

Beast Master 221

Chapter 221 Mental Focus

Now that Thor had finished his enhancement, that left the two large vials on the cart, waiting for someone to remember about them in all the shock and confusion of a Lightning Cerro using [Circle of Protection].

Thor was basking in all the attention that he was getting from the clerics, who were making intensive notes on his abilities, completely forgetting that everyone was here for a reason that wasn't studying Thor.

"Right, now getting back on track. This particular concoction should be perfect for Commander Alice. It's designed specifically for wind element mages and should strengthen your abilities and future growth rate.

I know for Commanders that is usually the most important part, as the growth can be painfully slow." The ancient professor announced, looking much more healthy than when he had hobbled into the room.

Alice looked more than a little skeptical about drinking a potion that held more than the average coffee mug, especially since they were intended to be ingested in one go, and not sipped over an extended period of time.

But it was a Commander Rank potion, and designed specifically for wind mages, which she was. There was probably no better resource for her, and if they were going to part with it without arguments, she would be an idiot to turn it down.

So, she found herself swallowing the entire vial full of the herbal concoction, while energy built all around her and her power level steadily grew.

The beasts could feel it, the strengthening of the magical power that Alice could wield, and through them, Karl had a fairly accurate guess of her current growth state, but for the others in the room, it was just a lot of bleeding energy, and then they would have to test afterwards to know how well it worked.

"My maximum mana control rate is definitely better than it was before, and I can feel the wind magic more clearly." Alice did her best to explain the changes that had happened with the potion.

"We will run a suite of tests later when we have more time. I need to study the salve that you provided once I return to my labs, and then there are all the other results as well. But there is still one more vial here. What was that one again?" The old professor asked his assistants.

"That is an attunement potion, double dose for humans, so it can be split between the two clerics in the group." The assistant reminded him.

"Oh, that's right. High Priest, we made this one for your people. The ingredients are a bit rare and therefore difficult to obtain, but with the Church's resources, it shouldn't be a problem to obtain enough to provide this to all of your promising members."

The Professor passed over the ingredients list and a packet of details to the High Priests, who looked at some of the ingredients in concern. Sure, they had access to vast amounts of resources, but they also had a massive number of clergy.

Plus, this was a Commander Rank potion, and the side effects on a Common Grade or Awakened priest could be catastrophic. At best, they could administer it after reaching Ascended to see if the promising priests could make it to Commander Rank and become high priests.

The potion was split in half, and handed to both Tessa and Lotus, who gave it very different looks. Tessa was holding it away from herself to avoid the smell, while Lotus was intrigued and taking careful sniffs, trying to determine what was in it without looking at the ingredients list.

"Well, bottoms up." Tessa reluctantly agreed.

She tilted the smaller vial back and downed the potion in one long slug, followed by Lotus. Both Priestesses grimaced at the flavour, but their bodies were gathering energy into themselves, and giving off a sense of Divine Power.

It was a shame that Sergeant Rita missed out on this opportunity, but everyone else had made out very well today, and their advancements had given the beasts a chance to learn new skills in the future.

Rae was eagerly looking forward to deciphering how to make her Golems wear clothing, colour adaptive camo netting to be specific, so they could hide as well as Rae herself did. But even Thor was looking forward to combat so he could try to learn the cleric tricks now that he knew he could make a Circle of Protection.

The High Priests were about to lead everyone back out, Karl could sense it in their demeanour, but the researchers weren't done.

"There is one more left. Now, the field of Warrior enhancements is pretty well studied, but we do have a few things left that might help the Beast Master himself. This next one could be considered a somewhat exotic potion, and we weren't certain that we would ever find a suitable test subject, but today might be the day.

Assistant, could you go fetch item FLA112C3?"

The assistant looked confused, but went and gathered the object from a storage room down the hall, still steaming with the intense cold of the ice magic that was used to preserve potions and pills that might become unstable when left at room temperature.

Inside was what appeared to be a gummy bear. It was even gummy bear shaped.

Karl gave the priest a questioning look, but he just shrugged.

"I ran out of other moulds, as this was a side project, so I used what I could find in the foods' lab."

Karl made a mental note to avoid gummy bears from the university. He would never trust their equipment after it had been used for experimental potions. But then, they were making experimental food products out of magical plants and monster meat already, so perhaps it was no worse than any other piece of equipment.

The Professor passed the gummy to a clean Petri dish with a pair of sterilized tongs, and carefully warmed it with fire magic using a handheld device.

"There it is, right back to perfect temperature. You will want to eat that quickly, I didn't do a good job of stabilizing it as a gummy, and the flavour could be unfortunate."

Karl nodded, and tipped the gummy directly off the dish and down his throat, the same way that Hawk usually ate anything he didn't have to tear apart.

The energy of the gummy hit him like a sledgehammer to the head, and power flowed from it through his body, completely bypassing him to fill the spaces.

It was probably a good thing that the beasts were outside at the moment as Karl focused on concentrating the energy into the sun and moon equivalents he had been using in place of the candlelight that the monks centred their space around.

There was a lingering power in the spaces, Karl could feel it, but he couldn't quite grasp what he was supposed to be learning from the pill, or what sort of skill it should be.

Then, as the energy settled and his spaces began to change in nature, becoming more alive, as if they were a real place, and not just a bubble of mental energy. That was what they had been missing, Karl realized, the bottleneck that was holding the beasts back from their advancements.

It would still be some time before any of them were actually Commanders, but they should be able to make it there now.

But the energy wasn't done. It was leaking from the spaces to his own consciousness, and to the void he focused on to meditate.

A soft golden light filled the space for a moment, then coalesced into what looked like a Holy Stone, or a golden dragon scale. It wasn't doing anything, but when Karl focused on it, he could feel the improvement in his meditation speed.

Everyone was staring at him, waiting for a verdict.

"It enhanced the spaces for my beasts, and I think that it improved my meditation as well, there is a golden stone in the void where I meditate now, and it gives off an impressive amount of energy." Karl explained.

"There is something in your void? That is quite interesting, and very close to our expectations for Psychic type mentalist Classes if they were given the treatment. The concoction is made with the neural nodes of a mind flayer, Drake blood, and an assortment of herbs. It is safe to say that it is unlikely to see another of them made in the near future, but I do have a few others from the same batch.

Now that I know they will really work as intended, we might be able to use them to help the accuracy of the Oracles and the Seers. For some reason, they don't trust my creations." The Professor ranted.

They could see the future. There was likely an excellent reason they didn't trust his creations.

Chapter 222 Lore

The High Priests thanked the researchers, and then one of them handed out slips to the teams whose concoctions had been chosen for testing today, some sort of compensation chit, Karl assumed.

"We really must be going. I have been receiving messages from the Inquisition that we are needed again, and then there is a meeting with some of the other High Priests later this morning." The older of the two High Priests with them sighed.

Karl sighed. It was going to be a long day if all that was scheduled for before lunch. He did wonder what the Inquisition wanted that they were calling them back so quickly. There couldn't have been that much discovered in the past few hours that the Church would be in a panic, so there must be some question about the answers that they got yesterday.

The Inquisitors were waiting when the group got back on the Church grounds, and Karl found himself separated from the others and brought down the stairs towards a proper questioning room, instead of the library, where he had met with the Blue Dragon priestess who could read minds.

If they hadn't gotten enough information out of him by reading his mind, he wasn't certain what they thought that they were going to get today, but they looked quite determined, and they were completely silent as they led him into the depths of the Cathedral.

Finally, they stopped in front of a blank wall, and the Inquisitor to Karl's left pressed his hand to the stone, then tapped three times.

The illusion vanished, and Karl saw that there was a scanner of some sort there, and that the Inquisitor had tapped on a wooden door, not the stone wall.

"This is as far as we go. We will be waiting here for you to return." The Inquisitor informed Karl, then pushed him through and shut the door.

There were only two people inside, one woman in ornate black robes, and one man in red. Both were dragonkin, with mostly scaled bodies, as well as wings and tails, and both were immensely powerful, Near the peak of the Overlord Rank by Karl's estimation.

The black robed woman began to speak directly into Karl's mind. [Greetings, Brother Karl. We have been watching you for some time now, and I must say that we are impressed with your abilities.]

Karl bowed politely and spoke in response. "Thank you. The Gods have favoured me."

That made the two of them chuckle.

The red robed man replied out loud with a smile on his face. "You have no idea how right you are. I am the Avatar of the Red Dragon, the highest authority for the War Goddess on this world, and beside me is the Avatar of the Black Dragon, the Dragon God of Death. Our deities have taken an interest in you, and asked that we see you in person."

"I have gained the attention of the War and Death Gods? Excuse my shock, but I am only an Ascended Rank Elite." Karl replied, too shocked to come up with a better response.

The woman in black spoke out loud, a haunting sound that seemed to echo from another world and sent chills down Karl's spine.

"It is not your penchant for war and death that caught their attention, though you do have a particular affinity for it that would have made you an exceptional Priest."

She stopped and took down her hood, revealing a delicate and beautiful, but childish face with jet black horns and shockingly silver hair that shimmered in the light.

She smirked at Karl's shock, and when she spoke again, her voice was a musical and kind tone that made Karl instantly want to like her.

"Death's blessing is eternal. Her High Priestesses do not age, and her High Priests do not die. But what has caught the attention of the Divine Dragons is your affinity for the System.

Focus on the power of the System in your mind and speak the word Status."

Karl wasn't sure what she meant, but the new focus in his mind seemed to be the logical point to start, as it was a focal point for power, and that power came from the Divine Injection created from the System Stones.

[Status]

A long string of text appeared in his vision.

[System Active]

[Name] Karl

[Class] Beast Master

[Partners]

Hawk - Ascended Rank Dragon Hawk

Rae - Ascended Rank Bloodbath Spider

Thor - Ascended Rank Lightning Cerro

[Available Skill Points] 34

"So, what do you see?" The Avatar of the Black Dragon asked eagerly in her musical voice.

"I see a set of text. My name, my Class as Beast Master, and the names of my beasts. Then at the bottom it says that I have thirty-four skill points, whatever those are." Karl explained.

The two Avatars smiled at each other.

"You see, the Divine Injection doesn't fully awaken the System in anyone. It only gets you a small fraction of the way there. It looks like you might actually have a fully functional version now that you have stepped on the System Stones.

The other clerics have tried bringing promising candidates to test the ones you found, but for those without a System, they won't activate at all. They won't even activate for Priests who gained their powers through faith, even though some of them were at the Awakened Rank.

So, naturally, we want to know if you really do have the full power of the ancient System.

Focus again and think the word Skills, or Skill List." She insisted.

[Skills]

[Skill List]

[Learn Skills]

...

Karl sighed as none of them worked, and then a faint message appeared in his vision.

[Skill list unavailable. Randomly assign Skill Points?]

Karl smiled. "It says that the list is unavailable and asks if I want to randomly assign my points."

The two Avatars sighed and shook their heads before the Red Dragon Avatar answered in his deep voice.

"You can if you wish, but it appears that your System is not completely activated, so I recommend holding off until you can find another Holy Relic. If you don't know what the Skills are, it might not tell you what you have gained, so you will never know what powers you have that you're not using." He explained.

Karl nodded. Having more spells and attacks would be wonderful. He didn't know how many points each of them would cost, but he could likely get at least a few more with what he had.

Karl considered the situation for a moment. "Is there anyone with a completed System that I could ask for advice?"

The laughter of the two filled the room, a booming chuckle overlaid with a delicate giggle, like ringing bells.

"There hasn't been a fully active System in this world for hundreds of thousands of years. Take a seat, and we will have a little history lesson that might help this all make sense." The Black Dragon Avatar replied.

"Not even you two?" Karl asked as he took a seat.

They were the most favoured of their gods, if anyone had a chance, it was them.

"We are neither subject to the System, nor are we born in this world. We only stopped in to see what the commotion was all about, after our Gods asked us to observe from the shadows. When we are finished our work here, we will leave and watch until our deities ask us to take on another task.

But that is only incidental to the situation at hand. Our Deities were wondering if your people could really earn the forgiveness of the World Dragon and reactivate the System, or if you would have to carve an entirely new path for yourselves.

It all started with a rebellion, as most changes do.

At the time, the System had been active for longer than the world had kept recorded histories. You know how it is, time wears all away, and after a number of wars, changes of leadership and such, the original documents were lost and only legend remained.

That was when a group of Demigods thought that they could become the next System Administrator. They led a revolution against the World Dragon, intending to usurp the world from his control.

They shattered the World Dragon Scale that had been placed in this world to maintain his will, but they had gravely misunderstood the power of the World Dragon.

The backlash alone was enough to obliterate their very essence, but the damage was done.

The world was cut off from its primary source of Divine Power, and without the World Dragon Scale, there could be no more System Activations by the will of the World Dragon.

For the next few thousand years, the surviving System users kept the System Stones powered, and new generations gained power as they should.

But, as everyone should have predicted, the movement to overthrow the World Dragon wasn't truly gone, and a surviving Demigod, a Titan named Omega, shattered the System Stones.

But just when he thought that he could take over this world in the name of the Giant races, tragedy befell him as well. A nature dragon demigod was passing by and saw him at his weakest, in the midst of the Divine Tribulation to ascend to Godhood, so she ate him.

It is unknown whether that was enough to push the dragon demigod to true godhood, but it hasn't been seen since, so there is a good chance that it ascended."

Karl's laughter stopped her story for a moment.

"Sorry, please continue. I just thought about the Nature Dragon Clerics that I know, and I can totally see them doing it if they had a chance."

The Black Dragon avatar smiled.

"After that, things went downhill fast. There was a world full of System users, but no new generations could gain the system, and without the system, the existing powers in the world rapidly fell into chaos, separating into factions to protect themselves.

There is a lot more, hundreds of thousands of years worth of history, but the start is the important part. Now that you have the System halfway activated, all that is left is to see if it is possible for you to gain the rest of its hidden powers, or if the World Dragon expects you to forge your own path."

Chapter 223 With The Avatars

Karl sat in stunned silence as the Black Dragon Goddess' Avatar finished her story. He was still a bit shocked to be in the presence of the representatives of the Gods of War and Death, and then to be told that the hubris of the world's most powerful had been the downfall of the entire world, he couldn't process it all that quickly.

"So, once upon a time, everyone were Elites, even those of the other species, and it all ended because someone thought that they could take on the World Dragon?" Karl requested, desperately trying to make sense of the situation.

The Red robed man nodded grimly. "Foolish notion that. Nobody ever wins those challenges. But you are correct that every species on this world once had the full powers of the System on their side. Even

the beastkin, though some of them insist they were actually cursed by the World Dragon to be used by others as good luck charms."

Karl chuckled at the notion. How would a beastkin be a good luck charm? Were they like a Holy Stone, and granted a luck buff if you held them? He supposed that wasn't impossible if the Gods were getting directly involved in the lives of the people.

"What if I can't activate the Ancient System, and I just am what I am, a Beast Master, with the ability to grow and learn skills like every other Elite?" Karl asked.

The Red Dragon Avatar shrugged. "Then I wish you the best of luck becoming the most powerful Elite in the world. I have no idea if it's possible, but the path of the Divine Beasts is a good one. In the ancient legends, there was a hero with the Beast Lord class, though they summoned their beasts instead of bonding living ones.

I have never heard of a Class like yours, but I would pay particular attention to the children of the Green Dragon. They are the God of Beasts who don't have their own Deities, so they will eventually take interest in you as well."

"They?" Karl asked.

The man frowned. "It's a tricky question. Nobody really knows if the Green Dragon is a female who uses Divine Power to fertilize her eggs, or a male who uses Divine Power to create the eggs he fertilizes. What we do know is that there is no other involved in the process of creating Green Dragon Demigods, and if they know, they're not telling."

All this talk of Gods and ancient treachery was giving Karl a headache. Even if he knew some of the answers now, there was nothing that he could do about it except possibly tell someone who would write it down so it wasn't forgotten again.

The black robed woman opened a portal on the wall behind them, and nodded toward the Red Dragon Avatar.

"It seems that our time is up, and we must run to another duty. Thank you for your time, and you may return to your day." The Avatar of the War God announced as he rose to his feet.

That was it, they just walked through the portal, which closed behind them, and then the door behind Karl opened, allowing the Inquisitors entry.

"Brother Karl, welcome back. Did you have a productive interview." The Inquisitor asked.

Karl opened his mouth to answer, but found that he couldn't speak at all about anything that had happened in the room. He could remember it, but no matter how he tried to phrase it, he was unable to tell them. The best he could give him was a generic confirmation.

"Productive would be a good word for it, yes." He agreed.

The faces of the two Avatars were already blurring in his mind, leaving behind a general impression to recognize them by, but not enough to accurately describe them, even if he could speak about the topic.

"That room is for foreign dignitaries of the Church. Anything that happens in there is usually confidential, so we won't ask you for details.

There is one thing that you should know, though. Six minutes ago, just before you entered the room, the System Stones that your team discovered disappeared. They were in the middle of a test, and then every single one of the monsters in the region, as well as the System Stones, and an entire mountain, vanished."

"An entire mountain? Now that's a missed opportunity." Karl gasped, shocked that nobody had noticed an entire mountain just appearing in the area. How bad were the maps they were working from? Or did nobody actually read them?

The Inquisitor sighed, realizing that Karl hadn't known anything about it, and hadn't been informed of it beforehand. The Inquisitor was hoping that even if he couldn't speak about the topic, there would at least be something in his response that would indicate that whoever he was meeting might have provided him with information about it in advance.

They walked back up to the main floor, and Karl realized that the others were taken somewhere else.

"What were the rest of us called back for? The High Priest said we were all summoned, and that was before the big event would have happened." Karl asked as they walked.

"Ah, right. There was no time to fill you in on all the details. Your group was called back for a formal recognition of your contributions. I'm not certain what will become of that now that the thing happened, but we are taking you to the others." The Inquisitor explained.

That was right, they had said that they had a meeting, and then a publicity thing. But if the System Stones had vanished, then there would be no grand announcement to the public, unless the Archbishop had managed to salvage their power somehow.

Karl was led into a room where the rest of his team, along with dozens of High Priests, some from every god that Karl had ever heard of, going by the differences in their robes, had gathered.

They were all waiting for something, and the Inquisitors left Karl to do as he pleased, while they went to join the other Inquisitors who had gathered by the door.

Everyone was waiting for news, and Karl saw Tessa and Lotus's concern as he joined them at their table up front.

"Have you heard?" The tiny nature priestess asked.

Karl nodded, and the table fell silent again while they waited.

A few minutes later, The Archbishop himself entered the room, and Karl immediately noticed that his unique layered robes with the Gold on the outside were the direct equivalent of the robes that the Red and Black Dragon Avatars wore. That would make him the Archbishop of the Golden Dragon Church, but the Avatar of the World Dragon, or perhaps the Golden Dragons, which were technically a different species entirely and specialized in organization and leadership.

He looked weary as he took his seat at the front of the room, on a throne facing the assembled priests. Only Karl's group included anyone who wasn't from the Church, which couldn't be coincidental. The people in the room were most likely those who had seen the System Stones for themselves, as they would need to know what had happened, and what the official statement would be on the matter.

"Greetings everyone. As you may know, there was an upheaval today. The newly discovered set of System Stones, along with the underground temple complex of the Seventh Dynasty, vanished along with the remains of a monster influx.

There was no warning, and from what we can tell, nothing else was affected. None of the groups who were in the area remember anything out of the ordinary. Only those in this room even recall that there was a temple complex under the mountain.

Only those in this room recall that our team arrived in the zone to study the System Stones. Even the Inquisitors that we assigned to assist the Church Guard elsewhere in the region have forgotten the circumstances behind their deployment.

Why that is, we do not yet know.

What we can say is that while the System Stones were active, dozens of clerics and others gained a new system skill from the anomaly.

Now that they have vanished, we will be treating this incident as a one time trial instance, with no way to recreate it. The contents of the trial are to remain confidential, but the gains will be in your official records, along with the achievements that were made during the influx period.

That will be all for today's meeting. All other press conferences, meetings and discussion groups are cancelled for the day while the schedule is reworked."

Then the weary looking Archbishop got up out of his chair and left the room.

Chapter 224 You Can't Hide

The rapid change left everyone a bit confused as to what they should be doing for the day, as their whole schedule had just been cancelled. The members who were on the media team were close to panic, though.

They were supposed to start broadcasting in under an hour, and they no longer had a story to report.

Just nothing.

But within seconds, they latched onto the best opportunity that they had left. The events in the field weren't classified, only the ones to do with the System Stones. Everyone else would remember the timeline mostly as it was, only where it involved the System Stones were the memories of those involved blurred.

"You can be the story. You Elites, who managed to get one hundred percent of the Commander Rank kills in an entire zone for a week. Yes, that's perfect for tonight's news. Please don't leave, we have to film thirty minutes of footage that needs to go on air in an hour." One of the clergy assigned to news releases pleaded.

"We already have the footage of you in front of the official background, so we can do informal interviews here, and then fill the time with reporter explanations. It will be perfect, we even have stock footage of Giants, Ogres and other monsters to work with." Another of the reporters agreed.

The Elites all sighed, while Tessa rolled her eyes as Lotus vanished beneath the table.

"She knows that we know where she went, right?" One of the reporters asked.

"Yes, but she's hoping that you will forget about her before she has to be on the news." Tessa agreed.

"Karl, hide me in Rae's space, they'll never look there." Lotus pleaded.

"You can't put living things in there. Well, maybe I could, but it might bind you to me like Rae is." Karl laughed.

Lotus paused like she was actually weighing the option, then came back out from under the table.

"Fine, but a short interview, for the Nature Goddess, and no trying to make me famous." She reluctantly agreed.

The room was quickly rearranged so that they could do multiple interviews at the same time, each facing the walls, which conveniently were created from multiple panels with identical patterns, so it would look like they were filming them one after another in the same studio.

Karl was led to the actual podium stage instead of one of the identical spots, and he sighed.

"You know, Commander Alice is the leader of the team." He reminded them.

The Priestess with him nodded happily.

"But you have a Lightning Cerro." She replied.

Karl chuckled, understanding where they were going with this.

"Alright, let's get this rolling."

The reporter gestured to the cameramen, who gave them a thumbs up as Karl adjusted his position to face the camera that was over the reporter's left shoulder.

The interview would be taken from two angles, so the person speaking could speak toward the camera without an unnatural turn away from the interviewer. That would also give them plenty of room to call out Thor, who Karl and the reporter were hoping would become the star of the evening news.

"Good evening, everyone. This is Sister Clara, with you again, to provide a special report regarding the topic of the week among the active combat Elites. For those of you who missed the beginning of the broadcast, there was a group of Elites on a defensive mission this past week who managed to score one hundred percent of the Commander Rank kills for an entire zone.

That's right, they single-handedly managed to contain the Commander Rank threats in their combat zone, and we have them here at the Capital Cathedral Studio for a quick interview before they return to their regularly scheduled duties.

With me right now is Karl, an Ascended Rank Elite student of the Divine Golden Academy. Can you tell us where you came from, and possibly say hello to those who are important to you?" She asked.

"Of course. I come from Lithium Mine Village, and I would be remiss if I didn't at least say hello to my loving parents, Jake and Ella. Plus, a special shout out to the miners of the third shift. I wish I could say I miss working with you, but I really don't miss the bottom of the mines." Karl replied with a genuine laugh.

The reporter smiled, and Karl knew that when this aired, the mines would be celebrating like crazy to have made the news.

The third shift was six in the evening to midnight, the usual shift for students, though they were sent back up at the halfway mark, so they only worked six until nine, and they would be ready for school in the morning.

"A miner turned Beast Master. I'm certain your hometown is very proud to call you one of their own, especially as an Ascended Rank Elite, already on the front lines while you're still in school.

Tell us, what is it like, working in the wilderness?" She asked.

[Make up a pretty lie.] The cameraman was silently shouting at Karl as he realized that Karl had never done one of these interviews before.

"Well, I must say that the experience is greatly improved when you have a Nature Priest with you. With the blessing of their goddess to create all sorts of plants, including spices, dinner becomes much more pleasant, both for myself and for my bonded companions." Karl replied, leading the reporter in the right direction, for which he could see the thankfulness in her eyes, though her expression remained professional.

"I have heard wonderful things about your bonded beasts, from which your Class gets its name. Might we meet one of them today?" She asked, following the cues.

"Of course. Thor, would you come out and lay down next to me?" Karl spoke out loud.

If he didn't lay down, the Lightning Cerro would be mostly out of the camera's frame, and that would just annoy the staff.

Thor settled in with his head right next to Clara's chair, but facing the front, where the reporter could lean forward to pet his head, and he would be in the shots of both of them, but not in the way of the upper body of either.

He instinctively knew where he needed to be, and the reporter smiled as she stroked his head between his eyes, exactly as Lotus had instructed her to do while everyone was waiting here to see what was going on.

While Karl was gone for a secondary interview, that was what they had done. Sat and waited and shared gossip.

"He is a lovely one, isn't he. For our viewers at home, Thor is an adult male Lightning Cerro, and we don't recommend that you approach them in the wild, but this one is quite tame and sociable." She explained as Thor made a happy rumble.

Karl smiled and nodded in agreement. "Not only is he possibly the most social member of the group, he's also an incredible front-line fighter. His Lightning Barrier can defend him against the strongest of Ascended Rank attacks, and he works well with others to strategize and control the movement of the monsters we are clearing from the wilderness before they can threaten the nearby towns."

Thor nodded happily, and then moved his head to bump up against her legs when the reporter sat back upright and stopped patting him.

The gesture made the camera operators and a number of the others in the background laugh. Thor was precisely the spokesperson that they needed on camera today, it was impossible not to love him.

"Can you tell us a little about a memorable battle? I know the others in the group have been asked the same thing, but I won't mind if it's the same one as one of them has mentioned." The reporter asked with genuine interest in her soft blue eyes.

Karl smiled at the camera. "Well, I have one in mind, and I'm not sure if it's the same one as the others have mentioned. We were on patrol and had just finished a fight with a group of Ogres when Hawk, our scout, informed us of a group of Hobgoblins who were giving the military unit we were attached to some trouble.

We rushed back to the scene, and found that the Hobgoblins had a shaman with them, healing the filthy monsters as the Elites of the army fought a valiant battle toward the centre of the Hobgoblin formation, where the cowardly little shaman was hiding.

Now, Thor here is a good bit larger than your average Hobgoblin, and he just plowed right through them, and tossed that Goblin Shaman twenty metres in the air, where our ranged attacks could take it out."

Karl accompanied the explanation with hand gestures, and at the right moment, Thor gave a flip of his head, showing the cameras how to toss a Goblin.

The camera operators were both giving Karl enthusiastic gestures, while the reporter smiled and nodded along.

"It sounds like quite the scene. How did the battle end?" She asked more seriously.

"Only minor injuries among the military unit that our clerics healed before the battle was even over. A resounding victory."

Chapter 225 Official Request

Within minutes, all the interviews were finished, and the reporters started doing their own bits, recording speeches over stock footage, and giving a highly censored version of events that wouldn't scare the general public while still honouring the fallen soldiers and Elites of the many battlefields around the nation.

That was a fairly standard part of any ongoing events broadcast, as there were always battles to be fought, but it did use a solid portion of the time that they needed to fill, and when combined with the interviews, it wouldn't seem as dull and routine as it did when they were just speaking alone in studio.

Karl retreated to the back of the room where he found the Blue Dragon High Priestess he had met earlier, the head of historians, whose name he had quickly forgotten, waiting for him.

Fortunately, Lotus was there to save him. "Greetings, High Priestess Lilith. Did you have a request for us? I made some great notes on plants I don't remember seeing in the study guides." The Nature Priestess greeted the historian.

Her eyes were lit up with excitement about the list of new plants, and between a Nature Priestess and a Blue Dragon High Priestess, who was obsessed with new knowledge, there was a very real chance that they were about to become best friends for the day.

The High Priestess looked just as excited as Lotus and for a second, Karl thought that the two were going to get lost in a conversation about plants, but the older woman turned her attention to Karl.

"Actually, I have a request for you all. An official one. We would like to ask that your group, with their exceptional affinity for stumbling across valuable new things, takes on a mission to the boundary mountains. There is said to be a strange phenomenon there, and the other groups we have sent in lost days of time, with no memories of them, but a feeling that they failed some sort of trial.

With the luck that your group has shown, we have some hope that you will be able to bring back some information.

That's official, straight from the Church Council. Of course, if the Elites choose to turn it down, we won't be sending you and Tessa alone, but we have some hopes that everyone present will agree." Lilith explained.

Karl was about to answer when he sensed a familiar presence over his shoulder, and a sense of menace that wasn't directed at him, but past him.

Colonel Valerie stepped up beside Karl with a fake smile, wearing a visitors' hassock, as all guests to the Cathedral Church would. She waited for the High Priestess to notice her and put together her unexpected appearance here with who she was and what it likely implied.

Lilith smiled at her. "Ah, Colonel. What a surprise to see you here, I had thought that you would still be with your tour group."

Valerie's resting angry face didn't even budge at the comment. "Naturally, I came to check on my Elites. It seems someone is quite intent on borrowing them from the Bureau, and I would hate to lose track of their whereabouts."

Her tone said that she was not planning to spare the High Priestess any of her wrath, which could turn into an epic battle of wills between the representatives of the Church and the Government. So both Karl and Lotus took a half step back from what was shaping up to be an epic cat fight, but the two leaders preferred to fight with mental jabs and not fists.

"That would be a shame, would it not? The Bureau for Elite Development, unable to even track the Elites that they're supposed to be developing. A tragedy of bureaucracy, really." Lilith agreed with a solemn nod.

"Indeed. It seems that Holy Quests are becoming increasingly common these days when it comes to new students. The will of the gods is a strange thing." Colonel Valerie snapped back.

That got a rise out of the High Priestess, that was quickly stamped down. It wasn't directly doubting the will of the gods, but it was coming perilously close to insulting her deity as well as her personal motivations.

Fortunately, they weren't the only people in the room, and after a few seconds some of the Inquisitors came over to see what all the glaring was about, just in time to catch the last round of barbs between the two.

Colonel Valerie continued. "I believe that it is time that the students returned to their education. It would be a shame to keep them away from their training for too much of the Semester."

High Priestess Lilith smiled back, and Karl was certain that her greying hair turned a bit more of a Royal Blue colour as she spoke next.

"It is the will of the Goddess of Knowledge that the group takes this trial. It must proceed." She declared in a voice that seemed to echo, as if coming from a massive being, not a rather unremarkable priestess.

Then she continued in a more normal tone. "But you will be happy to know that one of your own agents has been called upon to join the mission. She must be there, the fates demand it."

Two clerics wearing the uniforms of the tour guides burst into the room, looking for their wayward tour group member, and Colonel Valerie sighed.

"I will have a tracker put on them if this continues to be an issue.

Karl, Dana, I will catch up with you when you return. Sister Tessa, Sister Lotus, it was good to see you both again, and I will be waiting for your reports after this Holy Quest from the church has finished."

Then she followed the angry tour operators out of the room, and Karl noticed just how quiet it had gotten as everyone stopped to watch the drama.

Lilith turned to the room and made a dismissive gesture. "Show's over, everyone. You have your duties, I suggest that you get to them."

That made all the news staff scurry back to their work, while the Inquisitors pretended that listening in on juicy gossip was beneath them and the other clerics in the room scattered, leaving to find something to do elsewhere, where they wouldn't get in trouble with the High Priestess.

Karl considered doing the same, but she was here for him and the group, so trying to run would just make her chase him down again.

"Should we start packing right away, then?" Karl asked, as he still needed to restock and finish cleaning and repairing all his gear.

"You have the remainder of the day, as the flight will leave in the morning with another round of clergy transfers. The details will be provided to you privately later, but the Inquisitors have agreed to help you upgrade your gear for the current situation." She agreed, straightening her deep blue robes.

That actually sounded pretty good. With all the trouble they'd seen lately, his various uniforms weren't cutting it anymore, and it was probably time to switch to armour. It would be expensive, and there was a good chance that he would outgrow it, despite the growth spurt that he had already been through. However, if that happened while the armour was still in good shape, he could always resell it to the supply staff.

Of course, having Lotus and Tessa with them, who could repair armour, was a huge benefit. It would make their gear last much longer than it could otherwise be expected to, and between them, they could take care of both leather and metal armours.

Karl nodded his head at the High Priestess before catching the attention of one of the Church Guards who had been shadowing them since they arrived.

"Thank you, High Priestess Lilith, I will take my leave to upgrade my equipment now, and I will be ready to leave right after breakfast tomorrow." Karl agreed.

Lotus raised her hand. "Oh, I will come with you. You look like you have no fashion sense."

Karl stared down at the unrepentant little Nature Priestess, who saw nothing at all wrong with what she had said.

Lotus gave him a single raised eyebrow look of challenge. "What? Don't tell me you're suddenly fashionable. I bet that if I let you go unattended, you'd do something like trying to outfit match with Thor. Go, go. Let's go to the armoury and find something that won't make you look like a dork."

Chapter 226 Armour

Karl let Lotus drag him to the armoury room, following the two Church Guards who were navigating them through the corridors of the Cathedral, avoiding the public areas which were packed with tourists during the middle of the day.

With so many different Gods, there was a reason for numerous travellers to come to the cathedral every week of the year, but this week was the anniversary of one of the larger subjugation wars, which had freed an eastern region from the control of a Giant Clan.

So, every year, people from that region used their holidays to come here to the Capital and celebrate the anniversary with parties and a trip to the Cathedral in honour of the Priests and Priestesses who had come to their rescue, leading armies of Church followers.

The armoury was hidden at the back of the Cathedral complex, in a newer building next to the loading docks. If he hadn't known that they were still within the grounds, thanks to the number of ancient stone buildings around them, Karl would have thought that this was part of the commercial district.

From the outside, this loading area was hidden by trees and a long driveway, but it was modern enough that they could move all the goods they needed in and out efficiently, and without interfering with the experience of the visitors to the Holy Buildings.

"What can I do for you?" The clerk asked as Lotus waved happily at him.

"Karl here needs new battle armour. We get to go fun places." Lotus replied, excited about the day's upcoming events.

"Ascended Rank, and as he doesn't have armour yet, I will say that he's not the team leader, so it will be Ascended minimum with a heavy dose of Commander Rank targets. We can do that.

As long as he has the merits and access, that is." The clerk agreed.

Karl handed over his card, and the clerk scanned it through the reader.

"That should do it. Do you need weapons as well, or is what you have good enough?" He asked.

"I've got an Ascended Rank bonded sword, and the ability to coat it in Ascended Rank attack skills. It should be alright, as far as my abilities go." Karl replied.

The clerk nodded. "Can you take it out and show me? It's better if I know what we're working with, just in case you might need a backup."

Karl took out the blade, and then used the new shared skill [Flaming Body] that Hawk had shared to coat his lower arms and the blade in flames.

"Ooh, when did you learn that? Nice trick." Lotus cheered.

"When Hawk learned it. It should work out fairly well, and I can use it with the Refreshing Lightning barrier to keep up my defences." Karl agreed.

The clerk made a short note and then tapped a button to update his listings based on what Karl had mentioned for his skills.

"Well, we don't have much that's compatible with both Lightning and Fire, but we do have either or. If you're using Lightning as a defensive shield, I would recommend this suit. Are there any pieces of gear that you need to keep on?" He asked.

"My gauntlets. I've got a set of Bestial Strength gauntlets that should be kept on when I'm heading into combat. Then there's a ring I keep on as well, but that shouldn't interfere with the armour." Karl explained.

"A ring with what properties? So I know what to build around." The Clerk asked as he refined the search.

Karl did his best not to laugh as he realized how lopsided his buffs were.

"It's a ring of Giant Strength."

The Clerk blinked twice, slowly, and then entered it into his computer.

"You didn't look like the 'smash everything to paste' type of warrior, but I guess appearances are deceiving."

Lotus giggled. "Oh, he's not a warrior, he's a Beast Master. We just happened to have fought plenty of Giants recently, and they value strength above all else."

"I see."

It was obvious that he didn't quite get what a non-warrior class would want with all that strength, but he also wasn't well versed in actual combat, just in the theoretical aspects that went into balancing gear to distribute to the other Elites.

Being strong also meant being fast, in a way. It didn't help your reflexes, but Karl's were already excellent, thanks to his Class, so he could react smoothly while moving at much higher speeds than his body was normally capable of.

"Alright, I have a match. It has strong defence, a natural affinity for Lightning attacks, which should strengthen your barrier, and no gloves required, so you can wear your gauntlets." The clerk announced, before turning the screen to face Karl.

It was a superhero. The entire outfit was designed to make the wearer look like a children's cartoon superhero, complete with a masked helmet that Karl was certain had to be some sort of copyright violation.

"Heart Ranger, GO!" Lotus laughed as she saw the outfit.

That was precisely what Karl had been thinking, and the Church Guard with them nodded in agreement.

"I take it you would like me to look for something else?" The Clerk asked sheepishly.

Normally, if the armour was the best that you could get, but it was ridiculous looking, or it was mismatched and piecemeal as many Elites would wear when they didn't want to spend the money on a crafted set, they would wear it under a combat uniform instead of over.

Lotus didn't like the combat uniforms, though, and Karl was trying to get away from destroying them as well.

The clerk went through the options that he thought would be suitable, and at least wouldn't interfere with the skills that Karl was using, and came up with three options, which he brought up on the screen behind him.

"Those are your better-looking options. Not cartoonish, or superhero. These ones were designed more for the working mercenaries than the up-and-coming stars who are likely to be recorded and put on the news, but if that's what you prefer, we've got them." The clerk explained.

"That's very much what I prefer. I spend a lot of time scouting and on point in the wilderness. I would rather not look like a Super Ranger." Karl laughed.

One of the men in the back laughed as he heard the conversation. "Tell the kid it's not that bad. We all go into the woods with bright white robes on."

That made both Karl and Lotus laugh. The Church Guard did indeed go to battle in bright white robes, and their defensive magic even ensured that they stayed pure white for as long as possible.

Who had decided that was a great tactical decision, Karl had no idea, but it had been a tradition for so long that even suggesting changing it now would be unthinkable to most of the church members.

Lotus pointed up at the screen. "There, that one second from the left. What are its properties? I wouldn't be embarrassed to be seen next to that." She asked.

"It's lightning neutral, fire element friendly, and has an Ascended Grade durability. The materials are a mix of monster leather and enchanted metals, with no additional enhancements to benefit the user.

That means it is one of the budget options at the Ascended Rank. However, it is a quality magical product, and will hold up well to long-term use with the leather pants and the ability to be bonded, should the user be sufficiently compatible."

Lotus smiled. "Oh, bonded is good. What about the one on the far right?"

"Roughly the same, neutral to Lightning magic, but more attuned to fire. It also makes fire magic a bit less mana intensive to use. It can also be bonded by the right user, but it is all leather, no metal."

"Can you bring them both out? If Karl can bond with one of the two, that would be the preferred option, just for the sake of daily combat use." Lotus suggested.

The clerk nodded, and tapped the screen, eliminating the others.

A few minutes later, a muscular warrior came out from the back room with two boxes of gear, and a smile on his face. "Priestess, Elite. I couldn't help but overhear your conversation. I think that too many people overlook the benefits of not looking like an idiot when you're on patrol, especially when you're young.

Sure, you might think it's cool, but the team members who have been out in the field longer probably don't appreciate the walking flag in their midst. No, I can say for certain, nobody appreciates that.

I might not be one of the Elites, but I served over a decade on the front lines with the army before retiring. I doubt that having superpowers instead of a battle cleric will have changed the basics."

Chapter 227 Supplied

The clerk gestured to the two boxes. "You just have to put on one piece of the equipment, and if you are compatible, it will bond with you. Now, keep in mind that once it does, you've bought it, no returns exchanges or refunds."

Karl turned to Lotus. "I suspect that how I look matters much more to you than it does to me, so you pick which one we try first. If it works, that's the look I will have for the foreseeable future."

The tiny cleric sighed, then put on a serious face and turned her hair from black to a mottled brown that reminded Karl of tree bark.

"Oh, the Nature Priestess has her game face on. What's it going to be, Sister?" The clerk asked.

"All leather first. My instincts say all leather first." Lotus replied, before her hair changed back to blonde.

Karl wondered how long he had missed the fact that she had been changing her hair colour with her mood, so he almost didn't notice when he picked up the helmet and set it over his head that the rest of the equipment vanished, and his hassock now had a full suit of armour underneath it.

"Well, take it off, take it off. The hassock." Lotus demanded, upset that she had been denied the sight of her chosen armour option.

Karl laughed as he untied the belt and pulled the hassock over his head, revealing the plain flat black armour underneath, with a long sleeved green tunic shirt underneath that Karl didn't remember being in the pile of gear.

It felt a bit strange being restricted by armour, after always being in just cloth, especially the way that the leather pants, with their stiff additional plating on the thighs and lower legs, moved against him.

Lotus circled Karl three times before she made her decision that it was good enough for her.

"I like it. The green tunic was a nice touch, thanks guys." She congratulated the workers in the supply room.

"There was no tunic in the pile, we just assumed he was already wearing it." The clerk replied, confused.

"I was only wearing the hassock." Karl replied with a shrug.

The clerk shook his head. "You've been around the nature priests too long. Normally, visitors wear a layer underneath and don't just free ball it."

Karl laughed. "Well, I had no clean clothes, and this was what was in the room, so this is what I'm wearing."

The Clerk shrugged off his concerns, and decided that it was all part of the System's magic that added the shirt to complete the armour set. Not that there were gaps that needed covering, but it looked more natural with the tunic between layers.

"Well, it looks like I'm good on armour now. I suppose that I should see what they were planning to do to change my supplies. The Academy backpack has been pretty good to me, but it sounds like the High Priestess was planning to make some changes." Karl added as he admired his new armour in the mirror on one wall.

Now he had not just a weapon, but a full suit of armour that could be stored in a separate space, and if he was right, the armour, like the weapon, should come out clean again when he put it on. The weapon didn't take any blood or viscera back to the space with it, so the armour should be the same.

"Put the hassock back on before you leave the room, it's regulation." The clerk reminded him when Karl turned to go show off his new gear to the others.

"Right, almost forgot about that."

He removed the helmet and set it aside, then awkwardly slid the loose fitting robe back over himself and tied the waist. Then, as a test, he dismissed just the helmet back to the separate space, and sighed with relief when he found that he could go without it and not have to put away the entire set of armour.

All that was left that wasn't bonded were the gauntlets, and those were easy enough to transport wherever he went, as they were made of leather with steel plating on the top. Once they had resized to fit him, they could easily enough be tucked in a side pocket of his bag, or a pouch at his waist. He would say tucked in his belt, but it would never do to accidentally lose one while he was running.

"It's a definite improvement over the silly combat suits that make everyone look like a mall security wannabe." Lotus informed him as they left the supply room.

"That's one way to look at them. We didn't have a mall in the town I grew up in, so I have only seen them on television." Karl laughed.

Lotus giggled. "You don't even know what you're missing out on then. You know, you're most likely what one would call rich by now. When you get some time off, you could go out shopping in the Capital, take in the sights, learn to live a little."

Karl raised an eyebrow at the way she directed it straight at him. "Just me? You're not going to come along and show me what I'm missing at the shopping mall?"

The Nature Priestess just shook her head. "I would personally rather play with Rae in the forest. But I have it on excellent authority that the mall was a highlight of the childhood of those who lived near one."

The pair joked as the Church Guard led them back to the main building, where Brother Choi was waiting for Karl to return, ready to continue their meditation practice, at the instruction of the High Priestess.

"Don't worry, it's all for your own benefit. If you're going to run away tomorrow before we can finish the process, it would be best if you at least had one more afternoon of practice, so I can provide guidance on any aspects you haven't mastered." The Monk greeted them.

Lotus waved to Brother Choi as she kept walking. "I will make sure that your gear gets properly updated for the mission. Go and learn your focus thing, so Rae can make it to Commander Rank and take me through the trees even faster."

"I'm glad you have your priorities in order. I will see you at dinner." Karl called back as she headed into the building, followed by one of the two Church Guards.

The orders to follow the group around so they were available anytime they were needed were never changed, and at this point probably wouldn't be, as they were leaving in the morning, so everyone had an escort, and there was no chance that the inquisitive mind of a Nature Priest might lead Lotus astray in the nation's largest Cathedral.

They returned to the same meditation room as the last time, but this time, Brother Choi had more knowledge to impart.

"Since you're going to be gone when you get to the important part, I will try to explain it now. You will finish the flame, and then you will feel stuck again. But you're actually not. Once the flame is finished, you need to draw the aura of the flame out through the whole space, and then when it feels like it is balancing out again, rebuild the flame to a new, higher standard.

It will only go so far beyond the surrounding area before it feels complete and won't advance, so you need to keep layering more and more power through the space from the focus. If you don't bring it from the focus, it won't stay or increase the potency of the space.

It's hard to say how many times you will have to do it, but eventually, you will make it to Commander Rank.

While you were busy, I did a bit of research using the reports that the Bureau has made on you, and I think that you don't actually need to push yourself all the way to the Commander Rank with your mental space. Once you get far enough, the beasts will naturally advance, and they should pull you up with them.

That's something that I can't do, but in your early reports, it was clear that the advancement of Hawk was driving you forward, so the same should remain true as you advance further."

Karl considered that for a while. "Can I spread the aura of the focus before it's at its maximum?"

Brother Choi nodded. "You can, but it's not as efficient because there isn't enough energy there to make a nice even advancement layer. Like the rings of a tree, you need it to be even all the way around for it to be perfect."

That made sense, so Karl gave him an affirmative thumbs up and began to meditate to finish building up the three focal points. Now that he had a guaranteed way forward, it was much easier to focus on the task at hand and not worry about what he should be doing.

Chapter 228 Spellblades

The next morning came entirely too early as Karl felt that he was finally making real progress on his spaces, but the promise of a unique challenge for the group, with the promise of even better rewards was enough to eliminate most of the concerns that his time might be better spent in the meditation room.

His backpack had been upgraded while he was away, including a small note from Lotus about the state of his supplies.

[Karl, I replaced all your camping gear, other than what Rae made, which I transferred from a stick to a proper lightweight pole. There is a folded cloth tent, your hammock, rope, lightweight kitchenware, extra boots and socks, and then the essential grooming kit.

Since you're with us, I only included the small fuel stove with one can, but normally, you would carry a spare. The cup that goes with the stove contains a coffee perk, and some fresh ground beans if you find yourself in need of better coffee in the mornings.

There is a week's worth of ration packs in there, as is protocol, and an extra canteen full of good water.

I also added some extra clothes, since you never have anything clean when you get back to civilization. Your laundry is tightly rolled and packed in the central pouch. Please refer to the diagram.]

Her handwriting was beautiful, so what had happened to her picture drawing abilities? Even the shape of the backpack was barely recognizable, much less the stuff she drew inside. Fortunately, the labels were perfectly clear, and Karl understood without completely unpacking the bag.

Instead, he just opened the sections and pockets to double-check, before curiosity overcame him, and he pulled out the grooming kit to see what Lotus had thought were the essentials for a man's grooming.

There was a straight razor, shaving soap and a brush, which looked higher quality than his old one. Then there was a comb, scissors, nail clippers, a sewing kit with both fine and leather supplies, instant set glue, leather soap, mink oil for conditioning the leather, and then condoms. So many condoms.

Now, Karl wasn't a particularly prudish young man, and he did keep one in his old supply bag, just in case. But there were nearly thirty of them here. Was Lotus trying to tell him something? Or was this an oddity of what she considered essential supplies?

Fortunately, he didn't have to wait long, as the Cleric in question came to check on him just as he was putting everything away.

"Lotus, why is half my grooming kit bag filled with condoms?" Karl asked as the smirking woman walked in.

"You see, the standard operating procedure is fourteen days of supplies, except water, which would be too heavy to carry for most of us.

So, fourteen days, and two a day, makes twenty-eight. There are precisely twenty-eight condoms in your bag, and if that number changes, we will have some questions for you, young man." Lotus replied in her best motherly voice before devolving into giggles.

"Well, it's not like they're heavy, but I admire your optimism. I didn't tear the pack apart, but it looks like everything is there. Is it time to leave?" Karl replied.

"Yeah, we head down in ten minutes, that's what I came over to tell you, just in case you were meditating. They hate waiting for people, especially Elites, who should know better."

"The pilots hate waiting on anything. But I'm all packed up now, should we get going?" Karl replied.

"The others should be waiting."

The word 'waiting' turned out to be an understatement. One helicopter was shut down for maintenance, and there were fifty clergy members standing around outside with their gear, as the other pilots wouldn't leave him to fly without his formation if they didn't have to.

There weren't many monsters who could take one out when it was loaded with clerics and Elites, but if they were taken by surprise, even Hawk could be a deadly threat to the transport vehicle.

The mechanisms were complex and fairly delicate, so a single fireball to the rotors would take a helicopter out of the sky. For that reason, the bus was a more popular option, but for wilderness deployments, it simply wasn't an option, as it couldn't get you close enough to the deployment zone, and the Golden Dragon Nation was a large one.

As he scanned the group, Karl noticed that there was another team that stood out even more than his did. While half of his team was in armour instead of the robes of the clergy, the final team was in a different style of robes with a light chest plate, and swords on their hips in a delicate style that Karl was certain would shatter the first time they took a hard parry.

Obviously, they weren't for fighting head on, but more of a martial arts style of combat, but they didn't look like Monks, unless this was some odd fashion of the Capital that he didn't know.

"Spellblades." Tessa offered a one word explanation.

Oh, Karl had heard of those. They were mages who trained in the ways of the warrior. Not elites, but trained mages. They weren't known to be as quick growing as the Elite Mages, but they had a long history, hundreds of thousands of years, and they were the primary fighting force of many of the magical nations.

He wondered if they were going to get to see them in action wherever they were going, or if they were on some other mission.

That answer was solved easily enough when an aging Mage came to join them and quietly informed his group that he had arranged other transportation, and that they were headed to the airport.

But before they could leave, the crew announced that the helicopters were ready to go, and they could start loading now.

That caused a moment of indecision, but the mage waved the Spellswords toward the military helicopters, and made a phone call to cancel the arrangements for the other flight.

That was how Karl found himself seated next to a young woman in black robes, who had a large scar on the side of her face and a serious chip on her shoulder.

"Is this the grade of warrior they're sending into combat these days? Aren't you a bit weak to one of the Elite Brutes?" She asked.

The other Elites were about to respond, but when they saw that Karl wasn't bothered, they held back, wondering what he would do.

For Karl, who had grown up the smallest, being called weak was no real insult anymore, he was too used to it to take offence, but one thing that Rae had noticed right away was that this Spellsword was still at the Awakened Rank.

"You know, given that there is a whole Rank between us, I thought that you could be more polite. Something along the lines of [Have you been ill, Senior Brother? You look far too slender and handsome for a warrior.] That would be much more suitable, don't you think?"

From the look on the woman's face, you would think that Karl had slapped her. "Why in the seven Realms would I call you Senior Brother?"

"You're still an Awakened Rank Spellsword, while it won't be long before I move from Ascended to Commander Rank. Certainly, that deserves some consideration?"

Her teammates were smirking, but holding back from getting involved. Whether to prevent a fight from breaking out, or because they were looking down on the Elites, Karl didn't know. But when it came to a battle of wits, he wasn't completely unarmed.

"As if I would call some young child Senior Brother." She grumbled as she realized that Karl really did have the power advantage.

He didn't know how their faction's internal rankings worked, but the Elites went mostly by power. The more you had, the more respect you got. Most warrior groups should be the same, and Rae was quite certain that the oldest two in their group were Commanders, while the others were all Awakened.

"Teams one and seven, you are up first. You will be hot dropping into a combat zone, so be prepared for action." The cargo master announced, cutting off their argument.

Alice nodded in acceptance, as they were Team One, and it appeared that Team Seven was the Spellswords. It was just his luck, they really were going to the same deployment, and they were already off to a not so brilliant start.

Maybe there was a chance they weren't working together, but just near each other.

Chapter 229 Prince Corbin

Everyone unloaded as the helicopter touched down, and a bearded blonde Royal Rank mage came forward to greet them.

"Good, you all made it, and you've had a chance to meet each other." He paused to laugh at his own joke and the obvious tension between the two groups.

"I am Prince Corbin, and as you might already know, these four are Larry, Darrel, Darryl and Darrin, and finally, our ray of sunshine is Rosalind." The Royal Rank Mage introduced himself and the Spellswords, with a teasing glint in his eye that dared the girl to speak out.

The fact she hated the name wasn't a secret, everyone could see it, but it was just as obvious that she had done something to annoy the Royal Rank mage and make him use her full name.

Corbin was dressed as an Elite, so Prince would most likely be a power-related title, as Commander and Overlord were. Larry and Darrel were the Commander Ranked leaders, while the other Darryl and Darrin were the Awakened pair, making for a larger power gap than most groups, but if they had Prince Corbin with them, it was probably some Spellblade Clan related mission, as they were all from the same group.

"Now, I'm not going to ask you all to work together, that would be pushing my luck too far, but I will request that the two groups not attack each other if you see each other in the wilderness. My people have an assignment to hunt beasts above their rank, and the rest of you are here for whatever mission the Church had, so your goals shouldn't overlap by too much." Corbin finished, before nodding in satisfaction in a way that reminded Karl of his father when something went right.

Alice reached out and shook his hand. "Prince Corbin, good to see you again. For those who I haven't met yet, I am Commander Alice, then we have Sister Tessa and Sister Lotus, Dana and Brother Karl."

"Brother Karl?" Corbin asked, looking at Karl's leather armour with the green tunic. That wasn't Church Guard uniform, and he didn't feel like a Priest.

"The Church summons him so often you'd think he was a Priest. He's actually a Beast Master Class Elite, so if you see oddly tame monsters around, they might be his. I wouldn't pick a fight with them, they're stronger than they look."

Rosalind scoffed, but Corbin looked excited.

"Perhaps we could have a little sparring match, as we have two clerics here to deal with any mishaps? It would help build recognition between the two groups." He suggested.

"Sure, the young lady and Karl seem to have a companionable rivalry going on. Perhaps he could duel her without his beasts active, and they could get a taste for each other's skills?" Alice offered.

Rosalind pulled her short black hair back away from her face and smirked. "You don't think that I can handle one Elite with his gimmick pets?"

Alice gave her a vicious smile. "Why don't you try him first and then see if you think you're up to a four on one fight, a Rank above yourself?"

Everyone backed away, all confident in their contestant's chances of winning, despite knowing very little about the opponent.

"I would like to make one condition if I win. Never call me Rosalind again." The girl demanded of her Royal Rank mentor.

"I will consider calling you Muffin again if you win one on one against him. If you can take him and his pets, I will call you Rose." Corbin countered.

That seemed to be as good as she was going to get, and Rose drew her blade, glaring at Karl, who took the two-handed blade out of stasis.

"As I thought, a big slow brute." She laughed, then launched herself forward using a skill that nearly caught Karl off guard.

But he was both fast and strong, and his eyesight had picked up the faint flare of magic around her as the skill activated.

He brought up [Refreshing Lightning] along with [Flaming Body], which he focused on his hands and sword as he leapt to the side of the clearing, and then used a tree to launch himself back at the recovering Spellsword, who had skidded to a stop after missing her target.

She darted out of the way as the massive sword whistled through the spot she had been standing a split second earlier, leaving a trail of flames in its wake.

Her taunting look turned serious as Karl spun the blade and reversed its direction without shifting his feet, a manoeuvre that anyone with normal human strength would never manage with a weapon that large.

With the Spellsword off balance, he chased her back across the clearing with a flurry of attacks as she studied his fighting style.

She activated skill after skill, unable to use her more powerful spells now that they were so closely engaged, but with the melee range activation and her power disadvantage, none of the spells that she managed to activate could overcome the trail of fire left by [Flaming Body] to actually hit Karl.

She was by far the superior swordsman, but with a wall of flames in front of him, a reach advantage of over a metre and supernatural strength, it was not easy for her to get close enough to show it.

Rose couldn't parry his strikes, they would knock the blade from her hands, but when Karl missed with a strike, she ducked underneath his blade's flaming path and went for his open body.

Only, Karl simply took one hand off the blade and swatted her sword away, letting [Refreshing Lightning] take the damage as he charged into her with his shoulder, knocking the smaller fighter from her feet.

Once she was in the air, didn't let her hit the ground and get away. The unarmed combat class had taught him better. Instead, he dismissed his sword and grabbed her by the robes to reverse her momentum and hurl her across the clearing.

Rose made a startled squeak as she found herself truly airborne, headed for the treetops at an alarming velocity.

Corbin caught her in a net of water magic and set the Spellsword back on the ground.

"That was dirty fighting." Rose complained.

"He's as strong as an Ascended Giant. It's a good thing that I caught you, or you'd be stuck in the treetops right now. I know you can wind step to get down, but it is slower than his normal movement speed, thanks to that monstrous strength.

That's why beating a solo monster a rank above you is the challenge I have set. They're not as smart as a human, or as agile." Corbin chastised her.

"I understand, instructor. I have lost." She sighed.

"See, that's my Muffin. You learn so fast."

Karl wasn't certain that was actually an improvement, but the way the others smiled made it seem like a term of endearment. Perhaps they were related? That might explain the teasing, but they didn't look alike.

"I know his tricks now. I will win for certain next time." She agreed.

"And that will have to wait until after the mission. I don't want any of you challenging each other in the wilderness. Now, I have the maps for all four groups, and then we can all get going."

The two Commanders moved to stand next to Darryl and Darrin, and Prince Corbin moved to stand next to Rose while he handed Alice the updated map of the area, with monster sightings and harvested resources.

Alice looked over the map and nodded. It hadn't changed too much since yesterday when theirs was updated.

"Good luck, and if you need anything, look for us. We have two healers, and both can magically repair gear, so if you damage a blade or your armour in combat, we can get you going again." Alice reminded them.

The Spellwords all raced off into the woods to get started on their mission, while Alice gestured toward the mountain northeast of them.

"That is our first target. There have been strange sightings around the base of the mountain, and it might mean that whatever we're looking for has been hidden there." She instructed the group.

Karl moved to the point position, and called out Hawk to begin reconnaissance.

[This place is busy. There are monsters everywhere. Furry ones, big furry ones, scaly ones, big scaly ones.] Hawk notarized his estimation of their threat level.

There was only one problem, he had no idea what any of these creatures were called. He had never seen them before, and he hadn't seen them in the lesson books that Karl had gone through back at the Academy when they were studying monsters to help his growth rate.

"Well, there are officially monsters everywhere. If I knew what they were, I would tell you, but there are big scaly ones coming this way." Karl informed the group.

"Alright, let's move toward them. We don't want to lead monsters to the assembly point." Alice ordered.

Chapter 230 Big Scaly Things

Thor roared in rage as Karl called him out to prepare for the fight. He couldn't see the enemy yet, but he could smell them, and every Cerro knew the smell of their natural predators.

"The scaly things are some sort of bipedal lizard." Karl relayed as he tried to interpret Thor's enraged thoughts.

His mind just called them enemies, and the Cerro packs didn't have a name for them either, but there was no doubt that they were carnivorous and pack hunters. What he hadn't expected was the size.

The first of them came crashing through the trees, standing three metres tall, but nearly seven metres long as it stood on two powerful legs with its tail extending behind it, and Karl could hear more of them coming.

Thor bugled a challenge at them, and the reptilian beasts turned to charge at their natural prey, forgetting about the small humans in favour of a real meal.

This Lightning Cerro was no pushover like his average pack kin, and Thor whipped his armour-plated tail ball at the first one to charge, sending it careening into a tree, where Karl was able to get a good swing at it.

His body surged with power as the two clerics both buffed him, and his blade shone with holy light under the fire as it cleaved down into the creature's neck, leaving the Awakened Rank beast's muscles severed, and the head tilted at an odd angle as it crashed to the ground and bled out on the mossy ground.

That curbed the enthusiasm of the other two monsters that had been incoming, but they had bigger problems than Karl and his sword.

The Clerics had also buffed Rae and her spider Golems, which had just jumped out of the trees and onto the back of one, while Alice's Golem cut off the escape route for another.

Dana's Golems were already surrounding the beast, and with the additional damage that they had gained when she learned [Destruction], which added damage to all her spells, the two stone Golems, who were now armed and armoured, were having no problems hacking through the thick hide.

It was a huge improvement from before they had found the System Stones, and even if the two mages hadn't been casting anything else, the two Awakened Rank Golems would have easily defeated the beast.

The new weapons and armour were a real upgrade for the Golem, and the stacked improvements were quickly putting Dana near the top of the Awakened Rank for combat power.

[The smaller furry things are coming your way. Maybe dogs?] Hawk suggested.

The last of the reptiles hadn't even finished twitching yet, and there were already more attackers, but if they were wolves, it wouldn't be so bad. Wolves he could handle. But, of course, that wasn't the case. Hawk knew what Wolves were, and these were not it.

They had a similar muzzle structure, but they were the size of a bear, and they had wings. Actual, leathery wings. But those were less concerning than the size of the claws on their feet as Karl parried an incoming attack.

The claws sparked like steel as they met the fire magic on his blade, but they didn't appear to be damaged.

Karl stepped back to put himself into Thor's [Circle of Protection], while remaining between the monsters and the rest of the group.

That retreat seemed to be a signal to the beasts, and they teamed up to grab one of the bodies and drag it away. The group decided to just let them go for the moment, until they could figure out what they had just been attacked by.

"Is anyone familiar with those?" Alice asked hopefully, looking at Lotus.

"I know countless monsters, but not that. I almost thought it was an overgrown hellhound, but there was no fire or brimstone smell." Lotus replied.

"Their claws didn't shatter against an Ascended Rank skill, so they're at least that tough." Karl added.

"Ask Hawk what else is in the area, and for a more detailed description. Something is really wrong here, and I hope that the other groups will be alright, since they went out in pairs, and the beasts here seem to operate in packs." Alice replied.

That was a good point. The Awakened Spellblades would be a liability in a fight like that, and there was only one Commander with the boys. The Royal Rank Mage was a different story, he had enough power that nothing here would be a real concern to him, but if they saw the others, they should at least give them some warning.

[There are no more of the big lizards, they ran away when they saw the furry things. Those are taking the food they stole back toward a cave in the hills to your east.

There are smaller lizard men, and other furry things that stand upright.]

Hawk finished with a detailed list of where they all were, which Karl relayed to Alice, who plotted their course for the day.

"We don't want to be fighting all day and night, but we do need to clear many of the monsters in this area if we are going to do any searching for hidden resources. So, I have set a course that will lead us to the first suspected anomaly point, which we will set up camp near and explore in the morning.

It is unlikely that we will have a peaceful night tonight, so I will ask Rae to return to her space and get some rest well before dark. She will be needed to keep every watch with us after it is too dark for Hawk to see well, but she will also need to help set up a safe fort for us tonight."

Karl nodded in agreement. "Sleeping on the ground seems like a bad idea for tonight with those predators wandering the area. Do we know what the bipedal furry things might be? Some sort of monkey or ape that might chase us into the trees?"

Lotus frowned. "I don't think so. It's going to be close to freezing overnight and even worse further into the hills. I think that they will more likely be a species of Yeti than apes."

Everyone else waited for Lotus to elaborate, as they weren't familiar with the species. The level of intelligence and the type of magic that were innate to the species could make a significant difference to their plans.

"They're about as smart as ape type monsters, which is to say more intelligent than most. They also have opposable thumbs, so they can use handheld weapons. They have a thick hide under dense fur that makes for durable armour, and they are virtually immune to water and wind type attacks.

Fire is their great bane, and they will usually run if there is fire involved, as they cannot survive long in the heat.

Full-grown they are Ascended Rank, usually on the low side, but they travel in packs of up to ten, plus any juveniles that haven't moved on to form their own group yet."

Alice nodded. "So, we're looking at up to a dozen intelligent Ascended Rank monsters at a time? What does Hawk have to say on their numbers?"

Karl conferred with Hawk for a moment. "He counts five in this group, and two are smaller, juveniles at the Awakened Rank, but no females."

Lotus frowned. "That means they'll be extra aggressive. They're not particularly protective of their females, but they get extremely violent when they don't have any in the pack."

Alice turned to Karl. "It looks like you'll be at the front again, as fire magic is their weakness. Lead the way, and we will take them out before moving on."