

Beast Master 211

Chapter 211 What You Had In Mind

Two of the Inquisitors led Karl to a luxurious sitting room with comfortable looking leather chairs, and an older cleric woman in deep blue robes waiting for them.

"Greetings, Karl. I am Lilith, a High Priestess of the Blue Dragon, the Dragon God of knowledge. Do you mind if we use a bit of magic during our discussion today? It helps reveal details that you might have forgotten." The gentle looking woman greeted him, with her eyes glinting in the soft light of the lamps.

They were dragon's eyes, not human, but Karl took the seat beside her with a casual grace. The answer to that question didn't matter, the outcome had already been decided, and if he was right, the spell was already in effect.

"Of course. I only just started taking notes, so there might be many things I have forgotten." Karl agreed.

Before he could say anything else, the world seemed to fade, and his mind was racing through everything that had happened to him since he had received the Serum Injection.

The only stutter in the smooth progression was when they got to the Trial Instances, both in the woods and the one for the Ascended Rank, where he could feel something take notice of them, and the spell seemed to falter for a moment before continuing.

The spell raced through his memories, right up to the present moment, and then abruptly ended as the two timelines converged, leaving Karl dizzy and disoriented.

"What an intriguing time you have had in the few months since you awakened. The last reports were correct, you do have the World Dragon's own luck, always finding yourself in the right place at the right time." The old woman announced as Karl tried to get his bearings.

Karl chuckled. "I suspect that the World Dragon didn't find himself seated in rooms full of Holy Inquisitors quite so frequently as I have."

The High Priestess laughed at his assessment and shook her head. "Oh, Dear. You have misunderstood. I am not part of the Inquisition, I am the head of the Historians here within the Church. But now that I have recorded your personal history for our archives, there are a few things that I would like to request, as I don't have a clear understanding from your memories.

When you stepped onto the System Stones, it granted you more of your Class Skills. One of them is Identification, but limited to what helps your beasts. One is Mental Fortitude, of which you didn't seem to be lacking to begin with. But the third is known as [Skill Book], and if my guess is right, it is every bit as good as what the Inscriptionists can use."

The two Inquisitors were immediately on guard, not against Karl, but double-checking the room to make certain that nothing else was here or eavesdropping on them. One would almost think that the High Priestess had announced that they were under attack from the way that they responded, but her demeanour never changed, still intently focused on Karl.

"Sure. I don't actually know how it works, I have never tried it. Give me a moment and I will let you know what I need for the process."

Karl spent a moment deciding what skill would be best to try with first. Probably not Rend or Shred, as those were already common enough skill books. The Historian would be looking for new knowledge to add to her collection, or more correctly, the Church's collection, and if he wanted to get on her good side, that meant showing her something good right from the start.

[Refreshing Lightning] seemed like a good start.

When Karl focused on it, a list of items appeared in his mind.

"I will need a Lightning Element gem, powdered and immersed in Commander Rank blood to use as ink, and then fifteen pages of paper, ash from an Awakened Rank or higher beast vaporized by lightning and a pen made of stone, with a golden tip." Karl recited.

"What sort of requirements are those?" The Inquisitor behind Karl asked, confused.

"They're what the skill needs to create the book I wanted to make her. Do we have those things? Or can we get them?" Karl informed him.

If they couldn't get them, his day would become immeasurably easier. Having to write a fifteen-page book did not sound like fun, and his handwriting was atrocious.

However, the man nodded, and sent a text message. They only had to wait a minute before a scribe came tapping at the door with an armload of goods. There was far more than Karl had requested, as if they had expected him to fail multiple times before he got it right, as would be quite normal for a beginner scribe.

It was possible that was true, but Karl got the feeling that the challenge was not in making the book, but in using it. [Refreshing Lightning] wasn't a human skill, but the innate skill of the Lightning Cerro.

"Thank you." Karl greeted them as the child set his burden down on the table, then bowed and ran back out of the room.

The Blue Dragon High Priestess just stared at Karl, waiting for the magic to begin. Literally.

The moment that he arranged the ingredients and filled the pen, then dusted the paper with the ash as the spell instructed and shifted his pen to the writing position and activated the skill, everything seemed to happen at once.

The ink flowed from the pen to the sheets without him moving his hand, the pages arranged themselves, and then a green scaled binding that looked exactly like Thor's back, but with much smaller scales, formed over it and a buckled latch shut the book tight.

On the cover was a simple description. Refreshing Lightning.

"Well, it looks like it worked." The Dragon Priestess noted, then gestured for the Inquisitor to pick it up.

"Can you make another?" She asked.

Karl focused, and there didn't seem to be a cooldown, and there were still some supplies left.

"I should have the supplies for at least one more, and I don't see a cooldown on the skill." He agreed.

The High Priestess gestured for the Inquisitor to use the book, and he struggled with the clasp, unable to open it at all.

Then he shrugged and passed it to the other Inquisitor. He also couldn't work the buckle, so they called in a mage. She didn't have any more luck than the others, the book was firmly locked, unusable by any of them.

"Well, I guess it's one of those picky skills." The High Priestess sighed as she took the book back and gently rubbed the scales in appreciation.

The latch popped open, and the book vanished, making Karl laugh.

Of course, the skill book made from Thor's skill wouldn't open unless you petted it gently. Or perhaps it opened because she was a Blue Dragon Priestess, and she would have some affinity for scales and lightning.

But there was no denying that she knew the skill when a barrier of lightning formed around her body a few seconds later.

"It's a cleric class skill?" The Inquisitor asked, clearly confused.

"Or it just wanted you to pet it gently before it would open." Karl suggested, making the Inquisitors smile.

"If you would kindly make us another, we will test that theory." The Historian agreed.

Again Karl activated the skill, creating a second book, but giving himself a blinding headache that made the dim lamp feel like spears of holy light digging into his brain.

"Here, drink this. That feeling is mana exhaustion. Give it a moment and the feeling will pass after you finish the potion. It looks like one is the limit, though the second one did successfully form." The High Priestess noted.

The Mage picked up the book, eager to see what that barrier was like for herself. But nothing happened, though she seemed enthralled with petting the scales.

The same was true for the warriors that they called in next, so the High Priestess reluctantly called in another cleric.

A young Cleric with a snobbish look on his face walked in and turned to the High Priestess.

"This had better be good, I am on my day off." The Cleric complained.

"Don't take that tone with me, young man. Try to use this book. Just do what feels right." She instructed.

The new cleric gently picked up the book, and then took a cloth from his pocket to clean the fingerprints off before sniffing at it and then tapping the latch, causing it to fall open. He flipped the cover open and read the first pages.

"What an intriguing tome. A Lightning Barrier skill. Is this new for the archives?" He asked with real excitement in his tone.

"So it's not all clerics. Yes, that is a skill tome of Refreshing Lightning. I had thought that it was a cleric class skill that the Beast Master had gained from his pet, but it appears that it is not."

Chapter 212 Affinities

Thor was laughing in Karl's mind that they thought just any human cleric would be compatible with his skill. Blue Dragons had lightning breath, of course their High Priestess would be compatible with Refreshing Lightning. Nature Priests might as well, since they were more attuned to animals than humans. But the average, run-of-the-mill cleric, guard or any other class? Highly unlikely.

Maybe a Druid might be able to use it, but Thor didn't know any Druids, he had only heard of them and seen a few.

"You seem to know something that the rest of us don't." The High Priestess informed Karl with a serious look.

"Blue Dragons have lightning breath." Karl replied simply.

The High Priestess facepalmed, and then sighed. "Of course they do. So, it's not a matter of just the class category, you have to have an affinity for Lightning. Alright, I will have to make copies later, and then teach them to some other Blue Dragon Clerics.

We don't usually go out and get in fights, but not all knowledge is conveniently indoors and in books. Plus, when you're teaching the more rambunctious students, the skill might come in useful."

Karl wondered what sort of classes she had been teaching that might require defensive magic on the part of the teachers. Certainly, no class that he had been in, but maybe they were instructing new clerics who hadn't mastered their abilities yet.

The younger cleric that they had called in flipped to the first page of the book again. "Why is this book credited to Thor the Lightning Cerro?"

Thor cheered in Karl's mind, making him smile at the room full of clergy.

"That's the beast that I learned the skill from. Naturally, the book would credit him and not me. It's his skill."

"Are there any other skills that you might be able to teach?" The High Priestess asked.

The passive physical enhancements weren't anything he could focus on, nor was Offensive Optimization, which left just two.

"At the moment, just Shred and Rend." Karl replied.

But then he realized that there was one other skill. The beast space skill. He focused on it for a moment and on the skill, before receiving a message.

[Skill Locked. Insufficient Skill Level.]

But as he examined the spaces, Karl realized that they were almost at their maximum, and the efficiency of forcing more energy into them was slowing. They were ready for a qualitative change, but he wasn't quite certain what needed to happen.

First, it was to create an environment, then to make it more realistic. Something needed to change to allow more growth, but Karl wasn't certain what he had missed.

If that was the ability he had gotten from the System Stones, he would have been overjoyed. Skill Books just seemed like a recipe for having other people make him work. Even if only a few people could use them, it would still be a good chunk of his time at one a day.

At least the ones who could use them were Blue Dragon Priests, who seemed to have Inscription among their repertoire of skills.

"What do you think of the Church?" The High Priestess asked, sending Karl's thoughts for a hard left.

He hesitated to come up with an answer as thoughts flashed through his mind. The Church was helpful, sure. But what came to mind first was the assortment of cute cleric girls. Even Tessa was sweet in her own way as she encouraged and buffed Thor as they rode into battle.

The High Priestess gave a very undignified giggle.

"Well, I wasn't expecting that answer. Cute cleric girls with a fondness for monsters and the knowledge of how to scratch a Cerro's head just right is definitely not at the top of most people's minds when they are asked about the Church." She laughed, reminding Karl that she could read his thoughts.

Even the Inquisitors were smiling in Karl's peripheral vision, while the young cleric that had been called in to see if he could work the skill book looked scandalized.

The Blue Dragon Priestess turned her attention to her subordinate with a gentle smile. "Don't get so offended, Nathan. It's not like you had a chance with those two anyhow. Tessa would hurt you, and Lotus would really hurt you."

Nathan made a gesture of protection at the mention of Lotus' name, and the pair of Inquisitors straightened their faces so he didn't see the mockery in their smiles. What the boy had done to earn himself Lotus' enmity must have been bad if everyone knew about it. She wasn't even from the Capital.

"You may leave now. Send in Brother Choi as well. He should be outside by now." The High Priestess instructed, sparing him from any further embarrassment.

Then she turned to Karl with a smile that said that she was definitely breaking some sort of rule he didn't understand. "You see, everyone wants to get their hands on the best talents, and you, young Elite, are the best talents. So, we have arranged a little extra help for you, in hopes that you will become more amenable to working with our forces in the future."

The Inquisitors pretended that they didn't hear the High Priestess saying the inside part out loud as Nathan darted out the door like he was late to the toilet, and a second later, a muscular Church Guard in polished steel armour stepped inside.

"What did you do to the boy this time? He's never going to heal from the trauma if everyone keeps making fun of him." He announced.

"Brother Karl came in with Sisters Tessa and Lotus." The Inquisitor whispered, too low for most to hear, but clear to Karl's ears.

Choi laughed and shook his head.

"Poor bugger. Just when he thought that he escaped."

Karl gave him an intrigued look, and the Guard known as Brother Choi smiled. "Nathan grew up with Tessa, and he had an extreme crush on Lotus at the Seminary Academy. He even went as far as proposing marriage and begging her to join him in renouncing their vows so they could get married and run away with each other.

Of course, nobody told Lotus that he was in love with her, and she beat him nearly to death for playing pranks on her. He's suffered from Gynophobia ever since."

Karl could see that. Lotus was tiny, and in his experience, anyone who was too far from average in any aspect tended to be sensitive to mockery after a lifetime of overexposure. Plus, she was far too close to being on Rae's wavelength for anyone's safety.

Then Brother Choi turned to the High Priestess, who nodded at Karl.

"This one needs mental ability training. Something about the nature of mental spaces or the void or something. You're a Monk, you should know some things about that." She explained.

Brother Choi looked over Karl's toned physique, still lithe and muscular without being too bulky for martial arts, with approval and nodded.

"I suppose I could teach him a thing or two about a Monk's mental discipline. How might it help him, though? Impulse control issues or pure curiosity?"

Karl shook his head. "I have three beasts bonded to me for my primary Class Skill. They live in a mental space that helps feed their growth, but I'm reaching a plateau in the development of the space. I don't know how to change and improve it next, and if I can't, it will limit their growth."

Brother Choi smiled. "So it is a matter similar to the Void of the Monk Classes. Alright, we can work on that. Just let me set up the training dates after you finish with whatever you're doing, and we will be all good."

The High Priestess shook her head. "No, you will start now and continue until he breaks through. It has been ordained by our superiors. They wish to see the youngest Commander in history."

Karl raised his hand. "I would like to point out that I just made it to Ascended Rank."

The Priestess shrugged. "Not my concern. They want what they want, and Brother Choi is going to help you with your mental state."

Oh, that gives me an idea. He can accompany your group when you leave."

The Inquisitor cleared his throat. "High Priestess, there are already two clerics in that group. A third would be against regulation unless we added more members of other specializations."

The old woman tapped her fingers on the arm of her chair, and Karl realized that she had just embarked on a self-appointed mission. She wanted to know the answer to how long it would take him to make Commander, and she just needed to find a way to make it happen.

Most likely, her Goddess demanded it. It was new knowledge that nobody else had recorded before.

"I will have the group enhanced before they are sent out again. What else did we need them here for?" She asked.

"They discovered the new set of System Stones. They are here for publicity and for safekeeping until we are certain that these System Stones really do belong to the World Dragon." The Inquisitor reminded her.

"Who else would they belong to?" Karl asked.

"There was another System recorded in the Dragon Gods' Holy Books, from a time before the World Dragon was born, run by a Chaos God who cared for nothing as much as his personal amusement. Because these System Stones suddenly appeared in the monster zone, there is a suspicion that they might have come from the same place as the monsters, so they might not belong to this world." The Inquisitor informed him.

Karl honestly hadn't expected to get an answer to that question, and now that he had, he was beginning to wish that he hadn't asked.

Chapter 213 Focus Training

Brother Choi led Karl out of the questioning room and out toward the central courtyard of the Cathedral complex.

"The rooms for guests face the central courtyard, where all the tourists visit. It's become our way of keeping everyone in easy sight, and keeping them from getting lost. As an Ascended Elite, you will be on the fourth floor, with a courtyard view, instead of an interior room with no windows on the lower floors that we use for the general population.

The rest of your team will be here with you, and as you notice, there are no others in this section except for the Church Guards. If you want to go somewhere, it will be with an escort.

Your movement within the Church isn't limited, at least not beyond what the other secular Elites are limited to, but they don't want anyone running off or getting lost if they should need them for an interview or want questions answered."

Karl chuckled at the cleric's honesty, and sighed as he saw the simple stone room that he had been assigned. It was just like the ones at the seminary school, and though the bedding was high quality, it was the same simple one bed and a desk setup with the showers and toilets down the hall.

But at least his group would all be together, so it shouldn't be too bad, and they could get some quality rest while they were here.

Karl dropped his bag at the foot of the bed, as he didn't want to put a dirty backpack onto the furniture, then realized he didn't have anything proper to change into.

"I really need to start keeping one uniform for formal occasions." He sighed as Brother Choi waited for him by the door.

"I'm sure you look fine in the visitor's hassock. Everyone wears them here anyhow, we don't let the tourists into anything but the public areas without changing. This is the Capital Grand Cathedral, after all."

Karl realized that there was a robe and fresh slippers waiting for him on the back of the door, along with a clean towel.

"I will give you time to get washed and ready, then we can work on your advancement technique. I might not seem like the best option, but I probably am.

The Monk Class is trained at the Golden Divine Academy, but most of us end up at the Church after, for the meditation and mental conditioning that is needed to build our focus. Once you understand a bit better, it will make perfect sense." Brother Choi explained.

Karl grabbed the fresh clothes and headed for the showers.

"So, what God do you follow, as a Monk of the Church and not a Cleric Class whose Goddess is decided for them." He asked as he turned the water on.

"The human god of battle and wisdom. Also known as the Human God of Magic. Did you know that in the ancient mystic language, both of you have the same name?"

Karl nodded, though the Monk couldn't see it. "My mother always said that my name meant wisdom and power. I learned in school that I was named after one of the Ancient Human Gods. It's fairly common where I come from."

Brother Choi chuckled. "It is everywhere. If you weren't Ascended Elite Karl, you would have quickly gotten a nickname or second name, just like all the boys named John, Dave, Chen, and Moe. In a small town, you might be the only Karl in your generation, but in the big city you need another name. Same in the church, we're one big family of sorts, and we can't all share a name, it would be a mess."

Karl laughed as he finished washing up and got into the hassock and slippers.

"I don't know. An army of Dave could be fun." He joked.

Karl came out into the changing room and found that Brother Choi had removed his armour for comfort, tucking it into a basket with his name on it. He wasn't going to shower this early, just getting his armour off after his shift, and when they left the showers, he brought the basket to drop off at his room.

"Let's go to the meditation area. That should be the best spot, as they have enchantments to help you focus and build mental strength. What was the most difficult challenge you've been having?" The Monk asked.

"I don't know where to progress toward. Do you have a separate mental space?" Karl asked.

"Of course, it's essential for a Monk. But ours is probably a bit different from yours, as I don't have anything living there.

What we start with is a simple candle, then we build a starry sky, followed by a lake of power. Eventually, that becomes complete, and we have to move on."

Karl nodded eagerly at that part. That was where he was stuck.

"The next step is both a tricky one, and the most delicate of processes for a Monk. Once your 'sea of soul', as we call it, is complete, it needs guidance. You need to imbue the essence of a true path into the space to guide your future growth.

Without that guidance, any more power you put into a completed space will be lost. It is the true essence of what and who you are.

Now, for your spaces, they are individual to the beasts, right? It might be that you need to fully understand your partners, and what they are trying to become in order to grow their space."

Brother Choi's description made perfect sense to Karl, but both Hawk and Rae were laughing at him.

[He's more vague and dramatic than Rae.] Hawk laughed.

[Understand the true essence of the Spider. To become the spider, you must think like the spider.] Rae mocked in a fake sage voice.

Karl tried not to let the amusement show on his face.

[Still, I think that he has a point. What is the difference between an Ascended and a Commander Rank beast? That might be what we need to change, some intangible bit of the energy flow or makeup of the space.] Karl replied seriously.

All three beasts began to think of what it might be that they needed to improve their space. They instinctively knew the difference between Ascended and Commander, but they didn't know how to make that part of their space, or even how to explain it properly to Karl.

Which was, of course, why they were all stuck. One of them had to understand how to change the space from an Ascended Space to a Commander Rank or higher space, and then explain to the others.

"You know what this spot needs? Nice warm sunshine." Thor noted as he soaked in his pond full of Holy Stones.

That gave Karl an idea. If it worked, it would be brilliant. If it didn't, then Thor would get his warm sunlight anyhow.

What they needed was a change in the essence of the power. The same way that the Monks started with a candle to create a core of higher grade power that would seep into their space. But instead of a candle, Karl thought that a sun, or in Rae's case, a moon, would be perfect for that focus.

"Alright, we can start here. Find a comfortable spot and clear your mind. I'm sure you know at least the basics already." Brother Choi announced as they reached a small soundproof room.

Karl settled onto a cushion, and began to focus as he imagined the sun in Thor's space, with everything that came with it. The energy, the warmth, the light.

Brother Choi's voice floated into his consciousness as Karl focused.

"Yes, that's the way, now condense the energy. Don't let it leak and spread, keep it contained to one brilliant point of light. That is the secret to growing the flame."

Karl wasn't making a flame but a sun. The idea should be the same in practice, though. He just had to keep the energy stored in the ball of light until the quality made a breakthrough and exceeded the natural state of the space. Then he should be able to use that to spread energy to the rest of the space and the beasts in it.

Only time would tell if it was the right way, but it felt like it was working, and Thor could feel the warm sun on his scales, which was all that he was after to begin with.

Karl lost track of time as he meditated, but it didn't seem like anyone was going to bother them until the dinner meal, and the room was perfectly silent, other than the sound of their breathing, with a relaxing scent in the air from an incense cone burning somewhere.

Chapter 214 Hidden Treasures

After a few seconds, Karl found that it was easier to have the new feature form in all three spaces evenly, as an imbalance in them was going to cause him to have to alternate.

That proved to Karl that this was definitely something different than he had done before, as the other additions to the spaces he had been able to add freely to each of them independently, they were just decorations.

It was only after the basics of the new power cores in the spaces were in balance and properly formed that the energy increases started to spread between them, keeping the three focal points in balance naturally.

Hopefully, doing things this way wouldn't preclude him from forming another space, as Karl got the feeling that he should be able to add another one when he reached Commander Rank. The natural progression seemed to be one per Rank, but he had rushed things when he bonded both Thor and Rae at the same time, so he was going to have to advance through Ascended just trying to recover from the damage he did to his progression.

If there was another Beast Master in the future, he would be certain to warn them not to try that, and to take things in the proper order, but until then, he was going to have to use himself and his partners as guinea pigs to see what worked and what didn't.

Hawk was quite certain that wasn't a good thing. Guinea pigs were a species of mouse, as far as he was concerned, and you never wanted to be the mouse. But if it was going to make him a Commander, then he would submit to some experiments.

Thor thought that trying new things was pretty good. The sun was warm on his scales, and it was very comfortable to lay in his pond full of shiny rocks.

Those shiny rocks were having a rather profound effect on his pond now that Karl was adding the new sun to the area as well. They glowed in the light, making the pond shimmer, and Karl could feel the energy emanating from them to be soaked up by the lounging Cerro.

At this rate, they weren't even wrong to call him Brother Karl because he was going to end up with a Holy Beast in his menagerie.

Now, exactly which God or Goddess would find the Cerro to be sacred was a question, but going by the responses he had gotten so far, it could be any of them. Even the War Priestesses thought that he made a mighty steed.

Thor preened in pride at the idea of being as valuable as a mount, while Rae giggled at the memory of Lotus riding her through the trees.

While Karl might not be much of a mounted combatant, and preferred to use his own two legs, that didn't deter the Priestesses from finding faster methods of transport than simply running places.

The only one in the group who was faster than Karl was Hawk, or possibly Rae on open ground, which she preferred to avoid if at all possible.

As he worked, Karl took an inventory of all the random items that the beasts had been collecting. Mostly it was just body parts in two of the spaces, and plants in Thor's, but as Karl searched, he found a number of gems and trinkets in both Hawk and Rae's spaces, left on bodies or carelessly tossed on the ground.

That was odd, as he couldn't forcefully put such things in the space, and Karl had assumed that they couldn't enter at all. But once he looked at them more closely, it was easy to tell that they all had something in common.

[Flame Ruby: Usable by Hawk] combines with zombie ash and phoenix down to trigger a constitution improvement.

Well, they definitely didn't have any down feathers from a Phoenix, so that one would have to wait.

Damaged: [Ring of Giant Strength: Usable by Thor] should be crushed to powder and combined with red veined Alum Fern and ground Drake Scales for an improvement in physical power.

That one might actually be plausible. The inspection of the damaged ring, which was cracked open by an attack, highlighted the other two ingredients in Karl's vision, and he mentally pulled them over as he worked on the energy focus in the three spaces.

Grinding the items in the mental space only took a little effort, and left him with a pile of powder that Karl sprinkled over some of Thor's favourite feed, which he moved next to the pond, so the Cerro didn't have to stop soaking to test the improvement.

Free food was free food, and he didn't even have to get up to eat them, but Thor was slightly disappointed when there was no instant and massive change in his body after completing the snack.

He could feel extra power in his body, but he was also soaking in the pond full of Holy Stones, so that was fairly normal. It was also the only way that his growth could keep up with Hawk, who had evolved, and Rae, who would make Commander on her own if given enough time.

[Don't worry about it too much. I'm sure we will see the results the next time we're in combat.] Karl assured the Cerro as he continued his work to improve the spaces.

He had totally lost track of time, so it was a shock when a gentle rustling noise alerted him to movement in the room.

"It's dinner, and there will be plenty of curious people waiting to meet you. The Beast Master who made Ascended in the first semester at school is a hot topic, even here in the Capital. Normally, both you and Dana would be the centre of attention for your growth rate, but with your most recent advancement, it looks like you will be stealing the spotlight from her for the moment." Brother Choi whispered.

Karl chuckled. "I'm sure she doesn't mind too much. You should have seen her face when she found out that the school wanted her to become an Idol. The next Archmage, singing and dancing by night, Elite Mage by day. They even had a career path planned for her by the end of the day after she made Awakened."

The Monk smiled back. "You say that like it's in the past tense, but you should know that those dramatic old crones won't give up that easily. What is the phrase? Living life vicariously through others? They can't become pop idols themselves, so they will stop at nothing to be known as the force behind the next great Idol."

That description seemed to fit the middle-aged ladies of the dance and vocal training classes exceptionally well. They weren't Elites, nor were they famous actresses, singers or songwriters. They were the behind-the-scenes staff who had tried but never really made it to a professional level before being forced to support those who surpassed them, and it had made them bitter and jaded.

At least in the magic and combat specialties, the people training you had real skills, not just a talent for teaching others to use their skills.

Though even that was questionable. The Classes who had an aptitude for singing, like the Bards, would get magical enhancements to their voices, rhythm and even their looks, so the value of the teachers in that department really was suspect.

Karl's mind was still on Dana's unfortunate life plan when he saw her coming out of the showers in the same hassock he was wearing, with her deep chocolate curls still wet and bouncing all around her face.

He couldn't blame the teachers for wanting to make her an Idol. Not when she was standing right in front of him, looking like a wingless angel.

"Sister Lotus, Sister Tessa, it's good to see you again. I met with an old friend of yours not long ago." Choi greeted the two clerics as they came out behind Dana.

"So I heard. Nathan ran past us like someone had lit him on fire, and apparently made quite the spectacle of himself. Someone really should convince him to go to the therapist more frequently. He's never going to get better if just the memory of being turned down by Lotus is enough to make him like that, even after all this time." Tessa agreed.

While she had a point, everyone else was more interested in what Tessa had done to him over the years that her name also elicited a trauma response.

Chapter 215 The World Dragon's Luck

The whole group, minus Sergeant Rita, was seated at the same table, with Brother Choi and two Church Guards, who Karl hadn't seen before.

"I take it that you two are the evening shift? My apologies for the trouble." Karl greeted them.

The guards smiled and nodded, but didn't say anything as they waited for the meal to begin.

The process here was a bit different from the Seminary Academy, as everyone here was already graduated and working, so they only waited for the staff to bring the meal, and then someone rang a bell and everyone began to eat.

Karl realized quickly that the Guards on duty were not supposed to speak, as they simply gestured to be passed items from the table, instead of asking. If they had been able to speak to anyone, it would have made sense to just ask Brother Choi for what was closest to him, but it all worked smoothly enough, as the other Clerics knew the routine already.

There was no ritual packing of the rice balls at the end of the meal. Instead, the few leftovers that came from the tables would be kept for snacks, and whatever wasn't served to the tables would be distributed to the needy citizens of the Capital.

They were led back up to their rooms after dinner, and Karl prepared to spend the night in meditation and focusing to build up the energy focus in the three spaces.

It was a bit embarrassing to admit that he had entirely skipped the first step that the Monks would have taken, and that it had caused him to hit a dead end in his growth, but he would have it sorted out soon enough, and from there, hopefully the beasts would be able to reach their full potential.

There wasn't much to do in the Cathedral in the evening. Only the major areas had lights, and the rest of the building kept their schedule from sunup to sundown. The Cathedral was primarily a working church, so the daily visitors were the vast majority of the workload, and it was only on a full or new moon that anyone would come to worship at night.

That made the sleeping quarters nearly as silent as the meditation room when Karl settled in for the evening, and allowed him to focus on building the energy cores right until the first rays of sunlight hit his face in the morning.

He couldn't say that he was well rested, but the act of meditation did refresh the mind to some degree. Fortunately, he had [Refreshing Lightning] to soothe everything else away and leave him ready to face the day after a long shower.

Dana stepped up on one side of him, and Karl tucked an arm around her shoulders. Lotus did the same thing on the other side, and giggled as Karl did the same, while she was silently mouthing the word "Spider" over and over until Karl relented and called out Rae to play with her friend.

The two of them took off out a window, leaving the guards staring at them in shock, but they didn't go far. They were just in the trees outside, still clearly visible from the hallway, playing in the branches.

Brother Choi walked over to see what the commotion was about.

"Nature Priests, you never really get used to them. Where did she find a Bloodbath Spider?" He wondered.

"Rae is one of mine. They became good friends while we were hunting." Karl explained.

The Monk nodded. "That makes sense. Beast Master and Nature Priest are even more of a natural choice than Druid and Nature Priest. Those two are too similar, their little differences always seem to cause friction."

Karl shifted to hold Dana's hand as they made their way to breakfast, and Rae returned to her space after returning Lotus to the hallway a few seconds later. He suspected that they had been yelled at by the guards, but Lotus didn't seem like the sort that took it too personally if she got in a little trouble for reinterpreting rules.

They were met at the table by two High Priests today, an older man and a younger, who took the seats of the relieved looking Church Guards, who went to eat with their comrades.

"Good morning, Elites. After the meal, myself and Brother John have a few questions for you all together, and I do hope that you can answer some of them. We will explain everything once we are in a less public venue, but there have been some questions about the recent discovery that you made.

It appears to be authentic, but that has only increased the number of questions that the High Clergy have about the situation." The old man explained.

The food was served and the High Priests remained silent while everyone ate, then led the group out of the dining hall and into a larger meeting room, with a round table in the centre, and a number of clerks already waiting along the wall to take notes on what was said.

The brown haired High Priest known as Brother John spoke as they were seated. "Now, if everyone is ready, our questions are probably not what you might be expecting. We have read your reports, and they are quite comprehensive, so we're not going to go over the basics again.

Instead, what we would like to know is how such a strangely effective group keeps forming around each of you. Now that you have been put together, your combat effectiveness is far beyond your rankings, but even through your histories, there is a trend of such events.

We believe that this might have to do with the favour of the World Dragon, which could in turn relate to the reason that it was your group that found the System Stones intact.

We have verified from previous scouting missions that they should not have been there in the past, or if they were, they were inactive. But when your group arrived, they activated in response to your mere presence, with no ritual prayers or spells required."

Everyone in the group looked at each other, unsure what to say. Dana looked a bit skeptical after her misadventures on this last trip, and the misfits that she had been put with before she began to freelance trips with the military.

Lotus shrugged. She just assumed that was how things were supposed to be. Her patron was the Goddess of Nature, and when you had her favour, the world was right all around you.

Karl had assumed it was political interference by Colonel Valerie for the most part, and possibly by the Academy. But these High Priests had access to the official files, so they should have known if it were someone in politics pulling all the strings.

The older High Priest was looking at Karl, who had been central to multiple recent incidences, including an overwhelming number of above Rank monster kills that were padding his accounts and his combat records at an astonishing rate.

Karl took a second to form his thoughts before speaking. "Well, I suppose that I can start at the beginning, since you already have all the classified details. The first mission was entirely luck. It was just a standard first year outing, in an area that had been scouted to have mediocre but newly appeared resources. We went on the trip and found a Trial Instance in a cave that was scouted to have magical stones that the mages in the group all wanted.

The next major series of incidents would have started on the flight to the combat region we were last in. I met with the Mackenzie brothers on the helicopter, we cracked a few jokes, and they invited me to join them without even knowing my Class or specialty.

Their sisters picked them because they saw the names on the incoming members chart when the threat was upgraded due to the presence of the Ettin Mage.

Then it was Central Command that had us moved to the higher threat area, despite being under levelled, and after that, most of the decisions were made by the Bureau of Elite Development helping

me out to find group members and sending me back to the battle lines to gain experience, as that's how my beasts grow the most efficiently."

They listened intently to Karl's description of events, which seemed like perfectly reasonable situations, given his circumstances. But the results didn't match the situations he was in.

"Alright, Sister Lotus, how is it that every time you go out, something strange happens? Last time you found a rare earth mineral vein that has turned into a large-scale mining project, and this time, you were spotted riding a Bloodbath Spider into combat, when their species is supposed to be extinct." The High Priest asked.

"I blame Karl for the last part. The spider's name is Rae, and she's his partner." Lotus announced with a cheeky smirk.

Chapter 216 Luck Prevails

The High Priest stared evenly at the tiny Nature Cleric. "So are you denying that you were riding a Bloodbath Spider through the woods, or that you were operating as a team in combat?"

Lotus shook her head. "I do not. I just wanted to clarify that the situation did not involve a wild Bloodbath Spider, She belongs to Karl, and she's bonded to him with his class skills.

Also, I should probably mention, before one of the guards mentions it later, we did take a little outing to play in the trees earlier."

The High Priest John sighed and rolled his eyes. Priestesses like Lotus were the reason that half the clergy had grey hair and was balding from pulling it out in frustration, he was absolutely certain of it. However, that was just the way of the Nature God, and even if they tried to stop her, they would be going against the will of the Gods, and it probably wouldn't work.

At least not in the long term.

"Yes, I already heard. It caused quite the commotion among the civilians to see a monster in the Cathedral Forest." He replied, then let the other High Priest continue the meeting.

"While we can dismiss the experiences of Sister Lotus as a case of curiosity meeting the Nature Goddess' favour, that doesn't actually explain much about your group's most recent outing. For example, the total Commander Rank kills for the combat zone that your group just left, do you know what percentage of them were yours?" He asked.

Everyone shook their heads.

"One hundred percent. There were four other sightings, but in all cases, the groups were forced to flee. Every Commander Rank kill in the area is credited to yourselves and your attached military unit."

Alice nodded in understanding. There was no way that wouldn't look suspicious on the official records. The logs of the disciplinary matter would be filed separately, so they might not have put together the fact that there was only one group in the area that was capable of efficiently dealing with Commander Rank monsters, with the numbers that they were seeing in front of them.

"Did you know that there were fourteen other groups assigned to patrol duty that had three or more Ascended Rank fighters in them, none of which managed to score a single Commander Rank kill until after the Church Guard took over command of the operation?" He asked.

That implied that there had been at least one since then, and that couldn't have been an easy feat, even with the help of a Church Guard. The patrol groups there were definitely not the most combat minded of units, they were mostly only there due to minimum combat duration rules within the army.

They were desk jockeys by day.

The Lieutenant would probably get a perverse sense of pleasure out of the current situation, where the laziest of his counterparts were being forced to do their jobs by an uncompromising High Priest, and actually succeeding at the tasks that they had been too scared to do on their own.

Alice shook her head. "I wasn't aware that any of the groups had multiple Ascended Rank fighters in them. We were informed that we were the only group capable of taking on Commander Rank challenges, though there weren't supposed to be any there, according to the scout reports."

High Priest John waved that off, and a flash of golden light from his eyes showed that his internal emotions weren't as settled as his facial features. When Priests got emotional, their magic tended to flare up. "That matter has been taken care of. But it's the string of coincidences that have brought us to this point that are the real highlight here. I have a spell that checks for Divine Magic, essentially for luck. What we plan to do is check your group, and see what sort of bonds that magic might have formed, and if sending you all together in the future is likely to have similarly positive results."

Karl nodded, then remembered that Thor had a literal pond full of Holy Stones just sitting there, leaking Holy Magic into his space. That was bound to throw off the readings at least a little bit.

But it was too late to say anything, and the room had already begun to glow with golden holy light, creating strings of magic that reminded Karl of Rae's webs.

The connections between Lotus and Tessa were forming rapidly, which made sense to Karl, as they had been friends for a long time. But the number that were coming from him to the others dwarfed anything except the friendship between the two clerics, and they were still growing in number and intensity as the spell progressed.

Dana smiled as the links continued to grow between the two of them, with some encircling their bodies without actually touching them, and some starting and ending at their bodies in a straight line.

There was certainly some meaning to how each of the links formed, especially since there were multiple designs, but everyone had some. Even Alice, who wasn't as often with Karl in the past, had quite a few of the links.

Karl checked his spaces, and noticed that some of the stronger links went straight from Alice to Thor and Rae, while only a few weaker ones went from Alice to Hawk. The links between Tessa and Thor, and Rae and Lotus were also both numerous and strong, indicating their friendship and frequent interaction.

Hawk's with Karl were the most plentiful of any of his partners, as they had been together the longest, but Hawk's to everyone else except Rae and Thor were limited, as he preferred to observe from a distance, and certainly wasn't going to let people manhandle him like Thor enjoyed.

"That is astonishing. Look at the density." One of the clerks along the wall gasped, breaking everyone from their observation of the links.

The elderly High Priest nodded and spoke in a raspy, even tone. "I would only expect a number of fate links this high among an old married couple, not among a group of young adventurers who have just met. Other than Lotus and Tessa, who we already knew were fated to be lifelong friends, the rest of you can't have met more than a year ago, and yet already the bonds are so strong.

But more importantly, we have a central focus for these events. Almost all the fated bond links involve Karl in some way. There are a number which involve the whole group, others that involve only part of the group, but almost always Karl and someone else.

Perhaps we should bring in someone skilled in Divination?"

The other High Priest shook his head. "I doubt that is necessary. They won't be able to see past the interference of the Divine to see what is going to happen, at least not the important parts, and these youngsters won't want their futures spoiled for them with foreknowledge."

It took a moment to realize the true horror of having your future told to you by an Oracle. Once you had been told, how could you trust that any choice you made was your own? Would you deliberately sabotage the good things that might happen to you while attempting to change the choices that might lead to the undesirable options that you had been informed of?

Worse, would you lose all sense of direction once you felt that your fate had been settled, just going through the motions of life?

"Alright, I think that we have seen what we need to. There are more people involved in this tangle of fate, I could feel the tendrils reaching outside the range of the spell. I suspect that the Sergeant who arrived with you is one of them, though she will be occupied for some time, and there will surely be other Elites entangled in a fateful event this large, but we have enough now to know that it is best to keep you all together, the closer, the better."

The High Priest paused and then continued. "Do not take the direction to stay close as permission to sleep with a Bloodbath Spider in the Cathedral Park, either, Sister Lotus. I know how you think."

Lotus smirked, while everyone else in the room tried to stifle their laughter. Even without implied permission, she had probably already been considering it. In fact, if Karl left Rae out tonight, the two of them would definitely go on a misadventure together, there was no doubt about it.

Chapter 217 Spend Some Reward Money

High Priest John looked at Karl and Dana. "This is the second Holy Relic that the two of you have been involved in discovering in the past few months. I know the circumstances behind that, but I must say that the coincidence level after putting all of that and your combat records together is extraordinary.

With Dana still being at the Awakened Rank, though attached to a unit with a Commander Rank leader, on paper it truly does seem outlandish that you have been involved in so many noteworthy incidents."

Then the older High Priest took over from him with a stern look on his aged face. "What were your plans after leaving the field? Surely, you have put some thought into your progression from this point forward."

Karl nodded. "I had planned to use the credits that I had earned to ask the University to help me create some resources that would help the three contracted beasts evolve and grow. I have some idea how to do it, thanks to my Class, but they are the specialists, and they likely know much more than I do, and have access to resources I haven't even heard of."

The High Priest nodded. "That sounds reasonable. What about you, Miss Dana?"

Dana brushed her curly locks back out of her face again and sighed. "Unless I can find another form of the single use mana enhancement potions, I'm in a cycle of growth and enhancement. There are too many mages for too few resources, it's a drawback of having such a common class."

John smiled gently in understanding. "Well, you do have noted access to Ascended and Commander Rank resources thanks to your kill record, so you can bypass the most common and highly sought after resources to go straight for the rare and potent options.

Talented Mages can grow rather rapidly when given the right combination of resources, it's a wonderful thing to see them shoot right up once they're positioned for success."

He wasn't even trying to hide the fact that they had resources that would make Mages jump up a Rank or more, that were reserved for the truly promising Elites who would be thrust into the spotlight, or onto the front lines of the battle against the monsters.

They likely also came with a cost. Nothing that powerful was ever without side effects, in Karl's opinion, but it had to be worth it if they were still saving it for the very best.

The older High Priest looked thoughtful for a moment. "You know, a field trip to the University might do us all some good. They have the resources that every member of this group needs, and I haven't been outside the Cathedral in some time."

"Are there side effects to the potent resources for mages? You implied that it's not a big deal to get them to skip ranks, or advance rapidly to high power, so there has to be a drawback, or they would be passing it out like candy with a government subsidy." Karl asked the High Priests, too curious not to speak.

John shrugged. "According to the Mage Council, less than one in a hundred who get the Mage Class will ever make it past Commander on their own. The concoctions they've prepared will rapidly move a mage past that natural bottleneck, but it sacrifices any natural talent that they had left.

So, they will move from Commander to Royal, Monarch or even, in one case, Overlord Rank, and then that's it. That's where they stay, with their potential exhausted, no matter how hard they work."

Karl nodded as he thought about the idol known as the Archmage. She had been extremely promising in school, and graduated as a Commander, then gained a "mysterious opportunity" and moved to Royal within a few months.

There was a chance she was still growing, and it was natural, but it did sound like there was a chance she had hit her limits and tried this method to limit break and see how far she could get.

Dana was intrigued by the notion.

"So, there is a bottleneck at the peak of Commander Rank?" She asked.

The High Priest nodded. "It exists for all magic users. Even Priests. We overcome it with Faith, the Mages have to do something different. The warriors don't suffer from it as much, but they eventually hit the extent of their ability to advance at different points, depending on their skills and training.

Eventually, their bodies just decide that they are in peak form and stop upgrading."

Karl turned to Alice. "So, you will have to find a way to break the bottleneck as well."

Alice laughed and shook her head. "I am from the early years of the Elite program, and I was inducted late. I'm already 28 and still on the low side of Commander. If I make it to the peak, I will already be a middle-aged woman, and at that point, I'm unlikely to be able to advance anyhow, even if I wanted to keep trying and staying in a combat role.

As the High Priest said, one in a hundred, at best, can do it on their own."

Dana nodded. "So, it's a trade-off. If you can't make it past the advancement on your own, it might be worth it, but if you can't get close enough to peak Commander, you won't be able to acquire the resources to jump past it anyhow."

The elder High Priest nodded. "And it's potential-based, or you could say life force based, so the younger you are when you take it, the better it works."

That was a real conundrum, Karl thought. How young was too young to give up on the dream of ever making it past Commander Rank naturally, and how old was too old to take the opportunity if you had it?

It would never be easy, especially for an Elite, to admit that they had peaked, and they would never do any better, but if they held out too long, then it wouldn't matter even if they changed their minds.

The old priest continued, gently smoothing his robes out of unconscious habit. "A lot of it has to do with foundation. Too long establishing your foundation and you miss your peak growth ages. But if you use too many resources to increase your growth rate, then you will end up with an unstable foundation for your magic, and it won't be able to support you at higher ranks.

That's especially true for warriors. A lot of them will go for things like Dragon's blood and Stoneskin Elixirs, which will help their growth, but it damages their body at the same time, and they can't fully recover.

That's what happened to Overlord Drake. He found a powerful resource that brought him from Royal Rank straight past Monarch to Overlord, but the internal damage it caused has greatly slowed his growth. Now, he's still one of the stronger Overlords, and he might not have ever become one without it, but at the same time, it's a shame.

That's why the University is working so hard on new products so that they can reduce the side effects of the resources which we can grow ourselves or artificially reproduce."

[You hear that? Too many resources and you will hurt your foundation.] Karl informed his team.

[I think that only counts for humans. You're like below Common Grade to begin with, even Goblins can kick the average human's ass. We're proper beasts, just give us the good stuff.] Hawk countered.

Rae nodded in agreement inside her space. [He has a point. You're trying to go from arguing with Earth Mice over living space to Royal Rank, I'm just trying to go from Commander as an adult to Royal right now. That's one step, like a human going to the Awakened Rank. I've got some leeway.]

"What do the beasts say?" Alice asked as she noticed that Karl was distracted within his own mind.

"They say that it's not a big deal to them, since humans are so much weaker than they are to begin with. They would all make Ascended or Commander on their own, though Hawk had to evolve to make that true, so they're looking forward to whatever the University can make for them."

The High Priests smiled. "That's the spirit. We can call this meeting close enough to done, now that we have the answers that we came here for. You should all be kept together as much as possible, and being together will increase your chances of coming across rare opportunities, thanks to fate.

Now, if we can just get you all a bit more advanced, those opportunities can be ones that will make a difference on a much larger scale."

Chapter 218 University Educated

The High Priests didn't waste time once they had made up their mind, and they quickly escorted everyone out of the Cathedral and across the street, into what turned out to be one of the University's research labs.

Karl hadn't realized that the two were located adjacent to each other, as they both had vast green spaces around their main buildings, which made it look like the Cathedral was located in a city park.

There were armed security at the doors to the university lab, preventing anyone without a pass from entering, but the High Priests didn't seem bothered by the fact, and they simply waited for the supervisors to come down and let the group in after announcing their intentions to the guards.

The arrival of this group seemed to have caused an extreme level of excitement within the University labs, and Karl could hear and see people running around frantically, preparing various projects, or gathering notes and waiting by the doors of their workspaces in preparation to receive visitors.

That seemed like a good sign, like they might really get access to good things, the way that Hawk was hoping.

But they also had something to offer. If they offered up one of the spears of the Commander Rank grass, from the fight with the Commander Rank Giants, these researchers might be able to make something that would benefit all the beasts.

His Identification skill said that the grass would help Thor, but Karl didn't recognize any of the other ingredients, and he couldn't well tell these scientists that he knew what would work but not how or why.

Well, he could, but Karl wasn't at all certain that they would take him seriously or believe that it was a Class Skill. The plants also didn't always have the same names in the listing that they did in common use, so they might not even understand what he was talking about and assume he was making it up to sound impressive.

"Welcome, Elites, to the Capital University's advancement research division. Here we have all the Golden Dragon Nation's finest minds, working on ways to combat the threats facing our nation through

the rapid evolution and advancement of the Elites." The director greeted them as he opened the door, clipboard in one hand, and a whole suite of pens and tools in the pocket of his white coat.

"Now, I see that we have two mages and a Beast Master here today, as well as our fellows from the Church. Can you tell me, are the beasts actual beasts, or are they summoned each time they are needed?" The director asked, unclear about the nature of Karl's abilities.

"They're actual beasts, currently living in a separate space." Karl explained.

"So, they require resources to help them grow? We have a division for that. They have been working on ways to tame Moor Tigers as guard animals."

Karl gave the man a confused look. A Moor Tiger was roughly the size of a bus. Compared to a full-grown Lightning Cerro, it was three times the size, and it was a Royal Rank beast when fully grown. What could you even offer it that might make it loyal to humans?

"That is further down the building, so perhaps we could start with the mages, and see what we can offer them? One of the two mages looks like she is still a student, so she should currently be in her prime growth state." The Director suggested.

"How long does the prime growth state last?" Dana asked, unclear as to the definition.

"It's generally considered to be two to three years after the Serum Injection, which is why the Academy runs for four years in total. By then, they already know how most of the Elites are going to shape up. There are some exceptions who grow faster after they leave, but that is a rarity." He explained.

Dana smiled. If it lasted two to three years, she had plenty of time left to try to catch up to Karl. He was already pulling ahead of her, and if he continued to outpace her like that, the government would consider her too far beneath his rank to keep going on missions with him.

"Now, did you have any resources that you might have brought with you? I know many working Elites do, as it offsets the cost of treatments from the University Labs." The Director asked, with a gesture toward a cart with dozens of sealed and sterilized empty sample jars on it.

Everyone turned to Karl, who nodded. "I have a few things here. I have this fungus, which reads as an Ascended Rank plant by energy, though I haven't personally identified it, we have these herbs and flowers, I've got some broken magical accessories, and I've got this odd Commander Rank plant, which, I think, might be good for my Lightning Cerro, as it greatly increases the regeneration rate of monsters who use it."

Those were all out of his share of items, but if the others needed what the items made, he would just trade, since their portions were all still in his space as well, and the only one likely to even know the majority of the loot existed was Lotus, who had given much of it to Rae for safekeeping.

The Director stared at the rapidly filling jars as Karl and his assistants loaded everything away, and shook his head in dismay.

"I take it you're not going to ask me for something small and simple today. The value of those items is incredible, and I was half expecting you to pull a 'spare holy stone' from out of nowhere to put on the pile. Just to put the value off the charts." The Director joked.

"I've got one if you need one. A spare Holy Stone, that is." Karl commented evenly.

The director laughed at the joke, but Karl borrowed a small and weak one from Thor's pond and placed it in an empty jar.

"Dammit, I was joking, don't just go putting Holy Stones in my sample jars." The Professor complained.

"Fine, I will put it back in storage. Thor likes the smell of them." Karl shrugged, but the Director immediately moved to protect the stone.

"I see how it is. I'm sure the lab can make good use of it." Karl chuckled, while the High Priests softly laughed at the researcher.

The Church made Holy Stones, so they weren't as rare for High-Ranking Clerics, but still, the value of them to the common person, as the researchers of the University Labs were, was immense.

If they could keep it for themselves, there was a chance that they would naturally awaken Holy Magic, like the clerics did without the Serum.

"Alright, it is safe to say that enough rare resources have been provided to offset the cost of any of the more common treatments, and heavily subsidize the others. Those Blood Lotus blossoms alone are worth more than most of the Ascended and Commander Rank treatments. Where did you even find them? No, don't answer that, I don't want to have to fill out the paperwork involved in knowing the answer. I will just gladly accept the rare flowers as payment."

Though they were called a Blood Lotus, they didn't show as being of particular benefit to Rae, according to Karl's identification skill. It just said that they were useful for life drain type abilities. Which, technically, Lacerate was not. It didn't steal the life, just let it bleed on the ground.

Alice and Dana both gave Karl happy hugs as the Director basically gave them a free pass to choose the resources that they wanted today, but the research assistants were even more excited.

"Mister Karl, is it true that you will be looking for resources to help your pets advance? You see, we are from the defensive beasts division, and the research from your advancement has already been quite valuable to us." One of them asked.

"Oh, you got the notes from the treatments that the Bureau oversaw?" Karl asked, and the researchers nodded happily.

"We got notes from the Bureau about your time in the field as well. The possibilities are incredible. If only we could bond them the way that you do." The researcher sighed.

Karl shrugged. "Give it time and I might learn the method to teach that to others as well. It would be quite the trick, having regular citizens become Beast Masters if they couldn't become Elites."

Chapter 219 Armored Golems

The research assistants looked dreamy at the notion of being able to bond a monster to call upon in their time of need, like a guardian spirit that would make them the equivalent to an Elite, blessed by the Gods through the Divine Injection.

But it was time for them to focus, as the newest items for the mages were on display in the first area, and there were two mages interested in testing their work.

The researchers got recognition within the department when the Elites chose their new products over an existing and proven formula or device, so this was showtime for the research lab.

"Alright, as we have you recorded as a wind and a Golem Mage, respectively, we will bring forward the projects that are most likely to be of interest to you. We have a number of formulations that should be of great benefit to you both, so let's get started.

First up, we have the Summoning Stone, as it has been dubbed by its developer, the Grand Mage Sandra."

An old woman in a lab coat waved happily as her invention was sent forward by her assistants, who would be the ones to introduce it to the Elites.

"We have completed initial testing on the stone with extremely promising results. When ingested, the magic successfully bonds with the user with a one hundred percent success rate, increasing their mana strength, and has a thirty-four percent chance of causing the activation of a secondary skill informally known as Indestructible Constructs. There have been no noted side effects.

We have not yet tested on a live subject, but the data from the research mimic should be accurate, and the resources used are all Awakened Grade or lower, with an Ascended Rank outcome." One assistant announced, while the other held up pages with graphs and data charts on them that should show the results of their tests.

"What is a test mimic?" Dana asked.

"Oh, it's a wonderful thing. The Grand Mage learned a spell that creates a clone body, accurate to the real one in every way except that it lacks a consciousness. Many of the research teams use them for testing, as the mimic will respond to potions and show signs of gaining skills, as well as the duration of potions.

It cannot tell us what the skill is, obviously, but we can extrapolate the data from our predictions, and the Grand Mage's observations of her mimic."

So, the product hadn't actually gone through human testing yet, but they were somewhat confident that it would work. That would explain why the Director was so eager to get volunteers, and why he said that it wouldn't be a hassle to purchase nearly anything they were making.

They were here to get stronger, but they were also the guinea pigs testing new resource combinations.

Dana nodded. "That sounds perfect for my skill direction. I have learned from my group members that having Golems to block for you while you cast your offensive magics is by far the superior way to fight. Even better if you can enhance the Golems with offensive magic."

Alice nodded in agreement. She used both barriers and a spell known as [Tearing Wind] on her Golem whenever it was in combat. Hawk hadn't gotten the hang of it, which was a bit surprising, but the change to Dragon Hawk seemed to have changed his elemental affinity from wind to fire.

The assistant brought the container with the stone over, and everyone gathered with their notepads to record the event.

"There is a security camera overseeing the area, please feel free to proceed when you are ready." The Director informed her with a happy smile.

The first item they had brought up, and already they had a volunteer to try it. That was a much better than average acceptance rate, though the sample size was limited.

Dana cautiously took the stone shaped pill out of the jar, and set it on her tongue, then swallowed.

The effects weren't immediate, but after a few seconds, there was a slow buildup of power, and then Dana began to smile.

"The official name for the skill is Durable Constructs, according to the system, so you were close." She informed the researchers.

"Can you summon your Golem and explain any changes it has undergone? We should have had you summon them before, so we could get proper before and after data." The assistant realized.

The Grand Mage chuckled at their oversight. She would get many more opportunities to test now that the product had proven effective without immediate side effects, so she wasn't concerned, but they were students at the University, and missing steps in the process affected their grades.

Dana called out her golems, and everyone nodded in satisfaction at the changes. The Golems were formerly classically nude and muscular marble statues, but now they were wearing bronze armour, which included a form of segmented armour skirt that somewhat hid their assets from view.

"They look like they did before, except that they were nearly nude. Now they're wearing armour. It looks functional, so I would say that the Golems have definitely gained an advantage from the new passive skill." Dana explained.

The Director sent the team back and called up another set of presenters. It looked like he was willing to let them try anything that they were willing to, and he was just calling everyone whose work was relevant today.

The next one up was a wind element resource that sounded good to Karl, but Alice shook her head, declining it.

They returned, not dissuaded by the rejection, and another pair stepped forward.

[Oh, get me the good thing. I want it.] Hawk demanded.

"This might not be quite what you're looking for, but we have developed what we call the burning soul pill, a combination of fire resources that increases elemental affinity with fire. It has been tested by four Elites before, one of which managed to acquire a new fire spell, and none of whom had any noted side effects during or after the process." The presenter began.

Karl called Hawk out to stand on his outstretched arm, and the scientists turned to look at him.

"Hawk wants to try it." Karl explained.

The scientist looked startled, but they nodded in acceptance, and everyone got out their notepads.

"Should we..." One of the assistants began.

"No testing fire skills indoors." The Director reminded them, making both Hawk and Karl laugh.

"We have been told the same thing in the past. We're not laughing at you." Karl assured the research assistants.

The assistant noticed the look in the bird's eyes and quickly opened the jar before Hawk could smash it, allowing him access to the pill.

As it had last time he advanced, flames rose from his body as he absorbed the fire resources, and his feathers turned a bit more bright red before settling down.

[Shared Skill gained] Flaming Body

[Flaming Body] surrounds the body in damaging flames.

"Hawk gained a new fire skill. Flaming Body, he can now surround himself in flames. It seems to have helped the damage done by his fire spells as well, but I can't verify that yet." Karl explained.

Hawk surrounded himself in flames, and then shot a short burst of fire from his wings, an extended attack that created something akin to a fire blade, but he didn't let it detach and go flying around a room full of humans and precious shiny objects.

Hawk had great respect for the good things that the humans made.

Lotus moved up to stare at Hawk, who had returned to his normal form, and then gently stroked his feathers, making sure not to ruffle them.

"The feathers retain their softness and flexibility, but their temperature is elevated. The size of Hawk seems unchanged, but the colour is more vibrant. The lack of additional scale development suggests that he isn't evolving toward a dragon template, but the lack of intense heat suggests that it isn't toward an Elemental or Phoenix direction either." She narrated as she gently massaged Hawk.

"Thank you, Priestess. I was unsure how we were going to gather data on a bestial subject, but it appears that you are a natural." The Director noted.

[She really is. I want to thank whoever taught her to massage and preen a wing.] Hawk agreed.

"Alright, let us see what else we might manage to find here. Are there other elements that might be useful to your group?" The Director asked.

"Well, there is a Lightning Cerro, with the obvious abilities, and a Bloodbath Spider who has learned to summon a form of Tree Golems." Karl offered.

"Tree Golems? That's the nature magic department next door. We could try the regular Golem pill for her, but we don't have any more ready." One of the assistants from the first group replied.

"That's alright, we can try the new things from the nature magic sorts. Who knows, it might actually be useful for beasts in a way that it isn't for most human magic users." Karl suggested.

Chapter 220 Protection

The other groups conferred for a moment to see if they had something that might be relevant to a lightning magic user, but there wasn't anything in the works at the moment. There were some already made, but they were the research division, they were already finished with those ones and didn't keep them around.

But while they were waiting around for a decision to be made on what was happening next, Karl noticed that something was happening with Rae. She had taken a concoction yesterday, and it had started a process that looked like it was completing.

She wasn't completely changed, but the power level in her body was rapidly increasing, and the red of her legs was moving toward a crimson at the tips of her legs, while it darkened toward black again on her upper legs and body. The fur on her torso seemed to multiply, until her actual carapace was barely visible, and a shadowy miasma seemed to hang over her body.

[Looking good, girlie.] Karl congratulated her.

[This is good, we should make more of that later. I think I'm almost at my final adult form now, and I'm just waiting on something. Maybe for you to finish that power moon in my space.] She agreed, placing the blame for her not reaching Commander Rank today firmly on Karl.

[I will make you another batch later, don't forget to remind me.] Karl informed her as another group of researchers came into the room with a bunch of carts.

There were more products on them. Some were pills, some were liquids, some were baskets full of meat or feed.

That had to make them the nature department, and they were all going insane about something.

Their leader, an elderly man with a walker, raced forward, or at least attempted to, given his condition, and then protectively cradled the regenerative grass plant that Karl had donated.

"When was this picked? How long has it been out of soil? Is it still viable?" He asked in a deep baritone that didn't match his frail body.

"It was picked earlier this week. But it has been in stasis, so you can consider the elapsed time to be roughly fifteen minutes. The roots are intact, so it should be absolutely viable. We even left native soil around them to ensure that it didn't suffer from an extreme transplant shock." Alice explained carefully before Karl could think of where to start.

An assistant went running out of the room and returned seconds later with a large pot half full of some sort of blue gel, into which the plant was carefully lowered before the old man breathed a sigh of relief.

"Do you have any idea how valuable that plant is to be just leaving it out like that with its roots exposed? Idiots, all of you. It's good that I managed to save it, the regenerative properties are most potent while the plant is still alive." He ranted.

Alice chuckled, and took a small empty vial from one of the carts. She filled it with the regenerative paste that they had gotten from the Giants and handed it to the old man.

"That is how the Commander Rank Giants were using it. Now, are you ready to calm down, or should I get you somewhere to sit and catch your breath?" She asked.

The man flipped a panel on his walker, which latched in place to form a platform, and then he took a seat on it, alternating between glaring at Alice and lovingly staring at the paste.

"Go ahead and use some. You've got a whole plant to replace it from." She encouraged him.

The old man mixed some of the salve into a cup of tea that his students presented him, and then rubbed a bit of the salve on his throat. Karl was curious about what the tea would taste like, as the plant smelled somewhat like Aloe, but it seemed to help whatever was wrong with the old man.

The assistants all got increasingly excited as the man's health visibly improved over the next few minutes, and then he got up out of the walker and stood smiling at the Elites and the other researchers.

"Well, this has been an unexpectedly profitable day. Now, what did you need my help with? Anything that my department can provide is yours for the asking."

The other Elites smirked at Karl, who called out Thor and Rae to join Hawk.

"I am looking for a way to get these three to Commander Rank. They're bonded to me by my class, and their growth directly affects my growth." Karl explained.

The old man stared at them and nodded solemnly.

"So, we've got a mutated Dragon Hawk, a Lightning Cerro, who radiates holy power, and an adult Bloodbath Spider who hasn't reached her advancement yet? We can work with that as long as they're not hostile." He agreed.

"They're not, but I don't recommend ruffling Hawk's feathers, or touching Rae, she can be particular. Thor, the Lightning Cerro, on the other hand, is very affectionate." Karl explained.

"What additional skills have they learned so far?" The professor asked, gaining vitality by the second as the balm worked its way through his body.

"Hawk knows Fireballs, Wind Shield, Rend, Shred, and Flaming Body. Thor knows Refreshing Lightning and Earthquake. Rae knows Offensive Optimization and Wood Golem." Karl explained.

"What is offensive optimization?" One of the assistants asked.

"It's the Bloodbath Spider's innate passive skill. It's how they can tear through everything so effectively if you give them a few minutes to practice."

The assistant looked clueless, but the old professor looked grim.

"You might not know, as they are supposed to be extinct, but a full-grown Bloodbath Spider is a Commander Rank beast that can tear through the hull of an armoured transport in a matter of seconds. When it comes to combat power, they are among the finest in their Rank, and if they were given any defensive abilities, or ranged attacks, they would almost certainly be ranked as a Royal Rank threat." He explained.

The students looked shocked as they looked at Rae, who was standing a bit more proudly at the kind reference to the powers of her species. However, in the eyes of the others, that only made her look more intimidating until Lotus came up to rest against her side and whisper something to the spider.

Not even Karl's sensitive hearing could pick it out, but Rae's amusement was clear in his mind.

The group from the Nature Department discussed the matter very seriously, then came forward with two large vials of glowing liquid, and an intricately carved glowing rock.

The High Priests looked at the glowing rock in shock.

"You can't be serious." The High Priest scoffed.

"I am quite serious. I believe that it will work." The old man replied with great dignity.

Karl had no idea what the object was, but one of the assistants brought it forward for Thor.

"Uhm, he just needs to eat this, and then it should take effect right away. I mean, assuming that it works."

It looked like the High Priest wasn't the only one who wasn't sold on the fact that this resource was right for Thor, but nobody tried to stop them as Thor opened his mouth, and she placed the carved stone on his tongue.

Thor chewed and swallowed with a happy grunt.

[Kind of fizzy, pleasantly bubbly. Warm too.] He explained.

Then a flood of golden light came from him and created a circle on the floor.

[Oh, I learned a thing! Circle of Protection.]

"Thor says it is a Circle of Protection." Karl informed the room, while the clergy all stared at him in shock.

"He learned holy magic? How does that even work?" Tessa asked as she stepped into the circle.

The High Priests both followed her, and their looks turned from doubt to curiosity.

"It really is a Circle of Protection. It reduces damage taken in its area of effect, and restores stamina." The senior of the two High Priests explained.

"Thor the Tank." Tessa agreed as she patted his scales.

"How much of an effect will the spell have?" Karl asked, unfamiliar with the magic.

He had seen the golden circle that damaged enemies, and the one that slowed and weakened them, but not the one that reduced damage.

"Against other Ascended and low Commander Rank enemies, it should reduce his damage taken by about half. That will also be effective for anyone standing near him, so against a large target like a Giant or an Ogre, it will protect the whole melee group." The High Priest explained.

"That's impressive. With this in place, very few enemies will be able to get past the Golems at all." Alice noted.

"That's a good point. With half as much damage done to the Golems, and the recent upgrade that Dana got to her Golems, we should be able to hold quite well against stronger threats." Karl agreed.