

Beast Master 671

Chapter 671 Blue Days

Joan, the Red Dragon Acolyte, tapped the table to get Karl's attention. "We should likely head back to the Cathedral for the night. Is Rae keeping Sybil for the evening?"

[Nope, she can sleep tonight, we will train in the sun.]

"You can all rest for the evening. We will work on training tomorrow. It will be a little later in the morning, so if you finish everything, you can come here looking for us." Karl informed her, and the young Priestess began to herd her teammates toward the door.

It was subtle, but she was already taking on the Red Dragon Cleric's natural role as caretaker.

Once the kids were gone, the ladies called for wine from downstairs, and Karl knew that it was going to be a long night.

Karl woke up the next morning to find the other occupants of his bed were Rae, Cara, and a dishevelled Lotus, who was wrapped around the Void Badger making happy sleeping noises.

There was snoring coming from the living room, more than seemed likely for just two people, so most of the others must have passed out there after he went to sleep. Only habit had gotten him up this early, but it was a prime opportunity for them to order breakfast and not be the one tortured by the smell of fresh food for once.

At first, Karl considered cooking, but after getting spoiled by the building's chefs and the clerics, he couldn't bring himself to have another of the simple meals that were all he actually knew how to cook.

Bacon and eggs were a wonderful breakfast. But bacon and eggs with all the fancy sauces and garnishes was even better.

Karl dressed in the black pants and white shirt of his official uniform, then reminded himself to have Rae make more clothes for him when she had time.

[There is a whole stack in my forest. The hut with all the little ghosts hanging from the roof.] Rae offered, without moving from her spot in bed.

Indeed, there was. Quite an impressive selection, even if it looked like they were all the failed efforts to make something else. Not bad enough for her to destroy, but piled in a storage space out of the way.

Karl grabbed a pair of black pants and a light grey polo shirt with a spider embroidered over the pocket, and padded out to the front room.

But not everyone was asleep.

There was an assortment of breads, meats and cheeses on the table, accompanied by five blue robed clerics.

The cleric sitting at the foot of the table turned to smile at him, and spoke softly, in a practised Library whisper.

"Monarch. Please join us for breakfast. We were sent over by The Head Librarian to see if you had time to make a copy of the new skill today, and to ask some questions about Runecrafting. She had wanted to ask them herself, but in all the confusion yesterday, she forgot. Today, she is busy with the Archbishop, and won't be able to attend before you are busy with the students."

Karl placed the [Epic Guard] skill book on the table with a soft thump.

"That's the new skill. I finished it last night. From what I can tell, you need to be compatible with Golems and at least Royal Rank to use it."

The Blue Dragon clerics immediately began to play rock paper scissors, and Karl wondered what they were up to. Then he realized. If they could actually use the skill, then opening the cover to read it in preparation to copy it would just teach them the skill and the book would vanish.

Unfortunately for them, they were all Royal High Priestesses. So, there was some sort of chance that they could use it.

The first to lose the match reluctantly reached for the book and caressed the cover as they made notes about the outside.

It was a promising sign that nothing bad had happened when she first touched the cover, so the cleric carefully turned it over to inspect the back and make detailed notes of how it had formed.

With great trepidation, the Cleric slowly flipped open the cover and breathed a sigh of relief as she read the first few words.

"This is going to take forever to copy." The cleric sighed as she looked at the thickness of the book.

"It took me about four hours." Karl agreed.

The Clerics rolled their eyes at him. "That's with superhuman hand speed. It would take us nearly a week to copy this."

"Then I bet you're glad it didn't teach you the skill."

The Clerics all nodded in unison, and carefully flipped through the book with soft cotton gloves on, so they didn't mark or damage the pages.

"This is incredible. The details that go into this skill are so extensive that I can't even really consider it a Golem. It is a construct, and built like a Golem, without internal organs, but otherwise, the magic is so far removed, that structure is all they really have in common." The Priestess explained.

Karl shrugged. "I've never looked through a Golem book. I wonder if I can even use them, since I'm not a mage. Rae can use Golems, but it wasn't a shared skill." "Don't you have enough summons yet? You've got all those bodyguards, and Rae's Golems, and now this Guard. Plus all your partners. Are you trying to become an entire army legion on your own?" One of the Clerics asked, still in the hushed Library whisper tones.

"That's not a bad idea. I wonder if I can make an army of Spiderlings some day?" Rae asked quietly as she appeared at the table beside Karl.

The Blue Dragon Clerics looked horrified.

"An army of Spiderlings? Like dozens of tiny golems?" One asked.

Rae nodded. "Or even an illusion that looks like them, but can still do spider things. Oh, the wonderful things that I could make with an army worth of little versions of me spinning silk."

Chapter 672 Reading Comprehension

While most of the clerics were busy looking over the text, one had more in - depth questions for Karl about Runecrafting as an art. Or, at least, what the system had taught him about Runecrafting as an art.

"So, did it teach you all the conjunctions to modify the spell outputs for item creation, or the proper character compounding to make the spell phrase all fit on a single piece of paper to make talismans?" The cleric asked.

"I don't know what ones are used for item creation. I do know how to compound the characters, though. In fact, I know how to do that in multiple different ways, depending on the desired meaning of the phrase, and the nature of the item that I am writing it on." Karl agreed.

The cleric nodded slowly as she considered her next question.

"So, the Runecrafting skill gives you all the knowledge of the language, but in an entirely theoretical way? You know what the word is, but not how it might be used to create an item, or describe a spell on a talisman?" She verified.

Karl nodded. "That's about right. I mean, I can guess. But that's what it is, a guess. I don't have any clue how those who came before me would have done it, so I can only do my best to try to come up with something workable."

The cleric made careful notes, but was beginning to look discouraged, so Karl asked follow-up questions of his own.

"What is it that you're hoping to uncover? Some sort of lost crafting art?" The middle-aged woman's face twisted into a rueful smile. "Nothing quite so grand, I am afraid. What we were hoping for was some sort of frame of reference so that we could tell how much has been lost from the various crafts that use runes as part of their art.

You see, we've lost huge amounts of Smithing knowledge. We've lost almost the entirety of magical weapons creation as an art form, including the majority of the ability to improvise. Though, as Runecrafting spreads, we might be able to help them out with some theory.

But there are vast quantities of items that are recovered from Monster Spawns in damaged conditions, sometimes intact but mostly inoperative.

If we knew more about the craft that made them, we would be able to more easily repair them.

Instead, we need to have a Runecrafter that knows what might be missing explain the problem to a blacksmith who doesn't know Runecrafting because we don't have System access to the subcategory skills that would combine the two."

Karl frowned. "So, what you're saying is that recovering the Runecrafting skill actually just made everyone aware of how much they still have to learn, and created more questions than it answered?"

The cleric sighed and nodded in agreement.

"But if we had one of the subset skills but not the entirety of the Runecrafting Library, would we not still be in the same situation?"

That caught the attention of one of the others.

"No, if we had something like Talisman Master, the ancient crafting skill, we would think that it was whole and complete on its own. Nobody would connect that to the missing bits of knowledge that Runecrafting supplies."

The cleric who had been grilling Karl nodded in agreement. "There is a distinct pain in knowing that you are missing knowledge that should be available to you. It's like having all the answers at your fingertips, and having someone remind you that you're too uneducated to even know what to ask."

For the blue dragon clerics, that was indeed a particularly painful situation. They were servants of the god of knowledge and teaching. Not knowing something was anathema to their goals in life. The HAD TO know. It wasn't an option.

"Alright, I think that I get where you're coming from. We could likely recover a bit of the lost knowledge from the old Dwarven Cities, if you sent someone with Runecrafting knowledge there." Karl suggested.

There were murmurs of agreement with that. But no surprise at all, which suggested that it was an idea the blue dragons had already considered, and had likely acted on, or made plans to act on as soon as they had properly trained researchers available.

Like the green dragon clerics and their penchant for wandering off in the wilderness for indeterminate amounts of time. The Blue Dragon Clerics were known to get so immersed in research problems that they would forget about everything else for days and weeks on end.

Karl could see that these clerics were already well on the way to becoming obsessed with the lost knowledge associated with Runecrafting, even though it didn't seem that any of them had actually learned the art yet.

Possibly, only because they had previously become immersed in a project on another trade skill, and now they couldn't switch.

If they could figure out how to replicate the Epic Guard skill book and teach it to large groups of Elites, that might change. It was far more interesting as a skill than [Golem] was, and the power level was similarly impressive.

The majority of the group was studying the skill book with increasing intensity, but the amount of work that it would take to replicate it was dampening their enthusiasm considerably.

Spending an entire week on a project, only to have it used by someone else, was enough to put a damper on anyone's day.

Now, if this was a skill that they could use themselves, and then make copies to teach to the ones who needed it, they might be much more amenable to the concept.

At the very least, they would have a cool Guardian to look at.

[They're all a bit odd. They might take it as the perfect friend, just because it's always there and doesn't talk to interrupt their concentration.] Remi noted.

Thor seemed to agree with her.

[If nothing else, it would give them someone who doesn't run away when they begin to get too excited about their work. The sun isn't even properly up, and they're already this excited about work. Not even good work because it's for someone else's pack.]

[When have you ever been reluctant to work?]

[But you only ask me to do fun things like pull the wagon.] Thor complained, feeling slighted by the comparison between that and making books for strangers.

Chapter 673 Efficient Study

After a few minutes of focus on the Epic Guard Skill's outer layers, the clerics started to really get into the book, with one researcher dedicated to feeding the others breakfast, so that no greasy fingers would be touching the manuscript.

It was a well practised routine, and Remi thought that it was hilarious.

Most species only hand fed their beloved ones, or the young. But the blue dragon clerics did it so that they could research more efficiently, without even taking meal breaks.

[Give them a few minutes, and they will realize that they got entirely too comfortable around Karl, and they will be all embarrassed.] Remi laughed as they finished eating, and then the designated food holder carefully washed her hands before replacing her white cotton gloves.

"Is there a reason that the gloves are always white? Is it just so that it is easier to see if you've gotten them dirty?" Karl asked as they delicately flipped the pages.

The clerics all shook their heads. "Cotton is naturally white. We choose white cotton gloves because there are no dyes added to them which might transfer to the pages if they have something on them or our hands are a bit wet." Lotus sat down beside them and began picking her favourite parts off the plate of breakfast snacks.

"As if a blue cleric would ever let wet hands around a research book. They're so mean when we go to the library, like the books were their beloved children." She complained.

The others all rolled their eyes in unison, but didn't respond. "Are you sure it's not because they never know where a green cleric has been, and there is a greater than zero chance that you have both tree sap and peanut butter on your hands?" Karl asked.

"That might be part of it. But they're not only mean to us."

The middle-aged woman leading the research team shrugged. "Well, we did personally write most of the copies that are in the Library. But nobody properly respects the books. We have entire teams dedicated to just cleaning and removing stains from our collection." She reminded Lotus.

"Don't I know it. I had to spend a whole week helping them after my botany textbook had an unfortunate mishap."

The clerics all laughed, and even Karl chuckled, knowing that almost anything could have happened to the book.

The day that he had met her, Lotus wanted to take Rae to go nap in the trees.

For the most part, they worked in silence as the rest of the team woke up and ordered additional breakfast items.

The ones that the Blue Dragon Clerics had brought appeared to be mostly chosen for ease of consumption, but they didn't cover everything that the others were used to eating.

Once they were done, the rest of the group all prepared to head off to the training grounds, leaving Karl with the Librarians, while the beasts helped train the team.

Well, not totally alone. Hawk had no intentions of going over there, though Remi was back in Spirit Snake form and accompanying Cara on their mission to educate the students in the proper methods of training their bodies.

She wasn't going to feed them questionable resources today, as they were already advanced far enough that they would be suffering side effects. But she did have a number of nutritional beverages to help them through Thor's physique enhancement training.

Today, not even the small beasts would be spared his tender, loving care. Without Karl to keep them safely entertained, they would be training with their partners for the day, and that meant they had to keep building muscles and working towards an evolution.

Thor had become his strongest after he evolved and his scales changed. So, naturally, the same should be true of them young ones.

"Gather them all in the courtyard before you start so that I can activate the training skills on everyone. If I don't, it's mostly a wasted day anyhow." Karl reminded Thor, who was about to leave the apartment in human form.

"No problem. We are trying to prove to the government people that we're good at the job." The Cerro agreed.

It never crossed Thor's mind that being too good at your work could just lead to you being assigned even more work every time that it arrived. He was just happy to have hatchlings to train.

What Cerro wouldn't be?

Rae was doing her best not to laugh at Karl being stuck in here with the Librarians, while they got to go outside and play and watch the newbies come up with new and inventive ways to avoid hard work.

Everyone did their best to slack without getting caught, and this group had proven to be quite creative with their ways of doing just enough that they didn't get in trouble.

Of course, that didn't work on Rae. She just kept pushing until her senses told her that you really were about to collapse.

She had a nearly perfect track record with it, and almost always managed to stop them for a break before that point. It was only when they stumbled and simply wouldn't get back up again that she had to admit defeat.

"Is it really that important to train a group of new recruits before they get to the Academy?" One of the Librarians asked.

"In this case, yes. The Archbishop himself wants to know how far and how fast we can push various new Elites, in order to build up a military force that is capable of replacing our losses during the war.

We all know that the Giants aren't going to give up that easily, so we are going to need to get the number of new Commander Rank and higher Elites up above the numbers that we have lost."

He could see that the clerics were doing the quick mental math to determine if that was possible. They would need many new Commanders, more than any Academy group had ever counted among their ranks before, but it wasn't too farfetched.

Chapter 674 Dwarven Runes

Once the group had gathered outside the building where Karl could see them, he activated [Skill Master] on the students and their beasts, focused on the teachers that they would have for the day.

The young beasts and their Rangers were well behind the initial five now that the first group of Acolytes had taken Remi's special potions, but that didn't mean that they wouldn't try to catch up as fast as they could.

The goal for the day was to help the Rangers learn their shared skill, and to work with everyone else to improve their combat abilities. But only after Thor's gruelling physical stamina improvement training.

It was working wonderfully, and the students were adjusting rapidly, but Karl did notice that the students were not getting the initial boost in physical development that the ones who received the injection did.

Karl had grown significantly while he was on the train, which was only a few days, and then again after they had reached the Academy.

But these students, who had all been awakened by System linked items, were not changing in that sort of way. Instead, they were growing physically at a perfectly normal rate, but their power level was increasing steadily, as expected from the training that they were receiving.

Karl turned to the clerics, who were watching the students, in case there was some visible effect from Karl's abilities.

"I've got a question for you. I awakened five of those students with system linked rings, and six of them, the ones with the beasts, with quest items. But they're not getting the sudden burst of growth and physical improvement that the students normally get from the Divine Injection.

It's been over a week, and they look the same. No signs of rapid maturation, even for Sybil, the Rogue, who is years younger than the others. She's younger than we had even expected to awaken, but she shows extreme compatibility with her class, and her progress rate matches the other students.

She even shows higher than usual growth rate for skill learning, but she still isn't gaining the physical boost." Karl explained.

The Clerics nodded. "The clergy has noted that among others who were awakened that way. The working hypothesis is that the injection actually does have side effects, and that the rapid growth is one of them. It is also possible that it is not so much a side effect as a desired outcome. The Divine Injection was created to give power to the humans who weren't innately talented with magic. But it is a divine item, imbued with immense amounts of holy power. So, there is a chance that the holy power interprets the Archbishop's desire for powerful defenders of the faith as a need for rapid growth.

Of course, the more we study, the more we will know. But the fact that it is so obvious with your group shows that it won't go unnoticed by the students once they're sent to the Academy next week."

The clerics began discussing the various possible outcomes among themselves, then the oldest of them suddenly paused and began to laugh.

"Sisters, we have been sidetracked. There are too many things going on today, and we are losing sight of the reasons that we came here. The head Librarian was most insistent that we get some answers about the Runecrafting skill, and what it entails so that we could start building a larger picture of the possible outcomes for it.

I know that we already covered the theory, but we have brought texts on the various disciplines for you to try.

The most likely of them would probably be the free-form use of Runes, as a Rune priest would simply write them in the air, but the most practical would be the Runesmith, who uses them to enhance objects.

Which would you prefer to start with?"

Karl considered that for a few seconds, then tapped the table with his knuckles. "I think that the ability to enhance items with Runecrafting is the most viable route for me.

If it does lock me into a specialty, I would prefer if it were one that allows me to enhance the items, armour and living spaces for my team.

I saw Runes everywhere in the old Dwarven Village, and some of them remained functional enough that we could light a forge fire with mana to use it as a cooking grill.

That sort of utility would be a huge boon to the Elites.

When you're travelling, the more versatile your items are, the better. I know that we're all getting Inventory spaces now, and we don't really need to carry massive backpacks and worry about weight, but there are still restrictions, and the stronger our Elites get, the more utility and progression items they are going to want to carry with them."

The cleric nodded and swapped the books on the table, replacing it with one that read "A summation of the lost art of Dwarven Runcrafting."

Karl smiled. That choice of reading material felt right. The runes that Remi had recorded from over the forge in Graska looked just like the ones that were embossed on the cover, and slightly different from the standard runes, as they were stylized for a purpose.

Karl put on the offered white gloves, and gently ran his fingers over the tome. "This is incredible craftsmanship for a book that isn't a skill book. The System makes all sorts of beautiful covers when you're making them with a skill, but this looks like it was hand carved out of alloy. I don't know what sort of alloy this is, but it's much lighter than expected."

The clerics nodded. "The book was actually made by Dwarves, before they left the continent after their battles with the Giants. There weren't enough of them to safely hold their homelands here, and at the time we weren't strong enough as an ally to do it for them. There are records in the Library if you are interested. It was a fascinating part of our history."

Karl chuckled and the cleric sighed. "It's far too easy to get distracted when someone actually asks us about historical knowledge. Please, continue."

Chapter 675 Bad Translation

Karl carefully opened the book and looked at the first page. The letters were unfamiliar, but the more that he looked at them, the more sense they made.

He assumed that the system would do all of the translating for him, the way that it did with spoken languages. So he simply waited, and examined the first page until it began to make sense.

It didn't.

At least, not in any meaningful way. But most of the language was based on Runic, so Karl was slowly able to make out two thirds of what he assumed that it was saying, and then guess at the rest.

"Can you read that?" One of the clerics asked as Karl flipped to the second page.

"Mostly. It's not a language that I would claim to know, and I get the feeling that I am missing a huge amount of context to the words as I read them. But I can follow the descriptions well enough to at least tell what it is talking about.

Now, when we get to the technical parts, that may be much more difficult. As I said, I am missing a lot of context, so as I read through the more detailed sections, I'm going to miss even more."

The first few pages were mostly just an introduction, and a crude glossary, as if the writer had assumed there would be no need to flip through the book to find a particular section, and that the reader would simply read it cover to cover until it was memorized.

That might be possible. That was how the mine bosses wanted them to treat the company handbook. But a professional tradesman wouldn't be quite as arrogant, Karl assumed.

[For a true Dwarven Master Smith, the quality of their alloys and forging process is the key to everything. But the same cannot be said for a Dwarven Runemaster. While a runic Dwarven weapon will always be a vast improvement on the original, greater relative gains can come from weapons that are further from the peak of perfection.

As long as it lasts, the Runic inscription will be just as effective on a low-quality blade as a master crafted one. However, it is worth noting that a poor quality blade, or an inferior blend of alloy will simply shatter if too much power is directed through it by a Runic Array.]

None of that was a shock to Karl.

What did shock Karl was the fact that it was immediately followed by a list of alloys by quality for Runic Weapon making, due to their compatibility with high mana flows.

Of all the things that he had expected it to say, he had not expected the author to put pure silver near the top, just under Mythril and a few alloys that Karl had never heard of.

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Obviously, it was a lousy metal for making weapons on its own, as it was soft and wouldn't hold an edge. But with Runes, that could be overcome, while the high mana capacity and accessibility made it more viable than any of the complex alloys on the list.

Karl made notes as he translated, in hopes that he would be able to go over them later and glean some additional meanings that he had missed the first time that he read through the book.

Karl flipped the page, and found that the foreword to the novel was only that one page long. As soon as the introduction of the best metals was over, the author dove straight into the important parts of how to use the craft to improve your work.

[Now, if you are short of a proper Dwarven forge, as may be the case while travelling, you will need to know these basics to make the tools of the less advanced species viable for use.] The next page began, before being filled with scrawling and scattered Runic symbol clusters in various shapes for different objects.

They all appeared to be designed to enhance the strength and durability of metal objects, but the author had not just included the runes for strengthening.

That seemed curious, so Karl wrote out the Runes, separated into their component parts, and started trying to decipher what they all meant, and what part they played in the overall inscription.

It was not going to be an easy task, Karl realized. Instead of using a spell effect as the building blocks of his work, with the strengthening layered over top, the Dwarf had used a paragraph - long rant about how humans couldn't tell impurities from rare alloys. Then it went on about how they were too frail to stand next to a forge long enough to heat metal for shaping, and too poor to afford oil for tempering.

"What does it all say?" The cleric asked.

"It appears that the dwarf who wrote this was not a particular fan of the other races' crafting. It's an entire rant about how the humans can't make a decent blade, with a strengthening effect tacked on top."

The Cleric looked confused by what he meant, so Karl went and grabbed a pair of knives from the breakfast cart. It took him the better part of five minutes to write out the runes on the butter knives with a fine tip marker, but the clerics simply remained silent and waited for him to finish before they asked any more questions.

"See this? That's the base metal strengthening rune group. This one is what the book recommended to strengthen a human made blade. I don't know if there is actually any difference in the effects between the two." Karl explained, gesturing between the knife with a simple rune on the handle, and the one that was entirely decorated.

The cleric shrugged, then activated the runes with a gentle flow of mana.

"See what it takes to bend them. The kitchen will forgive us a few damaged butter knives." He suggested.

"The second one sure is pretty, though." One of the other clerics noted.

"Yes, gorgeous Rune work. I can see why they would have done it that way. Even if it provided a marginal or negligible increase, it is much more pleasing to look at, and the Dwarves were known to be vain about their handiwork."

Karl picked up the simple strengthening rune marked blade, and forcibly bent it in his hands.

Then he repeated the process as the Clerics sighed in regret at the loss.

Strangely, the second blade did appear to be significantly stronger, despite not having any other activation runes in the inscription.

Chapter 676 Reading Dwarf

Karl gently straightened the two blades and passed them to the clerics, who looked overjoyed to have such an interesting pair of test samples in their hands.

"We could test how much energy can be passed through them, but that would be destructive testing. What I am more interested in is the fact that one of the two really is stronger than the other, despite having the same active rune.

Perhaps it's the intent behind them, proving the superiority of this method on human tools. Or perhaps there is some more profound meaning that I have missed with my incomplete translations." Karl explained, then moved on to the next page of the manuscript.

The details there were about how to enhance Elven steel for durability, as even the Dwarves recognized that it had a very fine edge. Their words about the things that Elves did with trees were far less polite than the insults they had hurled at the humans' craftsmanship, and Karl did his best not to laugh as he read it.

"Well, we can say for certain that this author was not a fan of Elves. Or perhaps not a fan of their supposedly hedonistic ways. But as I don't have an Elven crafted weapon to test any theories on, we can keep going." Karl translated, as the clerics dutifully copied the pages.

They were Blue Dragon Clerics. The fact that they couldn't actually read the pages would not stop them from transcribing them exactly as they appeared in the tome. One of them had some skill with Runes, but not at the level of having the Runecrafting skill, as the Librarian had not yet had time to finish a duplicate for the others to copy.

[The artistry of Dwarven Runecrafting is not just about appearances, as many of the other races believe. In fact, the matrix of the Runes, even irrelevant filler, is integral to the even distribution of the flow of power across the surface of the item.

I have no idea why I'm writing this, perhaps my memoir will be a children's book, full of facts that any small child should know? Or perhaps just so that the basic knowledge is not lost if Runecrafting should fall out of favour in the future.

Such was the fate of Golem Masters, whose constructs were so durable that for ten generations, no more needed to be made, and the basic knowledge was lost, making it nigh impossible to train new apprentices once the old masters had passed and left only their most valued tomes.

Yes, that is what I shall do. Forgive the rambling of an old man as I impart to you the basics of the basics.]

The text went on for two more pages, detailing the proper ways to write Runes on an item so that the effect applied evenly, the artistry behind how they wrapped a common surface, such as a hammer, vase, or armour plate. To someone of his time, it likely would have been obvious, as they would have seen it every day, and heard the tales from their parents, or their master if they were coming from a different trade.

That made Karl wonder what sort of societal set up the Dwarves had. Did they have something akin to a trade school, where System Users could just learn a trade of their choice? Did they have masters choosing apprentices, or teaching one of their children the arts to take over their business?

None of that was included in these early pages, but Karl was learning a huge amount about the functionality of Dwarven sculpture, in ways that he had never even considered.

In fact, the old man even included a few tidbits about how to activate Golems with Runes, though it was not his specialty, and he 'lacked a level of patience suitable for Golem work' in his own words.

That made Karl wonder if it might be possible for some of the mages to learn Golem Crafting, as a subset of Rune Crafting, and make armies of autonomous Golems to defend small towns that didn't have much of a guard force.

The Clerics were thinking the same thing as they made their copies, but they were wondering if it would be possible for their brotherhood. They were the keepers of knowledge, and it would be wonderful if they could use golems, whose hands did not sweat or shake, to handle the precious tomes of their libraries.

To them, it would be a dream come true. An assistant whose hands would not harm the books, who never slacked off or forgot directions. One who never needed sleep and didn't get promoted out of their assigned tasks.

Then Karl flipped the page once more, moving past the old man's ranting about basic knowledge, and moving into what he called 'the first day of apprentice training'.

The diagram of what Karl first thought might be a pickaxe, but with a battleaxe blade on the scoop side, took the entire page, with the description of how to place the runes on the opposite page.

The two sides were different, as the runes were not duplicated, but wrapped around the head to give even mana flow, and stopped just short of the sharpened edge.

They weren't just bare runes, though. Instead, a grid pattern had been stamped into the metal, serving as a guide for the Rune work, but also turning the runes into a decorative pattern of line work that hid its true meaning, while keeping an apprentice's work on track.

One of the clerics snapped his fingers. "That, we have some of those axes. Not with the runes, but the design survived the years, and there are some in the armoury. We've been using the design as a polearm, on a long spear's handle. But you could certainly cut it down to hand axe sized."

Karl nodded. "Should we continue transcribing, or should we call for a delivery, and test the lesson that we are learning?"

That was one of the great challenges of their lives. Prioritizing knowledge.

"We have all day, so we should at least try one sample of the art, as a proof of concept to show the others that we have been productive, and that the tome we are transcribing has value." The leader of their team reluctantly agreed.

As much as he wanted to see what was on the next page, testing what was on this one was still the priority.

As long as the delivery got here quickly.

Chapter 677 Cleanliness Is Paramount

The delivery took nearly ten minutes, just long enough that Karl could see the stress building on the faces of the Clerics as they snacked, then carefully sanitized their hands in preparation for writing.

Their dedication to cleanliness was admirable, and Karl was gaining a new respect for what it took to keep a Library full of books in readable condition. But as soon as the axes arrived, along with the chisels and small hammer that would be needed to carve the Runes, they were as giddy as small children in front of a candy bowl.

Karl double-checked the descriptions that were in the book, then referred to the details on how much mana each alloy could transfer. These weapons were stainless steel, which was not even on the list. It was probably counted as the 'generic human steel alloys' that were mentioned near the bottom, so Karl would be careful not to give them too much of a boost.

The actual power of activation would depend on the user for this sort of weapon, unless you added something to make it always active, which Karl assumed came later in the book.

The total for the weapon was only thirty runes, not more than a few lines of written text. But when you had to precisely carve it into steel, the practice was much more nerve wracking.

The book noted that that depth of the carved runes would have different effects on the outcomes, so he couldn't just paint them on and call it a day without sacrificing an unknown amount of the effect. That was unfortunate, as Karl wasn't well known for his skills as a sculptor, and the intent as you were carving the runes mattered, so he couldn't just have Rae or Remi carve them for him.

Fortunately, the chisels were enchanted, and given his enhanced strength, they cut through the metal with little resistance. Even without Karl using a skill. If he had coated the chisel in [Rend] or [Disintegrate] he could have written the runes as easily as writing with a pen on paper. But that would

come with the risk of messing it up and carving too deep, which would ruin the axe head. Definitely not worth the risk on a piece that could be completed without it.

Line by line, the piece came together, and the somewhat plain axe with its dimpled surface began to take shape as a piece of metal art.

Even Rae agreed that it was worth the title, and her tastes in artwork were much more particular than any of the others.

Karl checked the work to ensure that he had not made any major mistakes with the runes, either in the depth of the carvings or the shapes. But this was intended for beginners such as him, and the symbols were all quite straightforward.

"I believe that it is done. I will first increase the level of the enchantment to Awakened, and make sure that the weapon is holding up. Then I will bring it to an Ascended, followed by a Commander Rank weapon enchantment.

It's just a durability carving so that the weapon holds an edge well enough, but it should sharpen the steel to the point where it will actually cut through a Commander Rank plant.

At least, that's how I interpreted the description."

Going on half to two thirds of what the runes might actually mean was a gamble, but if he could make Commander Rank or better magical weapons with a half hour's worth of work, Karl knew that he was about to become a very wealthy man.

Well, wealthier. Remi's space was beginning to regrow all fresh sprouts from what was burnt away during her advancement, and her swamp was all at Monarch Rank now. With the resources that he had available, Karl could probably never claim poverty and expect anyone to believe him.

The first bit of mana made the runes glow in a dull copper tone, and Karl smiled.

"Is that for the success? Your smile has a nostalgic look." One of the clerics noted.

"The Runes advance similarly to the badges at the Academy. Except that the Runes are Black for Common, Bronze for Awakened, Silver for Ascended, Gold for Commander." Karl explained.

"I see that the Runes really did turn bronze when you brought them to the Awakened Rank.

Fascinating.

I wonder if that was a hidden meaning in the badges themselves? The Archbishop decreed that they were the colours to be used, but most of us never questioned it, as bronze, silver and gold are the standard progression for awards of all sorts." "Do we have something to test on" Karl asked, then realized that he was the one with the test materials.

A branch borrowed from Thor's space, from a durable Commander Rank bush, should be enough to test it.

It was flexible, but strong enough that a regular blade wouldn't cut it. Awakened Rank might not be enough either, but it would serve as a reliable test sample.

"I will try with this. First, with a regular blade, if someone has one." Karl informed the group.

One of the clerics handed him a dagger, and Karl sliced at the branch, scratching the bark, but not doing any real damage.

Then again with the axe, slicing across the same way he had used the dagger.

That cut through the bark with moderate force, but only scratched the wood inside.

The clerics nodded, and then made entire pages of notes on the test.

One of them put a barrier on the countertop, and Karl set the branch down to hack at it with the axe, using what he hoped was a regular human's strength. He was basing it off Dana shoving him, so it should be close enough.

The axe made chips in the wood, and would eventually cut through the branch, but not efficiently.

"Yes, I believe we can call that suitable for an Awakened Rank blade." The lead researcher agreed.

"Wonderful. Now, to Ascended Rank, and I will repeat the process."

As he increased the mana input, the Runes turned from Bronze to silver, shining on the dull metal of the axe head. They didn't glow, but they were clearly silver, and not polished steel. At that point, Karl was certain the weapon could be sold for a decoration, even if it wasn't as effective as he was hoping.

Ascended scratched the wood much more easily, and took solid chunks when swung as an axe, but it still took a half dozen hits to cut through the branch.

"You know, this test is giving me a whole new appreciation for the value of a Cleric's blessing on the weapons of the line soldiers, the ones without superhuman strength or magic. Just one Rank higher, and the effect is so much more noticeable, even while using the same amount of strength.

Now, on to Commander Rank." The Runes turned golden as he increased the power once more, and the whole axe head appeared to smooth its surface, gleaming like polished stainless steel in the light of the kitchen.

A gentle swing of the axe cut right through the thin branch, carried mostly by the weight of the weapon itself.

"Gentlemen, we have a winner. The weapon has undergone a qualitative improvement as Commander Rank, and it cuts through Commander Rank wood with ease. Against Awakened Rank monsters, this level of enchanted weapon should be immediately lethal."

The blue dragon clerics looked at each other with excitement. This was something that they could do. If they had Runecrafters trained, they could copy this and make Commander Rank weapons, as long as they were powerful enough.

It would be immensely time-consuming to provide them to the entire army, but they could provide higher quality weapons to the Academy and the new students.

Karl was thinking the same thing. He had eleven students in total, between the Acolytes and the Beast Rangers team. Eleven weapons was a day's work, but he could manage that without any major complaints.

"Should we go further and see the extent of the capabilities of our modern steel?" Karl asked.

"It should be more durable than ancient steel, unless it was from a System Enabled period of history.

We don't actually know when this book was written, and there hasn't been any mention of the System in it, only of crafting skills. So, it could be from nearly any point in the past." The team leader noted.

"More durable doesn't always mean more mana compatible, though. This alloy probably wasn't in use at the time, so we may have to continue to study which alloys are the most suitable in the modern era." One of the others added, sparking a small argument about which alloys should be tested first, after they had their own Runecrafters trained.

Karl let them argue as he began to inscribe the other axe, making an identical copy. One of the two was going to be destroyed by the testing, and he was certain that the clerics would want one brought back as a sample for whatever sort of presentation they were going to have to give to their superiors.

The final consensus was that they might have to bring back some of the old alloys, the ones which had silver mixed into them, or other precious metals. That was not good for the utility of a nonmagical weapon, but for one with Runes on it, the change could be critical.

By the time that they finished arguing about the answer, Karl had already finished the other weapon, and the delivery man had brought him a whole pile of short swords and daggers for the students.

"We are ready. Please begin to upgrade the blade." The clerics announced in unison, then began to laugh at their synchronized thoughts.

Karl slowly added mana density to the test weapon, and the runes began to turn from gold to a shimmering amethyst purple, which filled the carved runes like a solid gemstone.

It was absolutely exquisite.

Just as the transformation finished, Karl stopped adding more power, leaving the weapon at the lowest possible Royal Rank power level. That was enough to prove the point, and he wanted to see if the weapon was going to remain stable.

The clerics began to cast spells on it, and turn it carefully in their white gloved hands as they studied it, then one went to the phone on the wall and made a call.

"I have summoned a Royal Rank warrior to us. They will be able to test it in the basement training room without fear of overpowering the enchantment accidentally. Then we can see how it will react to having a skill used as an overlay to the Runes.

That will be the most telling part of our trials." The cleric explained.

Karl nodded. "Then I will bring this other axe to mid-Commander Rank. Please summon a Commander as well, in case the first test fails.

Or even if it doesn't. So that we can see if there are any hidden stability issues."

Karl wasn't sure if the response could have been more excited, even if he had told them that they were celebrating every national holiday on the same day. The Clerics were overjoyed, practically vibrating with energy, and sorting through piles of cameras and sensor equipment in the backpacks they had left by the door.

The two Elites came running only minutes later, prepared for combat, or some other emergency.

"Relax, it's just a weapons test. The Blue Dragon gets a bit excited about new knowledge." Karl warned them.

"A weapons test?" The shorter of the two men asked.

Karl pointed to the axes on the table, and the two Elites began to visibly freak out about the presence of the magical 'artifacts'.

"Where did you find these? Commander Rank and higher weapons are so difficult to come across, even in the Dungeon. Is that really a Royal Rank blade? Dragon Gods, that is beautiful." The Royal Rank warrior gushed.

"An experimental Royal Rank weapon. We don't know if it's stable enough for regular use yet. What we need you to do is follow us to the training area, and see how they do when you actually use them, especially with higher ranking skills." Karl explained.

"Certainly. What will we be using them on? I doubt that the standard training dummies will hold up to repeated hits at Royal Rank." The warrior noted.

"You will be using them on me. Or, more correctly, on my barrier. That way the dummies shouldn't be mangled with every hit, and we can continue to stress test the alloy used in the weapons." Karl explained.

No need to tell them that it was just a regular axe whose appearance was altered by the empowered Runes.

The two Elites took their Rank Matched weapons, and were immediately ushered out the door by the hyper group of Clerics.

Karl was beginning to think that all Clerics were secretly nerds, but they all just had different things that set them off. Red Dragon Clerics got all mushy and maternal around orphans, Green Clerics were constantly looking to go interact with nature, and as Karl could clearly see, giving Blue Dragon Clerics new knowledge to test was better than any sugar rush.

In fact, they were nearly as worked up as Lotus when she saw that Remi and Cara had advanced. It was far more entertaining to watch than Karl had expected, and he had to jog to keep up to their pace, so he didn't miss the elevator.

Chapter 679 Quality Control

The two volunteers were dragged out of the Elevators before the doors had even opened, then the Clerics realized that they needed Karl to let them into the training rooms, which were locked to all but the residents of the building, or those with passes.

Karl selected the first room, and had it bring out a pair of dummies, which were charged to his account, in case they were destroyed during training.

Then Karl realized that he didn't actually need the dummies, he could have his Guardian or one of the Lamia Bodyguards do the job instead.

But, it felt much more formal and controlled to just put an [Eternal Lightning] barrier over the dummies.

After all, the Bodyguards were intelligent creatures, and asking them to let someone hack at them with an axe was just rude.

"Let's start with the Royal Rank weapon. The barrier on the training dummy is Monarch Ranked, and I will refresh it between hits, so there is no need to hold back on your skills." Karl explained.

"You seem quite confident that I can't take it down in one strike." The warrior noted.

"I am. You will understand once you actually hit it. It's much more than a Guard skill or an introductory level Mage Barrier."

The warrior didn't look convinced, but the barrier was a challenge to his might as an Elite, so he put his all into a [Sunder] attack that sent out a glowing green arc of blade energy toward the dummy.

The signs on the wall of the training ground read the maximum energy peak, the same standard that the Nation used to judge advancements, though it wasn't really a great indicator of actual damage output.

It was a mid-Royal Rank energy signature, so there was no doubt about the effort. But the real question was whether the weapon would hold up to it.

Eternal Lightning had briefly flickered at the hit, but nothing close to failing, which made the warrior frown in annoyance.

There was a larger gap between his stage of Royal and the entry to Monarch than he had thought.

The clerics rushed over to examine the weapon, and noted that there was a tiny chip in the blade of the axe that they hadn't recorded earlier.

"Please do that again, repeatedly. Until either the barrier fails or the weapon does." They instructed.

Karl focused on keeping the barrier up, and the warrior began to hack at the dummy with all his might. He cycled through different attack skills, testing them for effectiveness. But what he didn't see, but Karl could, was that every strike was chipping and cracking the weapon a bit more until a [Sunder] attack split the axe deep enough that it damaged a rune, and the weapon went dark.

"Dammit, I almost had the barrier down." The warrior panted, exhausted from the effort.

Karl nodded. "That was quite the effort. If I didn't have such a large mana reserve, the barrier certainly would have failed first. Unfortunately for our tests, that still means that Royal Rank is beyond the capability of that alloy. It held up during enchantment, and for a few minutes of use. But a few minutes of use are not going to pass muster for military procurement, or even training use at the Academy.

Fortunately, we have a Commander Rank user, and he can go wild as soon as my energy level has recovered."

The clerics nodded, while the Commander frowned. "How long will that be? I can ask for a mage friend of mine to come over and assist." Karl waved off his concern. "Give me two minutes and I will be good to go again. My barrier recovers stamina. Being two ranks above you, the draw on my barrier won't be as bad as it was for the last test."

The Commander nodded in understanding. Two Ranks was a nearly insurmountable advantage for most Elites, especially the Warrior Class, who didn't often get an overpowered cheat ability that would let them fight significantly stronger opponents one on one.

Karl nodded and gestured to the dummy once he was sure that he had enough mana again, and the Clerics double-checked all their recording equipment, then waited patiently with their pencils in hand for the test to start.

The warrior put all his might into a [Cleave] attack on the barrier, and then stepped back so that they could check the weapon for damages.

Even to Karl's eyes, there didn't appear to be any stress points, cracks or fractures in the gold inlaid weapon, and the power appeared undiminished.

"There are no flaws detected. Please do continue until you are exhausted, or there is a weapon failure." The lead cleric instructed.

Karl watched carefully as the warrior began to hack at the barrier, and noted something fascinating. The weapon absorbed a little bit of each attack's energy, refreshing itself. He couldn't say whether it was tempering itself with use, but it was certain that continued usage would prevent the Runes from discharging.

As long as a skill was passed through it on a regular basis, the weapon should remain empowered indefinitely. That was much better than having to send it to a specialist to reactivate it, or having to teach everyone who bought one the technique to bring the Runes to life.

The Commander was panting and sweating heavily after fifteen minutes of steady attacks, but he didn't give up until the half hour point, when his knees began to shake with exhaustion.

Once the clerics took the weapon away for examination, Karl cast [Eternal Lightning] on both volunteers, allowing the skill to refresh their stamina so they could at least make it safely home again once the clerics were done with them.

"Flawless. If anything, the weapon appears to be in even better condition than when we started. There are no signs of wear or damage, and the runes are fully empowered. They are also at a slightly higher standard than when you began using the weapon, so they have adjusted to your own peak power, not just where they were set."

Karl frowned. "So, it may be possible to overload the weapons if a more powerful user passes an incredibly powerful skill over them." The Clerics looked up from their notes. "That is a possibility. If we had more samples, we could test that more thoroughly. The difference between where it started and where it is now is less than three percent, so there is a chance that it is a natural process, where the runes are finding equilibrium after use."

Chapter 680 Don't Leave Yet

The Commander cast a longing look at the weapon in the hands of the Clerics, but everyone knew that he wasn't getting that one back. He had gotten to test it, but they would be taking it back to the temple as part of their research project, where it would be subjected to weeks or months of scrutiny before being filed away in the Library as an exhibit, or evidence of a theory.

They also knew that Karl could make another, as they had gleaned that much information from the ramblings of the Clerics, but asking an unknown Monarch, who might be one of the nation's hidden assets, to make them a new weapon was an expensive proposition.

Neither of them knew Karl, but he was a Monarch already, so he was probably older than he looked, and deliberately hidden from the public.

That was the logical conclusion for any Elite when they met a powerhouse that was not in the public eye. The idea that Karl simply advanced too fast to make a public reputation for himself didn't even cross their minds.

"Thank you both for your time. We will keep you updated with the progress of this project, and put you first in line when additional units become available for distribution, as a reward for your assistance." The lead Cleric informed the volunteers he had called.

"Thank you, Librarian." The warriors responded in unison, using the Blue Dragon Clerics' preferred honorific.

They left the training area, and the clerics gathered around the two weapons, comparing notes to ensure that there was nothing overlooked before they returned to the apartment to continue their studies.

At this rate, they would probably end up making multiple attempts at new weapons during the day, which would greatly slow their progress rate at reading and transcribing the book. However, the outcomes and new knowledge gained from practically testing the lessons was so much more valuable than the efficiency.

Knowing that the lessons worked on the mass-produced weapons they already had was going to revolutionize the arming of soldiers once they had enough craftsmen.

"Now, what does it tell us to try next? This was a wonderful success, so there should be a next step up, right? Perhaps we could obtain some real silver silverware to test the runes on." The lead cleric noted.

Karl smiled and tried not to laugh at the thought. A Royal Ranked combat butter knife was possibly the most excessive and unnecessary item that he could imagine.

Though, he could reshape it into a throwing knife or a dirk with his fingers before enchanting, as the silver was so soft compared to his strength, and a barrier would protect his hands.

But the clerics had a better idea. There were ceremonial silver daggers in the Cathedral, and they had a large supply of them. The White Dragon's healing clerics carried them at all times, as they were used in wedding rituals and to open holy water during burial rituals.

The metal was supposed to be great for the purpose of Runecrafting, so they requested that a half dozen be delivered to the apartment for testing.

That naturally brought even more clerics who were wondering what the Blue Dragon adherents were up to, and then they brought acolytes to help them take notes, until Karl's apartment was packed with blue and white robed researchers.

"Should we move this to the training centre downstairs?" Karl suggested as he realized that he would be working on a metal plate placed on the kitchen table, surrounded by clerics.

"That would be less convenient. It is customary to let others work in and not monopolize the space, as there are limited time slots available. I promise, we won't bump you or interfere with your work." One of the new arrivals informed him in a gentle, musical tone that immediately put Karl on guard.

Her voice was lovely, but there was something about it that was triggering his danger response. Karl turned to look at the speaker, but she appeared to be an ordinary Ascended Rank Priestess. Cute, in a girl next door sort of way, and very approachable in appearance.

For a moment, he was going to shrug off his concern, then she smiled and spoke again.

"I am part Siren. You can likely feel the lingering magic in my voice. I don't take offence, all the stronger Elites notice it right away." She explained softly, her voice too low for the vast majority of the room to hear.

That gave Karl a great idea. "Do you have a metal instrument on you?" He asked.

She nodded, then handed him a small silver flute with the mark of the clergy on the end cap.

Karl picked up his tools and carefully engraved the strengthening runes on it, skipping the elaborate bits of insult, and the wrapped format, which would interfere with the keys. He was sure it was possible to work around that, or include them in the design, but he hadn't read that far yet, and he had no idea how it would work.

But with a simple Runic phrase meaning beautiful music added to the strengthening runes, Karl slowly added mana until the runes vanished, then turned gold.

There was no restriction that he could feel, so he went one step further, and brought it to Royal Rank, where the runes turned amethyst purple.

"Do you know any magic that uses music?" Karl asked as he finished.

The cleric nodded. "There is an area healing song that all the white dragon clerics know. I can perform it with the flute, but it's not a strong magic. Mostly, the church uses it to have people leave feeling refreshed and a bit less sore after a sermon."

Karl nodded slowly, and realized that he knew the song. They played it at the end of every sermon at the church at home. He just hadn't realized that it was magic. Or it might not have been magic in a place as rural as the Lithium mines, but it could be magic when the right Cleric was doing it.

"Please, play the song for us, and tell the Librarians if there are any differences in the outcome."

The happy tune from the flute had all the clerics swaying along and humming the words as the Siren played. Karl could feel the healing magic seeping into his bones, and see the weariness of some of the older clerics fading away as the tune progressed.

That was real magic, of the sort any bard would be envious of.

It wasn't in the book, at least not the parts he had read, but magical instruments for the bard classes might help them regain a bit of respect from the other Elites, who mostly viewed them as comedy relief, or a sideshow.

The song finished, and the clerics all clapped for the performance.

"Thank you for your assistance. I am certain that your blue dragon following kinfolk have many questions for you, and you can negotiate when you will meet with them." The white robed girl giggled. She would be playing her flute all day and night for them, just so they had a large enough sample for their studies. But it was a lot more fun for a cleric who was part Siren to play music than to study healing herbs and poultice techniques that saved on mana use.