his body was much younger looking than average. All he had going for him was a handsome face, and even that had gotten him beaten up a time or two.

But now that he had the Divine Serum on his side, everything would change.

Slowly, he opened the textbook to see what was inside.

[So, you've awakened your powers. Congratulations, and welcome to the upper echelon of society, the elite five percent that have been found compatible with the awakening serum that will soon activate the latent magical powers in your bloodline, passed down from the time of our Nation's founding by the Immortal Golden Dragon itself.

Though you have all learned about it in class, there are a few things that you don't yet know. First, your powers won't fully awaken until you use the first skill related to your specialty. Just follow the guidelines in this text, and you will discover the primary awakening method for your abilities.

Once you have finished that most basic task, you can begin the homework assignment.]

Karl read the first page three times before he flipped the page. Next up was a listing of different marks that the awakened classes should have, and most of them seemed self-explanatory. Ice shards, fire, blades, shields, paws, bows, and even an ornate fan were all detailed with page numbers that would lead the students to their awakening methods.

But there was nothing that resembled claw marks.

So, instead he turned to the homework assignment, hoping for answers. But that was even more useless, it was all about the student's abilities. How strong they were, the description, activation times, speed, energy usage, side effects. In short, he couldn't fill it in at all.

All the marks seemed so obvious as to what sort of abilities they represented. Even the red aura around a pair of axes was clearly a berserker in Karl's mind, but the claw marks didn't make much sense.

There was a similar one with an animal paw that was some sort of druid shaman, but nothing that was as simple, but confusing as his. Was he supposed to be a punching bag for monsters? That didn't sound right at all, the book said that these marks represented superpowers.

But after a few hours, there still wasn't any clear answer as to what he was supposed to do. It was time to call for one of the soldiers and get some answers before the train reached its destination.

Chapter 2: Into The Unknown

While Karl was trying to find a way to awaken his powers, the guards were making the rounds, checking which new students were already awake. Those with the most powerful bodies always woke up first, but it had only been half a day of travel, and they weren't expecting anything yet.

"Sir, there is one active room already. Room 12a, a boy named Karl, no family name recorded." The patrol guard reported back to his commander in the front of the train.

"What is his class? Have we seen him activate any skills yet?" The General asked.

"Nothing yet. He appears to have a nonstandard Class marking, three claw marks." The guard replied.

The General gestured for his assistants to go look for the details on this class, but even after a few minutes had passed, there was still no news.

Other markings in their records were close, but nothing exactly like that one was found.

"Well, then he will have to awaken on his own. I hope that the boy has good luck or thick skin, he's going to need it if he turns in a blank sheet for his assignment when he gets to the Academy."

It wasn't unheard of for a student to get the mark but fail to awaken their powers immediately, even if they followed the instructions. Some would have gotten a nonstandard starting skill, and some were just worthless at using the power that had been given to them.

The General even recalled a case where a child had awakened the Mage class, but didn't have enough mana to cast any spells until nearly the end of the first semester. In the end, that student had proven to be a dismal failure, and had run away during a

school outing to live the life of a commoner without ever getting past the beginning of the first level of his training.

That was the fate of many of the students who never learned to awaken their skills. Either because they were completely unsuited to the abilities that they had received, or because they had a marking that no guidance could be issued for, like the three claw marks boy in room 12a.

The Divine Serum was a modern invention, created after extensive research of an astonishing archaeological find at a holy site under an ancient World Dragon Cathedral had detailed the inner workings of an ancient Divine Device known as the System Stones.

The device itself was broken, but an initially unidentifiable power within it remained. Using the stones as a guide, and after decades of study, the Serum had been created to attune humans to that power and give the Golden Dragon Nation a chance to overtake the military might of their neighbours and change the fate of their citizens.

What did it matter if the Ocean People had water Magic to guard their ships against the rockets and guns of the Golden Dragon fleet? Now, they had mages of their own. Even if the untamed monsters of the Beast Lands attacked, they had warriors and guardians with powerful skills that could cut down the most ferocious magical creatures with ease.

That was the strategic value of the Divine Serum, and the reason that every student who was found to be compatible was taken in by the military and intensively trained in the duties and responsibilities that came with being a protector of the nation.

Life wasn't all military training and duty, though. If it were, there was an absolute certainty that the serum compatible and freshly empowered future guardians of the nation would rebel against authority and either turn traitor or stage a coup. So, they were treated as the legendary resources that they were, able to live in luxury all their lives on the condition that their power was enough to justify their salary.

Once they could pass all the tests that the Golden Divine Academy placed before them, they would even receive official titles from the church, and a collection of legal and social benefits to match. Society had always belonged to the rich and powerful, but now the phrase had taken on an entirely different meaning.

Karl was blissfully unaware of the topic of the observers' conversations, and while they were discussing the likelihood that he might not be able to awaken his powers in time to keep up with his classmates, Karl was preparing to ask the passing guards for advice.

"Sir? Pardon me, but my skill marking doesn't seem to be in the book. Could I be missing a page?" He asked as the uniformed guard passed by again.

"Not in the book, eh? Tough luck there, son. The book only covers the common markings, the ones that ninety percent of the new students get, but there are others possible. The injections are a mysterious divine force, and sometimes they give out results that nobody understands.

The best I can tell you is to try everything, and whatever feels right probably is. If you're lucky, you'll awaken some powers before your classes start.

Between me and you, you want to awaken those powers before you get to the Academy, the elite students are particular about the power rankings, and if you don't, you'll be starting school from the very bottom."

"Thanks. But have you ever seen a marking like this?" Karl asked curiously.

The Guard rolled up his sleeve and showed off the picture of a bear paw, the mark of a Druid, and according to the guide, a nature magic user with an affinity for animals.

"Since it's a little like mine, and seems to involve animals, perhaps try things related to either animals, or unarmed combat. There isn't much you can do to attune with nature on a busy train, but the windows open a little if you need some fresh air.

That's what I had to do, I couldn't awaken my powers without some attachment to nature. In fact, I didn't awaken them on the train at all, they woke up as soon as I touched the trees on the way to the Academy Gates." The guard explained.

"Thanks for the help." Karl called as the guard walked away. He didn't seem to be big on talking, or perhaps he just didn't want to get Karl's hopes up. But the advice gave him something to go on.

Chapter 3: The Early Bird

Karl flopped on his bed and looked out the window, to see if there was any sort of hint as to what his powers were supposed to be. The guard had a point, and the claw marks definitely had to refer to some sort of animal. Humans didn't leave marks like that.

So, the first thing that he tried was focusing on adding claws to his hands.

"Claw!"

"Nope, yelling out skill names isn't going to do it. How do the other classes activate their skills?" Karl complained, unaware that the bored supervisors in the main car were watching through hidden cameras and laughing at his antics.

Open the box of casting assistants under your bed using the thumb of your left hand, and extract the appropriate casting medium to begin attempting to activate your first spell.]

"This doesn't look like the sort of marking that a spell caster should have, next page."

[Page 3, Combat classes

Open the box of practice weapons under your bed with the index finger of your right hand and choose the most appropriate weapon for your desired skills.]

That sounded more likely, so Karl knelt on the ground in front of the bed and unlocked the upper drawer, where he found a collection of simple weapons, and even some more obscure ones, like throwing knives, single-handed crossbows, and some sort of axe on a chain that looked like it would be more dangerous to the user than anyone else.

He was, unfortunately, not yet among the physically gifted, so Karl picked a short sword from among the weapons while he cursed being the last in his class to enjoy the full benefits of puberty.

He had never actually held a sword before, but this one felt right, and Karl gave it a few tentative swings before trying for a more meaningful strike toward the door.

[Pet Skills Not Available. You must record a pet.]

Karl blinked slowly as he worked to process the idea that had come to him as if implanted in his mind.

It was a message directly into his thoughts, obviously from the effects of the marking, and now he somewhat knew what he needed to do. But how did he record a pet? It couldn't be as simple as just writing it down, could it? Or maybe he needed to do something to memorize it?

But first he would have to find some sort of animal. This was a shiny new military train, not the company houses at the mines, there weren't going to be any mice. If he had to touch the animal for the skill to activate, this could be much more difficult than he had been expecting.

The obvious choice would be to try writing something down, and to see if that worked. Maybe there would be a book in the spell casting equipment.

The drawer of tools slid open, and Karl stared in amusement at the wide variety of strange items held inside. He had absolutely zero clue about how these were supposed to be used. Some of them didn't even look like they were anything special, like this silly snow globe with no base.

What were they going to do with that? Sit and ponder their Orb?

Karl picked the surprisingly heavy glass ball up in his hand, and suddenly, it lit up with a bright white light.

[Taming Space viewing is not available. Please Record A Pet.]

At first, the message that appeared in his thoughts made no sense, but after a few seconds of focus, Karl could feel the change. In his mind, a vast emptiness was forming, giving him a sense of eternal power beyond anything he had ever imagined.

"What about a Dragon? Can I have a Dragon?" Karl thought, trying to will one into existence in the taming space.

Nothing. Of course, it wasn't going to be that easy.

Karl was deep in thought when someone touching his arm brought his attention back to the present.

"Did you have any luck?" The patrolling guard asked, looking at the two open drawers, and the sword on the mattress.

"Yes and no. I get the feeling that the blade is the right choice, but I'm lacking something to activate the skill. None of the other weapons I looked at are really appealing, though." Karl sighed.

"Well, keep at it, you'll find something that works for you soon. If you've already got an idea, you're ahead of the others. Most of them are still asleep."

"That's something, at least. Maybe I can figure this out before we get to the Academy after all. I don't suppose there is a kitchen here? I always think better on a full stomach." Karl asked hopefully.

The guard smiled and gestured down the hall. "You woke up before the main kitchen for students was ready, but they won't complain if I lead you out of the room for a little something. You'll learn soon that the food at the Golden Divine Academy is somewhat special, compared to what you are used to.

The magical abilities that the elites use put a huge strain on the bodies of their users, and they need the energy of magical plants and beasts to recover quickly.

Trust me, you're in for a treat this time."

They walked down the hall to another train car, past a half dozen rooms identical to the one Karl was in where other students from his class were sleeping soundly, and into an empty dining room, past which a kitchen could be seen.

"Just grab what you want and set it by the grill, I'll get to you in a minute." The cook called from the freezer, not realizing that there was someone other than staff in the room.

Karl didn't mind though, it wasn't like this was some fancy restaurant, it was more of a common area for the staff to serve themselves, with an actual cook on duty so that those who shouldn't be allowed in a kitchen didn't starve.

Karl collected a pair of small steaks, a bowl of rice, a collection of assorted vegetables, anything that looked and smelled good. Then he noticed a small pile of oversized white eggs, and grabbed one to add it to the plate.

[Suitable Pet Target Found: hatching]

The egg directly vanished from his hand, leaving Karl staring at the food in confusion and wondering just how long it would take for a monster egg to hatch in a magical void in his mind. Would it even hatch? The thoughts said so, but they weren't giving him many details.

A small straw nest slowly appeared in his mind, with a single large white egg inside. Over the course of the next few seconds, the Egg trembled, and then cracked open, shocking Karl into taking a step backward, though the sight was in his mind.

He bumped into the guard, who thought he might be faint from hunger, and stabilized himself.

"Sorry about that." Karl mumbled, while the guard gestured to the cook and led Karl to a table.

"Don't worry about it. Everyone is a bit off for the first few days after they wake up. Especially some of the magic classes, the power can really scramble their brains. Just focus on solving those strange markings of yours, and you'll be fine in no time."

The cook looked their way from behind his grill. "Having a hard time with a nonstandard marking? That's a rough one. What does it look like?"

"Three claw marks on the right forearm. Big ones as well, not one of those wimpy little marks like the nerd classes get." The guard laughed.

The cook smiled and turned his hand toward Karl, who didn't understand what they meant. They should be talking about a class marking, but with the dozens of visible tattoos, Karl had no idea which one might be the one they were referring to.

The cook tapped a small stick tattoo, and Karl realized that it was a mage type Class marking, a wand with sparkles at the end. It was on the top of his hand, and only a few centimetres long. If he hadn't seen it in the book, he would have never noticed it at all.

"There is a theory that the size of the tattoo has some relationship to the talent of the recipient, but I don't believe that's right at all. Unless it's not related to the mental compatibility, but just the ability itself. Have you got any clues about yours?" The line cook asked.

"I felt right with a short sword in my hand, and the marking seems to have something to do with animals, so perhaps I'm a hunter of some sort, or a park ranger with bad luck." Karl joked.

"Well, you'll find out once you get your first class skill to work. After that, you can just think the word [Status] and get an impression of how your magical abilities are growing. At least, that's how it is for Mages." The cook informed him.

Chapter 4: Windspeed Hawk

While the cook got his meal ready, Karl closed his eyes and focused on what was happening in the strange spot in his mind. The result wasn't words, but a somewhat detailed impression of the status of the bird. He had to translate it himself, but the actual information was pretty basic.

[Beast Space Activated] 1 occupant

[Pet Number 1]

[Name] Windspeed Hawk

[Rank] Common

[Connection] Low

[Skills]

[Claw] [Rend] [Super Vision]

Karl felt an indescribable power flow into his body as the status was completed, and a second round of physical impressions came to him.

[Beast Master] Karl

[Rank] Common

[Bloodline] Human

[Skills]

[Beast Skill] Super Vision

[Beast Attack Skill] Rend

That didn't quite mesh with the knowledge that he had from the booklet. Wasn't he supposed to get some sort of instinctive guideline on how to progress? Maybe a little something about how he was doing in his training of the skills?

"How does the power rating of the system work? Is there some sort of level, or grade, or something? How can we tell who has real power and who is like me, a newbie waiting on his skills?" He asked the two older men.

Older being a relative term, as they likely weren't much more than twenty themselves, but older than him and finished their time at the Academy.

"That's the fun part. You don't. Unless they directly tell you, or you have some special skill to sense energy fluctuations like some of the mages, you just have to go with your gut instinct or the public rankings.

The problem with the Rankings is that they're all subjective. You see, I'm a Wand Class Mage. I can use the Fire Element. If I was an Orb Class Mage, I could use two Elements at once, but that still doesn't tell you anything about my power.

The important part is that I never made it past level one in my spell book, I just don't have the talent for it. But the Druid here, he describes his powers entirely differently."

The guard nodded. "I'm a level six mortal grade Druid. My grade has never changed, but I can use much more powerful nature magic than when I was starting school, and I can even transform into a bear.

Because everyone's internal measurements are so wildly different, we judge everyone on the same scale as magical beasts. From Common to Mythical in Rank based on what they can defeat in battle, or how effective their healing and support skills are compared to beasts at the same level.

So, while the cook is still considered to be in the Common Grade, I have made it one rank up to the Awakened Grade, and I can fight awakened Magical Beasts on my own. At least in limited numbers I can. But I was near the bottom of my class, all the way through. My skills are varied, I can heal, fight, transform into a bear, even help plants grow, but I can't do any of them worth a damn, so I'm stuck at the Awakened Grade."

Karl nodded, understanding the concept if not the actual power level. Sometimes focusing on too many things would lead to you never getting good at anything. There was a guy like that in his neighbourhood, a jack of all trades. He could fix your car, your sink or your fridge, but only the common issues. If it were really broken, he would refer you to someone else.

"I think that I follow the idea. How powerful were the top students of your class?" He asked.

"Have you heard of the Archmage Mia, that new idol spell caster? She was in our class, and she reached the Awakened Rank in the first year, by the end of the second, she could defeat Ascended beasts with ease, and by the time we graduated, she was already a Commander Grade Mage.

Then only a few years after that, she got some super secret resource from a mission, and it pushed her to the Royal Rank. That's when everyone started calling her the Arch Mage, and the fame started to get to her head. She doesn't answer our messages anymore, but we can still proudly say we went to school with someone super famous."

Royal Grade monsters were a terrifying thought to Karl. Even one of them could level the mining town he grew up in without breaking a sweat. The strongest fighting force in town was likely the Mayor, a Commander Grade Warrior, and in Karl's opinion, he was getting too old to be picking fights with monsters. Plus, the town didn't have any sort of armed guard, other than the handful of police.

If it came to a fight, the old Mayor would definitely not have a good time proving he still deserved his rank.

Karl sat in silence for a moment as he ate, then smiled at the two senior graduates in front of him.

"I suppose that I should get back to my room and see what I can do about awakening some sort of skill, then. If not, we will all be shut out of the class idol's phone list in the future."

The cook laughed. "I like the way you think, a bit of motivation goes a long way when you're trying to find a reason to get through the most gruelling parts of your training."

Karl thought a lot about that as he walked back to his room. The hardest part of any task was seeing it through to the end. It was easy at the start when you were motivated, but somewhere in the middle it became a dreadfully dull grind, with no reward in sight and very little progress to be made.

That was when you would lose sight of the goal and start to slack. If you were lucky, you recovered from it, but if not, you would end up in trouble and behind schedule. Even the Mine Foreman had said the same thing to the students when he came to talk to them on career day.

Not that anyone truly listened to him, with the prospect of the divine injection coming up only days later. But the others, the ones who returned to class afterwards, would be thinking more about it every day.

Once the door to the room closed behind him, Karl stared out the window and tried a skill for himself.

[Super Vision] grants the Beast Tamer the sight of the contracted Windspeed Hawk.

The forests in the distance were suddenly crystal clear in his eyes, and everything in his peripheral vision became just as clear as what was right in front of him. A bit of movement caught his eye, and Karl noticed a Quill beast moving through the grassland over a kilometre away.

It was incredible, and the world was so much more vivid, with colours that he didn't even have names for. As he recalled, not only could the Windspeed Hawk see into the Ultraviolet and Infrared spectrums, but they were also accomplished nocturnal hunters, with excellent night vision as well.

While [Rend] was the much cooler combat skill, [Super Vision] was incredibly overpowered in Karl's estimation. Just being able to see where you were going at night would give him a great advantage over other students in the practical tests.

Maybe the written tests as well. He could easily read other papers from across the room without moving his head or looking straight at them. Cheating on a written exam would be simple, if he weren't already certain that none of the other students from the Mines were smart enough to cheat off.

Chapter 5: Rend

With the issue of activating his very first powers settled, Karl could finally rest easy for a few seconds. That was all it took for him to see the homework assignment on the table and realize that there was still a lot for him to do before they reached the Academy.

'Alright, let's get this done in advance, and then I can relax.' His silent motivational speech had very little effect, but Karl sat down with a pen and the homework assignment in front of him.

Name, Karl. Age, Fourteen. Skill Name:

It only had one spot for a skill name, and that made him assume that it was normal for a newly awakened student to only have one skill. But which should he put in there? Beast Taming, Super Vision or Rend? This homework would be posted for the class, he was certain, so he didn't want to give away the extent of his abilities to the other students and become the target of other students' envy before he could defend himself.

Plus, the contracted pet might be a magical beast, the Windspeed Hawk, but it was still a gosling, and wouldn't grow into its full power for months or even years. Wouldn't he just become a new target of bullying if he showed everyone a baby bird as his power?

Super Vision seemed like it was much cooler and more useful, but it wasn't a combat skill, and for the elite, combat strength was King. So, he went back to the bed and picked up the short sword again, determined to make [Rend] work.

Activating the skill was incredibly easy, a single thought lit up the blade with a dull red light, and when he swung it toward the portion of the wall that was marked [Testing Area], a crescent arc of destructive power was thrown out and absorbed by the high-tech alloy.

Drawing the blade through the air when using Rend was like mixing thick dough, he could barely move his arm, and the blade speed was slow, but the skill formed as the blade moved, so with a bit more training, it should be faster to activate.

Rend would definitely make him friends in class. With a bit more effort, it could slice a wide swathe through enemies, and allow him to target an entire group.

Karl hurried back over to the sheet and filled out the questions about his skill, including the restriction on movement speed when using the attack, which limited how fast it could be activated. If he thought about it, there might be a way around that if he was already moving when he activated the skill.

Wasn't that how Hawks hunted? They didn't rely on strength, they came in at high speed and took out their prey in a single strike. If he could determine how that skill was supposed to be used, his combat power would increase drastically.

But other than the skill, the questionnaire also asked about the user. Any headaches, feelings that you had forgotten something important, physical increases or decreases?

Karl tested himself, and other than the Super Vision, he had definitely also become a bit more flexible. Not by a lot, but it was clearly noticeable.

In the end, he decided to leave that portion of the questionnaire marked with 'none'. If the agility increase improved in the future, he could blame it on something else from his training. After all, some of the elite were said to be true superhuman monsters, and some were just as frail and human as always, but with mind-boggling supernatural powers.

One of the idols had even sprained an ankle after stumbling to go on stage for a meet and greet event. That seemed like pretty conclusive proof that the injection's skill distribution system did not distribute physical enhancements in a fair and equal manner.

Once he was satisfied that the answers would be enough for the Academy to rate him fairly highly among his classmates, Karl carefully slid the paper into the envelope provided and placed it in the tray by the door.

That was everything that he was expected to do until they arrived at the Academy, but he couldn't help wanting to try out more and better ways to use the [Rend] skill.

What if he tried to be more like the Hawk? There should have been a clawed gauntlet among the equipment there, as well as a trident. Both would replicate the three claws of the mark on his arm, but the trident was a stabbing weapon, which didn't seem well suited to how the skill worked.

He opened the drawer again and put back the sword before taking out a pair of gauntlets with clawed tips on the fingers. As a weapon, they weren't too impressive, but they looked like they would work with the skill that he had.

They were a bit big on his hand, as Karl was slightly smaller than average, but after a few buckle adjustments, they fit well enough, and he tried the skill again. With his hand extended out in front of him, the way a Hawk would when swooping down on prey, he flexed his fingers, and four small streaks of red light tore through the air in front of him to hit the wall.

Each of them was much less impressive than the one created by the sword, but the speed was incredibly fast, and they would hit multiple areas on the target. Against lightly armoured targets, that seemed like the better path. The more attack blades they had to dodge or block, the better.

Each time he used the skill, it seemed to drain some of his energy, and after only a few more swings, Karl could feel his arms getting weaker, and he had to sit down and catch his breath. This was going to become an issue very quickly while doing combat training. He had spent plenty of time in the gym, but he was trying to improve his physique, not build his stamina and endurance.

But that was what the school was for, all he had to do was focus on his training, and it would definitely work out in the end.

As Karl massaged his sore arms, the first of the other students were only just beginning to wake up and begin reading the guidebook. It wasn't much of a head start, but the first awakened elite of the batch was already determined.

Chapter 6: Dropoff Site

"All new students, gather your preferred weapons, your school uniforms and wait for the notification to disembark. We are now five minutes from the Golden Divine Academy." The train's announcement declared just after breakfast on the morning of the second day after Karl woke up.

He packed the snacks he had obtained in advance from the train's kitchen into the provided backpack along with the spare uniforms and shoes, then put on the black metal clawed gauntlets and hung the short sword from a scabbard at his hip.

There was no rule saying you couldn't prefer more than one weapon, and the guards hadn't mentioned it when they saw him practising in the room that way, so it should be alright.

The cook and the guard had both mentioned the walk into the Academy on the first day after he woke up, so the train wouldn't be stopping at the gates. This was probably some sort of test, either to see how the students would solve a problem or get along or some nonsense, Karl decided, but whatever the reason, he was packing a lunch.

As expected, the train came to a stop about a kilometre from the Academy, at the far end of a grassy field with a few well-maintained hedgerows along the way.

"This is your stop. The last bit is up to you. I will see you all in the Academy tomorrow after the train is cleaned and repaired." A slender man in a guard uniform announced.

The students mostly stood by their open doors with looks of confusion, but Karl walked out into the hallway and stepped down from the train to take his first breath of the clean country air.

Without all the dust from the mines, it smelled strangely like trees and flowers here, and he could feel the power of the Academy in the distance, like a tingle in his bones, warning him that it was something abnormal, something magical.

The first student out was like a beacon to the others, and slowly the new students started to leave the train, mostly still exhausted from practising their new skills and a lack of sleep, but the sun was directly overhead in the sky, and sleeping under the scorching morning sun wasn't going to be easy.

The slender man in the guard uniform stepped in front of them again once everyone was off the train, and raised his voice to address the crowd.

"Welcome, everyone, to Golden Divine Academy. As a special welcoming gift to all of our new students, we have prepared the traditional walk across the grounds to the front gates for you. Every year, the new arrivals make this trip, entering the gates as Awakened elites to begin their new lives.

Now it is your turn. But be warned, the grasslands look empty, but that isn't always the truth."

He wasn't lying. Karl could see that the train tracks circled the Academy at a distance of roughly a kilometre, passing through these grasslands, a large portion of forest, and even through a swampy bog around a river.

They must drop every group off at a different point, so they could watch them come into the academy. It seemed like a strange tradition, but when he looked out over the field using [Super Vision] he could tell that there was a huge population of Earth Rats, a

Common Grade magical beast with incredible digging skills, and the ability to throw small stones using magic.

They were mostly harmless, and Karl had dealt with them using a slingshot as a kid, but in large numbers, they could be a real menace.

In this case, it was likely to be a nuisance, just an 'amusing' prank by the seniors to watch the new kids get pelted with rocks as they ran to school.

[Mice, hungry.] A voice sounded in Karl's mind, coming from the space where his Windspeed Hawk was kept.

It was incredibly insistent, and eager to taste the mice, so Karl stepped forward into the field to see what they would do to the students who tried to pass. He might have hunted them before, but that was with a slingshot and in the house where they couldn't use the earth to escape.

Getting a clean kill shot here would be much more trouble, but he was fairly certain that he could do it with the speed of the [Rend] attacks. He just had to time them right.

Karl stepped forward into the grassland battlefield, against an unknown number of the weakest magical creatures, armed with a single untested combat skill and a baby bird as a pet. Not exactly the most glorious of first battles as an elite, but it would have to do.

The response to his invasion of their territory was immediate, and the ten centimetre long earth mice began to hurl small rocks at Karl, highlighting their position, and making the starving Hawk in his Beast Taming Space go insane with desire.

A flick of his fingers, and four sharp red energy arcs flew out into the battlefield, taking out one of the mice before it even knew there was a danger, and then the other hand took a second.

Super vision really was a remarkable skill for both eyesight and hand - eye coordination. His second attack hit a mouse as it was attempting to go underground to evade, and then his third reached its target as it tried to run.

Karl jogged forward and picked up the bodies, then moved them into the taming space for the Hawk to eat before continuing on toward the Academy under greatly reduced levels of attack from the earth mice, who had sensed the presence of a predator in their midst and began to target the other students.

Only a few brave ones would still throw rocks at Karl from a distance, all of which were easily swatted away with the armoured glove.

"That glove is such a cheat code here in the open field." A dark-haired girl with a wand in her hand complained from directly behind his back.

"You're a mage, a real magic user. Just blast them if they throw rocks at you." Karl reminded her after seeing the magical casting device.

"And pass out again in the middle of a field? I'm not sure if you're aware, but magic is hard. I can only cast like two or maybe three spells before I collapse from exhaustion." The girl complained.

That was what had happened to Karl the first day as well. But once he got a bit more used to it, the consumption seemed not to be as bad.

"Just stay behind me then, and undo your coat so you can hide your head. Earth Mice aren't smart, and they won't target your face if they can't see it."

Chapter 7: The Fields

The other students quickly saw the tactic that Karl and the mage had come up with and began forming groups. From what Karl could tell, almost all of the newly empowered students were some sort of magical warrior class, and carrying various melee weapons.

Not many of them had chosen shields, but those who did have shields took the lead in a group to push forward, while the ones with ranged skills fell in behind, encircling the mages and others who got no physical attribute enhancement.

Two more classmates fell in behind the mage, following the example of hiding their faces, though they didn't know why they were doing it.

The sight frightened the weak-minded Earth Mice. One scary guy with claws leading three headless humanoid monsters was terrifying to the small creatures, and they began to flee instead of attacking Karl on his way forward.

That let him set a brisk pace through the field, and put the field full of mice behind him right until they made it to the first hedgerow, where they took a short breather for everyone to recover some stamina.

"Magic uses far too much energy. How long does it take you guys to recover after using your skills?" One of the boys in the back row, a warrior class with a large axe, asked.

"I can use mine three or four times, as long as I don't go all out. But then I'm tired, and I need to eat or rest. I haven't tried to time it yet." Karl replied.

The mage nodded her head. "I'm the same. Two spells, and I'm at my limit and I need a breather. But if I sit down for fifteen minutes or so, I can cast another. I saved my magic this time, so I can at least use one and keep going, or I can cast both in an emergency, but then I'll slow the team down."

The boy with an axe frowned. "I can only use mine once, and then I'm done. But I'm a woodcutter's son, and I can swing the axe for hours if I don't use the skill."

"That's good enough. So far, it's just been Earth Mice, and only an idiot would chase them with an axe. But if there is something bigger and slower up ahead, you can go ahead and fight it without using that skill. Did the injection make you stronger? It was one of the questions on the homework, so it must be a thing." Karl suggested.

"Yeah, a lot stronger." He agreed.

The other warrior smiled. "I'm not so strong, but I was alright to start with. Unfortunately, my first skill is defensive, see the shield in my marking? The silly thing is, I have no aptitude with a shield. I tried everything with the one in the storage box, but nothing worked. However, if I use a two-handed sword, I can activate the skill no problem, and keep it active all the time.

The only problem is that I can't swing the sword fast enough to block those rocks the way that you do with your gloves."

Karl nodded. "So, we've got a super strength axe man, a durable swordsman, a mage and me with my claws. That's not bad, and it looks like the teachers wanted us to group up to fight our way through to the gates.

Not that it's been a tough fight so far, more of a practical joke by the seniors, but be prepared for something like Water Moles or Quill Beasts in the next field."

After a short breather, they moved forward in the same formation, but without the coats pulled up over their heads. If there was something more dangerous than Earth Mice in this field, they wanted to see it coming, and not find out when it reached them.

Karl's [Super Vision] scanned the field, but currently it appeared to be empty and easy to pass. Likely, whatever lived here was just sleeping or going about its daily business, unaware that something was about to invade its home turf.

"Do you think that we should move through the trees? That would bring us to the academy without crossing the field, we just need to go to the side a little." The mage suggested.

Karl scanned the treeline and shook his head.

"There are at least two iron tusk boars in those trees. I can see the torn tree bark at different heights. It might be a different species, but those marks are pretty distinctive." He quietly informed the others.

They were a long way from home, so it might be an entirely different species of boar, but if the tusk markings were similar on the trees to the ones he knew from home, then the animal likely was as well.

"Then onward, valiant scapegoats of the freshman class. Let's amuse our seniors and get ourselves inside that gate before it gets dark." The woodcutter's son laughed.

They moved forward at a fast walk, not wanting to make too much noise or vibration underground that might disturb the beasts living there, but not wanting to waste time and let the others behind them catch up either.

None of the other groups had entered this field yet. Most were resting, some were still struggling with either a lack of courage or the mice, and some had decided to go the long way around, under the assumption that the direct route was a trap.

That group probably wasn't wrong, but that didn't mean that the other routes were any better.

They were halfway across the field when the next group moved forward, jogging to catch up to the leaders, and the field erupted with activity.

Vines sprung up out of the ground around the feet of the new group, trapping their ankles and pulling them down onto the soft dirt, while loose vines whipped at their faces.

It was some sort of plant monster, what sort, Karl had no idea, but the loud footsteps had awoken it.

"Keep moving gently, it hasn't attacked us yet, it's just active in our area. Keep moving and we will get out without much trouble. Don't attack unless you're actually trapped, and don't step on the vines." Karl instructed.

"You're the boss. But if we end up stuck in the middle of the field, I'm totally blaming you." The Mage whispered with a rueful smirk on her face, fully expecting the worst.

Chapter 8: Walk Softly

Soft steps got them almost to the end of the field before a sudden twitch of a vine put it right under their sword fighter's foot, and not only did he stomp on the vine, he tripped, and his blade sliced a dozen of them clean in half.

"Get him up and let's run. The vine monster will not be happy about that." Karl shouted, before beginning to dash toward the relative safety of the hedgerow.

The woodcutter hauled the other boy to his feet, and the four of them took off running, hoping to make it to the edge of the field. Entangling vines grabbed at Karl's legs, but

fast steps kept them from finding a good hold, and he was nearly out of the vines' range before he was pulled to a stop.

Coming up from behind him, the young mage used Karl's immobile figure as a springboard, running across his back as Karl was getting up and leaping toward safety, only to be caught in midair and dragged flat to the ground with a puff of dirt and a pained groan.

"Good plan, poor execution." The swordsman laughed from behind them as he hacked his way through the vines.

Karl sliced himself free with [Rend] and then did the same for the mage, who frantically scrambled for safety in the trees.

The last to reach safety was the woodcutter, but he was also the most lucky, as he had experience with entangling vines in the woods, and knew how to smack them with the back of his axe to keep them from grabbing his ankles.

"Sorry, it takes too long to explain the trick, or I would have told you all." He mumbled as he reached the trees a few seconds behind the others.

"It's all good. We each have our own knowledge base to work on, and there was no time for some long lecture in the middle of the field." Karl agreed.

The Mage seemed like she was about to say something, but then reconsidered. There were only a few seconds between the stumble and the escape, there really was no time to explain.

All that was left now was a section of freshly mowed grass, with a single cobblestone path that led to the gates. If they could make it through that, they were safe. Well, relatively safe. From what they knew of the elites, the culture favoured the strong, and they were not yet the strong. But they were all well suited to their class, and in time they might be.

"Stay off the grass. I learned that from my mum's workplace. Fancy people hate when you walk on their grass." The mage mumbled as they got ready to move.

"Good point. I was looking forward to soft grass under my feet after growing up in the mines, but using the path just seems right." Karl agreed.

These other three hadn't gotten on at his stop, but they should at least understand the concept of the mines. There were ten other middle schools in the nearby towns, so even if, like Karl, they had never travelled, they had at least seen the mountains over the mines in the distance.

Triumphantly, they walked down the path, with the swordsman doing his best to hide a slight limp and the mage brushing the dirt off the front of her uniform to look a little less like she had been rolling in the field for fun.

They reached the gate, where a pair of teachers were waiting to greet them with a large bag full of textbooks and a table full of drinks.

"Welcome to the Golden Divine Academy, students Karl, Dana, James and Kruger. You are the first to make it to the gate today, and therefore the first to get to pick your rooms in the dormitory. The map is on the table, and you may pick any room on the second floor that is not currently marked as occupied."

They rushed over to collect a drink, and then gathered around the map.

"This layout makes no sense." Kruger, the axe wielder, mumbled.

"All the rooms are random. Look at this one, it's tiny, but with a huge empty balcony, who would pick that?" Dana, the dark-haired mage, agreed.

But a long, narrow room caught her eye. There was supposed to be a training target at the end which she could fire spells at from a distance, which would be great for practice.

"I want the balcony room." Karl shrugged, then picked up a token from the table and placed it on the map.

"Right, you have a wide area attack skill. If you want to practice, you need more space. I'll take the training room here, with the Murphy bed that folds against the wall." Dana explained, picking her space.

The other two went for the largest pair of dorms, with a training dummy in the main room and a separate bedroom. Each of the rooms was a bit special in its own way, but Karl noticed that there was one selectable option that seemed quite inferior. Someone could actually pick the supply closet as their dorm, it was marked as an option, and might be left to the last person to complete the trials.

The Windspeed Hawk in Karl's taming space looked out through his eyes and squawked in appreciation of the choice. The big balcony was one of the few rooms that had proper outdoor access. In fact, it blocked a half dozen other rooms' access to the outside, unless they had a window that opened onto the balcony.

It was perfect for the bird, and once it digested these delicious Earth Mice, the tiny monster was convinced that it would have the energy to grow enough that it could fly around outside. Baby monsters didn't stay helpless for long, even in this situation, where it was being nourished by a human beast tamer and not its mother.

[Are there more mice?] It asked hopefully.

It was strange to hear the bird's thoughts as words in his head, but unfortunately, Karl didn't have anything else for the beast right now.

[Just wait until dinner and I will get you as much meat as you can eat.]

[I hope they serve mice.]

Chapter 9: Room Choice

"Interesting choices. I can see the others, but why did you pick the balcony? The room itself is barely a bedroom." The teacher in charge of reception asked Karl.

"I can always set something up on the balcony, but mostly it's for training. I have an area attack skill that I can't train indoors easily. But the room is fine, it's bigger than mine at home, and it's got both a bed and a desk, with its own shower and water closet."

The others quickly double-checked to make sure they had picked rooms with their own facilities and sighed in relief. Not only did the rooms they picked have a full bath, they also had a small kitchenette with a fridge and hot plate for cooking in the room while they were studying.

"In that case, I will give you all your keys, and wish you well in your studies."

The teacher's smile told them all that they had probably screwed up somehow, but they had no idea what they should have done differently in that situation. Unless the juice was poisoned, they had just picked the rooms that seemed the most appropriate for their class. Or the biggest ones, in the estimation of James and Kruger.

They took a few steps, and students from the senior classes, wearing badges with White, Black and Bronze symbols on them, fell in beside the group.

White for Common Grade, Black for Awakened, and Bronze for Ascended, according to the text on the badges. The badges on the new students' uniforms were all white, so Karl hadn't noticed until now that they represented anything but the Academy.

"Welcome to the Academy. We will show you to your rooms. It's always fun to see the newbies' first experience of the dorms, you see. It's a completely magical building, so whatever you were expecting, just put that out of your mind right now." The student with the bronze badge, the strongest of the three, explained.

They didn't say much more until they got to the main doors of the dorm.

"On the right is the cafeteria, open from four in the morning until midnight. On the left are the laundry facilities, they're a drop-off service, just give them the basket, and they'll

launder it and bring it back to your room. This isn't a hotel, there are no maids, but the cleaning supplies are right here.

Don't forget to keep your room clean, everyone gets punished if too many students fail the dorm inspections.

That way is the supply room, you can go visit him later, when you have academy credits, to get essential supplies and things you want for your room or your studies.

Now, there is no elevator, but there are three staircases. The main ones are the best, as they're five metres wide, and you don't get jammed up with cross traffic.

Your year is lucky, you got rooms on the second floor, mine is up on the fourth floor, and these two are on the fifth floor. It's a long walk down to get to class, but I heard that the rooms are nicer at the top than they are on the lower floors."

The boy's smirk told Karl that he was definitely pranking them. Either there was an elevator, or the rooms were all strange, no matter where you went.

The three older students put their hands on the shoulders of the newbies and led them up to the second floor with a smile.

"You two are right here, since you picked the square internal rooms." The leader of the senior students informed them, gesturing to the doors on either side of the stairs.

That was a factor that they might have forgotten to consider. Being right next to the stairs could be loud. But the hallways were decorated with thick red carpets, hanging tapestries on the walls, and plenty of decorations that should prevent echoes.

The two warriors opened their doors, and looked at the bare rooms.

Stone walls with multiple scorch marks, cut marks and absolutely zero furniture in the main room greeted them. They stepped inside in shock, and found that the bedroom had a simple single bed in it, unmade, but with quality linens and a comforter emblazoned with the school's crest folded at the foot.

The main room had a stone golem standing in the middle, the training dummy that the diagram had informed them the room included, and the older students whistled in appreciation.

"Now that's a nice bonus. They left you the training dummies from the last senior class. Those are Commander Class, you'll never break them in the first two years, maybe not at all. I think it's a good tradeoff for the initial cleaning you'll have to do." The student with the black badge laughed.

Karl gave them a suspicious look. "Are these just as the students left them, or is there some system to it?"

The others just smirked and shrugged. "Why don't we let the others get settled in and see where you and the mage are staying?"

Dana sighed and gestured down the hallway. "If I remember the map right, I'm that way. Room 17, the long training one."

The student with the bronze badge nodded in appreciation.

"I'm also a mage, so I picked the same room on my floor. Let's see what you got."

They opened the door and looked at an incredibly long hallway. Far longer than the actual dimensions of the building should allow.

But at the entrance was a small bedroom, restroom and a kitchenette along the wall, followed by the vast stone expanse of the training hallway. It was spotlessly clean, and there was a single potion sitting on the table with a welcome note from the last occupant.

"Congratulations, you got a decent senior. Check out your welcoming gift, we will get Karl here settled into his room."

The balcony room was just around the corner, and at first, Karl almost missed it. The supply closet room was right next to his, so the doors were narrow and very close together, but the older students knew which one it was.

"Right here. Let's see what it's like. The balcony on our floor is empty, we didn't have as many students as you guys do, so some of them aren't in use."

The door swung open to show a very plain room past a short hallway with a bathroom on the left. The main room was just a metal desk and a large bed, trimmed in black leather, with drawers underneath. The walls were painted dark grey, giving the room a very odd feeling, but the curtains were the academy logo gold ones that presumably came with the room.

"Well, this must have been the kitchen witch's room. Creepy goth girl. You can repaint once you get some credits to buy the supplies. Good luck with that." The Gold badged student sighed, obviously disappointed that there wasn't anything special about the place.

But they had forgotten the most important part. Once they left and the door closed behind them, Karl opened the curtains to the balcony and stepped outside, only to find himself in the middle of a greenhouse.

There were plants everywhere, blocking his view, and Karl smiled. He had never had plants in the house before, his parents couldn't even keep flowers alive. But the Windspeed Hawk was overjoyed at the potted trees, flowers, and vines that were scattered all over the balcony.

Karl didn't recall seeing this from the entryway, and he should have, as they passed right under it on their way in. However, the more he walked, the more Karl realized that the balcony was not normal. It was at least three times the size that it should be, and nearly filled with plants, until he got to the far end and found a gazebo with a hammock, a curved bench, and a small table that contained a well-worn notebook.

[Care and keeping of the balcony. Abridged version.]

Karl smiled at the title and flipped the notebook open.

[While I don't know if you will appreciate the legacy of the greenhouse, you will find that it is effortless to care for, and every plant here has a purpose. You see, they are all edible. Most of them are for humans, to help your growth, but I have personally added a few important ones of my own.

This is the catnip plant, the feline type magical beasts love it, and you can use it to keep them from reporting you when you sneak out at night. This one is the Honey Berry, which is popular with bear type monsters. If you smear the pulp of this plant on the shoes of other students, it will attract the giant grizzlies to them in the woods.

Be sure to wash your hands before following.

The final one is only edible in a limited quantity, the clear mind fruit. Use it before the major exams to help you focus. But keep in mind that it only works a few times, so use it sparingly.]

The rest of the book was just a watering schedule for the plants, and a note that the magic of the balcony would take care of the rest.

'So, the last resident planted a fruit to help her cheat on exams, one to sabotage other students in the woods, and catnip to bribe the security so she could sneak out at night. This senior was definitely an interesting person.' Karl decided.

Chapter 10: No Mice

[There are still no mice.] The baby Windspeed Hawk complained.

He was right, even with super vision, which could see into the infrared spectrum and would pick out urine trails of rodents, there was no sign of mice. That should probably have been expected of a magical dorm, but it was a great tragedy in the mind of the bird.

[Alright, buddy, we will go to the cafeteria and find some meat.]

Karl headed for the main floor again, and made his way to the buffet of the Cafeteria.

"New student? I don't know you." The old woman behind the counter asked.

"Yes, ma'am. My name is Karl."

"Polite, that's not bad. Alright, grab what you like, but only the white plates are allowed to be taken back to the rooms, and must be returned during your next meal. Eat all you like, magic affects all you kids differently, no need to be shy about your appetite."

[MEAT!] The Hawk shouted happily in his mind, drawing his attention to a pile of raw fish set along one side of the long counter. It looked like a grocery section, where you could pick out your own ingredients to take to your room, while the first half of the counter was prepared dishes.

"Then, pardon my hunger." Karl replied, and took a pair of white plates to fill for their dinner.

Pasta and meatballs with cream sauce, roasted pork, some sort of vegetable that gave off an incredible feeling of energy, and then an entire plate of raw meat for the Hawk.

"Well, that's one of the more interesting plates, for sure. But if you're in a room with a kitchen, you can cook it as you like. In the future, you can just ask the cook to prepare it if there's a special way you like your food." She explained.

"Thanks, I'll keep that in mind."

Karl retreated to his room while the Hawk pleaded pitifully to be fed. If this was how adorably needy all baby birds were, no wonder their mothers would go to the extremes of even chewing food for them. Fortunately, the Windspeed Hawk had an extremely sharp metallic beak and could bite through bone with ease, even as a newborn.

The meat chunks were all boneless, which the bird found disappointingly lacking in crunch, but the meat was all monster meat, high in nutrients and energy, and its body was growing at a visible rate under the pile of nourishment.

It somehow managed to chew through five times its body weight in ten minutes, and it was still pleading for the meatballs on Karl's plate as he finished his meal.

[Fine, one meatball. But after that, you need to wait for dinner.]

[When is that? I'm starving.] The bird complained, then burped loudly and fell asleep.

That certainly didn't seem like starvation to Karl.

By the time that it woke up, the Windspeed Hawk had grown to the size of a sparrow, and was happily flying around Karl's mental space, an exuberant distraction as he cleaned the balcony of leaves, which were set aside to be sorted for drying, and then watered the plants.

Everything here should be a magical resource of the most basic level, so even the leaves would likely be worth something if they were properly dried and preserved. The problem was that he wasn't sure if this garden was sanctioned by the school, or if they would view all the resources here as looted school property.

[Is it dinner yet? We should get crunchy food this time.] Hawk suggested.

[Sure, let's go down and see how everyone else is doing after I finish writing a letter.]

The bird was confused by the concept of a letter, but Karl wanted to write home to his parents to let them know that he was alright and settling in well at the Academy. The students wouldn't be home until the end of the school year, but he didn't recall any rule saying that they couldn't send a letter or a text message.

Not that either Karl or his parents could afford a cell phone, but that wasn't the point. Maybe he would get them one once he was finished training and started to get the elite stipend. If it was enough, he could probably even move them out of the mines and let them retire.

It only took a few minutes to finish the letter home, and Karl put it in the box by his door, which could be accessed from either the inside or the outside. That was where he had received and left the paperwork on the train, and it was where letters were picked up if you had to send them at home, so it should be the same here, Karl assumed.

The dining hall was packed with new students, mostly in rather rough shape, with torn clothes, covered in mud and grass stains, and a few sporting visible injuries.

Karl joined the line to grab dinner, then took a second plate, scooped an entire roast chicken on it, and transferred it to the beast taming space while nobody was watching him. Then he took another, added a collection of cheeses and snacks to it, and brought it to an empty table.

"You were the gauntlet guy from the first group, aren't you? I didn't get a good look at your face earlier." A girl with blonde hair and a heavily bruised face asked as he sat at the table next to hers.

"Yeah, might I ask, what happened? Everyone looks like they were beaten half to death." Karl asked.

"We were. I went with a group that understood going together for safety against the Earth Mice, and our lead warrior chased them off with a skill, but when we got to the second field, the plant monster was already going insane.

So, we thought it would be safer to go around, and we decided to try the treeline to the right." She paused and gently touched her face, then flinched.

"The one with the monstrous boars?" Karl asked.

"Oh, you already know?"

Karl nodded. "That's why we went through the field. I saw the marks of the boars on the trees, and recognized them from outside the mining town where I grew up."

The girl laughed. "It's me, Jasmine. I guess you really didn't recognize me with my face like this."

That explained why she didn't introduce herself when she started speaking, he should have already known her. Karl looked her over again. He was absolutely certain that when they left, the Jasmine that he knew had not been a blonde, and that she had been at least twenty kilos heavier than she was now.

"You look different. It must be the hair." Karl mumbled, not wanting to insult his classmate by mentioning what she used to look like.

Maybe it was puberty, but he should have noticed a change like that, he was sure of it. There were a few other familiar, but also not familiar, faces in the crowd. It was like everyone was a bit different than he remembered, and most of them had improved in the best of ways.

Come to think of it, he didn't remember sitting quite so tall at the table, and his uniform pants didn't quite reach his shoes anymore. That wasn't right, they definitely did this morning when he got off the train.

Maybe his Academy experience wasn't going to be a bad one after all. A little more height and he would catch up to his classmates.