

Beast Master 611

Chapter 611 Exfoliation

While Karl answered mundane questions about his mental state for the doctors, Rae was hard at work with her advancement.

She had finished her exfoliation routine, and she had the perfect blend of blood in the bath for her upcoming advancement. She wasn't entirely certain what sort of skills it would give her when she did become a proper queen, but she had high hopes for this blend with the little bit of Totem Rank blood that she had managed to acquire.

It was only a few drops, but it contained ridiculously potent healing abilities, and it was two full Ranks over her.

She settled into the pool and began the work of pulling all the energy out of the blood. The process was simple for a Bloodbath Spider, and instinctive. You just absorbed all the energy from the bath, and then you found out if your body adapted to it well enough to break through the bottleneck and if you learned any new skills.

The Cyclops species might have an innate skill that she hadn't gotten to see during their battles, as they were almost all crazed by the spawn, but Karl's blood definitely had some special properties, as did the Emperor's blood.

She could feel the energy from Karl and the Newbon Emperor, mixed in with the Monarch Rank cyclops blood, revitalizing her, while the blood from the two creatures that could regenerate also strengthened her resistances.

The Emperor's blood worked on her elemental resistance, as Trolls were immune to all but fire, where Karl had Limited Invulnerability as part of his core skill set, and the [Iron Within] skill that made his blood into living liquid metal and improved his already impressive invulnerability.

It was the perfect time for her advancement, Rae decided. She had gotten to have fun for most of the night, then a good nap, and now she got to skip all the boring stuff before the trainees showed up.

Rae briefly wondered how fast a baby Rogue would improve their Shadow Step if a giant spider was actually trying to eat them.

Just a little bite would do it, and then the clerics could heal her after, but it would add all the motivation in the world. Even if she did have to chase her down every day to continue the training.

Her mind wandered to many similarly pleasant things as she bathed, and then Rae noticed that there was another source of energy that nobody had bothered to remind her of. That sword and the ghost tree stick both had lots of energy in them, but they were stored separately, and she couldn't reach them from the bath.

It was unfortunate, but she would remember them for next time. More energy was always a good thing, and who knew how hard it was going to be to get a proper bath for her next few advancements.

Today's bath was particularly refreshing, Rae realized. The energy just seemed to keep coming as Karl refreshed the energy in her space, and the combination of Karl's and Emperor Troll's blood regenerated the damage she was doing in the process of remaking her body as she filtered an entire bath's worth of blood.

It was like having an energy drink that just didn't run empty.

She carefully stirred her bath and rolled over to refresh the coating on her back, then floated with her legs up for a few minutes as she enjoyed the influx of energy.

Rae was gaining the faintest hint of a new skill, and though it was going to take some effort to focus on it, she knew that when she got it right, it would be beautiful. Everything that a spider could hope for.

Karl was nearly finished with his interview with the psychology team when Rae finally got it right.

She had invented the most incredible combination of skills with Karl's [Skill Merger] ability. Ghost Beast had combined with Iron Within and Shadow Step to make a new stealth ability for Rae.

[Night Hunter] Ignores physical damage in spectral form. Allows movement to any point that can be seen or touched with the incorporeal body. Invisible to optical vision. Regenerates life while in spectral form.

But the skill wasn't the only benefit. Her body was rapidly growing more powerful. The advanced abilities of the blood she was ingesting were remaking her in a much more drastic fashion than her previous advancement, though Rae could see that she still looked like herself.

Her outer shell now would be nearly impervious to attack, thanks to Karl and the Emperor, and her physical strength was off the charts.

If she wanted to, she could now leap over a hundred metres to get into combat faster or take her prey by surprise. From that distance, most of them wouldn't even know that she was waiting for them until she was already on top of them.

But that wasn't all that she wanted. Trolls and Karl both had humanoid forms, and she wanted one.

She was quite literally the thing that haunted the darkness now, and that only worked if she could get to her prey.

The lingering power of her advancement helped Skill Merger and Skill Master function more efficiently, but the power was waning as she took in more than the blood could regenerate, and imbued her body with the energy.

But she still had the token, and a lot of determination. All she had to do was learn to use the spell without the amulet.

Karl was shaking hands with the doctors now, so they must be nearly done, but Rae was confident that she had the right method. All that was left was to try it out.

A surge of power activated [Humanoid Disguise] and she was in her two legged form in her space with only her own power.

Then a thought activated [Night Hunter] and Rae stepped out to stand beside the door, forgetting that she was still dripping with blood.

The effect when she let the spectral form fade and reappeared in front of the psychologist, covered in blood from head to toe with a row of serrated teeth smiling at the cleric, was even more beautiful than she had hoped for.

The man screamed like Lotus did when she was scared, then vaulted backwards and over the kitchen island before crashing to the ground and scurrying across the floor towards the back wall.

[Ten out of ten. Perfect form.] Cara congratulated her.

"A celebration is in order. Doctors, may I introduce to you Queen Rae Bloodbath, the most powerful known member of her species, and our Nation's newest Monarch Rank resident." Karl announced.

Skittles took a drag off one of the Nature Cleric specialty cigarettes as he glared at Karl.

"You're going to give an old man a heart attack one of these days."

Karl smiled. "Fortunately for us, not only do we have two clerics present, we also have one that can resurrect. It's fine if Rae sneaks up on people now and then."

The terrified man on the floor scoffed. "In my professional opinion, bringing them back to life won't undo the mental trauma of being literally scared to death."

Rae gave the man two thumbs up. "I will keep that in mind for next time. No scaring them all the way to death. Halfway is fun enough."

Chapter 612 Terror and Knowledge

The other four Acolytes came in, then stopped when they saw that Rae was soaked in blood, which was rapidly being absorbed into her skin.

"Did we come at a bad time? The lady at the door said that the doctors were on their way down." Joan, the dark-haired Red Dragon Cleric in the making, asked.

"No, you have impeccable timing. They were just on their way out when Lady Rae decided to show off her advancement to Monarch Rank and startled them." Karl explained.

Skittles was laughing so hard that he had tears in his eyes, but no noise was escaping from him, and his posture was both unnaturally straight and formal until he could get his amusement under control.

"Congratulations, Queen Rae. I am certain that we will see each other again soon." The hippie doctor announced, doing his best to avoid giving the new arrivals a poor impression of his professionalism.

The doctors left, and Karl's group split up to talk to their charges, while Karl sat down at the table with his writing implements. Most of them would need a skill book, and he hadn't even started on the ones he already knew he could make.

[Chain Lightning] for Owen the mage wouldn't be too hard. It was usable by most types of elemental magic users. Not Dana, at least not anymore, but it should be good for Owen.

[Circle of Protection] was more questionable. It was theoretically usable, but the description said [Suitably Blessed Clerics]. What exactly that entailed was anyone's guess. Compared to that, the warriors would be easier. They had wanted [Slash], which they should already have. But Karl had [Rend] and [Shred] which were both better sword attacks.

A couple of books of [Shred] didn't take him long while the others got acquainted with the students.

Sybil already had a head start, and she had Rae guiding her, while Cara gave helpful hints from the pile of blankets she had amassed in her space.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I have some books ready for you. For our warriors, I have copies of [Shred] to increase your damage output. For Owen, I have [Chain Lightning]. Then, for Miss Joan, I have a copy of [Circle of Protection]. I have a spare one as well, if Lotus or Tessa needs it."

The two older clerics both shook their heads. "We can already use it, but it doesn't stack, so we just let Thor, as his is stronger."

Karl nodded. That made sense. Karl could extend [Eternal Lightning] or [Refreshing Lightning] over the whole group, but he rarely did it, as Thor had it handled.

"It seems that we're all relying on you." Karl informed the transformed Cerro, who now had a shield hung from the back of his armour.

That was odd. Karl didn't recall getting a shield as an item drop anywhere.

Then he realized that Remi had a whole new stack of books and a fancy wooden shelf on the altar in her swamp.

[Someone ordered delivery while I was asleep, didn't you?]

[We put it on your account, no problem.] Remi agreed easily.

[It's a good thing we're not short on money. Was there anything else that we needed?] Karl asked.

[No, I think we got everything. I also gave them different ingredients to make snacks for the kids during training. The soup was a bit too strong for the Rogue, but we have lower grade stuff leftover in here.] Remi informed him.

At least the beasts were taking good care of the new trainees. Their initiative was admirable, and this was the most excited that Karl had seen the team get about something in quite a while.

The Acolytes had hesitated at the table, and hadn't opened the books yet. Everyone else was giving them expectant looks, even Sybil, who was still periodically trying to test Rae's grip on her to see if she could escape.

Little did she know there was a single strand of Royal Rank silk attaching them, so the young Rogue wouldn't be able to go far without learning to pull Rae along with her.

Owen, the mage, was the first to try, and the [Chain Lightning] book vanished in his hands as his eyes went wide in shock.

Rae clapped happily. "Alright, Lightning Mage obtained. Who is next?"

Joan, the Cleric trainee, came forward and took her book. Opening it made her glow with bright golden light. Then her entire body glowed red and blood began to drip from the corners of her eyes, while [Eternal Lightning] healed her.

The girl was lost in a vision of something, staring off into nothingness, so Karl didn't try to interrupt her experience. Whatever the Red Dragon wanted her to see was probably an important part of becoming recognized as a cleric of the God of War.

The two warriors looked concerned for their friend, but they did step up and collect their books.

Nobody had heard of Warriors getting more than a headache and sore muscles from attempting to learn things, so the book shouldn't hurt them.

The skill books vanished, and the two young warriors shared a high five.

"Alright, now what path did the two of you pick? I believe the System should have given you options for your first few skills." Karl asked the warriors before Ophelia and Thor could steal them away.

Aaron smiled. "I picked the defensive route, while Jaime picked offence. Then we can teach each other the opposite fighting style."

Karl nodded. "They won't be able to pick the skills from the tree, but there is a chance that they can still learn some of the skills through hard work, and knowing how to fight both offensively and defensively will make you more versatile."

Many times in the future, you may need to serve as attackers while your group has a Golem distract the target.

Oh, that is an idea, I should see if I can teach the Mage how to summon Golems. It's a core skill that the Academy wants all mages to know if they can learn it. Some aren't compatible with the skill book, though."

The problem was that Rae's Golem spell wasn't a standard variation, and Karl couldn't summon them themselves.

Dana shrugged. "I will contact the supply warehouse and let them know about the situation. If Owen can't use it, then that's that. But I have high hopes for him. He started with the same basic skill that I did, back when I was a Common Rank freshman."

Chapter 613 Mixed Training

"Alright, while Dana calls to order a skill book, we can all get ready to go to the basement training area if it's available. If not, we will train in the Cathedral's guard training practice ground." Karl decided.

"But... they don't have a system, they're just warriors." Owen noted.

"All the more reason to practice with them. They are simple warriors, regular humans relying on the favour of the Gods to survive, not special skills or magic. You might be fledgling Elites now, but rest assured, anyone on those training grounds is likely to be able to humble you in a matter of seconds." Sybil didn't look impressed. She had all these new skills that Lady Rae had taught her. How could she not be better than some church soldier?

The skill book delivery was shockingly fast, and the hotel staffer who came up with the book on a silver tray appeared nearly as eager to see what was going on as the kids.

Dana smiled at the delivery man. "Thank you for the prompt service. Young Owen here is going to try to learn to summon a Golem. Owen, you know the routine. Just focus on the Golem you would like to summon as you cast the spell for the first time, then every time after it will be the same.

But not until we get outside. My Golems are well over two metres tall, and we wouldn't want to damage the floor in here if you get a lava or stone golem."

The kids all rushed for the door, ready to try out their new skills, but Tessa hadn't forgotten Karl's suggestion, and when they left the elevator, she led them out the front door and towards the church soldiers' training area.

"This is the perfect spot to train. The soldiers use Holy Magic on their weapons, so the training ground is more than capable of dealing with some Common Rank attacks." She explained.

The Acolytes didn't quite understand why she thought so highly of it until they got to the large sandy area that was used for training, and saw that the Red Dragon Clerics also worked on their combat magic here, to keep teams buffed and protected as they sparred with each other.

"Wow, what spell are they using?" Aaron used as he saw the Elite Guards sparring.

"Spell? That's nonmagical training with wooden blades. The ones over there are using defensive and blade enhancement magic." Tessa explained.

"But they're so fast." The young warrior complained, trying to explain the impossibility of the soldiers being normal humans, though there were no Elites in those units.

"Resources from the church help enhance their physical abilities, When you grow up and train, you will be much stronger and faster than that. Which is why we will ask them to help train you, right after we find out what Owen's Golems look like."

That got the attention of the soldiers, who were on a break.

"Oh, do we have a few special cases who were awakened off schedule? Let's get a good look at these new Elites before they're lording it over us.

No offence, Sir, and Priestess."

Karl laughed and waved off his concern. "We've got an interesting group of Acolytes today. The Archbishop has asked that we try to train them up as a team, to see if working together helps them grow faster."

"A holy assignment? Wow, you must have done something right."

Karl shook his head. "The opposite, I think. We get to train a group of the next generation as an experiment to see if it keeps us all out of trouble for at least a week."

Many of the Elites assigned to the Academy for short durations were the same way, making up for causing someone trouble by taking on a job that would rehabilitate their image.

Dana talked Owen through the process one more time, then the new mage focused and began to cast the golem spell.

The surface was smooth and pale like a child's doll or a store mannequin, and didn't appear to be gaining any features as it grew to human sized. Not as large as Thor, but a hair taller than Karl.

But as it finished, Karl noticed that it was not as solid as it looked, the surface was flexing and shifting slightly as it formed.

Dana stepped forward and inspected it. "Not bad. Clay Golems aren't the most powerful, but they are highly durable, as they can absorb most blunt attacks with minimal damage.

Now, part of the challenge as you grow will be keeping the Golem properly equipped. It can attack with its bare hands, but it's better if you give your Golem a weapon."

Owen nodded. "Do you give yours a sword or a club?"

Dana shook her head. "I have an advanced version of the [Armoured Constructs] skill. My Golems appear with armour and weapons, so I don't need to provide them. But that skill will take you a while to learn, if you ever do. So, for now, you need to work on how to coordinate your Golem with your magic, and later with your team.

The goal is to have your Golem block for you so that you can continue to cast without being hit.

Do any of you fine gentlemen have a moment to assist us? King Thor will happily put a defensive barrier on you so that you're not injured during the test. All you need to do is get past the Golem and hug the mage to win."

The soldiers who were on break motioned for their Sergeant, who came over, bowed slightly to Karl, then turned to Dana.

"Did you need a few of my soldiers to assist with your training, Princess?"

Dana smiled. "Likely not all day, unless you have some who don't need your full training regimen. This is their first day with as Elites with a class, so our trainees are starting from nothing."

The Sergeant nodded. "If you would like, I can spare you these four, as they're all on light duties after injuries. Then, if you would like, I can take the youngsters for basic combat forms training with the rookies starting at three.

They're also only a few weeks into their training, and mostly only a few years older."

"Oh, that should be good for the warriors and the Rogue. I'm not sure about our fledgling cleric, but I will be working on mana volume and control with Owen all day." Dana agreed.

The Sergeant made a 'get on with it' gesture to his injured men, then returned to the crowd.

"I will go first. How far off should I start?" One of the men asked.

"Twenty metres is far enough. By the time that a mage needs to go into defensive mode, the enemy is at least that close."

That was actually a lot more warning than a mage got in most battles, but for the first day of training, it would give Owen more time to work with his Golem. The better that he understood defensive tactics, the better the Golem would understand them. So, as he had no other combat training, this was the best they could do.

Rae smiled at Sybil. "I like this game. We will have a soldier try to keep you from reaching me as well. It's nice and sunny out, so do your best."

The spider's mirth was not lost on the young Rogue. She couldn't Shadow Step on an open field in the middle of the afternoon, and she wasn't Rae, who could create a stone to appear under when she wanted to move.

Thor motioned to the warriors. "We will train here. I have a defensive barrier up on everyone, including our volunteers, so don't worry about getting hit. I will start with Aaron, while Ophelia starts with Jaime, and then we will switch once you have a good grasp on how to use [Guard] and [Shred]."

The young warriors weren't certain that would be any time soon, but Karl knew that there were skill books for the skills if they needed them, and the instructors in question shouldn't have any problem teaching the skills.

Thor would be faking Guard with his [Eternal Lightning], and Ophelia would be imitating [Shred] by using [Rake], but the visual effect would be close enough that with some instruction, they should learn some version of the skill without using a point.

Chapter 614 Humbled

Karl took a seat off to the side of the training grounds, along with a few of the Elder Clerics, who were supervising the training and not actively involved in the process.

An old woman on Karl's left gestured towards where the warriors were training. "It looks like you got a batch of naturals. They already understand about basic sword stances and blade techniques."

Karl nodded. "They were raised by a soldier, a fallen Elite. The other ones might need a bit more work, but the warriors should have the basics down."

As they talked, Owen was spun in a circle by the soldiers again, as they had gotten past his golem and dodged his magic missile.

Dana was giving him hints, but he had zero combat sense. So, she changed the routine. Instead of having the Golem defend, it was on the attack, with the soldier defending her. Now, the young mage could see what it took to keep an enemy away from the mage for as long as possible.

Further down the sandy field, Sybil was also having issues. Despite her diminutive size, she was completely stonewalled by the warrior on defence, and couldn't even make a step of progress towards Rae. All she had to do was get close enough to touch Rae, who was standing still, and she would win the round, but it just wasn't happening.

A messenger came over with a note for Karl, in the apartment building's stationary envelopes.

[If your Bloodbath Spider isn't busy tonight after dinner, I will be free to train with her in Basement 3 training Gym. I have it booked and I will be there all night. -Niall]

"Thank you. If you see him, let the Overlord know that Rae will be there at sunset." The messenger nodded, then returned to the apartment, but not before stopping to watch the practice for a few seconds.

The soldiers of the Church were an extremely physically fit group, and not gender segregated during combat training, which the messenger obviously viewed as an opportunity for eye candy.

The aging cleric woman next to Karl was watching the training with sharp eyes, making sure nobody was in real danger, but she continued to talk to Karl.

"Were you going to try something new with these ones? I see that you've awakened some extra skills for them, but that's pretty standard for individually guided students." She asked.

"I believe that we might have a way to speed their initial level increases. With a couple of herbal supplements and a specialized training regimen, we should be able to make them at least Awakened before the school year even starts, with a good shot at Ascended the first semester.

After that, we will likely be moved to another assignment, but I believe our plan has potential. If we manage to bring these five to Ascended in half a year, they might start implementing the method on a larger scale.

From what I can tell, the goal is to more reliably bring Elites up to Ascended or Commander Rank, where they are in a position to challenge the main combat forces of the Giants and anyone else who might invade.

If we can prove that it is possible, the status of the Elites will change quickly to gain the sort of respect that the Spellblades command elsewhere." Karl elaborated.

The old woman smiled. "I can only imagine. With all the different classes the Elites have, they would have so many new skills in battle if they were stronger. It wasn't bad like this until recently. When it was just the feral beasts and some monster spawns, we could take care of it with the armies of the faithful. But with the Giants invading, and that new Dungeon that seems to attract trouble, I understand why they're trying this.

But how did you pick these five? They seem like an odd group, and I think that Rogue is deaf."

Karl chuckled. "She is. However, they did the selection by lottery, and she stuffed a bully in a storage closet when he tried to steal her place, so she's got the motivation."

The old woman smiled. "That is what the Elites need. Too many of them are after the fame and fortune. Not enough of them are willing to stab someone to get where they need to be in life."

"Are you sure that you're from the Red Dragon and not the black?" Karl joked. "War is war. It doesn't matter if it's external forces, a civil war or a Cultural Revolution. If they want to turn their movement into a war, the Red Dragon approves, under certain conditions."

The cleric next to her, a middle-aged man also in the robes of the Red Dragon, nodded in agreement. "The Elites are a Cultural Revolution. Who would have thought fifteen years ago that we would be recruiting every child capable of becoming superhuman and giving them the chance to become the hero from their childhood stories?

The Elites might have all but won the war of public opinion, but were you not nearly assassinated just a few days ago?"

[She has a point. They might not have understood that they were hopelessly outmatched, but whoever they were, they were willing to sacrifice their lives for their cause.] Remi agreed.

Karl considered the answers. "You know, I never thought about it that way. I thought about how the extra combat power of the elites made things safer when monsters appeared near my hometown, and how they put on shows on the TV in the café.

But I suppose that it makes sense that there would be pushback, even if it didn't primarily come from GDN residents."

The Cleric nodded. "Nothing in life is ever as simple as it seems, and the War Dragon sees every conflict, then judges its worthiness."

The old woman smiled. "Even between the Spellblade Clans, the Red Dragon recognizes states of war. Small and petty wars, where they are both subordinates to someone else, but determined enough to have earned the Red Dragon's recognition.

There was a time that she even recognized a workers' uprising and attempt to unionize."

Karl chuckled at that. It had been the miners who had risen up against their employers, and they had fought against the mine bosses for over a decade, shutting down nearly all resource production. They had eventually lost, and the leaders of the unionists were executed, but it was a legend of heroes to the miners of Karl's generation.

"Is that why you watch the soldiers training? Because they're the ones who are most likely to please your God in the future?" Karl asked.

"Oh, perceptive. That is part of the reason. We find it relaxing to be here. But we are actually working. We are the supervisors for the clerics on duty, and in charge of preventing serious incidents.

When you give swords to a thousand people who may or may not like each other, things can happen."

[Friendly Fire is not Friendly.] Thor chuckled.

[Indeed.]

The younger cleric laughed out loud, making Karl think that he had heard Thor's mental voice, but the Cleric was watching where Thor had changed training techniques and was having Aaron charge at a training post with his shield up.

"What on earth is your warrior teaching him?" He asked.

"Shield bash. Thor is a firm believer in the usefulness of smashing posts as a training tool. Just watch, the young warrior will learn to adapt his [Guard] ability soon, and use it as an offensive slam attack with his shield."

It was only natural, after all. Karl was putting a lot of energy into Rank Four Skill Master to help everyone teach and learn skills. With a little luck, his beasts might even pick up a new combat technique from watching all the training.

Chapter 615 Just Can't Win

[I think I have just the right thing for the baby Elites to try. Nutrition is important, and Rae's new pet grew really well last night, though she couldn't properly digest the soup.

I know that they have lunch coming soon, but I have made a mild berry juice to go with it.] Remi informed Karl while the Warriors were taking a break.

[Is it good for recovery? You could give it to the warriors now.] Karl suggested.

The others would be going for a break soon as well. They were getting frustrated with their inability to win against the veteran soldiers, even though they were Elites.

It was a humbling first day for them, a chance to realize that being a Common Rank Elite didn't make them better fighters than regular veteran soldiers, so it should build their motivation to grow their powers.

[It should be good for energy, so I guess it could be used to recover between training rounds.] Remi agreed.

[And what is it made from?]

[I've got these berries I collected when we were back in time, and the tea made from the moss, and this minty leaf from Thor's space for flavour. It's not strong, Ascended Rank. So I think that they'll be able to digest it.]

The moss was a potent resource, and according to Karl's [Identification] skill, the minty leaf was good for growing mana density. The berries didn't have a specific use listed, so he assumed that they were some sort of Ascended Rank food.

[Make one more. I want to taste test it before you pass it out. I know that your taste buds aren't the same as humans.]

Remi happily passed him a potion bottle full of the juice, and Karl sipped at it, while the clerics gave him confused looks.

"Sorry, I was out of clean cups. It's just a berry smoothie." He explained.

It was tart, but refreshing, very suitable for drinking.

The old woman gave the potion bottle an intrigued look, and Karl wiped the mouth of the bottle, then passed it over.

She smiled and took out a long straw, then sipped the thick mixture.

"It's mixed with ice? Oh, that is beautiful. What flavour is it? I don't think I know that one."

Karl shrugged. "I actually don't know the name of the berries either. But they're mixed with silver mint leaf and moss tea. You can have that one if you would like. I was just taste testing it before I gave it to the students with lunch."

Once the break started, Remi came out in Naga Queen form to hand out the smoothies and take notes on the effects that they had on Common Rank Elites.

The fact that they were being used as experimental test subjects for a new blend of energy smoothie was lost on the students, but after feeling the surge of energy from the juice, the old War Cleric knew very well that this was not just a simple snack.

The lunch delivery from the apartment arrived at the same time, and by the time that they had finished eating, the students were practically vibrating with energy, but more importantly, their bodies were quickly refining the existing energy to push them up through the Common Rank.

"That is fascinating. Do you think that it's a sympathetic reaction between the food and the drinks? They don't appear to be taking damage from the situation, and the quality of the energy in their body is increasing.

I think it's the moss tea and silver mint combination. The two are usually used together at lower quality for cleanses, but it appears that they are completely cleansing the nascent energy from the ... oh, there they go. As I said, full cleanse."

Lotus began to laugh as the five trainees began running for the training area restrooms. The effect of the juice was cleansing all impurities from their bodies. Absolutely all of them.

{I will add that to my notes. May have side effects. But we will see how they're doing when they get back. It might become a standard issue item for the Academy if it works well.} Remi declared, speaking Serpent.

That was a fair wait, nearly an hour, before anyone returned to the training ground. They all had suspicious looks that said they would not be willingly accepting random food products from Remi in the near future, but they were definitely more powerful.

The old woman beside Karl nodded. "If you're giving that recipe to the Bureau, tell them to issue it during the last day of the train rides. At least then they won't be losing a training day."

Joan, the new priestess, gave the woman a pleading look. "You still intend to give that evil juice to people? Did we not suffer enough?"

The old woman just smiled at her. "One hour of suffering to move most of the way through Common Rank. If it wasn't for diminishing results, I would be tempted to ask them to issue it every morning for a week."

Tessa patted her small charge on the shoulder. "Now that you're back and fully energized, we can get back to training. Your mana levels have increased, so we can increase the frequency of your casting."

The others realized they wouldn't be getting off easily either, and their respective trainers dragged them off to practice.

They still had most of the afternoon left in their training schedule, and the warriors were swapping between offence and defence, while Owen was moving to mana training. Unfortunately for Sybil, Rae wasn't feeling merciful, and had decided that the problem with her attempts to bypass the soldiers was a lack of practical skills training. So she was learning blade skills with the soldiers, and then when the rookies arrived, she would be moving on to unarmed combat techniques.

As a Rogue, she needed to know as much about fighting as possible. Skills burned too much energy, and using them would alert Elites and magic users to your presence.

However, Karl suspected that the intense schedule wasn't as much about Sybil's lack of skills as Rae's frustration that she had to wait until dark to play with Overlord Niall.

The end of the day couldn't come early enough for any of the trainees, or even Karl, who was getting that disquieting feeling that someone was talking about him.

The feeling was validated soon after the trainees had started their afternoon training, when Karl saw visitors from the Inquisition and the Government headed his way with determined looks on their faces.

Once he was back at his apartment, they would be less likely to come bothering him, but out here in public, everyone could see that he was just overseeing the training of juniors.

"Monarch. If we could have a bit of your time? The President and the Bishops have a few questions that they believe you can answer."

"If I say no, they're just going to show up at my house later, so we might as well do it now. Would the conference room over there work? I have a training skill active, and I would prefer not to get out of range of my students." Karl reluctantly agreed.

"Of course. The topics at hand are private, but not particularly sensitive."

Chapter 616 Overlapping Plans

They headed for the nearby building, and Karl checked the Skill Master bonds. The ability wasn't feeling stretched at all, or limited without him watching. During the early days, when Skill Master was still at Rank One, he had to actually watch the process and focus, but now it appeared that simply activating it with deliberate intentions would help them learn the skills as well as they could.

"We will start with the least likely portion first. We have a group of Special Forces soldiers here, well, special forces cadets, who the President and his advisor Generals believe would be a suitable test force to follow in your footsteps. They have been working with the Moor Cats that the University is training, but have been unable to form the sort of bond that you have." The Inquisitor with his head shaved announced.

None of them had given their names, and while Karl could look at their system status to find out, that always seemed to occur to him a few minutes too late.

Besides, you could just call people by their title, and it would make them happy.

"Of course, Inquisitor. But that will most likely involve going to the university to get the beasts involved. A personal touch is the easiest way to change their minds, especially if they're already stronger than the trainees.

After all, a bond like mine would kill them if they tried to bond with an Ascended beast while still at Common Grade with no preparation."

The bald Inquisitor nodded. "They do have some training. Though they aren't Elites, they were trained both physically and mentally as Monks. It was done for unorthodox combat purposes, but I am told that your mental skills are similar, with a heavy requirement for mental fortitude."

One of the men stepped out of the room and came back in with ten young men and women about Karl's age.

"These are the cadets. Can you see any obvious flaws in our plan?" The Inquisitor asked.

Cara came out of her space to examine the group, not particularly impressed until she got to one who crouched down to pat her head like she was a dog and not an intelligent Royal Rank monster.

[This one definitely suits being bonded to a Thor.]

Karl nodded in understanding. "Alright, why don't we do the university portion first, and then we can finish the questions after?" The cadets looked excited, and the one who had tried to pet Cara looked over to address Karl.

"Do you really think that we can bond the newborn Moor Cats?" He asked.

"I don't know yet. But I have a good feeling about it. The process might not have a one hundred percent survival rate, but I think that most of you should get it after a few tries."

The cadets paled, and the Inquisitor tried not to laugh. Whatever the Beast Master had in mind was very different from their plans if he didn't expect everyone to survive.

So, the procession back out of the room only a minute after they entered was a silent one, as was the shuttle ride to the University.

Only when they reached the building marked [Animal Husbandry and Genetic Research] did anyone begin to speak.

"So, this is it. After an entire year of trying, we might finally succeed in bonding one of the young beasts." One of the cadets whispered.

Karl turned to the Inquisitor. "They're not going to try to bond a year old Ascended or Commander Rank juvenile Moor Cat, are they?"

The bald man smiled. "Fortunately, no. The mother cat that we have just had another litter that is ready to be weaned to solid food. They have been feeding the kittens for a few days now, and they're still Awakened Rank."

"Does it have to be Moor Cats? They might actually do better with a weaker but fast-growing beast first." Karl asked.

"What did you have in mind?"

"Well, you said special forces, so you want the beast as a combat companion. Something that can reach Commander easily enough, instead of the Moor Cats, who can be Royals at their peak, would be easier to bond. It would also make it easier to get a unified force if the Moor Cats reject them."

"We will keep it in mind. There is a small pack of Lightning Cerro here now, with many of them newly hatched. They were brought to study how you managed to evolve Thor, but they could also make good companions for an assault force."

As they approached the door, a young woman with a leather glove over one arm came running frantically towards them.

"There is a Devil Snipe on the loose. Please wait here until I recover it." She pleaded.

Karl turned to inspect the area, then pointed at one of the trees. "It's right there. Holding some sort of fruit seed. Would you like me to grab it?"

The Devil Snipe was a Common Grade Monster, and at full growth could still fit in the palm of a grown man's hand. They were named devils for their temper, not their power, though they did have a small amount of wind magic.

"Oh, you are the Beast Master, right? Please, if you have a skill to get it back, I have put in significant effort with that one, but he's got an odd food obsession and flew away when someone left the fruit bowl out." She pleaded.

Karl took out a single Commander Rank Mountain Gooseberry from Hawk's space, which made the napping Thunderbird laugh. No mere Snipe could resist such a good snack.

Karl held his hand out with the snack, and the small bird's head immediately turned. It raced down out of the tree and gently landed in Karl's hand, then cooed in pleasure as it took small bites.

Karl stroked the back of the bird's head, then passed it, along with the berry, to its handler.

As she received the bird, the young woman's gaze went vacant for a few seconds, then Karl felt her aura shift.

He inspected her more closely with his system interface active and saw that she was now shown as Arabella, Common Rank Ranger.

"Well, that went better than expected. Congratulations, young woman. You have successfully bonded with your Snipe. Who, I would note, is quickly advancing to Awakened Rank." Karl informed the group, as she was still in shock.

The bird looked smug, and the woman rolled her eyes, answering its mental demand.

"Is it that easy? You just touched her, and she gained a class." The Military Representative asked, shocked at the development.

"Actually, the fruit made the bird advance, and it was the bird's advancement that cemented the bond that they already had. If my guess is right, it realized that humans reliably have food, so it wanted a human to keep it fed." Karl explained.

Arabella sighed. "Yes, that is very close to how it went. Flicker requested a contract, and when I accepted, I awakened a class."

That small revelation changed everything. Karl forged bonds with the beasts, not the other way around. But getting the cats to want to be with the humans would be so much easier than having the cadets try to move a kitten into a separate space and convince it to stay without tearing their mind apart for fun.

Chapter 617 Moor Cats

The researcher was quickly collected by the Inquisitor before she could escape their grasp. She was proof that their method might actually work on a larger scale, unless it was proven that the outcome was a result of Karl's interference.

"The Moor Cat enclosure is this way. Monarch Karl, how certain are you that this will be feasible?" The Inquisitor asked, without removing his hand from the researcher, who was engrossed in conversation with her bird.

"With Moor Cats? I would say the chance is slim. If we go to the Cerro pens, I think that they will have good luck. Lightning Cerro love to meet new friends and expand their herd."

The other officials looked like they were much more set on the Moor Cats than the Inquisitor was, but he was likely the only one of the group that really realized that trying to bond the Moor Cats was likely to get many of these cadets killed, even if they succeeded.

"These are the cat cages. Is there anything you need to do in preparation?" The military representative asked.

"I need to go speak with the mother cat first. Is she in the same cage as the little ones?" Karl asked.

"No, they have been separated for safety now that the young ones are on solid food."

Karl sighed and shook his head, then walked to the door with a full-grown Moor Cat in it.

"If you would kindly open the door, I will go speak with her."

The University staff and officials all looked at him like he was crazy.

"Sir, that Moor Cat is not sedated. You can't go in there."

"I thought that you were trying to train them to help you? If you have to sedate them to be near them, you're clearly failing. But I'm not concerned. Open the door."

One of the researchers shrugged, then took out what looked like a smoke grenade, likely of sedative gas, expecting Karl to be attacked.

He stepped through, then closed the door behind him as the massive Moor Cat, taller on all four feet than Karl was standing upright, stared at him.

"Good afternoon, my name is Karl. These gentlemen would like to form a life bond with your cubs. The young humans, that is. Is that permissible to you?" He asked.

The big cat growled and glared at him, but Karl continued anyhow.

"What about one of them? There is one of them brave enough to pet a full-grown Winged Void Badger." Karl offered.

The cat looked curious, but kept its hostile stance.

"The cubs will have to agree to the contract, of course. But I am going to offer each of the cubs the chance to pick a partner." He continued.

One massive paw flashed out, and Karl raised a hand to stop it, letting the force slide him across the floor a little, but a simple swat wouldn't harm him.

That got the Moor Cat's interest.

"Oh, I think that I get it. You don't have any respect for the weak humans, so you don't want them dragging down the futures of your cubs." Karl guessed.

The cat rumbled in agreement, then snarled at the humans outside the cage.

[System Quest Activated] If they die, they die.

{Use the contract tokens to allow each recruit one attempt to bond with a magical beast and activate their system assignment.}

Ten tokens appeared in Karl's hand, and he smiled at the Moor Cat.

"See, these are the tokens, nothing dangerous. The humans will use one to try to bond with a new partner. Then your cubs can show them how powerful a Moor Cat is."

The big cat wasn't happy with him, but it reluctantly nodded, and Karl turned halfway to knock on the door.

Showing his back to the mother cat would be rude, so he sidestepped through the door before turning to face the students.

"You might want to bring a cleric. I suspect that this might not go how they were hoping. The cats need to be fully cognizant and unrestrained for the next part." Karl explained.

[That wasn't part of the rules.] Cara reminded him.

[The bond isn't instant. Nothing is stopping them from turning on the cadets later tonight when the drugs wear off, if they're trapped that way.]

[When you put it that way...] Cara wasn't sure which would be funnier. Watching the cats, which were nearly her size already, beat up cadets, or knowing that they would wake up from a drugged stupor later and tear apart the Elite from the inside out.

They went one cage over to where the kittens were receiving instructions from their mother, and the cadets approached the bars with determined looks.

"Alright, we will do this one at a time. Who wants to go first? All you have to do is prove to your chosen partner that you are worthy." Karl asked.

The guy who had tried to pet Cara raised his hand and stepped forward, as did one of the kittens, who had paused its grooming mid blep and still had its tongue sticking out as it came to rub against the bars.

The mother cat was visibly embarrassed at such behaviour, but the two were clearly fond of each other.

Karl grabbed the key card from one of the researchers and stepped inside the cage.

"You, follow me. I will use this token, and you have one chance to make your choice believe that you are a suitable lifetime partner for them."

Karl activated the token as the man crouched to hug the cat and murmur something in its ear before he was tackled and licked, then turned into a pillow as the cat simply curled up on top of him.

The cadet laughed as the huge kitten kneaded his leather armour with its paws, then the baby Moor Cat vanished, and the bond was completed.

His class was {Beast Ranger}, which was somewhat close to what Karl had expected, and while it wasn't a Beast Master, he had a Moor Cat and a class, so it was certainly what anyone would call a resounding victory.

"Well, that's one for one. We're off to a good start. Who is next?"

A confident young cadet swaggered into the cage, then gestured to the largest of the kittens. "Bring me that one.

I mean, I would like that one, please, Monarch." He corrected as he realized who he was making demands of.

Karl caught the mother cat's smirk, and ushered the successful candidate out of the room.

Karl motioned for the Moor Cat Alpha cub to come forward, and activated the token.

As soon as he did, the cat growled, and the token put up a shimmering black and green barrier over Karl, then a second one over the cage.

"Oh, it looks like this is a test of worthiness. Good luck, young cadet."

"What the hell? Are you not supposed to give me a Moor Cat?" The cadet demanded as the cub began to stalk him.

"That's not how it works. You have to prove you're worthy as a partner. I have been informed that you've been trained as a special forces soldier. You've got this, it's just a kitten."

The cadet drew a training sword and the kitten growled, as did the mother. Weapons were cheating in their minds. But that didn't matter for long.

The cat pounced, and the cadet was too slow to respond. Four black claws tore his face open, popping an eyeball, and then continued slashing down the front of his armour, while the other front paw tore apart his sleeve as he flailed helplessly at the kitten's back.

The Inquisitor tried to cast something, as did the cleric outside, but Karl could see the spells hitting the barrier.

"Monarch, do something." The Inquisitor demanded.

"What exactly? Shatter a divine barrier to save a cadet from his hubris? I'm not certain I can manage that. The barrier should fade once the test is over." Karl replied calmly.

"He will be dead by then." The priest reminded him. "That's very much a 'you' problem, not a 'me' problem. Or we can call High Priestess Lotus over, as she can resurrect the failed candidate if she gets here in time."

The white robed cleric sighed, then winced as the kitten tore the throat out of the cadet, then proudly strutted away as the barriers fell.

"See. All as the gods intended. Who wants to go next?"

Chapter 618 Friendly Kittens

Everyone just stared at Karl as he stood next to a growing puddle of blood as the cleric worked to heal the cadet in preparation for resurrection.

"Why didn't you tell us you were serious?" One of the others demanded.

"Did everyone think that I was joking about you dying if the cat disagreed? I wasn't lying. I am also not joking about you only getting one chance. The token won't work for you again if you fail and live. But there are other beast species options here, if you want to try one of them." Karl reminded them.

One young woman stepped forward as she wrapped her hands in some sort of cloth.

"I would also like to try for a Moor Cat kitten. The young lady with the white stripe on her neck." She insisted.

The kitten turned to stare at the audacious upstart of a human kitten.

It didn't particularly dislike this human, but to think that a human thought they could be partners in any meaningful way? Ridiculous.

The cleric pulled the body out of the cage and began the hard part of his work while calling for reinforcements. Resurrection took a huge amount of energy, and for some reason, healing this victim was harder than usual.

If he couldn't do the resurrection alone, he might need to cast the Reincarnation Ritual and have the cadet reborn in a new body.

The tokens that Karl was using appeared to be some sort of divine blessing, and the Gods themselves were interfering in the casting of his spells.

That should have been expected, Karl thought. Both the Nature God and the God of Death approved of permanent death by stupidity as a punishment. They also both rewarded those who were brave enough to try anyhow.

Assuming that they survived.

The mottled black and grey kitten with the white stripe on its neck marched over to Karl, demanding he use his spell so she could find out if this fake monk was worthy.

[Do you think she's getting eaten?] Cara asked.

[I think that she knows something about that cat in particular. If it was a lingering injury or deformity, she wouldn't have chosen that one as a life partner, so it's likely about personality.] Karl suggested.

When both appeared ready, Karl used a token on them, and the cat pounced, only to have the cadet punch her paw.

In the next few seconds, dozens of strikes were parried, and the girl nimbly dodged strikes with the jaws, as well as a four footed pounce, intended to pin her to the ground.

Interestingly, while the barrier was up around the cage, Karl was not blocked this time. He could move freely around the cage, but chose to sit along the wall between the mother cat and the action.

The cadet was beginning to sweat heavily with exertion by the end of the second minute, but the kitten was losing focus. It had forgotten that it was supposed to be making the monk prove that she was a worthy partner, and had reverted to simply playing with the human like she did with her other siblings.

Two minutes after that, the cat vanished and the girl smiled. [Name] Nikki

[Class] Tiger Monk

"Congratulations, you have succeeded, with only minimal injuries." Karl informed her.

The girl was actually bleeding very heavily, and was likely to pass out from blood loss soon. It was only adrenaline and joy keeping her conscious right now.

A newly arrived cleric cast a healing spell on the exhausted monk, while Karl warned away a few of the other cubs that thought it might be a good opportunity to eat a human while they were exhausted.

After all, defenceless humans were basically just giant steaks, and they loved it when the white coats fed them steaks.

Karl saw the longing looks as the kittens backed away, unwilling to start a fight with the powerful male. So he took a small sample of Commander Rank meat, the lowest grade that Hawk had in his repository, to cut and toss to the others.

"There, a little treat for everyone. Thank you for helping us so far." Karl whispered, like it was some secret he was feeding them.

Then he tossed a larger steak through the bars to the mother cat, who rumbled in joy that Karl was kind enough to give her a decent portion for her body size.

Too many of the workers tried to give her little bites that wouldn't even cover half her tongue.

After a few seconds, the monk gave Karl a weak thumbs up, and the kitten appeared in front of her with a flash of green light, a phenomenon that didn't happen when Karl's beasts left their space.

It marched over with all the imperious pride that a kitten could muster, then gave him a pleading look and whined for food.

Everyone else had gotten a snack, but she was stuck in a separate space.

Karl patted the Moor Cat's head, and then fed it chunks of meat as it hung from his arm, attached with long black claws that were unwilling to let him escape.

"Fascinating, it has become so gentle after being bonded." One of the University staffers noted.

Karl laughed. "Don't be mistaken, its claws are pierced deep into my arm. But I have Trollish regeneration, so it's doing less damage than I regenerate."

He was also immune to this level of damage, but that wasn't a fact that they all needed to know.

"Who would like to go next? Any volunteers?" Karl asked.

Silence.

Then one of the boys spoke up. "I got to meet your Thor once before, could you do the same for the Lightning Cerro hatchlings?"

[Haha, I knew they were all herbivores. But it's a shame we don't get to watch more of them commit suicide.] Cara joked.

[You can't expect everyone to be able to handle a strong personality right off the start. But I'm sure that they will make for an excellent herd of Elites with their Lightning Cerro partners.]

"Yes, if that's everyone who would like to try for a Moor Cat as their partner, we can move on. I am certain that the army will be overjoyed, no matter what you pick." Karl agreed.

The mother Moor Cat gave a derisive snort, and Karl winked at her, letting the beast know that they were on the same page about the competence of this group. Karl just understood the limitations of humans better than the Moor Cat did.

The Moor Cat kitten climbed up Karl's arm to sit on his shoulder, much to its new partner's dismay.

"Will you come down here? Monarch Karl isn't going to give you more food just because you're close." The newly minted Tiger Monk demanded.

The cat gave her a skeptical look, then rubbed up against the side of Karl's face while the mother cat looked away, unwilling to be associated with such shamelessness, even if this strange man did have the best snacks.

Cara dropped a small bit of meat in front of the kitten as Karl stood up to walk out of the cage, and the beast gave its partner a smug look.

"You are stronger than you look." The Monk noted, confused at the ease with which Karl could stand while carrying a twenty - kilo cat draped over his back and shoulder.

"Soon you will be as well. If you advance along with your partner, it shouldn't be difficult for you to become a proper Royal Rank Elite."

Her eyes lit up with excitement as she followed him back to the group, envisioning the day when she was one of the powerful ones.

Chapter 619 Cerro Hatchlings

The Lightning Cerro area was much less heavily guarded. The baby Cerro were not too threatening, so as long as you wore shin guards, you would be alright until they grew up a little.

[Oh, I have bribes for the baby Thor type beasts.] Cara announced. [Oh, what did you come up with?]

Cara held up a hazelnut, and Karl wondered where it had come from.

[The Lotus made them for breakfast food, and I claimed some nuts for trees.] She declared proudly.

They weren't naturally a magical resource, they were just Hazelnuts. Tasty, but not rare or special. But after growing up in a Royal Rank beast space, even the common Hazelnut tree was imbued with mana.

What Cara had done was to make a crude copy of the hazelnut butter and insert it into small apples with the core removed. Even a young Lightning Cerro would treat those as a one or two bite snack, and Karl couldn't deny that they looked pretty tasty.

The Inquisitor nudged Karl, reminding him that he still had someone else's Moor Cat on his shoulder.

In response, he handed the monk girl a bag full of diced Commander Rank meat. "Feed her that when she needs a snack. High Rank monster meat is the best way for a young beast to grow, so don't be too stingy, even if the food costs are high.

I don't know if your ability is like mine, but if it is, you might eventually be able to keep food for your cat in a separate mental space." He explained.

Nikki looked confused and shrugged. "When she's not out here, she wanders my spirit ocean, the spot in my mind where I focus energy to grow mental strength."

So, she didn't get a separate space for the beast. That was unexpected. It also ruled out keeping resources there.

"In that case, you can put the meat in your inventory, you don't need to keep holding it." Karl reminded her.

"Right, inventory. I have a Class now." "And don't forget to check your class skills in your skill tree so that you can plan your advancement. You have a lot to do. The same for our first success story. Where did he go, by the way?"

A hand waved from the back of the group, and then Karl noticed that the clerics were taking away a body covered in a white sheet. They really hadn't been able to resurrect the one who had died to the Moor Cat kitten.

He was going to have to be reincarnated, and that couldn't be done here. It was a six high cleric ritual.

The grown Cerro group came over to greet Karl, and much to his surprise, they had a lot to say.

[It's a pack leader. Are we going to move the pack? This place is small. Why do you smell good, do you have food? Aren't the little ones cute? Are you keeping the predators away?]

Karl had no idea why he could hear all the Cerro in his mind, but he took a pile of feed out of Thor's space for the pack. Thor wouldn't begrudge them the good stuff, and it bought Karl some time to try to determine why he could hear the Cerro pack.

If the reason was nothing more than that he was a Beast Master Packmaster, so he could hear pack animals, Karl might actually give up on trying to understand the system.

In his mind, Thor laughed. [All Lightning Cerro share a mental link. We can all hear each other's thoughts when we're close to another pack, so we don't need to bugle except as a warning. I can hear them, so you can hear them. Probably.]

Karl accepted Thor's idea as the most likely one, and addressed the Cerro Elders.

[I came to make a request. Some of these humans want to start packs with the young ones. They will take care of them and have their packs help the little ones grow up strong. Do you know of Thor, my Cerro partner? Or is he too far away?] Karl asked them, focusing on both Thor and the pack.

[We can sense him, but he's not close enough to talk to.] The current pack leader agreed.

That made things much easier. If they knew that this agreement could grow stronger than usual Lightning Cerro, they were more likely to agree.

[How many of them? Our pack is already small.] The leader asked.

[Not more than seven. But these white coats will continue to look after your pack and keep predators away.]

The Cerro considered it and grunted before turning to eat. If the little ones wanted to try joining the human pack, they would allow it. The human pack that looked after them was strong, after all.

"Alright, everyone who wants to try for a Lightning Cerro partner, come forward. I will provide you with snacks for your potential partners and then activate the tokens."

Karl passed out Cara's apple concoctions, then took one for himself.

[These are good, we should make more of them.]

Cara nodded with hazelnut spread on the fur around her mouth.

[I agree. I will prepare more of them.]

She was using [Disintegrate] to core the apples, so the only time-consuming part was making the hazelnut paste.

The little ones came forward to see what sort of snack was being offered, and only a few seconds later, the first bond formed.

Karl saw that this one was also tagged as a {Beast Ranger} by the system, and the small Cerro in front of him was marked as his partner.

Then two more cadets gained the same class, and everyone began to notice the pattern. Beast Ranger was the default class for people partnered with one of the Cerro, as a regular Ranger was unable to bond with magical beasts, only common animals.

Two more cadets gained the class, and the group was beginning to think that Lightning Cerro was the best option for this process.

Then, things began to go wrong.

One of the Rangers began to convulse, and Karl sensed the distress from his bonded partner. It was part of his pack now, and the pack member was in danger, but the Cerro didn't know what to do.

It had already put a [Refreshing Lightning] barrier over him, but it couldn't see the attacker.

Karl examined him as thoroughly as he could, but it just didn't make sense. The man had the class, the Cerro was a common rank hatchling, and everything looked normal.

The white robed cleric realized it first.

"The mental link is too strong. It's breaking his mind. I will sedate him, but I don't know what we will do after that."

Karl wasn't sure that would work. The mental link was active even when you were sleeping. But being unconscious should give him the best chance to focus and stabilize his mind.

That left only two of the cadets, and while the hatchlings happily accepted all the snacks that they could offer, they wanted nothing else to do with them.

Then a second cadet dropped to the ground with blood pouring from their eyes and nose.

The cleric rushed over, but the boy waved his hand. "I will be alright, he's just... energetic. There is a tree of life in my soul sea, and Devon, my Cerro, charged it with his horns." He mumbled.

Karl chuckled. "You have a smashing post in your mental space? You're in for a very rough week until you build your mental strength."

The others all looked confused, so Karl created an [Earth Barrier] post on the far side of the enclosure.

The Cerro herd cheered and began to line up to take turns smashing into it.

"Dammit, we were finally breaking them of that habit." One of the University workers grumbled.

"It's essential to their mental health. You need to let them play. If they can't charge at posts, they need to charge each other, and that isn't as much fun. If you have mages, they also like mage barriers." Karl explained.

A number of the nearby Cerro nodded in agreement, making the cadets who were not having a hard time with their new partner laugh.

Mage barriers were good. Posts were better. Magical posts were the best. If they could find one that made a better noise when they hit it, they would revise the ranking system.

Chapter 620 Quest Complete

"What is wrong with me? I swear I'm a good partner." One of the two men who were left out of the selection pleaded with the little Lightning Cerro in front of him.

The beast stole the offered snack from him and ran away victorious.

Karl discretely sniffed to see if there was something he was missing. It was buried under soap and alcohol-based sanitizer, but there was something rancid, like the worst possible combination of body odour and rotting fruit. He couldn't pin down what it was, but there was something wrong with him.

When Karl focused on Soul Sight, it was immediately evident. The normal light blue glow was tattered and corrupted, profoundly wrong.

The other one was similar, but not in the same way. Their soul was just wrong, and gave Karl a feeling of evil, like someone who takes pleasure in bullying others. It wasn't something that he could point at and say "This is what is wrong" but it was definitely there, and the herd could sense it as well.

But the cadets had already used their one token, and there would be no second chances. At least not with Quest item assistance.

Whether those two could convince a beast to bond with them in the future was unknown. But now that they knew the trick, the researchers should be able to find at least a few more successful Rangers among their ranks.

The Inquisitor turned to Karl for answers, but he didn't want to say it out loud. "I will explain privately later. I think that this Quest should be nearly complete."

The word quest told the Inquisitor all he needed to know about why this should be a private conversation. He had thought that the tokens Karl had taken out were related to a skill that he had. But if they were from the System, that changed things immensely.

Karl looked over the young Elites. The rest of them appeared to be having better luck with their bonded partners, and only the one was in serious trouble.

"That's not bad. Sixty percent success rate." Karl noted as the clerics worked to save the man in an induced coma.

"Sixty percent among trainees who weren't able to gain a class with the serum, but showed signs of compatibility with magic." The Inquisitor added.

"Did you try the system linked item trick already?" Karl replied.

The Inquisitor nodded. "We did, with no luck on this batch. The real question is how many might have succeeded without the tokens."

Karl considered it. "I would say three. Three of them struck me as compatible with the technique from the start. The two successes among the Moor Cats, and one with the Cerro herd."

"Do you think that these last two might be able to activate a system interface with an appropriate skill book?" The Inquisitor suggested.

"Honestly, I have no idea. I don't think that everyone was ever able to access the system, and we've already sorted these by their ability to use mana. Among the general population, the chances will be much lower."

It was beginning to sink in that while they were trained as Special Forces soldiers, the two who were not deemed suitable by a Cerro and didn't try with a Moor Cat would have to be transferred from this unit.

But the leadership was not concerned with losing a few research volunteers. If they had six healthy test subjects in the unit to attempt to train up with their magical beasts, that meant that they could begin working on methods to increase growth speed now for when they found a way to make the projects applicable on a larger scale.

Karl was playing with the baby Cerro group while the students and scientists began to work, recording data and getting responses from the successful cadets.

Then one of the hatchlings bumped Karl's hand, nuzzling at his ring, then looking at a student researcher with her hair dyed the same gold as Cerro eyes.

"Oh? You want to give a gift to your sweetheart?" Karl asked the little beast.

The Cerro nodded happily, so Karl took an Awakened Rank ring from the spare trash in his storage and hung it over the little beast's nose horn.

The student laughed and petted his head as he came strutting over, then reluctantly put on the ring at his repeated insistence.

Then the Cerro vanished.

"Hey! What are you doing now? I thought you only had quest items for ten." The Inquisitor demanded.

"I did. I actually just gave the Cerro a ring of minor agility as an engagement ring for his beloved handler. The rest was unexpected, but I think that she awakened a class as well."

The Inquisitor sighed and ran his fingers through his hair. "Are we going to have to let everyone in the nation try on a system imbued item to find out if they are actually System compatible?" He muttered.

"That's probably the easiest way. It looks like a lot more people are compatible than we had thought by using the serum alone. You can't blame anyone for it, though. It's not like we had system linked items available even a year ago." Karl agreed.

Now, more of the baby Cerro wanted rings, as a method of recruiting new herd members.

"Just wait. When it is time, the right herd members will come to you. You don't have to hurry to find them when your pack is already strong." [Did a hatchling just get engaged? How is that fair? I have been rejected by so many, and he gets his first choice.] Thor complained.

[He went after a Common Rank student with no scales at all. Don't worry about it, buddy. You'll find your perfect woman one day.] Karl assured him.

[No scales? Did he propose to a human woman? What a strange kid.]

Thor definitely did not see the appeal.

Karl noticed Cara leaving the area, and tracked her movements as she left the building entirely, heading for another section of the university.

[Try not to get yourself in trouble.] Karl warned her.

[I have a plan. Trust me.]

That did not reassure Karl at all. Cara and plan in the same sentence generally meant that there was going to be trouble of some sort.

So, Karl was not shocked when under a minute later, a runner was coming to get the Inquisitor for a "situation".

Cara had found the orphans' school at the side of the University compound, and she had started handing out sweet grasses from her space along with magical items for the kids to try on.

[Oh, they sent people to help.] Cara informed Karl happily.

[I think they're actually coming to restrain you. What did you do?]

[Lotus told me that the kids don't get birthday presents at the orphanage, so I'm giving them all presents. You should see how happy they are. Oh, and that one got a warrior class. We're on a roll here.]

[Cara...]

[Don't worry, I'm almost done, there's only like fifty kids here.]

The Inquisitor turned to Karl with an angry glare. "Care to explain?"

Obviously, he had already seen Cara, so the report would have told him immediately what was happening with the ball of chaos at the school.

"The nature priests told her that orphans don't get birthday presents. So, she made an executive decision to go distribute them."

"And you didn't stop her?"

Telling this man he thought it would be funny probably wasn't the correct answer. But Karl was saved from saying anything when the Inquisitor continued.

"Never mind, I can tell that you have no intention of stopping her as long as nobody is getting injured. I will ask the recovery team to bring her back to you." He complained.

Just trying to capture Cara was likely to cause more chaos than it stopped. In fact, there was a decent chance that the kids at the orphans' school would think it was some sort of comedy gag routine.

"That's likely not necessary. It's not like they can capture a Winged Void Badger, and she will come back when she is done."

"They are specialists." The Inquisitor insisted.

"She can Nullify skills, and she's got a Monarch Rank bubble of [Disintegrate]. Plus, she can fly. Are you sure you don't want me to call her back instead?" Karl suggested.

The Inquisitor considered it. "No, let them try. It will be a good experience for them."