

Beast Master 321

Chapter 321 Morgana

Morgana sat Karl down at an empty table in the hospital cafeteria, and took out her notebook, which he couldn't help but notice was just as covered in drawings as her body.

"Alright, we will start with the basics, your future goals, growth path, anything that might not have been passed on to me by the Colonel or by Lieutenant Rita." She began.

"It's still odd to hear Lieutenant in front of her name. She was always Sergeant Rita, and she was promoted after we were separated. But I think most of it should be in the notes. But I would like to add that I got this shiny sword that steals life essence from things I kill, and that seems to have a rather noticeable effect on the beasts' growth rate.

Once I got it, they started growing to full adulthood in a rather remarkably short time period. The only exception is Remi, who is still in her early growth phase, when the others would have been fully grown by now."

Morgana nodded. "That's just because she's a Spirit Snake. They normally take decades to be fully grown, not just a few years like the spider or Cerro. So, it's nothing to worry about if Remi's journey to adulthood is slower than the others. She also has an evolution ahead of her, but from what I can tell, she is developing in the giant spirit snake direction. Most likely in the Storm Snake pattern."

"Storm Snake?" Karl asked.

"It's a name that the researchers have given to Spirit Snakes whose abilities favour weather manipulation. Blizzard, Lightning, and so on. Then there are the Blood Snakes, who favour blood magic or the Giant Spirit Pythons, but she's clearly not one of them, as she has venomous fangs." Morgana elaborated.

"That makes sense. I thought you were saying that there were even more evolutionary options available to her than I had realized. There is a chance she will grow into an actual Naga Shaman, but somehow that seems unlikely. When she was just born, she used her water manipulation to form arms, but I haven't seen her do it since."

"Oh, what caused her to do that?" Morgana asked.

"A celebratory gesture, marking the fact that she had safely and successfully made it into the world." Karl elaborated, while the Witch Doctor nodded in understanding.

"Naga aren't as bad as the Lamia, who tend to kill their clutch mates, but they don't tend to have any sympathy for them if resources are limited.

But we can get to Remi's development later. What were your plans for after graduation? What sort of career would you like to get into? The school is a bit lost as to what sort of path you should be on. They first thought that you should be trained to join the ranks of politicians and bureaucrats, but you have developed a habit of telling those sorts of people off at every chance you get, so I believe you might be unsuited to the task.

Did you want to take up some sort of trade? Perhaps become a business mogul? What is the dream future for Karl?" "They're determined to set a career path for me, are they?" Karl sighed.

"It's essential to your training. You didn't think that you could skim through four years at the Academy without taking a single actual class, did you? The first year is more focused on your skills to determine potential without the extra education getting in the way, but we can't neglect your future."

Karl chuckled at her earnest determination to be a good teacher, but he really had no ambitions involving business or politics at all. If it was left up to him, he would work just enough for a luxury life and spend the rest of his time focusing on the growth of his partners.

Maybe being a librarian or teacher would suit him? He had an ability for making skill books, so it would benefit him to know as many skills as he could. That also sounded like it would give him plenty of opportunities to be in the wilderness, looking for new skills.

Karl gestured toward the book in her hands and smiled. "Actually, I have a talent for learning and teaching skills. Perhaps I could do a job along those lines? Searching for new skills and turning them into skill books to be distributed by the Blue Dragon Clerics after they've been duplicated."

"You want to be a treasure hunter, or perhaps a teacher? That's a bit of a dichotomy, but I can see that the focus is more skills for your team. Do you get access to all those skills directly?" She asked.

Karl shook his head. "I get access to racial skills of the beasts, but not their entire repertoire. For example, I have the effect of the [Offensive Adaptation] skill active on me, but I can't create Golems on my own.

I have studied it enough times that I might be able to make the Golem book with Rae's help, but I still can't cast it. I suspect that I wouldn't be able to use the book I created either."

"What an interesting skill. Can it just be any skill that your beasts know?" She replied.

Karl shook his head. "No, I have to have a pretty solid understanding of how and why it works before I can create the book, even with their help. If it's a new skill, there is no chance. But [Spear] is a pretty simple one, and similar in function to [Rend] and it creates a solid object, like the bow that I use. I know how both those things work, and with Rae's help I managed to make the book for both of the Nature Priests."

Morgana smiled. "You know how to use [Chain Lightning], correct? What do you think that the chance is that you could make that into a book that lightning magic users could use? Lightning Bolt is a common book, but [Chain Lightning] is not. The odds are that I wouldn't be able to use it, as that isn't my specialty as a Witch Doctor, I'm a Hex type, not an Elemental Shaman. But if we could give the book to the Cathedral Library, they would give you a nice little commission off each copy sold, the same as they do for the [Refreshing Lightning] barrier, but hopefully with a wider target audience."

[Do Flaming Body too. More Fire Magic users to offset the evil ice giants.] Hawk insisted.

"I think that it should be possible, and I would like to do one other book as well. The more skills that are available to future Elites, the better." Karl agreed.

Morgana gave him an odd look. "When you say it like that, without any greed in your tone, it just sounds strange."

Karl laughed. "Hawk wants me to teach everyone [Flaming Body] as a form of vengeance against the Frost Giants, and cold in general. I strongly suspect that he learned the skill entirely to spite the water element."

"Is that how it works?" Morgana asked, taking notes.

"Probably not, but nobody ever told Hawk that, and even if it shouldn't be possible, it didn't seem to stop him. He gained a number of fire skills from resources that we used for growth, but he has evolved those skills and perfected the usage of them on his own.

For example, the flaming attacks I use, and the fireballs that he throws aren't actually a separate skill. That's just [Flaming Body] formed in different ways. Even the cigarette lighter for Doug is the same skill." Karl explained.

"You know, if someone taught that skill to the nature priests, they would be unstoppable, a true menace to society. Hiding their lighters is the only way to get some of them to work." The Witch doctor laughed, and Karl noticed that the whites of her eyes went completely black when she was amused. It was kind of freaky, and he wondered if it happened for all emotions, or if it was different. "Well, if you want to learn and teach more skills, and you have a skill that makes inscription training unnecessary, then I think that we can work out a path for you. I am thinking that it will be cartography and history, with an emphasis on ancient architecture, so that you know the signs that there might be an undisturbed ruin nearby, and what era it might be from.

Then it would just be a few extra courses in public speaking, for when you need to introduce a new find to the world. Some things that you find when you're searching for the rare and exotic won't be what you might have expected, but they can make big news, and that means being on television, but unable to throw Thor at them to distract the reporters."

So, she had seen his first time being part of a news broadcast. Karl was quite proud of that performance, for a first attempt at doing a public interview.

Chapter 322 Career Path

After lunch, Morgana led them to an empty room, which might have been a consultation room, as there was nothing more than a simple desk in it with two chairs and a side table with a pot of coffee and cups.

"I don't have all the books that we're going to need for the lessons, but I do have an aptitude test for you, both to judge where you are in your education, and to see if your head injury is causing any lingering effects when you need to focus.

I know that they will try to steal you back to the battle lines with the other advanced students even sooner than they said, so we should get the basics laid out now." Morgana explained.

Karl nodded. "Before we start, who did all that ink for you? Some of those tattoos are incredibly intricate." Morgana chuckled. "I did them all, but they're actually all spells. As a Witch Doctor, one of my abilities is a blessing or a curse on a target to enhance their abilities. So, the few who have the class all chose to cover themselves in the spells to mimic the abilities of the other classes, with enhanced mental powers and physical skills."

Karl smiled and thought about the last of the Rank Two attack skills that he hadn't learned. [Brutality] increased the strength and size of the target by ten percent per rank. If he had been thinking ahead, he could have used that during the last battle to help even the size difference between him and the Frost Giants, as well as reducing the strength advantage of the Royal Rank Giant.

Morgana rapped her knuckles on the desk. "You look lost in thought. Care to elaborate?"

Karl shrugged. "Just thinking of what I could have done differently in that last fight. There are a few Class Abilities that I could have taken advantage of and the fight might have ended differently."

Morgana shook her head. "Don't second guess yourself. That only leads to doubt and hesitation. Neither of those things will help you survive, so just put them out of your mind. Now, here is the aptitude test. Much like your graduation test from middle school before the injections, but more difficult.

You have all afternoon to finish it if you need, but it usually only takes an hour or two."

Karl opened the booklet and picked up the pencil, then smiled as he realized that it was a multiple choice test. Multiple choice was easy.

But after the first page of general knowledge that all changed. It became long answers, more in depth questions about things he had learned at the Academy, things he had no clue about, and complex math questions whose answers he could only guess at.

The only sections of the test that he was certain that he had done alright on were the botany and monster related questions. The math was a lost cause, while he might have done alright on the magical theory, though he suspected that section had no real right or wrong answers, as long as you actually knew how to use magic.

Every class did things a little differently, so their understanding of magic wasn't the same, and they would describe the answers very differently. Even the beasts had conflicting answers about how and why some things worked. For example, Thor said that you knew the Circle of Protection was working because it felt right on the scales. How did you relate that to anyone else? It wasn't the sort of thing that you could explain in words, but Thor's impression told Karl just what it should feel like on the scales - if Karl had scales.

"Alright, I think that is all the questions. I can see now that there are plenty of things in life that I don't know the answer to. Like the volume of a cylinder. But there should be at least a few of them where I did alright." Karl informed Morgana, who was reading the notes of his training as he worked on the test.

She flipped through the test, and got to a question in the math section, where she looked startled. "How did you get the answer to this?" She asked, turning the book back to him.

"Oh, that's a force and velocity thing. One tonne is about what a juvenile Lightning Cerro weighs, and if he hits a wall with his brute strength at a forty kilometre an hour run, he will exert about that much force. Thor loves smashing things. Poles, barriers, walls. They're all fun. So, I have seen it in action enough times to know the answer.

I didn't use some fancy calculation, but I'm pretty certain that's right." Karl explained.

"It is. All of the ones on applied force are close to the proper answer, which was shocking, given how badly you did on the rest of the math questions." Morgana replied.

Well, at least she didn't try to sugar coat it.

Then she went through the rest of the booklet, only smiling when she got to the botany section, where Karl knew all the plants in question, and the monster biology section, where Karl knew the vital points and the likely skills of the common species referenced.

It had all been on common threats in the Golden Dragon Nation, so it wasn't hard for him to recall the early lessons that Sergeant Rita had gone through with him when they thought that Common Rank Monsters were going to be the target of his missions for the first year.

"Alright, I understand where you are at now. They went over the survival portions of the training first, and left the others until you had settled into your class, which they obviously never got to as you left the Academy to play in the woods.

That doesn't change much except the starting point for your next bit of training, and I will have the books here by tomorrow so we can get to it. Honestly, it's going to be a fairly simple and enjoyable course load. The first thing you will need to learn for geography is the basics of all the different environments. How to traverse them safely, the creatures you are likely to find, what plants are edible and which are poison. How to hide your scent, and how to blend into your surroundings."

She paused at that point, noticing that Karl had been partially distracted by the team's running commentary.

"I need a real-time translator for you. I get the feeling that I'm missing out on two thirds of the conversation, and I'm the one speaking." She commented in a dry tone.

"Sorry. They're all giving me hints on the areas that they know best. The plains, the forests, the swamps, the sky. Rae is a Bloodbath Spider, so she has a natural ability to blend into her surroundings, and she doesn't really understand why it won't transfer to me, when it did transfer to her Golems. Thor thinks that blending in is overrated, and we just need a stronger pack. Hawk is laughing at their inability to fly away from danger." Karl narrated.

"So, you're saying that you should be good at the wilderness survival portion of the training? That's a real time saver. I thought that we would have to call in a Nature Priest to help." She sighed.

"We can still do that. I have one in the group, well two of them if High Priest Doug and his team will be staying with us. But Colonel Valerie said that the next mission would be with the Academy students, so possibly not." Karl suggested.

Morgana shrugged. "Well, I am also a Commander, so probably not. The war isn't going well for us, even with the Elites on our side. Every line is spread thin, but your time in the Frost Giant nation gave them hope that the new generation of students might have either some sort of power advantage as the World Dragon's favour returns to the people, or new ideas that would overturn the prevailing logic of battlefield engagements."

"The sort of logic that doesn't bother to count the number of Giants before sending teams deep into enemy territory to engage them? Yeah, I can think of a couple of ideas that would overturn that line of thinking." Karl agreed, with anger slowly taking over his voice and expression without him noticing.

Chapter 323 Suitable For The Role

"Is this an ingrained issue with authority, or a new thing?" Morgana asked cautiously, concerned that Karl's anger might be the start of a bestial rage.

"It's not really an issue with authority. I mean, Overlord Drake, and every one of the Princes that I've met so far have all been solid and intelligent leaders. Some of the others, not so much. I've always had issues with stupid people and the 'give head to get ahead' crowd." Karl replied with a shrug.

Morgana choked on her coffee. "The what now?"

"Oh, sorry. I guess that bit of slang isn't universal. It means the ones who suck up to the leadership to get better positions, raises and perks. The sort of pencil pushers who always know better than you, even if they've never done your job, and are happy to go whine to their superiors if they don't think that they're getting the respect they demand." Karl explained.

Morgana smiled as she tapped a rhythm on the table and thought about what she had read in his file.

"I get it now. That's why you get along with the church so well. They actually do the things that they ask others to do. For example, if they want monsters cleared, they send a cleric with the group who knows what they're doing. There's a front layer of competence, which the politicians and most of the luxury Elites lack." She guessed.

Karl nodded and his posture began to relax. "I mean, every Elite who got the injection has the blessing of the World Dragon, right? Shouldn't that be used for something more important than forensic accounting in a government office?"

Morgana laughed as the anger faded from Karl and the sense of danger vanished as if it had never been there. "I get your point. I am also not an office person. I prefer to be left alone with my potions. I used to sit in the gazebo for days at a time working on them. Alchemy is my trade skill, you see. It goes well with my class skills, and fills in the gaps in the abilities that I have. I think that learning to explore might fill your need to be away from bureaucracy, but I'm not certain that it will fill the gaps in the abilities that you have. Of course, you are one of the most versatile Elites that I have ever met, so I am not certain where the blind spots in your abilities are yet. But when we find them, we can consider adding a trade skill to your courses."

Karl smiled at the dutiful teacher. "You make it sound like they're really planning to keep me in the Academy for all four years. I am already a Commander, and by this time next year, I will be at the bottleneck and looking for a way into the Royal Rank, or possibly past that bottleneck already. By the time that I graduate, where will we be?"

The estimates I have heard are two years as a Royal, so with a bit of effort I should be pushing for Monarch Rank as I start senior year, and then what? At that point, I might as well be here in the university because there won't be much for me to learn other than some new combat skills at the Academy. The Academy not really a place of higher education, more of a survival training camp for those with magical powers. I don't need that much survival training, and the ultimate goal here is to have fun while I push my beasts to the peak of Overlord Rank, where nothing is a real threat anymore. Where I can make the rules, simply because I'm the one with the power."

Morgana looked shocked for a moment. "A survival training camp? I suppose that would be how you see it, as you never followed a life plan or career path at the Academy. But there is much more to it than just building power. Networking, building connections, a reliable social circle that can help you through the rest of your life. That's what the Academy is good for."

Karl considered that for a few minutes as he thought about all the people that he had met since he left the Academy and started hunting outside.

"I think that is more true for those who are still Awakened and Ascended. When you're a Commander, the others treat you more as an oddity or a teacher. We're not really one of them anymore, no matter

how much we want to be. You graduated right before I started, right? So, less than half a year ago? When did you make Commander?" Karl asked.

"The week of the graduation ceremony." Morgana replied.

Karl sighed as he gestured in her direction. "And now here you are, as a teacher, assigned by the Bureau of Elite Development, no longer a student of the Academy. You're not on their level anymore. I made Commander before the end of the first term of the first year. Out here, I'm leading Elite teams into combat, standing on par with the combat power of Generals and Regimental Commanders twice my age, sent as the rescue force when Awakened and Ascended teams can't deal with the threats that they have found.

I remember that Sergeant Rita said there are about six Commanders per year in the graduating class out of hundreds of Elites. It's like I've skipped the entire progression part of the Academy's team building exercise, and I don't really have a place there anymore.

No matter how nice the balcony that you left for me is."

Morgana smiled softly as Karl explained his point of view. "You know, I wonder if this is also related to your class? Beasts grow up fast, ready to take their place in the world. Normally, freshman students keep that cute and naive nature for most of the first year, then they start to form cliques and factions during the second year. You went from that cute naive kid during the first weeks to the jaded child soldier much too fast, and you've already formed your clique. Or should I call it a pack?"

Thor nodded enthusiastically in Karl's mind. Their herd was a good one.

Karl chuckled. "Thor prefers herd. A Lightning Cerro operates as part of the herd."

From behind Karl, Doug's amused voice interrupted their talk. Karl hadn't heard him open the door, so the Nature Priest was being extra sneaky today.

"Not all hope is lost, there is still some of that hopeless new student left. You should see him with Dana, it's adorable. They're clearly crushing on each other, but too shy to say it outright." The Nature Priest joked.

Morgana smiled as Karl blushed before turning to face the intruder.

"Brother Doug, have you finished your meetings for the day?" He asked.

Doug shrugged. "Skittles was mad at me for shirking on my paperwork. He says you have to balance work with fun, so I spent the day catching up on reports. But I came to see if you two were coming to dinner. It's about that time already."

Morgana checked her watch and frowned. "It's not dinner for like two hours yet."

Doug shrugged. "Overlord Drake and Prince Axel wanted to have dinner now, so I've been sent to fetch everyone before they have to go. I think that they have enough information now to give a proper update to whoever they're reporting to.

I know you and Jill are reporting back to the Colonel, so someone else wanted them to stay and keep an eye on us until everything was decided."

The High Priest had a point. The Bureau already had their agents standing right beside the students they were most worried about, and Ophelia likely had Anise with her, or someone else from the Bureau, since she was with Karl's team, and they were all away from the Academy and showing promise.

Sure enough, when they followed Doug to the cafeteria, Ophelia had Dave, Jill's partner at the Bureau, sitting next to her, working on a lesson plan, while Dana and Jill were engrossed in a conversation about something magical theory.

Drake and Axel were sitting at opposite ends of the long table, so everyone was spread between them, while a number of doctors came in and out, adding reports to the files that the pair had assembled.

It couldn't all be for Karl's group. There were only nine of them here, but at least forty folders between the two Elites, and the doctors were bringing more of them every minute. That meant it had to be a general update on the state of the patients who were likely to be able to return to combat in the near future.

That notion seemed to be supported by the cautiously optimistic look that many of the doctors had as they turned in the files. If they were bringing reports of those who would be confined to the hospital for the foreseeable future, they wouldn't look as optimistic.

Chapter 324 Drake's Verdict

Once the reports stopped coming in, the staff brought over food for everyone at the table, an oddity at the cafeteria, where you usually ordered from the counter and waited for it. But this was an impromptu meeting with the Prince and the Overlord, whose gear had already been brought in, and was sitting by the door.

Overlord Drake's deep voice carried through the room with ease. "As you've guessed, we have been called back to the line. But we have the official reports for your groups. Lao Tie, Harry Kim, and Bob Mackenzie. Your wounds are considered healed, and you are officially fit for duty. High Priest Doug Mackenzie, you will be reviewed in two more days. She's not here, but Ascended Tori has been officially assigned to the Spellblade Clan for training, as it has been determined that she is now a naturally awakened Mage.

Sisters Lotus and Tessa, you are both cleared and fit for duty. Ascended Elites Ophelia and Dana, you are both on medical hold for the next two weeks, barring a change in circumstances. Commander Karl, your healing will be reviewed at the end of the week."

Karl looked at Ophelia, and wondered if her quiet acceptance of everything and generally mild nature when she wasn't in Werebear form was hiding more issues than she was willing to speak about in public. With Dana, it was much easier for Karl to tell that she needed more time. She had been right next to Tori in the wagon, and she had taken it hard.

Drake cleared his throat and continued. "For the others gathered here, I have some news as well. There are assignments for fifteen of you to the Frost Giant border, as a recuperative period after your injuries, as the fighting there has decreased to a minimum.

There are many others in our pile of reports who are cleared to return to duties, but who are not being requested to go to battle at this time. Military personnel who are cleared for duty will be contacted by your commanding officers, and cleared civilian personnel without a combat assignment will have transport arranged for them. There are enough names here that I will post them on the wall. Long-term

patients, those who have been here more than a month, are with Prince Axel, and those who have been here under a month are with me.

If your name is on the list, you are cleared for discharge from the hospital. If it is not, your doctors will advise you as to when you might be."

The two Elites put the list on the table next to them, and the doctors put copies up on the poster board by the door.

That caused a slow exodus of bodies from the room, as the patients who had gathered to hear the news began to get excited to see the official determination. The doctors had told most of them whether they could leave or not, but the doctors didn't know who would be going where.

Once the room was mostly cleared, Prince Axel looked around at the group with a tired expression before giving them the final announcement of the night.

"As much as I fought against it, as I don't support student soldiers, the entire Awakened and Ascended population of the Academy is being sent to the border in the next two weeks. Once you are cleared, you will not be going back to your dorms, but to the border near the Hill Giant offensive.

Commander Doug Mackenzie and his group have been assigned to the Capital for security, along with his two sisters. While you are cleared for combat, the Bureau wants you to have some downtime between battles, so you will spend a minimum of one month here in the Capital. High Priest Doug, that will unfortunately include you as well.

Apparently calling the head of psychiatric medicine Skittles to his face earned you some time doing public relations work for the church." Axel informed them, his stern expression turning to a smirk at the end.

Doug just shrugged as he ate his dinner. "He is, and will always be, Skittles. I regret nothing."

Prince Axel just shook his head at the Nature Priest. There was no reasoning with the man, it seemed.

Overlord Drake stood from his chair. "Now, I wish you all the best of luck, and we will see you at the next inspection of the lines, World Dragon willing."

The two ranking Elites left the room, and Karl's group fell silent for a bit before Tessa finished her juice and sighed.

"Well, I guess we will meet again soon if half of us are being discharged. Do any of the doctors know if we're just waiting at the Cathedral?"

One of the doctors nodded. "Yes. You've both been assigned to wait at the Capital Cathedral until your team is cleared to leave. Official orders from the Archbishop himself have your entire team together for one year. It would take a lot to get him to change his mind on the matter, and it's doubtful that it will even cross his mind again."

Tessa nodded. "Well, we do have a contract that we won't leave anyone behind, and that we will do one task that pleases the Red Dragon Goddess every three months. think we're actually way ahead of the curve on that one, but I suspect that the extras don't factor into the time frame when she expects her next tribute."

"You have three months between missions for the War Dragon? How long has it been since the last time her influence was obvious?" The doctor asked, not wanting to risk an issue by keeping the team in the hospital.

"The battle that led us here. So, under a week, and the one before that was only three days or so prior, so we're good even if one doesn't count." Tessa explained. "You have been busy. Though, with your group composition, it's a bit concerning that you would agree to a contract like that." The Doctor frowned.

"Actually, our group is really well suited to it, once you add the monsters and Golems. That makes all the difference. It's a lot like having three extra Commanders with us, all with different skill sets. But I think that the War Dragon is particularly pleased by the fact that we are actually willing to go out and fight, and don't just do the minimum.

I might have tested short of the Commander Rank exam requirements, but not by much. By the time that we get back from the Hill Giant border, I might be the youngest High Priestess of the Red Dragon." Tessa replied.

The doctor looked shocked. High Priestesses of the War Dragon only usually came in two varieties. Disfigured and angry battle nuns in their early middle years, and matronly sorts who looked after orphans for a living.

Becoming a High Priestess so young, at least for the Dragon God of War, was unthinkable in the minds of many.

"So, once we clear you, there is a good chance that you're going to throw yourselves back into battle, and challenge the Hill Giants to please the Red Dragon?" The Doctor

asked.

That was clearly a trick question, and designed to be used against the other members when they were doing their evaluations the next day. But the Doctor had no shame about his actions, and wasn't trying to hide it.

"I wouldn't call it throwing ourselves in combat. Thor likes to smash things and Rae is likely running short on blood by now, so we will take a cautious outing to find some monsters to refill our supplies. Then, whatever happens, happens. Maybe we will find another village full of refugee children. That pleased the Red Dragon a lot."

Tessa replied.

The Doctor nodded, having heard the story already.

"Alright, I won't pry too deeply. I know battle is an essential part of most Elites'

lives." He reluctantly agreed.

The last of the assembled doctors slowly dispersed, and then Karl's team retired back to their respective rooms for the evening, prepared for at least another week of monotonous tests and afternoons filled with lessons and chores.

The 'chores' part was especially fearsome to Lotus, who had been enjoying the wilderness far too much, even if it was cold. Now that she was back in the city, and headed for the Cathedral, she would be expected to join the chore rotation during her stay there. That meant long hours and honest work, two things that no nature priestess willingly volunteered for.

Chapter 325 New Doctors and Understanding

Karl sat in the next day's 'decompression session', a mental health counselling session that was mandatory for all patients here, and stared at the new doctor who had been assigned to him. She just wasn't getting it, and he wasn't certain how to explain the situation anymore.

"So, you're saying that a young child such as yourself isn't bothered by the death and gore, but you don't feel that is a problem?" The old woman asked.

Karl considered that for a moment, trying to find a new way to explain the issue, before he gave into the urge to just stand up and just walk out on her.

"If there is a rabid animal or wild monster loose in your neighbourhood, what do you do?" He asked.

"Call animal control, of course." She replied.

"And what do they do?"

"Trap and relocate it, I assume." She shrugged.

Karl rubbed his temples. This woman had never actually worked with anyone who had been in combat before, and it was exceedingly obvious. She had to be one of the academics from the University.

He shook his head. "You can't just relocate a dangerous creature and make it someone else's problem. They put them down. That's what we do. We put down dangerous creatures who are threat to the people. It's not personal, it just needs to be done."

"But if they were people in your mind, how would you handle it?"

Karl saw where she was leading with this now. "I would say that is a law enforcement issue. If they were humans, each and every one of them would be a serial killer and mass murderer. Many of them would be cannibals, as they prefer human flesh.

I don't think that many people would object if they were put down, even if we did it live on television."

The woman huffed in annoyance and walked out of the room.

Victory.

Skittles, the aging Nature Priest doctor, came in to replace her with a big smile on his face.

"What did you say to make the substitute counsellor cry?" He asked.

"I told her that the human equivalent of monsters are serial killers and mass murderers that nobody would complain about being executed live on television." Skittles, or Doctor Xander, as he should properly be called, burst into laughter. "The University sent over a bunch of academics to prove that our way isn't effective

enough. They think that their treatment methods will create more healthy and balanced Elites."

"Or get someone stabbed for asking the same stupid questions over and over." Karl pointed out.

"We monitor our patients for weapons." Doctor Xander replied stiffly.

Karl took out his maul and passed it to the nature priest, who nearly dropped it on his foot.

"Goddess, that thing is heavy. Is that what you use to fight Frost Giants?" He asked. "No, I usually use a two-handed sword, but that maul packs a beating with it when it comes into play. But my point is that most of the patients are armed, even when it doesn't look like it."

The doctor chuckled. "Point taken. But I suspect the actual weapons aren't the largest issue if your personal problem is the annoying academics. Those who are unstable are sedated to prevent them using magic, but we already know that doesn't work on you, and if you set a monster on them, they wouldn't last long.

The Academics aren't clerics, they're just teachers. They don't have any magic or superhuman abilities, so they don't really understand what it's like. They're terrified of the threats to humanity, and many have the attitude that the ones who protect them are some sort of servants tasked to clean up problems."

Karl nodded. "Like that one. Maybe we should terrify them a little, make them

leave?"

Karl saw why Doug called him skittles when the man smirked, his eyes flashed with multiple colours of light. It might be some sort of skill or ability, but the glow did

rather look like skittles in his eyes.

"What were you thinking just now?" Doctor Xander asked.

"I could use a bit of exercise. Perhaps we could arrange space to do some sparring out

in the yard? Or if there is a suitable gymnasium here?" Karl suggested.

"I will arrange it. There have been all sorts of complaints this morning, and I have been concerned that some of the Elites might just do a self-checkout against doctors'

advice."

"Let me know when you've got somewhere for us to exercise, and I think that we can arrange something that will take the naive ones' attitude down a notch." Karl agreed. Doctor Xander nodded and left the room, and Karl made sure he had shorts and a tank top under his hassock. He tended to forget, but if he was going to be sparring, he should have the lower layer on.

He was just getting comfortable in the chair when Doctor Xander came back, under a minute later, with a big smile. "Alright, it's arranged. Even the white robes are on board with this. Just, don't do anything that might cause more patients." Karl chuckled. "You don't have a cardiology department, do you? Because I can't

guarantee that some of them won't need it when they see what being an Elite actually means."

"Nope, that's next door and not our problem. We're not an emergency care centre."

Karl followed him out into the courtyard, where someone had created a huge amount of sand for a twenty-metre round combat circle, the sort of training pit that soldiers had been using for close combat training since before recorded history.

"Alright, Doctor Xander has asked that we all attend this seminar, both for the Elites to blow off some steam, and to show the new hires a little of what it means to be an Elite in combat. Commander Karl has graciously volunteered to help with the Demonstration, so who would like to go first?"

The patients looked a bit confused, but Ophelia hopped up. "Do we get to spar with

Karl? Or is he going to cheat?"

Karl laughed and had Rae call out a Spider Golem with the ends of its legs blunted.

There were a number of screams from the new doctors, and Ophelia laughed.

"I see how it is. Alright, who has the training weapons?"

Karl shrugged. "I don't think that you need them. Rae won't take it personally." [Because there is no chance they're going to be able to kill my Golem.] The two squared off against each other across the circle as the civilian doctors watched in horror, then Ophelia activated her armour and twin flaming axes before transforming into Werebear form and launching herself at the spider golem. The two exchanged dozens of strikes in the first two seconds, with the golem parrying Bear's berserker rage infused attacks, while she looked for an opening. Karl watched the doctors for a while, and even some of the clerics looked shocked at the brutality of the fight. Then it slowly turned to amusement as the Golem knocked Ophelia over and used its blunted legs to tickle her belly while pretending to land

strikes.

Only when she roared at the golem in a fully animalistic rage did Rae finally relent and have the spider golem retreat.

"That's one for the golem. I think almost everyone gets the point. Who wants to spar

next? I know I could use the exercise. My muscles are getting sore from lack of use."

Karl offered.

A man with a fresh scar across his face and down his bare chest raised his hand. "Commander on Commander unarmed spar?" The Monk suggested.

"That sounds good. We've got plenty of healers to deal with bruising, or we can do it

with a barrier up so we're not actually harmed." Karl offered.

"Then we would need to use skills, and that might lead to accidents. Bare hands

versus training weapons is fine."

Karl had Rae dismiss the Golem as he stepped into the ring. The hospital hassock

would be fine for fighting, it was easy to move in.

The two stretched a little, and then moved into a light sparring session, testing each

other's skills. Karl didn't have his rings on, and this was the first time in a long time he had to test himself against another Elite in actual physical combat.

But once they started moving, he realized that his natural state was neither slower nor weaker than the Monk.

"I thought you were a Ranger type." The Monk questioned as they circled. "Beast Tamer is an odd type. Our growth direction depends on our beasts. If we were using melee skills, I would get my ass kicked in seconds, but as for the basic body, I'm getting closer to that of a Commander Rank beast." Karl explained as he tried and failed to grab the shirtless monk.

He realized why they fought shirtless when his hassock was grabbed, and he was flipped to the ground, only narrowly avoiding being pinned. The laundry room was going to hate them for this event.

Chapter 326 Let Off Some Steam

Once the Monk began to sweat and look a bit winded, Karl backed off and smiled at him.

The Monk nodded. "That was good exercise, I needed that after two months here. The new limbs are still a bit sluggish."

They left the ring, and more groups moved in, Awakened Elites, who went four teams to the ring, as they weren't moving nearly as far as the Commanders had.

The new doctors all seemed to be in shock, even now that the fights were on a closer to human scale. They had been so overwhelmed by what they had seen at the start, which they could see was a game between friends, with no harm done despite the brutality of the event, that they still hadn't managed to get themselves under control. One of the younger doctors was sitting with her head against her knees, working to control her breathing. She didn't look alright, so Karl went over to check on her, snagging a couple of bottles of water off the table by the ring on his way. "Here, sip slowly, it helps." Karl informed her as he sat down in the grass beside the young doctor.

She numbly sipped the water as she stared at the Elites sparring.

"Do you know why I became a psychologist? An Awakened Rank Giant Wolf Spider took residence in my hometown while I was in the city at school. It killed half the population, and the ones the army recovered from the cocoons were never the same." She whispered.

"Sorry, I didn't mean it as a personal thing to anyone. The spider Golems are just renewable, so I could show everyone an actual fight without injury." Karl replied.

She nodded slowly, her heart still pounding so hard that Karl could hear it.

"I know that. It was just so... so..."

Karl patted her back. "I know, and so does everyone else here. Every Elite in this hospital has seen that level of battle and much worse. Most of us have been sent on those rescue missions to invaded villages. But look how much fun everyone is having now. That was the goal of coming here, right? To get everyone's mind back into a good place."

The doctor smiled at Karl as she got to her feet. "That's right. Thank you for reminding me. But I should give you some advice as well. If you're going to spar in a hassock, put pants on first."

Karl laughed. "I am wearing shorts underneath. I've been yelled at for that before, so I changed before we came out."

A few of the other doctors laughed, especially the nature priests.

As the doctors from the University began to see the camaraderie between the Elites,

they began to relax and look at them differently. Not as a problem to be solved, but as people who shared something that the rest of the world couldn't really understand. And so, the morning meetings were changed to morning outdoor activities, at least on the days with good weather. Wheelchair basketball, sparring, any sort of game the Elites came up with was incorporated into their recovery regimen.

Many of the doctors had pushed for this from the start of the Elite program, but it was considered unconventional, or too risky for the wounded, even when they were confined to a basketball court, where they could easily be kept within the range of an area healing spell for treatment while they exercised.

So that was how Karl's next week went, with exercise in the morning to bring his arm back up to his standards, and lessons with Morgana all afternoon to catch up on the schooling that he should have been taking during the first and second year, before he was sent out into the world.

Karl didn't even know that some of those historical eras had happened, much less that they had their own architectural style that was likely to contain magical relics. It was enough new information that even Thor's prodigious memory was struggling to

remember it all.

The only easy part was the public speaking lessons, as Karl wasn't bad at that to begin with. The challenge was learning how to turn everything into polite doublespeak so that you could convey your message without antagonizing anyone, even in a hostile crowd.

But all fun things must end, and at the end of a week, it was time for the review of the party members' progress. He had been healing well, but it was still unlikely that he would be discharged early.

Ophelia might be, as she was doing much better now that she got to spend her mornings in Werebear form, wrestling and sparring. It was Dana that Karl was concerned about. She had gotten quiet since the battle, and had lost a lot of the bubbly personality that used to come out at every chance.

Perhaps that was just part of the experience, but it still seemed like she could use a bit more time with the priests. Or perhaps that was the problem, and she just needed to get back to normalcy with the other students?

On the final day of the week, instead of the morning games, Karl was called to a meeting room where five doctors in five different cleric robes sat as a panel behind a desk.

"Commander Karl, initial prognosis, nerve damage to the left arm and a severe concussion. We are pleased to inform you that your time with us is now ended. You are cleared to return to duty at any time. The Academy should be contacting you later today to let you know of their deployment plans."

Karl smiled. "That is excellent news. Have you met with the rest of my team yet?" The doctors shook their heads. "No, you are the first review of the morning. There

are a number of other patients between you and them, but you should have answers before you go anywhere."

That seemed to signal the end of the meeting, and Karl stepped out into the hall, where his three roommates were waiting along the wall for his results.

"I'm good to go. It's been a pleasure, gentlemen." Karl informed them with a smile. "Where are they sending you? Back to the Frost Giant border to freeze again?" Karl shook his head. "No, once my team is ready, we will be off to the Hill Giant border with the students from the Academy. I haven't graduated yet, after all." The trio laughed. "We heard a curious rumour about you. Is it true that you're still in the first year?"

Karl chuckled. "Yeah. Halfway through my first year at the Academy. I know it doesn't really look like it anymore, with the advancements and their physical improvements, but I was in the last batch of serum injections."

"Shit, we should try getting on the good side of some monsters. Maybe that's the secret." The blonde man joked.

"Ask the nature priests about that one first. They have many stories about the appeals and hazards of trying to cuddle the danger floof."

Behind them, Doctor Xander laughed. "You're a bad influence on the entire Green Dragon Priesthood, you know that? Do you know how many of them have tried to make new friends in the last week and nearly ended up in the emergency room?" "I claim no responsibility for that. They were like that before I arrived." "That is true, I suppose. But speaking of which, we will be moving you over to the Cathedral tonight to wait on the rest of your team, unless they're all released and ready to go today. I believe some of them were suggested to stay another week." Karl nodded. "Yeah, I believe that the two Priestesses are already there waiting for us. I'm sure that after a week in the Capital Cathedral, they're ready for some less exciting days."

The doctor laughed at the thought that being with a military unit at the border was either less exciting or more enjoyable than the cathedral, but Karl knew that they would be stuck with all the paperwork that he had been dodging for the last month. Compared to that, sitting with a thousand students in a camp at the border sounded much better. The two Priestesses weren't students, so they wouldn't be asked to take lessons while they were there, and they were part of Karl's team by contract, so they wouldn't be reassigned to some menial duty, as they had to stay near the action to please the Red Dragon.

Plus, Lotus had to be going crazy without any animals around, other than the cats of the Cathedral.

Chapter 327 Rehabilitated

Karl waited in the cafeteria while the others went in for their analysis that morning, and watched the mood change every time someone got good or unexpectedly bad

news.

Dana and Ophelia went in one after the other, with Ophelia going first and coming out with a positive attitude to give Karl a thumbs up.

"Well, we're good to go. They cleared me to fight, and said that these issues with my berserker rage trying to take over were all sorted out. As it turns out, I just wasn't embracing the bear fully enough, and it was the sparring session with the Golem that set things back in balance." She explained.

"Weren't embracing the bear enough?" Karl asked.

"Yeah, you know how I've usually got some sort of self-control in battle? That's not how it is supposed to work. I thought I was better at the Berserker Rage, but I just wasn't fully activating it. Those partial activations were causing a mental imbalance, as the berserker side and the sane side of my mind were trying to merge, and that's just not possible without going insane."

Karl nodded. "That makes sense, the whole point of Berserker Rage is to let go and just go wild, right? I'm glad that you got it all sorted out. It's not going to mess with your combat too much, is it? Like, you won't have to start training all over?"

Ophelia shook her head. "Nope. It's all instinctive, so I'm unlikely to attack known teammates. Well, no more likely than an angry bear is to attack her own instead of the enemy. That should be fine in combat, and the way that Berserkers train imprints our skills in our subconscious, so we will still use them when we're in a rage."

As they were talking, Dana came back out as well, with a more cautiously optimistic smile on her face.

"Well, I'm cleared to leave, but they want me to avoid intense battles for a while. I know that's not really possible, but that's what it is." She informed them.

Karl pulled her in for a hug. "Of course, we can avoid the more intense battles. Only small scout group eliminations with supervisors and reinforcements until it's time to go find more refugees or something to keep Tessa from getting in trouble with her goddess."

Dana laughed. "If you're going to make up a lie, at least make it a good one. I don't think that any of us would be happy just slacking off. But seeing what happened to Tori, I wasn't ready for that."

The mood turned sombre at the end, but they understood.

"It's fine. I will get them to transfer us away from the main lines, where we're more likely to see allies die." Karl assured her, but Dana shook her head.

"I think that we should join the main group. It might help if we can thwart a few direct attacks, you know? Save some lives where we can actually see them."

Ophelia nodded. "That sounds good. We can socialize, and build up some of that reputation that we're supposed to have with our peers. I mean, I didn't socialize much because everyone but the Berserkers is afraid of the only female Berserker. But you two were barely at the Academy at all, and now you're powerful, so you might as well go get them to put some respect on your names."

From Karl's left, one of the other patients laughed. "That's right, they'd better put some respect on the monster man's name. Who else here could use half their class skills to defend their group while taking on a solo duel against a Royal Rank Frost Giant?"

Karl smiled at the man, whose hand was halfway regrown and held in a brace, so he didn't damage the forming portions.

"Don't forget, that idea got me here with you. I don't recommend it."

While they were chatting, Morgana, Jill and Dave all arrived in the cafeteria. "We got the good news from the doctors when they finished the morning assessments. You might as well get something to eat, and then we will head over to the Cathedral for the night. They want to test everyone before you head out again, just in case.

We will be leaving for the border tomorrow morning, but no more hospital nights for you."

"I should go change, after lunch, I guess. Finally, the hospital can get their stylish short-sleeved outfit back." Karl joked.

The kitchen staff laughed at that. The short-sleeved hassock was unique to the hospital for people who needed injured limbs accessible at all times. Normally, if you had a cast, it would fit under the sleeve, and you would just roll it up for checkups. With Karl's, they were constantly looking for discoloration or other issues, since there was a high risk of infection by Frost Giant blood. None had appeared, much to their surprise, as there was very little chance that Lotus had even tried, much less managed, to get all the Giant blood off the severed limb.

The two species were about as far from compatible blood donors as it was possible to be, so the body would normally treat it as a toxin and go into overdrive trying to expel the blood.

When Karl returned to his room to get his gear, there were fresh robes waiting for him, the standard ones from the Cathedral, with the Cathedral's property tag on the inside, so he didn't have to change when he got there.

That was convenient.

His roommates were still out, but Morgana came in a few seconds after Karl had the new robes on.

"Ready to roll out? Where is your pack?" She asked.

"In the locker. I never unpacked anything in it, so it's still good." Karl explained.

"We can restock it at the Cathedral. The hospital doesn't have mission supplies." Karl shook his head. "I meant that literally. I haven't unpacked anything from it. It's still fully loaded and ready to leave. We had three priests who could cook and Rae making the shelters on our last mission, so I never actually opened my main pack for anything."

The Witch Doctor shook her head as she grabbed the pack out of the locker. Karl was a bit startled that she could heft it around with one hand like that. His pack was quite heavy, as the weight didn't mean much to him, but she was a magic user, and they usually couldn't use strength items.

"Alright, take that and let's go. They've got a surprise for you at the Cathedral." Morgana informed him with a wink.

"Did Lotus adopt a Warbear? Because I wouldn't put it past her."

"Goddess, I hope not. But that's not the surprise I'm referring to." She muttered,

making Karl laugh.

She led him outside and down a cobblestone path that led into the side of the Cathedral, where Tessa and Lotus were waiting for them, along with Bob and Doug, who now had teacher's badges hung on chains around their neck.

"No way, they made you guys teachers?" Karl laughed.

"Substitute teachers for the remainder of the school year, technically. Not all of the Academy's teachers are well suited to combat, and they needed a few extras. We're both Commanders, and we have more than a little experience with the Hill Giants that roam into the Nation, or appear during the monster spawns.

What do you think? Does it suit?" Bob replied.

"Definitely. I think that you two will be great teachers. You even volunteered to look out for me during my first proper solo mission. Teaching might just be your calling."

Karl agreed.

Morgana gave them a curious look. "What are you supposed to be teaching, anyhow? Don't all teachers have a subject?"

The brothers smiled back at her. "Wilderness Survival."

The Witch Doctor rolled her eyes. "Of course you would get a class that doesn't

involve actually knowing how to read."

The brothers laughed, and Karl put on his best innocent questioning look.

"I didn't know that you knew each other."

Bob laughed. "We met a few times on missions, while she was still in school, but for the record, I can read. I won't make any guarantees for Doug."

Doug reached into his robes and pulled out a hymn book. "I will have you know that

once you have memorized all the songs, you don't need to know how to read

anymore."

Morgana sighed while everyone else laughed, so Karl patted her on the shoulder.

"You get used to them, but they're the sort of people you want on your side when things go wrong in the wilderness."

Chapter 328 Cathedral Again?

Morgana looked toward the Cathedral. "As much as this is a surprise, it's not the one that I was expecting. Monk Chen was supposed to meet us at the Cathedral, he has joined the staff as well, and will be coming along to help with meditation and mental fortitude training."

Karl laughed and pointed toward the building. "He's almost certainly inside those doors. They lead to the meditation area, and they're a much better spot to surprise a visitor."

Tessa and Lotus surrounded the Witch Doctor and wrapped their arms around her.

"So you've been drawn into the Karl gravity well. Aren't you a bit old for him?" Tessa asked.

"First off, I am his advisor from the Bureau, secondly, aren't you older than I am, Sister?" Morgana cut back.

Doug and Lotus both laughed before Doug gave Tessa a conciliatory pat on the shoulder. "She's got a point, she was the youngest in her class, nearly a whole year younger. She didn't even get long enough legs to keep up with the group until third year."

"You really want me to Hex you, don't you?" Morgana replied.

Lotus hugged the Witch Doctor. "Don't feel bad. I graduated last year and I still have short legs."

Morgana sighed and looked away just as the door opened, revealing Brother Chen, who had been drawn by the commotion.

"Commander Karl! It's good to see you all healed and returned to service. But why does the lovely Miss Morgana look so defeated?" He announced.

"She's not ready to deal with Nature Priests today. I heard that you're joining the Academy Staff, congratulations." Karl replied, before giving the Monk a hug. Monk Chen smiled back at Karl. "You know, you actually look your age from this angle."

Behind them, Doug laughed. "Not for long. It's his birthday next week, and he will get his baby face status back."

Karl did quick math, as he hadn't seen a calendar in ages. Doug was right, but he was surprised that the Nature Priest knew that.

Tessa nodded. "And it's both Lotus and Dana's birthday next month. We're all getting old, make it stop."

Her dramatic announcement made the Monk laugh. "Just wait, soon enough you will be looking like one of the Orphanage Matrons, all round and jolly with a ruler in your hand as you terrify school children."

"You take that back right now."

Tessa had the sort of narrow and angular features that Karl couldn't see ever getting that sort of chubby. The Battle Nuns, as everyone called the lean and muscular female Red Dragon Clerics who practically lived in combat, seemed like a more probable outcome.

The rest of the group joined them as the clerics all exchanged stories. They hadn't seen each other in a while, as Bob and Doug had been assigned to guard duty, and while Monk Chen wasn't technically a cleric, he was mostly hidden in the meditation areas of the Cathedral.

"Let's lead you all to your rooms to drop off your gear. It's good that they got you robes in advance, that makes life easier. The Cathedral has seen too many visitors trying to sneak out of bounds lately, so if you will notice, those robes don't have the silver thread in the cuffs that the regular visitor robes do." Brother Chen explained. Karl had never noticed the silver threads before, but he hadn't really been looking for them in an all white robe. But as they walked through the cathedral toward the upper floor rooms, he did notice that on the tourist robes, one single thread on each sleeve was dyed silver. Not always in the same spot, but they all had a silver thread near the cuff.

That was brilliant, and meant that even if you tried to sneak in by blending in, the actual clerics would notice right away.

But if they didn't have the silver, that meant there was something else that marked the Elites and other authorized visitors from the clerics who were working there. Karl still hadn't found it by the time that they reached the rooms, so he put it out of his mind for the moment and stowed his pack for the evening before quickly washing his hands and face. He really did need to shave, he decided, before pulling his kit out and realizing that there was an easier way.

On second thought, that was a terrible idea, and it would fill the room with the smell of burning hair. So, with his shaving kit in hand, Karl headed for the sinks in the men's shower room. A few minutes of work and he was clean-shaven again, looking like a proper Academy student, and ready to face the remainder of the day. When he walked out again, he heard cursing coming from the ladies' showers that sounded like Ophelia, as well as a lot of laughing. She had said that she might be hairier in human form than Werebear, but Karl didn't realize that she actually intended to shave it all off again.

They were headed out in a day or two, so it was just going to grow back. But perhaps, like him, it just felt a bit more human to be all cleaned up for the day, like a reset between missions.

Karl returned to his room and took out one of the books from the small bookshelf that each room had. They were all church literature, but some of them had useful information and not just religious dogma in them.

Like this one. It was told from the viewpoint of the church, but it was a history of the conflicts with the Giants, who occupied most of the territory around their borders.

He could use a bit more information about the Giants, and how things had gone in the past.

Karl recalled that there should be some wise saying about repeating history, but he couldn't think of quite what it was as he began reading through the book. The story started the same as this war had begun. The Giant Clans had started to work together, attacking the nation from all sides as they searched for relics of the System Stones, which they believed would allow them to regain some of their lost

power.

The first war was only a few generations after the stones had been shattered, and the Giants were convinced that the humans had another set.

They didn't understand how the humans were keeping their advanced magic. But that was because, uniquely among the species, the humans had managed to train new generations in many of the skills that had originally come from the system.

The book was an older one, written before the Elites had been a thing, and it didn't mention Inscription as a skill, as it had been considered a lost art at the time.

That was how humans had passed down the skills, until the number of Inscriptionists had dropped so far in places like the Golden Dragon Nation, thanks to the concentration of magic users in their own enclaves, that it had been forgotten by

most of the world.

Some nations had always been able to do it, but it was a jealously guarded skill, and only when the Elites had started to do it on their own had they slipped up and revealed that they could as well. It was their determination to find the person who leaked their secrets that had actually given away their secret.

They had rampaged through the nation as the humans hid or defended their walled cities, doing what they could to defend their survival. At the time, it had been unthinkable that the humans could take on the Giant Clans without the legacy magic users who had fled and left them to their fates.

And they had been right, but at the end of the war, the humans had managed to hold enough, and the Giants didn't have the population to hold the entire region. So, they slowly rebuilt, and attacked the Giants where they found them, until a century later the church had managed to unify the region.

The story was the same nearly every time, with some subtle variations. There was only one exception, the Fire Wars, when the Giants had allied to trap and destroy the Fire Drakes that humans had been breeding as their defenders.

Karl hadn't realized that they had started here. He had thought that the Island nation of Drake Riders was where they were because they had arrived from another

continent.

Of course, it could all be propaganda, but it was official propaganda, and the Church was actually very particular with their records so that they didn't upset the Blue Dragon of knowledge.

Chapter 329 Empty Halls

There were far fewer Clerics in the dining hall than there had been the last time that Karl was here, and the room looked almost empty, while the lower ranked dining hall had only been half filled when he had passed by.

That was a testament to how much of their membership had gone to war, as the Capital Cathedral was one of the bastions of the faith, where most of the residents were researchers, theorists and essential staff to record keeping.

The dining hall was silent as the food was brought around, but in a remarkable break from their usual rules and decorum, once it was served, the Clerics began to talk and shift between tables.

A number of them brought their food over to the table where Karl and Morgana were seated with Monk Chen. The rest of the group had split up at the table behind them, as they wouldn't all fit at one, but even then, Karl noticed that there was shuffling, and both Bob and Doug shifted to a third table full of clerics.

"Well, this is new." Karl noted quietly.

The Clerics who had just sat down nodded in unison.

"It's our chance to get news, and we will all be rotated to the front soon, when they release more of the wounded from the hospital. We heard that you were on the Frost Giant front before you were sent to the recovery wing." A dark-haired Blue Dragon Priest replied.

"Yeah, the Frost Giant border has calmed down significantly. They suffered a disaster as their actions broke a number of imprisoned dragons free of their confinement. There was a large volcanic eruption as well, thanks to an angry Magma Dragon. It's just a general mess all along that front, but not nearly as dangerous as it had been, just cold." Karl replied.

The Blue Dragon Priest wrote notes and nodded in satisfaction. "That's what we have been hearing from everyone. Do you know where you're going next?"

"The Hill Giant border. From what I'm told, they need all the Commanders that they can get to keep the incursion under control, and I have been accused on at least one occasion of being enthusiastically competent at that." Karl replied.

Morgana chuckled. "Well, that's one way to put it. The Academy is sending all its Ascended and higher students to the front lines for a training mission. There will be teachers there to keep up with their course work, and to help provide a measure of safety for our next generation of Elites.

Wow, it feels strange saying that when I just graduated and some of them are only a year behind me."

The Clerics sighed at the news that they weren't the only ones running short on staff. If the Academy was mobilizing en masse, then the rest of society wouldn't be far behind. The elites had been living a pretty good life, and many of them were the sort of rich and famous that most could only dream about.

However, when it came down to it, they still had a duty, and that was to keep themselves and everyone around them alive.

The cleric across from Karl nodded. "I will be going there as well. Most of the ones here now will be going to the Frost Giant front, as they've already shipped out the High Priests, but I got the draw to go to visit the Hill Giants."

Karl smiled at him. "You'll like it better. The other border has terrible weather, and a little bird tells me that we can celebrate my birthday with a bonfire."

Morgana gave Karl a suspicious look. "Is that code for Hawk wants to see if the Hill Giants burn as well as the Frost Giants?"

Karl shook his head. "They don't. We already tried, and it's better to bury them. But everyone likes a good birthday party, right?"

"Well, if your birthday is next week, we might not even be settled into the lines yet." Morgana replied.

"How is that? It's only a few hours helicopter flight from here, I know, we were almost to the Hill Giant's portion of the border when we flew back." Karl asked. "They have been shooting down our helicopters. Once they learned that trick, it became too dangerous to land near the border, so it's either land in a safe spot and walk most of a day to the mission location, or go in by bus.

The bus was the obvious choice, since we can't walk in with an entire line's worth of supplies, so we're doing to have a few days worth of driving, and possibly more if there are monster attacks or bad weather.

That's also why you don't see many wounded Elites from the Hill Giant front at the hospital here. They're recovering at a triage hospital closer to the border, instead of flying them all the way back." The cleric explained.

That was better than what Karl's mind had conjured up. When things got really bad, there weren't any wounded to send anywhere. They simply didn't make it back.

"Do you know what they're doing for deployments with the students? I'm sure with that many of them in one region, they'll be coming up with something to keep them safer than usual." Karl asked the others at his table.

Morgana nodded. "From what I've been told, they are planning double deployments, ten where it calls for five and so on, along with an extra commander for every enhanced group that leaves the base."

That wasn't necessarily better. Larger groups would attract more attention everywhere that they went. But the extra Commander was a brilliant move if they could spare them.

They must have only left the Ascended Rank teachers at the Academy for the Common Grade and Awakened students that had been left behind, which would be an interesting event on its own, but there still weren't all that many Commander Rank teachers in the Academy.

They taught large groups of students, and had their assistants help out with the

individual issues, there was far from enough to send one with every ten students. Or perhaps, they weren't planning to send all that many of them out to begin with? If they were only going to allow three or four groups out of the camp at a time, then it would be feasible, and the majority of the students would be with whatever army reinforcements or other Elites had been sent to their location.

Tactically, that made a lot of sense, but to Karl and the others in his group, it sounded horribly dull.

If they were going to be stuck in a camp at the border, they might as well be at the Academy. They wouldn't really be doing anyone any good, just sitting around all day. Even if there were attacks on the front lines, they had always been minimal, at least on the Frost Giant front, while the artillery did all the

heavy lifting for them. He could keep up a barrier over the group without any real issues, unless they were either using Royal Rank attacks, or repeated Commander Rank artillery strikes.

It would be better, both for him and for Thor, if it didn't come to simply tanking the artillery, but if they had to, they could, at least for a while.

"So, when do the buses leave in the morning? It doesn't sound like we're getting a flight, and I'm hoping the answer is early." Karl asked the others at the table.

The Golden Robed priest sitting next to Morgana nodded. "Yeah, right after breakfast. The replacements for the Clerics who are being shifted out will be here by then, so it should be a smooth transition, and then a very long drive.

The roads have been improved all the way to the border, in anticipation of extra traffic, but the wilderness is always unpredictable.

Maybe, if you're lucky, you will get on the train most of the way there, and then a bus for the last fifty kilometres or so to the border. That would be much better. I know I will be flying, but that's because I'm going to the Frost Giant border."

"Did you pack warm? You are certainly going to want something thick and fur, not just the cold weather gear that they issue. Trust me, it's terrible, and everyone fighting on the Frost Giant front does their best to get a replacement for it as soon as they can." Karl explained.

"I will make a note of it. We have thicker cloaks and robes in the store rooms, but the border is supposed to be starting to return to normal temperatures."

Morgana smiled. "Starting is the operative word there. Given a few more months, you shouldn't need it. But this week, you'll be thankful for it."

Chapter 330 On The Road Again

After dinner, everyone settled in for an early night, prepared to get as much sleep as they could before the long bus ride ahead.

The borders weren't the only dangerous areas, and some of the areas that they had to pass through had recent monster incursions. They were at the Common and Awakened level, but that didn't really matter if they had damaged the roads, or attacked the buses before the passengers could stop them.

The plan was for the buses to keep moving constantly until they arrived, and lunches had been packed for everyone, while dinner would be made on the bus, should they still be moving at that time.

Given that the roads were previously soft dirt for much of the last portion toward the border, Karl didn't have high hopes that they would actually get there in one day, but he might get to let Thor out to help pull a bus convoy.

A little extra traction was all that they usually needed, and Thor could provide that for them.

The helicopters arrived during breakfast to take the clerics that were going to the Frost Giant border, and to drop off more patients for the rehab facility, as well as Elites and clerics who had come off rotation.

The buses were waiting and ready to go when Karl and his group loaded themselves in, along with as many of the clerics as they could fit.

There were no supply vehicles in this group, only personnel, to get the number down to just two buses for the sixty people going, with the hope that it would reduce the

risks of them being attacked while a vehicle was immobilized.

Break-downs, flat tires, stuck in the mud, or a dozen other reasons could cause them to be delayed, and every delay increased the danger to their healers.

"Are we ready?" The bus driver asked as Karl took a spot at the front of the bus, putting him closest to the door in case there was a threat.

Karl and Morgana were the only Commanders on the bus, as Bob and Doug were in the second vehicle, so that put him first in line to respond to any incidents. They didn't have the usual security guards in the small convoy today, as they couldn't be spared for escort duty when there were already Elites in the bus who could do the job, but Karl didn't really mind, and Bob knew that the beasts would step in to help deal with most issues, as Karl was in the lead vehicle. "Yeah, we're good. The head count is correct, everyone has verified that they didn't forget their gear, and they've all been to the potty before our field trip." Karl replied. The bus full of clerics laughed, but Karl wasn't joking. The last thing that they had been advised was to use the facilities before they left, as the bus had a limited capacity. Not that anyone wanted to use the tiny bus bathroom any more than they wanted to be seated next to it after someone used it.

They rolled out of the compound and headed for the main highway out of the Capital, using the priority lane normally reserved for emergency vehicles.

That got them out of the city in a reasonable time, and for the next few hours, the road was paved as they moved through the core of the Golden Dragon Nation. It was only when you got near the borders that the roads were strategically unimproved so that they didn't make it even easier for an invading army to come straight to the Capital.

But they hadn't had rain in quite a while, and the roads were solid. Dusty, but solid. Their speeds dropped as the roads got worse in the hills near the border, and by the time it was dark out, they were down to twenty kilometres an hour or less, crawling through the rutted dirt paths toward the distant lights of artillery shelling. That was a better start than any of them had dared to hope for. Karl had expected that it would take at least a day to get this far, and while they had seen monsters, none of them had been brave enough to come near the pair of church buses. "Those awake, please ensure that the sleeping passengers have their harnesses fastened. This next portion will be very rough." The driver announced.

Karl looked out the window and saw that the road was deeply rutted in the valley from the last rainfall, and now that it had dried, that clay dirt would be as hard as pavement, with only a few routes that could be safely navigated without getting the bottom of the bus hung up on the ridges.

"Slow a little more, and I will send Thor out. His Earthquake should be able to level the ground a little, or he can smash down some of the biggest ruts with his tail." Karl

offered.

"Alright. I will let the other bus know that we're stopping while he works."

Karl had said the magic words, and Thor was already running past the bus, looking

for the best path to smash so that he could let them through.

He hadn't had a chance to smash anything in days, and this was tail smashing, not just charging a pillar in his space. The Cerro equivalent of a full-body workout. Or perhaps the equivalent of leg day, Karl thought.

He wasn't convinced that the Cerro was looking for the best route for the bus as much as he was looking for the route that would be the most fun to smash to a smooth surface, but Thor was already at work, and the dust cloud was accompanied by a deep rumble that said he was using Earthquake and not just his tail to level the

road.

The noise woke Morgana from a light sleep, and she looked around in alarm before realizing that they were stopped and Karl was still in the bus.

"It's just Thor, fixing the road for us to get through. Nothing to worry about, and we will be back in motion in a minute." Karl whispered, trying to avoid waking the sleeping clerics.

As soon as they got to the border, all of them would have their hands full of work, so

it was only right that he tried to let them sleep for now. Thor made it to the other end of the valley, where the road was smoother again, but he didn't stop his work, and smashed out the ruts on the way up the hill as well, resurfacing the dirt as well as could be hoped for until the next heavy downpour. "Alright, it's clear to go through. Thor says it's bone dry all the way down, so you can take whatever route you like. The right side of the road is fairly soft, though, as it had the worst ruts and he didn't compact it after he levelled it."

The noise had scared away even the smaller creatures, and for half an hour after Thor returned to his space, they didn't see a single living thing.

Then, they came across a few farms which were still inhabited, with a single red light illuminated to inform the Elites and others passing by that they had nothing left to

spare.

The lights would draw the aid convoys from the clerics to them, and they would help them restock, so the farms had enough for themselves, as well as a bit more to spare for the next group that came along, but at the moment, they were in too much of a

hurry to stop.

Plus, farmers with animals to feed in the morning would likely not appreciate visitors at two in the morning.

The flashing lights of the artillery were slowly joined by the sound of rolling thunder as the dawn crept up on them, and Karl began to become concerned for the state of the border. That was an intense bombardment, and it had been going on all night

long.

If it wasn't enough to repel whatever attack was coming at the lines, then they were in for even more Chaos than they had expected once their journey was completed. They only had a few more hours to the border, and even if his group got out and ran, with the casters on the beasts, they would be there in the same amount of time or less. So, there wasn't much they could do but wait, and hope that any changes in the rate of fire were good news.