

Beast Master 181

Chapter 181 Back To Church

As he thought about what the protocol might be for changing locations now that his official mission was over, Karl realized that Colonel Valerie was still here somewhere, and he had her number in his phone.

He scrolled the handful of numbers in the phone's directory and sent her a simple text message.

[I have a request from the church to go to the Seminary Academy. Do I need to do any paperwork to let the school know where I am?]

His phone dinged a few seconds later with her reply.

[I will take care of it. Have them arrange for your transit back to the Academy when you are finished, or update the mission log if they're sending you out again.]

That was simpler than he had expected it to be, but then a second message came in.

[Sergeant Rita will join you for your time at the Seminary Academy.]

"Are you good to go now?" Doug asked as Karl read the second message from Colonel Valerie.

"It looks like it. They're sending my personal tutor from the Academy to join me during my time there, so I think they're expecting me to be gone for a while." Karl agreed.

"They're sending a Tutor? Not a Professor?" Doug asked.

"Yeah, I usually train under the guidance of Sergeant Rita, or a pair from the Bureau of Elite Development. All three are around somewhere most days, though the other duo sometimes have work to do." Karl explained.

Doug nodded and smiled. "It looks like we got to you too late, they've already found you a cute girlfriend who just needs to make the first move."

The twins laughed and Karl chuckled. "If it's about Sergeant Rita, she's got competition from the first years."

"Oh? Do tell." Bob asked.

Karl realized that they didn't know who he was talking about. "I forgot for a moment that she wasn't on the same helicopter on the way in. There is another fast-growing student, a Mage named Dana. She's already Awakened Rank, and has been on all the same missions I have, only we got separated onto different teams this time."

Bob smiled. "Well, at least you had the good sense to go for someone close to your growth rate instead of befriending the charity case. That always ends up messy when you get too far apart in power and end up on separate details with very different social status.

Or worse, they stop giving them details and the company you work for just hires them to be your shadow or bed warmer. More than one of the lowest performing Elites was hired as an 'assistant' for a much more powerful friend after they graduated."

Karl recalled that Bob had graduated at Awakened and had only made Ascended afterwards, so in his case the experience was likely reversed, where his crush surpassed him, and he was the one left behind by social pressures. He didn't seem like the type to take a demeaning or low paying job just to be close to someone.

It was a difficult thought for Karl. Would he end up forced apart from his friends because of his progress? He had once heard the mine foreman say that it was lonely at the top, regarding being an Elite or a company boss, but Karl had always just assumed he thought like that because he was a douchebag and nobody liked him.

Doug led them out of the building, and Karl saw a very familiar head of curly hair in the distance, pushing a cart of supplies around. He would know those curly locks anywhere, even if she wasn't wearing an Academy Uniform with the familiar black Awakened Rank badge on the coat.

"Speak of the devil, that is Dana, the mage I went on the mission with. I'm not sure what she's doing in camp here, but we can go say hello if we have a minute." Karl explained, while waving in her direction.

Dana spotted them and ran over with her cart to greet Karl with a big hug, which brought some stifled laughter from the mages and a whispered "aren't they adorable?" from Doug, that he probably wasn't meant to hear.

"Dana, it's good to see you again. When did you get to the base camp?" Karl asked.

"Five days after we were dropped off. My group was completely useless, and our guardian cleric brought us back to the nearest base, who transferred us here, and put the other three on work detail for avoiding their duties. The cleric's report was far from a glowing recommendation of their skills and work ethic, but he put in enough of a good word for me that I didn't get any sort of punishment. They just reassigned me to look for another team.

I've been doing day trips with some groups to get the experience, but I haven't found a full-time group yet. It doesn't help that they upgraded the threat level here to Ascended, so there aren't many groups in the area I can even join, since most of them have Commander Rank leaders." She complained.

Karl nodded in understanding. "They transferred us here because of that upgrade. The rest of the team here are all Ascended. This is Bob, the lead warrior, Brother Doug, of the Green Dragon, and the twin mages Danni and Donni."

Dana did her best to hide her envy at Karl, having gotten a good group right from the start. She had been bouncing between groups for a week without any real hope of getting on full-time. The groups were already at full strength, they were just taking on an extra for the day so that she could get the experience.

"Where are you off to now? Back into the field after you resupply?" She asked, with a gesture to her cart.

"Nope, off to the Seminary Academy for a bit. They wanted to talk to us about a thing." Karl explained vaguely.

"Alright. Good luck, I've got to deliver these supplies, and then I'm off in the morning with another fresh team. They've just arrived back, but they're military, so maybe it will be better." She replied, then waved at everyone and made her way toward a group of trucks.

Doug chuckled as she left. If she thought that things were going to get better with a military group, she was in for a surprise. But at least it would be somewhat stable, and they probably wouldn't ship her back to town after a single day, like these short mission sorts.

Once Dana was gone and social time was over, Doug led them to a convoy of white buses with church logos on the side, which were just discharging their passengers.

The young clerics were giving Karl a curious look, and he realized that he actually had met most of these people before. They were students of the Seminary Academy, being shipped out to supplement the groups here.

He leaned over to whisper to Doug. "Should we really be headed back when things are so bad that they're sending bus loads of students out to the front lines?"

Doug smiled and patted him on the back. "It's not like that. They will be assigned as the second or third healer for a ten person military unit to gain work experience. This is a common thing for both Academies once the students are in their second years."

The group stopped to wait for the buses to be ready to start loading again, and the students took that as permission to come say hello.

Sort of.

"Brother Karl! Is Thor here?" One of the girls called from three buses away.

That brought dozens of eager looks their way, and Karl called out the happy Cerro to say hello to everyone.

"He's getting big. Good afternoon Thor." The girl giggled as she ran over to rub his horns.

Thor was quickly swarmed, and the Mages gave Karl a questioning look.

He just shrugged. "Thor is a people person. He makes friends everywhere that we go."

He was making even more friends here, behaving like an attention starved puppy around impressionable young clerics.

"At this rate, we're going to have to give them a refresher in the interacting with wild animals course when they get home." Doug chuckled.

"Thor is thoroughly domesticated. But I wouldn't recommend doing that with a wild Lightning Cerro. Though who knows, maybe they would like it, and it's just that nobody has tried." Karl agreed.

"Oh, someone has tried. That's why we teach the course." Doug countered with a smirk that said he was familiar with the story behind why the course existed.

Chapter 182 Bus Trip

It took an hour before the buses were cleaned, restocked and refuelled for the trip back to the Seminary Academy, which was set to take over ten hours.

Compared to flight, it was incredibly slow, but in terms of cost-effectiveness, Karl assumed that it was much better. He didn't know much about what it cost to run a helicopter, but it seemed like it would be a lot.

Karl and the team were the only ones on the bus who weren't part of the church, and the returning clerics seemed curious about why they were along on the mission, but two Inquisitors had come to sit in front of them, and nobody was brave enough to speak around them, in case the team was in some sort of trouble.

Both of the Inquisitors looked totally wiped, probably from dealing with slackers for the last couple of weeks, and Karl nudged Doug, then handed him a bit of the moss for tea.

"How about you make everyone a nice, refreshing cup of tea? I think that they've earned it." He suggested.

Doug looked startled when he saw the moss. "Where did you get this? It looks freshly picked."

Karl shook his head. "It's from a previous mission. But I have ways to store resources that don't let them spoil. I know it's usually dried better, but it should be alright. We made a pot the first day we got it, and it was fine."

Doug nodded and got out his teapot, with a heating element.

A few minutes later, a warm and earthy aroma filled the bus, and Doug poured a thermos full of tea, which he passed forward up the bus.

Each person it passed poured a small cup, and when the thermos made it back to Doug, it still had a little in the bottom.

He topped off his cup and started to brew another pot with the same moss.

"It's good for at least two batches, though the first is the most beneficial. I know that not many of our clerics are physical sorts, but it can still be useful to them." He explained as the second pot steeped.

One of the Inquisitors turned back to talk to them. "That's pretty good. Most of the time the moss is stale from storage, and the flavour is off. It makes better tea when it is freshly dried, but this isn't too bad."

"Thanks. I think I will put some cinnamon and nutmeg in the next batch, to liven up the flavour a bit." Doug replied, as he added the spices to the pot.

"I heard that we get to do a bunch of Commander Rank tests this week. Who thinks they have it? Surely, not Karl. Though I wouldn't be surprised if he went for Ascended already." The Inquisitor asked.

Doug gestured around. "I think that all the rest of us are close enough to give the test a go. The Bureau is sending an attendant for Karl, so I'm not certain if we will get to test him at all, or if they'll make him wait to do it in private."

The Inquisitor laughed softly.

It made no difference to him. The Inquisition had immediate access to all the records either way. It was just a matter of who else knew how fast the most talented student of the year was advancing.

The Academy might want to hold off until the end of the Semester or until next Semester's midterm for the official test, to make it look like the rate was slower than it really was. The Elite Rankings were public information once they were published, so eventually everyone would know, but changing the date of the official recording could give those watching a false impression of how things were going.

All the Elite Agencies had at least a few agents who were waiting on official tests, but had advanced months or even a year earlier.

But for most Elites, it was a point of pride to show off their advancements, especially to Commander Rank. For the clerics, it was an especially large jump, as the Commander Rank marked the High Priests and Priestesses.

If Doug could make that, he would get much better assignments at work, and would probably get a few assistants assigned to him to do the annoying parts.

For the others, it was mostly semantics, as they already had the power, but it would help them get promotions and better paying jobs. Not that they particularly needed the money, but you could never go wrong with a little better quality of life.

The bus rolled through the wilderness, and Karl noticed a group of Ogres in the distance.

"Are there groups in this zone?" He asked.

The inquisitor shook his head. "No, this zone is already cleared, and there hasn't been anything spawning here."

"There are Ogres over there. They don't look fully grown, so likely low Ascended or high Awakened." Karl informed him, with a gesture toward the tiny figures in the distance.

The Inquisitor took out binoculars to see if he could tell what Karl was talking about. Sure enough, there were Ogres, and they were headed away from the patrolled zones.

The Inquisitor sent a quick text message and sighed. "Thanks. They will take care of it. If you see any other monsters in the area, please let us know. Sometimes there are a few that slip through the cracks during an operation like this, and they don't always get picked up again until they're near civilization."

The buses were moving too fast on the oiled gravel road to send Hawk out to scout, but he could sit on the roof and keep watch, and relay anything he saw to Karl. The wind in his feathers made Hawk happy, and even though he didn't see much of note, he at least got to be outside while the other two slept.

The convoy trundled down the roads all day, and as it started to get dark, Hawk returned to his space to sleep. Rae considered taking up his spot on the roof, but she was fairly sure that the other drivers would panic if she just appeared on top of the bus unexpectedly.

It was after midnight when they made it to the Seminary Academy, and Karl knew that it was going to be a rough night, but Doug led them to the same wing that he had been staying in last time. It wasn't the same room, but at least he would know his way around.

"I will see you all at breakfast. I hope you got enough sleep on the bus because it's going to be an early morning." The cleric joked.

Bob nodded. "We know the routine. I will see you in the morning."

The routine of the Seminary Academy didn't change for anyone, no matter how late they got back to the Academy, and when the sun came up, there was a knock at Karl's door, waking him up for breakfast, and he could hear the Mackenzie siblings getting ready across the hall.

They were much more enthusiastic than usual, as they were looking forward to taking the Commander Rank test. That was enough to get them motivated even at the break of dawn. The only other one that Karl knew who was that enthusiastic in the morning was Thor, and that was because he knew that there were countless people here to visit.

Chapter 183 Candidates

The showers in the Seminary Academy never seemed to run out of hot water, a fact that Karl was immensely thankful for as he scrubbed away the grime of an extended field mission with the coarse pumice soap that they provided.

The gentle and inoffensive smell made him feel properly clean again, and reminded Thor of the waters in his pond, whose bottom was lined with Holy Stones. It was a good feeling, and they even had fresh clothes ready for him, as Karl hadn't had time to do laundry.

It was what they referred to as a visitor's robe, a simple white robe without any of the markings of the church, and a rope tie around the waist. The hassock reminded Karl a bit of wandering around in his housecoat, which was a bit strange, but it was comfortable.

The rest of the team came out wearing the same outfit, except for Doug, who obviously had his own room and clothing here.

The Green Dragon Cleric smiled at their plain white hassocks and gestured toward the dining hall. "Let's take our seats and see where we ended up. Most of the time they will put the visitors together if they're in a group, but they might split us up today, since three of you are here for the Commander Rank tests, and the Commanders will want to meet with their potential peers."

Doug's guess was right, and all of them, except the twins, were seated at separate tables, with Doug getting a spot of honour, right up at the front with the High Priests. Karl found his table in the back corner, seated between Alice and Sergeant Rita, with the rest of the table filled with Priestesses.

"What are you smiling about today?" Rita asked as Karl took his seat.

"It's the same setup as the first meal I had here. Just myself in the corner at a table full of lovely young ladies." He replied with a wink.

That made Alice laugh and most of the Priestesses blush.

"He's been taking lessons in charm from Thor, I'm certain of it." The Bureau agent laughed as Rita gave Karl a concerned look.

The room fell silent as the Matron walked in, and the students began to deliver the trays.

Everything in their room was delivered smoothly, but Karl heard the crash as someone tripped in the other room, and the apologies as they ran off to get cleaning supplies and another tray.

Rita and Alice seemed confused as to what they were waiting for, though they understood the rules. The Priestesses just seemed to accept it as part of life here. If she wanted to wait, she waited.

Karl heard the last tray being delivered, and looked up to the front, to see the Academy's Matron smiling back at him. It was obvious that she knew he could hear the commotion in the other room as well, but she didn't say anything, and just silently began her meal once the last tray was delivered.

The priestess across from Karl smirked as he moved to pick up his fork just as the Matron took her first bite.

"You really do know what the timing is. I heard from some of the younger students that you told them how to pass the homework assignment, but I didn't believe it." She whispered.

Karl smiled back and whispered. "They were telling the truth. Ask them about it later, and I'm sure they can explain how the system works."

Then he gave a meaningful look toward the front of the room, to remind them that she could hear every conversation in the dining hall.

"Is it true that you managed to kill a Commander Rank Hill Giant?" One of the others asked quietly.

"With my group, yes. We got more than one, and quite a few Ascended Rank Giants and Ogres as well. It was a very productive trip." Karl agreed.

"Wow, then the others on your team really might all make Commander Rank this time?" She replied.

Karl nodded. "I am not the best at telling relative power, but in combat, I can say that they should all meet the standard."

They finished breakfast, and Karl followed Rita and the clerics from his table out of the room and into a classroom.

"We have a few things to go over. The Bureau wants you to stay out and gather experience, but your previous team looks like they're going to be promoted, so they will be getting a new member, as you're still officially Awakened.

So, we have chosen a selection of potential team members to go with you back into the field. Did you have any particular requirements? Or can we get started with the introductions." Rita asked.

"I think that if you vetted them, then they've likely got all the qualifications that we need. I will admit that being with a Green Dragon Priest who can make all sorts of food did spoil us a little bit, but that's hardly a requirement for a mission." Karl joked.

The Clerics laughed at that. It was definitely a game changer when you had a nature god's priest or priestess with you on an extended mission.

"Alright, that is an option. There are tradeoffs, as Nature Priests aren't as good at healing as some of the others, and they don't have the group buff abilities of the war clerics. Some, like the wisdom and education gods, rarely go on missions, so there aren't any in the room with us, but you should be able to find someone you can work with." Rita explained.

"What is the rest of the group? What sort of other Elites do we have with us? Normally, it's one cleric to a group, so the composition matters a lot. Bob, the warrior from the group I was in, specialized in front-line tanking, holding the enemies back while the mages cast their spells.

If we don't have that, we will have to adjust expectations.

If it's going to be random, then the most versatile of options would be best." Karl suggested, not wanting to single anyone out or cause any hard feelings within the group.

They were all likely great options for a mission team, and he wouldn't want to mess up any future encounters.

"Then we will start with introductions from left to right. We have Jenny, a healing specialist from the God of Life. Tessa, a War Cleric of the Red Dragon. Kira, a battle cleric from the Church Guard, Andrea, a Holy Cleric specialized in group enhancement spells, and finally Lotus, a Priestess of the God of Nature."

The responses of each cleric were different, but somehow in line with their deity. Jenny gave a polite nod, Tessa went with a smirk that said she was looking forward to seeing combat again, Kira nodded in recognition with her hand on the mace at her side, while Andrea gave Rita and Alice curious looks, as if wondering if they were also group members.

Lotus was the outlier, and the tiny cleric poked Karl in the side with a pleading look.

"Can we see Thor again?" She asked.

Rita laughed, but motioned for Karl not to do anything.

"Thor has gotten larger, there isn't enough room for him in here. We can let you two visit later." She reprimanded the cleric, who stuck her tongue out at the warrior in return.

Chapter 184 New Group

Karl turned to Rita. "You still didn't answer the question about whom the other group members are."

Rita shrugged. "That's because we don't know. What they're asking of us right now is to pair you with a cleric and a mage, and we've got our mage right here. Alice will be your group leader for the rest of this assignment, but who the other two members are hasn't been decided.

For all I know, they might send me with you if they decide that you're going to officially test for Ascended Rank right away."

Hawk laughed in Karl's mind. He had said on the very first day at the Academy that it wouldn't be long until they surpassed the evil woman who worked him without snacks, and now it was coming true.

Alice smirked as Karl realized that she would be his team leader for the mission, as she was a Commander Rank Mage, and he was picking from Ascended Rank clerics.

"Alright, I am at least vaguely familiar with Alice's abilities. She is good with barriers, but specializes more in attack. We're already well-rounded in attack and defence, with a versatile mage as the leader. Thor also specializes in defence, while Rae is full offence, and Hawk is our scout.

His presence made it possible to clear an entire zone by lunch because we didn't have to hunt for the monsters' hiding spots." Karl explained to the clerics.

"So, mostly you need someone to keep you alive and fed, while making sure that the monsters die in a prompt and efficient manner?" Tessa, the War God's Cleric, asked.

Alice nodded. "That is a pretty good way of putting it. We can obviously feed ourselves, and there are ration packs, but nobody says no to a bit more variety in their diet."

The Clerics all nodded, and then they looked at each other.

Lotus smirked at Karl. "There really isn't a bad option here, so if you're hoping that someone will eliminate themselves, you're out of luck."

That was precisely what he had been hoping, but it seemed obvious now that it wasn't going to happen.

"Well then, I guess we just need to work on a solid core for the group, no matter who we get for the last pair. Since that's the case, who here is good with both healing and group buffs? We have barriers taken care of thanks to Alice, but combat enhancements are important." Karl asked.

All five of them raised their hands, and Karl gave Rita a questioning look.

"They all have specialties, but I picked five that had the best qualifications." She replied.

"So, this will not be easy. Alright, I am going to have to find some other criteria, or I will have Alice draw names to see who goes." Karl sighed.

Lotus cheered. "Drawing names is the best way." She agreed.

Jenny rolled her eyes. "That's only because you have insanely good luck when it comes to trivial things. I'm not sure that it will extend to getting a party member, but if we were drawing straws for first shower, Lotus would win every single time."

Luck might not be a quantifiable factor, but it was an incredibly valuable one.

While they were considering their next move, one of the High Priests came in and silently handed a note to Rita. Karl didn't think much of it, as they were at the Seminary Academy, but the look on her face said that it was something important.

"The extra group members have been decided. I will be accompanying you, and they request that we pick two clerics to make up the five-person group." Rita informed them, reading from the note she had been given.

Alice looked a bit startled to hear that, and moved the selection forward. "Either they're short on Elites, or we're going to be doing something unexpectedly annoying. I guess that means we're definitely going to need someone good with combat buffs, and ones who don't mind fighting.

Are there any of you who don't get along well?"

They all shook their heads. There were no deep-seated rivalries between them.

"In that case, I will pick the ones who like to fight the most." She finished.

"That would be Tessa and Lotus." Jenny laughed.

"Not Kira?" Alice questioned, as Kira was a cleric of the Church Guard.

Tessa shook her head. "She might not look like it, but the tiny one is scrappy. My theory is that she's part honey badger, and as she got more attuned to her Goddess, it made her want to pick fights with everyone."

Lotus definitely didn't look the part of a fighter. She was even shorter than Dana, despite being graduated from the Academy. On the other hand, Tessa looked more like a warrior dressed in a nun's habit than an actual Priestess. Even from here, Karl could see the muscles on her arms, and the scattering of red scales. Plus, she nearly stood eye to eye with his 180cm height, making her exceptionally tall for a Priestess.

"Now, the real question. Can one of you use advanced food creation?" Karl joked, giving the clerics a wink so they would know he wasn't serious.

Tessa laughed. "Funny story that. We both can."

Alice extended her hand to Jenny, who was closest. "Thank you all for giving us your time, and know that you are still on the short list for any future missions that we take. We have to head out again as soon as the testing is completed, so we won't keep you from your daily tasks any longer.

Tessa and Lotus, if you would like to go pack your mission bags, we will meet you at the testing cathedral in an hour."

The rejected candidates waved as they left, while Tessa and Lotus gave each other a high five as they went to pack their bags.

"Well, this could be an interesting mission. Who would have thought that we would be assigned two clerics?" Karl muttered as they left the room.

Alice nodded. "It's unexpected for certain, but the Colonel believes that you're up to the task."

That said a lot about how they ended up with such a strange group, and in such a hurry. Karl assumed the normal state of things would be for him and his chosen cleric to go back to one of the base camps and get assigned someone from the reinforcements to go with.

"So, are we really going to do the test for Ascended before we go?" Karl asked, instead of voicing his thoughts about what was happening with the Colonel's favouritism.

"We are. I am a Commander Rank Mage, so normally my group would be all Ascended or higher. If we're going to keep the military and the government dispatchers happy, you have to make it to Ascended as soon as possible.

We can write off a few weeks or a month as training, but after that, they will start wondering what is so special that you are out fighting when others are stuck in class." She replied.

"So, I will be out for some time?" Karl asked carefully.

"Look at Thor and Rae. That sort of growth would never happen in the Academy. So, as long as it keeps up, we will keep finding you opportunities to keep them growing.

I must say some of it is personal curiosity on the part of Rita and myself, to see how fast you really can grow, but most of it is the practicality of it. The Colonel thinks you might be the next powerhouse, and that means doing all we can to make it come true." Alice agreed.

"But don't worry, we will get you back to your little Mage Girl before you know it." Rita laughed.

Chapter 185 Test Location

Sergeant Rita cleared her throat to get Karl's attention. "The test will be administered by a group of High Clerics, using a combination of Divine Magic and technology, to determine if your combat power and maximum energy output meet the standards of an Ascended Elite. Your class is a bit of an anomaly, so I

am not certain whether they will count your beast's maximum as your own, but it is almost certain that they won't allow you to combine the outputs to get a more impressive number.

The look on your face says you never even considered it, but it has come up in the past with druids and Rangers who had summons. They count the summon as a separate effect, and while they do allow you to have it active if you gain a buff from it, their attack power is not added to your own.

For that reason, the total effective combat ability of mages who can use Golems or Elementals, as well as classes with various types of summons can be much higher than a single warrior."

She stepped toward the door, and Karl turned to follow, eager to get through the test and find out what the plan was to find another way for the beasts to advance.

He had an idea of his own. A simple one, but effective so far. The Lizardmen and Ogres tended to carry magical gems on them, which could be used in potions to enhance warriors. Those should be effective on the beasts as well, and he even had some coming from his share of the loot from this mission.

Most of it was in coins, but they had a rather large pile of magical gems in Doug's bag as well.

"Will we have time to drop in on the Commander Rank tests? The team I was with before are all testing for advancement today, and I think they would appreciate the extra bit of moral support." Karl asked.

"Possibly. Not all of them, as they're running at the same time as your test, but the last few we should be able to go see unless they are faster than expected or close the temple." Alice agreed.

She led them to a small temple off to the side of the compound, past the stables, where a small group of older clerics had gathered.

An ancient looking man with golden eyes that were slotted like a goat's turned to look at Karl with a curious expression.

"This must be Elite Karl. You have a lot of the World Dragon's Luck about you. Are you confident in your ability to pass the Ascended Rank trial?" He asked, speaking slowly, as if each word was an effort.

"Yes, High Priest. I am confident that I can pass the trial." Karl replied politely.

A younger priest stepped forward. "Then we will use the Divine Trial to test whether you are Ascended or not. When you come back out, your mark will be glowing golden if you passed, black if you failed."

Alice and Rita both looked shocked at his words, but Karl wasn't sure why. The cleric had just said it was a trial to confirm his status. Obviously, the Church would have their own way, and not the power meter thing that the Golden Divine Academy used along with the teachers' judgment.

"The Divine Trial has been activated?" Alice asked.

"Is it such a shock? It is active for twenty-four hours when it is used, and we have a High Priest testing later today." The old man slowly answered.

"Forgive my impertinence, High Priest. I was just shocked that it was active. I didn't know that you were elevating a High Priest today." Alice replied.

That must mean that they were confident that Doug would pass the trials and become an official Commander Rank Green Dragon Cleric, which would grant him the role of High Priest by default.

There was still some internal ranking among the High Priests, but Karl had no idea how it worked, and he didn't really care, as it was unlikely to ever affect his daily life. The protocol for dealing with them was all the same for those outside the church, and he already remembered the rules of courtesy.

Danni and Donni came over while they were talking, with Bob not far behind them, having an animated conversation with one of the guards.

From the hand gestures, it seemed that they were deeply engrossed in the finer points of swordplay, so Karl just waved to them and waited for instructions.

The Seminary Academy Matron herself stepped out of the building in front of them with a gentle smile on her face.

"We will be doing the trials today in order of age, as the Gods have demanded. Therefore, the first to enter will be the Beast Master, Karl. Followed by Donni, then Danni, Brother Doug, and finally Robert. You can enter anytime that you want after the previous applicant has entered, the trial will separate you, and none will be able to see what happens inside except the trial taker.

The results are impossible to fake, even for me, so do your best. The Gods can be unforgiving with their standards in a way that a standard test is not." She declared.

Karl believed that. The Trial Instance he was in had very different standards for those taking the tests than anything that Karl was familiar with. So, if the clerics set a certain standard for your test, he knew that the trial wouldn't allow you to fake your way through or cheat in any way.

She gestured toward the door, not allowing him any time to doubt his resolve, and Karl stepped through the large bronze doors into the chapel building.

Inside it was very unobtrusive, with a simple stone interior, wooden benches, and a collection of magical items along the walls.

It felt like the room was judging him, and Karl realized that the door behind him no longer existed. He must be inside the trial, but he wasn't certain what he should be doing.

There was an altar at the front of the room, and it had some sort of devices sitting on it. That must be the first test it wanted him to take.

Karl walked up, and saw that it even had written instructions, though the script was archaic, and he couldn't read it. But whoever had made this had prepared for that, and there were pictorial instructions as well.

Karl walked up, and saw that it even had written instructions, though the script was archaic, and he couldn't read it. But Place both hands on the device, and make it glow.

Karl put his hands on the round plate, and wondered if he should do something, but then it felt like the energy was being drained from his body, and he quickly brought up Refreshing Lightning. It was still

drawing heavily from him, as if he was using some extreme skill, but the Lightning eased the burden a little.

Then the standard increased, and Karl's knees nearly buckled. But he held on until the draw increased again, and then abruptly stopped when Karl couldn't provide the power that it demanded.

He wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not, but the altar vanished, and Karl found himself in an empty field. A golden Golem appeared in front of him, and a voice whispered in his mind.

[Hit it as hard as you can.]

Again, simple. Karl checked to make certain his bracelet that increased skill damage, the reward he received the last time that he was here at the Seminary Academy, was firmly attached to his wrist, and then coated his sword with both [Shred] and Refreshing Lightning, before lunging forward and landing five rapid strikes on the Golem, letting [Offensive Adaptation] do its thing.

Each time he hit it, a bit more of the Golem turned from gold to red, until after the fourth strike it stopped advancing. Again, Karl had no idea of how the measuring system worked, but the scene changed again, and he was sitting at a desk with a written test in front of him.

He didn't expect a written component. He couldn't even read the language of the Holy Relics.

But the test turned out to be just one question, and it was in the Golden Dragon Nation's common language.

[Which Deity do you owe your allegiance to?]

That was a tough question. There was a whole pantheon. He wasn't a cleric with an affiliation, so although the World Dragon was considered the primary God of the Golden Dragon Nation, he wasn't certain how to answer.

Wouldn't a layman like him picking just one be an uninformed answer and an insult to all the other Gods that he didn't pick?

The page went blank for a moment, and then new words appeared.

[Answer accepted.]

Chapter 186 Ascended Test

Karl stared at the words on the sheet. He didn't recall coming up with an actual answer, but he supposed that was an answer on its own.

This test was the most confusing trial he had been through so far, and he had no idea how he was even doing. He didn't even know what the standard was that he was aiming for.

Then the desk vanished, and he found himself at another temple with steps up the side, identical to the one in the last Trial Instance. Except this time, every side but one was shrouded in dark mist.

Karl walked over to the stairs, and found himself looking at the sign in annoyance. It was again in a language that he couldn't read. But the picture had a person stepping up the stairs and an arrow. That would be clear enough for anyone to understand what it wanted.

So, he stepped onto the stairs, and a soft sound like a tambourine's cymbals jingled. He stepped again, and it was a bit louder and longer. There was no appreciable resistance as he walked, so he just kept going, listening to the song that the cymbals were playing until they were joined by a drum beat.

At first, it only beat with every stair, but it was slowly gaining a beat as he moved up the stairs.

Then a flute joined the music, and a heavy weight seemed to descend on his shoulders, making every step a challenge. The Refreshing Lightning barrier seemed to help, and the mana flowing through his body helped keep him focused as he realized that he knew this song. It wasn't some Divine Hymn, or some ancient ballad, it was a rhythmic working song that the miners sang, that Karl knew by the name "Give the working man a chance". It was about hard work getting you nowhere, and that the only way to true power was to take it by force.

The song was officially banned in the mines, but not because it was a revolutionary theme song. The lyrics he knew advocated murdering the boss and taking over his job when you knew you could do a better job.

Karl sang along as he trudged up the steps, and that strange sense of amusement that he had felt on the steps after the trial appeared again. One of the Gods must know this song.

Or his version of the lyrics were so very wrong that they were laughing at him missing the point.

Six steps later, a familiar ache, like the end of a full shift swinging a pickaxe, had settled into his bones and muscles, but still Karl pushed forward, until he found that he couldn't take another step. As it had been on the fate steps, it was simply impossible to move forward. No matter where you put your foot, you somehow ended up on the same step.

This was a trial, so there should be some way forward, he assumed. Karl poured extra energy into the Refreshing Lightning Barrier, and slid his foot up the step.

That got it onto the next stair, but when he put weight on it, he found it back on the same step as his other foot.

So, he added more power with Shred and Rend both activated. Now he was on the step, and the other foot came up behind it. After a half second that felt like hours, both feet were on the next step, and a flow of power was entering his body, refreshing his aching muscles, then he was flying through the air, away from the temple. It was ironically familiar after his attempt to jump straight up on the stairs in the last trial instance, but he landed on his feet with a solid impact that left a ten-metre-long furrow and made the Refreshing Lightning barrier flicker.

The scene faded, and he found himself in the first room again, but this time he was facing the open bronze door, where he could see the Academy Matron and Alice waiting for him. The others were out of his line of sight, but the Matron was smiling at him.

"There is no need to discuss the trials you faced. They are different for everyone, and it won't help them to know what you faced. Congratulations, Ascended Elite Karl, you have passed the test." She announced.

The claw marks on his arm were glowing bright gold, and Karl let out a sigh of relief.

"That was a short test. Most of them take over an hour, but you're out again in under thirty minutes." Rita noted as Karl stepped out of the temple.

"Half an hour? It didn't feel quite that short. Though that last trial messes with your sense of time, so I suppose that could be right." Karl replied.

Rita waved off his efforts to explain.

"You can keep the content of your trial a secret. They often contain some sort of spiritual or personal revelation that will help you in the future." She explained.

A revelation that would help him in the future? Unless there were less violent lyrics for that song which had been playing, the trial probably hadn't given him any sort of deep moral lesson.

Karl found himself whistling the song that had been playing in the trial, and one of the High Priests gave him a strange look.

"Do you know that hymn?"

Karl gave him an equally confused look. "Hymn? As far as I know, it's a worker's song, with a rhythm to swing a pickaxe to. It was playing in the trial, and it got stuck in my head."

The old man nodded. "I heard it once about fifty years ago, in my own trial for High Priest. I couldn't find anything about it, though. Even when I spent half a year looking through hymn books, old musical sheets and composition records."

Karl laughed. "This one won't be in any written record. If you have some time, go ask the miners to sing it for you. But don't ask in front of the foreman or the boss because the song is banned."

The old man smirked. "Why should I wait? You know it, and we've got a few minutes before the others finish. I assume that you're intending to wait to see how Brother Doug and your friends do."

Karl nodded. "Sure, just give me a moment, I need some sort of instrument to keep rhythm if I'm going to sing."

Rita smiled and took out a pair of spoons. "I know the song as well. I will keep time, you sing. I bet that the miners' version of the lyrics are more fun than the ones I know."

The old cleric looked intrigued, and he had already pulled out a notepad and pencil to write down the lyrics, and possibly write the musical sheets for the song.

She took up the rhythm with the clacking of the spoons in place of the tambourine, and Karl started to sing the lyrics, while the clerics all looked vaguely scandalized, except the Red Dragon High Priestess, who began to sing along after a few verses.

She knew the same lyrics that Karl did, and the old cleric looked annoyed that he had looked for so long, and the answer was right in front of him, but so different from what he had expected that he wasn't asking the right questions.

When they got to the end of the song, with the line "Throw him down the shaft and give the working man a chance", the Red Dragon cleric laughed, and the other High Priests and Priestesses clapped in appreciation.

Rita shook her head and wrote out an alternate version for the cleric. "These are the words that I know. I grew up right by the border, so it might be regionally different, but the rhythm is the same. It's not a song you will hear much in public, just when the lowest class are working hard and not particularly happy with their employer." "Amazing. Thank you all for your assistance. Now, I must plan a journey to find the original version that all of these derived from." He insisted, then wandered away to do exactly that.

The group patiently waited for the others to come out, mostly with a quiet professionalism, but every few minutes the Red Dragon High Priestess would begin to whistle a song, and someone would laugh, annoying the other clerics who were trying to focus on something while they waited.

The first to appear was Doug, whose plain green robe was now layered with black and gold underneath, and his class marking was glowing bright gold.

"Welcome back, High Priest Douglas Cormac Mackenzie." The Matron greeted him.

Doug winced. "Really? You had to full name me?" The old woman smiled. "Of course. You're a dignified High Priest now, everyone gets to full name you. How else will they remain reverent of your power when you're happier playing in the garden and getting the guards high on their days off?"

Doug whistled and looked away, pretending to be innocent, but not fooling anyone.

"Well, it is good to be a High Priest anyhow. I believe my Goddess is happy with my work." Doug replied with a reverent tone when he spoke of the Dragon God of Nature.

The other clerics chuckled at his pronouncement, long since used to the carefree ways of the nature Priests. Little things like rules and regulations never bothered them much, unless they interfered with the natural order of things.

They couldn't even be counted on to prevent violence among the students because, in their words, "sometimes people deserve a punch in the face". But on the other hand, you could count on them to deal with the matter fairly after it happened.

Chapter 187 Commanders Mackenzie

The next out was Bob, whose warrior mark was glowing a faint gold, barely illuminating the mark.

"It seems that it was a close thing, but you too have passed the trials. Congratulations on your success, Commander Robert Mackenzie." The Matron greeted him.

"Thank you Matron. It got very touch and go there for a bit, but I am glad that I managed to satisfy the Gods that I was worthy of the Rank." He replied.

Then he turned to Karl, and gestured to where he had left his backpack.

"I have the loot split. If you don't mind, the mages were quite interested in the crystals for crafting, but they have offered a ring of Giant Strength and a magic sword in exchange. The values are equal, according to the church auditor." Bob informed him.

Karl nodded. "That works well enough for me. If they know someone who can make good use of them, then they are welcome to the gems. Has the cash been deposited into the account? I don't know how to check my card balance away from the Academy."

Bob nodded. "You can check it at the supply counter here at the Seminary Academy, or at any money machine in the towns. But yes, the money should be deposited already. It's a rather substantial amount, so try not to act shocked when you see it."

Alice gave Karl a curious look, and he shrugged. "We brought back two backpacks half loaded with coins from the Giants and Ogres. Even split five ways, it should be a fairly substantial amount, as Bob called it."

Bob handed over the ring and the sword, which Karl recognized as the dagger that they had gotten from one of the Giants, which Bob had been using himself as an improvement on the other sword he owned.

Karl slipped the ring on his finger, and strapped the blade to his pack until he could get a scabbard made for it. It wouldn't fit into the one for the sword he already owned, and he didn't have another way to carry it, like the metal loop that Bob used as a sword hanger.

The supply room should have something for him, though. They had all sorts of gear made by the church, and it was usually reasonably priced, from what he had heard. Even many of the items at the Golden Divine Academy were made here.

The influx of power from the Ring of Giant Strength was impressive, and Karl wondered if he could do like Thor and flip an armoured car from a standstill. His own strength was improving, but with the odd tests of the trial instance, he couldn't say how well it compared to warriors at the same entry to Ascended Rank level.

The twins came out at the same time, as perfectly as if they had planned it, and both showing off the golden wand marks on their hands.

"Congratulations Commanders, you have both done a wonderful job today. We will be updating your registration in just a few minutes, would you like some family alone time before you are pulled away by those eager to celebrate your advancement?" The Matron asked.

"A few minutes at least would be appreciated." Doug replied with a smile, right before he pulled his sisters into a group hug.

Karl nodded to Bob, who gave him a happy soldier's salute, then went to join the others.

"Alright, I think we're finished. Do you two need anything, or should I just go grab the last items I need before we head out?" Karl asked.

"Grab what you need and meet us back at the front gates in fifteen minutes. That's when the clerics will be arriving." Alice agreed.

Karl ran off to the supply counter and handed his card to the clerk, who did a double take as he noticed it wasn't a Seminary Academy card, but hadn't noticed that Karl wasn't one of them while he was wearing the generic hassock.

"Can I get a scabbard to fit this blade and two sets of black training mission fatigues if you have them?" He asked.

The man punched in the request without a word, then tapped Karl's card against the reader and nodded. "We've got them. Just allow me a minute to grab a few scabbards and see what fits best. That looks like it was taken from a monster, so it's probably not a standard size."

True to his word, he returned in just over a minute, with an armload of clothes and scabbards, then proceeded to test the fit of the sword until he found one that he was satisfied with.

"Is it hanging on that belt?" He asked dubiously, looking at the rope tie of Karl's hassock.

"No, I have a sword belt, Academy standard issue, but everything was in the laundry this morning." Karl explained. He hoped it would all be clean and ready, but last time he was here, he hadn't returned to his room for quite a while. But the supply chief was prepared for that, and he pulled out a plain black leather sword belt, intended to be wrapped twice around the waist, to adjust the hanging height of your blade.

"No charge. It can replace the standard belts that come with the fatigue sets. Do you need new boots?" He asked.

Karl shook his head. The plain black ones he had on were already broken in and comfortable, and after a short cleaning, they were good as new.

"Thanks, I've got to run up and get packed, we're supposed to leave in fifteen minutes." Karl informed the supply chief, who smiled and waved for him to get running.

When Karl got back to his room, his school mission uniforms were all freshly laundered and waiting for him, along with a set of fresh Bronze badges. That had to be from either Alice or Rita, as they were Golden Divine Academy badges, not something that you would expect to see at the Seminary Academy, but Karl appreciated the gesture.

If they were here now, then they had been dropped off before his trial was complete, anticipating him succeeding.

With well practised motions, Karl tucked everything back in his pack the way that he liked the balance best, and then headed back downstairs to inquire about the fact that all the consumables from his last mission were already depleted, and he didn't have an opportunity to restock them.

The clerics were just getting down to the courtyard when he arrived, and there were stacks of supplies being loaded into the white bus convoy, in preparation to head back out again.

"This time it will just be us and the convoy guards with the supplies. The other missions only last for a week before they return to the Academy, so they bus team will wait for them there after we deliver the supplies." Sergeant Rita explained.

"Alright. I will need to restock as well, I returned here with nothing but loot in my pack." Karl replied with a laugh.

Lotus giggled and wiggled her fingers in the universal children's symbol for casting a magic spell.

"Don't worry about it. We've got all those sorts of supplies taken care of. Tessa can also use her magic to repair metal, so if you've got damaged gear, we can take care of that as well once we're in the field." The tiny cleric explained.

"It sounds like we're ready for almost anything then. Alright, I will let Thor out for a few minutes because he might not forgive me if he doesn't get to play with the clerics for a bit, and then we can go."

Those were magic words for Lotus, and Karl wasn't sure who was more excited to meet the other for the first time, her or Thor. There was a lot of happy squealing and rough affection from both sides, to the point that the other clerics were hesitant to join in until the two had calmed down a little bit.

Tessa smiled at Karl. "See what I mean? She's a bit too in tune with her animalistic side. But she's a good cleric, and you can always count on her to have your back."

Karl smiled at the War Priestess. "That's the only part that really matters, isn't it? If you can't count on them to have your back, it doesn't matter what else they can do or how their personality is."

Chapter 188 Join A Patrol

Once the buses were loaded, they picked one and loaded themselves in the front, among the limited space that wasn't taken up with stacked supplies.

The bus seats didn't fold, but they had done the best that they could to load them with supplies, and the bus was packed from the third row back. That didn't leave much space for the five member team and their gear, but fortunately none of them was huge and burly. At least not to the point that they didn't fit in one of the narrow bus seats.

Karl took the seat closest to the door, while Hawk took a seat on the roof rack, which was also loaded with boxes of supplies for their journey. There were no off-road or particularly bad stretches between them and the base camp, so they had loaded as much as humanly possible into the vehicles for the trip.

That hid Hawk from sight from behind, and while it limited his view a little, he could see enough that he wasn't afraid of missing any threats to the convoy. The only real danger that they would face would be road conditions, as by the time that Hawk relayed them, it would probably be too late to do anything about them.

The morning was passing smoothly, with the miles flowing by outside the bus without incident, until Hawk spotted the same situation as on the way back to the Seminary Academy. There was a small group of monsters who had escaped from the containment area, and they were headed toward the road.

[They might make it to the road before the bus group gets there.] Hawk warned Karl.

"Incoming monsters ahead. They've left the containment area, and they're headed for the road ahead of us." Karl warned the driver.

The driver relayed the message, and the convoy began to slow as the lead driver spotted the same monsters that Hawk had seen thirty seconds earlier. They were right on the road now, according to Hawk, but they were no real threat, as they were all Awakened Rank.

[Take care of them quickly, and then someone will drag them out of the road so we can keep going.] Karl instructed.

That was a pleasure for Hawk. He flew up off his perch and forward to the front of the convoy to get in range, then hit them with a barrage of fireballs. The flames seemed to melt into their bodies, remaining coherent like chunks of magma, and the Ogres dropped dead, falling all along the road and in the ditches.

[Your fireballs are becoming quite impressive.] Karl congratulated him.

[Fire is wonderful. I should have had fire from the start.] Hawk agreed.

That was a new attitude from Hawk. Karl was actually surprised that he didn't use Rend, but with Fireball being as good as it was now, clearly an Ascended Rank advanced attack ability, it made sense for him to switch.

"That Hawk has some serious attack power." The driver commented as he listened to the lead guard group going out to clean up the dead Ogres and scavenge any loot that they could get. Hawk didn't sense anything worth keeping, but they might have some money on them, which the church would use to pay for the supplies and bus fuel.

They had the road cleared in under a minute, and the convoy was back in motion, with Hawk now sitting on the top of the lead bus, so he could get that extra few hundred metres worth of warning if there was anything headed toward the road.

Burning holes in Ogres was surprisingly satisfying, and with Karl meditating all the time lately, his space was starting to gain enough power that he could feel a bit of leeway to keep growing his skills.

Keeping up with the demands of the three growing beasts was more than Karl could easily manage, but now that Hawk had found some advancement room, he was making the best of it to improve his fire abilities.

Karl could tell that Rae was working on something as well, but he couldn't tell quite what it was that she was trying to comprehend. He still had [Skill Master] active to help their learning, but without anyone to watch, their growth would be limited. She was dedicated to it though, and she seemed to have a good grasp on what she was doing, there was just one last step left that she wasn't understanding in order to make the spell work. Once they were in combat again, she might grasp it, as long as it was something that the group here was using as well.

With the combat enhancement of a War Goddess Cleric, the pets might even manage to learn some new combat enhancement spells and abilities. Sure, it was Divine Dragon Magic, but there was still a chance. The class marking were Divine Magic from the World Dragon, after all.

There were a few more monsters near the road just before they got to the base camp, and Hawk was getting excited about getting to burn them again, but the team on patrol in the field got to them first, and had the road cleared before they arrived. It was their job, but Hawk was still disappointed that he didn't get to show off his new skill.

The convoy rolled into the camp, stopping at the edge of the parking lot so that the work teams had more room to unload, since the interiors, roof racks and belly boxes were all loaded with cargo.

The guards exited the cabs, to give the work teams room to do their jobs, and Alice led the group toward the base camp office.

"I hear you made the Public Safety officer cry last time that you were here, so try to be nice to him this time. We will inform his office that we have arrived, and then we will be sent out with a weaker group as their escort. The military does things through the weight of numbers, not with raw individual power, so don't expect an all-star team like you had last time." Alice warned Karl as they walked away from the bus.

"I've already got an all-star team with me, I don't know what you mean. But I understand that we will be tasked to a regular military unit to help with the sorts of things they struggle with." Karl agreed.

That did somewhat explain why they had two healers. If they were accompanying a larger group, they would need more healing, and if the soldiers were fighting above their level, they would face not only more frequent, but more serious injuries than usual.

The staff member was the same one that had escorted Karl and his team in the last time he was here, but today she was all business, taking Alice's notes and pulling the assignment for their team from the printed stack of missions.

"You will be assigned to the 4pm group. Their commander will have more details for you." She informed Alice as they finished the process.

"Understood. Have a good afternoon, and we will see you in a week or two."

They left the office and headed for the staging area, where the soldiers were gathered. The military insignia on Sergeant Rita's uniform got them through without any unnecessary questions, and in only a few minutes, Karl found himself looking at the largest armoured vehicle that he had ever seen.

He hadn't realized how big an artillery platform was until he first saw one up close, but Thor seemed to take the presence of the vehicle as a personal challenge. He was supposed to be the group's front line, not some metal truck with too many wheels.

[Relax, buddy. It's probably not coming with us into the wilderness, and it's certainly not agile enough to be on the front lines of a battle. It stays at the back, far away from the fight, to shoot at it.] Karl assured him.

Thor was still suspicious of the large vehicle, but decided to let the grudge rest, as long as it didn't try to steal his job.

Alice led them to a Captain, who had a group of soldiers with him ready to leave the base, and shook his hand.

"Good to see you again, Captain. I've got a proper group for you today." Alice informed him.

"Oh, and how is that?" The soldier replied with a smile for the slightly younger mage.

"We've got myself and the Sergeant, plus two clerics and a Beast Master, with three Ascended monsters bonded." She replied.

"And who is the small child?" The Captain asked, with a gesture toward Lotus, who gave him a rude gesture in return.

"That would be the Nature Priestess Lotus. She's not a child, just very short."

Chapter 189 Forward Operations

At half past three in the afternoon, the group started to load up into the helicopter to head into the woods. It was the only good way in, and there was already one team waiting in there for them. Karl smiled as he saw the terrified faces of the group that was waiting for them. They were all students, both from his own Academy and the Seminary Academy, and they all looked like they were new to the Awakened Rank.

Alice leaned over to whisper in Karl's ear. "The military group has been telling them horror stories, so when they found out that they were being tasked to set up a forward observation base in the woods, where they would treat the wounded and keep the supply lines, they feared the worst. Ogre invasions, constant battles where they would have to fight ten on one against a single monster to stand a chance, you get the idea.

But we will be based out of the camp that they're supplying, which is why we didn't need to pack as heavily this time.

There is another group there now, holding the position so that it isn't overrun, and there should be base building supplies already on site. That's not our concern though, our team will be going outside to clear the more powerful monsters from the area, the same as always. But we can go back to camp at night if once the worst of the infestation is under control."

Karl smiled. "Well, that will be a change. I got very used to sleeping in the comfort of Rae's webs at night. They're kind of springy, and hold the body without any of the pressure points of a cot or a cheap mattress."

Sergeant Rita smirked. "You weren't exactly roughing it last time, were you? Everyone else came back exhausted from fitful sleep leaning against tree roots, and your lot were complaining that the smell of gourmet cooking attracted even more Ogres than usual."

Karl smirked back. "Who said that was a complaint? We made out like bandits off those Ogres. There was one day when we got four Commander Rank kills before lunch."

The students paled a little at that mention. They would rather not see any Commander Rank monsters, much less four in one day. What sort of mission had Karl been on that had been so dangerous.

Sergeant Rita hadn't noticed that they had an audience, though. "You know, we're going to be flying directly over your last deployment location, and it's not that far from our new location, so you might be in luck if the surge picks up again. But this time you have a whole military group with you, so you'll have to share the glory."

The Captain of the group they were accompanying laughed. "And the loot. Please keep that part in mind as well. You will have to share the loot. I don't think I've ever seen a student decked out in that much magical gear before, and from what I can see, it's all monster dropped. Did your team spoil you, or was there that much?"

Karl shrugged. "We split evenly. The gloves I got as my share, the bracelet was a gift from the church, while the ring and sword were traded for my share of the magical gems we got. The mages wanted them for crafting."

The Captain shook his head. "Well, at least we've got a well geared frontline fighter out of the deal."

Karl resisted the urge to tell him that he was not on the front lines voluntarily, but because their group didn't have another warrior capable of tanking damage from the monsters.

Avoidance Tanking had to be a thing because Karl had no intentions of just getting hit, but if he was going to be at the front and drawing the monsters' attention, it was difficult to argue that he wasn't the tank of the group.

The last of the team took their seats, and the doors were closed, leaving Karl in uncomfortable silence while the other students sized him up and tried to figure out who he was. None of them remembered having a classmate like him, but he was wearing a bronze academy badge, so he had to be an Ascended Elite.

It was the students from the Seminary Academy that finally explained to them who he was, as they had seen him during his first visit.

"So, that's the first year wonder kid? How did he even make it to Ascended already? We're not even done the fall term yet, and he's already ahead of half the school." One of the students complained.

"Half the school? How many students are even going to graduate at Commander? Like six out of five hundred? I would say he's already ahead of most of the school, and he's probably going to get some fancy title by the time that he reaches second year." Another one scoffed.

"Nah, it's most likely just a unique class that gets an early bump. Like the Druids that summon a powerful supporter and jump up a rank in a few weeks, then flat line." One of the others replied in a snarky tone, unwilling to accept that Karl really might be the next monster among the Elites.

Karl pretended that he couldn't hear them, as they were making an effort to whisper, and didn't know that he could hear everyone in the helicopter, including the air traffic controller speaking through the pilot's headset, guiding them to their destination.

Karl looked out the window, and his eyes picked out the fort that Rae had made in the lower branches of the Redwood tree at their second stop.

"You were right, we're over the last zone I was assigned to. See, there's the redwood where I set up camp, and the clearing by the river where we killed that Commander Rank Giant. Oh, it looks like someone else is there now, fighting." Karl informed Rita, raising his voice a little to be heard over the noise.

Rita looked down and shook her head. "From this height, I can barely make out that there are people moving down there, much less what they are doing."

The helicopter passed over the area, and then another ten minutes passed before Karl saw a military group in the distance. That had to be where they were going, unless there were multiple new base camps being set up. There were piles of supplies, surrounded by a group of people in military uniforms, and a few Elites in plain clothes.

The helicopter waited for a few minutes, circling the base as they prepared for the arrival of the rest of their troops, and then it landed in a clearing just outside the perimeter.

"Everyone out. There is no more space inside the base for helicopters, so we are being rerouted to the clearing. I recommend that you get a proper helipad sorted out before your next supply shipment needs to be delivered, but that's up to you." The Cargo Master aboard the helicopter informed them.

The military teams filed out first, leaving Karl and his group as the last ones aboard. They shook hands with the crew as they departed, and quietly followed the teams into the base, with a gesture from Sergeant Rita for them to remain inconspicuous. Why, Karl didn't know, but it seemed to be important

to her that the people here not realize who they were right away. She led the group in behind the soldiers, then turned to inspect their equipment and storage.

"We're the ranking Elites here, and I want to get a look at their practices before they realize there's someone looking and shuffle us away. If they're not taking care of it, a good chunk of the supplies will get wasted." Rita whispered.

But as they walked through, Rita's mood was improving. Everything was organized, nothing was left in the mud, it was all elevated on pallets or logs, and the general state was just crowded, but not disorganized.

"Alright, I've seen what I need to. Let's go make our introductions and catch up with our mission team." She announced.

That caught the attention of the group's Captain, who was chatting with the base commander, while the other man discretely ordered his people to start working on expanding the base.

"Ah, Commander Alice, Sergeant Rita, I thought we lost you for a moment there. We will be headed out immediately, using the directions that the base has given us on the larger threats in the area." The Captain announced.

"Understood Captain. Our gear is stowed, and we're ready to move when you are." Alice agreed.

Chapter 190 Why Am I Up Front?

With a single whistle, the Captain had his unit focused and ready to move.

Karl wasn't a premiere expert on the strength of other Elites, but if he had to guess, the only one close to Hawk would be the Captain, and the rest were all at the Awakened level. So, his team would be the heavy hitters for the squad while they were out on patrol, while they took care of the large numbers, like the Goblin Tribe that his last group had used Golems to eliminate.

Karl fell in at the front of the convoy, and the Captain gave him a curious look.

"I'm the front-line warrior, so I'm with you. Once we're away from the camp, I will send my Dragon Hawk out to scout, and it helps if I'm next to you to relay any findings he makes. From up there, he can see an entire patrol zone clearly and relay the best route to clear it." Karl explained.

"So, you're both a scout and a melee warrior?" The Captain asked. "Not exactly a melee warrior, but I have a Lightning Barrier for defence, so I'm better suited to the front line than our other warrior, who has guard." Karl explained.

The Captain nodded. "Your Hawk shouldn't find too much. The scouting reports for the area say that there aren't any threats above the low Ascended Rank, with a low overall density. That's why they only sent one stronger team to the area this time. If we actually need the strength of a Commander Rank mage, something has gone horribly wrong."

That was a giant red flag if Karl had ever seen one, and he gave the beasts an advance warning that they were likely to see real combat sooner than expected.

As they walked, Karl let Hawk out, which caught the attention of the soldiers, who were quickly reminded that he was a friendly unit by the rest of Karl's team. Their skittishness was making Karl nervous about sending out the others, especially Rae, who wasn't as friendly looking as Thor.

"Have they been briefed on the beasts that I have with me? Because Rae is a bloodbath spider, and I really don't want her getting injured by friendly fire." Karl asked the Captain quietly.

The Captain nodded. "I have, but I can't guarantee how well they listened. It will be best if you bring Rae out before the fight starts, so they can get used to the spider before things get hectic."

[Hawk, how's it looking up there?] Karl asked.

[One more kilometre, then you can choose a Hobgoblin patrol, or some Ogres.] Hawk replied.

"We've got a patrol of hobgoblins and a few Ogres a kilometre ahead. I think it's best if I get Rae ready now, so they're used to seeing her." Karl replied to the Captain's comment.

The Captain raised his voice. "Team, listen up. Elite Karl will be calling out his Bloodbath Spider. It is a valuable asset on our side. Treat it as one of your team members."

Karl called her out on the far side of himself, so he was between her and the team, and Rae hissed as a half dozen of the soldiers turned weapons on her. Fortunately, nobody attacked, because an Awakened Rank soldier with no magical barriers on them would not take a hit from Rae and survive.

They calmed down after a few seconds and a stern look from the Captain, who had just finished warning them not to do anything dumb.

"Alright, Rae will be travelling with us, possibly in the trees away from the group, but nearby. She will join the fight when we come across our first group of enemies." Karl informed them.

Rae stayed in sight, just in case they forgot what she looked like, and Karl decided to add Thor to the mix.

"The Lightning Cerro is our additional tank. If you don't want to be charged by Ogres, make friends with Thor." Karl informed the group as he summoned the scaled beast.

That one didn't alarm them as much, and somehow Thor's expressionless face still managed to look happy to see them.

Thor's presence helped set the team at ease, and when Karl saw Hawk circling ahead of them, the soldiers were ready for a battle.

"Captain, the Hobgoblins are through those trees. The Ogres aren't far beyond that." Karl relayed from Hawk's information.

[Tell them that the Ogres are Ascended Rank.] Hawk reminded him.

"Ascended rank Ogres. Four of them in total." Karl amended.

That was a tough fight for the military unit on their own, but shouldn't be a challenge for Karl and his team.

The Captain nodded. "You five split off and take care of the Ogres."

Then he called back to the team. "We will deal with the Hobgoblins. Ramirez and Jones to the front, bring your shields. The Mercenary Elites will be splitting off to deal with Ascended Rank Ogres."

His voice was hushed, but it carried well through the unit, and the others split off quickly to join Karl, following Hawk's directions around the Hobgoblins to get to their fight.

"Our first fight as a team, are you mentally ready?" Alice whispered as the Ogres came in sight.

They were looking around, trying to find the sound of the footsteps, as they had heard Thor coming, but he had stopped out of sight, and the Ogres hadn't properly located him yet.

"I'm ready. It will be a big change standing up at the front with Thor, but we've got this. Trust in the Lightning barriers, and we will be fine." Karl agreed.

Of course, Alice cast a barrier over them as well, but her specialty was wind magic, so it wasn't quite up to the standard that Donni's had been, despite the barrier mage having just made it to Commander Rank.

The barrier was still enough to give Thor all the confidence he needed, and the Cerro waited eagerly for Karl to start the charge into combat.

With a nod to his partner, Karl silently raced through the trees while Thor crashed through the bushes the last dozen metres to the Ogres, distracting them while Karl sliced the throat of the closest Ogre with [Shred] before it could respond.

Its hand went to its throat to block the bleeding while it healed, leaving it only one hand to fight, but there were three other Ogres, and only two fighters in the front. Thor had practice with this, and easily

rounded up two of them, holding them in place while the mages attacked and Rita moved to the side to attack.

Alice summoned a Golem to help Karl at the front, making it three on four with one already wounded, and Karl dodged an incoming strike, then moved to prevent the Ogres from getting past him to the mage and clerics.

A flood of warm magic surged through Karl's body as Tessa cast a buff on him, and his steps became smoother, both faster and less encumbered by the gear he was carrying. He was about to go for the knees of the wounded Golem when the strangest sight met Karl's eyes. Two odd-looking spiders charged the field, looking like tree golems, but shaped like Rae. The spider in question was right behind them, and all three piled on the wounded Ogre, tearing it apart as it screamed in terror.

[When did you learn that?] Karl asked.

[It's pretty awesome, right? I figured it out when the Alice Mage summoned hers. The other Golem mage casts it all funny.]

The spider golems might not have all of Rae's skills, but what they lacked in power, they made up for in pure enthusiasm.

Even when the Ogre crushed two legs off one of them, it didn't slow down, and Lotus had the lost limbs repaired before the Golem could even find the time to care that it was damaged. That left Thor and Karl with one Ogre each, and Alice's Golem with another. Being Commander Rank, her golem was much stronger than its opponent, but the Ogre seemed more concerned with keeping the trio of spiders away from its back, and it was taking constant hits as it moved.

The extra speed let Karl meet every attack of the Ogre with a skill of his own, matching attack speed instead of brute strength. Rend was enough to stop the majority of attacks, or deflect them wide enough that they weren't a threat, and Karl was getting the hang of fighting in close quarters.

When the Ogre's club was deflected over his head, Karl went for the stomach, cutting the Ogre open with [Rend], and then blocked the next strike with his blade.

Surprisingly, with the effects of the Bestial Strength Gauntlets and the Ring of Giant Strength, he didn't feel like he was at a disadvantage in the physical confrontation, and the Ogre wasn't going to last long with the rate that it was bleeding out.

The first one wounded was the first to fall, followed closely by the one that Alice had focused with her golem, and then Karl's, which was outmanoeuvred and outmatched by the cleric enhanced Beast Master.