

Beast Master 621

Chapter 621 Challengers

[We have a challenger! Quick, I need more loot. Boss, toss some trash items into my space.] Cara demanded.

[What in the seven hells are you doing now? Don't taunt the teachers.]

[I would never do something so low and cowardly. The teachers called for reinforcements. Cast a barrier on me, will you? Ha! nullify!]

Those must be the response team that the inquisitor called, as Karl could hear chaos over the radio headset that the man had put on.

The Inquisitor's frown had turned to a sharp glare at Karl, then to resignation, and finally to a faintly amused smile.

"Man, am I glad I don't have to write this report." The Inquisitor muttered.

"That bad?" He nodded. "Would you want to tell your boss that your target dropped their barrier to give your team leader a wedgie, then gave a giant strength ring to a preschooler, before running away with a Nature Priestess on her back?"

"Not Lotus, I hope?" Karl asked.

"No, one from the response team. They apparently thought that they could pin the suspect, but they have now been abducted by a monster that all the children think is a funny-looking dog running loose in the park."

[And I'm out of loot.] Cara announced as she returned to her space, breathing heavily from laughter and exertion.

The chaos continued over the radio for a few more minutes as the security team had to convince a group of schoolkids to turn over the magical items they were given, and deal with the fact that some of them had actually awakened a Class early.

A security guard ran in a few minutes later, panting for breath. "Sir, we have lost the target. I regret to inform you that there is a Royal Rank Winged Void Badger loose in the city." The Inquisitor patted him on the shoulder. "Relax, son. The Beast Master took care of it, and the troublemaker has been given a time-out. How bad is the damage?"

The soldier sighed and shook his head. "We have three confirmed class awakenings in the middle school section, ten more probable class awakenings, four aggressive preschoolers with Giant Strength that we left to the Red Dragon Clerics, and a few bruised egos.

No major injuries, unless Jill is injured, wherever she went."

Karl frowned. "Is Jill your nature priestess?"

The guard nodded. "I take it that the agent of chaos is your bonded pet?"

[I'm gonna punch him in the face.]

"Partner. She is one of my bonded partners. Sorry for the trouble, she gets quite excited about new projects, and she wanted to give all the kids a gift to make up for all the birthday gifts they missed."

"Great, and now we have to feel bad for taking the presents away. I suppose that they can keep most of them, but the dangerous items will need to be collected." The guard sighed.

Karl was a Monarch, and even if he was a little eccentric, nobody actually got hurt, so the worst that would happen was that he got yelled at for a while.

"What did she give them? I thought it was all just random stuff from my inventory?" Karl asked.

"Yes, that's the issue, isn't it? It's just random stuff from your Monarch Rank Inventory. Most of it is magical gemstones, a few random potions, and food. But there are some magic items as well, including a number of Giant Strength items.

The Awakened Classes are a minor issue, and not my problem. But some of the kids were not entirely human, and the influx of power has had unexpected results."

"Do you want me to go sort it out? We're nearly done here. The test is finished, and we've proven the secondary theory that we were after as well. So, I can go over to the school and calm the situation." Karl offered.

The Inquisitor smirked. "You know, I think I would like to see this. Yes, let's see how you calm down an entire middle school."

In his mind, Cara laughed. She had given a bunch of the kids juice that Remi had made to increase energy. Nobody was getting them to calm down for hours.

[You know, we're going to get a bad reputation in the city after this.]

[Only with annoying people. The kids already love us, and so do the soldiers. I heard that they will let Thor and Remi give stuff to the other cadets to see if they can awaken a Class.]

Karl left the university researchers and the representatives from the military and government behind as he followed the Inquisitor out of the animal husbandry section of the university, waiting for the right moment to ask his question.

"Inquisitor, how bad have the casualties been with the Giants that we are trying so hard to find new ways to awaken Elites? I was under the impression that the government was happy with the current arrangement." He asked quietly.

The Inquisitor sighed and shook his head. "About twenty percent since the war started. If they keep it up another year at the current rate, we will have lost half our Elites just trying to defend the nation, and we've already fallen back in many sections, giving up the more difficult to defend regions to the Giants."

Karl frowned. "What the hell are they after? They can't be doing this without a reason."

The Inquisitor shrugged. "For a few weeks, they stopped pushing and sent invasion teams towards all of the newly opened dungeons. But now they're back at the border in full force and pushing harder than ever.

Whatever they're after, the official word is that it is likely to be system related. The current motivational videos say that they are jealous of the Elites and our power, so they're trying to stop us before we grow."

[The Titan Gods can't use the usual Relics to awaken their people. They need the fancy things.] Cara suggested.

[The system stones or the lost fragment of the World Dragon Scale that was supposed to be buried on this continent.] Karl agreed.

"You know something." The Inquisitor stated.

"Indeed. But that's between me and the Archbishop. I'm afraid I'm not free to explain."

Telling the Inquisitor that the Giants were likely to overrun the nation trying to find a lost Relic that could awaken the System in their people now that everyone else was getting in on the fun wouldn't do the haggard looking man any good.

Chapter 622 Schoolyard Chaos

The schoolyard was chaos when they arrived, even with a swarm of teachers trying to calm them all down.

As they reached the grassy area where the kids were gathered for their break, Karl switched to his armour and then used [Brutality] to increase his size, then [Haste] to buff his speed to the level he would need for his next show.

A sharp clap of his hands sent out a boom of dislocated air at supersonic speeds, and caught the attention of everyone on the playground.

"Listen up. I need everyone gathered here in front of me. If any of the little ones have gone inside, I need them back out here.

Come on, we don't have all day." He shouted before letting his size reduce back to normal.

The Children dutifully lined up in front of Karl in a jumbled group, with a few beastkin at the front. They seemed almost drawn to him, and it was their response that brought the others.

"Hello everyone. My name is Karl, and you already met my friend Cara, the Void Badger. Now it has come to my attention that the clerics are not happy with some of the gifts that she picked, so instead of having them confiscated, I came over to give you a chance to exchange them.

You see, young Cara just learned that the Orphanages don't celebrate birthdays, and she wanted everyone to have a late birthday present from her. So it wouldn't be right if it was taken away." A small boy ran up and hugged Karl, while the teachers smiled.

"It's my real birthday today." The boy explained, then held up a hand wearing a Giant Strength ring.

He was too young to have awakened a Class, but the item had equipped to him, so Karl was fairly certain that he would be awakening one in the near future.

"And the teachers thought that making you super strong was likely to break stuff." Karl agreed.

Cara was working frantically to prepare gift bags full of snacks, each with one special treat at the bottom. Nothing that would cause the chaos of the rings she started passing out after the security team began chasing her, though.

Cara wanted them to have one long-lasting item to remember her by, so some of the items were looted broken magical items, decorative jewellery that she had stuck a pretty stone into, replacing the ugly or missing stones or other similar items.

She passed Karl a bag, and he traded the preschool aged boy for the ring of Giant Strength.

He pulled it out and found a simple brass amulet on a chain, then opened it to find a crude self-portrait of Cara, carved with one of her claws into a quartz flake.

"It's so pretty! I will keep this forever." The boy declared.

"I will tell Cara that you like it. Happy birthday."

The ring returned to its normal size as the boy took it off, and Karl set it back into one of his inventory spaces.

There were far more trash quality magical items in there than Karl remembered. Sure, they looted the Giants' bodies empty, but there had to be thousands of damaged or extremely low-quality rings, bracelets, amulets and other bits of magical jewellery in there.

[Did we really kill that many monsters?] Karl asked.

[I don't think so. Well, maybe before I got here? Lots of that stuff smells like cold.]

That was right. They had looted the Frost Giant City. Or, Rae had. Remi wasn't coming out of her space in that weather, but Rae had stockpiled everything that she could get her hands on, just so the Giants couldn't have it.

[You can pick items that protect against the cold to give to the kids as well. Nobody will complain about those if they don't increase strength or magical power enough for the kids to become a problem.]

That made Cara's gift package giving much easier, though she was going to pick the food bushes in her space clean by the time they finished. She only kept them for decoration, and the others were all busy, except Hawk, who was still asleep, enjoying his day off.

There were only a half dozen items that needed to be swapped, and a few kids that Cara had missed the first time through, as everyone was moving around, and she was being chased by annoying people.

"Did we miss anyone?" Karl asked.

"The twins are in the closet, and the doofus with funny hair is sick today." One of the boys announced.

"His name is Ronald, and he's not a doofus." One of the girls defended him, though Karl noted that she didn't mention his hair.

The teachers were the ones that caught the important part. "Why are the twins in the closet?" The old woman asked.

"Because they're stupid and nobody likes them." One of the boys in back muttered, too low for human hearing to pick up.

Karl turned to the teacher. "Bullying. How about I give you this for Ronald, and you can go get the twins?"

The teacher nodded and jogged off to get the twins, while a number of the students gave the boy who had outed them a dirty look. It didn't take long to find the twins, and even less time for the teachers who remained outside to determine who the culprits were. The twins were brought out to meet with him, and Karl gave them a quick inspection. They didn't appear to be injured, and there was nothing visible strange about them. He had expected that they might have something odd about them, like part beastkin lineage, being too small for their age, or even an unusual hair colour. But they seemed perfectly normal so far.

The twin girls glared at the boys from their class, and the teachers sighed.

One of the teachers, a younger woman and still an Awakened Rank Red Dragon cleric, leaned over to whisper to Karl.

"They're recent arrivals. They lost their family to a monster spawn a couple of months ago, and they don't get along well with the boys. They're fine at the dorms, but classes are mixed." She explained.

That was understandable. They had just lost their family, and now they were in a new place, strangers among a group of kids who had mostly grown up together.

[I have just the right thing. Here, give them these bags.] The bags contained matching pendants, which added three points to agility. Not a major increase, though it would be noticeable for the children. The important part was that they were two halves of a matched set, so the twins would have their own thing, but not something that the other didn't have.

Chapter 623 Professor

The chaos around the school began to die down now that everyone had their birthday presents, and the teachers started to corral their students back into groups so they would go to class.

With the students all gone, the Inquisitor could finally relax for a moment, then he realized that the actual cause of all the chaos had not been handled, as he was still standing right there, holding the Void Badger in reserve for the next time that they got bored.

"We should return to the University. The government and military reps have their hands full, dealing with a bunch of hyper new Elites, and they won't stay under control long without someone who can actually handle them present." The Inquisitor sighed.

Karl chuckled. "Well, I suppose that we should do some actual work. But the students shouldn't be that much trouble. There are only two Moor Cats among them, and the rest are all Lightning Cerro, who are going to naturally want to herd up and make friends with the new people.

It's hard to explain, but the presence of a beast in your mind is highly influential, like a second track of inner monologue giving you different suggestions to the point that you need to remember what is you and what is your partner.

If you're not careful, it can start to influence your personality."

The Inquisitor gave Karl a blank look. Did he not realize how much his own personality was influenced by the beasts that he was bonded with?

Or was this him speaking from experience, as he had already let his beasts shape his mind, so now he was warning others to be careful.

[Don't leave yet, there is a dragon coming.] Cara announced.

She knew that she had to behave, but this was a Red Dragon anyhow. She already knew what they tasted like.

"Headmistress." The Inquisitor welcomed the dragon, who was in the form of a middle-aged woman with flaming red hair.

"I came to thank the Monarch. The kids are so happy today with their gifts. As you know, our budget is limited, and giving out durable items, especially magical ones, is far beyond our means."

Karl bowed slightly. "It might be a once-in-a-lifetime thing, but everyone should have a present to call their own. Something that they can bring with them to remind them of the good times."

The Red Dragon nodded happily. "What do you carry?"

"I don't have one. We could never afford anything that would last."

The headmistress nodded, while Cara laughed. [You have an emotional support Cerro instead.]

"We have made a listing of what belongs to which student, in case something is reported stolen, or an incident of bullying escalates to theft. It is harshly punished, but often the victim is too afraid to report it."

Karl nodded. "They still have to live with the bully, after all. The best you can do is try and have your teachers be proactive. Like the twins. It might pay to find out why and by who they were locked in the

closet today. Nobody ever moved to my hometown that didn't at least have family there, but I suspect that being new is hard."

There was a commotion behind them, and Karl saw a group of small Cerro running his way, being chased by their partners.

"Oh, the little ones got to run out on open grass? It's a good day to be a Cerro." Karl laughed as one of the little beasts came up to bump against his leg.

It was knee-high, still a hatchling, and just as eager to explore everything as Thor had been when he was young.

The two young Moor Cats were out as well, sniffing around and headbutting the Cerro hatchlings. The bond had helped them understand everyone was on the same team, and while they were still working on it, they were getting along better than expected.

Only the one unfortunate case of mental weakness had been taken away, and the other bonds appeared to be increasingly stable already.

"What was next on your schedule?" The Inquisitor asked Karl, as the Beast Master played with the small beasts.

"We have a few more hours of training for the Acolytes, as they have no combat experience at all. They were all recruited before the attempt at the Divine Serum, after all." Karl explained.

"Ah yes. With the five of them, plus all these successful attempts, there is a lot of training to be done." Karl slowly realized that his success had volunteered him to train these beast related classes as well, adding a group of special forces cadets to his roster of Acolytes.

But that wasn't all bad. They now had Beast Rangers and a Tiger Monk to add to their group of Common Rank Acolytes, and eleven people was enough that Karl might be able to convince someone to let him lead them on an adventure.

The area where he had first gone to collect resources was a good start, as it had moss that a Cerro would love, and he could swing by the cave to get them crystals for their mana development. Plus, there was a chance the instance would open for them.

Karl smiled at the Inquisitor. "What are the chances that I can take them on a field trip? Not far from the train tracks, and my team will supervise the eleven of them. There is a spot with resources that the Cerro love, and a chance at weak monsters, so they might be able to test their skills and let the Moor Cats hunt for their first time."

"Likely not for the next few weeks. The research team wants solid data on how well your technique works to advance them in the early stages, and letting them go on a field trip introduces all sorts of variables that aren't part of their methodology." The bald Inquisitor explained.

"So what you're saying is that we're school teachers for a while, but with eleven students instead of five." Karl sighed.

"But now we have beasts for you to prove your skills on. How much do you think that you can teach them?" Karl smiled. "More than might be considered reasonable by a sane person."

Chapter 624 Training Cadets

Karl motioned for the newly chosen Elites to come forward so that he could make a lesson plan.

"First, as I'm being assigned to help train you, I need to know what you know besides the basic combat training of the Church soldiers. What skills did you get from your class, and what do you have available? Other than Nikki, the Tiger Monk, you are all Beast Rangers, so your skills should be similar." Karl began.

The others gestured for the odd man out, the lone Beast Ranger that had a Moor Cat, to do the explanation.

"Well, Beast Ranger is a ranged combat class, with our teammate as our close combatant. The first skill that I got was [Deadly Accuracy] which boosts my skill with a bow. But I also got a system reward for going first, and it gave me [Shadow Meld], for hiding in the forest to set up an ambush.

If I am reading the class description right, we should all gain extra stats and abilities from the bonded beast that we chose. For certain, my agility and strength have increased substantially." He explained.

One of the other boys nodded in agreement. "For those of us with a Cerro, it's our strength and stamina. Jogging over here behind them wasn't even enough to raise my heart rate. I got the same starting skill, but no bonus.

Once I have a couple of points, however we get those, I can start picking bow skills like Infinite Arrows and Lightning Bolt."

The others nodded. "The skills seem to be the same for all of us. So, we will be good at working in a group."

Karl chuckled. "You have no idea how true that is. You see, your Lightning Cerro can learn to extend Refreshing Lightning over you with relative ease, and the whole group with a bit more difficulty. So, you will be excellent at working in a group, as your partner is specialized in team defence.

For the one friend with a Moor Cat, you are clearly the team's scout, as you specialize in stealth, and I will start training you with the rogue types in my group to build your skills."

"You have a powerful Rogue in your team?" The Ranger asked.

"Technically no. But I have a Monarch Rank Bloodbath Spider, and if there is anything in this world that knows about ambushing and becoming the reason other species fear the dark, it's Rae."

The cadet looked concerned about actually being able to learn anything from a Spider, but Karl hadn't mentioned that Rae could take on human form yet.

"Now, for the Tiger Monk, what are your skills?" Karl asked.

"I have two basic skills right now, [Energy Strike] and [Merger]. One is self-explanatory, the other lets me boost my power with my Moor Cat's presence when she is in my mental space. There are skills in my

skill tree for us to fight together, so I don't think it's supposed to be an all the time thing, but more for when she is recovering, or it isn't practical for us both to fight." Nikki replied.

"And you already know basic unarmed combat, so there is no issue there. Your training should be fairly easy. You can train with the warriors, but on a higher level, as the other two that I have in training right now are freshmen."

[More Pack Members?] One of the Cerro Hatchlings asked.

"Indeed, young Cerro. There are more military pack members there for you to meet, as well as my pack members, and a Monarch Rank Cerro named Thor."

That was all that the young ones needed to hear to be back at full energy and running around the playground, while the Rangers were shocked that Karl could understand what the Cerro wanted to know.

"Follow me everyone. We're going to the guard training grounds, where the rest of your fellow trainees are waiting to meet you.

Well, they don't know you're coming yet, but they will soon. There are only a few hours left in today's training routine, but before we call it a night, there is time for you all to get to meet your other specialists." Karl explained as he waved goodbye to the Headmistress of the Orphans' school and started to walk toward the training grounds with a pair of Moor Cats circling his feet and a line of Cerro Hatchlings behind him.

"It's like the pied piper. They will follow him anywhere." One of the Rangers complained.

And that was what they did, in an odd little procession all the way across the park to the training area.

They had gathered quite the crowd by the time they arrived, all intrigued by the presence of the baby beasts, and eager to find out what sort of thing they were up to at the Cathedral today.

The training areas weren't precisely off limits to the public, they just weren't popular visiting spots for anyone without a reason to be there. So, the small crowd followed them back and saw the recruits learning basic combat skills along with Karl's group of Acolytes, who were using Skills.

That immediately marked them as Elites, who would normally be finishing their first year at the Academy right now.

But those beasts who were following Karl weren't a year old yet, and that started the rumours that the whole group, nearly a dozen students, had gotten their Classes early.

That was huge gossip for the bored residents of the Capital, even before the group of Cerro Hatchlings raced across the sand to go see Thor. The sight was so adorable that everyone wished there was a reporter here to take proper professional pictures.

Then, Thor began lining them up in a row, while Dana made barriers for them.

The onlookers were confused, but Karl got everyone moving. "Cerro team, head to your partners. You will be practising working together as they charge. Moor Cats, Nikki will be with Ophelia learning offensive coordination, and Pat will be with Lady Rae to practice your stealth skills."

Karl gestured in the right directions, and Sybil gave a relieved sigh as she saw that there was finally someone to distract Rae's full attention from her.

Little did she know that the special forces cadet was at a higher standard of basic training than she was, and other than skills, she had a long way to go to catch up.

Chapter 625 Ranger Training

For the new Rangers, the idea of fighting from a distance while avoiding hitting a very enthusiastic teammate was much more difficult than they had expected it to be.

They understood basic tactics from their cadet training, even some advanced group tactics, but none of those were prepared for an overeager Cerro who finally got a chance to charge a smashing pole.

Thor had made the poles short, only a little taller than the Cerro Hatchlings, as there would be times when they were fighting smaller monsters, especially when they were Common and Awakened Rank. But that meant that they had to hit the target without hitting the Cerro, and the hatchlings were not good at following directions to get out of the way.

They tried.

They actually tried very hard. They just had no idea what their new herd members actually wanted, so they ended up simply switching posts, or running around in circles for a minute before they were instructed back to order.

Thor thought that it was hilarious, but there wasn't much he could do to accelerate the process, as the whole point was to teach the Elites how to give orders to their beasts in a way that they would understand, while working together as a team.

Both Aaron and Jaime were working on their offensive attack skills for the remainder of the evening, guided by Ophelia, while Karl took on the training of their new Tiger Monk.

"Alright, first things first. You have two very different combat styles. However, after the bonding, the levels of physical capability aren't as different between the human and the Moor Cat as they were before, so we have these lovely volunteers from the Cadet force to assist us.

The others were doing the same training earlier, and the concept is simple. There are three of them, and two of you. You will pretend that I am your team's cleric or mage, and prevent them from getting to me.

I have cast a barrier over them, so you can go all out. They are using training weapons, but they will still hurt if you mess up, so be careful. Now, show me what you can do when you are working together."

The Tiger Monk class should have a number of defensive abilities, and Nikki's durability was greatly increased, while her Moor Cat would be in no real danger from a training blade unless she got hit too hard on the head or poked in an eye.

That left Karl free to see how the others were doing, and the chaos that was an exhausted Sybil and a confused Pat trying to find a way to attack Rae.

The spider had five guards encircling her, and Pat had ranged attacks, but Rae was not an easy target to hit, even if she was taller than most of her defenders.

Every time he thought that he had a good shot, she would move so that a defender was between them, or someone would force him to retreat and change his angle.

They were allowed to retreat, and the guards wouldn't chase them, letting them set up assaults on their own. So, it was just a matter of time until he finally found a way to get past the defenders.

The Moor Cat charged, forcing a defender to the side as an arrow raced past, only to be caught in Rae's slender fingers, then crushed to dust.

"Wonderful timing, you've learned to shoot past defenders. Now, you just need to do that every time." She congratulated the Beast Ranger.

Pat smirked. "You know, being a ranged attacker is so strong. If we were close to the same Rank, wouldn't I have a huge advantage?" Rae smiled at him, then activated [Night Haunter] and shot out a stream of silk faster than the Ranger could process. Not as an attack, but as an extension of her body. Anywhere that she could see, or her body could reach, she could move to in incorporeal form.

Faster than Pat's mind could process what was happening, the slender monster woman was gone from the encirclement, and a massive black Bloodbath Spider was towering over him from behind with clicking mandibles.

Of course, Pat had yet to learn any of the advanced detection skills of his class, so to him Rae had vanished for a split second after activating [Night Haunter], and he had no idea how she had gotten behind him.

Rae tapped him on the head with her mandibles, then changed back to humanoid form.

"You're not the only one that can ambush from a distance. This is good training for forcing mages and clerics onto the defensive, but learning to defend against other ambush attackers will come later."

Sybil stared at Rae with open adoration. Lady Rae was simply too cool. She hadn't shown off at all when she was forcing Sybil to learn to use [Shadow Step] more efficiently, but this type of attack was precisely what Sybil had been trying to master all day long.

She would keep training hard, and soon, she would learn the trick to moving undetected.

For now, she was working on a more practical approach than trying to use the [Shadow Step] skill. Lunge, Parry and roll to launch an attack towards Rae. All she had to do was get around the defender, and she would get her shot at success.

What she failed to realize was that the volunteers in this group all had children, and many years of practice with escaping youngsters to add to their combat training. They knew all the ways that a kid would try to get around them, and they weren't falling for Sybil's tricks. The only way for her to succeed was to build up her combat skills.

Rae intended to add evening classes where they could move freely in the dark after the first week of going over basic attack and defence moves to supplement what Sybil had learned from her Class activation.

Her first impression was proving to be correct, though. The girl had promise, and she was a fast learner.

While she couldn't hear anything, the skill called [Echolocation] was a passive Skill ability, not a physical trait for her. For Rae and Karl, it was simply an improvement that modified their natural bodies. But for Sybil, it was a skill that had been added by the System, and her damaged ears made no difference to its effectiveness.

She was learning to use it well, as the skill told her when someone was about to grab her from behind, or hit her with an attack. It made her extra slippery, and a number of times she had nearly made it through the defenders already.

Not bad for a first day.

Chapter 626 Group Bonding

Once the training was done, the eleven new Acolytes were moved to the Elite dorms in the Cathedral. They were on the main floor with all of the other Common Rank Acolytes of the church, and they were all sharing one large dorm, but the atmosphere there was completely different from what they had experienced at the Orphanage, or in the common dorms of the cadets.

The other Cadets were all jealous of the ones who were chosen for Special Forces training, and the nomination had previously given the new Beast Rangers a level of arrogance, putting themselves above the others, though none of them were Elites.

Now, they were sharing a dorm with the Acolytes that had been chosen before them, and everyone in the room was on the same level. Over the course of the day, they had seen enough of the younger Acolytes training to know that while they were less trained, they were not weaker than the Beast Rangers.

It was a humbling experience.

But for four of the five chosen Orphans, it was a much more tense situation. They had finished dinner, and it was nearly to lights out. Lights out meant nearly complete darkness in the room. A room shared with Sybil, who could Shadow Step, and who they had bullied for being deaf all her life.

None of the ones here were lead participants in her bullying, as they simply didn't see her as worth the effort. But that didn't necessarily mean she didn't hold a grudge, and she was known to stab others even before she had a class that specialized in it.

Countermeasures were needed.

Sybil was about to climb up onto a top bunk in the corner of the room when Joan whistled softly, catching her attention through [Echolocation]. The Rogue turned to see what the fuss was, as the whistle was usually for the clerics to get the children to do something, but the girl was just smiling at her before she began to sign.

[Excellent work today, Sybil. You really were born to be an Elite.] Sybil smiled. That was the first nice thing that anyone had said to her in years.

"What is she saying?" Nikki asked from the next bunk over.

"Oh, right. I forgot that you all couldn't sign. I was congratulating her on her good work the first day. We were all chosen as test subjects for Monarch Karl's group to train, and they helped us all awaken our classes with an item and a skill book." Joan explained, signing as she went, then translating the responses for Sybil.

"Oh, Monarch Karl used tokens to help us bond with our beasts. From what I learned, you have to have the potential, and convince the beast to bond with you. It's not easy without guidance, and we had been trying for almost a year before today when he showed up to help." Nikki offered.

[You got an adorable kitten. I'm jealous.] Sybil signed while Joan translated.

The others laughed. Adorable and Moor Cat didn't often go together in one sentence, even when they were little. But for some reason, the cats liked Sybil, and didn't ignore her or shy away from her during the walk to the Cathedral after training.

"Just wait until she's big. Moor Cats are enormous when they're fully grown, as big as Princess Ophelia in her Dire Bear form. Well, the one before she uses her skills to become massive.

What sort of skill is that, anyhow? How is anyone supposed to fight a bear the size of a house?" The Tiger Monk complained.

Ophelia had shown off for them a little towards the end of the day, and while she had kept her speed down, it was still nearly impossible for the warriors to deal with her size.

With the Giants attacking, Elites were expected to be trained to fight both large and small enemies, but Sybil was certain that small was the easier half.

[Then she can block for you while you go for the vital points. It will be a good pairing. I've been trying all day to find a way to get around the guards, maybe tomorrow I will try using Pat's partner as a distraction.

But if I could find a weak spot on the bear, how would I even reach it? I'm stronger and faster than I was, but the bear is huge.] Sybil agreed.

Everyone was so excited about the next day that they forgot about their worries, even when the lights went out and the cathedral clerics began making their rounds to ensure everyone was in bed and not wandering in the dark.

Back at Karl's apartment, a training summit was in progress, and it had attracted all the talents.

Overlord Niall had come to train with Rae for the evening, but had gotten sucked into the discussion when Overlords Joram and Tabitha had come knocking at Karl's door.

They both had rooms on another floor, and had seen the training today from their windows.

Joram, the Ranger, was intrigued by the abundance of Ranger types with beast partners, and Tabitha, who was normally a strict and serious warrior, was intrigued by the idea of forming a tactical response squad out of these recruits.

They weren't strong yet. But they would be soon enough, and Princess Remi had laid out quite the plan for them.

{You see, giving a human too many resources burns their potential. Their bodies can't adapt that quickly. Like with the concoction that some use to bypass the Royal Rank bottleneck when they are stuck.

However, these six with the beasts have an advantage. They will grow with their linked partners. So, we can give the resources to the beasts. We know that they are going to grow rapidly, and all the human half will need to do is to work on their mental strength, so they don't take damage from the imbalance as they're pulled along.}

Remi didn't bother to use a transformation skill, so she was speaking Serpent. But Niall had brought a magical tablet with him that displayed the words for everyone who didn't speak the language.

"So, the goal is to try to bring up a group of regular human elites at the same speed as the beasts are growing, while keeping the Elites bonded to the beasts from taking mental damage?" Overlord Tabitha asked.

{Exactly. We can give them skill books, and use the Karl's learning skills on them, and train them all day long. If we do it right, with the proper nutrition, I think that we can do it.

I had a whole bunch of books delivered to me today, and I read in the ones on nutrition that humans only eat basic magical foods. Your slow growth could be due to a lack of nutrition.}

A bunch was an understatement. There were entire shelves of them in her space now, a small library of technical tomes and magical reference books.

Tabitha chuckled. "Or it could be an aversion to using too many magical resources to grow and crippling or unbalancing their potential. Everyone treats higher ranked foods as more of a growth resource than just food, but look at your other humans. They don't seem to be suffering in the potential department, and they've been eating highly potent magical plants and meats every day, on a level that is far beyond what would normally cripple an Elite."

She made a good point. Normally, you would expect that sort of fast growth to lead to damage, but nobody in the group was showing signs of it yet.

{There has to be something about it. Maybe because it's not refined, so it's easier to digest? I will study it more as we feed our trainees. I have potions for them as well, but not too many.} "You have a very helpful Naga Queen on your side." Overlord Joram congratulated Karl.

"She started life as a Spirit Snake Shaman, and she has always been obsessed with learning. I had totally forgotten that I should be careful while ingesting magical resources. If they taste good, they're food, right? I just went for whatever tasted best." Karl replied with a shrug.

"Making it through life on pure blind luck." Niall chuckled, then turned to Rae.

"How about we head down to the training grounds? We've got eight hours before breakfast to train."

And then they were gone, having escaped to the training ground with [Shadow Step].

Chapter 627 Sparring With Rae

Rae was delighted that the Overlord had not forgotten his side of their deal. Now, she was a Monarch, and only one Rank beneath him, so it should be a good sparring opportunity.

"So, which form would you like to practice in first?" Niall asked.

"I think human first. It should be easier to learn your tricks if I'm in the same shape you are. Then we can go all out when I'm in spider form with golems." Rae suggested.

Niall nodded and launched his first attacks, as Rae activated [Night Hunter] and extended her fingernails out into proper claws to parry his attacks.

The Overlord Rank Rogue tracked her movements with ease and Rae had to slip away using her web to keep him from getting behind her.

He could also step on air the same way that Dana did, meaning that even moving to the ceiling didn't put her out of his range. But the human was also faster than she was, and they were both constantly using movement skills to flit around the room.

To the Commander in the security office, it looked like the room was filled with shadows and smoke, as the combatants were moving faster than the recording cameras. Someone in the upper ranks was going to be extremely disappointed that they couldn't get a recording of the battle, but with the skills of stealth type classes, recordings were normally useless even if they weren't this fast.

After five minutes, a bell rang, and the combatants returned to the centre of the room, breathing heavily.

"How do you see me?" Rae asked, confused about her inability to hide. [Night Hunter] should make her invisible to both normal and thermal vision.

"I have [Presence Sense], and I'm a Rank over you. Unless you can completely hide your aura and life signs, you won't be able to hide from me.

But what is that skill you are using? I've never encountered anything like it. It's stealth and movement at the same time, and something more. Unless you have a separate skill that is making you incorporeal and immune to regular damage."

Rae shook her head. "It's all one skill. Night Hunter. It's not really a movement skill, though. It only lets me move my whole body to places I can see or touch. But it counts my silk as part of me until I detach it. So, I can weave a web and then move around the room with ease."

"And the transformation, is that you, or are you still using the token from Newbon?"

"That's all me. I put in many hours of effort to make a babysitter form for dealing with small humans. It is quite effective."

Overlord Niall chuckled. "Do you think that you will do better in spider form?"

Rae looked around the room, then frowned and shook her head.

"No, I'm too large for my extra speed to matter. I might be able to land a strike or two with my legs, but I won't be able to win without much more space."

"Then let's keep practising. Maybe you can learn one of my attack skills."

Really, Niall was determined to learn more about Night Hunter, and he could feel that Karl's training skill was active on both of them. Chances for an Overlord to learn a new skill were few and far between, so he would make the best of his night with Lady Rae Bloodbath.

He wasn't the only one training late that night, though. Thor's advance had granted Karl the ability to use [Lightning Zone], while Hawk's had improved [Flaming Body] to [Ghostfire Body]. So, Karl had to practice both new skills so that he would know how they worked, and their limitations, before he needed to use them in combat.

Ghostfire Body was very similar to the old skill, other than the fact that it appeared to burn away the soul energy of the target as well. But the Lightning Zone was going to take some work.

By default, it created a charged area around him that would shock anything that entered, other than the targets he specifically excluded.

It would be much more useful if it could be focused away from himself, or into a barrier line, where the lightning would shock and stun at a set point, and not randomly all over the zone.

It would make him difficult to sneak up on, as he would feel the activation when anything was shocked, but it was a bit too indiscriminate for Karl's taste.

He practised for an hour after all of the Overlords had gone to bed, but with no progress, he decided to put it aside for now and work on it later.

Hawk had some insights on the problem.

[Maybe you just need to make it more Karl flavoured? You are good at using our skills, but they're not really your skills, are they? Just a copy of ours. If you tweak them, it might be better.]

[So, more focus on using Skill Master and Skill Merger on myself? That's actually a good idea. Maybe I can advance a skill or two. Learning an advanced version would be a huge boost.]

Hawk considered that. [You have that fancy writing skill too. It's for more than just writing books, right?]

Yes, Runecrafting was for more than writing skill books. Though, it did also make writing skill books easier.

Karl thought about it, and took out a piece of paper to write on. Then he realized that he was short on supplies. A pen wouldn't do for this application, as the runes he needed to write had specific thickness ratios, and he didn't have a paint brush.

[I will have to test that tomorrow after I get supplies. Maybe I can leave skills behind if I write the runes on an object.] He explained to the beasts, who were watching with great interest.

[Who knew that we could be stumped by something as simple as a paintbrush? But you can be like this heroine in my book.] Remi commented.

[What book?]

Remi held up a small paperback, and Karl sighed. {Spirit Summoner Onmyo and her lustful Demon Lord}

[Where did you get that? Let me guess, you ordered it from the library because you liked the title.] Karl sighed.

[It's a good one. Lots of romance, but the main character writes runes on paper to cast spells and banish demons.] Remi agreed easily.

Putting aside the fact that the book appeared to be a white cover trashy demon erotica, it wasn't a bad idea. With Runecrafting and focus, he should be able to transfer some of his skills to paper and use them as wards on an area.

In theory, anyhow.

Chapter 628 Training Needed

The practice could wait until morning, Karl decided as he climbed into bed next to Dana, only to have Cara come out to snuggle between them.

She was taking her self-appointed duty to keep Karl wholesome until Thor found a date entirely too seriously, but the Void Badger was actually rather soft and warm, not at all unpleasant to sleep next to.

Dana would have much preferred that the Badger not lick her face to wake her up, though.

"Alright, I'm getting up already. Now, what are we up to this morning?" She complained.

"Same as yesterday. Breakfast, rescue the Acolytes from themselves, then training." Karl replied with a shrug, then jumped as Cara smacked his ass.

[Hmm, getting soft. You need to work out more.]

Karl stroked Cara's fur backwards to rile up the Void Badger, then left the room to go find breakfast. The first order of business was to call the concierge and have them bring up a stack of parchment paper slips, a set of brushes and some ink, along with a selection of casual clothes for everyone to wear when they weren't training.

Rae had been busy lately, and she was still training with Overlord Niall even now that the sun was coming up.

The two of them had made great progress last night, if Rae's impression of the evening was correct, and they were at a point now where even with her Golems out, she couldn't keep up with the Overlord's tricks.

Rae got a lot of combat practice, relative to her age, but Niall had spent a lot of his time since reaching Overlord doing security work, and he hadn't had the chance to really go all out for a long time.

It was a refreshing chance for him to hone his skills against someone with a similar skill set, instead of his usual training partners, whose moves he already knew as well as the other Overlords themselves did. With new practice partners, he would be better prepared should another nation send their own stealth type Overlords against him, instead of the usual Mage or Monster type infiltrators and challengers. For that, he was even willing to upgrade Rae's reward for the outfit she had made him to a bit of his own blood, instead of Monarch Ranked, as they had originally agreed.

Now that Thor was awake, he was casting [Eternal Lightning] barriers over them both to increase their stamina regeneration so that they could get the most out of the last few minutes of their training. But soon enough, the Overlord would have to go back to work and then get some sleep after spending all night training with Rae.

A gentle knock on the door caught Karl's attention, and he looked over as Ophelia opened it to reveal Sybil, along with a staff member from the lobby of the building.

It was the employee who spoke first. "Lady Ophelia, a group of trainees is here to see your team. They claim to have morning training scheduled with you, but it is not on the building's schedule for approved visitors."

Ophelia nodded. "We didn't expect them to be up and moving so early in the morning. But if they're this energetic, perhaps we went too easy on them yesterday. Please invite them up, and we will get a high-energy breakfast into them before a full day of training."

The concierge nodded. "Will you be requiring any ingredients?"

Ophelia turned to Tessa, who handed a short list to the delicate featured man. "That should do for breakfast. We will cook the rest ourselves."

"Very good, High Priestess." He agreed, then turned to leave, with Sybil still standing in the hall.

She turned to follow him, clearly only here because she was interested in what they would have to say, and not because she had been escorted. But Ophelia was faster, and grabbed the little rogue by the back of the neck to put her inside the apartment.

Lotus laughed and signed along as she spoke. "You can wait here for the others to arrive. The building staff won't keep them away."

Tessa had ordered a stack of omelettes, which arrived before the acolytes had even been brought upstairs. It would go well with the huge pile of bacon that the clerics were making, ever so reluctantly donated by Hawk.

After his evolution, Hawk actually ate less than he had before, despite his size increase. He would be an Overlord before he even made it through the Royal Ranked boards, if their progress remained steady, but he did enjoy looking at his mountains of food.

"Good morning everyone. Sit and eat to get some energy for the day." Karl instructed as the acolytes finally made it up to the apartment.

"Sir, we already ate breakfast at the Cathedral." Aaron reminded him.

"And now you will have a second breakfast, with a lot of high-grade protein. We were informed that you were all full of energy and eager to get training this morning, so we have a more intensive routine planned for the day."

The trainees began to wonder if the Cathedral's schedule had made Karl think that they were more energetic than they actually were. They had to admit, they were excited to get into training today, but that didn't mean that they didn't have sore muscles, even after healing and a good night's rest.

But it might also be the Monarch testing them to make sure that they were sufficiently devoted to learning and deserved to keep their spot in this elite team.

For the Special Forces group, it was a given that everything in life would be a test until they graduated. But for the others, they hadn't had a chance yet to learn just how creative the instructors of the Church Army could be with their training methods.

"What is first on the schedule?" Tessa asked as she finished serving breakfast.

"Strength training. Even mages need some muscle tone and stamina, and with all this extra energy, plus Thor's magic refreshing them, they should be able to build some strength in a hurry.

Getting a class increases strength for warriors, but it still takes a lot of training to get to peak form. Especially for the Rangers, who will be moving through difficult terrain and chasing their beasts, building that muscle tone will be essential to your survival." Karl informed the group.

It made sense, but they all got the ominous feeling that they were going to end up doing laps around the field to start their day.

Thor was not nearly that uninspired. There were no laps around the training area for the acolytes under his training regimen.

Instead, he brought out a number of weighted vests, made of Rae's silk, and had the trainees do sprints up and down the bleachers while he kept a milder version of [Refreshing Lightning] active so that the muscles had time to strain, heal and repeat.

If he kept too powerful of a spell active, they didn't suffer the strain needed to grow the muscles, but this way they should get the gains in a single morning that would otherwise have taken them months.

Thor was very proud of the plan, but Karl noticed that he put a stronger version of the regenerative spell on the Cerro Hatchlings, who were happily chasing everyone up and down the stairs.

They didn't need the work to grow up big and strong, they needed higher quality feed and a good smashing post to practice their skills. Chasing the herd was just fun.

Thor had prepared both for them, and he was happy to ignore the hateful glares that he was getting from ten of the eleven trainees.

Four laps in, Sybil was too exhausted to even glare at him anymore.

But that was quickly solved with an adjustment to her protective spells, and Rae was happy to keep her running. No disciple of hers would be lazy.

One of the training Sergeants came over to coordinate assistants for Karl's acolytes today and paused when he saw their physical training.

"Did they do something personal to you? Weighted gut laps up the bleachers is pretty extreme for rookies." He asked.

"Nope. We have a healing and stamina regeneration spell on them. In theory, this should build muscle at a rate that no steroid could compete with. We have limited time to train, so we're pushing them as hard as humanly possible without damaging their potential.

It's the core of what the Church asked us to do when they assigned us these lucky recruits. My group has a number of training specialty skills, and they were hoping that we could push up a fresh group of Elites, then teach others the method.

It's only day two, but I already see progress.

Take a look at that Monk, what do you see?" Karl replied.

"Just a Monk running up the stairs with everyone else." Then the Sergeant paused, then noticed one more detail.

"Much more easily than she should be with that much weight on her back. How monstrous is her strength?"

Karl chuckled. "If I am right, it's not about her strength, which is actually monstrous. I believe that she has learned a movement skill to reduce her weight."

"A new skill learned on the second day of training? How ridiculous is your method?"

Behind them, Dana laughed. "The Monk isn't the only one. The mage is using a barrier under his weighted vest so that he doesn't have to carry the weight himself. He's still dying trying to run up the stairs, but that's expected."

"Oh, you taught him the barrier spell yesterday?" Karl asked.

"No, apparently he got a skill point from yesterday's training, and he used it to buy the barrier spell once he found out that the day was going to start with weighted laps up the bleachers."

Having a fully active system was going to be a huge advantage, and if Karl wasn't proactive with his own growth, there was a chance that the average overachiever in this next intake might actually shatter his growth speed records.

If he told the Academy that, they would likely laugh at him. But Karl was fairly certain it was an actual possibility. The lack of System access was what was dragging everyone down in the past, and with these new students being close to fully active, they should grow steadily, and they would be able to just buy access to new skills to improve their abilities.

Thor let the students run for two full hours before he called a stop to it and had them come down to eat. At this point, even the Cerro Hatchlings were looking exhausted, but once Thor put out the pile of feed for them and Remi passed out steaks for the pair of Moor Cat kittens, all of the beasts were regaining their enthusiasm for life.

"I can see that everyone's physical strength has improved in just one morning training session. Don't worry about your weight, you're going to burn off every single bit of energy that you can take in during your training. Just eat." Thor informed them.

Sybil read his lips and decided that escape might be the better option, but she was only gone for half a second before she returned with Rae's hand on her shoulder.

The Rogue slumped in defeat after realizing that it would not be so easy to get out of the hard parts of the day, even with [Shadow Step].

But then the volunteers from the Army came over, and she realized that they were on to combat training, which was way more fun than strength training, even if it was just as exhausting.

Or more exhausting, as she would be constantly using her improved physique to try to defeat the guards. Or so she thought.

Rae smiled at her. "The rest of the morning will be focused on ranged weapons training. I have fashioned or obtained three different types, and once you have one hundred percent accuracy with all of them at a reasonable range, we can add new ones."

She had obtained throwing stars and throwing knives, as well as a hand crossbow that was a common grade magic item and created its own basic bolts. It would only be a decent weapon if there was poison applied, or a skill added to the bolts, but it was perfect for training, as it took minimal energy to make the bolts.

Karl shuddered to think of the hit that his wallet was taking now that the beasts had learned about ordering shopping for delivery. But as long as they kept it reasonable, he shouldn't run out of spending money before they went on their next proper mission.

Karl clapped his hands. "Now that everyone is done eating, the beasts are with me, and the rest of you can head to the same trainers you had yesterday."

The Cerro herd was stoked to play with the beast master, but the Moor Cats looked skeptical.

"You two lovable furballs will be doing hunting training with my bodyguard here, while I set up a training ground for the herd." He explained as he summoned the Lamia.

The snake woman was fast, much faster than any human both in movement speed and reflexes, so the Moor Cat kittens would have their work cut out for them. For the Cerro, Karl was just going to set up a field of smashing posts made of Earth Barrier, and then draw a course for them. If they hit the posts hard enough, it would break their fledgling [Refreshing Lightning] barriers, and then they would have to refresh it for the next strike. It really was the best training that they could get until their partners were ready to start working together with the herd in combat.

The issue wasn't accidentally hitting the Cerro with an arrow. The Special Forces Cadets were better than that. But the Cerro were still very young and the bond needed time to develop so that both halves of the partnership were on the same page when it came time to fight.

Until they reached that standard, it would just be chaos.

Chapter 630 Cerro Show

"Why are you going so far from the training ground?" The Sergeant asked as Karl began to herd the freshly fed Cerro herd away from the others.

"Do you think that four baby Cerro frolicking in the grass will be productive for the other trainees? If everyone is watching them, who will be training?" Karl laughed.

One of the Cerro rammed into Karl's leg and bounced off, bringing laughter from the soldiers on the sand behind them, as if to prove his point.

"Ah, I overlooked the human factor. I will have one of my Corporals wait nearby in case you need anything."

Karl shook his head. "No need to pull someone from their training. I'm just going to go out off sight behind the bleachers. That's far enough that we can train, and I can still hear the others in case of trouble. You never know what might happen with new Elites trying skills that they haven't fully mastered. Things can go wrong, and I'm pretty good at sorting out wayward troublemakers."

[Or you just want to be close enough to watch it all go down.] Cara added.

[I can jump onto the bleachers from here. It will be a great view.] Thor laughed quietly at the pair as he prepared his warriors for their training. Sitting on the bleachers would give a much better view, but he had trainees of his own to work on, and Ophelia was going to be working with the Rangers today. Instead, he had a pair of Remi's bodyguards to help with the one-on-one training. They had four arms, and four swords, so they could keep constant pressure on the warriors as if they were fighting multiple targets.

When Karl had the smashing poles erected and the orders given to the Cerro Hatchlings, all of the excess spectators moved away from the training grounds, leaving the rest of the group to train in peace, while Karl barked orders like a herding dog and kept the procession moving.

Then, he got a great idea. He could give them a competition, to get to a specific pole as fast as possible when he called the number.

Not only would it help them burn energy from the feed that Thor had given them, but it would help develop their tactical thinking as they worked to be the fastest.

Karl jumped on top of one of the pillars.

"Everyone, attack the pillar that I am on." He called to the four eager Cerro.

A tiny stampede started as they all rushed at the same time, tripping over each other to be the first to hit the pole.

"No, you have to actually reach the pole. Again." Karl called as he hopped to another.

The second attempt was a bit better, but still not well organized.

"You're a pack, you need to work like it. Organize your charge to hit multiple spots on the pole, then peel off for the second rank to strike. Again."

Over and over, the Cerro pack worked to better their coordination.

By the time that lunch rolled around, they were actually getting good at it, and Karl was having fun making them run around for the crowd as they learned to coordinate an attack that looked much more like scaly puppies running into posts.

The Cerro pack weren't the only ones that were improving at a notable rate, though. The bonded partners as well as the five acolytes that Skittles had brought them were also making remarkable progress. Fast enough that the soldiers had noticed the difference between yesterday morning and lunch today. They were all eager to find out what the trick was, and how the cadets could pick up new combat lessons after only seeing them one or two times.

That was a side effect of Skill Master that Karl hadn't considered. They were all working their way towards learning the combat skills that they were practising, but there were many other lessons to be learned along the way, before the actual activation of a new skill.

Not that they were likely to pick up another new skill so quickly, but there was a decent chance that they would have one by the end of the week.

Karl was having lunch on the bleachers with Cara and Remi when the training ground suddenly went silent, and most of the crowd dropped to one knee in the formal bow.

Karl turned to see who it was, as he could only sense an Overlord Rank presence, then realized that he had no idea who the Knight approaching the grounds was.

Fortunately, the System was there to save him.

{Overlord Drath, Commandant of the Church Armies, First General of the Golden Dragon Nation}

Karl stood and made his way down the bleachers to greet the Overlord, who was currently making his way through the officers' ranks, greeting various leaders and their drill Sergeants.

Once he was done greeting his subordinates, the Overlord made his way to Karl.

"Monarch Karl, it's good to finally meet you. I have heard a lot about you the last few days. You're the talk of the Capital." "Commandant Drath, it's a pleasure to meet you as well. I appreciate the loan of the Special Forces Cadets. They're turning out to be quite talented." Karl agreed.

"Oh, I wasn't sure you would know who I was." The middle-aged soldier chuckled.

"Your System interface is activated enough that I can see your name and Class assignment." Karl chuckled.

Drath smiled. "Who would have thought it would be so effective on an old man like me?"

Karl took a second to look more deeply at the man's details and found the important bit of detail that he had missed.

[Species] Bronze Dragon

Which brought up another vital question. How many of the older powerhouses in the Golden Dragon Nation weren't actually humans, though it was nominally a human run nation?

"Orthos said that all he needed was an item that was fully system activated to bring his dormant system functions back online. Are you still missing any?" Karl replied.

Drath laughed. "And just how old do you think that I am? I understand you met the old man in his youth, but I'm not yet seen my hundredth year. Even the Archbishop is older than I am."

Karl shrugged. "Well, you are an Overlord, so I assumed that you had some years on you. I don't actually know much about the maturation rate of Bronze Dragons."