

Beast Master 171

Chapter 171 Hill Giant Camp

Karl was awoken well before his shift by the sound of monsters moving through the forest. The sound of breaking branches brought him out of a sound sleep, or perhaps it was Rae relaying the information about the noise.

In his half asleep state, Karl couldn't tell the difference, but the mage on duty hadn't noticed it yet.

"There is something big moving in the woods." Karl whispered to her as he scanned the forest for the exact location of what was causing the noise.

Their position today wasn't as high, so he didn't have the advantage of being able to see over the treeline and look down at the monsters nearby, but he could still clearly hear the movement and it was getting closer.

"Wake the others if you think it's going to attack us. I will be happy to let it pass by if we can so that we're not fighting in the dark." She whispered back.

That was a good point. Picking a fight when nobody could see what they were doing was a terrible idea, and from the look of the sky, this might be third shift, not fourth. The moon was still high in the sky, but there was no hint of light on the horizon that would suggest dawn was getting close.

Rae was up in the tree with them, and after a few seconds, she tapped Karl on the shoulder, bringing his attention to movement in the distance that could only be spotted as a bit of warm thermal imaging through the trees.

A small group of Hill Giants were moving around, snapping trees and then retreating.

"I have found them. Hill Giants making a camp. The noise was them breaking off small trees for their fire." Karl whispered.

"In that case, we will likely be able to see them soon. They rarely hide their campfire, as it brings prey to them." She replied grimly.

Most monsters were afraid of fire, but then Karl realized what she meant. Fire attracted humans. Their campfire would bring groups of Elites and soldiers to them, for the Giants to kill and eat.

They weren't getting any closer, but they weren't the only thing moving in the woods, and after a few minutes, Karl noticed that Goblins were also drawn to the fire, possibly thinking that it was a camp of humans.

"There are Goblins on the move, toward the Giants. Nothing is coming our way at the moment." Karl updated the mage on duty.

"I've just started my watch, do you want to switch? Wake my sister next, and I will take your watch." She offered.

"Alright. Sleep well, I don't think that we will have problems, but it's easier for Rae to explain to me than to anyone else." Karl agreed.

[Can I kill the ones that smell good?] Rae asked hopefully after watching another group of Goblins headed for the Giants' fire.

[If they're weak enough that you can take them out without being spotted or causing a ruckus. We don't want to draw the monsters away from their party.] Karl replied.

That was good enough for her, and Rae watched carefully for monsters that weren't Goblins or other green things. The Lizardmen weren't bad, and they struggled nicely in her web, but none of the green things made her top prey list.

The Commander Rank Hill Giant definitely did, and she was looking forward to getting another of them in the morning. They wouldn't be difficult to find, as the fire was now clearly visible from their resting spot, and the sound of monsters arguing, or whatever they were doing, was loud enough that when Karl woke the next shift, she could hear them.

"How long has that been going on?" She asked.

"Nearly two hours now. Rae woke me up when the Hill Giants got close, and I switched shifts with your sister. Wake her up for last shift of the morning.

The light should attract all the monsters in the area, but I'm not certain what we will be able to do about it now that there are so many.

I have seen two groups of Goblins headed for the Giants, plus at least one group with Hobgoblins, and Rae intercepted a small group of Awakened Rank Ogres.

But we can't see anything coming from the other sides, only what is close enough to be within sight or hearing range of our location." Karl explained.

"Alright, get a few more hours of sleep, and we will work on a plan as soon as it starts getting light out. Prepare for a short night in case we have to run."

Karl tucked himself back into bed, and only briefly noticed when Rae returned to her space to sleep, letting Hawk take over so that they were all well rested when the sun came up and things inevitably got dangerous.

Not that she was worried that their location would be spotted, Doug had done a good job of blocking their scent, but because someone was going to have to deal with that group, and unless all the monsters had left the nearby woods to join them, there probably wasn't going to be another group to help.

They had all been relocated here because of the dangers of the area, so there were no extra groups around.

He was shaken awake by Hawk just as the others began to get active for the morning, preparing the breakfast ration packs, so the smell of cooking didn't attract monsters.

[There are Ogres all over the forest, but nothing close to us. I took a flight earlier and the Giants camp is big, but weak. Plenty of Goblins, only a few other things with the Giants.

No big boss Giant this time that I can see, and I didn't see a cave for them to hide in.]

Hawk was being extra vigilant today, after having missed the power level of yesterday's fight. It had been an excellent learning experience for him, and you could never be too prepared for a battle. You could be too scared, or too cautious, but never too prepared.

Bob motioned for Karl to come closer as they whispered their plans.

"We had Hawk try and explain the situation, and it sounds like the Giants are the only major threat there. Does he think that we can take them in a fight without getting injured? Or should we start further out and clear away the other monsters in the forest first?" Their lead warrior asked.

Karl considered Hawk's description for a moment. "There is no Commander Rank leader, and the Giants don't outnumber us. But there are countless Goblins, plus some Hobgoblins and a few Ogres that decided to join them. From his description, the ogres sound like weaker ones that needed protection.

There are a lot of other Ogres in the area as well, but not at the camp." Karl explained.

The rest of the group silently waited for Bob's decision. They all knew their capabilities, and he had the most practical experience, so when it came to the final decision, they usually deferred to him.

"Alright, we will go for the camp and blitz it. Wipe out as many of the smaller monsters as we can right at the start, and then focus on the Giants and anything at Ascended Rank." Bob announced after a few seconds of staring at the map.

"Eat up, and then we move out." Doug agreed, before filling his mouth with oatmeal.

Chapter 172 Clear The Woods

The group silently climbed down the tree and followed the noise of the monster camp toward the location the Giants had picked as their base.

The ogres were still avoiding the area, as Hawk confirmed, once he started his overhead surveillance.

"Fifty or more Goblins, ten Ogres, twenty Hobgoblins, and Four Giants. None of them are as large as the leader of the last group, but they all look the same according to Hawk, so I'm going to say that they are indeed more Hill Giants." Karl confirmed.

Bob motioned for them all to follow, and both mages took out wands from their coats. One was the wand of Fireball that they had recovered from the Ettin Mage, and the other looked similar, so they were probably both similar in function.

The more mana that they could save at the start of the fight, the better. They were going to have a tough time with that many Hobgoblins and Ogres, and only Thor, Bob and the Golems could effectively deal with the Giants.

Bob paused only a few dozen metres from the tree line around the Giants' encampment as he made his final preparations.

"Call the Golems as soon as we arrive. Then area damage to remove the smaller threats, while I hold off the Giants with Thor. The wood Golems have a vine attack that can hit multiple targets, so use it on the Hobgoblins.

Karl, I am counting on you, Hawk and Rae to deal with the Ogres.

Once those are down, join us at the Giants, and we will finish the fight as quickly as possible, then retreat away from the camp to rest before clearing the rest of the area." He whispered.

That didn't sound too bad to Karl. With Rae and Hawk, they shouldn't have too many problems eliminating the Ogres, who were relatively slow moving. If he dodged well enough, he might not even have to engage them in close combat at all.

Everyone but Thor agreed that was ideal. The more enemies that you could eliminate from a distance, the better. Even Rae felt that way, and she didn't have a true ranged attack. Instead, she preferred to let the enemy tire itself out on her web before she finished it off.

Karl moved to the right, closer to where the Ogres were gathered, and Bob moved left with Thor to approach the Giants from the back.

The monsters would hear their approach soon, as Thor wasn't great at stealth, being a nearly two metre tall scaled dinosaur. But the sound of monsters moving in the forest wasn't a sound that the Giants were unfamiliar with, and instead of taking it as a threat, they just kept tracking him, waiting for the Cerro to get close enough for them to attack.

One Lightning Cerro on its own was an easy meal for this large group, and that was all that they could hear so far.

The Giants roared in victory as they decided that Thor was close enough to attack, and Karl heard them run off into the trees. They hadn't waited for Bob to launch the attack, but the other monsters weren't joining them, as the Giants would take it as a threat to their authority if the others stole a kill.

That was when he attacked.

[Rae, grab the Ogres with your web to slow them down. Hawk, full attack.] He announced mentally as he darted forward to throw Rend attacks into the unprotected bellies and legs of the Ogres.

Their hide was thick, and tougher than most hardened leather, thanks to their status as Awakened monsters.

None of them were fully grown, as Hawk had informed them, and they were all on the low side of Awakened in power, which was letting his attacks cut deep furrows into their hide, enraging the Ogres, and making them charge toward the trees where he was hiding.

That was precisely what they wanted. Ten to one seemed like good odds to the Ogres, and even after a few of them stumbled and hit the ground, they still saw an overwhelming advantage for their side.

But Hawk was attacking from above, and the fallen Ogres had been killed without ever knowing they were under attack from multiple directions.

Then, the front row reached the trees, and Rae sprung into action, pulling them to the ground with a web she had left lying on the ground as a trap.

The moment she pulled it tight, the remaining ogres became entangled, and the Bloodbath Spider charged into them, tearing bodies apart from behind as Karl attacked from the front.

He was still retreating, leaving space between him and the web so he could attack without being in their retaliation range, but within seconds, that wouldn't matter.

They weren't bright, and they were becoming even more entangled as they fought with each other to get free.

Rae spun more web around them as Hawk bombarded them from above, and then moved off to assist Thor, who was having a tough time with the Giants.

Just because they couldn't smash through his barrier in a single strike didn't mean they couldn't at all, and the mighty Cerro was on the defensive, sweeping with his horns, and using Earthquake to keep the Giants off balance.

Being on four feet gave him the advantage in stability, and even when he stepped into his own effect, he was still able to stab and charge at the giants, herding them away from the main clearing, and away from Bob, so the warrior could finish his second fight without interference.

With the combined efforts of Karl and Rae, the Ogres were all in states of incapacitated already, and Rae was finishing them quickly to add to her snack pile before anyone could tell her they wanted something off the bodies.

They had been stripped of their loot and clothing when she tossed them in the space, and she didn't see any reason that the others would want the body parts, so they were hers. She had claimed them, and she wasn't giving them up.

Karl quickly checked the pile of items from the Ogres, and stuffed the bits of gold and silver into the side pocket of his bag, then moved to join the fight against the goblins.

The Hobgoblins were already down, eliminated by the golems, and most of the Goblins were gone as well, taken out by a large area fire spell.

Doug gestured for Karl to keep going, as the remaining Goblins were being held off by the golems array of roots and vines. They didn't need the help, as the goblins were much weaker than they were, just too numerous to be immediately eliminated.

That gave Karl an idea, though. Hawk knew a fireball that could expand over a small area. If he kept training at it, he could likely expand it enough to cover most of a clearing. Even if it weakened the spell significantly, it would allow him to eliminate threats like a goblin tribe in a single shot.

Nobody in the group had a large-scale spell like that, but Karl was certain that it should be possible, since the bird had already used it as both a stream of flame and as a ball.

With a gesture from Karl, Rae circled wide around the edge of the clearing while he charged through, attacking the few Goblins that turned his way as he headed for the Giants.

They could see him coming, and one broke free of Thor's distraction to charge at the incoming warrior, only to realize too late that it was a trap.

Hawk set a Wind Barrier in front of him, stopping the giant in his tracks, and the Bloodbath Spider was all over his back, tearing him apart in a position that he couldn't reach.

His scream of frustration distracted the other Giants, and one immediately fell to Bob's blade, while the other was knocked to the ground by Thor, then had its rib cage crushed by an Earthquake enhanced tail strike.

Karl finished the Giant and turned back to the casters, just in time to see the last of the Goblins fall.

That fight wasn't nearly as bad as they had feared, though Thor had retreated to his pond to rest and recuperate before the next battle. He would heal quickly even out here with his lightning, but it was better to completely rest until he was called on again.

Rae felt the same way, but mostly because she wanted to arrange her treasures in her web.

That left Hawk circling overhead, and an upbeat group of Elites, ready to move on to hunting for the rest of the monsters in their zone.

Chapter 173 Pulled The Adds

The radio was set to just above a whisper, so that Bob could hear if there were any nearby groups in trouble, and keep track of monster movements.

There weren't enough Elites around to clear everything before it wandered into someone else's zone, and most of the teams were doing what they had done, and working to eliminate the most dangerous group first.

If that one headed for the nearby villages, they would catch hell from their superiors, and the rewards for eliminating the more powerful groups were the reason most of them were here in the first place.

From what Karl could hear on the radio, most of the ones who had been forced to come out were the lower ranking Elites, the Awakened warrior classes, and they weren't anywhere near where his group had been relocated.

He did wonder if someone was going to come across their tree fort and the spiders that had been left overseeing it. It would be unfortunate for the spiders, as they would probably be slaughtered, when they weren't actually a threat to anyone, but most groups wouldn't be brave enough to go into the fort.

The common sentiment regarding spider monsters was "Kill it with fire" so Karl really didn't think that anyone would risk going into the fort to see if the creator was still there.

[Ogres ahead, two of them. Big ones.] Hawk informed Karl as he pondered the chances of the fort's survival.

"Two ahead." Karl relayed, then checked on Thor, who was rolling in the pond, using the stones to massage sore muscles.

[Thor, you can rest for a bit. Rae, come give me a hand.] He instructed.

Then he activated [Skill Master] with all three beasts as the target, hoping that at least one of them would learn a new skill either from the group or the monsters they were fighting today. A new skill or two would give them more options in a fight, especially when they were facing armoured targets, or new forms of monsters they hadn't had much practice against.

Rae joined them, and Karl sent her up to take Thor's spot, so that Bob understood what was happening without him having to explain the situation.

The mages prepared their spells once they saw Hawk circling, and the moment the Ogre pair came into sight, they unleashed on them, scorching them with fire before Rae and Bob moved up to finish them off.

One single combo attack was enough to take them out, and the Ogres died with an utterly shocked look on their faces that said they hadn't expected to lose this fight at all, much less so quickly.

It was short and brutal, but another pair of Ascended Rank kills for their logs. Normally, everyone would make their own records of the fights they had been in, but Karl didn't know that, and the group trusted Doug to make all the records for them.

Nobody would question the honesty of the cleric assigned to the group, as they didn't get the same sort of financial rewards that the others did. The church frowned on its members trying to get wealthy for any reason, so the rewards they gave were non-monetary.

He would still be rewarded, though. With so many kills coming their way, he would be rewarded very well. Especially if he managed to make Commander Rank.

They were all supposed to be close to the break point, but for the church, Commander Rank would make him a High Priest of his Goddess, the Green Dragon, who represented the natural balance and growth.

[More coming from all four directions. They heard your fight.] Hawk warned.

"We've got incoming from all four directions. Hawk will update as they get closer." Karl informed the others.

The golems were brought back, and a magical barrier ring was erected around the group, two metres tall. It wouldn't stop the Ogres from getting over, but it also wouldn't stop them from getting hit while they were trying.

Bob only had [Slash] as a ranged attack, the rest of his skills were melee, but the others all had plenty of range to attack past the barrier, while the four golems plus Thor and Bob would hold the front rank against the attackers.

[I think they have associated me with the attacks. There are some in the distance pointing at me and shouting.] Hawk updated.

[Fly off to see if they chase you to another location, then you can lure them back here after the fight.] Karl suggested.

"Hawk needs to relocate. The monsters are catching onto the fact that he's hovering over fights. They might think he's a scavenger, luring them to food he can't kill himself. I sent him off to scout." Karl informed the others.

"That's fine. As long as he can keep updating us on the situation, he's doing well enough as a scout." Doug agreed.

It would be good to have his extra attacking power here, but not completely necessary, now that they had the time to prepare defences against the Ogres.

The first arrived only seconds later, and died as soon as it reached the barrier.

The same was true for the next six, but after that, they started to get more cautious, and gather in a group before charging.

[Ogres are still going your way, but the other stuff is following me to a furious Warbear family.] Hawk updated.

"His ploy didn't work on the ogres. But everything else is following him into a trap." Karl laughed.

There was no time for questions as they hurled skills at the Ogres, who were struggling to get past the barrier with the wood Golems whipping at their faces and arms.

There was another pause in the battle, and Karl ordered Thor to grab all the corpses and throw them into Hawk and Rae's spaces. They could deal with them later, but they were starting to pile up against the barrier, and it was getting to be too easy for the new arrivals to jump over.

A short pause allowed everyone to rest for a moment, and Doug passed around some sort of crispy squares, something between a peanut brittle and a brownie. Karl felt his energy for the new arrivals to jump over.

A short pause allowed everyone to rest for a moment, and level begin to rise a bit faster as he finished eating, then washed it down with water from his canteen.

[No more Ogres coming. But I'm on my way back with what is left of the others.] Hawk updated.

"Hawk is incoming with the remainder of the other monsters chasing him. I guess not all of them fell for the trap." Karl informed Doug, who was giving a sad look at his favourite sword hand glove, which had ripped during the battle.

Bob pocketed the glove for later repair and picked up his sword.

Hawk flew overhead, and right past them, leading an enraged crowd of monsters that were periodically throwing rocks and spears at the low-flying bird.

Whatever he had done, they were beyond enraged with him.

It was just the lizardmen left, which Karl assumed was because they were the smartest of the monsters that had been following him, but their rage made them slow to react, and they were nearly eliminated by the mages and the golems before Karl could even get a second Shred off.

Once they were gone, Hawk returned and vanished into his space to take a quick break and get a snack before continuing to scout.

[Are the rest of the monsters in the immediate area gone?] Karl asked, just to be certain.

[All gone. Fed them to an angry Warbear. Don't go into the river bottom past the cliffs outside our zone. She is mad.]

"Hawk says he lured the others outside our zone to a Warbear den. They're gone now, but the Warbear is not impressed with us, or life in general, so stay away from the cliffs and the river bottom." Karl relayed.

Bob grabbed the radio to warn the team in the area. The Warbear was a native monster, and not the primary goal of the mission. In fact, they killed any other monster in their territory, so they would do the team's job for them if anything strayed too close.

Even the bravest of teams didn't like to tangle with them, as the bears were even more durable than most armoured monsters, and they were notorious for holding a grudge.

Chapter 174 Strategic Slacking

The mages let the barrier down so that the magic wouldn't attract any more monsters, and Bob signalled for the group to get moving. He was leading them back toward the fort they had built the previous night, even though they hadn't finished the full sweep of the area yet.

They had probably killed everything in the area, but Hawk would double-check while they walked back, after he had rested enough and nothing was looking for him.

As with the other zone, their assigned area was not large, and the threat level would vary, so it was best to get your rest when you could.

"We will return to the fort for lunch, and let Hawk scout while we rest. Then he can return to his hiding spot to rest so we don't end up causing the monsters to stampede again. It feels like we cleared this area fairly well, but you can never be too certain, and the monsters are always moving." Bob explained as he got the group moving.

Hawk happily made another round around the area, being sure to keep well away from the home of the Warbear, in case it tracked him back and decided to knock the tree down to get to him while he was sleeping.

Karl sensed the bird's thoughts and shook his head in dismay. If the Warbear could so easily take out everything that was thrown at it, then it meant that the matriarch of the clan was probably a Commander Rank beast, much tougher than the Hill Giant they had fought thanks to its nearly impenetrable hide.

That was not something that you were supposed to upset. At least not if you didn't have the brute strength to convince it to back down.

The fort was empty when they returned, and everyone settled in to rest weary muscles on the soft silk netting.

Hawk returned only a few minutes later with confirmation that there was nothing worth mentioning in their zone, so they were safe to relax for an hour or two.

The smell of cooking wouldn't draw anything in from this distance, so they didn't have to eat more of the ration packs.

"Should we set up another spot up at the top of the tree so that we can see more of what is going on around us? Even having Hawk in a nest at the top of the tree will give us much more visibility when something comes near us." Karl suggested.

"That's not a bad idea. The tree is large enough to move and get a better line of sight, but being lower here also helps us see what is at ground level, instead of having it blocked by leaves." Bob replied.

Doug nodded in agreement. "You can see a lot more than we can, so it's better for the watches if we're low enough that everyone can see the ground. With a bit of luck, we won't have to leave here again today. We can just wait for the monsters to appear again and then go deal with them.

We will ask you to send Hawk out every few hours to make sure we're not missing anything, but the others only expect so much out of us. You can't be in combat all day every day, it wears everyone out too fast."

The mages stretched out on the webbing and smiled up at the sky.

"We've already been upgraded once on this mission. If we start making it look too easy, who knows what they will ask us to do next. I have a good feeling about this mission, I might make it to Commander Rank with just a bit more work.

There is a change in my Golems, they're stronger than they were, and more agile with the vine whips. If you could have seen how they eliminated the Goblins, I think you'd agree that they're very close to reaching the standard.

All it takes is one signature spell for proof, but the rest of my attack magic is improving as well. It's impossible to tell against such weak targets as the Goblins, but hitting the Hobgoblins, they were dying without any sort of resistance as well, and that is a sure sign that you're two ranks above them." Danni explained quietly with her eyes shut, relaxing while she could.

Karl felt Rae laugh in his mind, and saw Bob waiting for him to relay the thought out loud. They all had to think he was a bit odd, but it was somewhat like having earphones in, where only you were hearing one side of the conversation.

"Rae questions the standard of things just dying when you hit them. She seems to think it's not that impressive." Karl joked.

The mages chuckled. "Well, for Rae, it's just normal. The rest of us actually have to work to make things die. I've noticed that your attacks are well above what would be expected of an Awakened Rank warrior as well.

Is that a result of your class? Or is it just because Rend is so good against the targets we are fighting?"

Karl shrugged. "It's a bit of both. Rend is good against fleshy targets. But I also get a boost to my effectiveness from Rae. Then there is Shred, which is an absolutely brutal attack to begin with. It uses a lot of energy, but near the peak of Awakened Rank, Shred will deal more damage than the peak Ascended Rank Slash ability.

Rend is already an improvement as an ability, but Shred is superior to Rend at the same power output. Then when Rae's ability optimizes it..."

He let the sentence trail off, and the others nodded in understanding.

"Then we get what we have here, with a group of fighters that outperform their ranking." Bob finished.

Doug finished making lunch, and they waited for another hour before sending Hawk out again. There was still nothing to report, so he settled back into his space to recover energy more quickly, and Karl kept watch in his place.

That pattern repeated all afternoon. Hawk went for a flight every two hours, found that there was nothing worth getting out of bed to hunt, then cleared a few Goblins and other minor nuisances and went back to his nest.

It was the sort of day that every mission team wanted to have. A good fight in the morning with no injuries, then a warm shady spot to rest for the remainder of the day.

But ten kilometres away, it was a very different story. Not every team that had been transferred could live up to the expectations of the deployment team, and many of them were being pushed back toward the nearest town as they retreated from the influx of Hill Giants and Ogres.

The radio had been at a whisper all day, and they had heard the movements, but no distress calls, and certainly no emergencies close enough that they would be able to respond to them.

The teams immediately around their own were all in good shape today, and while they were all exhausted from the battles, they were holding steady.

As night settled over the forest, they began their usual rotation, with Rae out to help the others keep watch, and Hawk sleeping in his space until the last watch, when the sky would be light enough that his vision was no longer limited.

Chapter 175 Dana's Trip

While Karl was resting comfortably in the fort that Rae had made for them, Dana was having a much different mission experience.

Her team had been deployed to the far side of the battlefield, nearly fifty kilometres from where Karl had originally been stationed, but they hadn't managed to stay there for long.

Her team was not a group of devoted veteran mercenaries like Karl had gotten, she had been assigned to a team of slackers with a Commander Rank Priest in charge of them.

They treated the mission more like a prison sentence, complained constantly about every task they were assigned, and during the first battle were nearly outsmarted by a group of Goblins.

If it wasn't for the fact that she had two Golems, they likely would have been overrun when the Goblins circled the clearing, as their warrior was next to incompetent, and was more interested in selling her on his new multi level marketing startup than actually protecting the group.

The others were supposed to be rogue classes, fast and deadly, but in reality, they were all slightly chubby IT guys who worked at the same company.

In short, the entire mission was a nightmare, but they had to keep moving because their group was so loud that it continually drew monsters to them.

"Can't you just cast that holy light circle around us and keep it up for the night while we sleep?" The warrior whined as the sun went down at the end of their third day on the mission.

The Priest nodded. "I can stay up all night and keep the circle active. However, the light will draw monsters to us constantly, like a beacon. So, as soon as I fall asleep, you will have a few dozen Ogres and a thousand or more Goblins to deal with, but without a healer.

If you can handle that, I don't have a problem being your nightlight."

Dana hid her smile at the way that he managed to say that without a hint of sarcasm in his voice, though it was clearly implied.

"What's the point of this anyhow? We're just out here getting attacked by monsters, instead of making money. Do they have any idea of the amount of market capitalization that my group has missed out on because I wasn't there to help pitch new members this week?" The warrior complained.

Dana glared at the man, and the Priest leaned over to whisper in her ear.

"Friendly fire is generally frowned upon, but if you have to, I understand." He whispered.

She smiled back at him. It was obvious why he had been sent with this group. Not just for his strength, but because he was unendingly patient with slackers and idiots.

"I wonder what Karl is up to." Dana muttered as she started her watch that night, hoping that he didn't have to deal with a group like this.

Rae would probably kill someone and pretend that they ran away.

It was decided that she would take the first watch, and the priest would take the second. Each of their watches was three hours, so there were only three a night, but nobody slept well when anyone but Dana or the Priest was on watch.

They were rapidly becoming exhausted, but everywhere they were forced to move to, they ran into more Ogres and Goblins. It was like they never ended, and just kept reappearing. Unlike the Mackenzie siblings, her group didn't know that they were really reappearing daily.

They had been tasked to clear the area, and that was what the Priest was guiding them to do, but he had decided that it would hurt morale too much to inform them that the job would never actually end.

The priest looked asleep, but he turned her way as she muttered to herself.

"He's with the Mackenzie brothers. I heard on the radio yesterday that they were reassigned to an Ascended area, which was suffering from attacks by groups led by Commander Rank Giants. They're likely fine, the Mackenzie brothers are solid, and Brother Doug, their cleric, is a good friend of mine." He replied.

Dana turned to face him. "Commander Rank Giants? Isn't that a bit overkill, even if the group he's with are Ascended?"

Her cleric shrugged. "From what I hear, only the top performing Ascended were sent, so whoever is with him and the brothers might include a Commander, or maybe two powerful damage dealers. Your friend might not be having any more fun than we are, but at least his group is reliable."

A crack of branches in the woods caught their attention, and then the stench of Ogre reached their noses.

"Everyone up, we're under attack." The Priest whispered as he shook the others awake.

"We just went to bed, can't we do this later? I swear, if I have to sleep in armour for one more day, it's going to chafe right through my skin." The warrior complained.

Dana's two golems intercepted the Ogre, and she hit the monster in the face with a magic missile, blinding it while the Golems hacked it down using the holy blades that the priest had created for them with a spell.

"See, they've got it. Just let me sleep." The warrior muttered as he curled up in his blankets.

They hadn't been assigned a zone, they were just told to kill as many monsters as possible, so the next morning the cleric had them move out, slowly working his way back to the base camp, where he was hoping to be able to trade a few of the useless ones for a decent teammate or two.

They were hiking through the woods, following a goblin trail toward the regional camp, when Dana spotted a considerable area of trees covered in spider web. The strands blended into the surroundings, but the scent of blood and the academy body lotion that Rae preferred for Dana to wear caught her attention.

There should be another student around here, and there had been a battle, she was certain of it.

"I smell Academy lotions and blood." She informed the others.

The priest sniffed at the air for a second, but only looked concerned.

"Everyone spread out. There might be a group in trouble nearby. Don't get out of sight of each other, but there might be an injured member hiding in the trees." He ordered.

Dana realized that she forgot to mention the web when one of the rogues began to shout in panic, and she could hear him flailing.

"It's a spider web, you idiot. Just cut yourself free and stand back up." One of his buddies called.

"You try it. My blade isn't cutting through it." He complained.

"Then use a skill. It's likely from a spider monster."

Dana sent the golem to cut him free with the magical blade, and noticed a collection of items sitting at the bottom of a huge redwood tree.

Then she looked up and saw that there was a rope ladder sitting in the branches, and some sort of fort above them.

"There is a fort here. Look up in the tree. It has a ladder, so it was made for humans, but it's made of spider silk." The priest informed the others as he noticed it.

"A druid?" One of the rogues asked hopefully.

"Possibly. It doesn't seem that they're here anymore, but we can check if they left anything behind." The cleric offered.

"Other than box tree spiders?" Dana asked, with a gesture up the tree.

"Votes for getting the fuck out of the creepy spider forest?" The warrior asked.

The rogues' hands all went up at once, and Dana shook her head as the cleric laughed.

"Well, at least we know that someone was in the area. That should explain why there are so few monsters here today. Let's keep moving, and we can inform the other groups of what we found, and warn them about the spider webs when we get to the base camp to resupply." The cleric decided.

That level of web control reminded Dana of Rae, and she wondered if this was where Karl had been stationed when he first arrived. If they had built a fort, they weren't being forced to run from anything in the area. Of course, if she had competent members, they wouldn't have had to keep moving so much either, but her and the cleric could only hold things together for so long on their own before they were too exhausted to continue.

Maybe they could just ditch these idiots in camp and join another team. That would be nice.

Chapter 176 Routine

One week after they had been transferred to the Ascended Rank area, Karl and the others had gotten into a solid routine. Breakfast in the fort, hunt anything that they had spotted on night watch, return for lunch, then either rest or make another loop in the afternoon if there were still signs of more monsters.

They were also beginning to amass a rather considerable amount of money, thanks to the Giants' habit of carrying gold and silver in their pouches.

It was a mystery who was making coins for them, or who they had stolen them from, but the raw materials were still valuable, and they could make a fortune trading it in when they returned.

But that wasn't the only thing that they had gained. Everyone was feeling much more confident and comfortable with their powers, and the last few days the Giants had seemed to fall without much of a fight.

It was difficult to tell if they were getting stronger or if the last few batches were weaker than usual, but they had a good feeling about taking the strength tests after they finished the mission.

[I sense magic in the area. Strong magic.] Hawk announced that morning, just as everyone was getting ready for breakfast.

"Hawk says there is magic nearby. He didn't say magical beast, just magic." Karl whispered as Doug dished out the breakfast.

They let Hawk lead them away from the fort, headed for the strong sense of magic, and only stopping for a moment to deal with a small group of Lizardmen.

Hawk swooped down and landed next to a small pile of rocks. They were piled on top of each other to look vaguely like a person, and the hunters and trappers used the design as a trail marker. If you followed the direction of the marker, you would find the next waypoint and landmark on a trail.

[It's under here.] He instructed, then poked at a larger rock nearby.

Shattering the stone wouldn't be a problem for him, but he was concerned that if he broke it, he might break the magical thing. Some of them were fragile, and Hawk understood that the group was trying to get as many good things as they could while they were here.

Just like the last time that they were out, but with fewer magical plants and more monsters.

Thor flipped the stone with his horns, and a large pile of glittering gems was revealed, just sitting under the rock, as if they belonged there.

They weren't cut stones, just raw gemstones, but that was clearly where the magic was coming from, and now that the rock was moved, everyone could feel it.

They had patrolled past here yesterday, only a few metres from this spot. If Karl looked hard toward the bottom of the hill, he could likely still see the blood stains from the battle a few days earlier as well.

These gems had to have just appeared here, unless something had buried them here and left no signs of disturbed ground.

Doug went through them, cleaning them off in a pouch full of water he had created, and then stacking them on the ground in an order that only made sense to himself.

"They're imbued gems. You don't usually use them in this form, they're normally carved and set into magical jewellery and items. These all have different properties, but I have sorted them by their basic elements, or aspects.

Do we want to sort them now, or after?" Doug asked.

"We can do it after. We've still got a zone to clear for the day." Bob gently reminded them before they could get distracted by the shiny objects.

Doug sorted the stones into small pouches and tucked them in his robes. That must mean they were exceptionally valuable, if he wasn't willing to leave them in his backpack with the rest of his gear.

His pack was getting lighter, as they slowly worked through the rations and other supplies they had brought, so it wouldn't be a burden to add a few stones. It was only Karl and Bob who had truly heavy packs now, as they were packing all the gold and silver that the group had recovered.

If the gear wasn't made of monster leather, it might have ripped under the abuse of heavy loads and violent movements, but they were holding up well so far.

Hawk hadn't even had time to take flight again when they heard movement in the woods nearby. Something else had been attracted by the stones, or by their presence, and it was large.

Thor turned to face the threat, and the golems shifted to take positions around the mages. There weren't many creatures incoming, it sounded like only a pair of large ones. That was confirmed when they crashed through the trees, but the fact that it was only two was no comfort today.

Unlike the Hill Giants they had been fighting, these two were heavily armoured, like human knights of old, and carrying mauls with heads on them that were larger than Karl.

There was no doubt that these two were both Commander Rank, and not on the low side of it either.

Hawk took flight, knowing that he couldn't take a hit from something like that, and Rae skittered up into a tree, waiting for the right moment to strike.

With them covered in metal armour, she didn't know quite where she should hit. She knew from experience that armour could be more durable than it looked, and this looked thick.

The Giants roared as they saw the humans, and Bob looked grim as he squared up against them. Thor wasn't going to take many hits from those mauls even with a barrier from Donni active, and the Golems weren't going to fare much better.

The only chance they had was to finish them quickly, but with the armour on, that wasn't going to be easy.

But other than their Commander Rank status, these two also smelled like magic, and Karl got the feeling that if they could defeat these two, there was something good in it for him.

The Giants made a sudden lunge forward, and Thor smashed the ground with [Earthquake] while Karl and Bob both sent attacks at their weapons, trying to slow the attacks, or deflect them off target.

The Giants stumbled and Rae saw her chance. She flew out of the tree, and both forelegs plus her mandibles pierced one of the Giants' necks right below his helmet line.

The attack wasn't enough to break the bone, and with a spurt of silk, she pulled herself back into the trees. But the damage was done, and the giant was bleeding heavily from the back of his neck, courtesy of a triple [Lacerate] attack.

The Giant fell to the ground as his body spasmed in pain, which allowed the Golems to wrap him in vines, slowing his recovery while Bob and the mages unleashed their best attacks on him.

Karl focused on attacking the arms and weapons of the other Giant, weakening his attacks against Thor. The Cerro had dodged the first attack, but the Giant had regained its footing, and the second real attack wouldn't be as easy to avoid.

It didn't seem to care about its partner as it found its opportunity and swung at Thor, who rolled over once with the impact, but landed on his feet with his Lightning Barrier intact. The first layer of shielding had shattered, but between the two it had been enough that he wasn't injured by the strike, just thrown to the side.

Donni was already rebuilding the shield as Thor charged inside the next strike and Hawk attacked the Giant's face. It simply ducked its head and the attacks hit its helmet, but the distraction was enough that Thor finished his charge and slammed into one thick leg.

The knee buckled, and the second Giant nearly fell, only catching itself with its maul. That kept it off the ground, but it left the Giant out of position when Karl attacked again, aiming for the gaps in the armour.

The Golems had pulled the helmet off the other Giant, and Rae moved in for the kill, aiming at the soft flesh of the neck.

That seemed to be the trigger for the upright Giant to realize that something was wrong with this scenario, and instead of fighting back, it pushed itself to its feet and fled, running in the direction it had arrived from.

Within seconds, the other Giant died a brutal death, and by the time that Karl had finished checking Thor and Rae for injuries, Bob was already starting to strip it of its armour to see where the feeling of magic was coming from.

Chapter 177 Phoenix Lotus

Bob carefully dug through the bags that the Giant was carrying, until he came out with a large red flower. It was as big as a sunflower, larger than his head, and it radiated a sense of warmth and magic.

Doug looked at the flower with interest. "That is a Phoenix Lotus, a fire Elemental resource. But it doesn't grow anywhere on this continent, so they must have arrived with it. Drinking a steeped infusion of it is supposed to be outstanding for Fire Mages and Berserkers with Fire Elemental attacks.

While our two aren't Fire Mages, they do have some talents with fire."

Doug paused as Hawk landed next to the flower and began to stare at it with a bit of drool leaking from his beak.

"And it looks like Hawk might like some of it as well.

How about I prepare it, and then we will try it over dinner? Even if the tea isn't enough for Hawk, he can always eat the remaining flower after I finish brewing. The process extracts most of the mana from it, but there will still be nutrients left in the petals, which are not edible by humans and therefore not included in the tea." He explained.

[You heard the man, you can have it after dinner.] Karl informed the bird, which was contemplating snatching the flower and flying away with it.

Bob passed the flower to Doug, who tucked it away in his backpack, and finished checking the Giant's gear.

They had all taken to trying on any magical equipment, just in case it adapted itself to the wearer, but most of what the monsters had worn was already damaged beyond repair by the time that they died, and the team didn't include an armourer, so they just buried it with the bodies.

"There is one more piece under the body. We've got a magical sword this time, but that's going to be a two-handed blade for someone." The warrior explained, then passed the weapon to the mages for examination.

Donni struggled to lift the blade, and ended up leaning it against a tree to read the inscriptions. Normally, a human would never use a weapon like this, as it was too unwieldy and weighed five times what a normal two-handed blade would. But if it was powerfully magic, they could get a reward for bringing it back.

"According to this, it is a blade of Ease. Using it makes your skills easier to activate." She explained, after reading the runes twice and verifying them against her notebook.

Doug chuckled as he heard the description. "That's perfectly suited for your needs, in a format that you could never possibly use."

The cleric was right. She specialized in barriers, and if they took even a few percent less mana to maintain, it would directly improve her combat effectiveness by a noticeable amount, and increase the survivability of the whole group.

The problem was that it weighed close to twenty-five kilos to her less than fifty. Even just carrying it all day would be a burden.

Bob picked the blade up and gave it a twirl. "It's not bad with my strength. It's not really my style, since I'm on the front lines blocking, but it might be alright with some practice."

He twirled the blade and struck the ground, activating a skill that sent a shockwave travelling away from him, leaving a deep furrow in the dirt.

"I would say that the reduction is close to thirty percent." He offered.

The mages looked in longing at the blade. Thirty percent was huge.

"You might have to drop in at the Academy and ask the Berserkers for some combat lessons." Karl laughed as Bob gave the blade an approving look.

"I already trained on the two-handed blade quite a lot, actually. It's just not suitable in this group, as we don't have anyone else to take point except Thor."

The Lightning Cerro snorted and stomped on the ground, then tossed his head to the side as if throwing enemies. He was quite certain that his armour was up to the task of dealing with enemies as the tank.

Having more damage at the front, and the ability to use skills with higher output without taking the stamina penalty for using skills near your limit, would be much more valuable than a second blocker.

"Alright. Thor can take point, just keep the barrier up on him, since he can't speak to call for relief." Bob reluctantly agreed when he saw how serious the scaled beast was.

Doug looked at Thor for a moment. "Don't you think he's getting bigger? I swear he was shorter than I was when we arrived, and now his back is higher than my head."

"I think you're right. He's almost fully grown now. That's much faster than I had expected, but the exercise has been good for him." Karl agreed.

Rae had also grown, though not as noticeably. She was at her full size now, roughly the size of a subcompact car when standing, though with a smaller body and long legs forming the rest of her silhouette. Hawk was just the same as he had been, but he was already adult sized and not expected to grow any larger.

"I think that we might have progressed further than we expected. With everyone growing, it's difficult to tell, but if we could fight against something that we know was on the borderline of Awakened and Ascended, we could get a better reference."

They hadn't seen anything like that in days. Everything was somewhere in the Ascended Rank, with sporadic Commander Rank leaders, which they were definitely getting better at killing.

"Alright, let's scout the rest of the zone and see what else we have for the day. I have a good feeling about this one. I'm thinking that we should be back in time for lunch." Doug cheered as Thor took his place at the front of the group.

Hawk led them toward a group of Ogres as the radio announced that there was a reinforcement mission arriving later that day, and for teams to keep their radios on, so they could lead the relief groups in.

Only a few would be getting replaced today, starting with those who had been in the field longest, but it was a good sign that they wouldn't be out here too much longer. Likely not more than another week and they would be on their way back home with bags full of loot and a number of new magical items.

Bob hefted the sword over his shoulder and prepared to charge as Thor found the Ogres, but the five-metre tall beasts seemed utterly uninterested in fighting once they saw that there were five people plus the Cerro.

Unfortunately for them, Bob did want to fight, and Rae wasn't about to let them run away.

The enormous sword whistled through the air as Bob activated [Slash] on a downward strike.

The arc of light raced away from him, slicing the Ogre in half in a single strike.

Thor charged and flipped the other in the air, where Hawk and Karl hit it from opposite sides with [Shred], killing it before it reached the ground.

"I think it can be safely said that we have Commander Rank combat power now. If Ascended Rank Ogres are falling in a single strike, not many would argue with our capabilities." Doug chuckled as he surveyed the aftermath of the brief battle.

[There is nothing else nearby. Everything ran away.] Hawk informed Karl a few seconds later, after checking for their next target.

"Hawk says there is nothing left to fight. We scared it all away. We might as well head back for an early lunch and see if anything comes back." Karl explained.

"Nice, early day it is." Doug chuckled, pointing his staff back toward the fort.

Once they were back and Doug had started on cooking lunch, Karl settled in to meditate. The three spaces were doing much better now, and they were providing him with a lot more energy than they had a week ago. But they felt like they might be limiting the beasts inside.

The three were growing so fast, and he was slacking so much on his meditation that the spaces weren't keeping up.

So, that was how Karl spent the rest of his morning, doing his best to improve the living conditions for his partners, and increase the energy density in the spaces, now that they were capped out in size.

A few hours wasn't going to do much, but if he spent a few afternoons and nights at it, he might make some progress.

The mages only meditated for a few hours an afternoon, and that had been Karl's schedule as well, but it was becoming obvious that it wasn't enough.

Chapter 178 Scared Them Off

Doug looked at the group that afternoon when Hawk confirmed that there was still nothing to fight. He had eliminated a small group of Goblins with a fireball while scouting, but their zone was otherwise barren.

"Do you think that we actually scared the monsters away? Most monsters will avoid the territory of a more powerful monster, so it's possible that either Hawk or Rae have scared them off. No offence intended to Thor, but the Lightning Cerro isn't known for being dangerous enough to chase others out of their territory." The cleric asked, while sweeping his dark curls back from his face.

"It is possible. We have patrolled this same area for so long that there should be a scent trail around the perimeter. If they sense that we're that much more powerful than they are, they will naturally avoid the area." Danni agreed.

Bob smirked. "To think, we were sent here to deal with the monsters, and now they're too afraid to come to the zone that we're assigned to. Is that a total victory or some sort of failure? Our orders are to hold this zone, so we can't just leave."

The mages shrugged.

"It's a win for us. If the scent of Rae around the perimeter was enough to scare off almost all the monsters, then we did our job. The zone is secure. But how is that tea doing, Doug? Is it almost steeped yet?"

Doug nodded. "I added one of the fire elemental stones to the mix and let it infuse. The mixture should be quite potent with that quality of flower, but it needs to be boiled down a bit more still. According to my alchemy book, it needs to be as thick as milk before it's completely extracted."

Hawk had noticed that the tea only involved the core of the flower, and that Doug had only reserved three petals from the flower. He had put one each into three vials, but that left almost the whole flower for Hawk, and he was getting impatient to try it.

As the tea rendered down into a proper potion, it began to glow with a soft orange light, and the stone that Doug had set in the kettle began to lose its lustre.

"There we go. All done. Now let me portion this. I've got five cups and three vials, since some of us aren't good with cups." The Cleric explained.

He passed everything out, and Karl passed the vial to Thor in his resting space. The Cerro just grabbed it in his beak and tipped his head back, swallowing it in one shot. Rae did the same, but seemed intrigued by either the taste or the effect.

Karl took the shot of potion, and it felt like fire was running through his veins as the effect spread through his body. He could feel it strengthening his body, but he couldn't quite grasp the power that it had.

Doug had said it was a Fire Element resource, and he didn't have any Fire skills. But the excess was being siphoned off by Hawk, who was happy to take anything he had to spare, as well as the remainder of the flower, whose petals he had started to chew on like bubblegum.

Everyone settled back to let the potion digest, and Karl returned to meditation while Rae volunteered to watch the area, in case something tasty came to her webs.

An hour later, Hawk decided that he had absorbed as much as he could for the day, and he stored the remainder of the flower in his space so that it would be safe until he finished scouting again.

He had a good feeling about the power of his fireball attack now, and he had every intention of finding something to test it on.

Unfortunately for him, they really had scared off everything, and there wasn't a single monster to be found in their zone. But that didn't stop a determined Hawk, and with only one more kilometre of flight, he found a group of Lizardmen skirting around their zone.

A single fireball from the sky exploded in their group, killing three and maiming the others. Then Hawk saw the group that was working the area and flew away, leaving the rest to them now that his curiosity was sated.

[Is that your Hawk, Mackenzie group? We just saw a Dragon Hawk ambush a group of Lizardmen and fly away like it was nothing.] The group asked over the radio.

[Yeah, that's ours. There's nothing left in our zone, so we let him scout a bit further out to see if they were just avoiding us or if the whole area was clear.] Doug replied.

The other groups didn't have to key up the microphone for everyone listening to know that they were cursing at the Mackenzie group. Their entire area had been cleared? What sort of nonsense was that? Most groups could barely walk a circuit of their zone in a day, and he was claiming they had killed everything by lunch?

[The Fireball works much better now. Almost as good as Rend, but over a much larger area.] Hawk informed Karl.

That likely meant that Fireball was far superior to Rend at this point, but Hawk would not easily admit that. If he could single shot ambush Awakened Lizardmen, it was good enough for Karl. That would allow them to take care of anything they were likely to come across on an Academy mission.

The group waited as Hawk scouted around their borders, occasionally attacking and killing monsters that were trying to avoid them, but mostly just marking them for the other groups that were in the area. Seeing Hawk circling and either sending fireballs or just screeching at them was enough to bring the groups over now that they were familiar with him.

Their team was the envy of the region by the end of the day, and everyone was wondering what sort of superstars Command had sent that could report multiple Ascended Rank monster kills every hour all morning, until they cleared their area.

There were Commander Rank monsters in their reports nearly every day, but it was the efficiency of the group that caught everyone's attention after that radio conversation.

Karl meditated through the afternoon and the evening, as did the mages, who were still working to absorb the gains that they had made from the potion. Doug had prayed to his goddess for a while, but Bob didn't seem to believe in meditation, so he was the only one paying attention to the radio when the next round of replacement messages came through.

[Mackenzie group, hold position for replacement. Your time slot is noon tomorrow.] The Command group informed them.

[Understood Command. We will do our best to have the morning clear finished before they arrive.] Bob replied.

That meant one more night watch, and they would be headed back home for a break before their next mission, or their return to work, in the case of the mages and Doug.

Karl wondered what it would be like to be back in the Academy with the first years on the second floor after this mission. He had been ahead of them before, but he hardly felt connected to them anymore. The older students seemed much more relatable, and Karl totally understood why they were less interested in what was going on at the school than their next chance to go out and grow their powers.

The advantages of training in the wilderness were just too good. There was little doubt that he would make it to the Ascended Rank the next time that they were tested, and he already knew that he could square off against most of the lower strength Commander Rank beasts with the help of his partners.

Doug sighed and leaned back against the tree trunk. "It looks like we did too well. But if we get to go home early, that's never bad news. We will have to go over what we have collected on this mission so that everything is split properly.

The gold is easy enough to split on its own, but we've collected a number of magical items as well, and that will be much harder to value and split."

Karl shrugged. "What do you usually do when it's just family?" He asked.

"We just split the money and everything else goes to who needs it." Doug replied.

"That works for me. We've already split everything else by need, so it doesn't really have to get mentioned again. Just split up the precious metals and gems we collected when we get back, and it's good by me.

I've got these nice gloves, Hawk is happy with his flower, Thor got armour for his tail. Rae might have gotten the short end of things, but at least she got some good snacks." Karl suggested.

Rae laughed as she looked at all the Commander Rank beasts caught in her web. That would be enough to allow a regular Bloodbath Spider to grow from a hatchling to its full strength, as long as it didn't go bad.

That wasn't a concern in the space, so she was certain that she had all the basic resources she needed, and now it was just a matter of increasing the speed, which meant either rare things, or making Karl meditate more.

Of the two options, it was obvious which was the more attainable.

[You know, if you just stay here in the fort we could go fight while you meditate all morning...] Rae suggested.

[We're not in that big of a hurry. It's better to have everyone together, in case of a surprise attack.] Karl replied, while wondering if she had forgotten that he could hear her plotting in his mind.

Chapter 179 Retrieved

The next morning, they made a quick tour of the area, following Hawk's directions to the monsters that had just appeared. Fortunately, the fights were easy, as their healer was mostly distracted, listening to the radio report the helicopters headed out to relieve the mission teams that had been called in to support the army.

It sounded like the influx of monsters had faded all over the region, and they would be able to keep things under control without too much trouble.

There had been some casualties among the Elites who were pulled out from their day jobs, and Command was planning to have all the departing Elites gather at the base camps for a funeral photo shoot, though Doug made it no secret that most of those bodies would not be in any shape for viewing, even if they were returned to camp.

Karl had seen a few of these on the television in the past. They were heralded as heroes, but it was never any of the famous Elites, it was always someone like a young government pencil pusher who had valiantly run into combat when monsters threatened and then tragically lost his life.

Of course, that was likely to be less than half the story, and he might not have been running into combat willingly, but it was good enough to settle the people and remind them that the Elites were doing valuable things to keep them safe.

[Mackenzie group, your helicopter is incoming. Please mark your position for the transfer of duties.] The pilot instructed precisely at noon.

[We will mark the location with a blue smoke spell. We have information for the incoming team during the handover, expect a three to five-minute delay.] Bob replied.

Doug set the smoke spell near the edge of a clearing next to the fort, and the crew transfer came in for a smooth landing.

"Elites, good to see you all safe and sound, despite having a student with you. You said you have information, what did we need to know?" The Captain of the incoming military team asked as he disembarked.

"First, in that tree is a fort made of Bloodbath Spider Silk. It is safe, and made by our team. You are welcome to use it as your ongoing base of operations. The whole area is secure, and monsters have been avoiding the perimeter thanks to the scent of the beasts on our team.

That will change when the scent trail fades after a few days, so be prepared.

Also, we have been burying the monster corpses with any damaged magical items they were wearing. If we couldn't use or salvage it, it got buried. So, if your team has a member who can sense magic, you will get plenty of false positives that are buried underneath you, hidden by plant growth." Doug explained.

"Anything powerful?" One of the soldiers asked.

"There are a few Commander Rank Ogres and a mid-Commander Rank Giant with damaged magical armour that were buried. So, it won't just be weak signals." The cleric explained.

The team leader whistled in appreciation. "You really lived up to expectations, didn't you? They asked us to verify your claims, but if you buried most of the bodies instead of burning them, it should be easy enough."

Rae giggled in Karl's mind. She had taken a lot of them for her own personal use.

"Karl, our Beast Master, has claimed some of them as pet food as well." Doug added.

Karl checked on everyone, to make sure they were safely in their spaces and not tempted to wander around, and Bob led them onto the helicopter as the scout for the military team confirmed that the fort was safe.

There were ten of them, not five, which would make it a bit cramped, but there was enough room for them to lay out their bedrolls, and that would be good enough. Nobody actually liked sleeping on the ground, and the spider web was a soft net, as good as a mattress.

The cargo master closed up the door once he was sure they were all in with their gear, and they took off toward the base camp for the area.

"You all look a lot more rested than the other teams we've been bringing in. I take it you're all veteran mercenaries?" The helicopter's cargo master asked.

Bob shook his head. "I'm the only one who is full-time. Doug is a Green Dragon Cleric with other duties, and the two mages work in digital security."

The man nodded, then looked at Karl, whose name was left out.

"Oh, I don't have a proper job yet, I'm still in the Academy." He explained.

The soldier did a double take, then shook his head.

"You all have the look of veteran adventurers, I never would have guessed that you had a student and two volunteers with you. But that makes it even more impressive. The big boss has asked to meet with you all when you get back, probably something to do with publicity for the mission, or checking your rewards before you head home." The soldier replied.

Doug chuckled. "I'm betting on them wanting to check our gear before we go back. With that many Commander Rank kills confirmed, they will want to make sure that we're not planning to sell contraband to the masses."

"Do you have any contraband?" The Soldier asked with a sly wink.

Doug made a show of reaching into his pocket, and pulled out what looked like a cigarette, but definitely wasn't according to Karl's sensitive nose.

"I am a Green Dragon Priest. I AM contraband. That one is on the church, consider it a sanctioned sedative." Doug replied.

Karl blinked slowly. Of all the things that he had considered about the possibilities of having a nature cleric around, including food for Thor, medicines and the healing potential, he had somehow never once considered the fact that most illicit drugs were herbal in nature as well.

The drug Doug provided wasn't technically illegal in the Golden Dragon Nation, just frowned upon by employers because it killed productivity. But still, it seemed to Karl that he had a lot to learn about interacting with others and smoothing over social interactions.

If he had thought about keeping a pocket full of little bribes and gifts for the transport crews and others that they interacted with, he could rapidly build a reputation as a good guy who was easy to work with.

And everyone knew that a good reputation would get you far in life.

The transport helicopter landed at the edge of camp and Karl's group quickly disembarked after the crew handed the staff of the base a sheet of paper confirming their identities and status.

"Welcome back, Elites. Please follow me." A stiff-backed young female staff member announced before leading them through the winding walkways of the camp toward the actual town that sat at the centre.

"The boss will speak to you momentarily, he's just finishing a meeting with some government brass." She explained, with a gesture to a row of chairs.

Karl took his pack off and took a seat, placing the large bag in front of him, the same as everyone else waiting in the hallway had done.

The distinctive metallic clank of coins sounded as he placed the bag on the floor, despite his best attempts to wrap them and keep them silent. The others briefly looked up, but that sound was nothing new to them. They all had some loot, and some also had chain mail armour, which made the same sound when dropped.

Seconds later, Colonel Valerie walked out of the office with a terrifying expression on her face that faded to the neutral gaze that Karl knew was her version of a smile when she saw him.

"Colonel, it is good to see you again. The mission went far better than expected, and I will have a full report ready for you at the Academy." Karl informed her with a smile.

"Understood, I will have your monitoring team collect it, as I will be occupied here for some time." She replied.

The Elites in the hall stared as she walked away. Some in awe that such a highly ranked minister was here in a remote base camp, and others in appreciation of the way that her hips swayed as she walked.

Chapter 180 Grease The Wheels

A voice came through the office door, breaking the silence.

"Mackenzie Team, come in." The man's voice demanded.

Inside the office was a portly older man, completely bald with his head shining under the fluorescent lights, and sweat stains on his shirt. It was obvious that he was not one of the Elites, even without considering his age, just by the condescending look that he was giving the group.

"I hear that you have done wonderful things for the productivity rankings of the Public Safety department. Excellent work. However, we must check your equipment for contraband, to ensure that there are no prohibited or sacrilegious items going back to the public." He smugly announced.

Doug turned to Karl as if to say, "I told you so", but Karl knew as well as everyone else that what the man was after was a bribe. He didn't give a damn about contraband, and his position in Public Safety didn't even allow him to handle it, he would have to call in the army to dispose of it for him if any was found.

But if a few gold coins were declared suspicious, who would be any wiser?

The others waited for the man to make his pitch, but Karl decided to move first, and picked up Doug's backpack, which had nothing in it except what it had come with. He set it on the desk and smiled at the bureaucrat.

"Of course that won't be a problem. Colonel Valerie of the Bureau of Elite Development already has our inventory, but you are free to verify the contents of the bags." Karl replied with a genuine smile.

The man's face fell like Karl had kicked him, and his whole attitude changed.

"You met with the Colonel?" He stammered.

"Of course. She is my direct supervisor, and has a pair of agents assigned to my development at the Academy. We spend quite a bit of time together." Karl informed him.

"Then I think that we are finished here. I will get a copy of the contents from the Bureau, and they can take responsibility for any contraband that might have made its way off the battlefield with your team."

He waved to dismiss the team from his office, and they silently made their way back into the hall, where their escort was still waiting.

"That was a short meeting. I am glad that you could sort things out so quickly." The young woman greeted them while standing in the middle of the hallway, as if prepared to prevent them from leaving.

"Yes, it is always a pleasant experience dealing with Public Safety. Now, will we be staying here in the compound, or are we set to fly out right away?" Doug asked.

"You will have to stay here for a moment, Brother Doug." A voice called from behind them.

Karl turned to see a rather familiar looking inquisitor behind them. If he was right, this was the big shirtless one from the Seminary Academy, who had been present for his interrogation after the discovery of the Trial Instance Holy Relic.

The man seemed to recognize him as well, but he didn't say anything as he led them away from the office, leaving the now smirking staff member behind them.

The inquisitor led them into a soundproofed room and locked the door, then turned to Doug with an expectant look.

"Don't blame me for this one. The new guy name-dropped the Bureau, and the Public Safety guy nearly shit his pants. I take it that he hit the alarm?" The Cleric asked with a laugh.

The Inquisitor sighed and rolled his eyes. "I got an emergency notification that your team had intimidated their way into bringing contraband back from your mission, and I was already standing next to you in the hallway. So, I need to check all your bags, while Brother Doug explains how things work to our newest Ascended Elite."

Doug chuckled as he put his bag on the floor, as did everyone else, before the Green Dragon Cleric turned to Karl, laughing softly.

"There is an unofficial policy that if a mission is run by an agency that isn't part of the Elites, they tax the gains a maximum of five percent. It's a get-rich-quick scheme for the politically connected, but it's not officially sanctioned.

However, unlike whoever you have used that intimidation tactic on before, these ones have connections that can make your day very difficult if you don't play along.

Now, you know, and I know, that we don't have anything. But if I didn't know the Inquisitor, how do you think our afternoon would have gone after he was informed that we definitely had contraband?" Doug asked.

Karl nodded. "I see. I was thinking of him like the shift foreman at the mine that used to want bribes to clock you out on time. The guy in the office was such a greasy weasel that he just didn't give the impression of politically powerful."

The big Inquisitor nearly choked as he did his best not to laugh, then shook his head.

"Yeah, this one is definitely one of us. Young Karl has a lot left to learn, but he's off to a good start. You should ask him about how he managed to cutesy his way out of an interrogation by having Thor come out and beg for head pats until nobody could take the session seriously.

Wait, there's not much about that he's allowed to tell. I will tell Brother Doug privately after. But it's a funny story." The big man explained.

Danni chuckled at the mention of Thor. "He's a big suck. You should see him now, he's gotten huge in the last week with all the fighting that we've been doing against Awakened and Commander Rank beasts. I always told you that it was the best way to gain power, and it looks like it works for the Lightning Cerro as well."

The Inquisitor gave Karl a curious look, so he called Thor out, taking up half the room.

"Goddess, but he's gotten big. That's a full-grown Lightning Cerro, for certain, and perhaps bigger than average. Thor might be ready to challenge for the position of Pack Leader if he was still in the wild." The Inquisitor gasped, then gently rubbed the bone ridge that ran across the back of Thor's head, protecting his neck from attack.

The Inquisitor absently rubbed Thor's head with one hand as he finished sorting through the packs.

The Inquisitor turned to Doug, "You should send Karl back to the Seminary Academy when you leave. We can exchange his share of the gold into the Church Bank account that all Elites get set up automatically, and I'm sure that there are a few Ascended Clerics that would be eager to meet him before the next mission he goes on.

We introduced him to mostly Awakened Rank students last time, but he's already outgrown that. Plus, you all likely need to be tested again, and that's done at the Church."

Doug nodded and looked at Karl to see if he had an issue with it.

"I will have to get permission from someone to go on another adventure, I'm certain, but I don't have a problem with that." Karl agreed easily.

Brother Doug was a great healer, and his advanced cooking skills were a real lifesaver on this mission, but Karl couldn't count on having him available all the time, as he was graduated, with a real job and responsibilities.

But if he could find a nature priestess, or another Green Dragon Cleric among the students, he would be in luck. It might not be written in any textbook, but finding the best cook was an important part of developing the perfect mission team.

Even the beasts agreed. Especially Thor, who now had a large pile of the special mount feed that Doug had been making for him daily.

That was much better than the regular roughage that he could get anywhere in the wild, or from the Academy Cafeteria, and the spell that Doug used made so much of it that even Thor's mighty appetite didn't keep up with the supply.

He didn't tell the Cleric that, though. Instead, he hid the extra in his space so that he had more for later, when he didn't have a Doug around to keep making it for him.