

Beast Master 151

Chapter 151 Testing Thor

Their first stop was the warrior training grounds, where the Academy had a wide variety of training implements, including test weapons with impact sensors on them to more accurately gauge the force put into attacks.

That was part of how they tested the defences of the warrior classes, and that was how they would test Thor's improvements today.

Rita addressed Thor directly. "Alright, we will be using a training sword with a damage metre on it. I will be swinging it, and my strength is at the Ascended level. The first tests will be just against your scales, without skills, to test your basic durability."

Thor nodded his understanding, then puffed up his chest to show his readiness.

The strange sight brought a number of the warriors over, along with the professor, who had his clipboard at the ready, so he could record the numeric results of Thor's tests.

"I hope you don't have performance anxiety." Alice joked as Rita prepared to begin the testing.

Thor bugled happily, and the mage laughed. Of course, he didn't. The Lightning Cerro had whatever the opposite of performance anxiety was.

Thor focused and Rita slammed the training sword into his side, making the warriors flinch in anticipation.

But the weapon hit the scales with a grating screech, and sparks flew as the blade was dragged across the rough surfaced scales.

"Four Hundred and ten points of force." Rita informed the other teacher.

That was near the middle of Awakened Rank attacking strength, and Rita prepared to attack again, as it was obvious that the first one did no harm to the heavily armoured Cerro.

With a crack and whistle of displaced air, the blade whipped through the air again, sending up a glorious shower of sparks as blunted steel met rough scales.

This time the attack rocked Thor to the side, and he almost stumbled before catching his balance, but he didn't give any sign of pain past a low grunt.

"Six hundred and ninety-eight points. I didn't think you had it in you, Sergeant." The other professor noted as he read the display from the training weapon.

Six hundred was the cutoff for Ascended Rank physical power without a skill attached, but it would take twelve hundred to break a low ascended rank barrier in one shot.

"Alright, I'm ready. Thor, bring your barrier up, and I will attack with [Slash]." Rita informed him.

The students looked much more nervous now. The training sword was dull, so unless it broke bones, it would only leave a bruise. But Slash could cut through steel even if you attached the attack to a stick.

Thor brought up his lightning, and Rita prepared her attack before the other professor stopped her.

"Wait, I need to set up the measuring devices. That sword won't measure the impact of your skill properly. Give me a second." The other teacher complained.

The sensor was an energy meter of some sort, an enchanted item that attached to the hilt of the sword and read the energy signature of the attack to guess the power based on the output that flowed over it. The actual damage could vary by the skill, but the slash skill was well known, and they had a proper data set for it at all basic power levels.

"Alright, go when you're ready." He announced once the tools were set up.

The blade arced down at the lightning covered Cerro, while the students watched in horror. The lightning seemed to wrap around the energy of the slash attack for an instant, before being pushed away, like a stone tossed into shallow water.

The light of the blade dimmed as the lightning barrier was dispersed over the area, and a terrible noise, like fingernails on a chalkboard, screeched in the air before a metallic snap marked the end of the attack.

The blade lay in two pieces, and there was a shallow scratch on Thor's scales, but it was already beginning to fade as the lightning pushed back over the breach.

"Combined attack thirteen hundred and forty-one points. The Lightning barrier was dispersed by the attack, indicating that it is still in the high Awakened rank, but the total defence of the Lightning Cerro known as Thor is confirmed to be above the threshold for Ascended Rank." The warrior class teacher informed them.

Thor trumpeted in victory, singing a short tune with his voice that sounded almost exactly like the military brass band.

The warrior instructor looked over the scratch on Thor's side, which had hardly cut through a third of a scale and hadn't touched the thicker section, or the harder core of the defensive plating.

"Impressive. I am fairly certain that he could take that strike to his side even without his lightning barrier. If it was the harder armour of his protective ridge or his horns, it is doubtful that the attack would have much of an effect at all." He informed the gathered students.

Most of the students sighed at the information that the Cerro was fully capable of beating them to a pulp. His barrier was also his attack skill, and if it was at the upper Awakened Rank, then it was stronger than any defensive skills that they had, while they would be completely incapable of injuring him.

"Are we going to test the others before they go to their training?" Daniel asked after giving Thor a friendly pat on the head ridge,

"We might as well. Do you have the defensive barriers for the ranged attack skills with you?" Rita asked the warrior class teacher.

"Of course. They live in the storage unit right there. Do you want me to get them set up? I thought we had already determined Thor's ability." He replied.

"We've still got to test Rae and Hawk's attack skills. We know they're not the most durable of monsters, and neither knows a comprehensive defensive ability, but their attack skills have been growing at a phenomenal rate." Rita explained.

The students started to get excited. They got to see Hawk in action all the time, when he was messing with the mages on the other side of the training grounds, but very few had seen Rae at all, much less having seen her using her skills.

The teacher tasked a group to bring out the official testing gear, and gave a sad look at the broken training sword.

"Those are supposed to hold up to Ascended Rank attacks, I guess they do have an expiration date." He sighed.

Rita shook her head. "I think it was the vibration from scraping over the scales that caused the failure, the sword was vibrating like a tuning fork in my hands when I made contact, and that is likely what shattered the blade."

The teacher made a note and smiled. "Now that is an interesting side effect. Thor, do you mind if I test something?"

Thor made a gesture that everyone took as a shrug, and the teacher took out a long metal staff.

He simply set it on Thor's back once the Cerro took down the lightning barrier, and then rapidly pulled it toward himself. The same screech filled the air, but at a slightly different tone that sounded much more like an angle grinder on plate steel.

Sparks showered the area, and Karl watched as the staff vibrated in the teacher's hand. Then he turned the formerly round object over, and gave an impressed whistle as he viewed the flat underside.

Then he took out a small bag and gathered the metal filings from Thor's scales and went back to taking notes.

"That is incredible. The scales are harder than the Chromoly alloy that we use for weapons, and the rough surface shreds them like a grinder. I am a Commander Rank warrior from the second year batch, and even I have rarely seen such an effective tool." He informed the group.

That would make him about twenty-four, Karl noted. He looked older, but not by much, and Karl should have realized that he was one of the Divine Injection Elites.

But somehow, his mind kept associating the teachers with the rare magical warriors and mages that came before the injections.

"Alright, now that my curiosity is sated, let's call out Rae and Hawk to see what they can do. Is a simple attack on our sensor plate enough for them, or should we get out some fancier targets?" The teacher asked.

Rita gave Karl a look that said to be happy with the official testing plates and not to get the urge to show off. But she was way behind, and both Hawk and Rae were already thinking of ways that they could upstage Thor and look more impressive for the crowd.

Chapter 152 Rae's Specialty

Karl smiled at Sergeant Rita. "Well, Rae does specialize in bleeding attacks, so perhaps it's better to have the dummy that shows off the bleed effect? But if there isn't one nearby, we can use the regular plating."

Rita sighed, and the warrior class professor shook his head. "We don't have one here. There are only a few in the indoor training area. So we will have to just test the actual attack power and then note the additional bleeding afterwards. What skill does she know that causes bleeding?"

Karl smirked, and Daniel answered the question for him. "She learned to use Lacerate after seeing one of the senior year students using it in training. The bleeding damage will be significant, but I think that the damage to the training plates should be enough to show off her destructive nature."

Then Alice perked up and raised her hand. "I have an idea. Do we still have one of those dummy training vehicles for the artillery mages? We can let her shred an armoured car. Just put different plates on each zone and see how long she takes to get through."

Terrifying the students with a giant spider tearing apart an armoured car was what Rita was trying to avoid, but both the warrior class professor and the students seemed even more enthusiastic about the idea than Alice was, and a pair were sent to pull the dummy vehicle over.

"It is already set up with three grades of plating, for the upcoming exams. I won't tell Rae which are which, but she should be able to tell once she starts." The warrior explained.

The vehicle was just a shell with detachable plates, and didn't quite look like a functional vehicle, but it was close enough for the purposes of training, and they had even put a test mannequin in the driver's seat.

The vehicle was blocked in place with tire chocks, and the teacher gestured toward it. "If you can call Rae out, we will be able to test impact force from the sensors on the back of the plates, and cutting force from the damage done to the plates themselves."

Hawk thought that sounded pretty good as well. He wouldn't mind chopping up an armoured vehicle, so he would go after Rae and finish off the damaged target.

[Don't destroy it too badly. The chassis needs to be reused for the testing of others. We will have to let them replace the plates or find another target before you can play with it.] Karl warned him.

[You're no fun. Why does everyone else get to show off?] Hawk complained.

[You will get your turn, just probably not to turn the armoured car into scrap, since the warriors still need that one.] Karl tried to calm him.

[I won't forget. If I can't eat the target, it should at least be fun.]

Rae faded from her normal matte black with red lower legs to the mottled green and brown of the armoured car, matching herself to the camouflage pattern on the vehicle. The effect made the students smile, but when the teacher gave her the nod of readiness, and Rae launched herself at it, tearing the hood off immediately and discarding it to punch an armoured foreleg through the windshield and bite a chunk of roof plating off, the amusement turned to horror.

Within seconds, most of the plating was destroyed, the doors had been torn off their hinges, and even the Ascended Rank plating was dented and bent far enough for her to tear it off the vehicle.

Rae hopped off the armoured car with the driver dummy in her mandibles as a sign of victory, and the students cheered.

"That was insane. I used to have a cat that went crazy when the food was brought out. This was a bit like that, except Rae actually peeled the can open to get to the food inside." One of the warriors noted.

One of the others shuddered. "That wasn't a mental image that I needed. Did you know that spiders usually eat their prey alive?"

Rae nodded happily, and a number of the other students backed away.

"It's their instinct. Fresh food is best, and you can't get any more fresh than that." Karl explained.

[And if you start while they're alive, they will sing for you as you eat.] Rae added.

[I'm not telling them that.]

The warrior class teacher gave a rueful look at the mangled vehicle. Some of those armour plates weighed over a hundred kilos, and they had been tossed around like bits of tin as Rae looked for the best way into the vehicle.

"Maximum combined attack power is exactly fifteen hundred points. That is well into Ascended Rank attack power. I did notice that the attack force increased as the assault went on. Does she need time to build up her attack power?" The teacher asked after a moment to check the numbers.

"Only the first time. One of her skills is adaptive, so after she has learned the most effective way to destroy a target, she won't have to do it again. But this is the first time she has faced an armoured car." Karl explained.

"So, we just taught her to tear apart an armoured car, and the next time she does, she will start where she finished this time?" The professor asked.

In response, Rae shot out one armoured forelimb, and the whole vehicle rocked up on two wheels as she punched a hole in one of the remaining plates.

"I will take that as a yes. Fourteen hundred and fifty-three points." The warrior laughed.

Then the professor turned to the crowd. "Can anyone suggest a more effective method of getting the driver out of the vehicle?"

Thor flicked his head and stomped his feet, earning a pat from the teacher.

"That is one way. If you flip it over and attack from the underside, you can get in more easily, as the floor pan is only one plate." He agreed.

"Or you could start with cutting the hinges and pulling the door off instead of destroying the armour." One of the students asked.

"That's another possibility."

Hawk exited the space and took flight overhead, then sprayed a plume of flame at the vehicle, letting it stop short of actually making contact, as Karl had told him not to destroy it.

The teacher shook his head. "Well, I suppose that is right as well. If you set the car on fire, he will come out of his own free will."

One of the warriors in this group had been with Karl on the away mission, and he took out the flaming sword he had gotten as a reward.

"That would do it, but first you need to penetrate the vehicle, unless you are going to attack the fuel tank through its armour plating." The teacher reminded him.

One of the warriors walked over to the armoured car and pulled up the front. Even with half the plates laying on the ground around the vehicle, he still couldn't lift it.

"Can even Thor flip this thing at a dead stop?" He asked.

Thor put his upper pair of horns under the floor and lifted it until the wheels came off the ground, then stepped back.

"Point taken. Warrior strength and monster strength are not the same thing."

Alice waited for the boy to step back, and then cast layered barriers over the armoured car.

"Hawk, how about we see how long it takes you to get to the car? Some of the sensors are still set up to record your attack power, so you can show off for us." The petite mage suggested.

Hawk crowed, and seemed to shimmer in the air as if surrounded by immense heat.

Then [Shred] smashed through the first three layers of barrier in a single volley, and another barrage was close behind it.

The fourth and fifth barriers went down as Hawk dove and spit out a fireball that engulfed the area, taking out the sixth barrier with ease.

The seventh was covered in flames from the attack, and when Hawk hit it with a twin barrage of Rend, the barrier broke and the last of the six rend slashes hit the truck.

"Top attack power recorded as Twelve hundred and ninety. Ascended Rank energy, and from the damage to the barriers, I will say that it was comfortably over the Ascended Rank combined attack power." The warriors' professor noted.

"It was. The multiple Ascended Rank attacks at once are truly impressive in their total output." Alice agreed.

Then Alice let out a stream of water that put out the burning grass, and Hawk cast her a suspicious look.

"Oh, don't glare at me like that. I'm a Wind Mage, I just happen to know both basic water and fire spells." She informed the bird.

Hawk grumbled as he continued to fly, then glided over to where the mages were practising to take out his annoyance on the water mages in that class.

"Inside joke?" The warrior Professor asked.

"Hawk has a vendetta against water magic for flowing around Rend attacks." Karl explained to the warriors' teacher.

"He's a unique one, for sure. But it looks like he has the tools to deal with them now.

Alright, everyone, enough gawking. Get back to work, you're already behind the friendly Cerro, and you're not going to catch up without hard work." The Professor insisted, chasing his students back to their training stations.

Karl gestured toward the berserker area. "Thor, you can go practice Earthquake as well. We will work on a plan to build up your lightning soon, don't worry about it and just keep working on your skills."

One of the students frowned at them as Karl sent the other two pets away.

"If you say that Rae will be testing our Guard skills, I am going to suffer a sudden illness that requires me to recover in my room for the day." He insisted.

Chapter 153 Lottery Assignment

Karl laughed at the horror of the warriors, thinking that they would have to face Rae in combat. These were all first year students, there wasn't even a faint possibility that they would be able to deal with that sort of attack.

Even if Offensive Optimization wasn't a passive effect, they wouldn't stand a chance against her strength, and Rae wasn't one of the more physically overwhelming monsters.

Rita shook her head. "No, we won't do that to you. Rae is going to practice her bleed effect optimization, and then we have to prepare Karl for an away trip."

Only one of the students here knew that Karl had just gotten back from a trip, and he was more than a little jealous. But as strong as the pets were now, he would probably be heading out with an Ascended Rank group to try to solidify his gains and get himself recognized as an Ascended Elite during the end of the Semester exams.

The speed of his growth was far beyond what anyone would call reasonable, and even the speed of his pets' growth was crazy. The Windspeed Hawk wasn't full-grown for over a year, and the Lightning Cerro shouldn't be full-grown until three years old, but Thor was most of the way there already.

He actually had far less than Rae to improve until he reached his expected maximum power, now that his body had received such a significant gain from the drake scale potions, and he was well over half grown already. Rae was closer to her adult size, but fortunately for the armoured car, not so close to her maximum strength.

Finding a resource that would allow her to increase her power would be a difficult task, but Karl was certain that at some point they would find something that she simply must have. It had been that way with the others.

When they found the best resources for their growth, they knew it.

So, he just had to keep looking, and they would find a way to help Rae break through her limits once she reached them.

Rita led the group away from the warrior training, and Rae returned to her web to have a little nap and dream of tearing apart armoured vehicles.

The two Bureau agents were a bit too relaxed right now, and they couldn't have known about the actual attack power of the pets, so Karl assumed that it was a front for the eagerness to tell him something.

They were all excellent at hiding their emotions, but the fact that they were doing it when there was no obvious reason for them to be doing it was also a tell, in that it let Karl know that there was something that he was missing.

Rita led them to a classroom, where the remainder of the Bureau of Elite Development team was already waiting, along with Dana and two older soldiers that Karl didn't know.

Colonel Valerie addressed the group. "Good, the last of our people are here. I have been made aware that there was a need for some practical experience, so I have arranged another mission for you two.

There are constant monster problems in the Golden Dragon Nation, that's no secret to anyone. But now that you are both on the stronger side of Awakened as Elites, the defence against those monster attacks are part of your responsibilities.

Normally, the students only get to apply for a lottery to deal with issues in this immediate region, but we have noticed a larger issue further from the major population centres. It is our suspicion that there is an overloaded Dungeon or an active portal somewhere in the region, and we haven't found it yet.

So, someone needs to deal with the overflow of monsters that are appearing every day, and the regular duty soldiers would greatly appreciate a short leave.

With that in mind, we have volunteered you two, as well as a combined team of professional exterminators and a team from the church, to fill in for them."

Karl was speechless. There were monsters just appearing every single day? What sort of insane scenario was that? But when he thought about it for a while, the Elites had been constantly killing monsters for a decade, and the army had been killing them even longer than that, while their numbers never really went down.

Most of the continent was wilderness, that was undeniable, but the monsters shouldn't have been breeding fast enough to remain an issue.

"So we will be working in a large team to clear the area? Or to search for the source?" Karl asked.

Colonel Valerie shook her head.

"No, you will be working in small groups to control the monster population, while you hunt for the source. The primary goal is to be population control. The military has been unsuccessfully searching the area for months, so our thought is that the source is underground or otherwise hidden from us.

So, the priority is keeping the population from growing enough that it will be a threat to the nearby towns." She explained.

Karl looked at the two soldiers, who smiled back. "We are the helicopter pilots. We will be taking you to the rest of the team this afternoon. Now, I believe that someone said you have beasts on your team, how much space do they need, and do they need containment while flying?"

Karl shook his head. "I am able to hold them in a separate space, and they are no threat while flying. If there are no other students going, then you only need seats for the two of us."

Colonel Valerie cleared her throat. "There will be others going with you. Four senior teams are looking for resources in that general vicinity. They will be dropped first, and then you will be deposited with your teams and the flight will return to base awaiting the call to recover successful mission teams."

Dana took out a notepad and a pen. "At least there won't be any wasted space. What do we know about the monsters in the area?"

Karl hurried to do the same, pulling a pen and notepad from his wasted space. What do we know about the monsters in the area?"

gear just as Colonel Valerie began her explanation.

"There have been at least three Goblin Tribes spotted in the area. We have reports of roaming Ogres and Trolls, and an unconfirmed report that there might be an Ettin Mage in the vicinity.

Strengths have varied, with most of the Goblins being on the low Common Grade range, but the Ogres and Trolls are all Awakened Rank. If there is an Ettin Mage, it will most likely be Ascended Rank.

However, there is a possibility that there will be an entirely different set of monsters when you arrive. Two weeks ago, the area was nearly overrun with Minotaur and Tremor hide Worms."

Karl knew what a Minotaur was, but the worms were a new one to him. He didn't recall seeing them in any of his books.

"Tremor Hide Worms are ten metres long, and large enough to swallow a grown man whole. However, they are slow moving, and restricted to sandy areas. They can't move through rock, and are especially obvious and ineffective in wooded areas." The Colonel explained.

Then she continued with her mission priorities. "If the makeup of the monsters in the area doesn't change, then we would ask that you bring back the heads of the Ettin Mage, if you should happen to find it.

They are a hot topic of study these days, as so few Ogre type species can use magic well. They're not particularly bright, and the government is curious about the brain makeup of the mages.

The rest is up for grabs, and you can keep what you want.

It should be noted that the monsters in this sort of self spawning region often have treasures with them that are far beyond what they should normally have. It has been known for them to have valuable

potions, magical weapons, and even enchanted gems in their possession, so check everything that you kill."

Karl felt Hawk and Rae laughing in his mind. Killing was their specialty, and neither of them had hands to be searching through the belongings of filthy Ogres and Trolls. When they got there, they would be able to hunt to their hearts' content, and leave Karl to dig in the filth for treasures.

Chapter 154 Drop The Seniors First

There wasn't much more information forthcoming about the mission. The details of such actions were normally held within the military and the upper ranks of government, which Colonel Valerie would count as, but her department was Elite Development, so she might have only just been briefed on this herself and didn't want to have to look up all the little details to answer questions.

"When do we leave?" Karl asked.

"Right about now. Do you need anything from your rooms? We have the kit bags packed and ready to go, loaded to Ascended Mission standards, so there are some more medical potions and cooking supplies as well as the rations." Colonel Valerie replied.

Dana gave her a curious look. "Why were there no cooking supplies in the last mission packs?"

"How many of you actually knew how to cook? That's why. If we relied on the first years to cook for themselves they would become nutritionally deficient before the mission was over, but you will have clerics with you on this mission, and they can create food. Plus, the other Elites are known to hunt for themselves occasionally, or bring various vegan options, depending on their preference.

That is why I asked if you need to go to your rooms to get anything." The Colonel explained with a smug smile on her face.

She wasn't wrong, though. Only one in the initial group actually knew how to cook. On the way back they had gained Sister Betty, who was much more knowledgeable, and even the two clerics they had rescued had some cooking skills.

"Will there be a water mage with us? Rationed water is no fun." Karl asked.

"There should be. I can't guarantee that the two of you will be together for these missions, as they will be split into smaller teams, and two rookies would be a liability, but there are usually either mages or clerics capable of creating water with each team.

Karl will presumably take the role of one of the warriors, while Dana will be their secondary mage. Most government issued missions call for groups that are a minimum of three people for Awakened Rank or lower incidents, five for Ascended Rank threats.

That is the safety tolerance. I believe I mentioned once before, that it would look terrible to the public if they found out that we had lost a student, or a promising young Elite.

Not that any of the Elites are particularly old, the program has only been running for ten years, but you get my point."

The team members all chuckled at her reference. She was one of the early testers of the Divine Serum, so she was older than the mainstream Elites, but still not far into her thirties.

"Alright, we will take the packs and head out as soon as we have checked them." Karl agreed.

"They're in the helicopter. Good luck, and we will see both of you soon."

Karl and Dana followed the Pilots out, while the Bureau agents prepared for whatever they would be doing while the pair were away from the Academy for an undefined amount of time.

If the goal was population control, it might take them a week or a month, or a season. There was no clear end point, unless they were going to be relieved as soon as the regular teams returned from their vacation.

That seemed unlikely to Karl. Back at the mines, there was always a bit of overlap after holidays, when they pushed to get more done than the standard quota to make up for the missed productivity. The same was likely true here, where the regular teams would join the substitutes for a day or two before the relief teams were sent back home.

Karl called the beasts back into their spaces, interrupting their training, but for a good reason. Thor was a bit disappointed that he had to stop playing so soon, but he would get to see new places, so it was a fair trade in his mind.

Hawk had no problem returning. The mages hadn't come up with any new strategies since yesterday, anyhow.

Each of the helicopters had twenty students already in them when they arrived, and the pilots pulled Karl and Dana toward separate rides to grab their gear. Karl waved goodbye to the mage as he wondered when they would next see each other, but the door closed as soon as he had his pack and had taken his seat.

The pilots weren't waiting any more, and headed straight out to their first destinations.

The berserker beside Karl smiled and patted him on the shoulder. The face was familiar, and Karl realized that he knew him from Earthquake training.

"What are you doing alone on a helicopter? Are you assigned to join one of the teams?" The muscular man asked.

"I'm getting airdropped in as support for an existing team, or so I have been told. I got the lottery win for a relief operation, so a regular military team can get days off." Karl explained.

"Oh, you lucky bastard. You got the call a month after reaching Awakened, and I didn't get the call until the end of last year. Military support missions are cushy. They throw all sorts of people at them, since they're not professional soldiers.

Half of the Elites on my mission were blogging and taking selfies as much as they were actually working. It was just one big social media publicity tour. Who knows, you might even get to meet one of your idols." The berserker laughed.

The man on the other side of Karl nodded. "Mine wasn't that casual, we were in the woods and actually working, but there were at least three times as many people as we needed. We ran across other teams

like twice a day. But the team I was with were all idiots. A banker and two politicians with their assistants. They had ditched too many calls, so they got forcibly sent on an actual mission."

Neither of those options sounded much like what Karl had heard from the Colonel, but there was a chance that they were right. She had said that they would be joining a team because the regular one was on days off, but she didn't explicitly state the quality of the team that they would join.

For Dana's sake, she hoped they were a good team. He could rely on Hawk and the others, but she was somewhat squishy. Warm too, and soft.

Karl caught his wandering thoughts and looked out the window before the berserker realized he had lost track of the conversation.

The others were all talking about the various missions that they had been on, so nobody expected Karl to fill in much. As a first year, he wouldn't have been out much, no matter how strong he had gotten.

"The best advice I can give you is not to piss off the healer. They might seem all righteous and such, but when shit hits the fan, and they have to pick who they heal and who has to suffer and hope they survive until the next spell comes in, you know it's not the group's jerk that gets priority." One of the warriors laughed.

The mage next to him laughed. "You learned that the hard way. You had a broken leg for all of a lunch break because the healer was too tired for one more spell until after they ate."

The warrior nodded solemnly. "It was an important learning experience."

"You're a slow learner, though. Didn't Sister Betty punch you in the face just two days ago?" One of the other warriors asked.

"Hey, she's not our healer, and I was very sincere in my intentions." The warrior defended himself.

Karl laughed. "You should be careful, she's stronger than she looks. She rode to the Academy from the Seminary with my team after our last mission."

Chapter 155 Everyone Out

The helicopter tilted and dropped toward a mountain valley, which signalled half the students in the vehicle to get their gear ready to depart.

Karl noticed that they were loaded in the back half of the helicopter, so their departure wouldn't cause a drastic shift of the balance, and the others spread out as they walked down the ramp, distributing the weight evenly again.

"You get used to it. Spreading out is not only more comfortable, but it makes for a smoother ride. If you're with a new group, teach them to do it. But mostly the new groups take the train.

We were supposed to take it as well, but the storm the other day damaged the tracks, and they're not fixed yet." The berserker explained.

"I saw that firsthand. We were stuck out in that storm, and we weren't sure that we were going to make it back to the Academy at all. As it was, we made it back only one day late." Karl agreed.

The first team was out, and the crew closed the door as the helicopter lifted off.

"Five minutes until the second team departs. Get your gear ready." The crew member riding in the back with them instructed.

That was faster than anyone expected, but they already had their bags ready. All they had to do was make sure that nothing was loose or out of place, and then strap them on.

The helicopter dropped only a few valleys over, where a small camp was set up. The team got out, and another team of twenty got in. These were older, and dressed for an extended time in the woods, whereas Karl was wearing the Academy's training uniform of cargo pants, tank top and jacket.

It was almost a military look, but anyone in the nation would recognize it as a Divine Golden Academy uniform.

"Seriously? Not only do we get a random group from all over the country, we get a kid fresh out of the Academy? Are you even Awakened Rank yet, kid?" One of the women asked.

"Pushing for Ascended already. I'm there in attack power, but still lacking some durability." Karl replied, resisting the urge to take the bait and get angry at her provocation.

The woman rolled her eyes, and snapped a punch at his face. Karl reacted instinctively, and raised the Lightning Barrier, which her hand hit with a crackle of energy.

"Oh, I like this kid. Didn't even flinch." The man beside the irritable woman laughed.

"Then are you going to take him on your team?" She asked.

"Yeah, I will take him. If he has Ascended Rank attack power and a lightning shield, he's not going to be a liability. But there's something about the look in his eyes. They're not natural, obviously, but they've got that placid look that large monsters give you, like they know you can't do a damned thing to them."

The woman just rolled her eyes, and the group started to split up into teams. They ended up with seven groups of three, and Karl moved to join the ones he had been lumped in with.

"Karl, Awakened Rank Beast Master." He introduced himself.

"Bob and Doug Mackenzie. I'm Robert, an Ascended Rank warrior, but you can call me Bob, and Doug is a green dragon cleric." The man who had spoken up for him announced.

Despite sharing a family name, they didn't look anything alike, but Karl wasn't going to cause strife within with a good team by questioning their parentage. He had gotten a healer, but it would have been nice if they had a mage in the group.

The Green Dragon was the Dragon God of nature, and their clerics' role was similar to that of the druids and the World Dragon, to keep nature running smoothly, so it made sense that they had been sent to help control the influx of monsters that was upsetting the balance. He should have solid healing skills, and he probably wouldn't be biased against the beasts.

The good luck Dragon Scale charm was working quite reliably, Karl decided.

"So, what can you tell me about the Beast Master class? I have never heard of it before, so I don't know what you can do in a fight." The warrior, Bob, asked.

"I have three beasts, actual beasts, not summoned creatures that can be replaced. An evolved Windspeed Hawk, that has learned fire magic. A Lightning Cerro, and a Bloodbath Spider. The Lightning Barrier is a skill I learned from Thor, the Lightning Cerro. I can also use Rend, and we can hear each other's thoughts to fight as a group." Karl explained.

Doug smiled, and his face suddenly looked much younger than it had a moment ago under his mop of black curls.

"Now, we must be in luck. We got extra team members. It's always better not to be outnumbered. Don't worry, we will take good care of your partners. Are they all Awakened Rank or higher? Or is one of them still young." He asked.

"They're all still young, but they're all at Awakened Rank in body or better. Hawk and Rae, the Bloodbath Spider, aren't exactly tanks, but they are fast and agile. Are you familiar with the species?" Karl asked.

Bob nodded. "Yeah. It's going to be a bit freaky having them around, but Doug is good with things like that."

The flight was silent for a few minutes, and then the crew alerted them that they were going to be landing again. The other helicopter was visible in the distance, so they were all working the same area, which was a relief to Karl, who could see two different camps set up near the river that ran through the area.

Bob raised his voice so he could be heard over the helicopter. "We will head for the hills. Our team should be well suited to the scouting of the more rugged areas."

The crew member gave him a positive gesture. "Zone one goes to the Mackenzie brothers and Karl. Call your preferences or I will pick them."

The teams quickly picked zones to scout for the next few days, and Karl checked the fit of his pack, so it didn't get uncomfortable as they hiked.

As they stepped off the helicopter, Karl saw that there were many more people waiting around the area, and a pair of girls with curly black hair that matched Doug's came over to pull the cleric into a hug.

"Meet our other two team members. Meet Donni and Danni." Doug introduced the two smiling women.

"Don't tell me, Mackenzie." Karl replied.

"Right in one. We all volunteered to come when they announced the mission. The whole area has been upgraded to possible Ascended Rank threat, as we have gotten a confirmation of at least one Ettin Mage in the area. Everyone will be getting two more members for their team out of the ones who got here first." One of the identical twin women agreed.

Karl looked between them with curiosity. "What are the odds that four children from the same family would get picked by the Serum?"

Bob laughed. "Extremely low. I don't know of more than a few other siblings that are Elites. Though, one of the test generation has a son who's in the Academy now. But we should get going before the annoying ones want to hold an all-night strategy meeting where they think of reasons that they shouldn't be the ones going out to do the actual work."

Chapter 156 The Mackenzies

Bob led them out of the encampment, past sharp-eyed guards, who were giving envious looks to their group with the twins. Most wouldn't realize right away that they were all siblings, other than Karl, so having not just one but two good-looking women with them would look like an envious situation.

"So, what are your specialties?" Karl asked as they moved out of sight of the camp.

"We're both mages. I'm better with Constructs, and Donni is better with arcane barriers." Danni explained.

They got a kilometre into the woods and Doug gestured to Karl. "Call out your team. It's better that we have a chance to meet them in advance, even if they're resting until we're in the threat area."

Karl called the three out, and Bob froze in place, staring at Rae.

Donni laughed. "Oh, this should be fun. Bob is terrified of spiders. Even little ones. Is she friendly?"

Karl nodded. "Generally. She's not always a people person. But Thor is friendly enough for two people, so it works out well."

Rae laughed at that as Thor made his way to the cleric looking for attention.

Hawk flapped up above them and sighed in relief at the chance to stretch his wings.

[What am I even looking for?] He asked.

[Groups of monsters. There should be goblins, big goblins, ogres, ogres with two heads that use magic, trolls, and maybe something else.] Karl explained, knowing that Hawk hadn't paid any attention to the briefing.

Karl sensed Hawk's dismay at the announcement, but he knew that Hawk wasn't afraid of Goblins, and probably wasn't afraid of ogres either, considering how much fun he had harassing random bears, which were neither smaller nor weaker than the ogres were.

[Goblins smell terrible. But at least they will be easy to find.] Hawk finally explained.

That would explain his reluctance, but he was already off and scouting the area for threats.

[Hey, this mission is stupidly simple. They're right here. Just turn right a little and you will find them.] Hawk informed Karl a few seconds later.

"Hawk says there are Goblins just ahead to the right. I wasn't expecting them to be this close, but he says they're here." Karl explained quietly to the others.

The mages looked startled, and turned in the indicated direction.

"Seriously? We're barely out of sight of the camp. What are Goblins doing this close to civilization? Our intelligence suggested that they first appear further into the mountains, and that is why we were going there to hunt for them."

"I only know what Hawk tells me. Should we go?" Karl asked.

Bob nodded. "I will take point with the casters in the middle. You take the rear, with the beasts protecting our flanks. You can have them move further from us, so the Goblins don't realize we're all together."

[I can smell them already. They're coming this way.] Rae informed Karl.

[Split off and hide. Ambush when the time is right.]

"Thor, move forward to fight beside Bob and protect the flank. The Goblins are coming our way." Karl warned.

The shouts of a goblin hunting squad became audible seconds later, and Karl took out his sword. He stepped off to the side, preparing to defend any attacks that might come from the left while Thor was on the right, but Doug shook his head, and Danni summoned four wood Golems to encircle the casters.

The cleric cast a spell on them, and the wooden bodies turned more sturdy, strengthened by magic. The two of them had a system and worked well together. Then Donni cast a barrier over everyone, and they settled in for the Goblin charge.

A flurry of Rend attacks came down from the sky as Hawk started his offensive, and then there was a shadow moving through the hunting squad like a whirlwind, throwing dismembered limbs in the air as the Goblins screamed and tried in vain to run.

"What in the Goddess' name was that?" One of the mages asked as Rae finished her work and retreated into the trees to wipe herself clean again.

"That would be Hawk attacking from above, and Rae ambushing from the trees. They're just common rank monsters, so it wasn't a big deal for them to clear them out, I guess." Karl replied.

The whole clearing was covered in dismembered goblins, and Karl hesitated. He had been reminded that they might have uncommonly good items on them, but Hawk was right. Goblins smelled terrible, especially the insides of them.

The others seemed to be thinking the same thing, as they all hesitated to get any closer.

[Time to do your part. Don't miss any good stuff.] Rae taunted him as Karl prepared to go loot the Goblins.

[You could have at least left them intact, so I wouldn't have to check so many pieces.] Karl complained.

[They're too squishy, they just blew apart when I hit them. I didn't want to use my mandibles, in case something got in my mouth. You already made me drink that potion, I'm not eating goblin.]

Hawk chimed in to the conversation. [I see shiny things. Metal shiny and gem shiny. I don't know if they're good things.]

Karl sighed and stepped forward, earning himself a curious look from the others. "Hawk and Rae say that there are shiny things, both metal and gems, on the bodies. We should see if it's valuable or useful. The Bureau of Elite Development said that these are escaped from a spell, and they might have loot that they wouldn't normally own."

The others sighed, then spread out in a line, so they could clear out the bodies in one pass, with as little contact as possible.

"I recommend that you grab a long stick. Poke the bodies to open bags and search them. It might not find everything, but it's better than actually touching them." Doug, the green dragon cleric, suggested.

Karl quickly grabbed a stick, and got to work checking the bodies.

He wasn't sure what was actually worth keeping, but his equipment had a fair bit of storage, and the first thing he found was a decent sized leather pouch that could hold anything that he gathered.

Then there were a few gold rings on one Goblin, a quality steel dagger on another, a few scattered gemstones, and finally a golden necklace.

"Lay your loot out on the ground and I will purify it." Doug offered helpfully once they were all on the other side of the clearing, where Thor and Rae had joined them.

Karl dumped everything out, and then laid the bag on the ground with the rest of the loot.

"Well, that's interesting. The majority of this is just shiny metal, and simple gems, but one of those rings is magical, and the bag is also enchanted." Doug noted as he finished cleaning.

"Do you know what enchantment?" Karl asked.

"I know that it's not a curse, but that's not my area of expertise. We will have to have it identified by the spell crafters when we return. They will know what it does." The cleric explained.

Karl shrugged and dumped the loot back into the bag, which he hung by its straps from his belt. If they were going to keep gathering from Goblin bodies, he would keep it there, instead of stuffing it in his pack next to his food and spare clothes.

The bag wasn't particularly large, but it would hold a half dozen hauls like this, as long as he didn't keep picking up more weapons. He wrapped the dagger in freshly purified cloth and stuffed it in the bag, as the decoration was pretty, and if he could find a scabbard for it, he would keep it with him.

"Should we burn the bodies?" Karl asked the others.

Bob shook his head. "The risk of a forest fire is too high. They will decompose quickly out here, if the other monsters don't eat them."

Chapter 157 Sharp Senses

With the Goblins dead, and the loot cleansed, thanks to the efforts of their cleric, the group started moving toward their destination again, but in a much larger formation. Rae stayed in the trees nearby, and Thor joined Bob at the front of the group, while the wood golems took up positions on the flanks and Karl brought up the rear of the convoy.

Nobody was saying anything, but it didn't feel unfriendly, more like it just wasn't necessary to say anything, since everyone understood their roles. If there was a threat, they would call orders, but while just walking, nobody was going to get lost or fall out of position unexpectedly, the way that a bunch of distractible students might.

The only one that was truly on edge was Bob, who kept catching glimpses of Rae in the trees, and thinking that they were going to be attacked until he realized that it was just her again.

"I think there is something up ahead. The ground here is more packed than small wildlife would account for, and there are broken branches above head height." Bob quietly warned them an hour after they left the goblins behind.

Rae made a mental note of that. For a Bloodbath Spider, prey usually came to them,. They didn't go out hunting things, so they had no inherited memory of tracking skills.

Hawk hunted by direct sensory input, and he had been guiding them down the trail, but he hadn't seen anything concerning yet.

So, it was Karl's use of Hawk's eyesight that finally gave them the clue they needed.

"Everyone stop. Face right. I have enhanced eyesight, into the ranges that a Windspeed Hawk can see. That includes ultraviolet, and it makes urine and other bodily fluid traces glow in the light. There is a handprint in the ultraviolet spectrum on a tree in that direction, too large to be one of us. It's even larger than Professor Tank's hands, and that man is well over two metres tall." Karl whispered.

[I will go look] Hawk replied.

He couldn't see the handprint from above, as it was hidden under the canopy of the trees, but Hawk did his best to search for anything in the area anyhow.

[I think there is a cave up ahead. I can't see it without landing, but something looks wrong.] He replied a few minutes later.

"Hawk says there might be a cave. It's hidden from above, but he's fairly certain it's there." Karl explained.

Bob nodded and led the team forward, following Karl's guidance every time he saw a sign of the large creature. Then, Karl started to see the telltale signs of Goblins. Plenty of filth was visible to his enhanced eyesight, but it all stayed tight to the trees, where it wouldn't be seen from above.

Bob noticed the signs only seconds after Karl did.

"I think they understand about the helicopters. They're hiding from overhead surveillance. But the Goblins must have come past here in a large group. They might be under orders from the Ogre we have been tracking as well.

Goblins are cowards, and ogres are lazy. So, if an ogre comes across a Goblin tribe, it will often threaten them to make them work for it." He explained.

The mages pulled closer together, ready for an attack, and Karl realized that he had no idea which one was which anymore. They had the same black hair, in the same haircut, and they were wearing the same uniform, with the same last name on their badges.

Someone had called Bob and Doug twins as well, but at least they were different sizes, and Doug's hair was longer, while Bob's was cut tight to his head.

The smell of burning wood came to them from the distance, and Karl smiled.

"We've found them. I smell campfire. So unless the forest is burning, there is someone up ahead." He whispered.

Bob led them forward, with Thor doing his best to be silent beside the warrior, and they burst into a clearing with their weapons up.

[You vanished.] Hawk complained, then dove under the tree line to join them and protect Karl.

But there was nothing to protect them from.

In front of them stood a large cave entrance, giving off a slight plume of smoke from a cooking fire inside, and a full ten-person military team was sitting around on the rocks.

"Dammit, we thought we found an Ogre camp." Bob sighed as he realized the situation.

The warrior at the fire smiled at him. "You did, but about six hours too late. We got four ogres and fifteen Goblins out of the cave. There should be more goblins nearby, but we are waiting for them to come back."

Karl looked up and noticed the slight shimmer of a spell that had been hiding them from Hawk's vision, as well as the obvious signs on the trees of a violent battle having taken place in the recent past.

Bob smiled at the warrior. "I think that we found the rest of your goblins. The beasts with our team cleared out an entire hunting party just an hour or so ago. We followed the game track they were on, and it led us here."

The team looked immensely relieved, and began to relax a little. There were still plenty of dangers in the woods, but if Karl's team had killed off the rest of the Goblins who lived here, then at least nothing would be looking for their resting spot tonight.

"Why don't you all take a break here for a bit? It's still early, but it gets dark fast in the hills, and there might be more monsters about." The warrior suggested.

Bob shook his head. "We are headed for region one, and we should try to get closer to it tonight. There were a half dozen more fresh teams headed out today, so you might come across another if they know how to track. Try not to ambush them before realizing they are humans."

The warrior nodded, and Bob gestured for his team to keep moving.

Once they were another kilometre down the road, Bob turned back to the group. "They are sitting in an empty ogre den. Something is going to notice that the ogre clan is gone soon, and then they will come looking to take over the cave.

We will swing by there again on our way back and see what has moved in." He explained.

Hawk returned to his patrols high in the sky once he realized that his senses had been tricked by magic, while Bob led them through the woods to a small river.

From his limited experience, Karl recalled that rivers should be a gathering point for monsters needing a drink, but the area was quiet, with only a few small tree animals.

The rest had been scared off by the presence of Rae, who was still hiding in the trees, or by the noise that the group with Thor and the four tree golems was making. They weren't going to win any stealth awards today, but nobody was seeing signs of large monsters, and they weren't worried about the smaller native ones.

"Once we find a good way across the river, we will move into the hills and find a campsite for the night." Bob explained.

It was only about ten metres wide, but it looked fairly deep, and none of them were looking forward to getting soaked right before the sun went down in the mountains.

[I will make a bridge for you.] Rae offered.

Chapter 158 Rope Bridge

"Rae will hook us up. Just give her a moment to work, and she will have a way across the river." Karl explained to the others.

She was already getting to work, attaching her web to trees on opposite sides of the river, and creating a small, woven platform for them to cross. Then she added a handhold line up near shoulder height, and darted across it to add a bit more securement to the other side.

Bob gave the silk rope bridge a look of trepidation, but he stepped up onto it, and easily balanced as he made his way across.

The mages looked at the bridge and shook their heads.

"There is no way we're making it across that without dumping ourselves in the river." One of them, possibly Danni, informed Karl with a frown.

"What if we send your packs first? Or should I have Rae make more bridge for you? It's not going to fall in the water." Karl asked.

Doug smirked as he relieved one of the mages of her pack and nimbly danced across the bridge, putting one foot in front of the other.

"They're just incredibly uncoordinated. Taking the packs from them is a good idea, but they still might not be able to walk a straight line." He taunted.

[I could throw them.] Thor suggested.

"Hopefully, it won't come down to having Thor toss you. How about you pass me your remaining pack and give it a try? The upper rope is sturdy, just keep a good hold on it and you won't fall in the river." Karl offered.

The remaining pack was handed to him, and the mage stepped up on the bridge, wobbling a little as she took her first few steps. But after that, she was getting the hang of it, and after a close call that left her hanging off the handrail for a moment, she made it to the other side.

"How is Thor going to make it to the other side?" The remaining mage asked.

"He will just duck into the separate space where he rests, and then come out again when I'm on the other side." Karl laughed, while imagining the sight of Thor trying to cross a single rope bridge.

The mage carefully crossed the river, then Karl walked across behind her, before turning back to the bridge.

"I suppose we should take that down, unless we are going to need it to go back. Or at least disable it so it doesn't let anything else cross the river." He suggested.

"Yeah, we could cut it and let it fall. Most creatures wouldn't be able to reuse it anyhow. How long will the silk last?" Bob asked.

Karl shrugged. "As long as it needs to, I suppose. It normally doesn't dissolve or anything."

"Leave it. Someone else will need to get across the river soon, and they will likely be following the same trail that we are. We have to cross two more search areas before we get where we are going, and they will appreciate the ability to get across. Well, at least after they realize that it isn't a trap by a giant spider to get them stuck in the middle of the river."

Rae perked up at the suggestion. That was actually brilliant. Just a bit of sticky silk, and she could get them stuck right in the middle, where they would be out in the open and nearly helpless.

But she resisted the urge to booby trap the bridge, and waited patiently for the group to continue. The sun was about to hit the mountains, and while it would be twilight for a few hours still, the direct light was about to end for the day.

"As we have Rae here, why don't we camp up in a tree tonight? It will be softer and safer than camping on the ground, and she is fast with the web. It isn't too draining, is it?" Bob asked as the light began to fade, marking time to get their camp set up.

Rae gave him what he took for an enthusiastic gesture, and Hawk informed her of a good tree nearby, with large wide branches that could be used to make a tree fort.

"She says it's not, and she's off to build us a camp in a spot that Hawk picked nearby. He says the tree has nice wide branches for a nest." Karl explained as the spider vanished.

The mages smiled at Karl. "You know, it's really handy having her around. Setting up camp is always the most annoying part of the day, and you usually end up having to sleep on rocks and tree roots, or out in the open where anything could see you.

But being in the trees will limit the number of monsters that can get to us, and Rae should be able to make a decent canopy to keep the rain off and the bugs out."

Rae was listening in from a distance and perked up at the mention of bugs.

[Do you think there are bugs big enough to eat here? I can make a sticky tent.] She eagerly suggested.

[I can't say for sure, but we're in the right area for them. There might even be another giant beetle out here, or some of the vampire flies, which are nearly as big as my forearm.] Karl informed her.

Rae started to alter her idea from just a platform to an awning tent that would enclose the area, trapping any bugs that tried to go for the team, so she could eat them later.

Karl led the team over to the chosen tree, and saw that Rae had made them a ladder to climb up the fifty metres to where she had chosen to put their encampment in a large redwood tree overlooking a clearing.

The view was incredible, and the tree towered over most of the others in the area, which would let them scout for enemies easily when the sun came back up.

"How far are we from our search area?" Karl asked as they looked up into the tree.

"We should be right near the edge of it now. Let me double-

check the map, but I believe that our area started just behind us." Bob replied.

The mages smiled. "That means we can keep this as our base camp until we've finished with the area. It takes ages to do a full search, and there are fresh monsters appearing every day, so even if we clean them out one day, we will have to start over the next.

But with a good base camp, we can just keep scouting and returning to the same spot, without letting the monsters build up."

Karl nodded in understanding. "You hear that, Rae? This will be a regular spot, so feel free to make more webs in the area if you want to catch snacks."

Bob sighed as he saw Rae start to spin more webs in the area, filling the tree tops and linking them together into one large web.

"Did you have to tell her that?" He asked.

"Of course. She's going to get hungry, and we need to get rid of the excess monsters, so the more that she catches in her web, the fewer that we have to hunt. I will ask her to leave some at ground level as well, since we're not just after monsters that climb trees." Karl explained with a smile.

Chapter 159 Tree Fort

Karl led the group up the ladder and into the large tree fort that Rae had created for them, complete with a nest for Hawk that he was filling with leaves and small branches for comfort.

There seemed to be a number of magical resources in that pile, Karl could sense the energy coming from the pile, but he didn't recognize any of the plants, so Hawk's comfort was worth more than an unknown leaf.

Not every magical resource had a known usage. Some were just plants that held a bit of mana in them, and were either a bit more durable than usual, or longer lived.

It had only taken a few minutes to make the web fort, which was smooth on the inside, but open like any other net, while there was a sticky and much more tightly woven layer underneath. That would keep the pests out, but it would also let the breeze in.

That might be undesirable from a temperature standpoint, but for the sense of smell, it was vital.

The awning overhead was proper silk cloth, keeping the rain off, and the sides were loosely woven, but Karl didn't see any issues with the design, other than the lack of a solid surface to cook on.

They should be able to come up with something, though., Even if it was just a split log to set the cooking stove on.

The mages were panting and cursing by the time that they made it up the ladder, and Rae was doing her best not to laugh at their lack of physical fitness. The rest of the group had superhuman strength and endurance, but they had to climb all the way up with normal human strength.

The group had come up one at a time, concerned about the strength of Rae's ladder, but her web was made to contain monsters of her level. If an Ascended monster could tear the web simply by hanging on it, the Bloodbath Spider would starve.

"This is nice. I mean, really nice. When we go out with larger military groups, it's common for them to have a large canvas tent, designed to hold the whole team, and it takes up a whole backpack. This

reminds me of that, but it's so well blended to the surroundings." Bob congratulated Rae on her handiwork.

She had put great effort into making the canopy blend in with the tree, and she had even pulled small branches and leaves into the weave so that they would shield the fort from outside detection until it was too late for the victims to avoid being captured.

They would smell and hear the people in the tree, and get lured in, but they would never expect the whole area to be surrounded in spider web.

Doug settled in with his back against the tree, and cast a spell that made a branch grow out past him, and then flatten into what looked like a cutting board.

"The advantages of having a nature priest with you. I'm very good at plant growth magic. Now, I will get started on dinner, and you all can lay out your sleeping bags. We will work out the watch schedule after we eat." The cleric explained quietly.

Every communication out here was done in a hushed tone, so you didn't alert your target to your presence, and for these experienced adventurers, it had nearly become second nature.

Karl laid out his bag next to Hawk's nest and watched the others finish setting up for the evening on the soft, springy net.

"If you don't mind my asking, what do you all do when you haven't been called to a monster control battle?" He asked the group.

Doug chuckled and gestured to his simple green cleric robes. "I think you can guess what I do for a living. But I am also on the environmental protection agency's emergency response team, so they call me when there is a toxic spill or other environmental disaster to help with cleanup. Most of the time, I teach students at the Seminary Academy, or tour the parishes, to make sure that the church crops are doing well."

Bob just shrugged. "This is what I do for a living. I am out here full-time, working on commission from the government."

One of the twins gestured between the two of them. "We work for a security company in the capital. I'm actually highly skilled with security cameras and all sorts of alarm systems, so we only use our magic one week a month when we come to join Bob in the woods.

It's a bit like a camping trip, a family tradition, but with dangerous monsters."

"That's quite the family resume. I still haven't even started to think about what I'm going to do after graduation. It's nice out here, and having grown up in the mines, I have a particular fondness for anywhere that is not a narrow underground tunnel. But other than that, I have no idea." Karl replied.

Bob laughed. "I doubt you have to worry about it. I checked your deployment orders before I got on the plane, and you've been sent here by the Bureau of Elite Development. They never latch on to anyone that they don't have a plan for.

If my guess is right, they think that you will keep progressing, and then end up in one of those fancy government jobs as grand high muckety muck."

That made Doug laugh so hard he almost dropped the potatoes he was cutting.

"Well, that's one way to phrase it. The Bureau tends to focus on people who will become either powerful or famous in the future. You don't look like the sort that wants to be on television, so I think they will likely push for you to take on a job like Bob's or to go into the Defence Department.

If you make it past Commander and into the Royal and Monarch Ranks, it is almost guaranteed to be government. But any further than that and things get murky. They don't have so many Overlords that they can just afford to have them wandering around doing what they please. That much power is what they call a strategic asset. The sort of person that can be used as a threat to make the aggressive beast clans and other nations back down."

"Aggressive beast clans?" Karl asked.

Doug shrugged. "You know, like the Drakes, the Phoenix Clans, the Wild Dragons and the Gryphon Nests. The sort of beasts that have human or higher intelligence, and very little patience for stupidity."

Hawk squawked with laughter at that. It was a wonderful description of the most powerful of magical beasts.

Bob smiled at his brother as he added his opinion. "It's not like they're at war with us, but every time someone does something that irritates them, we need to convince them not to go on a rampage to prevent it from happening again. Especially the drakes. They're incredibly irritable, and then there are the Drake Riders, who are a bunch of nut bars on a good day."

Karl chuckled. "So I've heard. Well, at least here we get to just look over our zone and find the prey, we don't need to worry about all those little details. All of my beasts are right on the borderline between Awakened and Ascended, so with a bit more effort and a little push, we might manage to advance and get recognized as Ascended during the next round of exams."

One of the mages sighed. "Lucky bugger. I didn't pass the Ascended exam until my last year at the Academy, in the final semester, no less. You can't be that old yet."

Karl shook his head. "No, I'm still in my first year."

Chapter 160 Doug's Cooking

Everyone turned to stare at him when Karl made that announcement.

"Say that again? Did you just say that you're in the first year? As in, you're planning to make Ascended during the end of your first semester's exams? When did they even test you to Awakened? It's not midterms yet, is it?" Bob asked.

"No, we're still not at midterms. Actually, I think I will miss them because of the mission. But I was tested to Awakened three weeks after I got to the Academy, when Hawk started to really grow in potential. Rae and Thor joined us a few weeks later, but they're growing fast." Karl explained.

"They're growing exceptionally fast if they're already this size and were infants when you got them. At least, I assume that they were newborns at the start of the school year?" Bob asked.

"Eggs, actually. I got them all as eggs, and I've raised them from that." Karl agreed.

"I think that I see now why the bureau is so excited to get their hands on you. You're growing at an insane rate, and that always comes with an extra dose of good luck.

Now, some people will look down on the luck factor, but luck is very real." Bob replied.

"Tell me about it. The Church even gave me a good luck charm when we stopped by there to pick up a cleric after my last resource gathering mission." Karl agreed.

"You got a lucky charm from the church? What the Dragon is the point of that? Anyone lucky enough to get one of their dragon scale luck charms doesn't need the bloody things anyhow." Doug laughed.

The whole group laughed as Doug pulled a lucky dragon scale from under his robes, and then the others all did the same.

"Alright, maybe they're not as rare as I might have thought they were." Karl corrected himself.

Bob laughed. "No, they really are. But like Brother Doug said, those with good enough luck to get one don't need them. How did you think we all ended up together to form a super team? Pure blind luck. You really couldn't ask for a better group at our power level.

I've got much stronger than usual defensive abilities for a warrior, we have both a barrier and a golem mage, plus a nature priest and a beast master, whose team not only includes a tank and an ambush attacker, but a flying scout.

Compared to the average five-person team, which might not even have a competent cleric, as they just send whoever is available, our group is living it large.

We don't even need to sleep on the ground, Rae made us this lovely treehouse, and Doug will have a hot meal ready in just a few minutes, since priests of the Green Dragon are capable of creating all sorts of food, and not just the simple rice and beans."

Doug tapped his cook pot with a wooden spoon. "Speaking of which, there is food ready now. Just a simple veggie board, but that should hold you until I've got dinner cooked. Do Hawk and Rae need anything?"

"I have meat stored for Hawk, and he doesn't really like anything else. Or at least I've never seen him interested in eating vegetables. Rae likes all sorts of things, from blood to insects and small monsters. But if her guess is right, she will be able to gorge herself on what comes to the webs tonight." Karl replied.

"In that case, just give this to Thor if you can." Doug agreed, and handed Karl an armload of what looked like herbs.

Karl passed it into the beast space for Thor, who sniffed at them carefully, then picked them up and mixed them into the mass of plants he had been eating.

[These are tasty.] Thor mumbled as he tested the new concoction.

"He says they are very good, thanks." Karl relayed.

"Excellent. It's a spell that I don't get to use often because we're usually travelling by helicopter or car. It is intended for a mount, but it should be good for Thor as well." The cleric explained.

Thor laughed at that, and Rae sent Karl the mental image of the cleric riding the Cerro and waving around his club. Karl couldn't resist laughing, and the group gave him strange looks.

"Sorry, they send me mental images, and some of them are funny. Rae was thinking about you riding Thor with your club flailing around to attack goblins." He informed them while trying not to keep laughing.

The mages snickered, and Bob made his best "gallant Knight" expression.

"Have at you, foul beasts. Brother Douglas and his noble steed Thor are here to smite you down." He joked.

Doug got a pensive look on his face. "You know, he's nearly shoulder height. I bet I could actually ride on his back. But he might be slippery without a saddle."

Karl shook his head. "Quite the opposite. His scales look shiny, but they've got the surface of a drake scale, and they would tear your clothing to bits when you shifted."

The group looked a bit confused, likely because a Lightning Cerro normally had smooth scales, but they didn't question how that had happened.

Doug passed out plates of what looked like steak and potatoes with mixed veggies, and Karl gave his dinner an appreciative look.

"That's a mushroom, not a steak, but they taste pretty similar. Nature priest doesn't actually eat meat most of the time." One of the twin mages informed Karl.

"I won't argue. Good food is good food. If we can avoid eating the ration packs, I can avoid the internal chaos that they cause." He replied.

Bob chuckled. "Reducing toilet usage in the woods, you see. But you'll need a gallon of prune juice and some heartburn medicine when you get back."

"We will take the watch in order of age, so you've got the early morning shift, Karl. Can you cook at all?" Doug asked.

Karl's sad expression told them as much as his words. "Not much. I started to learn after the last trip, when I realized how useful of a skill it is, but I don't know much."

"That's fine. I am the oldest, so I have first watch and I will wake up with the dawn if there are no other issues. Is Rae good for the evening? She's still outside somewhere." Doug replied.

Karl sent a thought out to find Rae, who was setting up webs near ground level to trap roaming monsters. She had already caught a few small monsters, but that wasn't enough for a full meal, and she was looking forward to the nocturnal monsters becoming active after she linked all her webs together.

[I only sleep an hour or two a day. If I rest in the space tomorrow while you walk, it is fine.] She replied.

"She says she's good for the evening, and she will sleep in the morning while we look for monsters." Karl told Doug with a glance down to where she was working.

Not many things would pull her away from setting up her web the way that she wanted it, but Karl was certain that the sheer volume of webs in the area would scare any of the smarter monsters away from their position.

Or, it would when the sun came up and the monsters could see them again. Rae was becoming exceptionally skilled in making her webs blend in with their surroundings, where her early work had all been plain white silk.