

Beast Master 701

Chapter 701 Sleep Schedules

The next morning came entirely too early, with Cara's cold nose poking Karl's cheek to wake him up.

[There are people waiting in the other room for us to wake up. I recommend no pants.] The Void badger informed him in a playful tone.

Karl smirked at her. [Why no pants?]

[It should make them go away so I can sleep.]

Karl sighed at the impeccable logic. It would indeed make most guests go away if he went outside with no pants on. But Cara didn't have to get out of bed just because he did.

[Of course I do. I can only freely enter and exit the space from a few hundred metres away. Who knows where they're going to take you? What if I want to go back later and get stuck somewhere boring?]

Karl got dressed in the same casual wear as last night, as he would likely need a barrier of some sort if he was going to be near a forge, and he might as well be comfortable if he was going to be sitting at a desk in a Library.

As he stepped out of his bedroom, the six overdressed academics, ranging in age from late fifties to surprisingly not dead yet, snapped to attention. They were standing stiff, with fake and forced smiles on their faces, waiting for the formal greetings to end.

The oldest of them spoke with a slow drawl. "Good morning Monarch. We were sent to accompany you to breakfast this morning, and then to your workspace." The same maid who was with Karl last night was standing to the side, whispering details under her breath without moving her lips.

"That is International Relations Advisor Chen. On his left and right are his sons, who serve as his personal assistants. The two on the outside are professors from the University. Their names don't matter, you likely won't see them again.

Staff will bring breakfast here for the rest of your group." She whispered.

Karl nodded to the elderly man, "Advisor Chen, it would be a pleasure to have breakfast with you and the Professors. Please lead the way so that we don't disturb my team."

Rae's voice whispered in Karl's mind. [Take Cara and Remi with you. I will remain here to watch the ladies.]

The Bloodbath Spider was on the balcony outside their room, hidden by curtains. The others were already in their spaces, except Thor, who would stay with the pack.

And Cara, who was still on the bed, deciding if she really did need to get up.

Karl shifted her into the blanket nest in her space, and led the group of visitors to the door.

The maid was with them, standing a half step behind Karl's shoulder where he could still see her as she guided them to the informal dining room.

This morning, there was a buffet set at the entry for guests to make requests to be brought to their seat. Carrying your own plate appeared to be taboo for some reason, or perhaps beneath the dignity of the people who usually dined in the Palace.

As they took their seats, Karl let his gaze roam the room, using Soul Sight to inspect auras for possible traitors or disguised spies. Most of the guests appeared normal, though a few had a level of corruption to their energy that suggested they were horrible people in a general sense. It was the same thing he had seen on the rejected candidates for the Lightning Cerro hatchlings.

One maid was actually a demon, but Karl noticed she wasn't wearing a disguise. She just looked human enough in her uniform that nobody noticed.

No, that wasn't quite right. She was wearing coloured contacts, to make her eyes appear all black. Not a big deal to Karl, as she was only an Awakened Rank demon. That might mean she was a spy for Newbon,

but it might just mean she was one of the small group of nonhumans that actually lived openly in the Golden Dragon Nation. There were many more, but they preferred to keep to themselves, as hybrids were generally treated as outsiders and had a hard time finding good jobs, while Demons were viewed with suspicion just based on their species.

Unless she did something questionable, there was no need to make life hard for her.

"Tell me, Monarch. What is it that you see with those enhanced eyes of yours?" Advisor Chen asked.

"I see that Ranking Elites are rare here in the Palace's dining hall. That there are four people in the room that the others are habitually sucking up to. That there are four more with personalities so vile that they would instinctively repulse animals, and one maid that prefers crotchless pantyhose to stockings with garters."

The last comment made everyone do a double take, then begin to surreptitiously look around to see if they could determine which Maid it was.

The one assigned to Karl was smirking slightly, as she already knew the answer, even if she couldn't see the difference. Standing still, it wasn't obvious, but when they moved, Karl could hear the difference.

{There is no way that you can know that by sight.} The maid whispered to Karl after she thought about his statement.

Karl tapped his ear in response, and she smiled. Being able to communicate from her spot along the wall without being overheard made her day so much more interesting.

Once they finished eating, the maid escorted Karl and the team of academics downstairs, to the underground transit tunnel that led to the University's research centre.

There was an electric train that ran back and forth on demand, moving workers from the city to the Palace without leaving the secured areas.

Karl got on board with the five men sent to escort him, and the Maid turned back to the residential area to wait for the notification that he was returning to the Palace.

As she entered the staff dining room, a black robed Inquisitor materialized from the shadows.

"Melanie. Report." The maid curtsied and bowed her head. "Inquisitor. I have seen no sign of the enemy moving against them. However, they may be waiting, as Monarch Karl's senses are absolutely terrifying.

He can hear the sound of garter buckles on a slip from across the room, clearly understand a whispered conversation from five metres away, and his range of vision is well over two hundred degrees.

Walking to the dining hall, he could track my movement a full step behind him without moving his head.

I have not had an opportunity to investigate the rest of the team, but I believe that he has left one of his beasts hidden with them, as well as the one known as Thor. I could feel the presence earlier, but I couldn't find it."

The Inquisitor nodded. "Thank you, Melanie. I will assign an additional member to their security detail once we have determined who was left behind."

Melanie waited for more details.

"There is a chance he left behind the Bloodbath Spider, and if she isn't warned in advance, there is a high likelihood she would kill and dispose of anyone we sent to shadow them."

Melanie frowned. "Is she that scary?"

The Inquisitor patted her on the head. "We have confirmation of her lethality from the Assassin group. There is zero doubt that she is a peak Monarch Rank threat, with stealth abilities and ambush skills."

That was enough of a description for Melanie to understand. The Inquisitor simply vanished after their conversation, but he was surely still here somewhere. Waiting and watching. He was lethal to enemies of the nation, but the status of Assassin went to people much more terrifying than he was.

Chapter 702 Day Job?

The train stopped at the University, and the Advisor motioned for Karl to follow him. "This is our stop, and then we have a short walk to the labs. They will have a security card for you once you are signed in so that you can open the doors yourself from tomorrow onward. Please keep it secure, as they are a pain to have replaced."

The Advisor led them through a series of magically reinforced double doors, then down an elevator and down a long hallway to another elevator going down.

The sign on the wall when they exited the second elevator said 'Armoury' and there was a whole team of Commanders in security uniforms standing at the ready.

The Advisor and Professors stepped out of the Elevator and turned left, following the instructions of the guards towards a scanner.

Then Karl stepped out of the lift, and red lights began to flash, while an alarm blared.

The guards drew their weapons and Karl began to laugh.

"Relax, it's probably just because I'm a Monarch. My name is Karl, I was invited to perform a number of Runecrafting experiments." He explained over the blaring noise.

A dart flew out of the wall in his direction, and Karl lifted a hand to catch it, wondering what sort of security system was shooting at him before anyone even investigated.

There was shouting from down the hall, and the sound of pounding boots. Then Karl felt the shift of someone appearing behind him with [Shadow Step]. A slight shift of his body put his back to the wall instead of to the elevator, and Karl waited for the verdict.

A young Royal holding in Inquisition badge in his hand stepped out of the elevator, as he had appeared behind Karl an instant too late.

"Monarch Karl? My apologies for the noise. Someone forgot to inform us you were on the way down so that we could deactivate the alarms until you were in the system. Give us a moment, and it will be... There it is."

As he paused, the lights went back to normal, and the alarm stopped.

Karl looked left and saw that the five men he had arrived with were all on the ground and secured with zip ties around their wrists.

Karl handed the Rogue the dart that he had caught, and the man stared at it for a second. "I had assumed that you were immune to the effect." He noted cautiously.

"I probably am. But I prefer not to find out. Some effects can have odd interactions." Karl agreed.

"Please follow me into the registration office, Sir."

The Inquisitor led him to a scanner with directions to stand inside with your arms spread.

A bar spun around in circles as Karl waited, and then an angry beeping reset the machine to its standby position.

"Sir, do you have any magical alloys on your outfit?" The operator asked, confused.

"I have a special Constitution. The Void Iron body. I literally am a magical alloy." Karl explained.

The operator sighed, and the machine turned on again. After a few seconds, it beeped again, and the operator motioned for Karl and the Inquisitor to come look at the screen, a masterpiece of magical engineering that displayed the results of the scan like a TV screen.

"It appears to be true. The entire skeletal structure and vascular system is metallic. I don't see any other metal on our guest, but the outfit is triggering the scanner as well. I believe it's monster silk."

Karl nodded. "Monarch Rank, to be precise. All the clothes I have are. Unless you would prefer that I use an Armour skill?"

"Please don't. The alarms for skill activation in the common areas are particularly obnoxious. That's what you triggered when you entered. I would assume that you have passive skills active that can't be turned off?" The Inquisitor asked.

"That is correct. It's not doing anything at the moment, but there is no real option to turn passive skills off." Karl agreed.

Well, other than Echolocation, Soul Sense, and Thermal Vision. They were all passive skills that went into a dormant state when he wasn't paying attention to them. But that wasn't truly 'off', just not in use.

"Are there any other skills that you would normally have active when you enter?" The Inquisitor asked.

"Normally, I have an [Eternal Lightning] barrier active at all times. I turned it off in the Palace so that I didn't panic the guards."

"Please leave that off inside the facility. Do you have any skills that might interfere with scanning equipment if traces of them remain after your work?" The Inquisitor verified.

"Well, I have [Nullify]. If that was activated in here, we would be having this conversation in the dark." Karl joked.

"In the dark?" The scanner operator asked.

"The power source for this floor is just over there, and it's a magical circuit. The lights are all magical, not conventional."

The Inquisitor looked impressed. "I didn't think that you would be able to locate the core device. You have great mana sense."

Karl nodded in acceptance, and the Inquisitor continued making notes in a large binder.

"Other skills that might be dangerous beyond your range of sight?"

Karl shrugged. There were too many to list. How did he explain the danger of a curious Void Badger or a bored Naga Queen?

"Well, if the Epic Guard used Gravity Slam, that could be a bit of a mess in an underground complex. But I don't expect to be doing any fighting, and especially not enough to summon backup."

The Inquisitor sighed as he finished the entries. "That should be enough details. I don't know why they asked, every Monarch Ranked Elite will be an S Rank existential threat to the facility. But your pass is updated, and I have attuned it to the energy you are emitting right now, so as long as you don't change your passive skills, you shouldn't set off the alarms tomorrow."

Karl hung the pass around his neck, secure in the knowledge that he would no longer set off the alarms just by showing up at work.

"Alright, where do I go now? They were quite sparse with the details."

Chapter 703 The Lab

The Inquisitor led Karl down a hallway opposite the direction of the scanners that the others were going to take him through, then down a set of spiral stairs, which led to another long hallway.

That ended in a massive circular blast door with an entire team of Palace Guards standing at it.

"Interesting. The actual labs are not under the University facility at all, but to the west. This isn't under a residential area, is it?" Karl asked.

"How can you tell that?" The Inquisitor demanded, visually scanning Karl for a compass or other tracking device.

"I'm from the mines. Never once in my life have I been lost underground. Now, can you tell me what is a kilometre west of the University? I haven't had a chance to see the surface of the city." Karl explained.

"Woodland Hills Cycling and Recreation park. It's a former gravel pit that was replanted and shaped into a public park when the city expanded past it. We're currently beneath the park."

That would leave some risk of civilian injuries, but minimal, and if there was a blast from the battle, it could be explained away as the gravel pit settling, should anyone notice from the surface.

"Five hundred metres below it. Four hundred eighty-five, if my guess is right. Even with the air circulation, I can feel the depth." Karl added.

[It sounds cozy there.] Rae agreed from her hiding spot in the Palace Suite. Well, not exactly a hiding spot, as she was incorporeal and sitting on the sofa watching nature documentaries with Lotus. But technically hidden.

The massive underground facility was basically one huge burrow, and if she killed the lights, it would be a perfect nest, already fully stocked and everything.

The Inquisitor was giving Karl a strange look, but he kept walking to the guards. Karl held up his pass, which they pressed a small stone to, waiting for it to turn green.

Once it did and the spells on the pass were verified along with the picture and Karl's face, they opened the door to let him into the laboratory. The doors slid into the stone, reducing the chance they could be pried open. They also extended a half dozen metres past the hallway, from the sound of the machinery moving them.

Truly a formidable barrier, even without the magical enhancement.

A gust of heat hit Karl's face, smelling of coal, hot iron and magic. Then, the sound of hammers on metal, the distinctive ringing of a forge, reached them. Karl smiled and stepped through the blast doors, which slid shut behind him.

He turned back and looked at the smooth surface, then realized that his skills might actually be as much use for security as they were for offensive weapons.

Enhancing the durability of that door to Commander Rank or higher would make it nearly impossible for anyone or anything to get through three metres of solid steel in a reasonable timeframe.

There was someone waiting patiently for him to address them, so Karl took his mind off the door and turned to see what sort of workplace he would have for the near future.

The air was hot with the smell of forge, but the actual lab was immaculately clean. It was set up as an open floor plan, with forges along the wall and crafters making weapons. Then there was an enclosed clean zone in the middle with workbenches for whatever sensitive projects they were working on.

The entry was elevated, nearly thirty metres above the lab floor, with a walkway that went all the way around. Access to the main level was through any of a half dozen staircases, plus four visible elevator platforms that only operated within the lab.

The girl who had been waiting for Karl cleared her throat, making him look way down to find a ridiculously short woman with pink hair, a bulbous nose and big ears. No way was that a human.

"Good morning Monarch. I am Chief Engineer Fizzspark, head of the engineering facility. You should be the new Runecrafter, correct? Please follow me to the floor and we can get started." She announced in a squeaky voice.

Before Karl could even respond, Cara was out of her space, and she had tossed the small woman into the air with her nose.

[Ha! I get a rider too. Away we go.]

Then she jumped off the walkway with the Chief Engineer, who was squeaking in terror.

She circled gently to land on the floor, while Karl simply jumped down beside them, and did his best to soften the impact, so he didn't shake anyone's work.

Cara seemed to have forgotten that she had a rider, and she was running around the floor, examining all the forge stations. The workers were laughing, while Chief Engineer Fizzspark's glower promised retribution.

They made a whole loop, and the gnome looked ready to murder someone, so Karl picked her up and set her on the floor. "Cara, behave. You have to ask before you take people for a trip." Karl admonished the wayward Void Badger.

Cara put on a show of apology, even patting the Gnome on the head before allowing the terrified Gnome to retreat. But her thoughts said that she was in no way repentant, and fully planned to do it again.

"What sort of devil being did you bring to my lab? I tasered it four times, and it didn't even slow down." The Chief complained.

"That's a Winged Void Badger. Petty things like a taser are far from enough to convince her to stop. You would have better luck using words. She's intelligent enough to understand where you want to go, and anything else you say. She just doesn't care if you want to stop." Karl offered.

"And how did you get her past security?"

"I am a Beast Master. They have a separate space attached to me. Wherever I am, they can be as well. But don't worry, I will keep her out of the clean rooms, so we don't get fur in anyone's work." Karl informed her with a shrug of his shoulders to explain that it couldn't be helped.

The Gnome glared at him. "If there was another option, I would have you replaced right this instant.

But for now, let's see what you can do to enhance a weapon. Thanks to the Forgemaster and his team, we've got a collection of blades, flanged maces, mauls and axes created from highly mana compatible alloys unsuitable to combat use in their current state.

Now, can you manage that without supervision?"

Karl gave the tiny woman an unimpressed look.

"Did you know that Cara is currently looking for a hug pillow to enhance her nap time experience?" He threatened.

The two glared at each other for half a minute, not saying anything, before one of the researchers, a Blue Dragon Cleric with his head shaved bald, revealing scattered blue scales, came over to break up the standoff.

"Chief Engineer. Please forgive him. The Monarch certainly didn't mean to insult you with his partner's antics. The Runecrafting skill is invaluable to our work here, and I will assign someone to ensure that he doesn't trouble you further." The cleric pleaded.

Chief Engineer Fizzspark began to relax a little, until a nasal voice came from behind her. "What, someone has been picking on the failure again? Hardly shocking." A handsome young man in a lab coat was sneering at the gnome with utter disdain on his features before he turned to Karl.

"Duke Ambrose, Head of Research and Development. It's a pleasure to meet you, Researcher Karl. I believe you will find your time here quite enjoyable if your skills match your recommendation."

Chapter 704 Team Leaders

Karl instinctively disliked this man, even before he noticed that the man was using a transformation spell to keep up his young master disguise. He couldn't really judge the man for his vanity when he had also been considering using magic to increase his height, but something about him just struck Karl as off.

Soul sight told Karl much more about the head of Research and Development. He was definitely human, but his soul looked slimy. Like food scraps left outside to rot in a bucket of water, the outer layer of his soul seemed to have a greasy, rotten sheen.

The man swung a lazy kick at Fizzspark, only to pull up short when Cara appeared between them, baring her teeth.

"Put your beast away, researcher. Such a creature doesn't belong in the lab."

Karl sighed, but he didn't reprimand Cara.

"I would recommend that you refrain from kicking coworkers. We enforce a zero tolerance for bullying policy." Karl insisted instead.

"Since when?" Ambrose scoffed.

"Since about four minutes ago. Now, it was a pleasure to meet you, Researcher Ambrose. But I have an orientation to finish with Engineer Fizzspark."

[Can we ask for new people? These ones are defective.] Remi asked.

[Probably not. But I think we can sort them out easily enough without killing anyone and ending up in a Royal Prison cell.]

A third person came over to their argument, and Karl smiled as he saw a familiar facial structure for the first time in ages. Duke Ambrose was 190 centimetres tall and whip thin, while Fizzspark was half a metre tall. Not at all like home. The other researchers had also been gathered from across the nation, with a dozen different regional appearances.

However, this man stood a solid hundred and forty centimetres, no matter what direction you measured him in, rippling with muscles, and a beard that he tucked into the apron at his waist.

He kind of reminded Karl of a shorter Commander Rank version of his dad.

"Will you two idiots cut it out? You're already on thin ice as it is, and picking fights with each other to lay claim to the newbie is only going to cause an incident that will get you both reassigned.

The Monarch isn't just a researcher, he's a War Hero, and he's here with the blessing of the Archbishop himself. You don't want that kind of trouble.

My apologies, young Beast Master. I am Forgemaster Granite, Head of Production here in the lab. As you can see, things here have been tense for some time. Unlike you, most of us don't have the luxury of leaving here daily, and they are going stir-crazy without the sun."

Karl chuckled. "That happened a lot in the mines as well. Some people are only suited for work topside. Don't worry, I don't hold any grudges. But I would appreciate it if everyone could get along well enough to get through orientation."

Duke Ambrose looked like he was going to start screaming, but Karl raised a hand to stop him.

"I can see on your face that you want to complain again, and I will warn you now that you don't want to press your luck.

I am not so morally upright that I wouldn't slap the stupid out of a manager. In fact, it's tradition where I come from.

I will apologize for scaring the Chief Engineer, but I don't give a damn about your interpersonal drama."

Forgemaster Granite laughed. "I think we're going to get along well. Alright, son. Follow me to the fifth station, and we can see how your new technique works on a freshly crafted blade."

That calmed the other two, and Karl resisted the urge to smile at the way that you could see how upset the short man really was with every stomping step that he took.

Karl strongly suspected that Forgemaster Granite was an actual full-blooded Dwarf. He didn't have any proof of that, but all the evidence was pointing in that direction. Especially with the clearly Gnomish Fizzspark working here as well.

The blade on the cooling rack was exquisite. Forged of an unknown alloy, but the tiny details worked into the handle, as well as the perfect angles of the blade, without any signs of tool marks, even before being polished, couldn't be the work of anyone but a true master.

"How hard is this alloy right now? Can I etch with a chisel, or should I use a skill?" Karl asked.

Granite shook his head. "At this point, I could bend it in my fingers. It's nearly as soft as pure silver. It was made for mana compatibility, not actual use."

Karl nodded, then mentally began to calculate the design before Remi held up a sheet in her space.

"I think this is what you need. Stronger, more durable, sharp edges, and an amplifying effect for skills that pass through the blade." She offered.

It was nearly two hundred runes in total, but Remi had done her homework, and she had included depths for all of them as well as spacing between the portions that weren't linked. All Karl would need to do was arrange them for use on the blade's particular shape.

[Thank you Remi. You're a lifesaver.]

Cara was still standing between the human and the Gnome, until Fizzspark climbed on Cara's back to get a better view, as the Void Badger was taller than she was.

The Gnome's fear levels had fallen faster than expected, and Karl just wondered how long it would be before she realized she was now Cara's friend. Whether she liked it or not.

Karl began to carve the runes, working from the root of the blade to the tip, flipping the blade regularly so he could write everything in order and not lose the meaning behind the phrases that he was adding to the blade.

When he finished the Runic inscription, it was time to test the blade's actual quality.

The runes went from bronze to silver, then to gold. The three team leaders all breathed a sigh of relief, then Karl continued, bringing the runes to a rich Amethyst as the inscription reached Royal Rank.

"Now for the moment of truth." Karl informed them.

All three looked confused, but Karl continued, and the deep purple runes slowly turned to the glowing red of deep earth rubies.

The blade pulsed with power as Karl's work reached Monarch Rank, then it settled to a gleaming surface so smooth it could be used as a quality mirror.

"That, ladies and gentlemen, is a Monarch Rank Runic blade in the Dwarven Runecrafter's style. Now, how about we test it to see how well the intended attributes merged?"

Chapter 705 Strength Test

"That would be my department. Please come this way, and we will go to the skill testing rooms. Fear not, they are enchanted to the same level as the training rooms used by the Royal Rank Elites in the Capital." Duke Ambrose bragged.

Karl nodded. "Then, should we call an Overlord down here? I wouldn't want to break them. I am a Monarch, after all."

The head of Research and Development froze in his tracks, only now realizing the issue, while Forgemaster Granite winked at Karl.

"The barriers were made by Overlords, and reinforce themselves constantly from the mana crystals in the complex. As long as you're not landing constant strikes, there is no danger in letting you go all out to test the weapon.

In fact, that's part of why you were chosen. If this project is to arm the special forces at Overlord Rank, we need to test them as well as possible. But it's simply not realistic to take an Overlord for our team

without their absence being noted by other nations." Granite explained, with his thick black beard bouncing on his chest as he quietly laughed.

The training room looked exactly like the ones at the apartment, and the quality of the barriers was only a little lower. It would definitely hold up to a single strike, no matter what Karl did to it.

Ambrose activated the training dummies, and the barriers in the room sprang to life.

Both Karl and Cara took a moment to add some power to the reserves, anticipating that they would be eliminating that much and more in the near future. It was standard procedure in the training grounds at home, but the three team leaders looked at them strangely.

"Standard procedure at home. Replace what you're likely to use as a courtesy to others.

Now, how would we like to do this? In theory, the blade should enhance a skill passed through it, as well as being more durable." Karl explained.

"We will start with the skill you want to use. Then again through the blade, to measure any difference. Then we will try direct impact testing on the blade before sending it to the production testing labs to check for flaws and perform quality control." Granite insisted.

Karl nodded, then prepared [Disintegrate]. The attack flew across the room to hit the dummy, which made the lights flicker. Everyone turned to look up at the number on the wall display.

"That's... impressive. Nearly peak Monarch Rank energy output. Is that a skill boosting your output, or are you close to advancement?" Granite asked.

"It's a skill. I'm still in the early stages of Monarch Rank. But when it comes to combat ability, I have no trouble standing on even footing with most new Overlords." Part of that was the fact he used [Nullify] as a barrier in combat, reducing the damage done by incoming attacks before they even got to [Void Body], but they didn't need those details.

"Now with the blade, if you would." Ambrose insisted.

Karl repeated the attack with a casual swing of the blade, but the same minimal set of buffs active, and full output, the same as before.

This time, the lights really did flicker off for an instant.

"A twenty-eight percent increase in energy output. That is beyond impressive." Fizzspark gasped.

Ambrose nodded absently as he considered the implications of such an effective boost to combat power. Such outstanding equipment would turn the tides of battles down the entire length of the borders.

"Now, to test the durability. The dummy has an impact sensor in it. Hit it as hard as you can, and we will test the yield strength of the weapon after your enhancement to see if it is suitable for combat use or if we should focus on ranged weapons." Ambrose began.

Karl smiled. This part would be the fun one. With the blade back, he crouched, tensing his muscles for a charge.

The trio stared at him in confusion, as Karl was ten metres from the target. Far outside melee range. But then Karl cast a barrier over them and leapt forward with an air - shattering crack of supersonic movement.

The barriers on the room vibrated with the impact, sending ripples of light and dark sections through the room's perimeter.

Both the blade and the target dummy were intact, but the researchers weren't sure that would still be true if Karl hit the barrier again.

Karl checked the edge of the blade, and found no visible flaws.

"Well, I didn't coat it with any skills or barriers, so that was a direct impact with the barrier at high Monarch Rank. For pure physical force, that's pretty impressive. In combat, there would normally be a

barrier or skill over the blade to protect it. Normal weapons don't hold up to that sort of abuse, after all." Karl reminded them.

"I thought you weren't supposed to use any skills for this test?" Ambrose asked in a shaking voice, rattled by the unexpectedly violent attack.

"That wasn't a skill. That is the physical strength and speed that you can expect any of the Elites who will be using these weapons to possess."

"Monsters." The thin man muttered, then looked at Cara, before returning his gaze to Karl.

[He's trying to decide which of us is scarier.] Cara laughed.

[Probably you if he keeps trying to mess with your new gnome.] Karl joked. Remi giggled softly as she looked outwards from a study project on the altar in her swamp. [I don't think that he's going to do that again. At least not while you two are here at work. He looks terrified, like he has never actually seen a powerful Elite up close before.]

Hawk squawked in amusement. [Researchers are like Earth Mice. They hide underground and never go out to see the dangers of the world up above. It's only natural that he is terrified the first time that he meets a predator.]

Cara thought that was sage-tier advice. You could only hide in the burrow so long before you had to go out. But that creepy human had his food delivered, so he had never gotten to experience the real world before.

Chapter 706 Limited Power Supply

Karl and Cara both put a bit more energy into the storage for the barriers, as they had done more damage than expected, and the array was likely to suffer for it until the draw was replenished. "There we go, that should make up for the usage of the room. Now, I suppose that we should send this blade off to be tested for any production issues. Was there anything else we needed to do before repeating the process with different combinations to test for viable alternate effects?" Karl asked.

"Do you have more variations prepared?" Forgemaster Granite asked.

"I have a few. The viability of them hasn't been tested. But theoretically, they should work."

Duke Ambrose frowned as he realized that he had been entirely cut out of the process. He was the head of research and development, but they had sent someone here with a skill that he didn't know. Someone who had already prepared designs for the testing phase, which was what Research and Development was supposed to be doing.

But how could they do their jobs when they couldn't provide any actual input into his design process?

Karl's entire presence here was an insult to his authority within the facility, and a challenge to his position. For years, Ambrose had been here, toiling thanklessly to create new weapons for the Nation. Now, some upstart young Runecrafter just showed up and crushed the performance records of everything that they had produced in the last two years.

What Ambrose couldn't know was that in order to make powerful Runes, the creator had to be at an equal level. So, they wouldn't be able to mass produce them for distribution at Monarch Rank.

However, what they could do was distribute weapons that could eventually withstand Monarch Rank usage, and then distribute them and let them grow with their users. With the assistance of a Runemaster, the runes would adapt to the power pushed through them if you deliberately overloaded the stage they were at.

So, if the weapon didn't explode, it could be improved when the user advanced.

That was a long way off, as they didn't have a single other Runemaster yet, as far as Karl could tell. He vaguely recalled that there were supposed to be Acolytes sent by the Blue Dragons. But he hadn't seen them yet.

The best thing to do was ask. "So, when will the Acolytes arrive? The sooner we can get working, the better." Granite shrugged. "They're in security somewhere. They arrived before you, but with ten of them sent at the last minute, none of their passes were ready."

That was one problem down. But there was something off with the chain of command here. Who was supposed to be arranging for their arrival anyhow?

Karl addressed the group. "Well, until they come down, we can continue on this project path. Should we start with the most or least likely to succeed?" Forgemaster Granite smirked. "I say that we start with the least likely. Doing things that you know will work is how we ended up so far behind the power curve to begin with."

That was clearly a direct jab at Ambrose, the head of Research and Development. But Karl ignored the bickering and motioned for someone to bring him another weapon.

This one was much different than the last one. Not only was the material different, the quality of the workmanship was far inferior.

Karl turned it over in his hands, then sighed and began to plan the Runes.

The Dwarves didn't believe in specific effects, they wanted grand concepts in their Runecrafting, to the point that even the language supported working that way.

So, Karl thought for a few minutes and came up with the most absolutely ridiculous compound rune that he could fit on the blade.

In a literal translation, it meant "A divine sundering blow that splits the earth, shakes the skies and instills fear into the hearts of men, dragons and gods."

But the supporting runes to shape the concept without breaking the single rune, as well as the addendums for power, an earthquake that would split the earth, and inspiring reverent awe of the wielder added quite a bit to the sigil.

The Dwarf stared at the rune as Karl finished writing the draft, then began to laugh out loud, his whole body shaking with mirth.

"Do you not have any fear of divine retribution? I am not certain I would dare to think that one, much less dare to actually inscribe it on a blade." Granite laughed.

"Well, I have Limited Invulnerability. At worst, I should only be ninety percent dead. But if the rest of you want to stand outside the room, I totally understand." Karl joked.

The rest of the group was baffled, as they couldn't even attempt to read what Karl had written.

Karl decided to tempt fate, and used [Disintegrate] to carve the runes as he envisioned them on first one side of the blade, then the other.

The runes appeared down the blade, as if drawn by an invisible finger, while Granite held his breath. He was waiting to see if they would be hit with divine wrath for hubris, but when the inscription was carved, nothing had happened.

"Now, to see what happens when we empower it."

Karl began to add mana to the inscribed blade, and felt the air around him begin to tremble. He had probably overdone it with the runes to enhance the power of the blade, and even when he pushed the power level to Commander, they still weren't lighting up. Royal Rank brought a faint purple flicker to them, so Karl pushed it to Monarch Rank. Now they were glowing faintly red, as if beginning to activate.

Then the blade exploded in a shower of blackened shards that rapidly dissolved into ash as the freshly imbued mana dissipated.

"Well, that was unexpected. I guess that blade wasn't up to the inscription." Karl sighed.

Forgemaster Granite cleared his throat, and pointed at the table in front of Karl. There was a black scorch mark on it where the blade used to be, and the protective enchantments were shattered.

"Minor technical difficulty. Do we have someone on hand to fix the tables?"

Chapter 707 Just Karl Things

Forgemaster Granite shook his head. "Those tables weren't intended to be consumable items. First off, how did you shatter an Overlord Rank barrier with a Monarch Ranked crafting failure?"

Karl shrugged. "It likely pulled the mana out of the enchantment when I didn't have enough to feed it."

What none of them could have known was that a single bolt of black lightning had hit the park overhead at the moment that the blade disintegrated.

Karl began to draw another inscription. "This one is a bit less overblown. Can you get me a blunt weapon? A maul or a war pick of some sort, preferably. I will try to enchant this one to add both durability and large amounts of impact damage to strikes."

It was a much less obnoxious enchantment than the other, and it would fit easily on the head of a hammer. An assistant came in with a cart holding a freshly crafted maul, still warm from the forge. Karl grabbed it to set it on the table, then froze halfway as everyone screamed in terror.

"I haven't even started yet." He complained.

"No. That maul, how are you alright?" Ambrose asked.

Karl looked at the hammer for a moment, then realized that the warmth on his hand was actually flesh melting heat to most people.

"Oh, that. It's fine, that won't hurt my hand, it's just hot. But that makes it easier to carve, if I can find the chisels."

They seemed to have been obliterated by the aftermath of the last failure, so Karl used [Earth Barrier] to make himself a new one and set about carving the runes.

This time, when he was almost done, Karl decided to add a bit more flare, and added a small side note about melting armour on impact. A small homage to Hawk's love of fire, and the heat held in the hammer.

Extra impact force and armour damage, or possibly armour ignore, depending on how the weapon interpreted it when used, should make for a suitable level of enhancement.

Karl began to add mana to the hammer, and watched in awe as the head of the weapon slowly turned a deep crimson, while the runes went from Bronze through silver to Gold.

"What is the mana compatibility of this weapon?" He asked as the weapon approached the Royal Rank.

"It should be close to that of the first weapon, higher than pure silver." Forgemaster Granite insisted.

"Alright, then we go all out."

Karl pushed the weapon to the Royal Rank, and the coloration changed. The head of the hammer turned deep amethyst, while the runes shone silver.

Then, the Runes went back to Gold, and Karl kept pushing the quality up.

It appeared that the alloy had been enhanced, changing in core quality, while sucking the mana out of the Runes.

That was interesting. He certainly hadn't expected it, and this might make for a much more powerful weapon than he had planned.

The whole head of the weapon glowed purple when it reached Royal Rank again, and then the purple hue began to fade, turning to an opalescent sheen on the metal similar to the maul that Karl had in his possession.

The runes finally turned Monarch Rank red, and then the process stopped as it reached equilibrium with Karl's power level.

"And done."

The worker who had brought in the hammer gasped at the changed appearance. "That is incredible. Why did it do that, when the ones before it did not?" He asked.

Karl shrugged. "Well, one of them blew up. But the first one, the one that Forgemaster Granite created, was already at a much higher quality level. If I am right, then this should now be an Exceptional or Epic Ranked weapon. But the blade that was used for the first weapon was already an Epic item before being enhanced."

Forgemaster Granite nodded as he stroked his long black beard. "Yes, it should be considered Epic Grade. All that it was missing was mana to get it there, as the Weaponsmith missed multiple steps in the imbuing process."

The worker looked terrified at the prospect of what the Forgemaster was going to do to correct such an oversight. They should all have been masters at their craft here, there was no real excuse for forgetting steps that would improve a weapon's quality to such an extent.

It was sad news for Karl, who realized that the improvement was not actually from his skills, but just finishing the work that the previous craftsman had skipped. But the result was an item that should be of more than sufficient quality for their purposes.

Duke Ambrose cleared his throat, as they were back to his department's specialty.

His petulant voice instantly annoyed everyone around him, but his idea made enough sense that they still listened.

"Perhaps we could have a less powerful user test the weapon, to determine the scalability of the Rune work.

While the first round is going to the Overlords, should they be suitable, this craft will eventually spread to all of the Special Forces." Forgemaster Granite held his hand over the Maul, checking the temperature, then picked it up and hefted it carefully to test the balance.

Granite was a Commander, so he would be able to put a decent amount of force behind the attack. Plus, it was a Dwarven Rune, so there might be a bit of extra affinity for him.

The Forgemaster collected another similar maul from the pile of completed weapons, as a baseline for their tests, and led the way back to the testing room.

"This will be so much fun. I haven't gotten to hit anything but work in far too long. You should try it too, Fizz. It's quite therapeutic."

They both excluded Duke Ambrose, who was a Common Rank human with no noticeable powers.

That would be closer to comedy relief. Assuming he could even lift the maul.

Karl charged the barriers in the training room again, while Granite set the new weapon on a table at the side of the room. Karl wasn't sure what sort of combat skills a Forgemaster might have, but there should be something for swinging a hammer, and that was what this one was designed to enhance.

Chapter 708 Forgemaster Granite

Forgemaster Granite's arms were powerful, and the first swing that he made with the regular hammer caused a flare of light on the barrier over the dummy.

"Impressive strength without using a combat skill. Do you need me to teach you one quickly for more effective testing?" Karl asked.

Forgemaster Granite shook his head. "I know how to fight well enough. But pure strength should always be the first test for a weapon. You never know when that fancy magic mumbo jumbo will fail you, and it will be time to just beat something to death."

Duke Ambrose looked somewhat dubious about the logic behind that, but Karl knew that it was true in more ways than one. You could be injured, out of mana, exhausted, or simply in an argument with Cara, and you wouldn't be able to use the skills that you were after.

Granite swung the hammer and smashed it into the barrier, giving a solid low Commander Rank impact reading just from physical impact. That was truly impressive, and under that loose shirt, he had to be even more physically powerful than Karl himself had become.

"Impressive." Karl congratulated, but the smith simply grunted and nodded as he switched weapons with a reverent smile at the new one.

He swung again, and the numbers on the meter began to grow, stopping just short of the standard for a Royal Ranked skill.

"Now that's a hammer." He sighed fondly.

"That's as good as an actual skill, and all he did was swing the hammer. There was no added input on his part. Now, a lot of that is down to his physical strength, which humans will struggle to replicate, but I must say that the result is impressive." Duke Ambrose noted.

"Do we have a regular human Elite here?" Karl asked.

Duke Ambrose looked pointedly at Karl, and the bearded Forgemaster began to laugh.

"No, we don't have any other Warrior type Elites here. Most of the apprentices have system skills, but they're the ones that awakened research and crafting related skills, so they're not officially Elites, they are researchers." Granite explained.

Karl sighed. "Alright, then we have Forgemaster Granite do the honours for Commander Rank testing. I will do the full output destructive testing, and his strength can be our proof of concept.

I strongly suspect that we won't be having too many problems with the quality of the weapons his subordinates have been turning out. But with every new design, there is a need for testing.

Now, we have a blade design that will enhance skill output. A hammer to improve impact force. Do you make ranged weapons here?" Chief Engineer Fizzspark jumped up and down on Cara's back, waving her hand, while her pink pigtailed waved along with her.

"That is my department. We have learned that the gods disapprove of mixing too much technology with magic, so while it can work, it won't link with the system. The operating theory is that the nature of the World Dragon as a Nature God prevents perversions of nature from working properly. Complex chemical compounds like potions work great. But Complex chemical reactions to create substances that don't exist in nature, like gunpowder, don't interact with the system.

There are ten thousand or more years of research, including the most recent research, as we were working to improve our base technology. But so far, nobody has found a proper answer, and the more you try to mix them, the worse the outcomes become.

So, we have worked out three different paths. One is thrown and hurled projectiles, such as knives and spears. Second are the bows and catapults. Third, are grenade launchers."

Karl stared at her for a second.

"I thought that you just finished saying that system linked items and technology don't mix?" He asked.

"They don't. The grenade launchers are actually just a rifle - shaped magic wand that fires fireballs. They're wonderful."

Granite chuckled. "They come in pistol form too. Fantastically dangerous for the user."

Fizzspark shrugged. "Minor technical difficulties. You just need to hold it far enough from your body that the proximity doesn't trigger the fireball to detonate."

"Which a Gnome is incapable of doing." Granite reminded her.

Lotus would love this creature.

Cara already did.

Karl smiled at the excited little woman. "It sounds like they're already well under development. But I can do something for the bows. I was reading a book the other day on Dwarven Runecrafting, and it included a section on how to enhance bows.

Of course, the most practical application, creating arrows so that the archer never runs out, is a spell effect that isn't as popular with the author, but it is a common part of enchantment. I also have a bow of that nature, and from there, I think that I can make something functional." Fizzspark gestured toward a hallway behind Karl. "Then, onward! We will inspect the bows. I'm trusting you to know how to operate them. My arms are too short."

Cara flapped her wings and flew down the hall with her pink haired rider, while Duke Ambrose sighed and ran his fingers through his hair. "I thought that this was supposed to increase productivity and morale." He muttered.

Granite shrugged, and Karl could see that he was hiding his smile behind his beard. "I don't know, it looks like it has improved morale already. Plus, we have two preliminary plans for actual Overlord issued weapons, and that's more productivity than the rest of us have managed in the last year."

Duke Ambrose didn't appear to be fond of that reminder, as he was head of Research and Development. An area where their ambitions had fallen so far off target that the King himself had called in a replacement to put their projects back on track.

It appeared to be an unspoken understanding that Karl was not so much an outside contractor as he was a direct slap in the face to the Research and Development department. Even the hour that he had spent here was enough for Karl to understand that much.

Chapter 709 Archery

After following Fizzspark into the archery room, which had its own shooting gallery in the back, Karl was flooded with cheerful greetings and the sound of cheerful conversations.

It was a very different feeling than the forges, where everyone worked in silence, as the noise of the forge was too loud for casual conversation.

Surprisingly, a large portion of the room was not crafters who had some special skill in creating bows, but Nature Priestesses.

Bows were traditionally created from wood. Nature Priestesses excelled at growing more of it. It was a perfect fit for them, Karl decided.

Karl walked over to one of the bows and picked it up to examine the enchantments on it.

{Bow of Multi Fire} Uncommon Grade bow. Creates two arrows each time the bow is fired.

Karl shook his head as he realized that the one important thing the bow didn't do was allow for separate targeting, or even aim assist when you fired.

But it was Uncommon Grade, and that wasn't a particularly powerful item. The question was, why was it the first thing he found on the table?

"What do we have that's already at the Rare or Epic Grade to be enhanced?" Karl asked.

One of the bowyers raised his hand, and Karl walked over to see his work.

{Compound bow of Brutal Impact} deals 110% of skill damage as physical impact. Requires skill use to activate. That wasn't terrible. It would be hard on the mana levels, but it would double your damage output, or allow you to use a much lower output that didn't deplete the Elite nearly as quickly.

The problem that he could see was that the actual bow was not particularly high-quality wood. Ascended Rank Ash, if his botany knowledge was right.

It would have helped to have Lotus here. She would gladly fill him in on all the little details without him having to ask. The clerics here were too nervous to say much today.

But he would be able to work with that, it would just take more runes to reinforce the wood, which Karl noted was in a carefully crafted composite. It was quite a modern weapon, with its compound design for improved arrow speed and shorter overall length while retaining power.

Karl made a quick mental plan, then borrowed a paintbrush from the tools on the counter. Carving into the composite of the bow would do more damage than help, so he would have to do what he could with paint.

"I have a marker." One of the nature priestesses suggested helpfully.

"Oh, that would be easier."

She handed it over, and Karl noticed that it was a rainbow-coloured marker, with sparkles.

Whoever got this bow once they were done testing had better have a sense of humour if the runes didn't change colours.

Karl decided on two phrases. One to strengthen and stiffen the bow, and one to greatly improve the travel speed of projectiles.

Adding mana to the marker runes was not easy, and Karl suspected that it was the changing composition of the multicoloured marker. Even when he brought it through Awakened and Ascended Rank, it retained its sparkles.

At Commander Rank, the runes turned shining gold. Karl hesitated, but a Commander Rank weapon wouldn't do them any good for an Overlord Rank Ranger.

So, he took the bow to Royal Rank. The runes shifted colour as the power level increased, and the whole bow turned a rich black, with golden lines making up the wood pattern around the amethyst runes.

He could feel the saturation of the wood, and didn't dare to take it any further. But it was a good start.

"Alright, who wants to test fire the bow?" Karl asked.

The creator shrugged. "I don't have an attack skill."

Karl nodded in understanding. His class was {Bowyer}, so he had thought the man should have at least one skill for testing purposes. But this bow only activated with a ranged attack skill. Perhaps whatever he had was not suitable.

Or worse, the class could be entirely crafting focused, without even the ability to fight in an emergency.

One of the others came over and picked up the bow, almost throwing it in the air.

"It's incredibly light. Feels good in the hands."

Then he tried to draw the bow, and only managed to get it a few centimetres back.

"Monarch, I think there has been a mistake. Nobody can draw this." He complained.

Karl frowned, then took the bow and stepped to the archery range. He activated [Rend] at Commander Rank and drew the bow string back, creating a vicious red metallic arrow.

The draw weight had to be close to a hundred and fifty kilos.

"Alright, perhaps that's a bit too stiff, but Rangers have strength close to Warriors, so it should be usable for them."

Karl let the arrow fly, and the barrier at the back of the room lit up, while the metallic target rang like a gong.

"One thousand two hundred metres a second. As good as a bullet." Fizzspark cheered.

"The bow effect activates on impact, so the skill hits first, then the bow's damage is secondary, hopefully after the barriers are down. Not too shabby." Karl agreed.

"Can you make it actually usable, and not just for you?" One of the bowyers asked.

"Sure. But the effect of the speed increase is percentage-based. The average combat bow tops out at something like a hundred metres a second arrow speed. Now, without significantly improving that with the actual bow, we're not going to see the same sort of results."

The bowyer shrugged. "The arrow speed is mostly irrelevant, isn't it? It's just to get the arrow where it needs to be."

Karl sighed, then turned to Cara. "Throw one of those arrows at me."

Cara giggled and climbed on the table, then drew back her arm and hurled an arrow at him in a perfect spiral.

Karl shifted slightly to the right and easily caught the projectile, while the crafters stared at them in horror, and Fizzspark tried not to lose her seat on the rapidly moving badger.

"As you can see, that won't work. At a hundred metres a second, not only can I dodge the arrow, but I can catch standard projectiles."

Chapter 710 Underestimated the Customer Base

The Gnome sighed. "We have underestimated the stronger Elites. I told them that something like this was happening when they returned the last batch of weapons we tried to send them."

"What feedback did they give you?" Karl asked.

Duke Ambrose scoffed. "Our researchers didn't have clearance to discuss the matter with the end users. It was determined that such interaction could unduly affect our development plans to favour the ones who had responded, instead of creating weapons for the majority of the Elites." "Determined by whom?" Karl asked.

The answer was clear on the man's face. Determined by him.

"Alright, that's not going to work. It's clear that none of you actually understand the usage scenarios for the weapons that you are creating. If the enemy can casually dodge your attacks, what is the point in wasting mana?

No, we need bows that will fire fast enough that even the mighty Overlords don't have an easy time dodging them. So, don't shy away from stiffer bows. If you have doubts, ask one of the blacksmiths if they can test it for you. If they can draw it, then it is usable by an average Warrior or Ranger. But for the Overlords, an exceptional set of equipment is needed.

The issue they have is that nothing we can get elsewhere is actually high enough quality for them. Even what I turn out to be the peak of my skills and power is still an entire Rank below what they truly need, and my limited skills means that there is a significant chance that we will still be lacking in quality compared to the items created by the Cyclops Forgemasters."

As Karl finished his speech with a mention of the Giants' craftsmen, Granite spat on the ground in disgust. "Unacceptable. No way will we lose to the Giants. But the Forgemasters should be extinct. Where did the Giants get more?" He asked.

"There was a Monster Spawn, where multiple Cyclops Forgemasters were obtained by the Giants at Royal and possibly Monarch Rank." Forgemaster Granite's disgust turned to something bordering on rage, until one of the Nature Priestesses handed him one of their signature 'cigarettes', already lit.

The Dwarf smiled at her and took a drag, then put it out.

"Thank you. Damnable Giants. Alright, I think I know why there is such urgency now. If the Giants have their legendary smiths back, and we're working with no information and a design team that has two functional brain cells fighting for third place, things are about to go south."

Duke Ambrose stormed out of the room, sick of their insults, but nobody seemed sad to see him go.

"How many people are on the Research Team now?" Karl asked.

"Just him and a couple of paperwork clerks. The last of his subordinates quit last week, and none have been sent to replace them. The Acolytes coming with you would presumably be the new team." Fizzspark whispered.

Karl gave her a surprised look before responding. "This doesn't seem like the sort of place that you can just quit and head home from."

The Gnome nodded. "They have the mages mind wipe your time here, so you can't spill secrets when you leave. I don't think that they'll try that with you, but most of our team doesn't get any consideration at all."

Cara chuckled, making Fizzspark vibrate on her back. "Cara has a point. Even if they wanted to, they probably couldn't. I am somewhat resistant to negative magical effects, and we already know that they don't have an Overlord here to do the job every day when I head back to my room at the Palace."

Fizzspark gasped. "You get to stay at the Palace? Lucky. I heard that it's really nice. What does the city look like?"

Karl shrugged. "I went underground from the Palace here. I haven't seen the city at all. Security reasons, they say. But there is a train that goes from the Palace Complex to the University, then it's all indoors from there to the entrance. Rather dull, really."

Their conversation was interrupted by the sound of the main doors opening. That was unusual enough that everyone in the main room turned to see what was going on. There were no scheduled deliveries today, and they had already gotten a new person who made the head of Research and Development cry.

More excitement seemed like too much for one day.

Five young Acolytes, all in their first and second years at the Seminary Academy, were led in by a security guard. Karl and most of the occupants of the archery room came out to see what the commotion was about, and Cara flew Fizzspark up to the landing.

Then she poked the Chief Engineer with her nose and made a 'get on with it' gesture for the Gnome to begin her welcoming speech.

"Acolytes for the Runecrafting project? Welcome to the development lab. Please do come in. Monarch Karl will be taking charge of your training from this point forward."

They wouldn't actually be able to learn the Runecrafting skill, Karl feared. Nacht had said that it had incredibly high standards as a skill. But there was some hope that they could learn some subset of it as a trade skill.

If nothing else, they could help Karl with his preparations while he worked out a way to alter the skills he had to the point he could train them properly.

[What would you even blend it with? Don't you need more useful skills before you can start mixing things for others?] Remi reminded him.

[Good point. They keep promising me more skill books, but they never do make good on their promise before I'm sent somewhere else.]

[Well, now we have captive Blue Dragon clerics. They should have some connections who would love to get more books for us. Maybe they brought books, I hope they brought books.

I've already read almost all of mine.]

That was impressive. She had entire shelves full of them arranged around her Altar, hundreds in total. But Remi didn't really sleep unless she was bored or full, so she had lots of time to research.

It made her a lousy night watch, but a great researcher.