

Beast Master 381

Chapter 381 Epic Team Challenge

"Who picked Epic?" The leader of the Knights asked.

Dana gestured toward Karl. "Isn't it obvious? Karl did the Epic version of the first two trials, now we all get to do the Epic version of the team trial." "In my defence, I didn't know that there was going to be a team event at the end." Karl responded. It was too late to change anything about it now, even though they were going to have to face extra enemies at Epic difficulty because he had let the intrusive thoughts win and Lotus spent an hour just playing with the boxes.

Across the arena from them, a four-armed Giant with shining Golden armour over black robes appeared. The monstrous creature stood nearly ten metres tall, and Karl wondered how exactly they were expected to deal real damage to that.

Its lower legs were heavily armoured, and that was all that they could conveniently reach, while the rest of it was not showing any bare skin at all. Even its face was covered by a golden helmet.

"It looks like a mage special to me." Tessa noted. There were soft joints, where the armour appeared to be leather, but none of those were in easy reach of the team, except for the mages, who had better ranged combat abilities.

"So this is what a modified difficulty Epic boss looks like." Lotus announced, enthralled with the appearance of a creature that she had never seen before.

"Now, we just need to find a way to defeat it because the fight is starting." Karl reminded her as the timer ran out.

When the timer ended, the Giant began to move, and the group scattered. Bob and Ophelia were headed forward, looking for an opening they could reach, while the Magic Knights were stepping through the sky to hurl blade attacks at the massive target.

Rae created a web to pull herself up into the bleachers, away from the main fight, and then hurled a boulder the size of a medicine ball at the four-armed Giant. The impact left a deep dent in the golden armour, and Karl smiled as he realized that while it was a deadly opponent, it was still Commander Rank.

It also wasn't double-jointed, and when the Spider Golems got on its back, it had to sweep up with a club to knock them free, which wasn't nearly as deadly for them as the fast purple demon had been.

[Rae, make a web net all around the arena for the Knights and Golems to fight from.] Karl instructed as he realized what the most effective tactic was likely to be.

If they couldn't reach from the ground, they wouldn't fight from the ground.

Rae worked fast, and made a loose net all around the arena out of super stretchy Royal Rank silk rope.

The fighters could land on that, grab it with a free hand, and then use it as a springboard to jump at the Giant when they saw an opening. Bob had superhuman strength, the same as Karl, and the Knights could walk on air, so it was an easy way for them to rest between attacks, and blows from the Titan's clubs wouldn't easily ruin it.

Karl tested the theory by taking a run toward the wall and jumping up on a completed section, then leaping off as he rebounded.

It launched him toward the Giant's lower-right arm, which was hastily withdrawn to let Karl's blade crash into an enormous club.

The [Chain Lightning] still spread through the creature's body as Karl fell to the ground, thrown well clear of the stomping feet by the impact.

Not exactly optimal for Karl, who had plenty of his own ranged attacks, but good enough that everyone else saw what he was going for without having to announce it out loud.

Once they all knew, Karl switched back to his bow and began aiming for the vulnerable joints.

That was surprisingly easy on a target this large, especially when it was being swarmed by fighters who wanted to attack from close range, and tortured by spells from their mages.

One massive target against a team of thirteen wasn't much of a fair fight, but the first time that one of the Giant's clubs made contact, Karl realized it might not be as lopsided as he had thought.

A flick of the wrist caught one of the knights across the chest, caving in his armour and sending him rocketing across the arena.

If it was not for the stretchy net that Rae had created, his journey would have ended with a splat against the stone seating, but instead he bounced off and fell to the ground, coughing blood before falling unconscious.

Doug was at his side within seconds, engulfing him in a wave of green healing magic and peeling his armour open, so the chest cavity could be healed.

With the dented plate in place, the repairs couldn't be made, and the Knight wasn't conscious to remove it himself.

Doug gave a thumbs up to the group as he finished the emergency work and dragged the Knight into an alcove along the arena's wall, where he was unlikely to be hit by any more attacks. Bob was their next casualty, when a club shattered his arm and destroyed his shield, sending him into the net right above his brother, who caught him on the way down and placed him gently on the ground.

The target was bleeding profusely from what looked like a hundred different wounds, but they were still closing, despite the effects of [Lacerate] and the battle was grinding on, with the human team slowly losing energy.

Thor wasn't certain what to do. He couldn't charge, the Giant was too big. He just had to stand there with Tessa on his back and keep the buffs up on everyone.

Being the support was important, proud work, but he did like it so much better when he could smash things.

Karl aimed high, trying to distract the Giant with [Chain Lightning] to the face, but with pure dumb luck, the first arrow flew straight through the gap in the visor, impaling one of the Giant's eyes and sending electricity crackling across the helmet.

It flailed wildly, now blind on one side, and the Knights moved to take advantage.

A flurry of spells hit the Giant's blind side, crippling two of its limbs, and tearing great chunks from its armour.

From there, the end was clear, or so they thought.

The Giant surged with power, and a wave of force erupted from its body, throwing everyone away and shattering most of their barriers.

The shockwave raced toward Karl, who was between the Giant and Doug, who was still working on Bob's arm. Karl brought up [Earth Shield] as a wall, hoping to deflect the worst of the damage and keep the healer safe, but it didn't last long, shattered to rubble by the force of the blast.

Everyone was at ground level now, and the Giant looked like it would collapse at any second, but the power was surging again.

[Golems, remove the head. It's trying to self-destruct.] Karl instructed.

Rae summoned a new pair and began building little stone domes over the groups of Elites on the ground, as Karl retreated to Doug's side to do the same for the wounded.

The air trembled with power as the next eruption peaked, and then it was gone, as were all the stone barriers and other spell effects, leaving the group standing in an empty coliseum.

[First Advancement Trial Complete. Calculating Rewards.]

Chapter 382 Challenge Complete

Many of the group members had assumed that they would get the reward they had chosen at the start, the one in the chest, so they wondered what there was to calculate, unless it was an additional reward for the team effort.j

But that thought was secondary to most of them, as their armour was heavily damaged, and every bone in their body was either broken or aching after that area attack. It was a good thing that the battles were over because they were going to need more than a few minutes to recover, even with the two healing specialty Clerics on hand to assist Thor's [Refreshing Lightning]

[Reward Calculated. Enhanced Epic Rank Team Trial Successful.]

[10 Percent Bonus added to all rewards.]

Everyone stared at the reward announcement, visible in the air above the arena's sand.

"A ten percent bonus for a third trial? Somehow, I feel a bit cheated." Bob sighed as he gingerly flexed the fingers on his freshly repaired arm.

Then, the awards appeared.

In front of each of the members, except Lotus, sat two silver chests, one small purple box and a leather bag. Lotus only had the purple box and a smaller bag.

"Oh, it's ten percent on top of the Epic reward for the third trial. I take back any and all criticisms I might have been thinking." Bob amended.

Lotus giggled. "I don't think it counts if you only take it back after you got the reward."

The silver chests were quickly opened, and Lotus sighed as she realized that her fun playing with the boxes meant that she didn't actually get them in the end.

But she did get a pretty purple one, and that was the one that she hadn't dared to mess with in the waiting room.

Now, there was no chain around it, but she waited with Karl while the others opened their chests and removed a pair of skill books plus a load of coins and gems.

There were no magical rings or other items in there, only precious metals and gems, but the skill books were the real treasures.

There was one in each silver chest, and both were different skills. Only, there didn't seem to be any organization as to who got what skill, as Karl could see that Dana had a blade skill and a combat form, while Ophelia had a druid type Dire Bear Transformation spell and a toxic claw skill.

On second thought, a [Berserk Terror] enhanced Dire Bear was a terrifying thought. They made Warbears look like they were half grown to start with, and with the additional size from the skill, she would be nearly as large as Thor's regular size.

Two of the Knights looked at the books in their stack, and then reached out to trade them, but the moment that someone else's hand touched them, they reappeared in their original chest.

"That is unusual. Does that mean we're intended to learn what we were given?" Morgana asked as she looked at the [Toxic Swamp] and [Painful Gaze] spells that she had been given.

None of the skills were extremely rare or powerful, as expected from the silver chest, which had displayed only books with simple covers. However, none of them were skills that the user already had.

Dana activated her two books, and they vanished as she grinned like a madwoman.

"Now, I just need to learn some movement skills, and I will be able to fight like the Knights. Learning combat forms from a book is so much better than doing it the conventional way." She declared.

When he looked at it that way, Karl realized that it was not giving them skills that should help with their current talents, but ones that would help shape them in the future. It seemed that Dana would become

more of a Battlemage, while Ophelia was treading the path of the Druid, with a transformation that was becoming even more bestial.

"Open your first two boxes, and let's see what the Epic Trials granted you as a bonus." Tessa demanded.

That made sense, as everyone would be able to open their last box at the same time, so Lotus wouldn't be left out at the end.

Karl carefully flipped open the lid on the first small box as Doug made a drumroll on the metal plates of Bob's armour.

Karl opened the first chest, and the amethyst box vanished in a burst of golden Holy Light, leaving behind an ornate skill book.

[Book of Evolution] Permanently causes any bonded pet to evolve into a form one Rank Higher than when the skill is used. Usable once per beast, some materials may be required.

That was a skill that was in Karl's Skill Tree, for a whopping fifty points, five times what it had cost him to get [Bestial Regeneration]. He had been intending to work toward it for some time, as it would be the most important possible skill to allow his beasts to break their limits and reach levels above Royal, but the price was ridiculous.

"That skill... Holy crap." Bob muttered.

"Right? If it wasn't once per beast, it would be world breaking, but even this will be huge. This is a skill that I saw as available to my class in another trial, but I hadn't managed to obtain it." Karl explained, not wanting to get sidetracked with an in-depth discussion of how the system appeared to him.

Karl opened the book, and it vanished, leaving him with a new skill, and real options to keep his beasts advancing, even if their power stalled.

"Alright, so the silver chest is one skill and some loot, the Epic chest is an overpowered skill. It looks like we're all in luck today." Tessa noted as Karl prepared to open the next chest.

The same golden light flashed from the chest when Karl opened the second Epic Rank reward, and again, there was a skill book. The book vanished in Karl's hands the moment he thought of opening it, and a second skill appeared in his mind.

[Bestial Raiment] grants the user armour suitable to their current environment. The armour will be of Epic Quality and of their current Rank.

"I wonder what sort of standard Epic Quality is?" He asked.

"What do you mean?" Doug asked.

"The skill is [Bestial Raiment], or Beast Armour for us less fancy folk. It creates armour at my Rank of Epic Quality." Karl explained, then switched armour from his battered main gear to the suit provided by the spell.

What he got was a mostly black scale bodysuit, with hard chitin plates over all the vital areas, and a black and white tabard hanging over the top, the colours split vertically.

As he recalled, Prince Corbin had said in the dungeon that those tabards were the mark of the Darklight Host. The ancient cult, or religious organization, depending on who you asked, that followed the World Dragon.

Karl shifted and found that the scales moved like the softest of silk, flowing with his body, while the plates were as secure as if they were attached to him, not shifting or bouncing at all as he moved.

"It's comfortable, I will give it that much." He explained as he examined the armour itself to see the bonuses that it would grant him.

There were unfamiliar stats among them, number bonuses to strength, constitution and agility instead of percentages. Then percentage-based bonuses to various types of elemental and magic damage, life steal on hit, and a durability percentage for the armour that was currently at one hundred percent.

"I wish you could cast that on everyone. It would save me so much work." Tessa sighed as she took in the state of everyone's armour after the last fight.

"Well, at least it's one less suit to do. Because mine is trashed again. The repair teams in the camp are not going to be happy with us when we get back." Karl laughed.

"So, do we just open the last one all at once and see who gets the best loot from the final boss? They should all be from the same fight, except maybe Karl's, since we don't know what order they were in." Lotus asked eagerly.

"That sounds like a plan. Everyone, prepare to open the boxes on the count of three."

Chapter 383 Group Accomplishment

All thirteen of the Elite Reward boxes were opened at once, and the golden light rose to a level that blinded everyone's senses. Even Karl's thermal vision couldn't see anything.

Then, they were in a new setting, all of them together, sitting on the ground in front of a massive golden chest.

"Well, that is new. Perhaps it's a group prize for the group fight?" Karl suggested.

"That's not the most insane thought that I had when I saw it." Lotus agreed.

The beasts had been forcibly relocated back into their spaces, and were currently trapped, as Remi found out when she tried to leave to go explore the huge metal box.

Lotus was practically vibrating with excitement, far beyond even the curiosity of Remi, so Tessa pushed her forward, letting the Nature Priestess be the one to open the giant box.

Of course, she had to climb it first, as she couldn't reach the lid, but anyone else in the group would have had to do the same.

Once she got near the top, she found a good foothold on a larger decoration, and wedged the bottom of her staff into the joint to pry the lid up. However, it was not a multi-ton solid gold box, but a magic reward chest, and it opened with the slightest of effort, sending Lotus tumbling down into Tessa's waiting arms.

"I knew you were going to fall off the box." The War Cleric laughed.

They backed away, and the box unfolded into a large golden platform with a spinning prize wheel in the centre.

All of the sectors had question marks on them, making the Knights and most of Karl's team glare at the random reward mechanism in annoyance. Couldn't it just tell them what they were getting? Or was there some sort of luck involved? Luck was a very real factor, and they all carried Holy Stones and charms to increase their own, but it really came down to who had the most favour of the World Dragon.

"Is one of you particularly favoured among the Gods? I would guess one of the High Clerics?" The female Knight asked.

"Actually, the one with the World Dragon's Luck is Karl. The rest of us were drawn into his nonsense." Tessa explained.

The Knight nodded her head. "I can see how that would happen. He's certainly not the average Elite, so there was bound to be something else favouring him."

"It also means I get to take the blame when they don't approve of the outcomes, so I guess I will be the one spinning the wheel." Karl agreed.

The others laughed and motioned him forward, even Lotus, who Karl knew secretly really wanted to spin the wheel.

He didn't torture the little cleric any longer, heading straight for the wheel, which felt warm in his hand when he grabbed one of the pegs to give it a spin.

There was an arrow shaped ticker at the bottom, marking the location of the winning prize, while the wheel itself extended far above Karl's head.

"Alright, here we go."

Karl gave the wheel a spin, and the ticker began rapidly clicking away as the pegs flew by. The bearings must have been well greased, Karl thought, as the wheel just kept spinning for most of a minute before slowing to a stop.

The clicking got slower and slower, headed for one of many anonymous spots on the wheel. Then Lotus darted forward, and grabbed the wheel in an attempt to drag it to a stop. But that wasn't happening, and the wheel simply carried her up into the air before coming to rest on a prize with one final click.

Lotus looked down, confused. That wasn't how wheels worked. If you made them heavy on one side, the heavy side ended up on the bottom. She was one hundred percent certain of that.

[Prize Confirmed] appeared in the air between Karl and the rest of the group as he gently removed the cleric from the wheel and returned to the others.

[Shared Prize Awarded] Three Months' Peak Rate Growth

There was a pause as everyone tried to understand what they were being given. What sort of reward was that? How did one even measure what three months worth of growth would be, and how would it even be awarded?

New knowledge of how to use his skills entered Karl's mind as golden light began to glow from the box. It engulfed the group for a few seconds, and then faded again, but left everyone feeling energized and enlightened.

As the reward bonus settled in, a surprising realization came to Karl's mind. He had what he needed to advance. He had a Royal Rank skill of his own, a Royal Rank pet, and more than enough stored energy to make the conversion. He even knew how to break the bottleneck smoothly.

How much of the three months that would have taken him on his own was a mystery, but one thing that he knew for certain was that Hawk was not happy.

He wasn't far from advancing, and Karl had stolen his spot in line because the rewards only went to him and not to all of them.

They would get their share after Karl advanced, both in excess energy and in the improved spaces that would come as a result of his advancement, but those were minor details in the mind of Hawk.

Karl wasn't the only one that was enjoying an advancement, though. Dana and Ophelia were both surging with power, and Lotus was glowing with a happy green light that had to mean she had made it to Commander Rank.

The Clergy were going to freak out when they met High Priestess Lotus, and it was going to be spectacular. The effects slowly faded, and the group began to pay attention to more than what was going on with themselves.

"Dammit, I'm so close I can taste it." Bob muttered as the last of the glowing light faded to nothingness.

"I take it you got caught at the bottleneck?" Karl asked.

Bob nodded and sighed. "I am missing something, and I can feel the lingering buildup of energy, but I don't have something that I need to break the bottleneck and move on to Royal Rank.

I think it might just be practical experience with my new skills that will let me move on. Or perhaps I just don't have a skill that's quite good enough yet, and I need to master one of my stronger ones. But either way, I think it's just a matter of practice now."

The five Knights all nodded in agreement. "We're not quite that far yet, but I'm certainly close to the bottleneck, and about to start looking for a way to break it. With this sort of bump, we might not need to use the resource stack to break through."

Karl was familiar with that. It was a combination that burnt out the Elite's potential to get them past the bottleneck. Either they would be Royal Rank forever, or they might even shoot into the Monarch or Overlord Ranks and then stay there.

It would be a shame for Elites as talented as these ones to take that way out. They didn't seem like the sorts that had built their foundation on resource abuse, so they should have the potential to get through the bottleneck on their own.

Chapter 384 Royal Return

The familiar text of the announcements appeared below the prize notification.

[Speak the word Depart to leave the First Advancement Trial.]

"Before we leave, we should prepare to be attacked. There was still a battle going on when we entered, so there are likely Hill Giants nearby, and we don't know which side will be holding the area around the exit." Karl reminded them as everyone prepared to get moving.

Once they were in formation, Karl tapped Lotus on the shoulder, and she spoke the magic words.

"We would like to depart, please."

[So polite.]

The notice appeared in the air below the other notices, and then they were standing on the battlefield, next to the portal, and in the middle of a fight between the teachers who were guarding the entrance and the Hill Giants who were determined to break through.

[Time to work everyone, show them what you've got.] Karl instructed.

There was a large group of Ascended Rank Hill Giants to Karl's left, until he hit them with a Royal Rank [Shred] layered with [Lacerate].

Those that it didn't kill outright were severely maimed and bleeding heavily, even missing limbs from the brutal arc of energy.

The Hill Giants scattered as they realized that there was a Royal Rank Elite on this portion of the line, doing their best to get out of his line of sight while they fought their way to the Trial entrance.

"What's the situation?" Karl asked as he moved next to one of the Mage Class teachers who had come to reinforce the portal area.

"The Hill Giants knew that the portal would open. We don't know how they knew, but it sounds like that was the reason they were attacking. One group of Hill Giants made it into the Trial, but they haven't come out yet, and we've got the rest of them pushed back now." The teacher explained.

"How did we find out that they knew?" Karl asked. That seemed like important intelligence that should have been shared in advance if they had it.

"The Giants Celebrated that they were the first ones to open a Trial. A number of us among the Academy speak Hill Giant." He explained.

"Crap. If that is why they're attacking the border, to create a conflict that will open a trial, this war just got a lot more chaotic.

The rewards in there were powerful.

Very powerful.

"If the Hill Giants get control of a few of those trials, their combat power is going to skyrocket. I recommend that we send a team of students so we can build up our total number of Commanders, and once we can, send another team of Commanders in, ones as close to the bottleneck as possible. If my team had been closer to the bottleneck, we might have had more Royal Rank fighters coming out just now, instead of a team of strong Commanders." Karl explained.

"We sent a team of Ascended Rank students with a pair of Commander Rank leaders from the defensive lines near the anomaly in as soon as your team came out. It wouldn't let anyone else in until then. Either the limit is two teams, or one team from each species." The mage explained.

From overhead, Karl heard Hawk mentally laughing as he formed flaming bird - shaped fireballs and hurled them into the Hill Giant ranks.

They exploded in grand style, sending out a spherical shaped [Rend] attack instead of shrapnel, and they were tearing holes in the offensive line.

[That's quite the combination.] Karl commended him.

[They make beautiful explosions after I added Rend to them. Just fire was alright, but it was a bit lacking. Now, they're perfect.]

It was a bit like a shotgun, as the Rend effect wasn't quite solid, and seemed to flay everything it hit with hundreds of light wounds. There was no deep penetration, just the shredded surface and the burns from the actual fireball explosion.

Karl heard swearing behind him, and saw that there was a whole team of Commander Rank Hill Giants pushing out from the Trial, while another team ran in between them, headed inside.

It had happened too suddenly to stop them, and the newly advanced team was retreating to consolidate their gains.

As soon as they were in, the entrance seemed to change, turning from a solid distortion to something much more transparent, the way it had looked before Karl and his team had entered.

The teachers pushed forward to check, sending a team to walk through it, and out the other side.

As soon as the Hill Giants saw that, they retreated a little, no longer trying to claim the portal, but staying close enough to allow their participants to rejoin their team safely.

"Professor, we should form lines on our side of the portal for now and hold. I think it will reduce casualties." Karl offered.

The Professor shot Karl a dirty look, but Karl just shrugged and continued to pick vulnerable targets for his arrows. He was only aiming for Giants attacking Elites who were in trouble, doing his best to minimize losses and strain on the Clerics. But keeping this offensive up when they couldn't even send another team into the portal was a waste. If they went to their own side, the Giants most likely would not follow until their team was coming out.

The teachers conferred on battle strategy for a half a minute, then began sounding the retreat, to bring the lines back to their side of the portal.

Immediately, a tense ceasefire began, with both sides easily in attacking range for their ranged abilities, but nobody doing anything as they waited for their teams to come back out of the Trial.

Karl had to admit, if the Hill Giants knew that they could trigger this First Advancement Trial by fighting with the humans along the border, it was a brilliant strategy to try to push a few more of their numbers over the breakpoint and into Royal Rank.

It was a shame that the human side wouldn't manage to get many more Royal Rank fighters, but none of them had expected the trial to close so quickly.

From what the teachers were saying, most instances were either first come, first served, or they were open for exact days. Whether that was one day, seven days or twenty-eight days was a mystery the first time, but it was almost always precise.

So, this four team limit didn't make sense to anyone on either side, and now they were left wondering what to do about it.

The next team out was the human team, who raced back to the lines, quietly celebrating their success while the Academy forces retreated.

If the Hill Giants got a Royal Rank advancement out of the trial, they didn't want to be too close to the action. Worse, they might have prepared a whole team right at the advancement point, and although

they had only sent a five-person team instead of the ten that the humans did, it would still be a massacre if all five of them came out at Royal Rank.

The tension continued to rise until the Hill Giant team exited the Trial and made their way back to their own lines. They were up by one Royal Rank Hill Giant, an even gain compared to the humans, and apparently not as good as they were hoping for, as the force immediately began to retreat.

Chapter 385 Formalities

Once the chaos of the battle had subsided, Karl realized that a significant amount of time had passed while they were inside the trials, and the night shift was about to start their rotation on the line.

It was strange to think that so much time had elapsed since the start of the trial, when the second group had only taken a few hours at the most, but the sun's position didn't lie.

Karl was waiting and watching, to ensure that the Hill Giants didn't try to push their luck and return, when a friendly hand patted him on the shoulder. "You can return to camp for dinner. The next shift is here. I think that the Administration Staff are going to want to talk to you as well after that incident with the trial. It appears that your team got some pretty serious rewards, and they are all excited." The soldier informed him.

Karl chuckled at the man's gift for understatement, and nodded his head. "I will return to the line once I have upgraded shields for the pike line. As soon as they switch, I will give them a layer of Earth Shield, then call it a night." Karl explained.

The soldiers lined up and raised the large rectangular shields of the shield wall, which remained on the line until they were damaged. "Earth Shield Incoming." Karl shouted as he cast the spell, then moved down the line again, as he had earlier in the day.

That should keep them through the night, or at least through the first few hits of an engagement if there was something happening during the night shift.

The Hill Giants didn't normally attack at night, but they had been particularly upset today with the abbreviated Trial, where both sides had only gotten two teams through. The Giants were going to want to punish the humans for taking two of the available four slots and not even using half of them to try for a Royal Rank fighter, but instead stacking their number of Commanders instead.

But what the Academy knew was that the faster you progressed while you were young, the further an Elite could go before they hit the limits of their potential. It seemed to decline with time, and readministering the serum didn't help refresh it.

So, pushing students to Commander still made it more likely that they would get to Royal Rank, and it was a better deal for the Academy if those opportunities were given to students than to teachers, whose peak growth years had already passed.

But they had another issue today, and that was that one of the students really did make it to Royal Rank. Namely, Karl.

They should have known better than to think that the news of Rae advancing wouldn't bring an immediate response from the higher powers. The Academy, the Bureau of Elite Development, the Church and the Army all had ranking members stationed here, but that wasn't enough for this unprecedented situation.

Rumours were already flying that his assigned group had produced two other unregistered Commanders plus two High Priestesses, but the power that Morgana and Bob were showing when they returned to the lines after the Trial had everyone wondering how long it would be before they also made Royal Rank.

So, more influential members had been sent from every possible facet of Golden Dragon Nation society, including reporters and a government Press Officer. They had all arrived in the last hour, while the second team was in the trials, with the hope that they would have an entire team of Commanders added to the Academy's population, in addition to the confused reports of Karl and Rae's advancement.

Karl followed the camp workers' directions to a secondary dining hall, where he found his expanded group, along with the other ten Elites who had been sent as the second group.

"I would like to say that nobody expects the Holy Inquisition, but this time their presence was entirely predictable." Karl greeted the group at the table beside his as he took a seat.

"Brother Karl, it's good to see you advanced again." A Royal Rank Inquisitor replied with a smile.

Karl nodded politely, then looked around the room to see if there were any familiar faces among the guests.

There was a High Priestess of the Nature God who he remembered from when they signed the contract to work as a team. She giggled at him and waved as he looked her way, which made Karl laugh along with her.

The Nature Clerics had to think that it was hilarious that Lotus was now a High Priestess, even if the thought of her in charge of anything horrified the rest of the clergy.

Other than that, some of the politicians looked vaguely familiar. They might have been part of the groups trying to recruit him at Commander Rank a few months back. It made sense that some of them would be the same, as they were originally sent to try to talk to Prince Corbin when he had reached the Academy.

One of the politicians in an expensive looking suit stood to address the room. "Now that we're all here, I would like to congratulate you all on your advancements. Today we recognize fourteen new Commanders, four of which are from the Church's ranks, and twelve of which are still students." He began.

Karl looked over at the other group and realized that there was a white robed Priest and an annoyed looking blue dragon cleric with them. Why they had a cleric from the god of Knowledge seemed fairly obvious to Karl, as everyone wanted to know what the anomaly was, but they normally didn't specialize in healing or group buffs, so they were rarely sent to combat.

They could do it, but their skills might be rusty, as they spent all their time in the library and inscription rooms.

At least she should have had [Refreshing Lightning] for her solo trials.

"We also recognize a new Prince of the Nation, and as is tradition, we would like for the Prince to choose one cause to assist with his influence." The politician continued.

Karl could see that most of the other factions' representatives were rolling their eyes, but Karl smiled politely back at him and rose to his feet. "I have been thinking about that issue since I advanced to Commander Rank, and I believe that I have an answer already. I would like to devote my time to increasing the individual combat power of the Elites. I believe everyone here has the clearance to know that I have already donated a number of skill books to the Inscriptionists, and I have assisted a number of our barbarians in gaining a powerful new Rage type skill. That is what I plan to continue. I will spend my leisure time looking for signs of relics or other methods that can be spread among the Elites to give us an advantage over those who would seek to harm us." Karl announced.

That would almost certainly have a dozen groups pushing for some of his time, but it didn't devote all of his efforts to one faction.

But as he had advanced and had been force-fed information from the final trial reward, many things had become clear to Karl. One of them was that he simply lacked the skills to share all of his skills.

What if he could teach someone else to have a beast space? Wouldn't that make for even more overpowered Elites? If it didn't work on other Elites, maybe it would work on some of the soldiers.

Or if he could teach more people the higher ranked skills that he was sure to learn in the future? Even just finding time to make books for the new skills he could use would be huge for the Clergy Library. Not even Lacerate had a proper skill book for it yet, and Rae had learned that from an Elite.

"Did you have more that you could teach the Elites?" One of the Inquisitors asked.

"I believe that with a bit of time I can create a book of Lacerate. That should be useful to dozens of warriors and rogues. After that, I will have to see if there are any other abilities that can be easily shared." Karl explained.

That was enough to get most of the people in the room excited. Everyone loved a chance to make the Elites more powerful, and that one skill book would be enough to ensure that Karl was not a name that was easily forgotten among his peers.

Chapter 386 Heroes Need Capes

The politician continued once Karl returned to his seat. "There will be formal testing at a later date, should there be any doubts about your advancements, but as of today, all of the advancements have

been certified through informal testing by the Clergy and Government authorities. New uniforms will be available to all of our new Commanders, and if Prince Karl will rise, the Inquisition has won the lottery to present your Royal Cape."

Karl stood, and the Royal Rank member of the Inquisition rose with him, holding a box he had taken out from under the table. It was a simple black robe with gold trim that went well with the Commander Rank black suit, and it attached across his chest with a heavy golden chain, bearing the twin dragon symbol of the Golden Dragon Nation on every link.

The cape bonded to Karl the moment that the clasp was fastened, and the badge on his uniform changed slightly to include a crown at the top, marking him as Royal Rank, should anyone doubt his word.

"Thank you, Inquisitor." Karl responded once the man stepped back.

"It is an honour, Prince Karl. Just try not to taunt the others too much with your rank, no matter how tempting it is."

[Behave, Your Highness.] Dana whispered in his ear using a tone that had his little Karl at full attention.

Karl gave her a wink and made plans for her upcoming birthday. He was going to have to give her a special present this year.

"I am certain that I can mostly resist the temptation. Besides, after spending months fighting along the Frost Giant border, the novelty of wearing a cape has already worn off. They're just too practical for cold weather." Karl joked.

The staff brought out a meal for everyone, the fancy sort that they usually reserved for visiting guests on the line, and Karl smiled at their efforts to make rice and beans fancy by putting long slices of pickled vegetables on top, then surrounding it with sliced meat.

The meal made it easy to see who was used to being out of the city and who was used to all of the fine dining establishments of either the Capital or one of the other large cities. The Inquisition members

were pleasantly surprised to find that they had spiced the meat, while most of the politicians just looked like they were doing their best to ignore what they were eating.

The new Commanders from the other group were being swarmed by dignitaries, wishing them well and not so subtly pushing for them to commit to some project or another, the same as they had done to Karl when he advanced. Only, these ones were all in their final year at the Academy, and they knew all about the tricks to expect when they eventually advanced.

A few had approached Ophelia, but she seemed to know the ultimate trick to scare them away. She was normally a quiet sort, and rather gentle in her human form, but when they approached her to try to get her to join their projects, she was obnoxious, crude and affected a heavy accent that had them all politely excusing themselves within seconds.

They would eventually learn that they had been tricked and come back trying to get her to join their causes, but that tactic should work well enough for today, and then Ophelia would have some time to make a decision on her own.

Oddly, as Karl sat with his hand on Dana's thigh, nobody tried to come over and pitch her for their cause. It seemed that his claim was enough to keep them away, with the assumption that her time was already spoken for by the new Prince.

Once they had eaten, the teachers came in with new badges for everyone who had advanced to Commander Rank, as well as their new suits, while the Nature Priestess came over to give new robes to the four clerics who had advanced.

The Blue Dragon Cleric's were quite fancy and trimmed with gold embroidery, similar to the ones worn by the cleric in white except for the base colour. Lotus got simple green robes, but with beads and leather laces all along the edges and more natural ornaments instead of embroidery. They were fancier than the ones the older High Priestess was wearing, and Karl realized that unlike the other factions, the Nature Clerics rarely wore their formal robes.

Tessa's, were red with black trim, and Karl noticed that the robes actually contained a mesh of metallic thread through them, as part of their enchanted defences.

They looked simple, but they were actually a rather powerful magical armour piece.

"I believe that we've crushed the previous record for the maximum number of Commanders enrolled in the Academy at one time." Karl laughed as the last of the new advancements put on their new outfits.

A number of the politicians laughed, and the Lead Inquisitor shook his head. "Before this mission, it wouldn't have just been a daily record, but a record number of Commanders as students. As it is, the Academy has doubled the number in a single day.

That advancement trial was a huge benefit to the Academy, and now that they've got a Royal Rank student on the lines, the Academy has little to fear from the Hill Giants."

The politicians looked nervous as he finished that sentence. They had been fully intending to pull Karl from the area to have him do something else that served their department's imperatives, but arguing with the Inquisition was a losing cause.

The best that they could hope for was to try to get his whole team moved to the Mountain Giant front, which was closer to the Capital, and easier to get to when they wanted them to do something.

The spokesman for the politicians stood to address the group. "Now that we've all eaten, why don't we get the interviews underway? We can do them outdoors, where the battlefield will make a proper backdrop for the footage of the new Commanders? It's a big day for the Golden Dragon Nation, after all." That was the part that nobody, except the news people, were looking forward to. They would have to do multiple interviews, so that all of the dignitaries could be seen with more than one of the new Commanders, and to fill time for the TV stations.

Worse for Karl, he couldn't even bring out Thor as a distraction this time, as it was likely to be more of an informal style, and he would be expected to interact with the officials who had come to congratulate them.

The spokesman for the politicians gestured at one of the classroom tents. "Prince Karl, if you would come this way, please. We would like to do a group interview with you while the Commanders are with the reporters. It won't take long, and it won't air with the other news, so we will be setting up a fake stage for your footage." "Ah, I suppose that it makes sense that they don't want anyone to know where exactly I am, now that I have advanced." Karl noted.

"Exactly. Your footage will be held until there is a need for it. The next time that the news cycle needs a positive story, it will be released so that the people have something to cheer about, and they don't have to focus on whatever had happened in the previous days." The politician agreed.

Chapter 387 Do I Have To?

The tent had been set up like the inside of a luxury hotel room, right down to a television screen playing a fake city street view behind closed curtains. It would only be in the edge of the view, but it gave a directionality to the lighting in the room, which Karl assumed would make it feel more natural for the viewers at home. To him, it was just too obviously unnatural.

For one, his vision was as sharp as Hawk's. Secondly, he had gotten so used to the echolocation and thermal imaging being overlaid on everything he looked at, that it was very obvious there was a television behind the curtains.

But then they turned on all the professional lighting, and it didn't matter anymore. The lighting would be perfect in the video, not natural, so the screen was only there to make it look like a real window.

"If you can take a seat there, that would be just right. And can you get your Hawk to stand on the end table? Or is the bond not like that?" The producer asked.

"I can have Hawk stand on the end table, that shouldn't be a problem. But his talons will almost certainly damage it unless you've got a stand that he can perch on. Hawks aren't meant to stand on flat surfaces. He's not a duck."

One of the workers ran out, and then came back in with an extra microphone stand.

"What about this? Will this work well enough as a perch?" He asked.

He set it up next to the chair and adjusted the height, so Hawk would be just below Karl's shoulder level.

Hawk left his space and landed on the perch, grabbing it gently, so he didn't damage the paint. Fortunately, it was a bit rough on the surface, so his feet didn't slip around and force him to use his claws.

"That is perfect. I don't know if you've heard, but some bard made up a song about you two while you were in the Frost Giant Nation, and it's climbing the charts. That's why we wanted Hawk with you today, so that even though people might not recognize you, they will associate you and your reputation with the song as soon as the interview starts." The producer explained.

"Hawk the Giant Slayer." Karl laughed.

"How close is that to the truth? We're not going to have a bunch of other Elites coming out to refute your actions, are we?" One of the politicians asked.

"Honestly, the song doesn't do our experience along the Frost Giant border justice. We went on a rampage even before the fight with the Royal Rank leader.

I can only say that it's a shame that we weren't at our current strength for that one. We lost a team member during that fight, but now it would be a relatively even match. One on one, Rae could take that Frost Giant in a matter of minutes." Karl explained.

"Are there any questions that we should avoid? Things that might not be suitable for television?" The producer asked.

Karl didn't see any issues at first, but then one came to him. "You should likely not ask about my own musical taste. I grew up in the mines, so all my favourite songs are miners' working tunes."

"That doesn't sound so bad." The producer replied.

Karl whistled the first few bars of 'Give the Working Man A Chance' and the producer paled as he recognized the tune.

"I take that back. The average citizen might not appreciate a miner's dark sense of humour. Or worse, they probably would." He replied, retracting his statement so he didn't have to edit out footage of the new Prince subtly advocating for the death of incompetent leaders.

But while the Producer and the Politician were both incredibly nervous about what Karl would say next, the Inquisitor thought it was hilarious.

"Brother Karl is definitely best suited to be one of us. With that kind of thinking, he might be the next Commander Hirsch." The Inquisitor laughed.

"Who is that? I didn't watch the news much growing up, and they don't play it here." Karl asked.

"Oh, it might not have even made news where you were. Hirsch was one of the first batch of Elite test subjects, years before the program went full scale. He was Minister of Justice for a while, until a corrupt politician tried to lie his way out of trouble, and the Commander killed him on the parliament floor." The Inquisitor explained.

"I would have paid money to see that."

The Inquisitor dabbed laughing tears from the corners of his eyes as he smiled at Karl. "And that's why it wasn't on the news."

"But did it work? That seems like the sort of thing that was meant to make a statement about ending corruption. Did it work?" Karl asked.

The Inquisitor whistled innocently while everyone else in the room looked away.

They were definitely not asking Karl about politics in his interviews.

As the cameras were adjusted for the size of the Inquisitor, who would be the first host, a note was handed to Karl, to remind him of all the things that were classified.

"You know, I'm beginning to understand why press releases don't ever actually say anything. So much of what we've done and are doing is classified that I couldn't even tell most of the good stories." Karl sighed.

"Good stories, like what?" The politician asked.

The Inquisitor nodded, meaning everyone here had clearance to hear what he might say, so Karl thought of a few things.

"Well, like that time that we picked a fight with two hundred Frost Giants and shattered a Frost Stone that blew up like a nuke.

Or that time that we hung out in an old Dwarven city for two weeks before we realized that the Magma Dragon had chased away all the Giants, and we weren't even in front of the line anymore, we were somewhere off to the side, and the shift had put us out of radio range, so we hadn't heard anything."

Karl heard giggling from the door and Lotus poked her head in. "Tell them about the time that Thor yeeted a Titan Cleric so far that we didn't even find the body."

The Inquisitor frowned at her. "Definitely do not tell anyone the details of that incident, High Priestess. Was there something that we could do for you?"

"They said that I had two hours before my interview and I wanted to ride Rae."

In her space, Rae laughed. Going for a run in the woods sounded like fun.

She appeared outside the door, and the little cleric nimbly hopped on top, then they both simply vanished as Rae Shadow Stepped.

"Well, that was bloody terrifying. I think I peed a little." The camera operator muttered.

"You get used to her. Even Bob Mackenzie, who was seriously arachnophobic when we met, has gotten mostly used to Rae now. He just prefers to deploy himself to the other side of the group, so they're not side by side." Karl laughed.

"Do you have fun stories about those two?" The producer asked hopefully.

"Like how they like to go for runs in the woods together? Or how High Priestess Lotus will ride her into combat so that they can stop to look for magical resources or shiny stones? Oh, we could send someone to take footage. I bet Rae wouldn't mind, she loves when people appreciate her greatness."

The cameraman raised his hand. "Maybe no fun giant murder spider stories. I don't care how you phrase it, I'm still going to have nightmares."

Karl chuckled. "Did you know that it takes her under three seconds to tear apart an Ascended Rank Armoured Car to get to a treat left inside?"

Chapter 388 Interview with Israel

At that point, the crew all realized that Karl was just cherry-picking stories to mess with them, but none of them doubted that Rae could mutilate an armoured vehicle.

"Which one of your pets is the friendliest?" The producer asked hopefully.

"Thor, followed by Remi. Hawk isn't really a people person, he just likes to watch them doing dumb stuff from above."

Hawk nodded in agreement. People were always doing dumb things. That was why you had to watch your fireballs all the way down. Because they might run right into them.

The producer nodded, then gestured for the Inquisitor to start the interview. "Good evening parishioners. I am High Priest Israel, here with a special bit of good news for you all. It is my pleasure to let you all know that we have independently verified that this young man sitting next to me has reached a major milestone. This is Prince Karl, born and raised in the Lithium Mines, and now the newest member of the Royal Rank Elites. Beside him is his Dragonhawk, who answers to the name Hawk. They are the subject of the recent hit song, Hawk the Giant Slayer.

Why don't we start there? The hawk is a majestic example of the species, and more powerful than I think any of use would have expected. Is he like a Parrot? Can he speak and understand human language?" The Inquisitor asked.

Hawk shook his head and Karl answered for him. "He can understand us just fine, but he can't speak. However, our bond allows us to communicate, so I can relay answers for him."

"That sounds like an incredibly useful ability. Is that why you rely upon him to do most of the scouting for your group?" Karl nodded. "Indeed. Being able to look down on a situation from above gives us a much better idea of what is going on, and reveals many hidden traps and potential ambushes that would have been hidden when scouted from ground level."

Combined with the extremely well refined eyesight and enhanced range of colours that he can see, and it is an incredibly potent combination."

"We are told that there is a song about you two, have you had a chance to hear it?" Israel asked.

"We did, actually. The bards in camp were playing it, and we got a good chuckle out of their rendition of our activities. They are truly a gifted class of Elites." Karl agreed.

Inquisitor Israel gave a professional smile to the camera, paused for a few seconds, giving them time to insert footage of the music, then continued. "How does it feel to be the youngest Royal Rank Elite in the decade that the program has been running? It has to be exciting for you."

Karl nodded. "It's a crazy feeling, and I can't really wrap my head around it. Royal Rank is just so far beyond anything that I thought I could achieve, that it is taking a while to truly sink in."

The interview went on for another half an hour and switched interviewers twice. They were both from the team of reporters, and only asked simple questions while avoiding anything that might need to be heavily edited or completely scrapped.

When they were finally finished, the final reporter got out of his seat, and he was replaced by a young woman in a wizard themed idol dress that wasn't hiding much of anything from Karl's point of view. It was knee-length and ruffled, but there was a slit up the thigh clear to the hip, and deep cleavage, despite the somewhat modest looking wide sleeves and high collar.

Karl was briefly mesmerized by her personality, but then he realized that this woman was also Royal Rank.

"Prince Karl, meet the Archmage." Israel introduced them.

"A pleasure." She responded, sounding like it was nothing of the sort.

"If we're dressing up for this, should I put on my fancy armour?" Karl asked.

The Inquisitor looked confused for a second until Karl changed into [Beast Armour] with the white fur cloak from the Frost Giants and no helmet. This time, the Chitin appeared as white with gold trim over the black scales, and Karl swept out the cloak, letting it pool behind him as he perched forward on the chair.

An assistant rushed forward, rearranging his cloak and his position, then gave him a thumbs up.

The Archmage looked startled at his armour, and leaned forward to inspect it, giving Karl a view down her ample cleavage.

"Is that an Epic Grade quest reward?" She asked.

"An Epic Grade skill as a Trial Reward, actually. The armour isn't physical armour, but created by a skill book. It still has the same sort of powerful enchantments, though. The bonuses on it are far beyond anything I've seen before." Karl agreed.

"What luck that must have been. Is it a new skill, or is that how you have had such success here on the front lines?" She asked curiously, with a flirty smile that Karl recognized as being for the cameras Karl had forgotten were rolling.

"It came to me during my Royal Rank advancement. I haven't even had a chance to properly test it yet."

The Archmage giggled in an endearing tone that didn't show in her eyes to Karl's sharp vision. She was good at this, playing it up for the cameras and doing interviews that she despised, but still making sure that her idol image didn't slip.

"There has been a lot of speculation among the other Ranking Elites on what your next beast will be. Have you made a choice, or received any sort of sign as to what it will be?" She asked.

"Not yet. I have a very well-rounded team, and they have done an excellent job so far. So, I've been holding off on making a decision until I have a better grasp on what we might be missing."

"That sounds like quite the luxury. On behalf of mages everywhere, I must say that I wish it could be so easy to learn new abilities."

Karl smiled and tried to remember what she specialized in. "Well, I've got a few new skill books to gift to the Blue Dragon Clerics, perhaps we can talk after and see if one of them might suit you." Karl replied with what he hoped looked like a shy smile and not a murderous snarl.

He had been reminded in the past that he was somewhat scary even when he didn't mean to be, which could be a mistake during an interview.

"Is that your intention as a Prince? To collect and distribute skills?" She asked, startled. Karl had assumed that they had warned her in advance, as it hadn't come up in his past interview, but he just nodded.

"Yes. It is a particular advantage that I have. It is my hope that with the contributions, it will make the early stages a bit easier for those who start with compatible classes. The Elites benefit from every new skill that we can gather, and I have a particular talent for finding new skills to share."

"That would be wonderful. But first, I have been asked to perform a short segment for the audience. Don't go too far."

"Cut." The producer called.

"We will film the actual bit to use an upcoming single when this is about to air. Thank you both for your assistance. You are finished with the interview process."

Karl sighed and let Hawk return to his space, while the Archmage got up out of her chair and grabbed him by the edges of his cloak.

"You had better not have been fucking with me about the new skill. Do you really have a skill book?" She demanded.

"Relax. I have a talent to make skill books out of the skills that I know. What is your specialty as a mage?" He replied.

"Lightning with a secondary in Ice Magic."

Karl checked what he needed to make the [Chain Lightning] book, and found that he had the herb that he needed, but if he had a Lightning Element stone, it was hidden in Rae's hole of shiny stones.

"Do you have [Chain Lightning]?" He asked.

"Do you think it's so easy to get advanced skills like that? I've got shock, stun, Lightning Bolt and Lightning Mine, plus Ice blast and Icicle for combat skills. Then a few just for show."

"Do you have a Lightning Element stone, Commander Rank or higher? I need to grind it for the ink for the book, and I will make you Chain Lightning. Or I can make you [Blizzard] with what I have on hand." [Blizzard] [Not Blizzard] Remi and Hawk responded at the same time.

Chapter 389 The Archmage

"You, assistant man. Get my bag. I have the stone we need in there." She demanded of one of the staffers who had come in with her.

"You can likely change back now that the interviews are done." Karl reminded her.

The Archmage sighed. "Do you think this frilly whore costume is bonded? It takes two hours to get into this and do all my makeup, then half as long to get it back off again."

Perhaps she had a lot in common with Dana. Not her temper or language, but she certainly didn't seem to be enjoying the idol life, though the rumour was that she had chosen it for herself after she advanced to Commander.

Instead, she donned a light silk dressing gown over her outfit and sat back down on the chair from the interview while they waited.

"Can you make me both of those skills, or is there a limit?" She asked.

"There is a limit, but two books in a day is possible. The [Lacerate] books for the clerics can wait, and I will make you both today. Do you know where they're sending you next?" Karl replied.

"Right here. I have shows all down the Hill Giant border this week, Military Inspiration Shows, as they call them. If there are attacks while I'm here, I help out. If there aren't I just go around doing Idol shows." The Archmage explained.

The assistant returned with a High Cleric from the Blue Dragon, and three Inscriptionists, letting Karl know that his comments would not be allowed to slide. They expected books, and they wanted them now.

"Did you bring the materials?" Karl asked. The Cleric nodded and put a pile of paper and a handful of Lightning Element stones at Commander Rank in front of him.

"Alright, let's get started."

It didn't take long to make either book, as he could use both skills and didn't have to refer to Remi. He just needed some of the grass from her space to mix with the base ink for the Blizzard spell.

Everyone sat silently as he made two copies of the [Chain Lightning] spell, and then two more of [Blizzard].

"Alright. Now, hopefully, this will work. It says that Mages with Expert or higher affinity in the element should be able to use it, as well as shamans and suitable element beasts." Karl explained.

"Mages and Shamans can both use the spells? Now we're talking." The Blue Dragon High Priest sighed. He had been fully prepared to be ridiculed for the obnoxiously restrictive books that Karl produced. They weren't broken or flawed, they just had such stringent requirements that they might as well be quest rewards of their own.

Karl felt Hawk's suspicion. [You're teaching more mages to use evil magic.]

[No, to use Blizzard, they already need a strong ability with Ice magic.]

[It's still evil magic.]

The Archmage reverently picked up the [Chain Lightning] book and flipped the cover open.

It seemed to hesitate for a split second, then the book vanished, and she jumped on Karl's lap, wrapping him in a hug.

"Thank you, thank you so much. That is a fantastic spell. How did you obtain it?"

"It comes from Remi, my Spirit Snake. Both of these are skills that she was born knowing, and since she's a Shaman, they were more transferrable than the other skills."

"And you didn't teach your group?" The High Priest asked.

"None of them are Ice or Lightning Element mages or Shamans. They couldn't use them without high enough proficiency in the Element.

But now your team can make copies of the books for every mage and shaman that is of those elements, and the Archmage can do her next photoshoot with two new spells. In fact, if you tone down Blizzard, it might be cool as a stage effect."

She looked confused, so Karl pointed at the cameraman and surrounded him with a very reduced Blizzard, but with high winds and thick snow, which sparkled in the light as it swirled around him.

"Just be careful of the distance. The wind can cause wardrobe malfunctions." Karl added.

The Archmage shifted on Karl's lap to pick up the [Blizzard] book, which vanished without as much hesitation, suggesting that her affinity with ice was actually higher than Lightning. She sighed in satisfaction, and got back to her feet. "They are going to want me to do more appearances before the late night show. Good luck, Prince Karl. You will need it once those bloodhounds from the special interests get to you."

She was turning to leave when Israel laughed. "I don't think he needs to worry about it. He terrified half of them and chased the other half away with a veiled threat to join the Inquisition. I don't know who taught him to play the game, but his angry hillbilly face doesn't match his craftiness."

"Hey, I will have you know that I was considered a handsome young man."

The idol laughed and shook her head. "You still are, but that aura you give off will scare the tar out of the non-Elites."

Then she was gone from the tent, and Karl just shrugged at Israel. He didn't recall threatening to join the Inquisition at all, but that might be how the politicians would have taken him, addressing the Royal Rank Inquisitor more familiarly than anyone else.

"Was there more that you wanted to share with the Church today, or do you need to hold off on the other skills that you might be able to copy?" Inquisitor Israel asked.

He hadn't missed how Karl had said that two books in a day should be possible, but he had actually made four of them.

"I'm mentally beat on that front. I was already pushing my luck with the fourth. But I should be able to make another tomorrow after a good night's rest. The problem is that most of the skills just aren't well suited to humans."

If I could make a book for Remi's Poison Flame Totems, that would be great, but even if I could learn the skill, it's a Spirit Snake exclusive skill."

The Inquisitor frowned. "There are so many restrictions on your skill."

Karl shrugged. "If I was making them for other Beast Masters, it would be fine. All they would need was a pet compatible with mine, and they would be able to use all of these picky books."

I'm hoping that one day I will find a way to transfer my core skills to others. Right now, it's not an option for the Skill Books, but I think that one day I might be able to create a book that will contract a beast. Then we can try making budget version Beast Masters out of people who don't have system access. If they could get even one space and grow with a beast, they could be maybe not on par with all Elites, but still stronger than the average soldier now."

The Inquisitor smiled. "Now that is a goal that I can get behind. I can see it now, a whole line of soldiers with their bonded beasts. They wouldn't even need to be combat beasts, just something with a good skill to share, and our army would be on par with any of the other magical or monster nations."

Karl sighed. "I'm not even sure that it will ever be possible. I've never heard of a way to transfer class skills to someone without the Blessing, but I've got a feeling that it should actually be possible if we can find a way to form the contract."

Chapter 390 Final Photos

As Karl finished his explanation, a whole new group of reporters came in with some of the other newly advanced Commanders from the Academy, and Karl was chased out along with Inquisitor Israel.

"As you might have noticed, the Prince title can get you many things, but getting in the way of people with things to do usually doesn't work, unless they're also Elites under your leadership and have to listen to you." The Inquisitor laughed.

Karl chuckled. "Why don't we go get some coffee and relax? We have time to kill until they're done with all the other interviews, and I don't think that they will appreciate it if we completely vanish."

"Can I meet your other team members? Have they all advanced to Royal Rank with you?" Israel asked.

Karl shook his head. "No. Rae advanced already, and Hawk is very close, but Remi and Thor are still solidly Commanders for at least a few more days. I can't say for certain when they will advance, but they're being pulled upward now that I have."

"Then let's go to the edge of the camp, but not too far, and you can show me the others. I briefly saw Rae before she ran away with High Priestess Lotus, and Hawk is a fine specimen of the Dragonhawk species, but I am curious about the others." Israel suggested.

"Oh, there's no need to leave. Thor is gentle, and everyone loves him, while Remi is small enough to not cause a traffic jam."

Remi came out and draped herself over Karl's shoulder, then stuck her upper body forward to get a better look at the Inquisitor.

He reached out and stroked the top of her head, making the Spirit Snake sway happily.

"She is venomous, isn't she?" He asked.

"Yeah. When she flares her hood, it is quite obvious that she's a Naga Spirit Snake, but when she's relaxed, she looks much less threatening. Just a big boop noodle."

"Tell me you don't let her boop people." Remi laughed, and the Inquisitor gave her a suspicious look. "She tried it, didn't she? Are they alright?"

Karl nodded. "They might have embarrassed themselves a little, but Remi only booped them on the nose with hers, there was no physical damage."

Karl called Thor out, and the Lightning Cerro immediately attracted attention from students who were living in the area near them on the right flank.

They all came over to pat his head or rub his scales, ignoring the fact that there might be a reason his was out in the middle of camp.

"It looks like the Lightning Cerro isn't far from Royal Rank either, but he's a bit odd, isn't he? I sense a lot of Holy magic from him." Israel asked.

"He's been training his Holy Magic in hopes of becoming a better support asset for the team. He has already learned Circle of Protection, and that's quite the feat for a Lightning Cerro. If he keeps it up, I think that he might actually manage to evolve on his own into some sort of Holy Cerro." Karl agreed.

"I heard that Hawk evolved, but that was due to resource consumption. Is it possible that your class could cause such a mutation on its own?"

Remi laughed, a sporadic hissing noise that sounded more like a hiccup, but left her mouth open.

"Did I say something funny?" Inquisitor Israel asked.

"Thor actually does have a resource, and a rather potent one. There is a pool of blessed water, imbued with the essence of Holy Stones in his resting space, and he regularly soaks there during his downtime." Karl explained.

Remi nodded in agreement, while the Inquisitor stared at Thor. "You have done very well for your beasts. The rare resources that I have learned that you found for them, and have apparently planted in their spaces, piqued my curiosity. That's why I volunteered to come out, when it could have been any of the Royal Rank High Priests." He informed Karl with a sly wink.

"You would be startled how much they have advanced since we met. Even Rae, who still looks very much like a Bloodbath Spider, has skills that I've never heard of a wild beast having.

She learned the Golems by watching mages use them, and now they're her most powerful attack ability, nearly tripling her combat power, or doubling it while she gains the ability to attack with Earth Magic from a distance and protect our casters." Karl agreed.

"So, would you say that Rae is nearly on par with a Golem Mage at the Royal Rank?" Israel asked.

"I would say that it's not even close if she's within range to summon her Golems.

Her other skills lean more toward assassination, so it's hard to compare them, but her Golems might be comparable to a whole mage on their own. The fact that they are imbued with her [Offensive Adaptation] and can use [Lacerate] might actually make them significantly more dangerous than the average Golem Mage."

"That is a good point. Most golems are good for absorbing damage and crowd control, but it takes a secondary skill to make them truly dangerous. Something like Durable Constructs, as your teammate Dana has, or a shared attack skill.

I suppose the most important thing that you can be doing tonight is actually focusing on trying to get the other beasts on your team to advance. Two Royal Rank threats is good, but five of them together is enough that there wouldn't be many who would dare threaten you along this border." Karl noticed that he amended it with 'along this border' as the Mountain Giants were even stronger, and willing to take on even the Overlords that the humans had sent to stop their advance. It was probably better not to mention that the Golems Rae summoned also benefitted from Durable Constructs. It hadn't taken her long to learn that skill.

Rae was much better than the average beast or Elite, but if he went further out, to the lands west of the Mountain Giants or into the Divine Beast Nation to their north and northwest, he would find an incredibly diverse range of threats that made magical skills a basic survival necessity.

In a way, being surrounded by enemies actually protected the Golden Dragon Nation, as it created a buffer between them and the other threats that populated this continent, but that was very little consolation to the humans of the one surviving largely nonmagical society.

Their neighbours weren't friendly, but at least they were mostly predictable. The mixed threats of the other nations were worse from a security standpoint.

As they talked, a reporter came up with a clipboard and an impatient look. "If Your Highnesses could spare us a few moments, the officials from the government would like to do a group photo shoot with all of the students who have advanced recently, as well as the other dignitaries present." She announced.

That meant that they both definitely needed to be there, as two of the highest-ranking Elites on the border couldn't simply be absent from the photo shoots that were meant to show unity and strength, as well as interdepartmental cooperation.

"Lead the way. We're ready for the rest of the interviews." Inquisitor Israel agreed.

"Oh, it's not interviews now, just a series of photo shoots. You know, posing, smile for the camera and all that." She explained.

The Inquisitor sighed and gave Karl a frown that made his face look much older than the mid-twenties that he likely was. "Let's get this over with, then. Fortunately for me, nobody expects the Inquisition to smile pretty for the camera. We've got a reputation to uphold and all."