

The First Legendary Beast Master #Chapter 23: Practically Trained In A Swamp - Read The First Legendary Beast Master Chapter 23: Practically Trained In A Swamp

Chapter 23: Practically Trained In A Swamp

The next morning Karl was waiting at the training grounds just as Sergeant Rita had instructed, when a large group of first year students arrived together, and a handful of senior students with black badges came walking in with casual smiles on their faces.

"Looks like we've got a new addition. Which group are you here to join?" One of the black badged students asked.

"No idea. Sergeant Rita just ordered me to be here." Karl replied with a shrug.

The students all gave him an assessing look, trying to guess what his skill and power level was at, but even with his recent growth spurt, he just looked like a handsome teen boy, not yet old enough to be called a young man.

Then the teachers arrived, two mages and Sergeant Rita, who had a bundle in her arms as she walked over to Karl.

"Flip your coat inside out. You will be the flag carrier for team five. Here is your actual flag for the mission, wear it as a cape, and I wish you luck. As I said, the first day is always the hardest." She informed him with a smile.

"OH? We get a rookie for today's training?" One of the senior students asked.

The larger of the two mages, an old man who must have been a natural mage and not one of the injected elites, cleared his throat and everyone fell silent.

"Most of you know the rules. Odd numbered teams are on defence, protect your flags as well as you can. The flag carriers are your team leaders. Even numbered teams are on offence, your senior will lead the team.

This is a group training exercise, as you alone won't be able to face down every threat that comes your way during training. Sergeant Rita will hand out the tokens at random, while the seniors know their numbers already. Senior Geoffrey is out on a mission, so Karl will be taking his place for the next few weeks."

Rita walked through the groups of first year students and passed out tokens, which everyone pulled from a bag, then the students grouped up based on the token they drew.

The fact that it was completely random, and that they wouldn't have any guarantees of a decent grouping, was already giving Karl a headache, but it looked like the others were well aware of the situation, and they were already making plans for how they would work with what they had.

That was the point of the lesson. When there was an emergency call, whoever was close to the emergency answered. You didn't get to pick and choose a front guard, healer and mages, you just fought with what you had, and there was no extra time to figure it out.

Karl's group was Dana, the mage girl who was behind him on the first day, along with seven large boys that all had shields and hammers or spears.

"Oh, come on." One of the other students groaned as they saw the group forming.

"How did group five end up with every defender in the entire class?" One of the mages agreed.

His group was five mages and three boys with short swords and daggers. If they were attacking, it wouldn't be too terrible, but they were group three, and they would have to defend a flag without anyone who could take an attack head on.

The flag carrier for group four laughed and pointed at his group. Eight first year mage girls, which left a grand total of two girls not on his team. Dana, and a warrior in group two.

But, they had picked the numbers out of a bag, so if there was any trickery going on, it was not easy to detect.

"It looks like today's game will be an interesting one. Sometimes the luck of the draw means that you have to improvise. While group five has the shields, they don't have a lot of mobility, and they only have one spell caster. It's not impossible to overtake them and capture the flag, you just have to get creative."

Karl draped the black flag with the golden Academy logo on it over his shoulders as a cape and tied it off, then joined his group to see what they could do.

"You will have two minutes to prepare, then we will move everyone to their starting positions." The older mage announced, while the other mage started to lay out a mat on the ground that had all sorts of fancy symbols drawn on it.

"Alright, what can everyone use for skills? With so many mages it will be difficult to just turtle, they will target me pretty quickly." Karl asked.

"The joys of being the new guy. They'll all be gunning for you because you're the only leader who doesn't know what he's doing. I'm assuming that you've been training for

this since we got here, but the other leaders are all in the second and third year. As far as skills go, I can create fog, or magic missiles." Dana explained, then swept her dark curls back from her face to tie them in a ponytail.

"We're all common warriors, and we've all got the same two skills. [Slash] and [Guard]. It's a thing that apparently happens every year because Guard is the most common skill, and slash is easy to teach." One of the warriors explained.

"Alright, what does [Guard] do exactly? At your level, that is. I'm not worried about how the Dragon Bulwark uses his in the movies." Karl replied.

The students laughed at the thought that they might eventually manage to use the Guard skill at the Overlord level to create a barrier that could extend a whole city block.

"It covers an octagon about three metres across. It will take a couple of spells for the others to knock down, but if the attacking team leaders target one of us, we're pretty much screwed." The boy explained.

Karl nodded. "I expected as much. Does everyone remember the gladiator movies? The triple line formation and the turtle shell? When we're attacked, form up to create an overlapping wall with your shields, and only when we're in trouble, use Guard to block them out.

Staying close together will make us harder to find, as long as we're not in an open field, while Dana and I will have to be the offence unless they charge us."

Dana sighed. "You know, magic missile uses a lot of mana, I can't do it much. The fog is easier though, I'm pretty good at the fog."

"Is there natural fog where we're going?" Karl asked.

The others all shook their heads.

"Then save it until we're under attack. I don't want them to find us because of the fog itself. How fast does it cast?"

Dana frowned. "About ten metres radius per minute, slowing as it expands. If we want to use it effectively, it will take time."

[Time is up. Everyone, prepare to transport.] The mage shouted.

Chapter 24: Swamp

Suddenly, they were standing knee-deep in swamp water, with a slight mist on the surface, and thick trees all around them.

"Dana, begin the fog spell. Everyone else, crouch down in the water near that stand of trees." Karl whispered.

Nobody was happy about being neck deep in swamp water. It smelled of rot and something even more foul, but they obeyed Karl's order and hid in a circular formation, with Karl and Dana in the middle.

Karl released Hawk and let the bird stand on his shoulder for a moment.

"Hawk, go scout the area for attackers, they're the groups with nobody wearing a black cloak like mine. Don't let them see you, and come back within five minutes." He whispered, speaking out loud so that the others could understand what his plan was.

"You have a pet bird?" Dana asked.

"I do. It's part of my class skills. But it's also a real bird, so I don't want him hurt." Karl explained.

"The bird scouts the area, to let us know when someone is likely to find us so that we're not ambushed. The fog hides our exact location, even if they can figure out right away that it is unnatural. Being in the water makes us difficult to target, and gives us the chance to launch the first strike." One of the warriors deduced.

"Exactly. Dana, don't make the fog as thick at the edges, make it get thicker as you approach the trees behind us. If they are targeting by the centre of the fog, I want them to miss us by at least a few metres. If we're lucky, they'll find each other first, and we can face weakened groups." Karl added.

Dana softly chuckled as she worked. "This is such a dick move. What's next? Tearing vines from the trees to hide under?"

Karl didn't even have to say anything, the warriors immediately got to work pulling some vines free. Not tearing them from the island, but pulling them up so that they could sit a blanket of vines over the group and pretend they were part of the island.

The fog cloud was growing quickly, but the groups were spread out over a square kilometre of swamp, and they weren't alone. There were Common Grade monsters here as well, bullfrogs and beetles, who made a lot of noise and distracted the groups that were trying to search for the defenders.

A few minutes in, Hawk swooped down from the sky, landing on the vines that had been pulled over Karl's head, and then disappeared into his Taming Space.

[I'm full. I'm going to nap now.] He announced.

[Did you eat bullfrogs instead of working?] Karl asked.

[I worked. Nobody is coming this way. Two of the other coat people are close together, and the others are all going that way.] The bird replied as it settled into the nest.

"Hawk says that the other two defender groups started close together, and everyone else is headed that way. So, it's three on two on the other side of the area. They likely won't come looking for us until that fight is over. Is there anything that we can do to help Dana keep up her energy and expand that fog?" Karl whispered.

"Nothing. It's not too draining though, I just need to keep focusing on it. By the time that they come looking for us, it will be big, but if they don't lose people, they will be able to just walk in a line and find us."

The warriors shrugged. That was actually fine by them. The ranged attackers wouldn't be able to see the fight from more than a few metres away, and they were close combat fighters anyhow. Being found at the last moment was just what they wanted.

[Hawk, go rest up in the trees. Keep an eye out for the other groups while you rest, since you can't keep your appetite under control between meals.] Karl instructed.

[Fine, I will go watch.]

The bird was going to need some sort of discipline training soon, Karl decided, but he had no idea how to train an intelligent monster, or what would even work to keep the food motivated creature working hard and not gorging itself at the first opportunity.

The fact that it had managed to hunt a Common Grade creature without any issues and return unharmed was a good sign that the Windspeed Hawk's power was growing quickly, though. Much faster than was normal for the species, and Karl was quite certain that it had to do with their bond.

There was far too much that he didn't know about this power, but as Hawk settled into the tree and began diligently watching the ongoing battles with his keen vision and relaying the play by play back to Karl, he began to understand a little more.

Hawk did what he wanted and whined constantly for more food, as was the way of all baby birds, but when Karl actually gave him an order, the bird obeyed. It was just that Karl didn't give enough orders, or enough details, so Hawk could take full advantage to twist them in the way that he wanted.

Like the first mission, to scout and return. He did exactly that, and probably didn't miss much during the seconds that it took to ambush the bullfrog. Then he promptly tried to take a nap because it wasn't forbidden, and that was what a hawk naturally wanted to do after eating.

When they were training with the mages, Hawk never acted up, but Karl was giving him instructions every few seconds to keep him in place to block the sections that he couldn't cover himself. Without the open-ended orders, the problem didn't exist.

[The fight on the other side is almost over. The old one has taken away most of the people, but there are four young people headed south now. They're not coming this way yet, but they're looking for something.] Hawk informed him.

"Hawk says that the others are headed south after their battle. Only four are left, and they're following the edge of the designated area." Karl whispered to the others.

"Only four?" One of the warriors behind Karl asked.

"Yeah, I'm not sure which four yet. I will try to get details, but for now, I have an idea." Karl added.

The rest of the group eagerly waited for anything that didn't involve crouching in a fetid swamp to become the new plan.

"We will keep up the fog expansion from the same point, but we are moving. They know where the extent of the combat zone is, so we are going to hide and wait for them to search the fog, then return and let the time elapse. Defending the flag doesn't have to mean fighting at all, we can frustrate them to death."

Chapter 25: Found

From a comfortable chair in a small hut on the edge of the Academy Grounds, the old mage watched the scene in the training grounds in a crystal ball.

"That new leader is sneaky. I like the way that he thinks, but he might be too afraid of combat." He noted.

Sergeant Rita snorted and shook her head.

"No, he's just avoiding any extra work. See the Hawk he's got up in the trees? The two of them can communicate. He's playing cat and mouse with the other team because he knows there is a timer, and they won't double back on an area they've just searched.

If they don't catch the trick, the time is going to run out with his people just sitting in the swamp." She explained.

The younger mage nodded. "His task was to protect the flag for the duration of the match, not eliminate the attackers. It is a valid strategy. It reminds me of when we collected that Grimoire from the Thalian Temple, and then just sat on the beach for a week drinking margaritas until the search teams moved on."

The older mage laughed softly at the memory. Their world had a rich history of magic to go along with the dangers of the magical beasts that lived in it, but as cultures shifted, the magically adept had gathered into their own enclaves, and left large parts of the world to rely on developing technology to survive.

When they did survive, that was. Many of the magical societies in the ancient past had believed that the human population shouldn't exceed a few million for the entire planet, in order to keep the game preserves and rare species that they used as hunting grounds and reagents for their spells intact.

So, when those left behind with no magic and insufficient weapons were eliminated, they didn't take any action to prevent the disasters.

That bit got glossed over in the history books, described as a failure of allied nations, rather than magic users banding together to the exclusion of everyone else, but that was mostly because the few powerful magic users who stayed in places like the Golden Dragon Nation were instrumental to helping the civilization survive while they developed enough technology to stand on their own.

Karl led his team south through the swamp, hiding behind trees as the attackers moved through the fog, and then waited as Hawk relayed their efforts to double-check the area, as the foggy area in the swamp was not only suspicious, it was the perfect hiding place for a group of warriors who didn't want to engage in ranged combat.

Among the four attackers, there were two group leaders, who were both warriors with ranged attacks, and two first year mages. It was a well-balanced group of survivors, but they were outnumbered by the defenders and couldn't afford to be caught from behind if they missed someone.

"They've moved. I don't sense any life here larger than a bird." One of the leaders whispered.

"If your skill says so, then we can keep going. But I think that they will return once they believe that we are gone, so let's circle back." The other agreed.

The mages weren't particularly happy about wading through swamp water all morning, but they got extra credit for just being part of the special training program, a reward for top-performing students, so they weren't going to complain and risk getting switched out.

The attacking group headed north to check for the hiding spot of the last defenders, and Karl prepared to give the order to move again.

"There are only fifteen minutes left." One of the warriors whispered.

"In that case, we wait right here. Hawk says they're going north, so they're not likely to find us at all."

The group silently waited as the attackers moved north, then with ten minutes left in the match, they turned back south, moving more quickly and searching for the last defenders.

"They're coming back. Hawk says they're almost to the fog now." Karl relayed as their scout explained the change.

They were deep in the fog when one of the two leaders noticed the disturbed roots and groaned in frustration.

"They hid here at the start, but they must have heard us coming and moved. They're not north or east, this is almost at the western edge, so they have to be south." He whispered to his team.

"So, we search for them in the fog again?" One of the Mages asked.

"No, they should be outside of it, the fog hasn't spread that far. Just don't let them ambush us because they might have split up to set a trap instead of being in a tight formation."

The attack group moved cautiously, but they were moving directly toward the spot where Karl had hidden the defenders.

Unlike the first spot in the swamp, they were not in the water here, they were lying among the thick foliage on relatively dry ground, counting on Hawk's warning to prevent them from being caught in a disadvantageous position.

[Hawk, once the fight begins, you attack with Rend from above, but keep your distance. They can attack back, and I don't want you getting hit.]

Then Karl whispered to his team. "Once we spot them, everyone to their feet, turtle formation. Dana, prepare your attack spell, and I will as well. Go for the leaders first, they're the real threat. We will leave the mages to Hawk, since they likely can't take a hit."

The warriors smirked. They hadn't seen Karl in action yet, but he had to have something going for him if he had been picked as a substitute team leader for the day.

The attackers came into sight, and the defence group rose to their feet, forming up and lifting their shields.

"They're in a full circle formation. It looks like they're on to your tricks." One of the warriors quietly joked.

The other had managed to master a movement technique that would allow him to move with incredible speed for a few seconds, so he could attack from unexpected angles.

Karl, of course, had no idea. He had set the turtle shell in case the mages had tricks up their sleeves so that the team could create a full dome of protection with [Guard].

Chapter 26: A Bird In The Bush

"Now." Both team leaders ordered at the same time, and [Guard] barriers went up at the same time that two blinding sword lights tore across the intervening gap, and six red streaks came down from the sky toward the mages' backs.

Karl slashed an uppercut toward the attackers, sending his own [Rend] attack into the incoming sword light. The collision dissipated the claws, but dimmed the light of the sword attacks, before the second [Rend] stopped them entirely.

The warriors on Karl's team smiled in victory as Hawk's attacks took down both of the mages, activating the defensive charm on their uniforms and sending them out of the battle.

"Sonofabitch, what just happened?" One of the attackers shouted, unaware that they had been ambushed.

They looked around frantically, unsure of where the next attack would come from. Hawk was still in the trees behind them, unwilling to fly out and make himself a target if he didn't have to. It distracted them for just long enough that Karl could launch two more attacks of his own, forcing them to defend, while Dana prepared her Magic Missiles.

She took longer than most to cast them, but when she did, her strength was much better than average. The attacking team leaders couldn't do anything about the magical projectiles, as their blades were already out of position from trying to parry Karl's [Rend].

They took the hits, absorbing them with their enhanced physiques, then jumped sideways to dodge the next attack by Hawk.

"That's just low. How did you trick the monsters into being on your side." The boys complained, while Karl's team laughed.

"Didn't they warn you? Karl has a pet Hawk, it's the talk of the first year dorms." Dana joked.

Their banter was interrupted as they were all surrounded by glowing magic, and moved to the staging area where they had started the battle.

"The match is over. I let you chat for a moment, but the victory goes to defence team five." The older mage announced.

"How did we lose?" The attackers demanded.

"You might not have noticed, but there were more than two sets of Rending Claws in the air when you evaded. You jumped right into the second set, and my defensive magic absorbed it for you, so it didn't flay your backs open.

You, Karl, was it? How long will it take for your Hawk to get back here?" The mage added.

Karl focused on his taming space, and Hawk appeared, disgruntled about having been left behind. The training area was part of the circle around the academy though, so he had only been a kilometre away, and could have been back in a matter of minutes.

"If I didn't call him, only a few minutes. We were only transported a kilometre or so. That is an incredible spell, by the way." Karl replied.

The younger mage smiled at Karl's enthusiasm. "It is a magical item that came from an ancient ruins. The ability to transport more than one student at a time allows for a much more immersive experience, but the protective magic is entirely the providence of the Senior Professor."

"Well, we should get you all washed off. It's not often that a team decides to actually hide in the swamp, normally they choose a more stand-up fight on the dry land. But I must say, that ambush was masterful. They didn't even realize that they were under attack until the mages were already eliminated." Sergeant Rita added.

"Yes, while the laundry team might not appreciate your ingenuity, the execution was flawless. I think that the young Sergeant has made a wise recommendation, adding a scouting and ambush specialist to the team leaders. Simply having warriors and mages who knew each other's style was a bit dull." The old mage agreed.

Sergeant Rita nodded. "Alright, everyone, get cleaned up. The bonus will be added to your student cards before you're back to your rooms. Good work everyone, it's been a long time since we had so many winners and such a challenging fight."

Karl's team walked a little more proudly as they returned to the base. The extra credits could get them some cool stuff for their rooms, little luxuries, or even more special treatment in the Academy.

This group didn't really need that, they were already recognized as worthy of the extra training, but they were quite intrigued as to how the Academy had known that Karl was going to be so outstanding right from the start.

It had to be that Rending Claw skill. That was deadly, and he could block the attacks of two Awakened Rank team leaders at once, without exhausting himself. The fact that

there was also Hawk, who could do the same, was just an unfair advantage in the minds of the other students.

What sort of class gave you a combo set right from the start?

But if they got to be on his team again, there was a good chance that they would get the extra bonus at least once more this semester. So far, all of their battles had ended in a pyrrhic victory, with the attackers only having a few remaining students when the fight was over.

The bonus wasn't cumulative, each winning student got the same, unless the teachers decided that they didn't do well enough to deserve it. So having all nine of them get the bonus was a huge victory for their pockets.

"How about we meet at the study hall after we shower? There are some good places to relax and study for the afternoon, if you'd like to join us." One of the warriors asked.

Dana smiled at Karl. "What theory classes do you have? I haven't seen you in any of the magic ones, so it must be a physical attack skill that you use."

Karl tried putting on his best innocent face, but the others caught it immediately.

"You don't have any theory classes handing out homework, do you? Are you in all practical classes?" Dana demanded, with jealousy showing on her face.

"I have skill interception training in the morning, martial arts in the afternoon, and then Sergeant Rita assigns me lessons as she sees fit. It's not really a class, just a bit of study on things I should know, like monster anatomy." Karl explained.

One of the boys laughed. "Well, you've got it better than Dana. She's got theoretical magic and practical skills in the morning across from our classroom, then she's in modern dance and cosmetology all afternoon."

Dana blushed, while Karl gave the cute mage an assessing look. She wasn't the sort of stunning beauty that would grow into a supermodel, but even covered in mud, he couldn't deny that she was the sort of adorable that you just wanted to hug on sight. How he had missed it the first day, he had no idea. Perhaps it was one of the side effects of the Divine Injection, like his extra height.

There was only one reason that she would have to take dance and cosmetology so early in her first year. They wanted to train her to be an Idol, whether she had previously wanted to or not.

"Just be glad it's not you. Those teachers have a lifetime of shattered dreams that they want to live through the students, it's hell." Dana muttered.

"I'm not sure that I'd look good in eyeshadow and lipstick. But I will join you in the search for a good study spot. I've got a bunch of books waiting for me to read them." Karl agreed.

Chapter 27: Best Study Spot

Once he was finally freshly showered, and the filthy uniform was sent to the laundry room, Karl headed down to the designated meeting spot, where he found only Dana waiting.

"It looks like the other two cancelled on us. Their combat teacher met them on the way down, and he took them for some additional training after he heard that they were getting so good with [Guard] skills." She explained.

"Well, then there will be more room for us to study. What do you have to work on today?" Karl asked.

"Mana theory. It's one of the big ones for the mage type classes, both to grow our own mana pool and to reduce the casting cost of the spells that we know. At first, we're really inefficient, but it gets better all the time. The idea is that as we get better, most mages will get some insight into new spells or skills, it's just part of the mage class.

Then we can use that to expand our spell book without having to learn the spells in class, which is way faster, and the ones you get from insight tend to grow faster and more powerful, which will help rank up." She explained.

"That actually sounds like a lot of work. Mostly, I just need to practice my fighting skills and my physical abilities so that I can keep up with my growth. At least, that is it for now. They don't know anything about the class marking that I got, so unless I get an insight like the mages do, I will only have the one skill, but it grows more powerful as Hawk does.

My body does as well. The stronger he grows, the stronger I grow." Karl replied with a smile.

"Well, that's both a tough break and a huge win. You get stronger just by existing and training your pet. No intense study needed. But only having one skill would be a bit limiting eventually."

They walked in silence for a few seconds, then Dana pointed to a pathway that led into a garden.

"That's where we're going. There are a bunch of gazebos with tables there, and we can do our study. Once I get a few more credits, I am totally getting one of the Academy laptops, or a tablet. It will be so much easier than handwriting these notes all the time.

I don't think that I've used a pen that much since I was in elementary school, but the mages on the teaching staff are all ancient, and they think that Tomes are the way to go. Just book after book of handwritten knowledge."

Karl laughed. The majority of electronic devices had only come about in the last twenty or thirty years, so anyone who was over sixty tended to favour pen and paper, and some of the mages from the old tradition, before the Divine Injection, were hundreds of years old.

They were not going to change their ways any time soon, even if printing pages made for much more legible tomes, and diagrams that everyone could clearly read. Part of the mystery was trying to sort out the bad handwriting, secret codes and shorthand of the author, it kept magic inaccessible through the ages so it wouldn't be misused.

Now that there was such a huge influx of elites, with a dozen or more new mages every year, that mystery was being lost, but the old mages were in their golden age, teaching spells and skills they thought might never be passed down to people who would be viewed as heroes, not potential traitors to the magical nations, or wealth hoarders.

Like anyone else with power that the nation needed, many mages had only ever been loyal to themselves, demanding exorbitant fees and living in luxury. They weren't viewed horribly, but more like the oligarchs of the tech revolution, as detached by their wealth and power, and not entirely trustworthy if you weren't on their social level.

"Actually, having a laptop sounds wonderful, but I don't know how to type. I came from the mines, and my family couldn't afford a computer, so I never used one before. I know most of the kids from the city use them all the time, but not us."

Dana smiled and nodded. "I forgot that you grew up there. My family ran a clothing shop in the city, so we needed computers for everything. Taking orders, tracking inventory."

That was just one of the many downsides to living in a rural mining town. Infrastructure spending didn't make it to them, except for the railroad improvements that got the coal and metals to town. The twin mines were a core asset of the nation. One was a massive coal seam that ran the power plants, the other extended the other direction across a fault line, and held a load of precious metals.

It was everything that a growing nation could need, but it belonged to the government, and none of that wealth made it back to the people actually doing the mining.

Dana led them to a small gazebo tucked into an alcove in the hedge maze, and when they sat down, the enchanted bushes grew around the small building, blocking them from passing students and giving them privacy to study.

"This is wonderful, and it smells so good." Karl sighed, thinking of both the coal dust at home and the filth of the swamp.

"Yeah, lilacs are my favourite to begin with, so it's difficult to beat this place." Dana agreed with a smile as she set out her textbooks across from him.

Karl set out his current study guide on common monsters around the Academy. This was the book that all the student groups who got to go out on expeditions were required to memorize, and Sergeant Rita had demanded that Karl learn it as well, even though she had no intention of letting him leave the Academy grounds so soon.

What she wanted him to learn was all the abilities of the monsters so that he could formulate a plan for his own growth. Once he had that, Karl assumed she would make good on her promise to find him another monster cub to try to add to his collection, one more durable than Hawk.

Chapter 28: The Maze

Studying monsters was fun, but between the smell of lilacs and whatever shampoo Dana had used, Karl was finding it difficult to focus. Hawk didn't care at all, as he found his nest more comfortable than the lilac bushes were likely to be, but Dana smelled wonderful, and her presence in this private gazebo had Karl more flustered than he would care to admit.

But, he did his best not to be a creep and work on his studies, carefully making notes about each of the monsters in the area that might be somewhat worthwhile, while memorizing the others, in case he ran into them in the future.

The more that he knew, the more likely that the Sergeant was to relent on her stance of keeping him here for training instead of letting him go outside.

Not that the Academy wasn't beautiful or well-equipped, but Karl had rarely been outside the mining town while he was growing up, and he had seen many kilometres of wilderness on their way here. Just getting to see it with a group would be an adventure, like the camping trip that his father promised on that mythical 'day off' that he never got.

The two studied silently for hours, until the sky started to change colours as sunset approached.

"Well, that's our cue to go back inside. If we don't get going soon, it will be dark before we get to dinner, and they don't light any of the academy grounds except the paths between buildings." Dana sighed, annoyed to have to stop her work.

"You seemed really into your studies." Karl noted.

"Yeah, the other two are good combat partners, but lousy study partners. They don't take anything seriously, and they never stop talking. Just being able to sit and study is a pleasant change." She agreed.

As soon as they packed their things and stood, the bush around the gazebo opened again, allowing them access to the maze, but the moment that they stepped out, the world got incredibly dark, as if the sun had already set an hour ago, and the gazebo had been providing its own light.

"Crap, I can't see anything." Dana muttered.

"I think it's just because we're behind the bushes and in a cloud's shadow, once we're back outside it should be better. But I can see just fine, so if you take my hand, we should be able to make it out." Karl suggested.

Dana's hand bumped his arm, then slid down to clutch at his fingers, and Karl realized just how dark it probably was to anyone else. None of the colours that he could see were ones he had names for, but the light was coming from the grass under their feet. It must be a form of bioluminescence that was outside the normal human range of sight, which meant that the darkness here was likely unnatural.

They hadn't mistaken the time, someone had cast a darkness spell on the maze.

Dana's hand was surprisingly soft and warm in his as Karl led the way back down the path, and her breathing was becoming more frantic as she nearly stumbled in the grass.

"Don't worry, I've got you. Just relax and follow my steps." Karl whispered.

Dana moved to his side, so Karl wrapped his arm around her shoulders, not letting go of her hand as they made the last few corners to exit the maze.

Their spot hadn't been far in, with little chance of getting lost in the maze itself, but the walk had still been quite the pleasant memory.

Dana sighed with relief when they made it back into the fading evening light, but she didn't move to step away from Karl until they heard someone softly laughing nearby, behind one of the trees.

"Congratulations, you are the first ones out of the Maze of Romance. And such a cute young couple as well." The person behind the tree laughed.

"Maze of Romance?" Dana asked softly.

"Didn't you know? This is the Academy's most famous make out spot, thanks to the hidden bushes. We cast a darkness spell over them whenever we get bored to see who comes out as a couple, who leaves their partner behind, and who thinks that darkness blocks sounds and takes things one step further." The senior classmate explained.

Dana blushed, but Karl had a brilliant idea. He leaned over to whisper in her ear. "If everyone believes that we're coming here to make out, nobody will bother our studies. We can be here all night and nobody will try to stop us."

For a second, she actually fell for the trick, then she looked up at Karl and her cheeks blushed a little darker as she realized what he was actually suggesting. The two of them, alone in the Academy's top spot for couples. It would be a scandal among the mage class students, and the boys of the warrior classes next to them would certainly whine about her and Karl being together, meaning that the other boys didn't have a chance.

But she didn't want any of them, and Karl seemed content to let her actually study, at least most of the night.

Dana pushed the thoughts of what they might do during the times they weren't studying and nodded her agreement with his plan.

"Tomorrow is an off day, we can come after breakfast to study." She whispered back.

"In that case, I will pack a lunch."

The two of them turned to leave, just as the sound of two people arguing came from near the exit of the maze. Whatever couple was coming out next was not happy with each other, but neither Karl nor Dana was interested in other students' drama tonight.

They didn't even notice that they were still holding hands until Dana turned toward her unit in the dormitory, and was briefly pulled back by her grip.

"Sorry, I forgot. I will see you in the morning." She stammered, then ran down the hall to her room.

Chapter 29: Sleepless Nights

Karl was nearly too excited to sleep that night, and he was at breakfast first thing in the morning, just after the sun came up, and he decided that it must be somewhat acceptable to leave his room. But he wasn't the only one that was excited about their first day off since arriving at the Academy, and the common areas were already packed with students planning what they were going to do for the day.

The consensus was that they should explore every bit of the grounds today so that they could find all the best spots for the next time that they had a bit of time off, but that would put a serious damper on his plans for a calm day of studying with Dana.

She joined him while he was eating, looking just as tired as he felt after a sleepless night.

"Good morning. It looks like we misjudged the best spot to study today." Dana greeted him as she sat down with a bowl of oatmeal and a beverage that was so incredibly bright green that Karl was certain it must be toxic.

She softly giggled at the concerned look on his face, then sipped the drink.

"It's an energy drink, they keep them in the fridge over there for students who spend too much time awake studying. It's not as bad as it looks." She explained.

Karl nodded reluctantly. They had them at the corner store at home, but he'd never seen one that colour before. The miners liked the ones that were mixed with coffee or juice, depending which side of their shift they were on.

Karl tapped his mug. "I will stick with coffee, thanks. But if it's going to be far too loud to study in the garden, why don't we go to the patio in my room? It's plenty large enough, and there is a spell that isolates it from the rest of the campus. It's perfectly silent, and there is a good table out there."

"That actually sounds really pleasant. My room is incredibly loud, you can hear the explosions from the students on three sides practising, and I swear if it was any worse you could hear them breathing."

Neither of them noticed the many envious glances they were getting as they left the cafeteria, or the flurry of conversation surrounding whether they had known each other before they arrived at the Academy, or if they had met for the first time on the way in.

With all the studying that they needed to do during the first few weeks here, gossip was all that they had time for to distract themselves. The students were taken straight from school to the Academy, so they had none of their old belongings with them except what they had at class.

Some of the students from the larger towns had brought packed school backpacks full of memories, and they had to cram it all into the Academy issued backpack when they left the train, but Karl hadn't actually owned anything worth keeping.

The only real restriction that the elites advised in advance was not to bring clothing, as the chosen students would be required to be in uniform at the Academy, and outfits would be provided for special events.

There was a single picture up on the wall, and the upgraded furniture in the room when Karl moved in, so at least his room wasn't as bare as some of them were, but it was the patio greenhouse that he was hoping would impress Dana the most.

She stopped off quickly to get her books from her room, and followed Karl into his suite, staring in surprise at the dark colours and padded leather bed frame.

"Well, this is, uhm, unique. I take it that there is room to study on the patio?" She asked.

"Plenty. After you." Karl replied with a smile, and pulled the curtains open.

Dana's eyes lit up as she saw the plants outside, and she rushed out onto the balcony to take a look.

"Hey, this is a moon berry tree, and one of the fruits is ripe." She gasped as she stopped under a tree with small fruits that were slowly turning from green to white.

"Oh yeah, I meant to look that up and pick it when it was ready. Do you know that fruit?" Karl asked.

"Moon berries are supposed to be super healthy and good for the brain. I saw them one time being brought to a fancy restaurant downtown." She replied.

"Then go ahead and pick it, we can split it as a snack." Karl agreed.

She reverently pulled the fruit down, and followed Karl down the path through the trees and bushes to the gazebo with the table.

"These gazebos are really popular here, aren't they? It's the same style as the maze." She noted.

"The chairs are comfortable, though, so I can see why they picked it. The greenhouse, as they call the garden out here, has been passed down between residents of the balcony suites. I didn't bring any of this, I just water it and pick up the leaves for drying, since most of the magical plant leaves are good for something."

Dana looked out over the school grounds and smiled. "It really is absolutely silent here. I can see the students walking under us, but I don't hear a thing. This is a fantastic study spot."

Karl smiled and opened his tactics textbook, the next in the stack of lessons that Sergeant Rita had left for him to do in his out of class time. This one would have been useful to have read before yesterday, which made him wonder if he was actually slacking too much on his studies.

She hadn't set any sort of due date for anything, and she wasn't giving him tests, so he hadn't thought about it. But perhaps she was, and the training lessons were the tests. Karl felt like a bit of an idiot for not having at least read the titles of all the books he was given. If he had known what they were, he could have read the ones that seemed most likely to be needed for the next day in advance.

Chapter 30: Snacks

Dana cut the Moon Berry fruit into pieces, and they snacked as they studied the morning away, feeling instantly refreshed every time they ate another piece. The tree only had a dozen or so fruits, so it wouldn't be possible to eat them every day, but one every off day to wipe away the stress and fatigue of the week didn't sound bad at all.

The tactical manual was incredibly boring to read, and Karl was a quick study with the help of a refreshed mind and Hawk's input on the best ways to hunt prey, so his mind began to wander. There were so many different plants here, and while he had looked through the journal, he didn't memorize the use of all of them, especially the ones that didn't have any fruit on them at the moment.

So, he switched books, reading through the details of the journal on the greenhouse instead, and discovering that there were a lot more fruits like the Moon Berry, but most importantly, there were a variety of teas, tonics and potions that could be made with the various plants, though some required a particular magical affinity.

The previous resident had been what the seniors called a witch, and she had been quite adept at brewing potions, but Karl had very little experience with that. His kitchen at home wasn't big enough for more than one person to work in at a time, so he hadn't ever tried to usurp his mother's position making breakfast, and two of his meals a day were provided by the school and the mine, respectively. Precooked and ready to eat.

That was one of the advantages of working a short shift in the mine yard after school, you got a guaranteed hot meal, and it would be portioned for a hardworking adult.

As he searched through the textbook, he noticed that Dana was getting increasingly excited, and beginning to glow slightly with some sort of magical effect.

She had already learned one spell other than her initial magic since she arrived at the Academy, and it looked like she was about to grasp another.

He didn't actually know how fast spells were usually learned, but from the chatter in the common areas and cafeteria, it sounded like most of the students were still working on their initial spell, trying to master it before moving on.

But according to the cook and the guard on the train, everyone had different capabilities, so maybe Dana was one of the fastest learners? The cook made it sound like he had never managed to get through even the basics of the spells he could have learned, due to a lack of aptitude, but she seemed to be the opposite.

The easiest way would be to just ask.

"You're really moving through the spells, onto a third one already." Karl remarked.

Dana looked up and smiled. "I've got an excellent memory, and while my power isn't as strong as some of the others, I am excellent at new magic. I had my first spell under control before we even left the train, but casting it twice was all I could do. Now, I can get a third casting in, or I can channel the fog slowly, but Gil, the strongest in our class, can cast five magic arrows at a time, and do it repeatedly. His power is insane, but he's still having trouble controlling the direction and stability of the arrows."

"So, the early advancement is more about what you're talented in? I can see how having lots of power but no control would become a problem rather quickly in class. But having too little power, like the cook on the train, means that anything else doesn't really matter.

They must have high hopes for you if they're setting you up to be a public figure, though." Karl suggested.

Dana rolled her eyes. "The dance instructor said that it's because I'm a fast learner. You don't need to be really powerful to be famous, you need to be versatile. As long as I can make it to the upper end of Awakened before I graduate it should be fine, but Ascended would be best, according to the choreography teacher."

Karl chuckled and Dana raised an eyebrow at him. "What do you think that they're training you for? Not many get a dedicated tutor, and you've got a whole dedicated class schedule. They're obviously grooming you for something special."

He shrugged. "The first thing that they told me on the train was that it would be better to have a golem to fight for me, and that's how they want to guide the combat mages who can learn it. So, they're probably hoping that I will join the military or the government to do monster control.

I don't really have a skill set that is good for much except combat or scouting, so that's most likely the only thing that they could think to do with me, and it's a unique class, so I don't even fit into the regular courses."

Dana thought about it for a while. "Hawk learned another skill after you got him, right? I heard from the second year mages that he can use Wind Barrier. Maybe you can teach him to use more skills, or you can learn to use more monster skills. That might make you more versatile.

If you could do something like using the ability of the Ascended version of that cooling aloe plant, you could heal wounds. That would make you into a top medic all on its own."

Karl looked at the plant. "That thing can heal wounds?"

Dana shook her head. "No, that one can treat rashes, sunburn and numb pain a little. It's really useful, but it's a common grade magical resource. They sell it at the drugstore,

and in the supply room downstairs. There is a higher quality version of it, which can reach the Ascended Grade, and that one can actually cure all sorts of wounds, but not illnesses or disease. I saw it in a nature drama."

Karl's family didn't own a television, so he only ever watched what was on in public, and that was rarely a nature documentary. He had taken a few classes on magical botany, but they were pretty basic, and didn't really cover much on medicinal plants, they were more concerned with the ones that might kill you if you happened across them in the wilderness.

"Well, I don't know much about raising them, but maybe it's worth looking into how to improve the aloe plant up another Rank so that it can treat more wounds. There are plenty of special plants here, but the guide that came with the greenhouse said that they're almost all edible ones, snacks for the residents." Karl explained.

Snacks that might help their abilities grow, but still snacks.