

Beast Master 161

Chapter 161 Morning Watch

One of the twin mages woke Karl up a few hours before dawn to begin his watch, Gently shaking the net beside his head to get him motivated.

Karl smiled at her and whispered. "Did you learn that from Rae? She gets upset when people shake the whole net instead of just a small bit near the head to wake people up."

Danni smirked. "She woke me up that way. She's down below somewhere again, but she will likely come back up when she has caught whatever appeared in her net.

We haven't seen any action so far, but the new wave of monsters should be here by morning, so keep your eyes peeled.

Nobody really knows when they will show up, and it doesn't seem to be a set time, but we do know that there are new ones daily.

I'm going to get a bit more sleep, wake me up for breakfast."

Karl sat in silence and looked out over the hills and forests, letting time pass by as he scanned for signs of movement and life in the predawn darkness.

With Hawk's low light vision, and Rae's thermal vision capabilities, the movement in the forests was easy enough to track, though the canopy of leaves blocked both in many areas.

However, it was not enough that Karl didn't notice when there were suddenly hundreds of new heat signatures in the area.

They didn't come from one spot, like they were coming from a cave, they just appeared all over the forest, all at once. Some even appeared right next to Rae's webs, and walked right into them before they realized they were in danger.

Her sense of victory as the prey flailed and shouted for someone to come save them filled Karl's mind, but the noise also woke everyone else up.

"The monsters just appeared everywhere. They're not coming from a cave or a set location, I saw them just appear all over the forest." Karl explained.

"What do you mean? How many can you see?" Bob asked.

"With the gifts of low light and thermal vision I gained from Hawk and Rae, I can clearly see for nearly two kilometres. There are hundreds of goblin sized creatures, a few dozen larger ones that I can see, and that's just what isn't hidden under the trees.

I can't see through solid objects, so I know I'm missing most of them, but Rae is going wild killing the ones that are in her webs down below. That would be the noise that woke you up." Karl explained.

Doug sighed. "And that means that we are about to have a lot of unwanted company, drawn here by the noise. Fortunately, it is still dark, and their eyesight isn't any better than mine, so they're not going to find us in the trees, but we need to make sure that Rae doesn't get ambushed."

Karl nodded. "It's still dark, but it should start getting light soon, when we can go down and start cleaning up the ones trapped in the webs. Do you want me and Hawk to go start silencing them now? Three of us in the dark will be faster than just Rae, and we can all see what we're doing."

Doug and Bob both shook their heads. "No, either we all go or we all stay. Safety protocol says don't send group members alone. Attack what you can without going so far from the group that we can't see you."

Karl thought for a second, then nodded. "Alright, I will head down a few branches using the ladder, as I can't attack through the fort without damaging it. But once I'm there, I can hit a lot of the nearby webs, and you'll be able to see me.

Hawk, you go help Rae. Make sure she gets rid of the loud ones first and doesn't make them sing for her. We will hunt them all day long, there is no more need to bait in prey."

[I got a good thing. There is a tasty scaly biped here with snappy jaws and a shiny poking stick.] Rae informed Karl.

That made very little sense, but Karl congratulated her on her find, and asked her to bring back the shiny poking stick when she had a chance.

What he got in return was a thread of silk sprayed his way from where she was hunting, which he had to assume was attached to the prize.

With a practised motion, the same as coiling up a power cable in the mines, Karl began to pull the item up, and found that she had recovered an obsidian headed spear, attached to a bamboo handle with excellent workmanship.

It wasn't magical, but to his eyes, the translucent spearhead sparkled, reflecting the minimal light from both sides.

Then, she put the body in her space, and Karl finally understood what she was talking about. It was a lizardman of some sort, currently missing a head, but larger than anyone in their group, with a powerful looking tail and a few crude bone ornaments.

Karl whistled to get the others' attention. "There was a lizardman in the web. It might not be all Goblins in the group today."

That got the group talking, making a plan for their hunting and defence based on the knowledge they had of how lizardman behaved. They were a common monster in the swampy areas, on the high side of Common to the low Awakened Rank, but often gathering in large groups that would challenge the smaller teams who went to hunt that level of threat.

"Are there still Goblins and Ogres?" Bob asked quietly.

Karl looked around, verifying the few monsters in the region that he could spot from his vantage point now that they had mostly moved under cover of the forest.

"Yeah, I still see Goblin sized creatures, and humanoids too big to be lizardmen. I will point them out on the map for you when I get back up." Karl agreed.

There were other beasts caught in Rae's web, and he was using Rend to dispatch them quickly before they could make too much noise and bring a force that the five of them couldn't deal with.

Rend's range was limited, and they were well up into the tree, but with Rae and Hawk moving lower through the forest, it only took a half hour before they had everything in the immediate vicinity dead, butchered and collected.

They had gathered what they thought might be loot, but there were probably some things that didn't catch their attention. Nothing magical, though. Beasts could sense the magic on the items, and they would have brought it back if they had found anything.

The pair returned to the fort, and Karl climbed back up to join the group as soon as he smelled Doug start cooking breakfast.

"The loot is at the bottom of the tree. We can collect it later. But first, I will show you where I saw the Ogres appear, and any other groups I remember. The Ogres are still our primary target, right?" Karl asked.

"They are. We need to keep the population of everything down, but the Ogres are the strongest beings that we have been informed of in the area." Bob agreed.

"Alright. Then we should check here, here and here. Plus near the ridgeline there.

Those areas all had multiple large creatures, and some of them went behind the ridge. Then we had large groups of Goblin sized monsters here and here, with scattered monsters everywhere else." Karl explained, tapping the map as he went.

Bob nodded. "Alright, that's good, I will come up with an efficient route for us to cover today, and we will start hunting after we eat."

The meal was similar to the one that Doug had made the night before, heavy on the potatoes, but this time Karl donated some of the Awakened Rank boar meat that Hawk had been ignoring.

"Now we're talking. Pork belly and potatoes is the real breakfast of champions." Bob chuckled.

Doug rolled his eyes as he cast a spell that created some sort of white sauce in a pot on his camp stove, and began to rummage in his pack until he found a tube that cracked open to reveal rolls of dough.

"Biscuit dough takes less room uncooked. The sauce is a form of coconut gravy, but with the pork grease, it should be pretty good." The cleric explained.

It sounded a bit sketchy to Karl, but who was he to argue with the cook? There were chopped mushrooms in the mix with the potatoes, and he already knew they tasted like steak, so there was a good chance that the white sauce didn't taste like raw coconut.

Chapter 162 Clearance Sale

The meal was, again, surprisingly good. Though the coconut pork flavour of the gravy was certainly unexpected.

Once they were finished, Bob led the group down the ladder with their packs, in case something happened, and they couldn't easily return to their fort tonight. It was always better to be safe, but with the amount of fighting that they were going to have to do very soon, Karl was questioning if they were even going to lose sight of the huge tree today.

The mages seemed to be having the same thoughts, as they didn't have the superhuman strength to make the packs a negligible burden, but nobody openly questioned the leader's decisions. That was a recipe for disaster out here, and any questions could wait until they were finished, or at least on their lunch break.

The pile at the bottom of the tree contained various metallic coins, shiny obsidian tools, and a few unknown ointments in leather pouches that Hawk and Rae had assumed must have some purpose.

Rae had returned to her den in the beast space for the morning, while Hawk continued to scout. Thor was waiting in reserve, ready to fight at a moment's notice, but not wanting to be loud and distracting before it was time to fight.

Likewise, the Golems were not yet summoned, so the flanks were unprotected. Well, as much as they could be when they had a mage who specialized in barriers in the middle of the group. That was her position, so that if they had to defend themselves, both ends of the convoy were equal distances from her, allowing for a circular barrier, which was the quickest and easiest to create.

Bob gestured through the trees. "Our first target is the ridgeline. That marks the edge of our zone, but if we see monsters just beyond it, we will go to help whatever team is working over there.

Then we will follow that along the edge of our area, and circle the perimeter, zigzagging through on the final leg to clear every likely hiding spot.

We don't need to be perfect, but the more we get, the easier tomorrow will be, and the day after that."

Hawk was flying through the trees today instead of overhead, so he could see more of what was going on at ground level. They hadn't seen many monsters in the branches, other than a few small insects and rodents, none of which were a threat to Hawk, but he still kept watch, as having trees overhead made him nervous.

He would rather be much higher, but from that height, he would miss things, and be slow to assist when needed.

[You can go up if you'd like, buddy. We have a scout here on the ground, and you can warn us about the big things.] Karl offered.

[Once you get to the ridge, where the trees are thin.] Hawk agreed.

After that point, he would at least be able to see the ground as he flew overhead.

The rest of their zone was more sparsely wooded, with low pine trees that he could see between. It was just this one area where they had set up camp that had the worst visibility.

But when Karl thought about that, he realized that their zone didn't actually cover the most likely spots for the monsters to hide. It was rugged terrain, and a difficult spot to get to them, but most creatures would naturally go for the steeper cliffs, or the larger trees, and not the region they were searching, where the ground was too rocky for dense forest.

"How do these work zones get picked?" Karl whispered to Doug, who was in front of him in the line.

"Grid squares on the map. We get a number when we are drawn or hired for the mission, and then the numbers are assigned to blocks on the map. We got a fairly easy one this time, no climbing gear required, and no huge bodies of water to traverse.

But that also means that the monsters will naturally move through here. They don't usually hide, they go looking for food, fights or whatever it is that motivates them." The cleric whispered back.

That made sense. Karl had misunderstood the situation, the monsters weren't hiding and trying to build their numbers, they were just doing as they pleased, and that meant in the case of the Goblins, they were looking for loot.

They loved shiny things more than your average crow did, and they were happy to kill to get them.

[Big Green things!] Hawk cheered as he spotted something in the distance.

"Big green things, Hawk says, straight ahead." Karl warned the others.

Bob prepared his Guard ability, and the four wood Golems were called out, as well as Thor, while Rae napped after working all night.

The crashing noise of the creatures chasing an amused Hawk back in their direction was unmistakable, and Karl immediately wondered what the bird had done to annoy them. He could fly, surely they didn't think that they were going to catch him if they had just spotted him.

Then Hawk came into sight, and everyone saw the young Goblin in his claws. It was still alive and flailing, and the crashing was getting louder.

"Hobgoblins." Bob warned as the creatures came into sight, flanked by another dozen Goblins.

Hawk rotated upward, as if avoiding the humans, and threw the small goblin back at its tribe, but hit it with a Rend for good measure before it made it back to the ground.

The Hobgoblins flew into a rage, smashing at the trees, the ground and anything in sight before spotting Bob and the other humans.

"Groopata!" The largest of them screamed as it charged at them, and the warrior shook his head.

The Hobgoblin's club hit Bob's guard right as Karl hit the monster with a [Shred] attack that took its head off, and two lightning attacks stunned and burnt the smaller goblins.

Thor charged past Bob, spearing a hobgoblin through the legs with his upper horns, then throwing him into the air for Hawk to tear apart.

The Goblin tribe began to scatter as the Lightning Cerro charged into the middle of them, but they had no sense of organization, and the two mages were quickly picking them off with small attacks, while the Golems spread out to keep them from flanking the group.

Thor circled back to make another pass as the Hobgoblins, while the mages focused lightning on the small goblins, who couldn't survive even the lightest of chain lightning attacks from the twins.

Karl stepped to the side so he could hit one of the Hobgoblins with Shred as Bob blocked its attack again, letting the club hit his shield and saving his energy by not extending [Guard] to cover the whole area.

That was the end of the tribe, and the group moved quickly to check the bodies, in case the noise had brought any other threats their way.

"Whole lot of nothing. A few bits of gold jewellery and some gemstones. It will sell well when we get back, but not useful now." Doug noted as they finished.

He cast some sort of spell on the group, and Karl began to feel refreshed, as if he had just had a good nap and a long shower.

That wasn't what he had expected from their cleric, but it was a very welcome surprise.

Chapter 163 Neighbours

Bob led the group forward again, toward the ridgeline, where they could hear the sound of trees being broken, and occasional shouting. There was no doubt that their target was there, and that they would be able to find it without much work.

He had already planned their combat strategy to have Rae held in reserve for evening watches, so the current formation was the golems surrounding the casters, with Karl in the rear and Thor at his right flank.

The Lightning Cerro made an impressive shield on his own, and having him on the warrior's sword side kept him from getting charged while he was fighting with his back turned.

For a young beast, Thor had proven to be remarkably well adapted to combat strategy, and he seemed to instinctively know what to do.

That was actually mostly Karl and Thor giving him insights into the situation and letting him make his own decisions, but the remainder was just his pure love for smashing things.

Hobgoblins, smashing poles and barriers had a lot in common.

"Everyone ready, there is a fight ahead, and we don't know who the other parties are." Bob warned the rest of the group as they approached the ridge.

The deep bellows should be an ogre, or possibly two of them, but the others weren't making any sounds that would give away their species.

If they were lucky, the Ogre would have come across an aggressive predator and both would be half dead when the group arrived to finish them off. But that was a lot of luck to ask for.

He led them over the ridge, and Karl sensed Thor's joy as Hawk circled back to the immediate fight instead of scouting in the distance to make sure they didn't miss anything.

There were more people here. New people, including ones in white. The ones in white knew just how to rub his head ridges, Thor informed Karl smugly, as if he was a neglectful master.

"The Cerro is with us." Bob shouted as he levelled his shield in front of himself and charged at the back of the group.

Three ogres were leading a party of lizardmen against another of the five-man teams, and the numeric advantage had put the humans on the defensive.

Thor put his head down and bowled over the lizardmen before spearing an ogre with his front horn in a place where no man would ever want to be speared. The ogre screamed in pain, but he was lifted onto his toes by the Cerro, and couldn't turn to effectively hit him.

Karl and Hawk both threw a barrage of [Rend] attacks at the giant humanoid, who was wearing crude leather pants and what looked like a flattened cook pot as chest armour.

It was no match for the attacks, and blood began to flow freely from the wounds before Thor flipped his head to the side and dropped the ogre on the ground.

He was under attack from both sides, and he lifted his tail to smash.

"Earthquake incoming." Karl warned, just in time for Bob to jump into the air before the skill activated and destabilized the lizardmen warriors.

"Nice skill." One of the twins laughed as she threw a pair of fireballs into the lizards, burning scales off and clearing the area around Thor.

The other team of Elites was regrouping, while engaged in battle with the other two ogres. The sudden reversal had taken the monsters by surprise, and the lizardmen weren't sure which group to deal with first, as their leader had been taken out entirely incidentally by one of the fireballs.

Karl turned to the left as he sensed something hostile coming his way.

Activating Refreshing Lightning to surround himself caused an obsidian dagger to glance off his throat as another group of monsters rushed out of the trees, screaming in Goblin.

The small green monsters were going to be a real nuisance, but Hawk was already moving downward on a strafing run, preparing to bathe them in fire, and the two wood Golems on that side were moving to intercept.

Karl sent a wave of [Rend] flying at the Goblins with his sword, and the front-line hit the ground, ducking underneath to save their lives, but leaving the second rank unaware of the imminent danger.

The attack sliced them clean in half, and the ones behind them as well, but there were still more coming out of the trees and into Hawk's stream of fire.

He flapped hard and moved back up to fifty metres in the air to get out of easy ranged attack range, but that put him in position to see more incoming enemies.

[Twenty more scaly people behind the Goblins.] He warned.

[Check the other side as well. I think we walked into a trap.] Karl cautioned.

"More lizardmen are coming behind the Goblins, like they're herding them to us." Karl warned as the cowardly little beasts halted and tried to run away from the wall of flames.

The second group of humans was moving toward them, running past where Thor was fending off the last Ogre with his tail, using Earthquake directly on the creature's chest to send it flying. Their warriors were wounded, and they only had one mage and one cleric with them, but the cleric was a student from the Seminary Academy.

He looked utterly terrified to be out here, but he had to be at least Awakened Rank to have been sent on this mission, and once he saw Doug, he began to gather his wits and remember his training.

The two of them were enough to heal the minor wounds that the warriors had, but the mage was looking exhausted from keeping up defensive spells.

The Goblins and Lizardmen fell back, regrouping just like the humans were, while their reinforcements arrived.

For a moment, it looked like the Ogre that Thor hit with [Earthquake] was going to get up, but as soon as it moved, it began coughing up blood and collapsed again, unwilling to try moving until its natural healing had more time to work.

Bob assessed the situation. "I count twenty lizardmen in total, some wounded. Under thirty goblins left, all terrified, and no more ogres. Mages, keep up the pressure with the fire spells, but don't burn too much mana.

Thor, come to me and defend against frontal attacks. Karl and Hawk can deal with the attack side."

Hawk was good with that. The lizardmen couldn't throw those spears high enough to hit him.

Rae woke up while they were catching their breath, and looked out at the battlefield.

[You guys went wild while I was asleep. Which spot is mine?] She asked.

[You can take the left flank of the lizardmen. Hawk will attack from the right, and I will back you up. But most of our attacks will be going toward the middle, where their numbers are denser.]

Rae appeared behind a tree on Karl's left and adapted her short fur to match the tree bark.

"Rae is on the left." Karl warned the others.

The mages relayed the meaning to the others in a whisper that the monsters wouldn't hear, and both sides prepared to attack.

[They're going to charge.] Thor warned, just as the Lizardmen shouted something and the Goblins did exactly that.

They were met with a barrage of spells from the mages, while Karl and Thor aimed for the taller Lizardmen. They were the ones giving the orders, and the best fighters of the group.

Then Rae attacked, piercing two with her forelegs while biting the head off another, and the new arrivals screamed in terror. The warriors visibly steeled their resolve for a hard fight, not quite grasping that Rae was on their side, but Karl's attacks were precisely where they needed to be, keeping the other lizardmen from being able to get close enough to properly attack Rae while she fought three on one.

One was already dead, but he had been replaced with another, and the two who had taken her forelimb spikes through the chest were fading fast as Lacerate prevented them from stopping the bleeding.

A limb flashed out, leaving a long but shallow wound on the fresh target, and it began to gush blood, leaving the creature suddenly weakened to the point of dropping its spear.

Karl finished the three with Rend, and Hawk worked on the other side with Shred and fireballs.

The monsters were effectively surrounded, but they were determined, and the remaining lizardmen charged through the burning grass into the line of warriors and Thor, who threw one high in the sky before thinking about his target.

"INCOMING!" Doug warned as a flying lizardman crashed into the group of casters.

It wheezed as it tried to get to its feet, but Doug was faster, clubbing it on the head and knocking it out, so the mages could finish it off with magic arrows.

Chapter 164 Odd Alliances

The fight wound down as the last of the Lizardmen was killed by the concerted efforts of the warriors, and the second team collapsed onto the ground in relief.

"You have no idea how thankful we are you showed up when you did. The attack seemed to go on forever, they just kept coming." The team leader thanked Bob with a tired smile.

"No problem. It's right at the edge of our territory for the search, and we heard the fight. There are more, unless you killed some ogres before we arrived. Our scout spotted at least ten ogres this morning around our zone, and there are only three here." He replied.

This battle still left them with plenty of questions, like if Hawk's description of big green things were all Lizardmen, or a mix of them and Hobgoblins. The fact that the lizardmen had pressured the Goblins into working for them wasn't too surprising, but allying with the ogres was.

The two were both powerful in their own right, and they were notorious for not sharing well.

Seeing them in the same spot was unusual, but if they had all arrived last night, then they hadn't had time to stake their territories yet, and there would be some level of power struggle between the species as they worked to establish themselves.

Doug brought over a water skin for the others, and motioned for them to stay seated.

"Catch your breath, maybe get a bite to eat before you move out again. We've got to keep going and search our zone, but we will wait here until you've recovered a bit." The cleric assured them.

"We will call in the incident. If things got that bad for us, then the other groups need to be warned as well. With two groups working together it was easy enough, but solo, they could be in trouble, and I heard that we're not the only ones who have a student with us." The other team leader informed them.

Doug nodded and gestured toward Karl. "We have one with us as well. The Beast Master, whose Cerro thinks that lizardmen are lawn darts."

Karl chuckled and Thor looked embarrassed. The warriors weren't too worried about it, and they patted him on the side in assurance that they weren't upset.

But when Rae returned to stand behind Karl, the others were visibly concerned.

"This is Rae. She's the ambush attacker of the team. Effective, isn't it?" Karl asked.

"Beyond effective. One scratch and that lizardman warrior nearly bled out. Is that [Lacerate]?" The mage from the new group wondered.

"Indeed it is. I hadn't thought that it would be so effective, but I have underestimated her skills many times in the past." Karl agreed.

Bob nodded. "We all do. The bloodbath spiders are a force to be reckoned with, and Rae is talented well beyond the average. She even made us a safe fort last night so that nothing could sneak up on us."

The student cleric looked like he might cry at that bit of news. "Safe places to sleep? That's unfair. We were attacked five times last night."

If you counted every monster that was caught in the nets, Karl's team had likely seen more attacks last night, but none of them got close enough to bother them until the last one in the morning.

"The appearance was a few hours before dawn this time, so if you clear the area around your camp well, then you should have it fairly easy for the first part of the night." Bob suggested, running a hand through his short black hair in concern as he thought of ways to make a secure camp.

"Thanks. I think that we will move tonight. There is a nice cave in our area, and that only has one entrance, which should be easy enough to block off. From experience, the monsters usually don't appear right on top of anything else that's living."

The second group leader ate a protein bar in a few mouthfuls and got his team back on their feet.

"Good luck out there. We have handhelds, set to channel six if you need to contact us on the shortwave radio." He reminded Bob, who nodded and took a small radio out of his pocket to change the channel.

"We will monitor channel six as well. Stay safe."

The two groups went their separate ways, and Hawk began to scout the route ahead, looking for monsters that might be near their route, but not quite on it. Now that Rae was awake, she joined him, rushing off into the trees to see what she could find, but only after using the leather vest of a lizardman to clean the blood off her legs.

Karl's group left all the possible loot to the other group, partially because it was in their area, but mostly because they would need something to pick up their spirits after having a close call in the wilderness.

Once they were well away from the other group, Doug stepped back to walk beside Karl.

"I hope you're not all rattled by the situation back there. Things like that sometimes happen, and it doesn't always have the best outcome. You know how it is, we might be Elites, but when it comes to taking care of monster threats, we're still the low men on the scrotum pole." The Cleric explained.

Karl gave him a curious look at the unfamiliar phrase, and the mages laughed.

"What he means is we don't have the power or the seniority, so we get screwed. If it were a more valuable group out here, they would have sent artillery and conventional troops with us. You know, keep us safe.

But we're not famous or particularly wealthy, and power makes the world go round." One of the twins explained.

Bob cleared his throat. "Come on now, no need to scare the newbie. Besides, give him another year, and he will likely be up with the Commanders, drinking fine whisky and choosing the teams to go with."

Doug shrugged. "It's just part of life. The strong rule the weak. But we're all civilized, so it's not as obvious as it is with the animals. If you want to find out how benevolent the world really is, try to directly say no to one of their requests."

Karl smiled and patted the priest on the shoulder. "I seem to recall playing a similar game with the foreman at the mines. He would promise something in exchange for added productivity, usually a time and a quarter pay bonus for the day, and we would do just enough to get it done.

But Dragons help you if you failed because they would dock you for every imagined infraction that month."

The Cleric smirked back. "The Green Dragons always like it when people understand how things work. Perhaps you're more in tune with nature because of your class? Or perhaps your class is because you understand how things work a bit better than the average? I have a theory that the markings are actually perfectly suited to everyone who gets them, and that some people just can't accept that aspect of themselves."

"That's an interesting way of looking at it. But you might be right. I think the hard part is telling the ones who aren't all that good at their class that they likely wouldn't be better at another.

You're all Ascended Rank, I believe, so you're not at the very bottom, but there are seniors at the Academy who have barely broken into Awakened Rank. They wouldn't take it well."

The mages smiled at him. "That's why we're hoping to push for Commander after this mission. If we can get a decent resource or two, maybe something that helps with growth, we should be able to make it past the test.

There aren't nearly as many Commanders as there are Ascended Elites, and they get a lot more respect. They also get the better resources. There is a whole collection of Commander Rank resources that are nearly impossible to get for anyone else."

Karl nodded in understanding. "Well then, I hope that we come across something beneficial. It's always good to have friends in high places."

Their joking was interrupted by Rae returning silently and spinning a web across the trees in the direction that she arrived from.

[There are more Ogres coming. They will be here in a few seconds.] She warned.

[They saw you?] Karl asked.

[No, Hawk threw a tree monkey at them.]

Chapter 165 Hawk Being Hawk

"There are ogres incoming. Everyone in position to defend from the direction of the web." Karl warned the group.

"Already? I wasn't expecting to find another group of monsters for hours. They have a habit of wandering out of your path as you search for them." Doug muttered.

Thor gave a soft laugh, well aware of what was going on, and the Cleric immediately became suspicious.

"They lured them to us, didn't they? It won't be Thor, he would have just made noise. So is it Rae or Hawk that got bored and wanted to fight more?" The cleric wondered.

Karl gave him a startled look, which made the others laugh.

"You will find that he's pretty good with all things nature, including both plants and animals." Bob informed him.

The stomping sound of ogres was accompanied by the shrieking of monkeys, and the sound of Hawk's screech as he taunted the giant monsters.

"What in the world is the bird doing? Did I just see him throw a tree monkey at an ogre?" Danni asked, pointing at Hawk as he flew overhead.

They were in a sparsely treed area, where Hawk could easily attack from overhead, and the group could defend themselves without anything getting in the way, but with enough growth around for the wood Golems to easily grab weapons.

"Most likely. It's one of his favourite tricks to taunt monsters. He actually learned it from the tree monkeys, but he uses them as projectiles, instead of throwing nuts and sticks at people." Karl explained as the ogres stormed into sight and Hawk settled into the branches of a tree behind them.

The enraged monsters almost looked grateful for a moment, like they were thinking that the Hawk had lured them here to kill the humans, but then it turned to hatred for the humans, and they pulled out their weapons to attack.

None of the blades looked all that special, but there was a ring on one of their fingers that Rae and Hawk both recognized as magic.

With only three targets, the flurry of spells that came from the human team was overwhelming, and the ogres stumbled to a stop even before Thor hit them with an earthquake and knocked them to the ground to be finished off.

"That was easier than expected." Bob sighed as he realized that the monsters weren't even going to make it to him this time.

"I think they're on the weaker side of Awakened. Is that normal? I thought that the ogres were supposed to be nearly Ascended." Karl asked.

Everyone turned to Doug for an answer, and he just shrugged. "It varies. There are strong and weak ones, but I don't know enough about them to tell them apart. But what is that magical ring? That might be a useful item for someone."

Danni walked over and used her dagger to cut the finger containing the ring off the Ogre, then slid the ring free and wiped it clean on a large leaf.

"There is some sort of inscription on it. Give me a moment and I think that I can translate it. It should be written in the ancient Arcane language." She explained.

It took her a few minutes to decipher the faded inscription, but when she did, she had to resist the urge to laugh.

"It is a magical item that is supposed to increase wisdom. Either it is broken, or he was in the running for the world's dumbest person to chase Hawk into a trap." She joked.

Bob shrugged. "It increases wisdom, not intelligence. He figured out that Hawk wanted him to follow easily enough. He just wasn't smart enough to realize that we were too strong for him to handle."

The mage slid the ring over her wrist like a bangle, and frowned as she didn't feel any discernible difference.

"Well, it might add up. Maybe it is a long-term thing that will help with your mana growth." Doug suggested.

Once the bodies were cleaned of anything valuable, Doug cast a spell that caused them to sink into the ground, letting the forest absorb them as nutrients instead of leaving the obvious and rotting corpses out to attract more monsters and stink up the area.

"This is going to be a long mission, isn't it?" Karl sighed as Hawk updated him on the nearby monsters.

There were more than a few, and at least three groups of Goblins, one of which Hawk was taking care of now.

Doug gave him a soft smile. "They always are. But once we have cleared the area, tomorrow shouldn't be as heavy, and then it will just be maintenance. Some days we will barely get anything in an entire zone, and some days will be like this, where we will get dozens of them."

Bob led them toward a group of Goblins, while Rae joined Hawk in searching out the final group that he had identified. The Common Rank creatures were no threat to the two of them, and they could move through the forest much faster than the humans.

It was just the more powerful monsters that everyone was worried about, but Karl knew firsthand that if the Goblins weren't dealt with, they would be an existential threat to the regular townsfolk.

A single pair of fireball spells took out the small Goblin camp, and Bob paused a moment to mark the location on his map. They were almost to the far side of their zone already, and it was time to start turning back so they would get to their fort before dark.

Hawk and Rae were still scouring the area, but something was off. The area was far too quiet. Where there had been a variety of monsters in the area at the start of the day, not even the small ones were around this area.

Everyone could feel that something was off, but none of them could locate the source of the wrongness, and no matter how many times the two beasts circled the area, they didn't find anything that would indicate what could be causing the problem. Everyone could feel that something was off, but none of them could locate the source of the wrongness, and no matter how problem.

Bob frowned in annoyance. "I will mark this area on the map for tomorrow. It might be a lingering problem, or something about the area's composition that is scaring all the monsters away. We should keep moving, though. We need to finish our route before it gets dark."

But the greatest travesty of the day was only now happening, and it was only when they reached the immediate vicinity of their fort that it became obvious.

[Some thieving bastard stole my snacks!] Rae shouted in Karl's mind as she searched her webs.

She could smell another monster, and it hadn't freed the creatures that had been trapped, it had taken advantage of her absence to kill them and take them for itself.

"Keep your eyes open. Something looted Rae's webs, and it might still be in the area." Karl warned the group.

"That's brave. It had to realize what or who those webs belonged to, and that they weren't long abandoned. If it was desperate enough to loot them today, it's likely starving." Doug noted.

"Or it's stupid and arrogant." Bob added.

Doug smiled. "That's always a possibility. But if it comes back to check again while Rae is here, it's in for a bad night. How much did it steal?"

Karl waited for Rae to answer as she inventoried her loot and threw the bodies into the beast space.

[Four webs, at least fifteen small monsters, all Common Grade, none of them Goblins.] She replied, outraged.

"She says at least fifteen small Common Grade monsters." Karl relayed.

For a moment, he thought that the mages were going to say something about those not being valuable creatures, but then they seemed to realize that Rae didn't care about the danger level. She was planning to eat them, and someone had stolen her dinner right off her proverbial plate.

"So, it's likely not a powerful creature, and it can navigate the webs well enough to not get entangled itself. We will have to watch for another spider tonight." Doug decided.

"And make sure that our fort is secure before we enter. It might have tried to move in, or leave traps for us. Some forms of monstrous spiders have poisonous webs to weaken their prey." Bob added.

Rae scurried up the tree and scented the area.

[It didn't come up here. But I know the scent now, and I will find it if it comes back to steal from me again.]

"She says it's clear, we can head up."

Chapter 166 Late Start

Before they headed up to the fort, an irate Rae had finished checking her catch and returned to her space to have a nap before evening descended, and she went on guard to make sure that nobody else was going to steal from her.

She had been active all day, so Karl didn't begrudge her the rest. Thor was returning to his space as well, since he couldn't climb to the fort, and Hawk had already settled into the nest he made in the fort last night.

That might be the reason that nothing came up. It would have smelled like Hawk and humans to them, and that would be enough to repel most forms of common monsters.

Even in her sleep, Karl could sense Rae's annoyance. The thief was most likely just some common grade monster who saw an opportunity and took it, but she took it very personally. In her space, there were no threats, and things stayed where she put them, so when someone looted her webs in the real world, she was not mentally prepared.

Doug prepared dinner again, and Karl relaxed against the wall of the fort as they all waited for the food to be ready.

"Aren't you afraid of falling?" One of the mages asked, and Karl opened his eyes to look their way.

"Honestly, not really. It's a strange thing, but I don't have any sort of fear of heights. With the durability that I have, I likely wouldn't suffer too badly if I did fall, but here with the wall at my back, it doesn't concern me in the least." He replied with a shrug.

"It's got to be a class thing. Even for the warriors, the fear of heights and sense of vertigo is inherited. Bob wouldn't be seriously injured either, unless he landed on his head, but even he stays closer to the middle of the net." She explained.

Hawk thought that the whole conversation was funny. Karl couldn't fly, but a little fall wouldn't hurt him.

[Maybe you should grow wings.] Hawk suggested.

[And how do you suggest that I do that?] Karl replied.

[Attach them to your uniform. I saw a video of soldiers with a big round net over their heads and they could float. Wings can't be that much harder.] Hawk replied with absolute certainty.

[That's a parachute. It does let them float fairly well, but actually flying is harder for humans. We're heavy.]

Hawk lost interest when Karl announced that he wouldn't be able to fly, but the idea was an intriguing one. If he had a hang glider or a squirrel suit like the extreme sports people on TV, he might actually be able to nearly fly, and attack monsters from the sky.

Hawk would love it.

They settled in for their usual watches after dinner, and at some point during the night, Rae woke up to patrol her webs because she was awake and in a much better mood when Karl was gently shaken awake for his watch.

[Did you find something good on your web?] Karl asked as he sensed her change of mood.

[I found a very good thing. The stupid thief is a Box Tree Spider family.] Rae replied.

Karl wasn't sure why that was a particularly good answer, so he thought about what he knew of the species. They were scavengers that blended in perfectly with tree bark and could flatten their bodies to avoid detection.

That was fairly benign.

They were also a Common Grade spider, and barely considered a magical creature, as their only supernatural ability was their ability to disguise themselves so perfectly.

Fortunately, Rae felt like explaining.

[I talked to them, and they're very sorry for stealing from me. But we have an agreement. I will leave webs here for them to use, and exchange, they will keep anything from climbing up our tree while we are away. Then when we have to go for a long time, they can take over our den until we return.]

That would likely end poorly for the box tree spiders when another group came here and saw the fort, but for some time, they would be able to live in peace, and the stronger webs that Rae made would trap prey much more effectively than the ones they could make themselves.

They weren't actually web building spiders, they were burrowing and hiding spiders, and they would either ambush the weak or scavenge other monsters' kills.

[I will warn the others when they wake up.] Karl informed her.

It was a quiet morning, and by the time that the sun came up, there still hadn't been a large-scale appearance of monsters. Karl was still dutifully watching, but there was nothing. Their area was only five kilometres in either direction, and he could see it all from here, but the spawn hadn't happened at the same time.

Slowly, the others woke up, and everyone turned to Karl for the morning update.

"Nothing major to report. Rae has a working agreement with a group of Box Tree Spiders to look after the tree and the webs while we're away, but the spawn hasn't happened yet. I don't see much of anything out there.

There were a few small signatures we didn't get to yesterday, but I haven't seen any influx of monsters yet." He explained.

"That's fine. It's not a precise thing. They will show up at some point today. We just need to keep watch on our area and keep the numbers down. If that means we leave later in the morning, we will take advantage of that to get a bit more rest.

Can you send Hawk out to scout the edge of the surrounding regions as well? Just in case everything spawned outside our area. If he sees anything, we can radio it to the other teams, so they're not caught by surprise." Bob suggested.

"I think so. From a thousand metres in the air, Hawk can see quite a distance, and he should be able to tell if there are any large monster groups moving through the surrounding zones.

Five kilometres isn't all that far for his eyesight, though he might not be able to track mice from that far away."

That made Hawk laugh a little. Indeed, five kilometres was too far to find mice from. But it was close enough, he would have no problem finding goblins and wolves. Ogres couldn't hide from him even from twenty kilometres away unless they could hide under the canopy of the trees, and on one side, that wasn't even an option.

Hawk headed up to get a proper view of what was going on in the area, while Karl heard helicopters in the distance. The others didn't seem to notice, but it was more than one, and they were coming from multiple directions.

"Hey, how often does an area like this get supplies and reinforcements? Do they cycle through a portion of the people every few days?" He asked.

"No, why? Normally, there wouldn't be any more activity in the area until we leave." Doug replied.

"There are multiple helicopters headed in this direction. Some from there, and more from here and here." Karl explained, gesturing toward the noises.

"Can Hawk see them well enough to tell us what they look like?" Doug replied.

"He can't see them at all. I can hear them, though. If the seniors from the Academy had either a really good or bad time, they might account for one or two of them, but they're coming from multiple directions." Karl informed the others.

"That is strange. Perhaps there was a delay with some of the teams. Can Karl see anyone else in the area? Humans that is." Bob asked.

[Three groups of humans are active in the distance. The ones we met yesterday, one between us and the camp, and one more on the far side of those, further down the river. I can see their campfire from here.]

Karl relayed that and Bob nodded before answering. "There should be another group beside us, but there isn't. It might be groups showing up a day behind.

They might have just reused the same helicopters, so not everyone got picked up on the same day. To keep this level of control on the area needs a lot of people, and there are only so many Elites.

Once they feel that it is under control, they will move us further apart with larger areas to cover."

Chapter 167 Helpful Hawk

The surrounding teams were essentially hunting blind, as they had no reliable way to find the monsters within their zones, and they wouldn't trust Hawk directly, but Bob had the answer for that.

He relayed the scouted directions that Hawk had given them in relation to the other groups, and they adjusted their search patterns to find the monsters that had eluded them.

None of the zones had nearly as many monsters as yesterday, and with Hawk scouting, they could keep a constant eye on their zone for the moment when the spawn appeared.

Doug smiled as Bob relayed another set of directions, moving a team just a little to the left to let them stumble upon a hidden enclave of Lizardmen. The beasts were just as shocked as the humans, as they had thought that their hiding spot was imperceptible.

Perhaps from ground level it was, but it was easily spotted from the sky.

Hawk was loving his new role. He got to send people to go fight with whatever he wanted them to, and then watch the outcome while he looked for more targets for him. It felt like he had become a King. The Royal Hawk, deciding the fate of the soldiers on the ground.

But maybe that meant he was a General. Could he apply for Commander Rank because he was a good Commander? It certainly sounded logical to him.

Karl just did his best to keep the bird on task, and not let him forget to keep scanning their own zone along with the occupied surrounding areas.

There was one side of their own zone that had no guards right now, but it also had very few monsters. If there wasn't anyone going to that location, then Bob fully intended to have his group cover it tomorrow, but for now, it was an insignificant threat.

The zone was on the far side of them from the nearest populated areas, so if they were going to threaten the towns, they would have to pass by the area that the group was protecting. But the few monsters there weren't showing any signs of motion, they were just settling in to live daily lives, hunt for food and build camps.

Then, just after lunch, the sound of helicopters returned. Three of the large transports were incoming toward their position, flying slowly over the forest, as if scouting the area for threats.

[Team Mackenzie, this is extraction four, come in. Please report your position.] The radio requested.

That made no sense at all, and Karl quickly called Hawk and Rae back to their spaces before the incoming helicopters could mistake them for threats.

[This is Bob Mackenzie, we are at 18.3002° N, 64.8252° W. Currently engaged in ranged scouting from an elevated position.] Bob replied.

[Prepare for extraction. We are relocating you to a priority zone.] The pilot replied.

[Understood. There is a suitable clearing next to the largest Ironwood tree in the area. We will meet you there.]

Bob looked at the group and shrugged. "Yesterday, this was the priority area. They know how heavy the attack was and that we almost lost a team, but today they're relocating us. I don't know what's going on, but I get the feeling that it's time to pay back a bit of our debts."

Karl frowned. "Pay back our debts?"

Doug smiled at him. "Inside joke. The politicians and billionaires all act like we owe them for funding the Academy, so every time they send us on a mission to nowhere, we refer to it as repaying our debts."

The twin mages nodded. "Non-optional missions, they're officially called. Most Elites get sent on one every two or three years. This will be our fourth, but we've just got that sort of luck."

"Aren't we already on an emergency call out?" Karl asked, trying to make sense of this dispatching system.

"We are, and it makes no sense that we're being moved. That's not standard procedure, so either we were specifically requested, or something so extreme happened that this location no longer counts as an emergency.

It could be that today's spawn appeared in a different location, possibly closer to a town, or that the danger level of certain areas is much higher than yesterday, and they need more hands.

They should tell us when we're on the chopper, but they won't say it over the radio, in case they panic the other teams, or leak information to foreign spies." Doug explained as he packed up his kit to head down the ladder.

In seconds, they were ready and headed down the ladder, just as the helicopter came into sight. It was nearly impossible to miss their location, in the tallest tree for half a kilometre, next to a clearing, and the pilot brought it down for a smooth landing with the rear cargo door already open.

If they had needed a sign that this was a rush operation, that was it, and the moment they were all on the ramp, it began to close, and the pilot brought them back up into the sky.

It was a good thing that the beasts could all return to Karl's space from a distance, as trying to round them up would have taken more time than this pilot was willing to wait, but the pilot wasn't the real concern here.

The Overlord Ranked General standing in front of them was.

"Welcome aboard, Elites. I am certain that you have questions that can wait until after I have finished briefing you." He began.

"We have reviewed your combat logs, and have determined that your group was misclassified. Our records show that despite still having a member at the official Awakened Rank, and no Commander Rank leader, your group has displayed combat prowess that is in line with a combined low Commander Rank scenario.

Such a threat has evolved in the region, and you are being tasked to take it over, with other teams being sent to fill your zone, as well as the empty zones near you.

Here is what we know so far.

We have confirmation of the priority target Ettin Mage, but it is not at the Ascended Rank as first believed, it is a Commander Rank monster.

The regular military units have been positioned to contain it, which has left holes in the defence, which still contain a number of Commander Rank threats, including Ogres and Hill Giants.

Your team has both a Beast Master and a Golem Mage, who our data suggests should be capable of handling Ascended Rank threats unaided. So, with that in mind, we upgraded your team's status.

Is any of this unclear?"

Karl shook his head in dismay, while the others answered verbally.

"No, General."

"Excellent. You will be under the leadership of the Bureau of Public Safety once you reach your target, we are only the transport and bearers of good news today. Now, expect heavy combat from the moment that you arrive, the spawn today was heavier than usual, and the teams were already relocated." The General announced.

The whole thing sounded like a bad joke to Karl, but there was still a chance that this could work out for them. High-grade food was vital to the rapid growth of the beasts, and Commander Rank meat wasn't easy to get. A few giants and ogres would keep Rae and Hawk stocked for months, and they would just need to find something suitable for Thor.

If everything went as anticipated, Karl believed that they could make it fully into the Ascended Rank before the mission was over, and then he would be considered on par with the rest of the team, not a charity case or a burden the next time that there was a mission.

As they approached the area, Karl realized that the General hadn't been joking about being under heavy attack from the moment that they landed. His sharp eyes could see that there was a group of Giants tracking the helicopter, running through the woods after them as the pilot announced thirty seconds to the landing zone.

"We've got Giants incoming from the south. Bob, do you want Thor with you?" Karl asked as the door began to open.

"Do it. Don't send Hawk outside until the Helicopter leaves, though. Let the monsters chase just one flying target." The warrior agreed, determination flashing in his grey eyes.

The General looked shocked when Karl called Thor out onto the platform beside their lead warrior, and even more shocked when Rae came out to stand beside him at the back of the column.

"GO GO GO!" Bob announced, jumping from the helicopter five metres from the ground.

Chapter 168 Bestial Strength

Karl grabbed the mages, one under each arm, while Doug jumped on Thor's back as they leapt from the vehicle, right into a grassy clearing, where they could see the Giants approaching.

Doug hopped off Thor's back, and the Cerro spun around to smash an Earthquake with his tail, causing the giants to stumble, while the mages called out the Golems and erected barriers over the group, Thor and Rae included.

Rae darted into the trees, moving to flank the attackers, while Karl threw a flurry of Rend attacks at the slowed Giants, and Bob created a circle of light around them that caused the Giants' skin to bubble as if burned when they entered.

He took the brunt of the first attack with his shield, nearly knocked to his knees, while Thor was slid backward as he parried with his upper horns.

But then Rae was on the giant attacking Bob, clinging to his back and tearing out his throat with [Lacerate] before fleeing from any retaliation by the other monsters.

The giant dropped his club to hold his throat, trying to keep the blood inside until he could heal, but that left his stomach open to Bob's counterattack, which tore apart his lower belly.

The Wood Golems moved up to join the fight, and Karl watched as the helicopter faded out of sight.

That should be far enough that anything wanting to chase it was already gone, so he called on Hawk, and used [Shred] to deflect and slow the attacks of the giants.

It was more effective than trying to cut through their thick hide, as his personal attack power was a bit lacking, but with Hawk on the scene, that was about to change.

Fireballs flew from the enraged bird into the small group of Hill Giants, blinding them and burning their faces, so they were defenceless as [Shred] and Rae's [Lacerate] came for their necks and knees.

Cutting the tendons in the leg joints caused the Giants to crumble down to a manageable height, and would prevent them from fleeing, while the exposed throats were a perennial favourite target of Hawk's.

There was more crashing in the trees coming from behind them, and Karl turned to see a two-headed Ogre coming their way.

"Shit, I think that we found the Ettin Mage." He called.

Doug looked back for an instant and frowned. "Take care of it. That's not the one they warned us about, it's not even full-grown yet."

It was four metres tall, what did the cleric mean it wasn't full-grown?

But Karl turned to face it, using Rend to deflect its first attack over his head, and then the attacks from the second hand cut deeply into its side.

Doug was right, this was an Awakened Rank beast. The skill had left it bleeding and gasping for breath through a collapsed lung, until Rae made her way over and claimed the heads as a trophy.

[Colonel lady wanted heads.] She reminded Karl with a smug sense of victory in her mind.

[Good job. Now, help Thor before someone breaks his scales.]

That was unlikely to happen, the Giants hadn't broken the barrier over him yet, but the twins were looking tired from the mana they were using to keep the barriers and Golems active as the Giants smashed them apart.

Bob had taken another down, and Doug had cast a spell over Thor that made him glow with golden light. The warrior's next attack shattered the knee of a Giant, and then the ball of Thor's tail flattened the creature's face as it tumbled to the ground.

That left only two of the creatures, which were surrounded by the Golems, and desperately trying to keep Hawk and Rae away with wide sweeps of their clubs.

It was a losing battle, and with a solid kick from a golem, the two Giants collided, and their timing was thrown off enough to allow the beasts to finish them off.

Hawk landed in a nearby tree, and Rae skittered over to Thor to drape herself over his back for support as she caught her breath.

"Well, that sucked about as much as I had expected. Seven Ascended Hill Giants and one Awakened Ettin Mage, was it? I see that you've already collected the heads, but we can loot the others once we have had a chance to get our bearings." Bob announced.

Karl was about to sit down, but a shiny rock in the hand of the Ettin mage caught his attention.

He pulled the massive fingers apart and found a wand with a large ruby on top clutched securely in its palm. It looked to be very well-made, but he couldn't read any of the lettering on it.

"Ladies, I have found a wand. Take a look and see if it's any good for you." He offered as he finally managed to remove it from the death grip of the Ettin.

There was a pouch full of coins and rocks at its waist, but nothing else of use. Still, it was a wand, and that was better than anything else they'd found so far.

Danni passed it to Donni, who was better with barriers, and she carefully examined the inscriptions.

"Now this is a find. It's a wand of Fireball. It has limited uses, but it is rechargeable. Think of it like prepaid magic." She explained.

Rae pulled the Ettin's body into her space and strung it up in a web for later, while the rest of the group began to disperse and check the bodies of the Giants.

"We're in the loot now, boys." Doug laughed a few seconds later.

He had pulled a bag from a Giant's waist, revealing a large amount of gold in the form of crude coins, as well as a magical dagger, that would be a proper sword in the hands of a human. Meanwhile, Bob had removed two magical rings from the Giants, and a pair of gauntlets that no human could wear.

The mages were the only ones who could properly identify the items, as they were the only ones who could read the language of the inscriptions, but anyone could sense that they were magical items.

Thor was uninterested in the majority of the loot, but there was a spiked helmet on one of the Hill Giant's heads that he was staring at with longing.

"Is the helmet magical?" Karl asked.

"It is, but it's huge. Unless we need a new cook pot, it would be a real pain to try to bring it with us." Doug replied.

[I want it.] Thor insisted.

Karl walked over, and intending to humour his Cerro, he removed the helmet from the Giant's head.

Thor thumped his tail down into the helmet and gave a soft bugle of joy as the impact seemed to mould it around the ball of his tail. A half dozen more hits, turning his tail as he did, and now his spiked tail had spiked metal armour around it.

"Well, that's one way to do it." Bob laughed.

"If it makes him happy, armour is armour." Doug agreed.

[Metal smashing tool.] Thor declared.

Karl continued to search the bodies, piling up the gold and gems that they were carrying. It would be split between the group members when they finished the mission, and ten kilos of gold was no laughing matter. You could buy a very nice house in the city, or three in a town like Karl grew up in with that much gold, and that didn't even count the gems.

If they were going to keep sending him on missions with rewards this good, Karl wasn't going to complain at all about being asked to fight.

With the rest of the loot sorted, Karl picked up the metal gauntlets that one of the Giants had been wearing. He was admiring the craftsmanship when Doug came over and pointed to the inscription on the cuff.

"Gauntlets of Bestial Strength. That's why that first attacker hit Bob so hard it nearly folded him." He explained.

Karl stuck his hand inside, wondering what it took to activate the ability.

Then, with a flash of golden light, the gauntlet shrunk, and the second one appeared on Karl's other hand, perfectly sized to his body.

"What was that? How did you do that?" Doug gasped.

Karl could only give him a confused look, and marvel at the power that he could feel flowing from him to his pets through the gauntlets. His own strength felt massively improved, but the effect wasn't just on him, it was increasing the strength of his partners as well.

"Well, I guess I'm keeping these. You can take it out of my share." Karl laughed in delight as the feeling of overwhelming power flowed through him.

Chapter 169 Ogre Cave

The loot was quickly split between bags, with Karl and Bob carrying the gold, while the others picked an item to either wear or put in their bag. The Wand of Fireball was hung from a belt, while the oversized rings were dangling from necklaces, which the others assured Karl was close enough to activate their abilities.

They weren't major magical items, and they were all to increase strength, which was the only thing that the Giants truly valued. But when compared to the base strength of a petite mage, it was a considerable increase.

The extra strength would make it easier to move through the woods, especially with their gear on their backs, and it would leave them less exhausted at the end of the day.

[I think I found the hiding spot of the Ogres. There is a cave over here, carved into a hillside.] Hawk informed Karl after a few minutes of searching.

"Well, we've got our next target. There is a cave in the hills that Hawk thinks has Ogres. Are we all ready for this?" Karl asked.

The group collectively sighed and prepared to move out. They were going to have to put in work to clear a zone in half a day, as it wouldn't be safe to rest overnight if they didn't. Normally, it wouldn't be an issue, but there was the underlying knowledge that they could come across a Commander Rank beast in this area, it was explicitly stated when they were assigned here.

None of them had much experience with that, and never before in a group that didn't have a Commander Rank leader.

Bob followed the direction that Karl pointed, and then spotted Hawk circling over the cave. That was enough to guide them to their target, with Rae and Thor sticking close to the group, in case there was something that Hawk missed or failed to mention.

As they approached, the stench of unwashed bodies assailed their nostrils, and the sound of arguing in an unknown language slowly became audible.

"Golems first. Attack them and draw them back out." Bob whispered as the cave came into sight. There were definitely either Giants or Ogres in there, the only question was how many and how strong were they.

Rae settled into the grass next to Karl, who was hiding behind a tree like the rest of the team as the Golems approached the cave.

The stomping noise of the large Wood Golems was unmistakable, and Karl heard the roars of rage that something dared to approach the cave that the monsters had claimed as their own.

A massive club came flying out of the cave entrance with such force that it knocked a Golem to the ground and continued on to shatter a tree to Karl's left.

"Shit. I think we found our Commander Rank Giant." Bob whispered.

[Rae, circle behind the cave entrance, so you can attack the back of whatever comes out. Getting hit with one of those clubs won't end well, so wait for the last of them to come out, and make sure you can retreat up the cliff if they turn on you.] Karl instructed.

The Golem was rapidly repairing itself as Danni poured mana into it, and Donni had layered them with a fresh barrier, while Doug cast that enhancement spell again, making the golems look more complete and armoured.

Six giants rushed out of the cave, bent over at the waist to fit through the entrance, and the Golems attacked, striking them with vine whips while Hawk attacked from overhead, raining [Shred] attacks down on them.

The last one out was half grown, only a little larger than a Lizardman, or twice the size of Bob. That was Rae's sign to attack, and with a deft pull of her web, she roped the monster by the throat and pulled it up into the air, out of the reach of its kin.

It couldn't even make a noise as it was abducted, but the Giants were too busy to notice anyhow, as that was the moment that Bob chose to charge.

"Forward!" He shouted, charging with Thor at his side.

The mages and Doug didn't leave the trees, but Karl moved up into the open, where he could get a clear line of attack on the Giants while they were engaged with the oversized Wood Golems.

Multiple Rend attacks kept the Giants annoyed and distracted, so they couldn't focus on the incoming forms of Bob and Thor. The muscular scaled body of Thor slammed into the one on Karl's right, and a twist of his head took the Giant's legs out from underneath him, dropping the massive monster on its back, where it was pummelled by a Golem, while two more tried to push the attackers back so it could regain its footing.

But that left them vulnerable to Hawk, and the wounds were rapidly adding up, weakening them.

The first of the Golems was smashed out of existence a few seconds later, and the largest of the Giants turned on Bob, smashing at him with its club.

He rolled to the side, narrowly avoiding the strike, but keeping his [Guard] barrier intact.

[Rae, when you see an opening, help Bob. Hawk, help Thor.] Karl instructed.

Thor was fighting two Giants, while two Golems worked to kill the prone Giant, and the last Golem was barely holding on in a two on one fight against the Giants.

Karl focused on that fight, putting all his power into [Shred] which shimmered with power as [Offensive Optimization] altered the spell to better cut through the target.

The strike caught one of the Giants across the face, blinding it in one eye and leaving a gaping slash from its ear to the middle of its chest, but the creature didn't seem to even register the pain, and the wound was slowly closing already.

That wasn't good. If he couldn't do enough damage, it would just heal and keep fighting until the mages were exhausted and the Golems dropped.

A shrill shriek filled the air as Rae came hurtling past Karl's face, involuntarily headed for the cliff.

She twisted at the last instant, but Karl could see that she was injured, and limping on the left side.

A glance left showed that the Commander Rank Giant was in much worse shape, and she had nearly torn his heart from his chest when she landed on his back, but the Giant had managed to grab her and throw her before Bob could stop him.

Green healing light glowed around her body as Doug took action, and a barrier shimmered back to life around her body, bringing the Bloodbath Spider back into the fight. She launched herself off the rock face back at the Giant, who turned to swat her away, only narrowly missing when she used her web to pull herself to the ground.

The move turned his back on Bob, and the Warrior glowed with golden light for an instant as he drove his blade into the creature's chest from behind, using the gap in the creature's armour that Rae had torn.

The blade sunk in up to the hilt, and silently, the creature toppled over forward, landing on the grass with a thump that seemed to freeze time for an instant as the others realized their leader was dead.

With him gone, they had lost their strongest chance at winning, and now there were two more attackers free to rescue the beleaguered Golem, while Thor fended off the attacks of two others.

Both his Lightning Barrier and Donni's magical barriers were being broken and renewed every few seconds, but the Giants were bruised everywhere and limping, while bleeding from multiple puncture wounds.

The prone Giant was finished, and the fight was over in the next few seconds, as the survivors of the Giant Clan were surrounded and torn apart by Golems and [Lacerate] attacks.

"Head count." Bob called.

"No injuries in the back lines." Doug called back.

"Minor wounds on my side." Karl replied.

With a smile and a sigh, the warrior sunk to the ground, still enveloped in healing light.

Doug made his way forward, looking much older than he had a few minutes ago, a weariness that could only have come from mana exhaustion.

"The mages are barely mobile. We need to find a safe spot to hide for the night." The cleric informed his brother.

"Get them loaded onto Thor if we have to. Staying here is too dangerous. We will go a kilometre or so, and then find a spot. Can Hawk scout for us?" Bob asked.

Hawk was already started, so Karl nodded, and began to check the Giants for loot.

There was absolutely nothing on them but their weapons and crude armour, which was now utterly destroyed.

There might be something in the cave for them to take, but Karl got the feeling that these Giants didn't have much to take in the first place.

"I will check the cave and meet you here in a minute. Thor, help the ladies onto your back. They need the help to get to camp." Karl informed the others.

Doug gave him a weary thumbs up as he collapsed back to back with Bob, not even having the energy to go back to where the mages were sitting.

They had come much closer to death than anyone was willing to admit, and even one more minute of combat would have left the casters comatose, while the front line was left on its own with no healing and little ranged support.

Chapter 170 New Fort

Karl checked the cave, and gathered the few coins that the Giants had gathered. There were numerous trophies in the cave, along with rancid meat and an incredible number of bones, but nothing of real value.

He shook his head as he returned to the group and noticed that Rae had moved the Commander Rank Giant into her web as a trophy, and then helped the mages up onto Thor's back.

"How are you still mobile? You burned as much mana as I did, and I'm half dead here." Doug asked as Karl helped him to his feet.

"Refreshing Lightning. It's Thor's specialty. It recovers stamina and mana, with a slow healing effect. While I burned a lot of mana, I also recovered most of what I used. I don't have a skill that uses significantly more than the lightning barrier recovers, so it takes a while before I'm burnt out.

Thor is the same way, he can go half the day at full output if he doesn't get hurt too badly."

Thor was still limping, and some of his scales had cracks, but he was in better shape than the mages, who looked grateful for the lift.

Karl slung their packs across Thor's upper pair of horns, and Bob helped Doug get mobile again.

The casters had taken the worst of the exhaustion, while Bob had taken a heavy beating. Rae was still in rough shape, and she retreated into her space to rest and recover, while Hawk scouted for a good spot to hide for the night.

They were just starting to leave when one large ogre with a stupid smile on his face walked into the camp, holding a dead Iron Tusk Boar by its hind legs.

It looked very proud of itself, and it was calling out for the Giants, until it finally registered what was going on.

Karl stepped forward, sword in hand, and lopped its head off from ten metres away with a single [Shred] attack.

"I've had quite enough fighting for one day, but I'm keeping that boar." He muttered as he tossed the carcass into the space for Hawk, or for the group to cook later.

[I've got a spot. Not quite a kilometre, but up in a good tree. As long as Rae is up for it.] Hawk suggested.

[Not too far up a tree. I will have to carry the mages up the ladder.] Karl reminded him.

[Got it. It's still a good spot.]

It was slow-going for the first few minutes, but Doug was slowly recovering, thanks to his own magic refreshing him, and Bob didn't have to support him anymore.

Hawk had picked them another Redwood tree, but this time they weren't going to the top, just up far enough that the Giants wouldn't be able to get to them.

It would still be quite the climb, but Rae was feeling a bit better after a half hour of rest, and she was ready to make another fort.

"Just keep it simple. We're going to have to move on again in the morning, and I don't know if we will be back. Just enough to let us sleep in peace." Karl reminded her.

Today's version was much smaller than the opulent fort she had made the last time, but it was big enough for them all to lay down, and it was well hidden far enough up the tree that the Giants wouldn't be able to hit them unless they threw their clubs.

Doug had a plan to prevent that as well. He used his magic to create a set of herbs that he scattered over the floor of the fort, and on the ground around the tree.

"That will mask our scent for the night. If Karl and Bob carry the mages up, we can get dinner in us and sleep. Same watch schedule as usual." Doug explained.

The mages complained, but didn't actually stop the two from picking them up on one hip and carrying them up the ladder. It was a bit tricky to climb with just one hand and carrying an extra burden, but they were fairly light, and as soon as Karl was in the fort, Thor returned to his space for the night.

Bob gave the group a weak smile. "I guess we can confirm that this group has Commander Rank battle power now. I have sent in the battle results and location to the battlefield Command, but they haven't responded yet.

There were too many battles today for them to process them all right away, but we should have some good rewards coming to us when we get home. Now we just hope that the next time we come across a cave full of Giants, it's not that messy."

"Amen to that. We had the Dragon's own luck to make it out of that without losing any gear." Doug agreed.

Karl's regretful sigh reminded the others that he wasn't as experienced as they were in the wilderness.

"In case of emergency, we have a potion that will give us a burst of energy. Not mana, just physical energy. The idea is that you drop all the weight you can and run if you have to use it. Flee and live to fight another day. But that normally means losing all your gear."

Karl nodded his head. "Well, it's better than being dead anyhow. I will have to put more effort into verifying what sort of threat we are facing. This one was in a cave, and it's not like Hawk can fly in and check it out, but I probably should have had him at least try to do a head count or something."

Doug patted him on the back. "Don't feel bad about it, lad. We knew it was going to be a hard fight, and we came out on top. There shouldn't be too many more fights like that during the mission, and with the practice and experience often comes breakthroughs.

I don't know what it is about practical experience, but it grows an Elite's powers faster than anything else. That's part of the reason that we keep volunteering to come help Bob all the time.

Did you know that back in the Academy, he wasn't considered anything special? He graduated as an Awakened warrior, and only made Ascended the year after.

Now, he's almost to Commander Rank, as we all are.

Just keeping at the training instead of letting our skills atrophy has done more for us than years in the Academy did. It's a lot further from Ascended to Commander than it is from Awakened to Ascended, after all."

The Cleric knew just how to set a mind at ease, and Karl nodded in agreement, which turned into a tired head bob that he barely caught before he nodded off.

Dinner was still on the way, and going to bed hungry would just make him sluggish if there was a fight in the middle of the night.

The meal was one of silently eaten ration packs, as creating food would take excess energy, and Doug was already exhausted.

"Hawk will keep watch with you. Hawk, wake up Rae before you sleep. I know everyone is wiped, so it will be better to have good night vision available all night." Karl whispered to the cleric before he nodded off.

"I will make sure we've got a good breakfast ready in the morning." Doug agreed before Karl's eyes closed, and he embraced sleep.