

Beast Master 201

Chapter 201 More Disciplined Troops

When Karl's morning shift came, he found that the patrols were still circling past the large tree, and that they were more numerous than the patrols the first night that they had been here had been.

They also had a Church Guard with some of the patrols, and Karl could see the sour looks on the soldiers' faces at the fact. The Guards were higher ranking than their team leaders, so they had taken over and had eliminated any chance of slacking on the night shift.

[Rae, did we see anything good tonight?] Karl asked, as Hawk wasn't awake yet.

[Nothing much. There were a few wandering Goblins, but the scouts got them.]

Tessa started cooking an hour into their shift, earlier than she usually would, and then set up the partition for the shower.

"The church hearings always start entirely too early in the morning, so we should be cleaned up and fed before they show up to tell us to head into camp to give our version of events." She explained quietly, not wanting to forcibly wake the others early.

There was no shower bag today, just a bowl of water with a washcloth and a bar of unscented soap. It would do the job, but the hot water was always comforting on the muscles.

Once he was ready, they switched positions, and Karl stirred the morning's stew.

It didn't take long for the scent to wake everyone else up, and Rae switched shifts with Hawk.

She had a theory that she wanted to test. Offensive Adaptation was a versatile skill, and it even enhanced Karl's Rend and Shred attacks, so it should start enhancing her Golems soon, she assumed.

That meant extra Stabby tree spiders, but also the chance that she could teach them other skills.

She didn't actually know any other skills to teach them. But in her mind, that was a Karl problem. Once she knew that they could learn the basics, she would convince him to teach the Golems more skills. That vine whip that the big tree golems knew would be nice.

It wasn't part of the basic Golem spell, it was an additional spell that Donni knew, but cast on the Golems.

The whole point of having a human around was to make them make you stronger, Rae was certain, and that meant she would have to convince him to find more good skills for her.

Hawk agreed with Rae on that last point. They needed to find new skills, or good things. They were all reaching maximum growth, and even with his new fire skills, Hawk was convinced that he could do better.

What they really needed was a shiny thing. Karl got shiny things, and now he had the strength to fist fight an Ogre. Some of that had even spilled over to the team, and Hawk's wings were stronger than ever when Karl was wearing the Bestial Strength gloves.

Having [Skill Master] active all the time without a defined target was helping, but they weren't seeing new skills. Everyone they met all knew the same basic set of Academy Skills. They needed to find cooler monsters and people that knew other stuff.

[We can go look for cooler monsters after we finish with the ones here. There might still be some shiny gems or other things on them, and you haven't fully mastered teaching Offensive Adaptation to the Golems yet.

Don't worry, once we get a chance I will find a way to teach everyone more skills, or even try to find a way to help them Evolve, like Hawk did when he got that potion.] Karl assured her.

[Oh, that would be good too. Maybe I could become invisible, or like super durable.] Rae agreed.

Thor laughed silently at the thought of an armoured Rae. But the thought of new skills was fun. He just hadn't found any that he liked yet.

He didn't even know what sort of skill he would like. Better Lightning wasn't really a new skill, was it? That was all he really wanted. But Rae said that ideas to make you stronger were what humans were for, so Thor decided that he could just wait for Karl to come up with something.

Their discussion of the best ways to get stronger, and how they should just sneak away to go look for really good things, was interrupted by the food being served, and then by the Church Guard coming to call all of them to make their official report on the conditions in the field.

As far as Karl could tell, it was exactly what he had been facing since he arrived at his second deployment, but according to whoever did the deployments, it was not supposed to be that way.

They took a minute to wash all the dishes and pack their gear to head out after the hearing, then followed the Church Guard back into the camp, where a large church tent had been set up in the middle of what would normally be the assembly ground.

"The High Priest will see you right away. He wants to get the outside reports filed before he starts with the involved parties." The Guard announced.

Karl looked around and noticed that there were more Command tents here than he remembered. There should have been one for the base commander, and perhaps one for the transient units, but most of those were camped outside the base as it was being renovated and upgraded.

But there were at least four of them marked with senior officer's emblems, plus the one for the High Priest.

They must have arrived yesterday while the group was out on patrol, but Karl hadn't noticed them.

That meant that this was likely going to be more annoying for their Captain than just a simple church inquiry into a dispute between Ascended Rank officers, who were both Captains in the army.

"Karl, come with us first. You are the unit's scout, so you have the most details of the situation." The Guard insisted.

[Hawk, I hope your memory is good because I haven't been taking any notes.] Karl informed his partner.

[Talk to Thor, he remembers everything in order.]

Karl was definitely using his notepad, starting today. He should have borrowed Tessa's notes before coming inside.

But now he was in the tent, facing a group of four Colonels and a High Priest, who were sat behind a table with an emblem that said JAG, the acronym for the Judge Advocate General's department, the military's legal authority. It was too late to turn back.

"Ascended Elite Karl, class designation is Beast Master, a new designation for a previously unseen mark. It says here that you are serving the role of attached scout for the military unit, is that correct?" The aging Colonel on Karl's far left asked as Karl walked up to the speaker's booth.

"That is correct."

"And can you give us an overview of the situation in this region, in your professional opinion as an Elite?" The man asked.

"I would say that the Common Rank monsters are somewhat less frequent, though we have come across large packs of Goblins. More frequent are the Awakened Rank Ogres and Hobgoblins, with about a third of our encounters consisting solely of the Ascended Rank varieties.

That is what my team is along with the patrol for, the stronger groups, but we have also come across a total of twelve Commander Rank monsters in the last two days. The heads collected yesterday were brought back to the camp as evidence, at the request of the Church.

The situation appears to be under control, as the number of stronger monsters is not increasing on a daily basis, but neither is it noticeably decreasing in the limited time since I arrived from a deployment between here and the Regional Command location."

The Colonel nodded. "Are you privy to the official threat assessment for the region?"

Karl shook his head. "No, sir. But I am privy to the official scouting reports, though they are somewhat limited in their scope, as they do not extend to the edges of the zone."

The officers flipped pages, while the High Priest made notes, and then the man second from the right pointed at a page and asked Karl a question.

"It says here in the official report that there are no threats above low Awakened Rank found by the forward observation post's scouts. Would you say that this is accurate?"

Karl frowned. "In a way. That scouting report only covers a one-

kilometre distance from the camp. In that distance, the monster density is indeed made up of only Common Rank and low Awakened Rank Goblins and Hobgoblins. But once you move past the distance that is within the hourly patrol route, the smarter monsters become more common."

They all made more notes, and then the High Priest asked his question.

"From your elevated position last night, what did your team identify as potential threats to be dealt with today?"

"There are two groups of Ascended Ogres camped respectively five and seven kilometres from the camp. There are four groups of roving Hobgoblins of unknown strength, with numbers in the single digits and low teens, and one pair of Giants, possibly a mated pair. Oh, plus a Warbear den, but that isn't on the list to eliminate, as they naturally control monster populations." Karl replied.

A clerk brought him a map of the zone and Karl filled in everything that they had located and hadn't had time to eliminate, plus what they had found last night during the daily spawn. With the help of Thor, who really did remember where all of them were seen last, Karl managed to put over twenty spots on the map before turning it back over to the clerk.

"Thank you, Elite. Your information has been recorded." The High Priest announced, dismissing Karl, and sending the clerks to bring in another witness.

Chapter 202 Tribunal

By the time that the tribunal was finished with everyone they wanted to call for witnesses, it was nearly lunch, so they postponed the final two interviews with the Base Commander and the Captain for after the meal.

That cut out almost all chance of getting a proper patrol completed on that day, and that meant double the numbers of dangerous monsters the day after, as Karl's team wouldn't be out there to deal with them.

But more importantly, with nobody challenging them, there was a chance that the larger monsters would team up and start coming after the base.

But very few in the camp were actually concerned about the implications of stopping their clearance duties for a day. They all wanted to know how this drama was going to play out, and if there was going to be a new Base Commander at the end of the day.

If there was, then they would expect a whole new set of orders to be coming, and they couldn't rely on routine to get them through tomorrow. Even if the Base Commander was just censured by the High Priest, the tribunal officers would be breathing down his neck for the foreseeable future, and that meant even more chaos than a new Commander.

They had all realized yesterday when the pile of monster heads was brought into the base that something was horribly wrong outside their patrol ranges, but most of them didn't know the details.

They did, however, know about the altercation between the Captain and the Base Commander.

Lunch at the military chow hall was a dismal meal, with everything from cans and no clerics assigned to kitchen duties to bring fresh food to the mix. Karl wasn't certain, but the ever present rice and beans might actually be better than what they were serving here.

Lotus must have felt the same way because Karl saw her sneaking spices into everything that she ate, including the tea. For such a tiny creature, the cleric ate a surprising amount, but she was still finished before the meal was over and waiting for the circus to begin.

The final decisions would be made within the next hour, and they would find out if they were going to have to patrol in the afternoon, or reorganize their team after it lost its Captain. There was a very slim chance that they would be sent out without their officer, but Karl's group might well be reassigned to another unit while the one they were with was put on base duty until they could receive a new officer.

The Golden Dragon Nation's Army was quite flexible with officer ranks, as they were mostly based on accomplishments, so you could end up with situations like this, where a Captain led a platoon of men, instead of a Lieutenant, but without an officer, nobody would be going anywhere.

Someone had soundproofed the tent, so everyone waiting outside could only guess at what happened after the Base Commander and the Captain were called inside, but it was an entire hour before they came back out.

The Captain, whose uniform insignia had already been changed to red to signify his punishment status, was now wearing the silver bar of a Second Lieutenant, along with the red stripes of an officer under punishment, while the Base Commander was no longer wearing any military rank at all. His coat and hat had been removed, and he was accompanying the JAG officers to the helicopter they had arrived in the day before.

The former Captain, now Lieutenant, waited beside the High Priest while he prepared to make an official announcement, waiting for the crowd to quiet before he spoke.

"Attention. Our decision has been made. The base will receive a new Commander within the next seven days. Until that time, I will remain here, and the Church Guard will take over administration of this forward post.

For the crime of instigating violence against a fellow officer, a demotion from Captain to Second Lieutenant has been issued, and this matter is now considered to be resolved. May the Dragons favour all your lives."

That was a much shorter speech than had been expected, but they still only had about five hours before it would be dark again, and there would be a spawn sometime tonight that would increase the monster numbers once more.

The Lieutenant motioned for his team to gather, then for Karl's group to join him. They were going to escape the base before the flood of questions began, and get some work done before they could be accused of slacking by those who were friends with the Base Commander.

There was no official word on what had happened to him, but leaving without his uniform, there was a good chance that he had either been stripped of his commission, or he was going to jail. Neither one would make the freshly demoted Lieutenant particularly popular with those who had supported the Base Commander's actions.

They were out of the base before anyone else had really grasped their intentions, and Karl sent Hawk up to verify the location of the biggest threats.

"I don't see any Commanders today, but we have a number of Ascended threats, as well as some nasty groups of Hobgoblins. We will have to work fast to get things done, but we should be able to clear at least the west side toward the lake before nightfall." Karl relayed once Hawk was far enough up to give a proper report.

"A nice dip in the lake tomorrow morning wouldn't upset anyone. Lead the way, Scout Karl." The Lieutenant laughed.

That would be perfect for them. Gone overnight, still doing their jobs, and a nice warm swim before coming back to the base.

Hawk led them through a gauntlet of small but intense fights for the remainder of the afternoon, working his way toward the lake, while the group pointedly ignored the constant chatter on the radio as the patrol teams struggled to adapt to the orders that the High Priest was giving.

They should have known that he would have no mercy on them. He was an old man, and he had been leading battles against the monsters for decades before the Serum injections created the Elites.

Back when all they had was a cleric like Tessa to enchant their weapons and armour, during battles when they would send otherwise perfectly human soldiers up against the supernatural, he was already a High Priest, doing the will of the Gods and ensuring that the Golden Dragon Nation prospered.

Their complaints that they couldn't defeat these monsters fell on deaf ears. They could and they would. They just needed someone to show them how, and the Church Guard was happy to be the ones to show them.

They were all from military deities, mostly the main branch of the Church, and they knew the skills to enhance weapons the same as the clerics always had.

Tessa could do the same, but other than the basic blessings of increased strength and movement speed, she mostly just enhanced Thor, as he was the only one who would be fighting up close and personal. She could do Rae as well, but the effects were limited, and the duration was short, so she had to return to the group to get it refreshed, and that was just too annoying for the spider, who preferred to hide until it was time to fight.

[The lake is right ahead, no big groups of monsters, and no monster fish in the waters. Tell them the best spot to set up camp is thirty metres from the shore and a hundred metres north of the path that leads you to the lake. There is a good spot there that isn't wet.] Hawk updated just before the sun went down.

"Good news. We found our camping spot. Hawk says it's dry, flat and free of monsters." Karl informed the group, who all smiled wearily.

They had pushed hard today to get the kills in, and tomorrow they knew they were in for a lot of walking.

Karl tested the waters of the lake when he first arrived, and found that the water was fresh, and cool, though not uncomfortably cold, as well as reasonably clear, which would be great for swimming in the morning.

The clearing was a bit cramped, but he wanted to set up along the tree line anyhow so that he could have Rae construct hammocks instead of sleeping on the ground again. Their one big tent wasn't terrible, but given the option, not being on the ground would be better.

Chapter 203 Caught Lacking

The next morning, Tessa and Lotus, along with the military team's healer, made a big breakfast for everyone, while the rest of the unit took a swim in the lake.

Undershirts and military issued boxer briefs were the fashion of the day, getting the essentials clean while they frolicked in the water. The mages had promised to use air magic to dry everyone when they got out, so for now, it was just time to relax.

Once the cooking was done, the healers traded spots with them, and ate while floating in the water. At first, the unit thought that they'd gotten the better end of that deal, until they realized that it took longer to break camp than it did to cook breakfast.

Karl ended up having to use his sword to disassemble their portion of the camp, as Rae had made triple bunk hammocks for them to sleep in, but the web was too strong for a normal knife to cut through. If he pushed that hard, he would cut through the tree instead.

"You look lost in thought." Sergeant Rita noted as Karl rolled the hammocks around sticks and strapped them to his pack.

"Lots to think about today. Everyone is about full-grown, and it's time to find a new skill or a way for them to break through. The mental spaces for them are close to complete, and that will push Rae well into the Ascended Rank without too much trouble, but after that, I might flat line unless I pick up another pet, or help these Three Stooges skip the slow part of their growth." Karl explained.

Rita nodded. "Yeah, I foresaw that same issue before we came out here, but I didn't expect them to make it quite this far before becoming stuck. What you really need are the accolades right now.

All these assists on Commander Rank kills really add up, and with the accumulated points, we can go to the Government University's genetic research lab. They are always working on something, and they might have a clue as to how to help the beasts grow.

Other than that, it's pure luck, or in-depth research on your own to try to find something that will work for them. We found a way for Hawk, and that brought him up a full Rank, so there is a chance that we can find something for the others as well.

Perhaps a Lightning-based resource for Thor would help his power grow?

As for Rae, I'm not certain now that she's showing signs of becoming a mage type support fighter. I would have thought that warrior resources to increase her attack power and durability would be best, but the first additional skill she learned was Tree Golems.

That doesn't match with anything that I know about the species, so there is a chance that we don't really understand them at all."

Rae rolled her eyes in her resting spot. Of course, she was misunderstood. Who could comprehend the ways of darkness, or the pure beauty that was a Bloodbath Spider? The humans simply lacked a sufficient sense of majesty to truly appreciate her nature.

Karl let her rant about her own majesty for a while as he packed up the camp gear, and then the unit prepared to head out to the first targets that Hawk had spotted that morning.

[We should go see the other unit first. They will want to fight the Ogres with us.] Hawk suggested.

Karl relayed the information to the Lieutenant, and he got the unit moving. The other group had camped in a hollow between two hills, not realizing that there were Ogres living in caves in both hills.

Neither of the entrances pointed toward the hollow, but it wouldn't take the Ogres long to realize that there was someone right next to their den.

[I don't think that they're going to fight the Ogres with us unless we hurry.] Hawk updated just after the group started moving.

[And why is that?] Karl asked.

[The Ogres are awake now. That patrol is totally going to get eaten if we're not there in like five minutes.]

"We've got about five minutes before the Ogres find and eat the patrol." Karl updated.

That got everyone up to a run, with Tessa and Alice on Thor's back, while Lotus was riding Rae through the trees, using a short length of silk as a harness.

The military unit was staying together, and Sergeant Rita had joined Dana in keeping pace with them, but just having the other Elites in place for a fight would be enough.

The patrol needed at least one of the Ascended Rank Elites with them, and that was Sergeant Rita, while Dana missed her chance to get on Thor before the Cerro took off through the trees.

The young mage shook her head in dismay as she jogged along next to the military patrol, and Rita patted her on the shoulder in consolation.

"You've got to move fast if you want a lift. We were both too far away this time, but there's always next time." She offered.

Dana smiled and shook her head. "If you can't move fast enough to catch up, I have no chance. Even Alice only got on because they nearly ran over her."

The Lieutenant chuckled at the two bickering Elites. From Karl's description, they had over a kilometre left to go, and the unit shouldn't take too much more than five minutes to get there, but if the Ogres were about to attack a unit that was still half asleep and slacking on the guard duties, they were likely to still be too late.

Karl and the others got to the site just in time, as Hawk began to bombard the Ogres with fireballs to wake up the camp and cause enough noise that they would know that they were in trouble.

The problem was that this was a group of Ascended Ogres, and there was only one Ascended member in their team. With half the group asleep or drowsy, they weren't putting on much of a showing of proper defensive formation.

Their group could, logically, defeat these Ogres. But it would require teamwork and strategy.

That was not the plan that Karl and the others had come up with, as a Lightning Cerro charged through the edge of the camp, and Alice leapt from his back into Karl's arms for a gentle landing.

Rae had called out the Spider Golems, and the situation in the ambushed camp was utter chaos, unable to understand why they were caught in the middle of a fight between beasts Ogres and mercenary Elites.

In their minds, they were just in the wrong place at the wrong time. But they had been here all night, and with the Ogres so close, they were slowly realizing that good timing just saved their day.

Alice's voice echoed through the area as her Golem stomped into battle. "Good morning, Ladies and Gentlemen. As you can see, your camp was approached to within thirty metres without a single alarm being sounded this morning. In fact, you didn't even notice a rampaging Lightning Cerro charging through the forest in your direction.

This is not acceptable practice for night watch. If you will kindly bring me your Team Leader, I would like to have a word with them while my team finishes with the Ogre threat."

Chapter 204 Rae and Lotus

The team leader wiped sleep from his eyes as he tried to get his armour straightened when Alice started yelling. This group was a mess, and they were very nearly literally a mess, if Alice and the others hadn't shown up to block the Ogres.

But there were more Ogres coming now that the first group was down, drawn by the sound of combat, and the smell of blood.

The rest of the unit was almost on site already, and the appearance of another military unit had this camp shaping up much more quickly than one irate Commander Rank Elite. Everyone had heard the new orders over the last day, even Karl's group, though they had kept the radios turned low so the news of other troop movements and combat orders didn't distract them.

Everyone who had left the base since yesterday had a Church Guard with them, so this team had been in the field for at least two days, which was unusual, as the camp was much more comfortable, and the patrol zone was limited.

The Captain leading this patrol actually looked relieved when he saw that the officer for the incoming group was a Lieutenant who was under censure, with the red stripes, but after a few seconds, he realized just who that Lieutenant was, and all the casual demeanour that he had been trying to put on vanished.

"Lieutenant, thank you for the timely interception of the Ogre threat. My men owe your team a debt." He began.

"You can save it. My team is still finishing the second group of Ogres that yours didn't see coming this morning. I'm not going to yell at you, but I will warn you that there is a Church Guard either waiting for you to return to camp, or already on his way out to meet you.

It would be wise to have all your protocols in order before they arrive because the High Priest is an old school battle priest, and his team doesn't believe in coddling Elites." The Lieutenant replied.

"Surely, they won't usurp leadership from the military officers?" The Captain asked, looking to Alice for confirmation, as she was the strongest one present.

Alice shook her head. "They already have. The Church has been asked by the Judge Advocate General's office to get this zone back in top form, and the High Priest they chose intends to do exactly that."

The Captain looked devastated at the news. Under the old system, before the Elites, soldiers were honoured as potential Martyrs because the life expectancy was terrible, and over half wouldn't make it back from a five-year term of service. But now, Elites like him had gotten comfortable doing the bare minimum and reaping glory and promotions along the way.

Karl finished the second group of Ogres, and Tessa pulled a glowing magical gem out from under one of the bodies.

"I found something interesting. Give me a moment to translate, it's in that Ogre or Orc gobbledygook nonsense." She explained.

Karl hadn't even realized there was something written on the crystal in her hand, but when she cast a light spell through it, the gem created a set of red letters against the green of Thor's scales, and the cleric slowly began to decipher the writing.

"It is a gem of wisdom. It helps mages refresh their mana more quickly, but it's worthless to the Ogres. They must have kept it because it's shiny." Tessa explained.

That actually made sense for the Ogres, but the gem should be good for clerics as well.

"You might as well hold on to that. At some point, we're going to need all the buffs and healing that you can give us.

But speaking of buffs and healing, where are Rae and Lotus? I know I saw them both fighting earlier, but they're gone again." Karl remarked casually, in case she was just standing in his blind spot.

"Who knows. They likely wandered off to find something fun in the forest. I swear that girl is half feral." Tessa sighed.

Karl checked on Rae in his mind, and found that she was about fifty metres from the group in a tree, where she and Lotus had found a particularly interesting flower that the cleric didn't find in any of her training materials.

As a nature cleric, she knew a lot about botany. More than most doctorate students in the subject. It was a gift from her goddess. But she still couldn't identify this flower, and it was bothering her. So she had brought Rae to go examine it and make notes while the others did 'people things', as Rae described them.

While the group leaders had a tense discussion, and Lotus spent her time engrossed in the details of a flower that Rae had every intention of snatching to put in her space later, the slacker team's worst fears came true.

The Church Guard assigned to them arrived with another group of soldiers on patrol. Not only that, but they had brought along a Church Guard supervisor for the soldiers accompanying Karl's group as well, which proved to be an amusing sight, as he already knew them all from the walk in.

"Elite Karl, where did you put the nature cleric? The others said that she ran away with your spider." The Guardsman asked curiously as he approached.

His smile said it wasn't an accusation, and he was an Ascended Rank Cleric as well, so there was a good chance that he knew her personally.

"Lotus is checking out flowers they found in the woods. There's something rare about it. They will come back eventually, or I will call them if there is a fight. They're always up for a fight." Karl replied with a smile.

"As long as you know where they are, and that there is someone covering for them, in case a monster tries to sneak up on them. It's policy not to let the nature clerics roam unattended." He replied.

Tessa snickered at the way he phrased it. The guidelines recommended that you did not have any group member alone and out of sight of the group, but the Nature Clerics had a bad habit of wandering away.

[Rae, the Church Guard says to keep the Spider Golems with you and Lotus, in case anything tries to sneak up on you.] Karl informed the wayward spider.

[Got it.]

The two Golems vanished as Rae summoned another pair, and the other groups of soldiers looked to see who had dismissed them. The number of unique Golems was still equal to the number of mages who might be using the spell, so none of them could understand where the last pair had come from.

[Hawk, what is our situation? Where are the nearest groups, and what is their strength? We've got plenty of patrols in this area, so we should get them organized.] Karl requested.

Hawk gave them a quick rundown, which Karl relayed to the unit leaders, and then Hawk added one more that he wanted for himself. There was a group of mole men that Hawk thought might taste like giant mice.

They weren't strong, but they were a priority target in Hawk's mind, and they were along the route that led to one of the Commander Rank Giants.

Chapter 205 Mental Space Limitations

Once Rae and Lotus returned from their flower hunting trip, with the flower safely stowed in Rae's space along with the branch it was growing on, Alice got the group moving in the direction that Hawk had recommended for them to follow past the mole monsters.

Hawk had already succumbed to temptation and caught one for a taste test, which he found pleasantly mousy, with a hint of feral monster. That meant bringing Karl to him so he could stow the bodies in his space before he continued his scouting flights.

Alice didn't say anything when she saw the rapidly vanishing bodies of the moles, but the Church Guard with them did give Karl a strange look, wondering what he was doing, and if this was some sort of food stocking ritual that he did for his beasts every day.

They didn't actually eat that much, and other than Thor, who was pleading for a fresh update of Ascended Rank feed every day, even though he had so much it was actually growing in his space now, they were in no need of refreshed supplies.

Their spaces were nearly reaching their power and size limits, and soon Karl would be able to begin working on a fourth space, in preparation for adding a new friend.

Thor's space looked like an idyllic pasture, filled with the best feeds, a few trees and smashing posts, while Hawk's was neatly organized piles of meat, cut and stripped to unrecognizable chunks based on flavour and energy content.

Rae's on the other hand, had a very horror graveyard vibe going for it, as she had strung all of her reserves up in her webs, and in the dim light, it almost looked like they were still alive.

[If you're going to add something, I want a cool friend.] Rae commented when she sensed Karl checking on the state of the spaces.

[Oh? What sort of cool friend?] Karl asked.

[Maybe like a Shadow Demon, or a Leaper.] She suggested, referring to two species of ethereal humanoid monsters who preferred to hunt in the dark and had incredible magical power. In the wild, they were natural allies of the Bloodbath Spiders, whose webs would catch and detain prey for all of them.

The other two would herd hapless monsters and humans into the webs, which the targets would be unable to break free from, and then take the choice bits and leave the rest for the Bloodbath Spiders as a form of payment for their assistance.

As Karl recalled, they were both born at the Royal Rank, and would grow up to become Overlord level threats that kept the majority of humanity out of the tunnels in the mountains.

[I will have to see what we can manage. I don't think that anything above our rank is going to end well, though.] Karl laughed.

Hawk led them to the pair of Commander Rank Giants that he had found, with the Church Guard following closely beside Karl as he moved through the trees.

"How can you be so certain that we're going the right way?" The Guard asked as Karl made a turn to follow a riverbank.

"Because Hawk is still overhead, and he will tell me if we're going the wrong way, or if something is blocking us. The Giants should be just around this bend in the river." Karl explained, as he slowed to make certain everyone was ready for the fight.

"Don't you think something is off about this forest? The woods here shouldn't be so lush, they should be more barren with the poor soil, and then there was that magical flower that Lotus found earlier. I think that we're coming into an area with higher than usual mana density.

That means a chance at some unique rewards, but also stronger monsters." The guard whispered as the others joined them.

Dana's eyes lit up in recognition. "Like the woods around the Holy Relic. They were loaded with good stuff, but this time we haven't been looking for it. We were just looking for monsters."

Alice smiled. "Alright, if there are Commander Rank monsters, there is a chance of Commander Rank resources. We can't turn that down, and it's permitted in our group charter to search for them.

I don't know about the army unit, but for certain the six of us are allowed to search."

The Lieutenant sighed. "Anything that we gather is to be turned over to military supplies for processing, and a reward will be issued as a portion of its value."

That line was straight out of the operator's handbook, and Sergeant Rita nodded in agreement.

[I will look for magical plants for Rae and the tiny human to collect.] Hawk agreed.

The last time they went for magical plants worked out very well for him. If they could find another good thing, he might really become a Commander Rank Hawk.

He was so excited about searching for magical resources that he almost forgot to join the fight when everyone moved to surround the Giants.

"Everyone move up to surround them, but leave a way out. We don't need them smashing through the ranks if they try to run." The Lieutenant quietly ordered his troops.

They were going to try to help, but they all knew that at two Ranks higher, the Giants could easily kill them with a single hit. If they got into the line of fire, it was over for them, and their attacks would do little more than distract the enormous humanoids.

When Karl reached the spot where the Giants were waiting, he saw that there was a good reason they hadn't moved, even though they had to have heard the soldiers approaching. There was an intensely magical cluster of grass between them, and the Giants had taken defensive positions around it.

"Do we know what that is?" Karl whispered to Lotus as she moved forward in preparation for the charge.

"No idea. I haven't seen it before, either. That's really strange, two unknown plants in one day." She replied quietly.

Alice nodded in agreement. "Then make certain that we do not destroy it during the battle. It must not be ready yet, or they would have picked it."

The Giants held their position as Karl and Thor stepped out into the open, with Alice, Rita and the Church Guard behind them. The Lieutenant had gone to the left, while Rae went to the right, so they could attack from the sides, while the rest of the unit got in position.

The Giants made a motion to shoo Karl and the others away, which Karl returned by pointing at the plant, as if they would let the Giants leave if they gave up the treasure.

The one closest to him roared in anger at Karl's arrogance, daring to demand the precious resource from literally between his feet.

The Giant charged at the arrogant young human, and Karl produced the large vampiric sword from its ready state. If he was going to get gains for his team, this was the perfect opportunity for it. There were plant resources right there, and the blade would suck some of the life force from the Giants when they died, giving them all an extra bump of growth.

Karl stepped forward, using [Rend] to reduce the power of the Giant's attack so he could block, while Alice's Golem charged at the other Giant before it could get in position to assist.

The Giant facing Karl lifted its blade to hack down at Karl just as Thor charged into the battle, crashing into the side of its knee, while Karl attacked its forearms with [Rend], toppling the creature over backward.

That was Rae's cue to get in on the action, and the Spider Golems were on the Giant instantly, attacking the arms so it couldn't pick up its weapon, while Hawk dropped Fireballs into the middle of its exposed stomach.

Rae herself was hanging back from the battle and waiting for an opening to attack the other Giant.

The rest of the force were all focusing on it now, as Thor and the Golems blocked their line of sight to the fallen monster. But then Rae had a brilliant idea. They didn't have to wait for the end of the battle to get the loot. She just had to dart over to the plant and use her forelegs to scoop it out of the ground and into her space for later.

Nobody even noticed when the plants disappeared, the closest to knowing what happened was the standing Giant, who only noticed Rae's approach after the plants were gone, when she went for the vulnerable spot between the shoulders, where the Giants weren't flexible enough to reach her.

That only lasted a few seconds, until the Giant managed to take a swing with its sword, sweeping over its back, and the Bloodbath Spider was forced to retreat while the Golem and the two Ascended warriors attacked from the front.

Chapter 206 Good Stuff

Once the resources were safely stowed away, there was no more need to hold back on the combat, and Karl pushed as much energy as he could into the oversized blade, allowing it to slice deeply into the wounded Giant.

It wasn't going to be that easy to take it out, and despite the heavy bleeding and awkward angle from a prone position, the Giant still managed to punch Thor so hard that both barriers on the Cerro shattered, and he was sent staggering back.

The giant began to get up as its wounds healed at an incredibly accelerated rate, already knitting back together.

It reached for the plants, but found them gone, and began frantically searching for them or whoever might have them.

The magical signature of the plants would normally give away their hiding spot, and make it obvious who was trying to loot the battlefield in advance, but with them safely in Rae's space, it was as if they had never existed. She had even taken the roots with them, just in case that was the valuable part.

The distraction turned out to be its downfall, as Karl's blade slid through a partially healed wound and deep into the creature's torso, aimed upward for the vital organs. With a gurgling gasp, the giant turned and swung a backhanded strike at Karl, who dropped to the ground and rolled out of the path of the enormous blade.

That effort twisted the blade still lodged through the Giant's back, and it collapsed to the ground, already dead.

The second Giant fell seconds later, and while the warriors caught their breath, the clerics collected evidence and updated their notes.

Once he saw the Clerics' routine, Karl also made a note of the day's kills, recalling how he had been questioned about them by the lawyers.

Hawk flew back up to scouting height and looked for other resources and monsters. Mostly resources, and he was finding a lot of them.

Karl took notes as Hawk updated the map with resource points, including their likely strength, and the monsters that had been drawn to them. In Hawk's mind, that was likely the important part. He might not know what the plants did, but if they attracted monsters that were similar to him, Thor or Rae, then they were likely going to be useful.

Most monsters worked on instinct and confirmation bias. If others like you thought it was true, it probably was. Sometimes it was genetic memory, sometimes just a guess, but everyone would fight over the resources all the same.

Karl dismissed his blade, which was trapped under the Giant's body, and the Church Guard came over with a leather pouch from the hip of the other Giant.

"It's a healing salve of some sort. It looks like it works fairly well, going by the magic in it." He explained.

"The Giants were regenerating abnormally rapidly as well. I've never seen a [Shred] wound heal that fast before. Normally, the jagged edges make it nearly impossible for monsters to deal with, but these ones were even able to stop the blood flow from Lacerate without applying the ointment." Karl agreed.

The Church Guard took a portion of the ointment into a trio of jars, and then passed the leather bag to the cleric attached to the military unit.

"You can turn that in at the end of the mission if you like, but you might need it." The experienced Guard cautioned him.

The extra jars were passed to the other clerics, who would be doing the group's healing duties, and Thor began to eye the plants in Rae's space with renewed interest.

If they could make him regenerate that fast, wouldn't he be nearly immortal? He was already tougher than some silly Giant, who had barely cracked his scales, and they were mostly healed on their own.

Of course, Thor was overlooking the fact that the Giant did that with a single solid hit through two layers of barriers, and if he had been hit any more, he would have taken serious injuries. That sort of thing didn't matter to the Cerro. There was strength in numbers, and if he got hit, someone else could go forward until he healed. It only took a few minutes.

Tessa gave Thor a pat on the side, and healed the last of his damaged scales, along with the slight bruising underneath, which left him in an even better mood while the Red Dragon Cleric went to check on the second Giant's body.

"There are some good things here, and more of the same ointment that we found on the other Giant. We've got an assortment of dried magical herbs in the bag, and there are magical bracers, which will have to be altered, but are potent enough to survive a reforging." She explained.

That was the sort of thing that Karl's group had always left behind before. They were huge and heavy, difficult to carry and not immediately useful. But sometimes, they would make themselves functional for the right person.

"Do we know what they do? High Priest Doug taught me a trick, and sometimes you can get them to activate and adjust themselves to you." Karl suggested.

The Church Guard did a double take. "Did you say High Priest Doug, as in Doug Mackenzie?"

Karl nodded. "He took and passed the test to the Commander Rank at the same time that I made it to Ascended Rank."

The Guard shook his head. "We will never hear the end of it. Doug Mackenzie made it to Commander Rank before I did."

Karl smiled. "The Clergy is a lot like a small town, isn't it? Everyone knows each other."

The Guard shrugged. "It is at the higher levels, but there are hundreds of thousands of staff, lay priests who aren't blessed with magic, and devoted nuns cloistered around the nation whose names most of us will never even hear, much less learn."

But at the same rank and close to the same age, it's hard not to know each other even if we're in different branches, and on different details."

Tessa laughed. "Plus, everyone knows Doug. He's the only Nature Cleric I know that's less reliable outside of combat than Lotus. Speaking of which, where did she go this time? Can you send Rae to go find her and bring her back?"

[Rae? Can you take your Golems and make sure we don't lose our tiny cleric? Give me updates if she finds good things.] Karl instructed.

[Already on it. She found tasty mushrooms. They eat blood from dead monsters.] Rae replied.

They were only a few metres into the trees, and if they weren't crouched down looking for mushrooms, everyone would be able to see them. Once he knew where they were, Karl found them with thermal imaging.

"She's right over there. They haven't gone far this time." Karl explained.

Lotus' voice carried through the clearing. "Hey! Everyone, come this way. There is a whole bunch of good stuff in the woods."

The Soldiers spread out, only vaguely aware of what they were looking for, but everyone could at least pick out some of the major magical plants, and things that didn't look like they belonged in a normal forest.

"Sister Lotus, I think I found something." One of the soldiers called, holding up a bright red mushroom with black spots that looked oddly like skulls.

Karl looked at Tessa. "That's poison, isn't it?"

She smirked and nodded. "Yup. But it's a paralytic, not a lethal toxin. He's going to collapse in... Oh, there he goes."

Lotus pranced over and tucked the mushroom in a specimen jar that she threw to Rae before she cast a cleansing spell on the warrior and helped him to his feet.

"What is the first rule of unknown magical plants?" She asked him.

"Sister, you see..." he began.

"What is the first rule of unknown magical plants?" She repeated, with her hands on her hips, looking fierce, despite her diminutive size.

"Look with your eyes, not your hands." The young man replied sheepishly.

"Exactly. Look with your eyes, not your hands. That means, no grabbing the death's head mushrooms. Now, are there more of those? They're quite useful for a number of potions." Lotus asked.

"Sister, there is some sort of glowing grass over here, and a plant with leaves that look like Golden Dragon Scales." One of the others reported.

That drew the Church Guard over to assist, and the unit went into full gathering mode, hunting in the area for more magical resources, the original target plant long forgotten.

Chapter 207 Suspiciously Good Loot

There were a suspicious number of magical plants in the area, that much was clear to everyone, but they were doing their best to collect what they could, not leaving much to regrow, unlike an area that could be safely farmed later.

The magical plants would attract more powerful monsters, and that was the last thing that the region needed when it was already short on Elites who were over the Awakened Rank. Most of the patrols only had one or two Ascended members, and Alice was the only Commander Rank Elite in the area before the Church Guard showed up.

Karl wasn't certain of the strength that they brought with them, but there were at least a few Commander Ranked Guard Captains in the mix, if he had checked the uniforms right.

"We should start searching the area for freshly appeared Relics and hidden places of power, given the amount of change that the area has undergone. There are far too many resources here for it to be nothing but a mana surge." Alice informed the Church Guard, who was technically in charge of the soldiers now.

He nodded in agreement, and began to issue orders to his troops to spread out and start keeping notes on the frequency of the plants, as well as the potency, if they could determine it.

The numbers would go up as they got closer to the centre of the disturbance, and the disturbance would be responsible for most of the increase in the number of powerful monsters, perhaps even for the whole extended combat region.

They never did find the source of the daily monster appearances, so it was possible that it simply hadn't made itself known yet, and their group might be the first to stumble across it.

Fortunately, it wasn't spawning anything above Commander Rank anywhere yet, since there were so few Royal and Monarch Rank elites to send out, and the handful of available Overlords had better things to do than stomp out a monster infestation two or more ranks beneath them.

The unit spread out in a wide line, while Hawk scouted overhead, leading them in a wide arc that would cover everywhere that he was finding magical plants, with the hope of finding whatever hidden good thing might help him advance again.

But he made certain that Rae and Lotus, who were scouting ahead, found the very best things before the army line got there, extracting them to be split between the mercenary Elites later. There was no good reason to let military command waste the best stuff on Elites who never saw the field outside mandatory missions.

Lotus was in heaven, surrounded by high grade magical plants all afternoon as the group moved in a winding spiral, trying to find the centre of the disturbance.

She was staying away from the group, but almost all the loot was going into Rae's space for storage, and Karl could see that it was really starting to pile up, and that there was quite the variety in there.

They had even found more of the moss that was used to make tea, and harvested another whole log to go with the one that was in Thor's space right now.

[You need to come here. There is a thing.] Rae insisted.

[I'm almost at the other end of the formation, give me a minute.] Karl replied, then turned to Tessa, who was beside him.

"I'll be right back, Rae needs me for a thing." He explained, then used all of his superhuman strength to launch himself through the trees at a run, headed for the spot where Rae and Lotus were waiting.

"What is the emergency?" Karl asked as he caught a tree not far from where Lotus was crouched on the ground, using the solid trunk to slow his momentum and drop gently to the ground.

Lotus looked up with a smile and pointed at a golden disc, formerly buried under the ground, and now exposed thanks to her efforts.

"What is it?" Karl whispered, confused, but feeling a familiar feeling of power.

"We're standing in the ruins of a city. That, right there, is a System Stone." Lotus whispered.

"You have to be shitting me."

The System Stones were the Holy Relic whose magic was used to develop the Divine Serum. They were the source of the entire Nation's hopes and power.

As far as anyone knew, there weren't any more of them, the original Relic should have been unique and lost to history. But this one, other than the fact that it was covered in dirt, looked like it had been made only days before.

"Are there more?" Karl added.

Lotus shrugged. "There should be. I saw the diagram of the original formation as it was when it was first discovered. If we don't move anything, and it is intact, the shape indicates that there should be another one right... here."

She began to dig again, and another golden stone appeared from the ground, an arch brick, curved on the inner and outer edges, with tapered sides indicating that it was part of a circular formation.

So Karl moved to where he thought that the centre should be, based on where the other stones had been found.

The moment that he reached the point, golden light erupted from the ground in a hundred points all around him, and dirt was thrown away from the formation.

Words appeared in front of Karl's eyes as the formation activated.

[Would you like to select randomly?]

Randomly select what? If there was an option to randomize, there should be an option to select deliberately.

"No" he thought, wondering if that would be enough for the magic.

[Gender, Species and Class remain unchanged. Generating Class Reward.]

That was too close, far too close. He had to warn Lotus.

"Don't select the random option. Whatever you do, do not select the random option." Karl warned her.

Lotus pouted, but she didn't change, and Karl's attention was pulled away by the magic of the System Stones.

[Class Skills Unlocked]

[Skill Book] Allows the Beast Master to record skills and teach them to others.

[Identification] Allows the Beast Master to discern the effects that magical materials will have on his partners.

[Mental Fortitude] You know you need it.

Karl blinked slowly. Were the System Stones throwing shade at him? That last ability's description was almost certainly an open insult. But what Karl hated the most was that it wasn't wrong, he did need mental fortitude because he needed to improve the spaces enough to allow the beasts to advance to Commander Rank.

Karl returned to the present as the magic faded, and found Lotus pouting in front of him.

"What if I could have been a dragon, or a Gryphon, or like an Angel or something?" She complained.

"What if you turned into a fat male half orc?" Karl countered.

Lotus considered that for a second. "With a big dick or a little one? I always kind of wanted to know what it was like to have a penis."

Karl flicked the little Nature Priest on the forehead. "It might have even changed your Class from Nature Priest to something entirely different. For all you know, you could have had to start all over from nothing."

The lights had drawn the rest of the unit to them, starting with the rest of their team, as the Lieutenant and the Church Guard were keeping the soldiers on task until they reached their destination.

Everyone stared at the System Stones, now clearly visible on a stone platform in the forest, untouched by time and intact.

"Are they functional?" Alice asked.

Lotus nodded. "Yes. They activated for both of us. But not for Rae. Karl says, don't pick the random option, but if you're lucky, it might turn you into a dragon."

"And if I'm unlucky?" Alice replied.

"Who knows. Should we ask someone to try?"

Lotus seemed far too eager to see what happened when you randomized, but Alice was with Karl in her thinking. Magic this powerful could cause completely unexpected results if you allowed it to run amok.

Lotus dragged Dana, the only one in the party she could physically drag, to the centre of the platform, and the stone glowed again, while Dana stared at something only she could see.

Then she slowly began to smile.

"I learned a new Class Skill. Destruction. It increases the damage of all my spells."

Chapter 208 System Stones

Tessa picked the mage up to give her a spinning hug, then conveniently placed her down away from the centre of the formation and took her place. The golden light flared and seconds later the Red Dragon Priestess erupted with fire, which coalesced into battle armour, with a shield and spiked flail.

The weapon looked vicious, with five small spiked balls on chains, all engulfed in flames, but the armour was gorgeous. It was a skintight bodysuit made of red leather and dragon scales, showing off every toned muscle of the Dragon Priestess as she flexed, even though it covered her entire body, even encasing her head behind a dragon mask.

Alice was the next one in, and after she stepped away, she activated a bit of magic and a tornado began to whip through the area for a moment before being dismissed.

"I think that it is giving us all Class Skills. Perhaps our Classes aren't fully active? Or maybe we were intended to return to the System Stones on a regular schedule to learn new skills as we got more powerful. Has anyone stood on the central stone twice?" Alice asked.

Lotus nodded. "I did. I left after I chose, and then walked back to yell at Karl once I realized I could have been a dragon."

"Possibly, with an unknown but tiny chance, been a dragon." Karl corrected.

Sergeant Rita stepped onto the platform with more hesitancy, and Karl saw Lotus crossing her fingers, hoping that she might pick the random choice. It didn't look like she did, as only a few seconds later, the light had flared, and she stepped away still looking like herself.

"It gave me Warrior's Tenacity, an increase to my constitution." Rita explained as she checked the group to see who hadn't gone yet.

She was the last of the six, so the next ones up would be the Lieutenant and the Church Guard.

They all gathered around the platform in reverent silence, awed by the aura of Holy Magic that the area was giving off.

"Alright, Guard. You're up next. Pick Random." Lotus encouraged.

"It will randomize your species, gender and class." Karl warned him.

"You're no fun, you know that? He's already ugly, how could it be worse?" The nature priestess complained.

The Guard laughed and ruffled her hair as he made his way to the top of the platform.

He glowed with golden light for a moment, and then smiled as he stepped off the platform.

"It gave me the Sacred Zone spell. It slows hostile targets that enter the area, and weakens them. It's an excellent large battle defensive spell, suitable for buffing an entire battle." He explained.

Then he seemed distracted and nodded his head.

Golden light enveloped all the soldiers at once, presumably as a result of the magic recognizing them as his subordinates who he could activate the System Stones for.

For most of them, it was a short and blissful blessing, which granted them a new skill, but one soldier apparently hadn't been paying attention to Karl's warning, and where a young woman in a military uniform once stood, now stood a female Worgen in battle armour, a combination of leather and steel that left the midriff and lower legs exposed.

A very furry midriff and lower legs with an extra joint, which flexed opposite the existing knee.

"I'm... a Worgen? A Worgen Rogue?" She stammered as she realized what she had done by choosing to randomize.

Lotus ran over to examine her.

"Interesting. She didn't have to start over, she's still Awakened Rank. What skills did you get?" The tiny cleric demanded.

"Uhm, I gained backstab, lacerate, impale, claw, pounce, dash and silent steps." She replied.

The warriors next to her looked impressed. That was a more powerful suite of skills than she had before, a much more powerful one if she had the physical strength and speed of a Worgen.

They weren't technically monsters, as they were considered a civilized sentient species, but they weren't native to the Golden Dragon Nation, so if you saw one, they were normally only passing through between the beast men nations, and wanted nothing to do with social interactions.

Occasionally, they might stop somewhere that seemed friendly for a meal, but mostly they just skirted along the edge of the Nation and kept moving.

With a fully furred body, and a wolf's head, they couldn't pretend to be human like many beastkin could, even if they somehow managed to hide the extra leg joint. So, persecution among humans was a real concern, even though they weren't at war or from officially hostile nations.

But now, she had accidentally changed her species, and that was going to cause at least a few questions and concerns among the military leadership.

Rae approved. The new version of the warrior was much more Stabby than the old one. She even had proper claws, and not just one but two swords.

Her words were slightly garbled by her new muzzle, and she almost bit her tongue once, but she was rapidly adapting to her new form, and looking around at the other soldiers, then at her outfit, which was a harsh contrast to the unit.

The uniform she had been wearing had vanished, but she had others in her bag, and she was still roughly the same size, though she was a bit longer in the leg now, and her boots wouldn't fit even if she still had them.

The Church Guard cleared his throat. "Did anyone else undergo a large change in status? Change of Rank, Class, or appearance?"

One more hand went up, and the unit realized that there was a child in their midst, even shorter than Lotus.

"Crap. Did it revert you to childhood?" He asked.

"Um, I think so, sir? I also randomized, and now I'm tiny. I'm still a warrior class, but my sword change appearance, and my skills changed a little.

I gained bow mastery, target lock, enhanced vision, night vision and forest sense." The child replied.

Tessa looked at them for a few seconds and then went to pat him on the head.

"I have good news and bad news. It didn't change your age, you're still roughly twenty. But you're an Elf. A twenty-year-old elf is still literally a child, and they won't hit puberty for like five more years, after which they will be full-grown in two to three years.

Your new skills are all Elven Racial Skills, so you're now an Elven Warrior, not a Ranger or any specialty class, unless the System Stones told you otherwise."

He shook his head. "No, it specifically said that my class was warrior."

Tessa nodded. "Then on to the good news. Elves live for about five hundred years, so you have a really long time to get used to being short."

The others laughed at his pain, but Elves were incredible warriors, or so they had heard. They were supposed to be super humanly agile, with incredible aim. Which meant that they needed to get their newly adjusted warrior a bow.

Alice grimaced at the Church Guard. "Do you think that we can bury this and pretend that we didn't know about it until after the paperwork is done?"

The Guard smirked back. "I have a better plan. I'm going to blame Karl and Lotus."

Chapter 209 Scapegoat

Lotus gave Karl a pitiful look, as if he should take the entire fall for this discovery.

Not that it was going to be a negative mark on their record, very much the opposite, actually. But the discovery of a Holy Relic of any calibre came with an intensive interrogation, dozens of reports to be filed, hours of descriptions, and much more.

Karl had been spared much of that last time thanks to Colonel Valerie's interference, but this time it was System Stones.

Actual, functional, System Stones.

If they brought compatible candidates directly here, they could test them without the dangers of the serum. At least in theory. For all Karl knew, it only worked if you already had the System activated to some degree.

Alice sighed and took out her phone, then smirked and handed it to Karl.

"If we're going to do this, we will do it all the way." She decided.

Karl smiled and shook his head, declining the phone, then took out his own emergency phone and dialed the fateful numbers.

#777

On the first ring, the same receptionist as last time answered.

"Speak."

"Ascended Elite Karl. 95988."

"Please wait."

Then an older woman came on the phone. "Elite, what is your report?"

"I have found a functional and complete set of System Stones on patrol. I can confirm they are active." He replied, then waited for the woman to gather her wits enough to answer.

"Seven minutes. DO NOT MOVE."

Then the line went dead, but Karl could see that there was a blinking light on it, and a status update that said [Tracking].

He tucked the phone in the pocket of his jacket and coaxed Thor to lay down, so he could use him as a backrest.

"You might as well get comfortable, everyone. We have seven minutes until reinforcements arrive." Karl explained.

"Are we not on guard against monsters?" The now Worgen Rogue team member asked.

"We are, but Hawk is up in the sky for that, and he says nothing dares to come close to this place." Karl explained.

While he waited, Karl began to focus on the items that were stored in the spaces. There should be a new ability to identify what was useful, and Lotus had dumped a huge number of resources into Rae's space.

The Death's Head Mushroom was listed as a Common Grade resource, toxic, useful for enhancing paralysis skills used by the Warlock Class.

It didn't say how, but that was still more information than Karl had to start with.

After a few herbs and flowers that all had basic enhancing abilities, Karl came to the strange mushroom that Rae said drank monster blood.

[Usable by partner: Rae] Combine with Blood Lotus, Shadow Grass and Commander Rank or higher vital fluids to create a sympathetic reaction.

That was somewhat less detailed than he had hoped, but after a short search, he found both the Blood Lotus and the Shadow Grass. Both were Awakened Grade ingredients, and both were in Thor's food piles.

Karl put the three plants together, and mentally created a bowl to mix the blood in with them.

Then he paused. He didn't actually know any alchemy, and there might be more to this than creating a stew.

Rae didn't think so, and once she saw what Karl had assembled, she dipped into her space and quickly munched her way through the mixed group of ingredients.

[What, there's more, if it doesn't work. Eating is the best way to mix magical plants.] She informed him as a powerful surge of energy began to brew in her stomach.

For a moment, the magical energy just kept building, far exceeding anything that the individual ingredients should have provided, and then that energy began to seep through Rae's body, strengthening her, and enhancing her carapace.

She was still a Bloodbath Spider, but an incredibly impressive one, and Offensive Adaptation felt like it was learning a new trick. Karl could feel the skill changing in his mind, where he shared it with her, but he couldn't quite tell what it was trying to learn from the combination of toxic plants and Giant blood.

The sound of approaching helicopters, three of them according to Hawk, distracted Karl from contemplating what sort of changes the plants had allowed Offensive Adaptation to master, and he began to mentally prepare himself for what came next.

The helicopters didn't land, they just hovered and the Inquisition team slid down ropes to get to them, before carefully lowering down what looked like a throne in a box.

Karl had no idea what that might be about, it was a bit ridiculous to be setting up a throne out here in the woods, even if it was the site of a set of System Stones. But as it lowered, Karl realized that it wasn't just a throne, there was a whole set of furniture there for interviews and press releases, including the gold on blue backdrop that the official Government News Alerts were broadcast in front of.

That likely meant that not all these people on the ground were Inquisitors, though most of them were young enough to be among the first batch of Elites, and the rest were wearing the robes of high-ranking members of the Clergy.

Tessa was looking grim as she noticed who all was here, and Karl finally stood up from his resting spot against Thor, before instructing the three beasts to return to their spaces to rest until the boring part was over.

The disappearing Lightning Cerro caught the attention of the clergy, and alerted them to which one was Karl without having to search for the phone that they were still tracking.

"Ascended Elite Karl. We have come in response to your call. Where are the System Stones?" An inquisitor in a fancy pointed hat asked.

"You're standing in between them. In fact, if the man with the knife strapped to his left leg moves another metre backward, he will activate them." Karl replied.

The man took a rapid step to the left and turned, really looking at the ground for the first time and seeing the central circle of the System Stones, with the World Dragon logo on it, and the surrounding rune inscribed blocks.

"Is this how you found it?" The Inquisitor asked.

"No, sir. When we arrived, it was overgrown. Once I stepped on the central location and activated it, the System Stones cleared the overgrowth from themselves." Karl explained.

The team moved to the side of the stones and started to set up their gear, along with the official broadcast screen, and Karl wondered who might be actually giving the speech. The Inquisition wouldn't give a public announcement, but he didn't recognize anyone in the group as a public figure.

Then, once the stage was set up, magic flooded the area, and a portal opened, disgorging a middle-aged mage whose very presence made Karl's instincts recoil at the threat that this person posed.

Overlord Drake was dangerous, but somehow, this man felt even more deadly than that. If it was possible, he might have advanced a step beyond the Overlord Rank, but there should only be one person in the Golden Dragon Nation that was more powerful than the Overlords.

That would be the Great Leader himself.

Technically, it could be the World Dragon's Archbishop, the head of the Golden Dragon Church, but that would be like seeing a mythical creature walk out in front of you and revealing that it was mortal. The World Dragon Archbishop was supposed to be more dragon than human, and though this person radiated power like a mythical creature, he looked quite human.

He settled himself into the throne that had been dropped on location for him, and more people began to come through the portal. First, there were scientists and clergy, then a handful of famous reporters, and the Government's Press Secretary.

Then the man in the throne turned his gaze toward Karl, and his eyes turned bright gold, with slotted black pupils that seemed to see right through a person.

As impossible as it had seemed two seconds earlier, it really was the Archbishop. The head of the church was here in person to secure the System Stones.

[We should have left and called in the location from a distance.] Rae suggested helpfully.

[It's a bit late for that, but making a run for it does seem like a better idea every minute.] Karl agreed.

The Inquisitor in the best hat gestured toward Karl and the soldiers.

"You all need to gather in front of the backdrop. Stand as still as you can and don't say anything." He instructed.

Everyone did as they were told, and after a minute or so of waiting patiently without moving, they were ushered off to the side.

"Excellent, that is all they need you for here, the footage of your interviews will be filmed at a later date. Now, come with us, we have questions for you all and the helicopters are waiting." The Inquisitor instructed.

Chapter 210 The Capital City Cathedral

The whole group was whisked away from the dignitaries now that they had the footage of them in the background that they would need to dub into the official press releases, and everyone began to relax as they got further away from the site of the System stones.

"It was some distance until we could get clearance to land. They will be setting up magical barriers all over the area, and establishing a no-fly zone. Tell me, who is the regional Commander here? They will likely be getting a commendation." The Chief Inquisitor asked Karl directly.

"This area is under the supervision of a High Priest on orders of the Judge Advocate General's office, after the Base Commander was found negligent in his duties. My apologies, but I do not recall his name at the moment." Karl replied.

The Inquisitor nodded. "That is fine, I will look it up once we are at the Cathedral. You are in for a treat, have you ever been to the Capital before?"

Karl chuckled and shook his head. "I was born in Lithium Mine City. I've only ever been there, the Academies, or on missions."

Dana looked like she was in the same situation, awestruck by the chance to go to the Capital, though they likely wouldn't see much of it other than the inside of the Cathedral while they answered endless questions about the situation that led to them finding the ruins.

Fortunately, there wasn't going to be a lot to tell, and he had some notes to help him along. So perhaps their trip to the Capital wouldn't be so bad.

Some of the soldiers didn't look too convinced, though. Their level of nervousness was only increasing as they approached the pristine white spires of the city, with its millions of people working, living and visiting the shops all through the city.

It looked like something out of a fairy tale, a magical bastion that had stood since time immemorial, but the Capital's spires were actually quite new. They had been started after the Serum was first made public, a revitalization of the Golden Dragon Nation's image after the progress of the experimental Elites was made public.

Before that, the Capital city was a grim place, with barracks along all the walls and a rough mercenary culture that bled through to everyone from the sheer number of fighters that it took to defend such a large population centre.

But for their reborn Rogue, this was a much better place to be than some rural deployment. It was much more common to see other species here than anywhere else in the Golden Dragon Nation. Worgen might be looked down upon in the almost entirely human nation, but here in the Capital, a mercenary was a mercenary. They would recognize her for her strength even before finding out she was an Elite.

"Down below you is the Cathedral of the World Dragon. That is the site of the nation's most Holy Relics, and the seat of the Archbishop. Normally, we would sell you on the opportunity to catch a glimpse of him when you're here, but we all know where he is right now, and you've already gotten closer to him than anyone outside the church has in decades.

Once we land, your group will be split, with the military unit headed to the Church Guard barracks, including Sergeant Rita, who is being called to an official meeting with the senior administrators, separately from this matter.

Those not under military contract will be guests of the church, and we have prepared rooms for you." The Head Inquisitor informed them as the helicopter prepared to land.

Karl looked down below him and saw not just the majesty of the Cathedral, but the dichotomy of a city that had advanced faster than its people could adapt.

Modern cars and ox carts full of goods both traversed cobblestone streets, many walked on the sidewalks, while those with superhuman strength used an elevated walkway and jumped across streets they wanted to cross.

The central areas of the city had traffic lights, but the areas further out had no such niceties, and traffic navigated intersections at its own whimsy.

Karl didn't see many people who were visibly nonhuman, but there was an Elf in the window of a tower full of what looked like mages training, and a group of beastkin walking into one of the taverns near the gates.

Then, in the most rundown section of town, he spotted many more people who didn't quite pass as human. Their features were just a bit off, not quite right, or sometimes just openly other, like the beastkin.

One of the inquisitors patted Karl on the shoulder when he noticed the direction of his gaze. "Many species of monsters can breed with humanity, to varying degrees of success. If they're civilized, we welcome the offspring of such unions into the city, but the lineage comes with a stigma that's far worse than being a foreigner like an Elf or a Beastkin."

Karl nodded. "I've never seen anything like it before. Do you know what the schedule is when we get to the Cathedral?"

"Nothing too serious today. First up, you all get to do written reports, then an interview after you unwind. You're still a young one, so you might not have noticed yet that after a bit in the field, Elites get a hard edge to them, and it scares the average citizen. We can't have you all wandering around the Cathedral ready to fight at a moment's notice. You would terrify the nuns and the visitors." The Inquisitor chuckled.

Karl looked around a little and noticed that he had a point. There wasn't anything different about their actual appearance, they had been eating well, so they didn't have that slightly emaciated image of war survivors from the films about the integration wars, but everyone had a twitch to them, and a sharp gaze, on alert for threats at all times.

It was essential in the wilderness, and Karl thought that it probably was in the city as well, but you had to hide it better when you were around so many people. Nobody owned anything worth taking in the mines, but here in the Capital, Karl had heard horror stories of all sorts of crimes that would be unthinkable at home.

The helicopter landed on a large concrete circle in the courtyard of the Cathedral, and the Inquisitors led everyone out.

They passed by the doors where the visitors to the Cathedral came to pay their respects or pray, and Karl couldn't help but notice the way that people were looking at him. Not so much the mages, but any of the higher rank warriors as well.

Their superhuman strength gave them a particularly effortless walking stride that he had first noticed with Overlord Drake. Combined with their mission packs on their backs and the weapons on their hips, they must be quite the sight, taking in the Cathedral with trained eyes and joking with each other.

It was a bit different to be observing the strangeness of the Elites from the inside. Karl hadn't really noticed the changes as they happened, but now that he had people who weren't Elites to compare himself to again, he could feel the differences that came from the power and confidence that had overcome all of them. Even the mages had a confidence in their attitudes that the average person did not.

The head of the Church Guard clicked his heel on the cobblestones to get everyone's attention, a subtle gesture, but a distinct noise.

"Soldiers, you're with me. The rest of the Elites are with the Lead Inquisitor."

Karl found himself leading the group toward the inside of the Cathedral after Sergeant Rita left with the others, subconsciously taking his position on point as they travelled through the bright stone of the building.

The Cathedral was beautiful, and had a sense of ancient power to it, born of centuries of constant Holy Magic use in the same spot. He had to restrain his hand as Inquisitors stepped out of the shadows, joining the column as they walked down the halls and deeper into the building.

[That's a pretty good trick. They didn't even use a real skill, they just control their breathing and movement as they stand in an alcove out of sight, so you don't notice them until they move.] Rae noted.

There were two for each group member now, plus the Lead Inquisitor, and Karl sighed at the familiar situation. It seemed that the questioning part was going to come first, then the unwinding and adapting back to civilization.