

The First Legendary Beast Master #Chapter 101 Forgotten Temple - Read The First Legendary Beast Master Chapter 101 Forgotten Temple

Chapter 101 Forgotten Temple

They were standing in a lush green valley, as he had guessed from the sound, surrounded by mountains, with a massive golden pyramid temple in front of them.

The steps up each side pulsed with magic that he could feel even from hundreds of metres away, while between him and the temple stood thousands of glowing crystal golems, the same rainbow hue as the crystals that they had come here to recover.

"I'm going to guess that there was no warning about not touching the crystal with your bare skin. But wherever we are, we might be in trouble." Karl informed the others, who were a bit slower to adjust than he was.

"How did we get here? And holy hell, are those Golems? I want one." Dana gasped, shocking Karl with her unexpected language.

The Golems were beautiful, and they looked powerful, but if Thor's guess was right, they were far from friendly.

Thor activated his lightning barrier, ready to fight, but the Golems didn't move at all. They just stood there, watching the group of intruders from a distance.

Karl stepped forward to calm the nervous Cerro, not wanting to start an incident before everyone was recovered, and they had some idea what was going on. If touching the crystal brought them here, then doing it again on this side might send them all back.

That would likely be for the best if it was possible.

But when he got a few steps forward, a message appeared in the air in front of them.

[Welcome to the World Dragon Temple's Trial Instance]

"Do you see that?" Dana asked from behind him.

"I do, and I would rather that I didn't if it means we've got to fight those golems." Karl agreed.

"I think that we stepped into an ancient holy relic. The crystals must have been the ruins of its activation array before it was buried under the cavern, and now we're in some sort of trial ground that the World Dragon Church set up for their members." She added.

"That's not reassuring at all."

Though most of the holy relics from those ancient times didn't lead to death, a trial ground might, especially if it was damaged by time.

While they tried to make sense of the message, one of the Golems stepped forward.

[The trial is simple. Make it up the steps to claim your reward. If you fall down the steps, you may continue to attempt to pass your previous high mark.] The Golem spoke in a strange accent, directly into their minds.

The lines of Golems split, leaving the road empty, and Karl took another step forward with Thor between him and the crystal giant.

It made no move to attack, and Karl simply shrugged at the other students as he began to walk toward the golden temple.

If they had happened upon a holy relic, there was bound to be something left behind from the Mythical times, when magic users reigned supreme, and legendary beasts vied against dragons for supremacy of the skies.

According to the tales of his childhood, the World Dragon, and the World Dragon Church of those times, had made a pact that had allowed the humans to live glorious lives of power and wealth.

Now that the Elite Serum had been developed, Karl and everyone else knew that it was likely related to the System Stones, but the fairy tale only got more popular instead of fading once it was proven to be plausible historical fact.

Maybe he would learn what had happened to end those glorious times, and how such a powerful culture fell into ruin. This place looked intact, so it had to have survived hundreds of thousands of years of history, buried beneath the forest.

Behind him, the rest of the group moved in the defensive formation, with the mages and clerics in the middle row, and Dana taking up the rear as she did her best to examine the Golems for ideas on how to make one.

The clerics simply stared at everything with reverent awe. This was a holy relic, a legacy of their church, their own ancestors. Temples like these were the ancient seat of the church's power, the source of the healing magic that they had managed to sustain with their faith through even the darkest of times.

When they reached the clearing around the temple, another one of the Golems stepped in front of them, and seemed to stare at Thor, who was still bristling with lightning.

[There are four sides to the Temple, four staircases to walk, and four levels of difficulty to master the lessons of the Trial.

Walking up the first side will test your strength. It is the easiest, as strength can be trained by any of the chosen.

The second will test your magic. Like strength, magic can also be trained by any of the chosen, but it is the more difficult path.

The third side will test your will. Will can be tempered, but should the tempering fail, it will shatter and leave you broken. For that reason, the third side is the most dangerous.

The fourth side will test your affinity with fate.

Approach the temple and speak the side you wish to challenge. Each visitor may challenge one side per day. Every day you remain on a chosen side, the difficulty of the other sides will increase.]

All the students stared at each other in shock. What sort of trial was this? They just had to walk up the stairs, and it would test them somehow?

Then, Thor disappeared, and reappeared a second later on one of the staircases to the temple.

[Nothing is stronger than a Cerro.] Thor announced proudly in Karl's mind as he stepped onto the first stair and a crushing weight seemed to descend upon him.

[See, nothing at all.] He gloated, then took another step and the weight doubled.

One more step and he began to reconsider his position.

[Except maybe these stairs.] He amended when he was forced to a stop.

There were a thousand steps, by Karl's estimation, to get to the top. Thor was struggling at step three and had come to a stop at step five.

"Well, that's how it's done, I guess. Just will yourself to the trial you desire, and see how that works out for you. We will stay here as long as we can, at a very minimum, we will stay four days, so we can try all the routes. We have enough resources for that in our packs, and it's only half a day to the train tracks." Karl informed the group.

"I like the way you think, team leader. Now, let's go do the trial before the clerics start crying in joy." One of the warriors laughed.

"Have you two taken the Divine Injection yet?" Karl asked the clerics as the rest of the group began to move forward.

They shook their heads. "Not until next year. We're still trainees at the Seminary School."

"Then this will be quite a day for you. Just do the best that you can, and maybe start with the magic route, since you've got some skill with holy magic already."

Karl let Hawk and Rae out of their spaces, and Hawk immediately vanished from sight, going to one of the tests that they couldn't see from their position.

The mages and warriors all seemed to still be visible, so it would be willpower and fate that were on the far side of the temple.

Rae went to join Thor on the strength training side, as she wasn't confident in her magical abilities, while Karl considered what route he should try first. The Golem said one route a day, so he would try willpower first, as that was one that he was more confident in.

Chapter 102 Willpower

Once you had learned to get past the fear and claustrophobia of the crushing depths of the mines, not many things would bother you. Plus, he had noticed that his will was stronger than most thanks to the beasts, and that might earn him some reward.

There were only a few others on the willpower testing stairs when Karl arrived. Hawk, plus the female cleric student and one mage.

Karl set foot on the first step, and a sense of doubt began to set in. What if the test rewards were only for the first trial? Surely, it would have been better to go to the other stairwells first in that case.

But Karl kept to his decision, and took another step.

The more that he thought about it, the more likely it was that this was also a test of character. Would the temple think that he had nothing else going for him but pure determination? He had met dozens of students like that in the accuracy training sessions.

They had remarkable willpower to keep going, keep training and grinding away every single day, but where did that get them? It got them to the bottom of the class, that was where.

Because willpower was all that they had.

Karl had talent. He had magic, he had strength. If he had tested those first, the temple would still see his determination, his willpower to keep going. Why had he chosen this staircase?

Another step and another, as the self-doubt crept in and the world around him faded until Karl could only sense what was around him. He barely noticed as he passed the mage, who was on the fifth step and in the middle of an existential crisis, or when he passed Hawk on the seventh step, who had stopped to have a little snack before he continued.

The Golem hadn't said anything about being timed. Perhaps Hawk had the right of it, and you should save your strength and keep refreshed.

No, if he stopped, it would be that much harder to get going again.

Karl made it past the tenth step, and the world completely vanished around him, leaving him in a vision of the mines. He was trapped in a collapse, his legs pinned, but ahead of him was another miner, closer to the emergency bell, and gasping for breath.

The man's rebreather was broken, but he could get to the button.

Karl took off the miner's mask he was wearing and threw it to his struggling coworker, then held his breath against the toxic fumes as the faceless man scrambled for the button, and the emergency supplies locker beside it.

Ten more seconds, that was all he needed. Ten seconds and the man would be coming back to throw him a new mask.

Nine, eight, Karl struggled to hold on. If he passed out, he would start breathing again, and the toxic fumes would linger in his lungs, adding a bit more permanent damage to the lifetime of injuries that a miner would suffer.

In his mind, Karl was still young, he hadn't taken the Divine Serum yet, and he knew that childhood lung injuries could ruin a man before he even became a man, leaving him useless underground. He would hold on, he had to.

Then the miner was back and slapping the mask over his face with a blast of fresh, compressed air and Karl was back in the real world, looking at the staircase in front of him.

"What was that?" He muttered as he looked at the steps in front of him.

The Golem had said that it would test his willpower, but it didn't say anything about that.

Another step forward and the reluctance built. This was an impossible task, There was no way that anyone was going to make it to the top with that sort of horror in their minds. No wonder the mage had stopped, and the cleric girl was moving so slowly, this was torture.

Worse, it was self-inflicted torture, with no promise of rewards.

There was no reason for him to keep going, he could just go back down and relax for the rest of the day. Maybe the warriors would be able to use the strength wall as a training event. He could go there tomorrow and try it as a gym day, building some muscle strength as he tried to move his physique toward Ascended.

But even with the doubts in his mind, Karl forced himself forward another step.

There was definitely a reason he picked this side. He couldn't remember what it was right now, but he was certain that this was the right side for him to test himself on first.

That thought got him through two more steps before he realized that you were unable to see the other stairs once you were on one. How would anyone even know if he did well? He could just slack off and wait here for hours and then tell everyone that he did well.

It was just the cleric and one mage here, and they were both lost in their own minds already. They wouldn't say anything against him.

But another step reminded Karl that he had work to do, he would make it to the top and find out what sort of recognition he could get from the temple.

But another step reminded Karl that he had work to do, he would make it to the top and find out what sort of recognition it was impressed with his determination, his willpower, maybe it would grant him a boon of some sort, a bit of magic that would help him in his training.

Training the beasts. That was his ultimate goal, to help them grow and let them pull him up to the top with them. He couldn't be less determined than they were. Even Rae was out in the sunshine, testing her strength on the stairs, he could feel the pressure that she was under, as if a mountain was trying to crush her to the stone steps, but her spindly little legs were still holding strong and pushing her upward.

That was determination, that was willpower. He would keep going. Even Hawk was moving again, now that he had realized that the cake was a lie, and that whatever delicacy he had seen was just a way that the temple used to convince him to stop, to give up and not progress any further.

The sun began to set over them when Karl forced himself to the forty-first stair, pulling his mind out of a nightmare of desperation, where he had lost everything, even his pets while trapped and starving here in this broken relic with no way out.

"Well, that one hit a bit too close to home. I've got this, one more step." Karl mumbled to himself, unconcerned if anyone thought that he was a madman.

Then the sun settled below the horizon, and Karl, along with everyone else who was still undergoing the trials, found himself standing in the grass near the second Golem who had spoken to them.

[The trials last one day at the most.] The Golem informed them, then went back to its silent judgment of their efforts.

"Perhaps we should have waited until morning to start our first attempt, but I think that we did pretty well." Dana mumbled as she lay on the grass, staring at the darkening sky.

"I'm not sure if we would survive a whole day of that. Even with these few hours, I had to back down two steps near the end because the weight was becoming too much to bear." One of the warriors replied.

"Well, there's always tomorrow. But first, we should make some dinner and set up camp." Karl reminded them.

He was not going anywhere near the willpower steps again, tomorrow or ever. He had done enough of that.

Chapter 103 Setting Camp

Setting up the camp proved that there had been some serious oversights in their mission training. It was assumed that the leaders would be experienced, and not just powerful first years who had never actually used any of the kit before.

So, an hour after dark, they were only just finally managing to get the tents set up around a small magical fire that they assumed was intended to be their campsite.

It was made of flaming rocks, which gave off a gentle blue glow, as well as a level of warmth that reminded everyone that while this was a magical realm, it was still getting colder at night.

For most of the students that wasn't a big deal, but some of them came from the warmer climates, or from the big cities, where the apartment buildings were maintained at a steady temperature. They weren't expecting how fast it got cold out, even with the fire nearby, and many had chosen to pitch their tents further away for privacy.

That situation changed quickly, and the students who had camped further from the fire found themselves moving out of their tents and coming forward.

Karl and Dana had both chosen spots near the fire, but not because they knew about the temperature. They were both used to it getting cold at night and were somewhat used to the change, but they had wanted to be closer to the centre so that they could respond evenly to an attack from any direction.

Both Golems and Rae were on lookout for the early portion of the evening, while Hawk would be taking over from Rae later so that they would both have enough sleep tonight. They could both see well enough in the dark, with the simulated stars overhead, but nothing that they were seeing was enough to concern them, and Karl didn't wake until Hawk informed him that it was first light and that Thor was being annoying.

The Lightning Cerro had realized that many of the students couldn't sleep in their cold tents, so he had volunteered his large, warm body to help them out. Which naturally led to the students going around in the morning to find snacks for their scaly benefactor, and a lot more movement than the grumpy Hawk would have preferred.

One of the students tapped a spoon against his metal canteen to get everyone's attention.

"Everyone, bring out the breakfast packs and anything you have to season them. If you brought something that you think looks good, you can bring it out as well. What I'm going to make this morning is known as a cowboy stew.

I'm not sure how many of you know how to cook at all, but I grew up on a cattle ranch, and we learned that if everyone brings a different bit of the basics, we can actually make one large decent meal out of ten lousy ones." The boy explained.

The students that Karl had set to pick berries each brought out a couple, as well as the packs of dry oatmeal, granola and dried fruit that were in the breakfast ration pack.

The rancher's son brought out a pot that he had managed to stuff into the bottom of his pack, and one of the mages filled it halfway up with a water spell. Then he added all the various ingredients in, and Karl brought him three sticks to create a tripod to hang it over the fire, the way his mother did at home in the summer.

It got too hot to cook inside, and this method was much better for cooking over the fire pit in the yard.

Then, Karl brought out the masterpiece of the meal, much to Hawk's annoyance. A large piece of Iron Tusk Boar meat at the Common Rank. One of the last pieces from the very first boars that they had killed during the fight against the Goblin Tribe, and a food product that Hawk routinely ignored, in favour of the many better options in his space.

Food didn't go bad in there, it seemed to be in stasis. So, though Karl couldn't keep books in there, all forms of food and other resources were a valid option, and it was going to make their breakfast much more enjoyable.

One of the mages scrubbed off a flat rock, and began cutting the meat into small cubes, making forty of them in total, then conjured a collection of long sticks and began to skewer them.

"Now, this is what I'm talking about. See, everyone, with just one chunk of meat and a few berries, we're all going to be eating well today." The warrior stirring the oatmeal gloated.

They weren't master chefs, and some of the kebabs got a bit burnt on the edges, but the oatmeal was fruity instead of bland, with no dried chunks of leathery mystery fruit to gnaw on. That left each of them with a small package of nuts left over, and the drink mix to go in the plastic drink pouches if they wanted something other than water.

Once they finished eating, Karl stood to address the group.

"Alright, you can try the same site again, if you think that you will gain something from it, or you can try a different one. I know we all discussed our experience last night, and the willpower side was definitely not the most popular among the options, but for those of you with trouble concentrating on your abilities, it might still be a valid and valuable training resource.

Take some time to choose your path. You can only do one a day, so there is no need to rush right to the wall this instant. I will see you all when we get back, but don't forget to bring water and something to eat, in case you find a spot you wish to train on all day." He informed the group.

As terrible as the willpower stairs were, his meditation last night had made huge strides in the improvement of the living spaces for his pets, and Karl was briefly tempted to go back, just to see if he could meditate on the higher steps and improve the beast spaces even more rapidly.

If the spaces were at their peak, it might make it easier for the three beasts to grow. Hawk was certainly advancing far beyond what anyone would expect of a Windspeed Hawk.

But it was also possible that what they needed was a more magical environment. Karl was human, they were all magical beasts. What if the real limitation was the fact that he had a virtually nonexistent mana pool?

He might not think of it the same way that a mage did, but ultimately, the energy needed to use [Rend] was still magical energy, so there should be some merit to going up the mana improvement stairs.

The warriors of the ancient times had powers beyond anything that he could dream of holding for himself, so was it possible that they did it by having a well-rounded set of abilities, and not some super rare class and an Immortal Ancient bloodline that allowed them to leave their competition in the dust?

Three of the sides of the pyramid appeared to be intended to train every aspect that a true warrior could need, and they were intending to stay here longer, so there was no

harm in using one of the days on the mana stairs. Even if they didn't help much, he could still meditate and make the best of his time.

Hawk had the same idea. He had tested his willpower, and the stairs had tested his appetite. So today he would train his magical stamina instead. Rae had decided to stay on the strength stairs to build her rapidly growing body to a standard she was happy with, while Thor didn't see any other option than strength as being worthwhile.

All the warriors were with him on that one, except for one Berserker who was staring toward the willpower stairs, which startled everyone around him.

"Are you thinking of building your willpower to extend the amount of time that you can maintain the pain nullification and enhancement of Berserk? I think it should work. I trained for a few days with Professor Tank, learning how to fight against and alongside Berserkers, and there was a lot of willpower involved on his end." Karl encouraged the young fighter.

The mention of the massive Berserker made the warriors smile as they reminisced about meeting him, and that steeled the boy's resolve.

"One day, I will be as mighty as him." He agreed, then stepped up to the guardian Golem and vanished to his chosen trial.

One by one, the rest split up, and Karl found himself standing next to Dana at the bottom of the mana staircase.

"You're training mana with Hawk? That's unexpected." She commented as Karl stared up the staircase.

"Magical beasts, magical energy. I think it will help. If not, I've wasted a day, but I can meditate on the steps." Karl shrugged.

"Well, if you're willing to risk it, I won't stop you. Good luck, I'll look back now and then to see how you're doing." Dana laughed as she set off up the stairs.

The first few weren't going to pose any problems to her, especially now that she knew how it worked, but the moment that Karl put his foot on the first step and felt the overwhelming magical force on his body, he knew that he was not going to be impressing anyone today.

Chapter 104 Mana Stairs

Karl managed to make it to the third step before the crushing weight of the mana test forced him to a stop, freezing his body in place and preventing him from taking another step.

There was an enormous amount of power around him, and he had very little clue about what to do with it. It wasn't the same as the energy in his beast spaces, but it was similar. It almost felt like an unformed magical attack, power waiting for guidance.

That was a concept that he understood a bit better. The energy that he used to form attacks came through the beast space, normally Hawk's as Karl hadn't tried really using any ability but Rend and Shred. He could use the Lightning Shield to a comfortable standard, and Offensive Optimization was more of a passive ability that worked all the time, so it was the one space where he normally got his power.

But if he reversed that path, taking the outside power and pulling it back into the space, would that improve them? There was one way to find out, and this trial hadn't hurt any of the mages who drew the power in, so it should be safe enough.

Karl stood motionless on the third step as the mages all walked past him with curious looks. The worst of them had made it to the fifth step yesterday, but Karl, who was much more powerful, was stuck on the third.

From their point of view, the test definitely favoured mages, and they had made the right choice to keep training their strengths before worrying about their weaknesses. Their strengths were still weak enough that they couldn't be neglected.

Karl managed to get a trickle of energy to flow into the three spaces, filling them with sparkling motes of light that slowly integrated themselves with the constructs that Karl had made to flesh the spaces out into their own small worlds.

He did his best to meditate as he stood there, frozen in place, and the trickle eventually became, well, it was still a trickle, Karl couldn't lie to himself and call it more than that, but it was a steady one.

The plant life was multiplying, improving the lake in Hawk's space, the grasslands in Thor's and the bushes in Rae's home, while also condensing a stronger energy inside. The expansion rate was still the same as it had been last night, but the quality of the space was actually improving now.

That hadn't really been the case before. It would improve a little when Karl focused on adding an element, but mostly he improved the size of it so that it would stabilize and allow the pet's energy to feed back to him.

Karl wasn't sure how much time had passed when the burden on him began to lessen, and he managed to move up another step. But he noticed that the sun was no longer overhead, and it was on the side of his face when he moved up to the fifth stair.

The team was going to be overjoyed when they got back home tonight. Karl's lake was an actual lake now, with small silver fish made of pure energy flitting about in it, Thor's grasslands had a number of solid stone pillars that he shouldn't be able to break and

enough room to get a good run at them, while Rae's dark bushes now had a half dozen trees, placed so that she could spin a web between them all to create the ultimate nest.

The energy level was noticeably higher, and it was beginning to feel closer to the mana rich atmosphere of the mage training areas than the open training fields where the warriors worked at the Academy.

Karl continued right until the sun touched the horizon and the Golems kicked them all out, then went back to sit around the campfire, where the self-appointed cook was collecting ingredients for the evening meal.

"We're doing the beef stew packages today, if you could toss me yours." Their designated cook announced as Karl walked up.

"Yeah, give me a second, it's in the tent."

The clerics had collected a number of herbs while they were out, as well as some edible roots when the group stopped outside the cave, so although they didn't have any rations with them, they could still contribute to the pot.

The roots weren't very nutritious, but they were large, and they added volume to the meal, making it look even more impressive. The rations were supposed to be lightweight and easy to pack, but that meant calorie dense, not large and filling.

They were just about to settle down with the pot full of rations heating when the cleric girl seemed to have a flash of inspiration, and she began mumbling a spell while glowing with soft golden light.

Nobody dared to interrupt her. This was a World Dragon Temple, and she was a priestess. A trainee priestess without much power to speak of, but still, a priestess of sorts.

As her spell finished, she spread a cloth out in front of her, and a large golden orb began to form in the air in front of her hands. Then, it solidified, and a large ball of soft white grains fell to the ground, landing on the cloak that she had spread.

"I did it. I finally got the spell to work. That, my friends, is the sign of a true magical Acolyte of the church. Blessing of Nutrition." She declared in a tiny, quiet voice.

It was rice. Nearly five kilos of it, Karl was certain.

That was far more than they would be able to eat even in a few days, but Karl had seen this magic before. The priests who came to town to help the poor would use their magic to create a giant pot full of rice and beans that would feed hundreds.

This was just the rice, but it was more than enough for today.

Karl patted her on the back in congratulations, then scooped up a bit of the rice with the bowl that attached to the bottom half of his canteen. He poured a bit of water over the top and set it by the fire to cook, signalling the others to do the same.

"Good work. Now we don't need to worry about running out of food so quickly. Even an extra day or two here will be a great help to everyone's training." Karl congratulated her.

The boy beside her looked both jealous and proud, as if he was envious of her achievement, but unable to hold a grudge over it. Instead of trying to copy her to show off, he began to pray and created a soft golden glow over them all that soothed aching muscles and minds. It wasn't a fully formed spell, but it was close enough to a minor healing spell to refresh the students and allow them to fully relax as they waited for their aching muscles and minds. It wasn't a fully formed spell, but it was close enough to a minor healing spell to refresh the dinner to be ready, now accompanied by a large portion of rice.

"How is everyone else doing? Is the training on the temple stairs giving you real results?" Karl asked as his beasts finished their patrol around the camp and returned to the beast spaces.

"It is for the mages, for certain. The amount of mana that I can handle is up by nearly a quarter. But more importantly, I gained an insight into how to make it grow more quickly even after we leave." Dana agreed.

The other mages nodded happily, as they had been sharing the trick with each other on the stairs all day.

The warriors decided that flexing and posing would be more appropriate, though Karl couldn't tell if they were actually any more muscular than they had been a day ago.

"I can't say for certain how much of a difference it is without something to test against, but I've made it four more steps today than I did yesterday. If this pace keeps up, then I think that I will be able to pass the Awakened Warrior exam after another week at the most." One of them explained.

"Alright. Enjoy your dinner, we will be headed back to train first thing in the morning. Make a plan, I doubt that we will get another chance like this again, unless we can return here." Karl reminded them.

The cleric girl shook her head. "This is a trial ground. Most of these can only be accessed at set intervals, or worse, once in a lifetime. After we leave, it could be a long time before anyone can use this place again, but I will make sure that the clergy marks it off as a protected holy relic so that nobody destroys the crystals that operate the entrance."

That was what Karl was afraid of. There were other holy relics that opened only on certain holidays, and the serum could only be used once in a lifetime. But they had been able to use this one, and he was going to make the very best of it.

So far, he had tested his willpower, which helped him grow the size of the beast space while meditating, and his mana control, which helped him improve the power of his beast space, so tomorrow, he could either focus on the mana control, which needed the most help, or on his body, which was already strong, and improved at a fraction of the rate that the pets were improving.

The initial burst of power that he had gotten from the pets had been impressive, but after that, the feedback was limited and his growth was slow. He would need a lot of training to get physically powerful, but if he focused on the pets, his combat power would shoot up much faster, and eventually drag his body along with it.

Chapter 105 Quality Over Quantity

The answer was made when the beasts settled into their improved homes.

[Oh, this is nice. I can feel the power soothing my muscles. Whatever you did today, do it again.] Rae commended him as she spun an expanded web between the new trees.

[Yes, this is the right improvement. I can feel myself getting more powerful.] Hawk agreed.

The two of them waited for Thor to say something, but he was staring in wonder at one of the stone pillars.

[Did you make a smashing pillar for me? You are too kind.]

He was nearly tearful with joy over the addition of the pillars, and the other two beasts immediately discounted anything else he said for the evening. Like giving Hawk an extra rare species of meat, the Lightning Cerro had been bribed with the thing he wanted most, and his opinion was unreliable.

Karl considered their answers for a moment, and then replied.

[Alright, I will go back to the mana training tomorrow and see how much I can improve the spaces for you all. After all, the faster you grow strong, the faster I grow strong in return.]

A good night's sleep brought about some notable changes to the trio. Not so much to Hawk, but Thor was a full hand taller than he had been yesterday, enough that it was immediately noticeable to everyone when he came out for some attention in the morning, but Rae was the one who caught everyone's attention.

She was not only larger, but the armoured chitin on her legs was beginning to turn the deep crimson that helped to give the Bloodbath Spider its name. As they grew older and more powerful, the red would spread up from the claws until her entire legs and portions of her black underbelly were deep crimson, as if she had been standing in a pool of blood.

She wouldn't lose the short black fur on her body, but the carapace underneath would change colour as a warning to others that she was not to be trifled with, and no longer needed to hide in the darkness.

Karl hadn't expected it to begin so early, as she wasn't even fully grown yet. The training must have been good for her, not discriminating against users, even if they were not human.

"Rae is looking really powerful. I didn't know that spiders got that big." One of the warriors noted.

"That's not even half grown for a Bloodbath Spider. When she's full-grown, she will be able to grab and flip an armoured car with her legs. They're scary enough that even the team that took me to the wilderness to find new pets didn't want to meet the adult version. I got Rae here as an egg." Karl explained.

The warrior wasn't quite sure he believed Karl's bragging, but that spider was huge, and if it was still growing, it was going to be nightmare fuel for countless students. All the ones here had met Rae, and knew that she was friendly, but if she crept up on them in the dark, they would still freak out.

Karl returned to the mana enhancement stairs, and slowly made his way to the fourth, and then the fifth stair to begin his training. That shocked the mages a little, as they had all expected him to go work with the warriors today to complete the rotation, but with two of the three pets there already, Karl was more concerned about making sure that their homes could keep up with them.

That day, the progress up the stairs began to really increase for Karl. He was getting the hang of pulling energy in from the outside to feed the beast space, whereas before he was only converting food to energy to build them. With him starting at rock bottom, he had nowhere to go but up, and by the end of the day, he had moved from the fifth step up to the tenth, where the pressure was immense on him, but he could still effectively channel more power than the step before.

That was enough to get ahead of their growth needs, and the beast spaces were actually starting to look like islands in the void. There was no real sky or anything like it, other than a few fake stars Karl had put in Rae's darkened space to simulate nighttime, but they had a fair amount of land after two days of training on the stairs.

But compared to Karl's internal improvements, the others were beginning to show real signs of the gains that they had made here.

Both of the clerics eyes shone with a faint golden light, the mages were all filled to the brim with power, and the warriors were becoming the toned and muscular Elites that they had dreamed of being since they found out that they were compatible with the Serum.

They were well into the afternoon, and everyone was exhausted and ready to turn in when the Golems made an announcement. Speaking in unison, their magical voices reached every one of the students.

[You now have twenty-four hours remaining in your trial. Choose your last day's event wisely.]

Those words sent a wave of panic through the group. They had no idea that there was a four-day time limit on the trials. Many of them had intended to try to push through to the Awakened Rank, then spend a few days checking on the other sides, just in case they could gain something important from them.

Karl didn't have any particular regrets. His body was already stronger than his mind, so testing his willpower and mana made the most sense. The question was: What would he do for the last day?

He could balance it out, and go for the willpower side again, but something told him that the neglected stairs, the random gamble that was the Fate Challenge was going to be much more entertaining.

It might only be good for a story around the campfire, but all of them should have some sort of affinity with fate, since they all passed the trial of the Divine Serum, and proved themselves compatible.

That settled it. He had gained what he needed from the stairs. He learned how to more effectively expand the beast spaces, and he could ask Rae and Thor about the effectiveness of the body training. So, he would take a chance on the final day, and he would go for the fate stairs to see what would happen.

Chapter 106 Fate Stairs

The next morning, the team realized that they might not have been as prepared as they thought that they were. They had only packed a week worth of rations, which were now over half gone, and they were almost out of the berries for the oatmeal flavouring, which would leave them with just the dehydrated bits that came in the ration pack.

They didn't have to worry about starvation any time soon with the clerics available, but the variety of their diet would soon begin to disappear if they spent too long in the woods before returning to the train tracks.

But with the time limit imposed by the trials, they would be outside today, and once the cleric trainees had properly marked the spot on their maps as a holy relic, they could be on their way to give the news of their trip to the church.

Before he went to the Fate Stairs, Karl stopped next to one of the Golems, hoping that it would answer a question for him.

"Excuse me, do you know how often this trial can be accessed?" He inquired politely, with the assumption that a bit of courtesy might get the magical construct to answer.

[The Trials open at the will of the World Dragon.]

Karl bowed and stepped away, then focused on being sent to the Fate Stairs. The answer he got was both informative and useless at the same time. If it opened at the will of the Golden Dragon God, the World Dragon as it was sometimes known, then there was no way that he could predict the next opening date for anyone who asked.

But what he could confirm was that it would open again at some point. If the Church kept a close watch on this place, they would probably be able to tell when it would open.

The Fate Stairs were different from any of the other sides. They were cloaked in thick black shadows, which made Rae immediately regret going back to strength training. That darkness looked wonderful to her, but Karl suspected that it had some other purpose.

It was likely something along the lines of everyone's fate is their own, so you could only see your own path forward, and everything else was shadowed, but it could also be intended to change if you stepped away from the path you were on.

Could that be what it was meant to do? Show you ways to change your fate through the decisions that you made? There were Oracles among the Elites, blind seers of the future, and their visions were uncannily accurate. This could be the same sort of magic, but built into a massive temple to show more than just a glimpse of the possible futures.

One step forward brought him onto the first stair, and Karl looked upward, seeing visions of first power and glory, then tragedy in front of him. But to his left and right on the second step were misty figures of himself.

Instinctively, he knew that he could step up toward one of them and see what changes would be made if he changed the first major event along this timeline. From what he could see, he returned to the Academy and claimed credit for leading the team that found a Holy Relic.

It would make him a darling of the church and the media. His fame would rise even faster than his power would, but after some time, that fame would fade, and the lingering resentment of those who had lived in his shadow would leave him alone in the world, discarded by those he had left behind.

Both of the options would reject that next step, but neither were clear to him. Karl's first thought was to step to the left, but he found that he could only move forward unless some condition was set.

Perhaps he needed to make a choice? If he decided not to claim the find, but instead attributed it to the group, the glory would be shared between all of them and the clerics.

He thought that he could also imply that it was the presence of the future servants of the Golden Dragon that caused the trials to activate, but then how could he explain that he knew it was all at the will of the Gods, or keep them from ending up in that same discarded and shunned state he saw for himself?

It was better to put it all down to chance. They had been the first ones here after the World Dragon had willed that the trials be opened, so they were pulled in. Glory to the World Dragon and all that pious sentiment.

Yes, that seemed best.

Karl saw the path to the right begin to become a bit more clear, and resolved to make that the reality. He would instruct the others, and say that he had seen a vision on the Fate Stairs instructing him to give glory to the World Dragon. Few would argue with that, and those in power would be more inclined to listen.

Karl stepped up to the right, and a new future path became clearer in front of him. In this one, the ten members of the team all became much stronger, and began to surpass the average, becoming notable among the Elites of the Academy.

His mind began to spin as the visions of ten different people's futures were slowly played out in front of him, and Karl saw the impact that a single decision could have on the futures of everyone around him.

He didn't see any horrible endings for them, they would all end up with some level of success and recognition, while their two clerics would become pillars of the church.

The Pillars were those in favour of the Gods, who could use Holy Magic at Royal Rank or higher. Each of them would gain a boon from their chosen deity, a special spell that only they could use. From what Karl remembered, the current head of the church naturally followed the World Dragon, and was granted the boon of Rebirth. He could bring the dead back to life, with some limitations.

What those limits were, Karl didn't know, but there was video footage of him resurrecting a murdered cleric after an attack on one of the churches near the border. Every student in the Golden Dragon Nation had seen that footage in primary school.

With such bright futures for everyone in the vision, Karl took a step forward and found himself somewhere entirely different.

He was still on a staircase, but one with no start and no ending point. It simply floated in a sea of stars, and a sense of power and timelessness surrounded him.

The first trial must have been to choose a path for your immediate future. Once you found a decision that you were content with, or intended to follow through, the vision ended.

But this place didn't have any instructions. He could go up or down endlessly, it didn't seem to matter which he chose, though upward was generally seen as the correct way. You should strive to work hard and move beyond, up the social ranks, increasing in reputation, up was used to signify all things beneficial.

But down seemed so much easier. If he were going to travel indefinitely, he could certainly make it further going down than up. His strength and willpower would last longer, and he would see so much more if it were going to give him visions or rewards.

Then an absolutely insane notion came to mind. This was just a staircase floating in the nothingness. The mental spaces where he kept Hawk and the others began as an empty void as well. If he simply stepped off the side, what would happen?

Could he continue walking as he wished? Would he fall endlessly? The curiosity was egging him on, encouraging him to do something wild, just because he didn't know and couldn't know what would happen.

As he considered it, Karl felt a sense of curiosity and amusement flow into the space. Not his own, but as if there were someone or something watching him. Someone who could read his thoughts.

"A little help here? What way is the right way?" Karl called into the nothingness.

For nearly a minute, nothing happened, though the sense of amusement remained.

Then the whisper of a man's voice filled the space.

[There is no right way. There is definitely a wrong way. But there is only your way.] It spoke.

Dammit. He was terrible at riddles and brain-teaser type problems.

There was no right way, only his way, but there was a wrong way for it to be his way? Or his way was destined to be the wrong way?

Jumping off the side of the staircase was beginning to look like a better option than trying to figure out what way was the best, and that feeling was increasing by the second.

Karl took the ration pack spoon out of his pocket and began to flip it in his hand as he considered his options. Over and over it flipped, then Karl noticed something odd. The more he focused on the spoon, the slower it spun, as if gravity stopped working correctly because Karl was focused on the spoon being where it was.

That gave Karl an idea. He would go up. Not up the stairs, but straight up into the air.

So, he crouched and gathered his strength, then jumped, flying high above the staircase for one brief glorious moment, seeing the staircase fade into the distance beneath him as if he were a God himself, floating through the universe.

Before landing exactly where he started.

[Not very bright, is he?] Karl heard a second voice ask.

[But entertaining.] The first whispered, and then Karl was back in the grass next to the campsite.

Chapter 107 Skill Master

Karl looked around the camp site and realized that it was mid-afternoon. Over six hours had passed since he left, though it only felt like a few minutes in his mind.

He went to move toward the fire, where there should be some fresh skewers to cook meat for lunch, and nearly tripped over a small golden chest at his feet. That wasn't anything that he had seen before, but the moment he touched it, the chest vanished from his hands, and a burst of knowledge entered his mind.

[Taming Ability: Skill Master] Increases the chance of a beast learning new skills when actively used during training.

Was that what his class was supposed to be? He wasn't just collecting the beasts and creating a place for them to grow strong, he was supposed to be teaching them new skills as well? Was that even possible without the help of the Skill Books?

They were a powerful magical item, and it had taken the Inscriptionist group nearly a decade to learn how to make them, but this new ability Karl had been rewarded with seemed like he would be able to teach them new magical abilities at will. Hawk had

been able to use [Wind Shield], so if it was the right element, they might even be able to learn magical spells.

There was more to the knowledge than just the title, and as Karl focused on the skill, he began to understand the way that it should be used. With the skill active and the beast watching the ability that you wanted them to learn, as well as some related resources as needed to increase their compatibility, he should be able to teach them to use an incredible variety of new skills.

They lived at the Academy, there should be all sorts of skills available to watch on any given day. He might even be able to teach his pets some of the skills that the others already knew.

Karl brought up Thor's lightning barrier around himself to help clear and focus his mind, as well as recover from the strain of the previous days' trials and three nights sleeping on the ground. If he could teach this to Rae, how much more dangerous would she become? Or [Shred]. If she could learn that ability, she would absolutely annihilate anything that she attacked.

The real question was if she would be compatible with either of them. Karl couldn't see Thor being capable of using Offensive Adaptation or Rend without some major attunement, or Hawk using Refreshing Lightning as he needed the delicate adjustments of airflow over his wings to fly.

But Rae might be able to use some new attack abilities, or possibly even fog, or a stealth skill, as her body coloration would naturally adapt to her surroundings. Just thinking about the possibilities was getting Karl excited, and the beasts weren't even finished their daily training for him to try anything.

So, he passed some time meditating, and improving the beast spaces while he wasn't on the stairs, giving himself a chance to compare the two training environments.

The difference was depressingly obvious. Though he had learned the technique to improve both the size and quality of the space while he was in the trial, his actual effectiveness at it when he was not partaking in the trial was less than a tenth as high. It would take him a month to get as much gain as he did in two days on the mana training stairs.

But compared to before he had learned and refined the techniques here, it was still much faster. That one month, which would feel so long after being on the stairs, was still equal to an entire semester or longer before they had gotten this opportunity.

So, there was no denying that this Holy Relic was a massive improvement for anyone lucky enough to have been able to enter, or that the change would have lasting benefits that could help them through their entire life.

As the sun got closer to the horizon, the other students began to tire of their training, and prepare to head back for the night. They had gotten an incredible amount from the Holy Relic so far, and most of them were only staying until the day ended out of general principle.

So, when the first one to come back early arrived, he wasn't expecting to see Karl sitting by the fire, and he certainly wasn't expecting the small silver box that appeared in his hands.

"What is this?" He asked nobody in particular.

"Try opening it. I got a gift from mine." Karl replied, eager to find out what the others would be rewarded with.

The warrior pressed the latch, and the lid popped open, then the small chest vanished, and a large flaming sword appeared in his hands.

"This is... wow."

Karl nodded in agreement. "That is pretty astonishing. I don't know what you're going to do about the safety measures needed to carry a giant flaming sword everywhere, though."

The boy smiled, and the sword vanished. "The chest says that it is bonded to me, I can use it at will and dismiss it when it is not in use. That will be so useful later, being able to have a blade in reserve on occasions when carrying a weapon is forbidden."

"You've got a point. Especially after you graduate and take up a job of some sort. If you're in an office somewhere, you're not going to be able to keep weapons handy all the time, and if you get an emergency call, it would take quite a while to go to your car, or run to the nearest armoury to get them.

Plus, it's a giant flaming sword. How cool is that?" Karl agreed.

A few minutes later, another student came back, one of the mages, and she was clearly nursing a sore head. She must have over exerted herself in the rush to get a gain before the trial ended, and had to leave early.

She tripped over the small silver box in front of her, as Karl nearly had with his golden one, and landed on the ground holding her head.

The warrior was only a few steps away, not quite fast enough to catch her, but he was there a split second after.

"Are you alright? You tripped over the reward from the trial. Pick it up and open it when your head feels better." The boy told her, eager to see what she would get.

If he got a sword, then the mages might get a spell, or a wand or something equally amazing.

It took her a few minutes to recover, but she picked up the box with curious reverence, as if it might crumble in her hands, but she simply had to see what was in it. The box was tiny, and nearly fit in the palm of one hand, but when she opened it, a large book appeared in its place.

For a few seconds, she was silent, likely listening to the trial inform her of what she had been granted, and then she began to squeal and dance around happily.

"I got a spellbook. An actual spellbook." She cheered as she dismissed the book and pulled the warrior into a swinging happy dance.

"That is remarkable. So, you can just cast all those spells by looking at the book?" He asked.

"Even better. I can just cast all those spells because I know them now. But if I hold the book, I get a bonus to my magical damage and mana recovery rate." She explained.

Then the influx of students began, as the trial forced them all from the stairs as the sun went down.

[You will be ejected from this space in twelve hours. The trial is now complete.] The crystal Golems announced, while all the students were still staring in wonder at the small boxes in their hands.

Some looked like jewellery boxes, some were small treasure chests, and a few of them seemed to be poorly wrapped holiday presents. There was likely some method to the madness, Karl assumed.

Then he noticed the colours. Almost all of them were silver, but Dana's was a small gold chest as his had been, and the worst wrapped of the lot were all in bronze paper.

It might be based on their accomplishment while here in the trial, as Karl and Dana were the most advanced and best prepared to begin with, but Karl suspected that it had something to do with their power levels, or some outstanding student who had been a bit slow at the start of the school year likely would have gotten a gold box as well.

Chapter 108 Rewards

The quality of the reward was also directly linked to the quality of the package. Not that any of them were useless, or anything less than a priceless treasure, but there was definitely bias being shown in the rewarding process.

The items that came from the bronze wrapping paper were mostly trinkets and pieces of jewellery that would help with growth or strength. But the items from the Silver category were more practical.

They included mostly weapons, the mage's spellbook, and in one case a scroll that would let the user pick one new combat skill from a set list.

But Karl had gotten a rather incredible new class skill that would let him easily teach the beasts new skills, and Dana had gotten a new combination attack and defence spell that nobody had ever heard of before.

[Nullification Barrier] simply dispersed anything that touched it. It didn't matter if it was a magical attack, or a stick that the warriors swung, it simply lost all energy and stopped when it hit the barrier.

The offensive use of the spell, [Nullification Blade] surrounded a weapon, and would cut through anything that they could find with ease, even the other mages shields.

Nobody was willing to try with a magical item, for fear that it would be disenchanting, but the barrier appeared to be much stronger than the usual ones they trained with.

If it had come from a skill book, she would have been fabulously wealthy beyond her wildest dreams, but the golden chest simply taught her the skill the same as it had taught Karl. Both were what the Academy would call Tier Three skills. Not the basics, or the advanced versions of the basics, but something that was entirely new and on another power level.

They were incredibly rare, and often unique in the world, with only one Elite having ever learned them. But more than that, they had a growth rate that scaled proportionately to their advantage. If they were twice as deadly as normal skills at Awakened Rank, they would be twice as deadly as other spells when you were at Ascended and Commander Rank as well.

They were simply superior in all ways.

Karl's was mostly only relevant to himself, but it didn't specify that the animals had to be bonded to him, and that was something that he wanted to test.

"Druid, sorry I forgot your name. Do you have a bonded animal?" Karl asked.

"Not yet. Most druids get the ability, but I'm still at level three, according to the way that Druids see their progression, and I don't have that ability yet.

My healing got much better while I was here, though, and I learned to use an area heal spell while training on the stairs." The druid replied.

"What did you get from the box?" Karl asked.

"A staff. It vanishes when I want it to, and it applies its additional magic damage even when I am wild shaped." He explained.

"Oh, you're a transformation type Druid. Never mind. I was thinking about trying to teach a Druid's spirit animal a new trick when we get back to test out the reward I got." Karl explained.

That made the others curious. Karl had returned first, so none of them had seen what he had gotten, and so far, he hadn't spoken of it. But if it was a transferrable power, a skill that he could teach others, wouldn't that just be too powerful?

If he left to join the army, he could teach his whole unit that power, which the team assumed should be at the Ascended Rank, since the item type rewards everyone got were generally a Rank above themselves. The thought that it might be a Tier Three skill that would scale with his growth, and not simply a more powerful normal Skill, never crossed their minds.

"We have some time before we are ejected, so get some sleep after you eat. We will get up early to pack our gear before we are pushed out, and then we can finish the mission and find the other plants that we came here for." Karl decided.

"Wait, we're still doing the mission? Even after we found a holy relic and got all these rewards, we are still going to get the plants?" One of the warriors asked.

"Do you not need them anymore? Will they not be effective on you now that you've gained some power?" Karl asked.

The warrior looked sheepish, and his friends consoled him. Technically, it looked more like mockery, but what were friends for?

"See, we will finish the mission, and then make sure that our new friends from the church make it safely to the train with us. Now that we've found the Holy Relic, it is not just about getting them back safely, but they need to properly relay to their superiors the information that we have gathered about this place so that it is protected and not disturbed before the next time that it decides to let a group in." Karl explained.

The cleric students nodded rapidly. "They will likely want this to be kept all hush-hush. You know how it is with holy relics. If we talk about finding it, then any Elite could look up our mission information and find the general area that it is in, to come here and try to exploit or destroy it."

That was something that Karl hadn't considered. The church did good things for the poor, and they had the best healing magic, but not everyone was a big fan of theirs,

partially because of the power that they had. Karl didn't watch the news often, but there was always someone mad about something that someone else did.

It was an undeniable fact, and the Church inevitably got caught up in arguments when their programs conflicted with someone else's.

The students all seemed to be in agreement, and as Karl brought out a bit more of the Awakened Rank boar meat for their final dinner here, the talk turned to what they might find at the other herb sites.

So far, they had found two spots that weren't on the map, an Ascended Beetle, a Holy Relic, and two refugee clerics. If they kept up at this rate, they might find the lost city of knowledge, one of the students suggested.

The thought of that was hilarious. The City of Knowledge was just a legend from mythology, and it was supposed to be where the young World Dragon learned the power to travel between worlds to find a new home to protect. But the World Dragon and its offspring were immortal, and given the nature of the legend, the City of Knowledge probably wasn't even on this planet.

Not that it had stopped generations of treasure hunters from going looking for it.

The final meal was a larger one than usual, as everyone who had gathered food donated a bit extra for the celebration, and they made a massive pitcher of punch out of all the energy drink pouches that they hadn't been using.

The plans to sleep early had gone right out of everyone's mind, and when the ever vigilant Golems warned them that they had one hour left before being ejected, they were all still sound asleep.

"Everyone up and get packed. We don't want to end up leaving half our gear here, unless you all fancy sharing tents for the rest of the journey." Karl warned them all.

That got them up and moving. The boys all knew that the girls wouldn't want to share with them, and Karl was right about them not wanting to cuddle with each other in a tiny tent with a single sleeping bag.

Breakfast was delayed, but they all got their gear packed in the next half hour, though it was quite disorganized, and most of it would need to be repacked before they went anywhere.

"Everyone, shoulder your packs and make sure there is nothing left on the ground, no signs that we were here at all." Karl added.

That took a few more minutes, while they adjusted their packs enough that they could be worn properly without gear falling out, but once they were settled, Karl called out to the Golem.

"Sir Golem, we are finished and packed, will you please send us back out?" He requested.

Instantly, he was standing outside the entrance to the cave, along with the other eleven members of their team.

"Alright, clerics, take two warriors and one of the golems as an escort and mark the entrance of the Holy Relic, then we can get going."

Chapter 109 No Access

The Clerics returned a minute later with concerned looks.

"The end of the tunnel is gone. Everything past the first chamber looks like solid rock, the whole tunnel is hidden. We marked it as the entrance of a Holy Relic, but I'm not sure that anyone will believe us if they can't see the crystals." The male cleric informed Karl.

"That's fine. When it opens again, there will be no doubt that it leads to the Holy Relic. Perhaps it's better this way. Anyone else who stumbles across it will be trying to get a portal to open on the wall, while only those who should know will understand that the tunnel will appear when it is ready." Karl replied.

The students started to repack their gear into the best approximation of its original state, helping those who just weren't getting it, until they were all ready to move again.

Having been in the same spot for a few days gave them some backpack space again, thanks to the rations that were used up. That would give them a bit more space for more resources to bring back, but they had already gained far more than they expected, even just measuring by the actual plants that the team had harvested.

Normally, you would only find a few flowers, or a small patch of moss, not entire trees and fields worth of them.

That led to many arguments in the student groups if they hadn't worked out a proper rotation for who got the resources, instead of having enough for everyone to split what was available.

"The next one is straight east of here by ten kilometres. I will send Hawk up to scout, but be prepared for a long walk." Karl warned the group as they set off.

Through the woods, ten kilometres was going to take them half the day, but there was always the chance that Hawk would find something along the way.

"Do you think that the abundance of resources we found was because the Holy Relic was about to open? I mean, it should give off lots of power, right? So it might be the reason that there are so many resources in this area." Dana suggested.

"So, you're saying to forget the map and look around the cave for more good stuff? Everyone, what do you think of that? Do you mind staying in the area for a day or two, in case there are more plants for us to find?" Karl asked.

They were the leaders, but the other eight were the ones who had actually planned the mission. The resources were mostly for them, and had been expected to be a level below what Karl and Dana would need.

Most team leaders would add a mission point of their own to the trip if possible, if not, they would do it just for the Academy Credits and the time away from the regular training schedule.

That was the important part to a lot of them. Getting to go out and explore on their own was much more relaxing than being in class, and the missions picked by the first year students were rarely dangerous.

Even the Ascended Rank beetle which had been mauled by their team was an outlier. The mission report hadn't expected anything that dangerous in the area.

[Hawk, circle the area. Any magical plants or other interesting things you see, let me know and we will go explore it. Even if it doesn't seem too useful, it's still a resource.]

Hawk turned to circle around the cave in increasingly large circles for the next ten minutes until he found something of interest.

[There are shiny rocks over here. The mages like shiny rocks.] Hawk offered, as if he wasn't quite sure what to look for if it wasn't food or a resource he had seen a picture of.

[That is good. I have shown you all the resources on the list, and if there are any that you have seen on the balcony, or in the botany books, you can tell me about those too.] Karl suggested.

He focused on Hawk's location for a moment, and then turned to face it.

"Hawk has found a possible magical crystal source. We will go there and see what it is." He informed the others.

Dana smirked at the other mages. Ten minutes outside the cave, and they were already on their way to even more resources.

It was a short walk, with everyone keeping their eyes open for more hidden magical plants and any signs of threats that might have come looking for them.

After the incident with the beetle, and then the Holy Relic, they had realized that they wouldn't be the only ones drawn to the magical resources in the area. Monsters would be as well, and that meant they would have to compete for what they could get.

As they walked, Rae darted out and grabbed a small vine from up in a tree to bring back into her beast space.

Karl wondered just what the limitations were on that. Vines, meat, branches, leaves. Those could all be brought in, but he couldn't put his backpack or textbooks in there. Clearly, it wasn't that they were a physical item that was the issue, so it must be that they weren't a resource for the pets.

As they approached the point that Hawk had marked, the Clerics started to get a strange look on their faces, and the mages were getting really excited, while the Warriors wondered why. Then they stepped over a small ridge and saw the situation.

There was a large pond with small glowing yellow stones at the bottom. Even the warriors could feel the magic now that they were this close, and the cleric girl looked like she was going to faint.

Her legs gave out after one more step, and Karl caught her in his arms.

Her partner pointed at the pond with a shaky hand.

"Those are Holy Mana Stones." He mumbled.

Dana looked at him, then did a double take at the pond. There had to be a hundred of the stones in the lake, and each of them was an Awakened Rank resource. They were to mages what the Strength Stones were to the warriors, only infinitely more rare.

They wouldn't be crushed to dust and ingested, as they were impossible to replace without an especially powerful High Priest, instead they would be kept in a locket or other safe place and the user would draw on their power as they meditated.

Even just having one was a huge status symbol among the clerics, to the point that priests would wear them outside their robes when visiting important people or hosting nobility, just to prove their favoured status.

They also apparently couldn't be stolen. They decided who was able to use them, and you couldn't touch them if they judged you as unworthy.

"Everyone, if those are Holy Stones, they won't approve of a greedy heart. Put aside any thoughts of taking them all, and pick one that you like. Go for that one in particular,

and if it lets you pick it up, put it somewhere safe." Karl informed them a moment before they were set to run toward the pond.

The cleric nodded fervently. "You must not entertain greed or violence in your heart, or they will reject you."

Karl jerked to the side, startled when Dana poked him on the arm.

"You can set the priestess down, she's awake again."

Chapter 110 Shiny Rocks and Big Ferns

Thor looked out of his space and popped into reality to run across the field and splash in the pond.

"Well, we can say that the water is safe. Go ahead, everyone, and try not to let Thor splash you too much if you're not going to strip down to swimwear." Karl laughed.

After splashing around for a moment, Thor settled into the pond with a sigh, letting just his snout show over the surface as he relaxed in the cool water.

[It feels so good on the scales.] He informed Karl happily.

Karl walked down to the pond, following the others, who were searching for a spot that felt right to them so they could pick a lucky rock.

Hawk thought that it was hilarious, as he had no interest in the rocks. Nor did Rae, as they glowed and would mess up the vibe in her space. How could she be a mysterious predator in the dark and use a nightlight?

[You could make a walkway with them down the sides.] Karl suggested.

[So bright. How would I ever sleep?] Rae objected.

Karl looked over at Thor, who was now snoring as he relaxed in the lake, and the spider began to laugh.

[Point taken.]

Karl decided he would pick a stone after everyone else had theirs. He wasn't strictly a magic user, so it didn't matter whether he found some perfect or most powerful stone, he would just pick a nice-looking one and call it a day.

So, while the others put great effort into their choice, Karl focused on making a relaxation pond for Thor in his mental space. If the Lightning Cerro liked the water that much, it only made sense to give him a pond of his own.

Finding the stones only took a half an hour, but then the warriors began to strip down to their shirts and underwear to go for a swim with Thor. The water had magic in it, and a swim might give them some benefits that they wouldn't get just by standing near the shore.

Most of the mages were more reluctant, as they weren't as physically toned as the warriors were, but eventually, they caved and ran back into the bushes to change into swimsuits from their bags.

Having to recover a resource from the water was an anticipated scenario, and the suits didn't take much space, so they were standard kit. They were also useful on rainy days in hot environments, when it was easier to just get wet and keep your kit dry than to try to dry your clothes later.

Karl finished the small pond for Thor, which he could expand later, and changed before he came out of the trees to join the fun. The combination of the Lightning Cerro, whose refreshing lightning made the water mildly charged and refreshing as he slept, and the natural magic of the pond combined to make an outdoor spa.

They likely wouldn't get much more done today unless they left soon, but Karl let everyone soak for an hour and play in the pond before Hawk reported that he had seen some strange ferns that were definitely magic.

"Hawk has found another resource. Has everyone found what they need here?" Karl asked.

"Yeah, give us a bit to change clothes, and we will be ready to go." Dana replied, giving the water a longing look.

They couldn't take it with them, but there were still plenty of magical stones in it, so they could come back on another mission to the area and play in the water again. The Holy Stones that they had gathered wouldn't wear out if they just used them as a meditation focus to improve their growth, so they wouldn't need to take any more of them, just relax in the water.

Once everyone was changed and shouldered their packs again, Karl called Rae and Thor back into the space. Thor was still half asleep, but Rae had only been splashing at the edge of the water, unwilling to go into water deeper than her lower torso.

Like a cat, she cleaned herself. There was no need for her to bathe in a pool of water, and she didn't see the appeal.

It was only when they were halfway to the next resource when Karl realized that the bottom of the pond in Thor's mental space was now lined with very real gravel and a large number of Holy Stones. He had taken them with him when he transferred back in, and it seemed that the Holy Stones didn't prevent their transfer.

[How does he do that anyhow?] Rae asked, meaning how he let his head float with his nostrils out of the water as he slept.

[His nose and mouth are fully separate. He fills his mouth with air and closes it, then it makes his head naturally float while he breathes through his nose.] Karl informed the confused spider.

[Make him stop, it's freaky.]

Thor snorted in amusement and moved a little, so his head was on the shore and not floating in the water.

[Better.]

The ferns that Hawk had found were a primary ingredient for healing potions, a thick stem filled with numbing gel that could be used alone as a painkiller ointment, but when combined into the potions by witches or other healing classes with alchemy skills, they would be able to heal major injuries almost as well as the expensive medicines that the doctor in the frontier town had provided to Karl.

"These aren't easy to store. Does anyone have extra glass jars for the gel?" One of the witches asked, hopefully.

Each of the warriors dug in their bag and took out one of the specimen jars, then realized just how inadequate they were for the task.

The jar held half a litre, which seemed like a lot, until they realized that the stem of the fern branch she wanted to drain was taller than they were, and as thick as their leg.

Karl thought about the issue for a moment, then unpacked one of his jars and went to a smaller fern branch. A slice of Rend cut it off past the first branches, where it should likely regrow, and then he stuffed the bottom of the thin stem into the jar, holding all the gel inside.

"There. Problem solved." He announced.

"I never thought of that. We will look silly with fern branch flagpoles on our backs, but it will give us so much. I mean, so much." The witch cheered.

Karl passed the jar of fern to Thor, who looked at it for a second before realizing it was medicine and not food. That was interesting. He couldn't put the jar in the space empty, but with medicine in it, he could.

The witch was staring at him now, so Karl shrugged. "I can store food and medicine in the same mental space where the pets rest. Just food and medicine so far, but that's where I put the fern."

The witch made a pleading look, then looked down at the pile of jars. It would be a nightmare to try to carry ten of the metre tall smaller fern plants, but sitting in Thor's space it wasn't an issue.

"Alright, I will give them back when we're done the mission." Karl agreed.

They stuffed ferns into the jars that had been donated to the Witch, and then cut down one extra fern and portioned the gel between everyone, including the clerics, who had leather pouches instead of jars. They didn't seal as well, but they folded flat and didn't take up as much space when empty.

"Now, we've all got medicine rubs, so let's look for more resources before we go home. Not too much more, though. We're all out of space."

The students laughed. There was no better problem to have during a resource gathering mission than finding so much that you couldn't carry it all.