

## Beast Master 191

### Chapter 191 Spider Golems

The battle came to an abrupt end, and Hawk landed among the bodies after making a quick spin by the army group to make sure they didn't get lost on the way to the Hobgoblins.

Sergeant Rita turned to Karl. "You know, a little heads up when your pets gain new abilities would be nice."

Karl nodded. "I told them the same thing. But that's the first time that Rae has managed to make that spell activate. She's been working on it for days, but couldn't get it right until she saw Alice cast her Golem spell. I've had [Skill Master] active for ages now, trying to help her learn a new skill.

I didn't expect that it would be Golems, but skittering tree golem spiders are pretty handy. Lotus had no problems healing them, and their damage isn't bad."

Lotus smiled up at Karl. "And, they're only a little terrifying, so they're a nice way to acclimatize your allies to her presence. They're built like spiders, but they aren't really spiders, so I think that the soldiers shouldn't be as afraid of them."

Rita chuckled. "You believe that the tree monster version of spiders will be any less terrifying to the soldiers? While they might not have the reputation of the Bloodbath Spider, anything arachnid shaped terrifies a significant portion of the population. They should be used to it by now, though. They've already met Rae, so accepting spider shaped Golems won't be a stretch for them. If anything, they will think that it is a personal idiosyncrasy of Karl's, since golems always take the same shape after they are summoned for the first time."

They quickly checked the bodies for anything useful and caught their breath, checking the straps on their bags and preparing to walk back to the main group.

Tessa gestured back toward the soldiers. "We should likely regroup with them right away. I can feel them still fighting, so something probably went wrong."

The rest of the group turned and started moving, not wasting any time when the others might be in danger, and the Red Dragon cleric moved up to run beside Karl.

"I will stay with Thor during the next fight. Some of my buffs are very short ranged, and with his massive strength, he will get the most of it." She explained.

"Just don't get squished. I kind of like your style." Karl replied with a wink.

Karl reached the clearing where the Hobgoblins were fighting first, and found that the danger of the fight had been greatly underestimated, while the actual fight was exactly as Thor had described it.

The soldiers were fighting a group of Awakened Rank Hobgoblins, but among them was an Ascended Rank Goblin Shaman, who looked like a normal Goblin Leader until it started casting healing magic.

The Hobgoblins had encircled it, and while their numbers had been cut in half, the healing was keeping them in the fight much longer than expected.

"Thor, you know the way." Tessa encouraged, and the Lightning Cerro put its head down, charging past Karl and into the melee.

Tessa was right behind him, so Karl followed her through the fight, batting away blades that tried to intercept them, and letting the Spider Golems take his back, which let Rae push through with him.

"Where are you going?" Karl heard Alice yell, but it was too late, they were already at the centre of the fight, and the Goblin Shaman was flying.

Literally flying, as Hawk had caught him after Thor threw him in the air, and was pulling the Shaman up in the sky with him.

A sharp turn sent it hurling toward the ground at hundreds of kilometres an hour, while the Hobgoblins roared in rage at the surprise invaders.

Karl slashed out, using [Shred] to cut down a wave of Goblins who were pushing back their way, and the Shaman reached the ground, directly onto Thor's front horn, which pierced through the creature's back for a moment before the Cerro flicked his head and used the body as a shield against a Hobgoblin blade.

Karl found himself shoulder to shoulder with the spider Golems, while Rae joined Thor and Tessa behind him, with the cleric moved toward the centre of their circle.

She had a chain flail, which had a surprising reach, and she was using it to keep the Hobgoblins from getting at Thor's back.

Not that his back was any weaker than his armoured head, but it was harder for him to defend.

Sergeant Rita cut her way into the centre of the fight, and took the side of Thor opposite Rae, which gave them enough numbers to start pushing out, and driving the remaining Hobgoblins into the encirclement by the military unit.

Attacked from both sides, they didn't stand a chance, and the fight was over before Alice's slower moving Golem could even make it to the fight.

"Thank you for coming back so promptly. Did you hear our calls, or did your scout warn you?" The Captain asked.

Tessa shook her head. "I felt the fight still going on after we finished with the Ogres, so we came back."

The Captain shook his head in dismay. The mercenary team might be more powerful, but they were really showing his unit up today. They even managed to come up with a better tactic in the few seconds after they arrived than he had managed to accomplish for the rest of the fight.

Of course, he didn't have a Lightning Cerro that could just smash through Hobgoblins like they were bowling pins, but he should have been able to come up with something to deal with that healer.

The Captain whistled to address the group. "Check the bodies, we're moving out. This won't be the only group that we come across today, and there are other groups in this region doing the same. You don't want to be the low producers for the day."

Sergeant Rita chuckled as she joined Karl, who was cleaning off Thor before he returned to his space. He didn't want to get the mess in his pond, and that meant someone needed to wipe him clean of Goblin blood before he returned to his space at the end of the day. It would be easier now than after it dried, and there hadn't been any word of a river or pond nearby to wash in.

[I found more people. We should go see them.] Hawk suggested.

[I think that the other groups have their own things to do.] Karl reminded him.

[But Rae's human is here, and there is a whole group of Ogres to kill near them.]

Karl had to think about that for a moment. Rae's human? Wasn't he Rae's human? "There is another group in that direction, about a kilometre and a half. There are more Ogres near them, and Hawk thinks they might need the help." Karl informed the Captain.

"If he says they need help, I trust him. This fight was going to be a tough one on our own, so if that one is worse, then reinforcements might save lives." The Captain agreed.

The soldiers weren't happy about being pushed to start moving again instead of taking a break after a fight, but they were moving, and Karl took the point with the Captain, while Rae darted off into the trees, but left her Golems to walk alongside the column where everyone could see them.

## Chapter 192 Found Her

The other group of soldiers didn't even notice they were coming until Karl was almost in the clearing with them. He had seen them through the trees over a minute earlier, but their scouting abilities were severely lacking, and the group looked exhausted.

[Rae, keep back, I don't want strangers attacking you. Hawk, you too. Or go scout out the other Ogres.] Karl warned.

[I will go scout the Ogres. These humans are weak too.] Hawk agreed.

Rae wanted to stay, but she knew it was best to stay out of sight, so she moved behind the column to make sure that nothing came up behind them.

Karl spotted a familiar curly head of hair, in an Academy mission uniform, and began to laugh.

[You mean Dana? Dana is Rae's human now?] Karl asked.

[She sleeps in Rae's bed, not yours. She's obviously Rae's human.]

Karl got the feeling that there was some level of slander in there, but he decided to let it slide as he raised his hand and stepped out into plain view of the other unit.

There were numerous Hobgoblins dead around them, and Karl saw why they were resting. With roughly even numbers, Awakened soldiers versus Awakened Rank Hobgoblins was a hard fight. They were tough, as well as much larger and stronger than the humans.

The group only had one Ascended Rank member, and he was wounded, with his arm in a sling.

Lotus spread a healing spell around the clearing, reviving the weary soldiers, and bringing a few smiles to the exhausted team.

Dana ran over and gave Karl a hug when she noticed he was at the front of the group, and Rita gave her a startled look, not expecting to have found her here.

"Are you stationed out of this forward operations base now? I heard that they were sending in reinforcements, but I didn't want to go back to the Academy yet, I've been making good progress on my magic out here." Dana asked Karl when she pulled back to look at him.

"Yeah, we are supposed to be operating out of here once the location is upgraded, but we're on an escort mission with Alice to help the military units in the area deal with the larger threats.

We found some more Ogres near you, so we came over to give your group a hand."

Karl's response caught the attention of the other group's team leader. "Did you say there are more Ogres nearby? We've been in nearly constant combat since this morning, and the lads are beat."

The Captain of the team with Karl nodded in understanding. "We can take care of it. The Hawk should be out there somewhere scouting, right? How is the strength of the group looking?"

Karl checked in with Hawk, who was circling back after having made a loop around the area to make certain there were no other imminent threats.

[It's just the Ogres nearby. Then we can go a little further along and find some Giants, or lots and lots of Goblins.]

That didn't sound promising. If there was a huge goblin infestation, it would be one of the priority targets for the region, before they became an even worse problem.

[Will the two units together be able to take out the Goblins?] Karl asked.

[I don't see why not. They have mages, and lots of swords. How many Goblins is each soldier worth? There shouldn't be more than fifteen for every soldier if the groups are together.] Hawk replied.

[Wait, fifteen Goblins for each soldier, if both groups are together? We definitely need to deal with that. We can't let three hundred Goblins just wander loose in the woods. If they come across a regular group, they would wipe it out.] Karl reminded the bird.

Hawk wasn't particularly concerned with that. He could take out three hundred Goblins alone if you gave him enough time, so he didn't see them as a real threat, no matter how easily they could eliminate the human patrols.

Karl walked over to his group's Captain with Alice and Dana following him, then motioned for the other team leader to join them.

"Gentlemen, we have an issue. There is a Goblin tribe nearby, roughly three hundred strong. Individually, they are fragile, but with that sort of numbers, we will have to work together to eliminate them safely." He explained.

Alice nodded. Their job was to assist the military units, not replace them, so they would fight alongside the units, and not volunteer to do it all themselves.

She was glad that Karl was learning that lesson early, instead of volunteering to do insane, nearly suicidal missions for the off chance that it would let him push through a bottleneck and reach new heights.

There was some merit to the other way, and when you were really stuck, some would still try it, but this wasn't the time or place to be playing the hero. They had two entire military units, and while Karl was probably a stronger military force than both combined, they could still deal with huge numbers of Goblins.

Karl explained the situation as Hawk had described it, and the two teams started to make plans to ambush the Goblins before they could start to move again. They weren't the only enemies still in the area, and if they managed to link up with something stronger and smarter, they would become much more dangerous.

"Just this morning, we came across an infant Chimera. If the Goblins get the help of something like that, we will be in real trouble." The other team's leader explained.

"A chimera?" Karl asked.

Dana shuddered at the memory and nodded, then took out a poison gland from her storage.

"Scorpion tail, dragon head and wings on a Lion's body. Absolutely terrifying, and both venomous and capable of breathing a toxic cloud. We were prepared, but we still almost didn't win, and it was just an infant, hardly larger than a house cat." She agreed.

That was a bit of a shame. A chimera might make a good partner for Thor. They were both big and durable. Plus, if they were something like Lions, they might be playful enough to keep the Lightning Cerro entertained.

"Alright, we will split into three teams. The two military units separate, and then the Mercenaries. Dana, you're with them. The mercenary group will lead the strike, while the military units take the flanks and encircle the Goblin camp to prevent them from fleeing.

We will signal the attack when we're in position, so hold back for a moment when you get close." Karl's team Captain announced.

Alice nodded, and called the rest of the team over.

"We've gained an Awakened Mage. We will attack the close side when the signal is given. Thor, Karl and the spider Golems are on the front line. Because of the numbers, ranged will not be holding back. I will keep my Golem back to protect against encirclement." Alice announced.

"I can summon a pair of Golems as well. Stone Golems. Do you want them at the front or the back?" Dana asked.

Alice considered that for a second. "Send them to the front. Most of the fighting will be there, and we've got Tessa with us if something gets past my Golem. She might be a cleric, but most warriors wouldn't be able to take her in a fight."

Tessa looked a bit crestfallen that she couldn't be up with Thor, but as Alice started to describe the plan, she realized they would only be a few steps back. That was close enough to activate her close range skills, and she would be able to step forward and touch him for the direct contact ones.

Lotus was preparing spells, layering them on her staff in preparation for the battle. Karl wasn't sure what she was planning, but it almost felt like they were precast, and waiting for a target. That might be her way of spreading out the stamina draw of extended mana use, but her techniques were her own.

"Alright, everyone move out." The Captain called.

The military units went first, and then the mercenary group started to move forward. Everyone was using Hawk as a reference point, as he was circling the area over the Goblin tribe. They would only see him every minute or two, but it was enough to let them know where they should be headed.

The only thing the soldiers regretted was not giving Karl a subvocal microphone so that he could relay Hawk's observations in real time.

## Chapter 193 Green But Not Lizards

Fifty metres from the Goblin Tribe, they paused to wait for the military units' orders.

[There are more monsters coming, you guys are really slow.] Hawk chastised them.

[What's coming?] Karl asked, wondering if it needed to be relayed.

[Orcs maybe? Really big green things that aren't lizards. About twenty of them. They are coming from the far side of the camp from you, so you can fight them last.]

Karl whispered the update into the handheld radio that Alice was carrying, and got back a click from the Captain in return, letting him know that he understood but couldn't speak right now.

Then came the single tone to start the attack, and Karl led the charge into the camp with Thor beside him.

[Remember, not too far in. Everyone is following us this time.] Karl reminded him.

He turned the flat of his sword on the closest guard, and swatted him like a cricket ball, sending the goblin flying halfway across the camp before landing in a crumpled heap.

Alice gave him a look as if to say "seriously" as the camp turned to face them, and the Goblins began to form up and charge their way.

The spider golems raced past everyone, tearing apart Goblins at a frantic pace, and every bit as messy as Rae when she attacked them the first time. Now she was more careful, in case she got Goblin blood in her mouth, but compared to the two Golems, Thor's crushing attacks and Karl's hurled bodies were only a minor distraction.

That was when the military units struck, cutting into the side of the camp with a wave of spells before they charged forward.

It was textbook perfect. Not a single one of the Goblins was watching the flanks when the attack started, and they fell by the dozens.

Karl swept through the Goblins with Rend, using lower power and wide swings of his sword to send out arcs of energy that sliced through waves of them, while Hawk rained down huge fiery explosions from the air. He had gotten the dispersed version of Fireball to work, and the effect was terrifying in a Goblin camp.

Then, the Spider Golems expanded to five metres tall, and Rae began to laugh hysterically.

The Goblins were terrified, but the Golems had no intentions of slowing down. Lotus looked inordinately proud of herself for the [Giant Growth] spell, which only worked on plant type lifeforms.

The Goblins couldn't even flee, they were being slaughtered wholesale, and the enlarged golems could spear multiple Goblins per second while running on six of their eight legs.

But the Orcs were here, and they weren't about to miss out on a good fight.

It was the screams from the military units that attracted Karl's attention to the disaster about to unfold. Six Orcs, green skinned humanoids, two and a half metres tall, with elongated lower tusks and black dreadlocks, had charged into the military lines, and their blades were shattering the [Guard] abilities of the warriors like glass.

[Spider Golems, go help the soldiers until I can get there.] Karl ordered.

They were the only ones that could move across the camp that quickly, but the whole group was moving forward at a steady walk.

The spider golems reached the Orcs in only a few seconds, and the military unit retreated to let them fight, but the Orcs also split up, three to a Golem. They had tactics, and while one kept the Golem busy, two hacked each of them apart faster than Lotus could repair them.

Rae was shocked. Her golems were more durable than she was, so if she had gone with them, wouldn't she have been hacked apart as well?

She summoned another pair as the Orcs turned back to the military unit, but they would be too late to get there before the unit was in trouble again.

Alice threw a barrier over the first rank of warriors in the military unit, but it was only of limited use as the Orcs knew [Slash] and half of the attacks bypassed them to hit the ranks behind them.

In order to allow them to fight, she had to cast it on their physical shields, and the Orcs were smart or experienced enough to know how to work around that.

Karl didn't need to be ordered to change his direction and order Thor to charge at the Orcs.

Tessa was right behind them, and the others were doing their best to keep up. With his increased strength, Karl could cover an easy five metres per running step, leaping over the Goblin defenders who were knocked to the ground by the force of his stride if they got too close.

The Orcs recognized the threat as soon as the trio approached with the Spider Golems, now back at normal size, surrounding them, and the largest of them did just as Karl had to begin the fight, and swatted at the closest warrior with the flat of his blade, sending the man flying out of the way to clear the battlefield between the Champion and Karl.

His short sword was going to be woefully inadequate for this, but Karl was going to have to make the best of it, and he leapt straight for the Orc Champion, using Shred and Rend together on his blade as he thrust it forward.

The Orc chuckled as he saw the much shorter human coming at him, but when their blades met, his two-handed sword was thrown wide by Karl's strength, and the Orc Champion took a deep wound across his chest as he turned out of the way.

Drawing on his unarmed combat training, Karl kicked the Orc's feet out from under him as soon as he landed, and followed up with a full-strength slash.

The two blades met with an explosion of skills, and the Orc found himself disarmed at the end of the clash, missing a hand.

But his other fist came up and crashed into Karl's Refreshing Lightning barrier, sending him staggering back.

Beside him, Tessa was sitting on Thor's back, using her flail mace to keep two Orcs at bay, and constantly refreshing the enhancement spells on her and Thor.

She enhanced Karl again as he charged back at the fallen champion, who had grabbed a fallen shield in one oversized hand as he got to his feet.

Karl drove his blade forward again, straight through the shield, and into the Champion's chest, knocking him back to the ground with the force of their collision.

He narrowly avoided having his head taken by the blade of another Orc as he rolled over, but it was too late for the Orc champion. Karl's blade had driven straight through its heart, with a shield impaled on the blade.

Karl reached around for another weapon and found the oversized two-handed blade from the Orc Champion. It was heavy, but at the moment, that didn't matter at all.

Karl surrounded it with the Lightning Barrier and parried the next attack that came his way.

The Orc in front of him was moving much slower than expected, restricted by Alice's wind magic, and Shred took its head without difficulty, leaving Karl briefly disengaged from the group.

The Golems were dealing with two, and Thor had another occupied with Tessa, but the others had already fallen.

A volley of condensed fireballs from above hit the Orc facing Thor, adding more burns to his already damaged body, and the Cerro's horns speared its chest right before Tessa's chain mace crushed the creature's head.

That weapon, glowing with golden holy light, couldn't be underestimated.

Karl gave the Orc Champion's blade a twirl, getting used to the size and weight, and moved up to engage the other Orcs. He didn't need to be at the front, the Golems had that, but he did need a good angle to attack from, and Alice's golem was as tall as the Orcs were, impossible to attack around.

The mages were having the same problem. In a crowded fight, it was challenging to get a direct line to anything that you wanted to attack, especially when you were trying to maintain a safe distance.

As much as he didn't want to, Karl found himself only a few metres from the Orcs when he threw his next Rend attack at them with a downward swing of his newly acquired blade.

The attack hit, and the formerly dull blade began to glow with a faint red light. It felt more natural in Karl's hand, as if he had used this weapon for years. The other Orc was surrounded, with no easy space for Karl to get an attack in, so he turned to the Goblin tribe and sent a wave of Rend across the camp, a metre above the ground.

The blade glowed brighter as the Goblins fell in a wave of destruction, and then Karl shivered as a wave of power flowed through him. He couldn't say for certain, but the blade felt like it was stealing the life force of the Goblins and transferring a bit of it to him, which then flowed to his beasts.

## Chapter 194 Headcount

The battle was over, with the Goblin tribe and the invading Orcs all dead, but not without a grave cost. Even the healing magic of the four clerics present couldn't save five of the members of the other group, which had been attacked by the Orcs.

They had been killed in a single strike, with no time to heal them or save their lives.

"Headcount." The Captain of Karl's group asked wearily.

"One down, seriously injured and recuperating." Their cleric replied.

"Five dead, including the Major, two injured." The other cleric replied.

The Captain sighed and shook his head. That Orc attack had been too much. From the moment that they had killed two Ascended Golems in a matter of seconds, he knew that there would be casualties, but losing a Major, the other Ascended warrior here, had been unexpected.

The second group couldn't continue alone without him. It was simply too dangerous out here to allow them to go on without an Ascended Rank leader, especially with their diminished numbers.

While the soldiers mourned the loss of their own, and the clerics did last rites, while finishing the healing of the wounded, Karl searched the bodies. The two-handed blade had bonded with him, and when he thought of dismissing it, it vanished, but remained available as a presence in his mind, similar to the beasts, but just present, and not in a space.

There were magical blades on all the Orc warriors, which made him wonder where they had come from. Even for an elite group, that was too well armed. They had faced Commander Rank Ogres before, and they hadn't been anywhere near this level of equipped.

But the blades were almost all they had. There were no coins on the bodies, and their decorations were all made of bones and teeth. Even their armour was hardened monster leather, though it was tattered now, and unsalvageable.

Alice came over to inspect the bodies, while the clerics came to inspect the weapons Karl had gathered, after stopping to pat and congratulate Thor, who was celebrating the fact that he had been a Cerro Knight for the battle.

"These blades are all magical. Most of them are just common grade enhanced blades, but this one is a blade of Skill. It will reduce skill cost use." Tessa explained.

Karl smiled. It was the second time that he had observed that effect, and the other blade was in the hands of Bob Mackenzie.

"Did you need it, Elite?" The Captain asked Karl when he noticed the smile.

Karl shook his head. "I bonded with the two-handed blade I took off the Champion."

Tessa made a grabby gesture, and Karl took it out to hand to her. She turned it over in her hands, reading the inscriptions, and becoming increasingly confused.

"I have no idea what that is supposed to do. It says the effect is called the Champion's Reaping, but there isn't a description, and the other runes don't make much sense. They're in Orcish, not the common magical language, but I am at least a little familiar with them." She explained.

"That's alright, I know what it does. It's a form of life drain." Karl explained.

Tessa nodded, then handed the blade back. "Life Drain is good. Is it the healing or the strengthening sort?"

"Strengthening, I think. I wasn't injured to start with, but it didn't feel like healing." Karl replied.

"That might be even better for you, at least for now. You have a whole team with you, and the Refreshing Lightning, which slowly heals you on its own. So, having a stacking combat damage effect will make you more effective in a battle.

We will have to examine these bodies more closely, as I have reason to think that they might be close to peak Ascended Orcs, but if command decides that they were low Commander Rank, there will be extra awards for everyone, including the families of the fallen." Tessa announced.

"I can store them as well, so we can drop them at the base camp for someone else to decide." Karl suggested.

Alice shook her head. "Unless one of the beasts wants them, there is no need. They will accept Tessa's judgment on the matter. The outcome of the battle should be enough for them to understand just how dangerous this situation was, especially when they struck in the middle of another battle."

The four clerics all examined the bodies, with increasingly grave expressions.

"We would say that there were two Commander Rank Orcs, and four high Ascended ones. This needs to be reported to the base camp. It is way outside the threat assessment for the area." The cleric that had come with their army unit announced.

The Captain nodded and began to send the message back to Command.

He nodded along with whatever their response was, and then his face turned severe.

"They say that there are no other signs of monsters outside the danger rating, so we are to merge units and continue with our mission." He informed the group.

That wasn't quite what the second group had been hoping to hear. They had just lost half their team, close friends and comrades. Continuing the mission was the last thing they wanted to do today.

The first thing that needed to be done was to dig proper graves for the soldiers, and redistribute their supplies. Fortunately, they had a few skilled mages, who could dig proper graves with magic, while Thor used his horns to throw the Goblins into a number of huge piles in the middle of the camp.

He just used his upper horns like a shovel, as the Goblins had died in waves. He pushed them together into piles, gathered close enough that they would burn and leave the area cleansed.

The unit gathered for the last rites, standing in orderly lines with the civilians off to the side. The priests attached to the units gave a Eulogy before the bodies were lowered, and the soldiers shovelled the grave full again.

Once everything was finished, they lit fire to the piles of Goblins, and the second team tossed the fully looted bodies of the Orcs on top of the piles.

Hawk went back on patrol once the fires were burning, to see what would be drawn to their position by the fire. Many monsters would come either for the smell or the smoke, and they didn't want to end up surrounded.

[East is clear. If you go that way, you can get away from the things coming, and then fight with a small group of Ogres, weak ones.] Hawk suggested.

[Close enough for me.]

Karl relayed the messages, and the Captain got everyone moving, moving away from the battlefield with the promise of easier fights to come. It wasn't much, but anything had to be better than this battle had been, they assumed.

After fifteen minutes, they came across the Ogres, three juvenile Awakened Rank males, which the enraged and grieving soldiers tore into with everything they had to give. It seemed to work, and once the battle was over they were more focused, and it was time to head back to the base camp for the night.

Forward Command hadn't prohibited them from returning, and the unit needed the normalcy for the night, so the Captain turned the back for the camp, intending to be there before dark.

## Chapter 195 Return To Base

Hawk kept scouting as they returned to base, and Karl realized that while they got closer to the base, the monsters became more sparse and weaker. Groups of five and ten Goblins at the Common Grade, a single lizardman, and threats at that level were all that the short range scouts of the base would have found.

But the further he flew away from the base, the stronger and more numerous the monsters became.

So, the problem wasn't that they had found unexpected monsters, it was that the limited scouting that the base had done hadn't given them a proper expectation of the monsters which were in the region.

The Captain had determined this as well, and as they approached the base, everyone could see his resolve to have a "discussion" with the base commander and the head of intelligence.

They had flown multiple helicopters over the region, they should have some sort of idea what was there, but it seemed that nobody was even looking out the windows.

They were met at the edge of camp by a supply sergeant with a clipboard in his hands. "Captain. Are you in for the night? Our barracks are entirely full at the moment, triple raked. Would it be too much to ask you to set up on the edge of the base? We have more barracks tents, but no place left to put them."

Karl looked inside one of the barracks tents, at the rough, stretched canvas cots, and sighed.

"Alice, permission to set up a scouting position in the trees?" He requested.

The supply Sergeant thought that was a wonderful idea because he knew they were short on decent scouts, while Alice wasn't quite as sold on the idea of sleeping in a spiderweb in a tree.

But after a look at the surplus, bargain brand cots, she had a change of mind.

"Captain, my team will set up further out in an elevated position for the evening. We will rejoin you after breakfast for patrols tomorrow." She announced.

"Understood. Unit, grab the barracks supplies and get to work. I want them set up and the stove burning to get everything dried and heated by the time that I get back from my meeting." The Captain announced.

The soldiers nearby made a gesture of condolences for the base commander, and anyone else who might happen to be in the room. None of the soldiers from the base knew what had happened on his mission, but it was obvious that he was not happy about it.

Alice turned to Karl with a serious look as the others got to work. "We're trusting you on this one. Don't let us down."

Hawk already had the tree picked out, and Rae got right to work building a new fort. Again, it was as far up the tallest tree in the area as she could get it, and blended into the leaves, with some branches pulled down as cover.

She had only gone a hundred metres from the edge of camp to set up, but Karl doubted that anyone in the base had even noticed. They were watching the ground, and only the immediate area around the camp, which was a terrible defensive choice for a remote location, on par with the Goblins level of simple thinking.

Karl could tell he wasn't the only one wondering who was in charge here, and how they had gotten the assignment. Forward bases were always run by the army, but not every officer was suited to life anywhere but behind a desk.

It was possible that someone in one of those roles had been sent out here "for experience" leading up to a promotion, and they were just making a mess of things.

It only took Rae a few minutes to finish as the group watched from down below, and Alice finally noticed that their group consisted of six people now, not five. She gave Dana a curious look, which was returned with Dana's best pleading face.

"Volunteers and Mercenaries have to set up their own tent, we're not attached to the military units. You're not going to make me sleep in the dirt when there's plenty of room up here, are you?" She begged.

Alice smirked at Karl and nodded her acceptance. "Fine, you're with us until further notice. I'm sure that Rae made enough space for you. I know that you two are good friends."

That made Dana laugh, recalling all the times that Jill, her personal tutor, had been webbed by Rae to prevent her from waking them up.

Rae sent down a rope ladder, and the whole group sighed, realizing just how far up the tree their fort was built.

"How about this. Hold on to the ladder, and I will have Rae pull it up into the fort, so you don't have to climb? It will be faster and easier for everyone." Karl suggested.

That seemed like a sketchy idea as well, being pulled a dozen stories into the air on a rope ladder made of silk, but it was better than climbing the ladder.

[You come up first.] Rae insisted.

Karl smirked as he realized she had no intentions of pulling everyone, just him, and he would have to raise the rest. But it was no problem, he could run up the ladder in thirty seconds or less.

"I will go first and help everyone up. I've got the strength." Karl explained after he finished talking to Rae.

Karl ran up the ladder, and the others began to climb. They started with the smallest, so the first on the ladder was Lotus, then Dana, then Sergeant Rita, at which point Karl hauled the ladder up into the fort, just in case it didn't hold up to five people's weight.

Rae was slightly insulted at that, but attributed it to Karl's lack of faith in his enhanced strength to actually lift them all.

Once they were up, Karl sent the ladder back down, and began to haul up Alice and Tessa, while Lotus happily explored the small fort.

"This place is incredible, but why build it with that branch extending through the room?" She asked.

"Oh, that would likely be because Doug, the Green Dragon Cleric that we had with us during our last deployment, liked to turn a branch into a table to work and cook on. So, Rae left you a branch to work with." Karl explained.

"That is brilliant. I wish I had thought of that ages ago, shaping branches is so easy." Lotus laughed, and then ran over to give Rae a hug.

The spider was somewhat mystified by the sudden affection, but she wasn't going to complain. If Thor's presence had taught them anything, it was that there were benefits to everyone liking you.

Karl finished bringing the last two up, and Alice looked around the fort.

"It's waterproof, with a double outer shell to keep the wind down, a cooking table, plenty of springy net for sleeping, and loose woven windows all around, so we can scout from this position. I must say, this is a wonderful base, Rae." Alice congratulated her.

The spider gave her a head bump, then vanished back into her space to rest in her own den for the afternoon. It was almost sundown, and she wanted to get some real sleep before she took her turn on watch after full dark.

Hawk had a nest built at the very top of the tree, where he could see everything that was going on around them, and keep watch for any stronger monsters that got brave and came near the camp.

"Alright, here is your watch schedule. We will watch in pairs, since there are six of us. I will take early watch with Dana, the second watch will be Rita and Lotus, the third watch will be Karl and Tessa."

That made sense. It did the best to give them a warrior and a caster on each watch, so that the skills they had were diversified if there was an attack.

Karl nodded in agreement. "Hawk will keep watch until full dark, then Rae will take over, as she doesn't need any light to see. Hawk will return to duty when we head out in the morning, while Rae will sleep again once my watch starts, or once the sun starts to come up, depending on how she feels."

Alice smiled at that. In her estimation, Rae was the cat to Thor's dog, much more whimsy driven and casually violent. If she didn't feel like doing things, you would have to force her, and then she would likely slack. She didn't know for certain, as Karl never seemed to push them to do things they didn't want to, but Alice had her suspicions that Rae had a rebellious streak that would run wild with Malicious Compliance.

## Chapter 196 They're Not Even Looking

That evening, they were treated to the combined efforts of Tessa and Lotus in the kitchen. As they could both use advanced food creation spells, they both worked together to make dinner on the table Lotus had formed, and the results were spectacular.

Doug was a good cook, but these two were artists.

Then, everyone settled in for the night, exhausted from the day.

Karl woke up to the feeling of Rita poking him on the forehead to get him up for his shift, and he realized that he wasn't alone under the blanket. Dana was curled up against him, sound asleep, with her own sleeping bag abandoned half on top of his. She must have rolled over at night, and Karl could see from the smirk on the Sergeant's face that Rita was going to hold this one against him in the future.

Once he was awake, she made a motion to silence him, and then quickly slid under his blanket as Karl got out, replacing him in Dana's arms, while the mage mumbled happily and held on to the Sergeant.

Karl joined Tessa on watch, and saw that the cleric's eyes were golden, just like Hawk's. Not glowing with holy magic, but obviously enhanced with some sort of spell so that she could see better in the dark.

"How is your night sight?" She whispered as Lotus crawled into bed beside Rita and Dana.

"I can see in low light like Hawk, and I can see in zero light using echolocation and thermal imaging like Rae. In the forest like this, with so much ambient noise and movement, I can see pretty well, especially if the target is warm-blooded." Karl explained.

Tessa nodded. "I knew I was in luck with you on watch. Lotus can also see in the dark in her own way. She uses the trees to sense movement around them. It's not as precise, but it gives a good idea of how big the creature is.

I think that Alice and Dana relied mostly on sound, since Alice is a wind mage."

That made Karl wonder if Hawk might pick up some new sensory magic in the future. [Skill Master] was still constantly active, so he was being enhanced to pick up new skills, but unlike Rae, who had learned to make Golems, he hadn't shown them anything new.

That didn't always mean he didn't know it. Just that he hadn't shown or mentioned it if he was using it.

There was no movement near the camp for the first few hours, but near the end of their shift, Karl noticed something large moving in the distance, as if scouting the perimeter of the camp.

"Do you see that? Three large figures, Ogre sized, scouting the camp. They're circling around outside the patrol range so that the guards don't detect them. But the Ogres are close enough that they would be able to smell the humans when the wind is right." Karl whispered to Tessa, while he pointed out the Ogres in the distance.

"Oh, those sneaky bastards. I see them now. Should we go take care of them?" Tessa replied.

"They're headed this way. I think we should just wait, but warn the camp that they're being scouted, in case there are more groups that we can't see from our position."

Tessa smiled and patted Karl on the shoulder. "Good call, very by the book. You've got decent instincts for a first year student."

Karl sighed as he realized that the more experienced cleric was testing him to see what his responses would be, but Karl was getting quite used to how things worked in the wilderness, after having been out here for a few weeks with a group that didn't make their planning some obscure leadership task.

After another half hour, they spotted a second group of Ogres doing the same thing, and again Tessa messaged the base to let them know the current location of both groups.

They hadn't pushed the scouts out, which seemed odd to Karl. But if they couldn't see in the dark, they might just be waiting until it was safer to fight.

Tessa started cooking just before dawn, when she knew that the others would need to be up in half an hour.

The smell woke them up as intended, and Karl could see that the rest of the unit was just starting to get upwardly mobile, but the kitchens in the camp were already hard at work, getting prepared for the day, with the first batch of breakfast ready.

[All team members, be ready to move in one hour.] The Captain of the unit they were attached to announced as Tessa started serving breakfast.

She had come up with the same mushroom steaks that Doug had been so fond of, but cut into thin slices like bacon and wrapped around peppers that were stuffed with something like cheese. It wouldn't be actual cheese, given that it was all plant based, but it was good.

She had also come up with an apple jerky for snacks later, and a fruit and nuts trail mix, which most ate on its own, but Lotus poured into a bowl and then added coffee to, like most would add milk to breakfast cereal.

Not that she needed the caffeine. The nature cleric was already too energetic in the morning.

Lotus smiled at Karl as they finished eating. "We should send Karl down first while we get cleaned up for the day's patrol. One man can only be so lucky, or it will unbalance the world."

Karl laughed. "Well, that's one way to say get out of the fort while we shower. Toss me a water bag, so I can wash up while I'm down there, will you?"

Alice snapped her fingers to get their attention. "We can just set up a dividing curtain. We've got plenty of those, and we're going to want Karl up here to lower us down, or everyone will have to climb that ladder."

Two ground tarps were quickly erected in the fort, sectioning off a portion of the far side, where Lotus hung one of the gravity fed black shower bags she had used her magic to fill with water. You just had to open the spigot, and they would sprinkle water like a shower. They were simple, but effective, and if you left them out in the sun all day, the water would be properly hot in the evening.

It was warm enough thanks to her magic, and Karl took his time shaking the dirt and dust off his worn outfit before setting it aside and preparing to get cleaned up. He didn't recall how many other shower bags there were in the packs, but the ladies would certainly need some time to get clean and dressed before he came back out.

He was about half washed when he heard the curtain move and felt a body against his back. A small finger pressed to his lips to keep him silent, and then two gentle hands began to scrub his back. Once he was clean and rinsed, he was turned around to face the curtain instead of looking out of the window, and he could hear Dana quickly putting her clothes back on before exiting the other side of the section.

It had to be her. Nobody else in the group was that size, and she was the only one that used that particular Academy shampoo.

When he came out, everyone was ready and waiting, and it seemed that there was an agreement not to say anything about the shower. So, Karl pulled the ladder up into the fort until they were only a few metres from the end and looked at the group.

"Who is going down first? Hawk is already on patrol, and the area is clear."

## Chapter 197 Morning Formation

Once everyone was down, Karl slid down the ladder like a rope, and checked his pack to make certain that it was properly secured.

"We have twenty minutes to get back to the camp, no rush. They will be gathering for formation in thirty minutes." Alice informed them, and started heading back.

Karl took his position at the front, using his enhanced eyesight to watch for any threats, but this close to camp, there was nothing to see. Not even the local wildlife dared to venture too close, in case they became a supplementary food product.

The team seemed to be in much better spirits today, but Karl noticed that the Captain now had red badges on his uniform instead of gold. There were still two silver bars for his rank insignia, so he didn't

get busted down from Captain, but it looked like he was on official punishment for however the meeting went the night before.

"There is a meeting with the base Commander before we head out. The whole base, except scouts, are to be in attendance." The Captain greeted them as Karl's group reached the barracks that the others had built last night.

Alice nodded. "Understood. We have Hawk scouting, so we will know what to expect before we head out today. Give him an hour, and he will cover everywhere that we can reach on foot."

The Captain nodded, and led their team to the meeting point, where the other units on station seemed to smirk a little as they cleared the way for him to take the place of honour at the front right of the formation.

It had been deliberately left open for them, a not so subtle nod to the fact that the other units agreed that he had been right, but the real shock was when the Base Commander and his adjutant came out.

The Base Commander was wearing Captain's bars, the same as their unit leader, but his collar was loose, and his jacket unbuttoned. His face was bruised and swollen, and from the looks of his shirt, his ribs were wrapped, which would explain the open coat. The adjutant wasn't in any better shape, and Karl could see that his hands were bandaged, and he was limping.

They had healers on base. Lots of them. So if he was still in that bad of shape, the Captain either beat him near to death, or the healers refused to work on him, which would be a massive case of insubordination.

"Attention." The Sergeant at the front of the formation called, bringing everyone to order as the Commander took the stage.

The wounded man cleared his throat and put on a stern face, as if everyone couldn't see that he still had one eye mostly swollen shut.

"It has been brought to my attention that our limited patrol radius has led to some inadequacies in the way that the threat level of the region has been assessed." He began.

That was the understatement of the day.

"As such, we will be reordering our patrols, beginning today. The new routes and zones are up on the board. I will expect a full report on every zone on my desk by zero four hundred tomorrow morning. That is all."

He stepped down off the crude stage, flinching at the pressure on his ribs, and the Sergeant dismissed everyone, sending them off to find their new patrol routes.

Just as they were yesterday, Karl's group was assigned to "Threat Mitigation" also known as the roaming groups. They would go wherever there were reports of more dangerous monsters, and deal with them before they became a threat to the base.

Yesterday, there weren't any recorded, so they just wandered. But today, Hawk had a rather interesting list ready for them.

He had found all sorts of monsters. Big groups, little groups, powerful loners, small groups with a powerful leader. A bit of everything, as should have been expected of a region where only the sector closest to the base had even been patrolled.

They exited the base so that their reports didn't scare the Awakened and Common Rank troops that had been stationed here, and then the Captain turned to Karl for the scouting details.

"If we start at the south, we have two groups of Ascended Ogres, both small groups. Then we have a Goblin Camp, this time with no other large monsters nearby. After that, continuing west around the zone, we have a group of Lizardmen with an Ascended leader, then a group of four Awakened Rank Giants. I will update you if that positioning changes." Karl informed him.

"You heard the man. Let's go clean up this mess before the Inquisitors get here and start to waste our time." The Captain announced.

For matters between Elites of the same Rank, the church usually stepped in if they couldn't settle it peacefully. If the Inquisition was coming, either the Base Commander had filed a complaint about being

beaten senseless, or the Captain had filed a complaint for negligence and incompetence leading to the death of Elites.

Possibly both.

The first group of Ogres was one that was on patrol during the night, and Karl was happy to get rid of them so that they couldn't report back to whatever had sent them to scout the area.

They were still continuing their route, circling the base, when the group caught up to them, and the Ogres brought out their secret weapon. They had managed to obtain a military issue riot shield somewhere, probably from a group that was forced to flee, and the larger of the two charged straight at Karl.

Karl left his regular blade sheathed, and took out the bonded two-handed sword, to better deal with the larger target.

He charged it with [Shred], and used his enhanced strength to swing at the shield of the charging Ogre.

As should have been expected of an Awakened Grade Riot shield, it was sliced smoothly in half by the enormous blade, taking the Ogre's lower arm with it.

Then Karl put his shoulder down to duck under the Ogre's club, and charged forward to do his best impression of a shoulder toss on a creature twice his height.

Then he called Thor out, and the Cerro appeared behind the other Ogre, who was startled into stopping and attacking the incoming ball of Thor's tail, which brutally transmitted an [Earthquake] through the Ogre's body.

The sound of cracking bones was clearly audible to everyone, but before the Ogre could do anything to defend itself, the first wave of attacks from the Mages was there, and the Ogre was dead.

The Captain cleared his throat. "Good work everyone. Collect the heads, we will need proof of our kills for the next few days."

That just about settled the debate about what was going on with the Base Commander. If they really did return with a bunch of Ascended Rank and higher trophies, he would be on the hook for not doing his job. The Captain would still likely get charges for beating him, but they were both the same Military Rank, so it wouldn't be as serious as if he had hit a superior officer.

"Keep moving. If they've got anything valuable on them, hold on to it, and we will sort it all at the end of the day. I want a productivity record today. We will show them who doesn't know what a Commander Rank monster looks like." The Captain insisted.

## Chapter 198 Productivity

As the day wore down, the group found themselves at the far side of the region, much too far to work their way back to base before dark. That was almost certainly a deliberate effort on the part of the Captain, but nobody in the unit really minded.

They had taken six Ascended and a Commander Rank trophy today, and if Hawk's scouting was right, there was a chance to get two more Commander Rank monsters in the morning.

Without Karl's team, that would never happen for them, but it would be a potent reminder of the dangers of an incompetent leader when they brought them back to camp.

For the first time on this mission, Karl actually helped set up tents that night, one large canvas tent that was erected by tying the peak of the roof to two different trees. It had been stored in Tessa's bag, and she hadn't brought any poles, as she could just grow them herself, or use spears from the warriors and a length of rope, but the process was still much smoother than Karl expected.

Tie the peak, tie the corners out, and then spike the bottom of the walls to the ground.

Fortunately, everyone else had a lot of practice with this process.

Then, once it was up, Karl realized that this sleeping arrangement was much more crowded than he was used to. They had found a nice level and soft spot to set up, but they would all be packed in shoulder to shoulder inside the tent.

That sounded great for the first few minutes, until Karl realized that he was between Lotus, who insisted on being at the door, and Dana, who was possibly the world's most restless sleeper. Tonight, they were on the ground, and the sleeping bags were zipped up and not laid out like blankets, so she wasn't going far, but she was more active at night than she was while awake.

[Want me to just wrap her up? She sleeps so much better when she's in a hammock.] Rae suggested, spending the night in her space, since nobody on their team had guard duty.

[I'm sure she will be fine.] Karl laughed as Dana tossed one last time, then finally fell still.

Morning came far too early the next day, and Karl activated [Refreshing Lightning] to take the stiffness out of his muscles from the uncomfortable sleeping position.

"That's just cheating. I'm not sure why, but I feel like someone beat me up in my sleep." Dana muttered as she packed her sleeping bag back into her gear.

Lotus laughed at her complaint. "Do we need to assign someone to keep you still while you sleep? You were tossing and turning for like an hour last night before you settled down."

Dana shook her head. "It's just been a strange couple of days. I should be fine tonight."

The team gathered to eat and make their plan to check the spots that Hawk was off to scout this morning. If nothing much had changed, they should be able to get at least one or two more Ascended or higher Rank beasts in the zone before lunch. After that, it would be up to whoever called in the reports to send them to more dangerous fights.

They set out as soon as everything was packed up, and Hawk led them to their prime target of the morning, a Commander Rank Giant, with six Awakened Rank Ogres. With Alice along, they shouldn't have too many problems with the Giant, and the regular military unit could take on six Awakened Ogres, now that they had reinforcements from the depleted unit. So, spirits were high as they moved toward the target.

[There are poachers! Kill Stealers! Evildoers!] Hawk warned.

[Calm down, what do they look like? Can they even kill steal a Commander Rank Giant from us?] Karl replied.

[The smashy ones in white. They're stealing our Giant.] Hawk complained.

"I think there is a church security team already on site. Hawk just warned me that someone is trying to steal our kill." Karl warned the Captain.

The older Elite's face went grim, and he motioned for the team to increase their speed.

If the church had believed the Base Commander, that team wouldn't be strong enough to deal with the Giant, and if they had, it was better that he was right there when it died, just in case the Base Commander had called in a favour.

Thor happily crashed through the undergrowth as he chased Karl and the Captain through the woods, so when they arrived at the battle in progress, The Church Guard split to face them as if they were a threat.

"The beasts are with me." Karl called as he chased Thor into the crowd of Ogres accompanying the Giant.

The Lightning Cerro sent one flying into the air, where it was intercepted by Rae's Golems, which seemed to appear out of nowhere.

The spider had chosen to sit this battle out and remain in her nest, but the Golems were dispatched to fight in her place. It was just Awakened Ogres, if they got into it with the Commander, she would get out of bed.

As annoyed as he was with her slacking, Karl had to admit that she had a point. This fight was hardly worth getting out of bed for, and if the Church Guard wasn't in the way, Thor would have charged right through it to the real fight.

The Golems and the Mages were working together to eliminate the Ogres, and Karl found himself just leisurely walking through the battlefield up to the High Priest, who had turned to greet him.

"Are you the team leader of this expedition?" The old man asked.

"No, High Priest. I am Ascended Elite Karl, the frontline warrior for the group. We have Commander Alice and a military Captain with us as the team leaders."

The man nodded, and gestured toward the Giant. "Care to lend a hand?"

Karl smiled and focused a [Shred] attack to tear apart the armoured plating on the Giant's back.

Then the Spider Golems moved in with their piercing forelegs and began to repeatedly stab through the hole, while Karl attacked the backs of the Giant's knees.

The massive warrior couldn't turn around, the Church Guard had him occupied from the front, so the attack on the legs went completely unnoticed until it was too late, and the beast was falling.

With a running leap and a massive overhead chop, Karl removed the head from the severely injured Giant's shoulders, sending it rolling across the ground to stop at the High Priest's feet.

Another wonderful "Just as Planned" moment that Karl wished he could take credit for.

In the distance, Alice clapped as she walked across the battlefield.

Unlike Karl, who had superhuman strength, enhanced by not one but two Ascended Rank magical items, she was forced to walk under her own power, which meant Karl and Thor had left her and the back of the column clear out of sight when they charged into battle.

She hadn't even known that there were Church Guards here until she had seen them, she was too far away to hear his warning to the Captain.

Alice and the Captain joined Karl at the fallen Giant, where the Church Guard were giving Karl somewhat reverent looks.

"Showoff." The Captain muttered when he walked up, which made the High Priest laugh.

"He's an enthusiastic one, for certain. I don't reckon that I've ever seen Spiders as Golems before, though. Odd choice." The old man replied.

"Strange to see them summoned by a warrior as well." One of the Church Guards added.

That made the old man pause and do a double take at Karl. The Guard had a valid point there. Warriors didn't summon golems.

"I'm a Beast Master, not a Warrior. The Golems are summoned by one of my Companions." Karl explained.

Thor took that opportunity to come over and get Alice to scratch his head in that good spot just between his eyes. It was his favourite trick to calm tensions, and it had the added benefit of having his head rubbed.

A win-win situation, really.

"Well, we can say for certain that there are Commander Rank threats in the area, and that they were not accounted for in the scouting reports. How long has your team been in the area?" The High Priest asked.

The Commander frowned. "We just got in yesterday. It was a bit of a disaster, there is an official report filed already."

The old man nodded. "Oh, you're that team. Well, this saves us some time. Our Guards will be with you for the remainder of the day. See if you can't find more high-level threats, and they will help eliminate them."

Chapter 199 The Value Of A Scout

[Hawk, you know what to do. Find us some high danger threats within the zone. As many in high Ascended and Commander as possible.] Karl instructed.

[Four hundred metres north. If you start moving now, you will meet with a lone Commander Rank Troll, thing. Maybe it's not a troll? Sure is ugly.]

"The scout says that we've got a large Troll four hundred metres north. If we move fast, we can intercept it before it gets to a regular patrol group." Karl informed the gathered leadership group.

"I didn't hear anything on the radio." The High Priest replied, with a gesture to his earbud.

"Mental communication between me and my Dragon Hawk. The Troll is moving fast, so I need to go if we're going to intercept it." Karl replied.

Tessa threw herself onto Thor's back and grabbed the short spikes on his ridge.

"Off we go."

And Thor took off in the direction of the threat, with Karl chasing him, and a small group of the Church Guard in hot pursuit. They had to see this battle, to ensure that nobody was lying or bringing in bodies from other zones. It seemed unlikely that this team would, when they had the power that they did, but anything was possible.

Karl overtook Thor as the beast had to slow down to avoid running into trees or throwing Tessa off, and was the first to come across what Hawk had called a Troll.

That might be what it was, but Karl had never seen anything quite that large and ugly before. It was six metres tall, covered in moss and where there was skin visible, it was pustulent and rotted. It almost looked like it was undead, but Karl could see the wounded areas knitting themselves together even as they rotted and fell apart in other areas.

That was definitely not something that he wanted to fight in close combat.

[Hawk, light this thing up. I think a little fire will improve the situation.] Karl instructed.

The barrage of fireballs seemed to sink into the creature and vanish, but they left smoking craters in the skin, which was slowly closing the gaps as Karl watched.

[We need more attack power.] Karl informed the others.

Rae was as reluctant to touch that thing as Karl was, but to her credit, she did come out to fight, and brought the Golems with her.

They shredded the corpulent flesh from the Troll, leaving rancid piles on the ground, and the creature began to gurgle some sort of war cry.

"Keep at it, the more flesh we rend off, the slower it is regenerating." Karl cheered the others on as he used [Shred] to hack a large portion of arm fat off, trying to determine where the actual muscles were.

Hawk lit the ground on fire, burning the disgusting piles of flesh, just as the Church Guard arrived on the scene.

"Dragons, what in the world is that smell?" One of them asked, as he activated a glowing golden circle, which did as much to burn away the severed flesh as Hawk's fire.

It also caused the outer layer of the Troll to begin smoking, and the plant life to burn away, showing the disgusting body underneath.

Like Karl, everyone was throwing ranged attacks at the beast, while Rae and her Golems did their best to tear away bits of flesh with their forelimbs.

"Call back your spider and have her stand in the purifying light. That Troll is infected with the swamp blight, and it kills almost anything in minutes. Trolls just regenerate too fast for it to kill them, so it's been wandering around blind." The leader of the reinforcements insisted.

Rae didn't need to be told twice. Before he even stopped speaking, she was next to the Guard in his cleansing light, but not close enough that she might bump into him and transfer the filth.

The Golems had no need to slow down. They weren't living things, and the beast was incapable of hitting them as they tore its back apart.

"Is it just me, or is this thing actually happy to die?" Karl asked as the Church Guard focused their attacks to take out the creature's chest.

The Guard shook his head. "It's trying to get us to cut enough of the corruption away that it can cure itself. Trolls of that sort don't die so easily. If you don't burn the bodies, they'll come back from just a hand eventually."

So, the disease was more susceptible to destruction than the troll itself was, and once they had burned all the infected body parts away, it might theoretically be back to full strength.

[Hawk, keep using fire. The troll can't regenerate fire damage as well.] Karl instructed.

As they fought, more of the fast-moving warriors were joining the battle, encircling the troll and hacking away at it, while making sure the ground stayed burning, so that the severed flesh didn't try to regenerate into more blighted trolls.

Slowly, painfully slowly, the creature was brought down, hacked into tiny bits, and then the bits were burned to ash to ensure that it didn't regenerate.

"Well, that was unexpectedly disgusting. Even after burning and purifying it, the area still smells horrific." Karl noted.

"It will take a bit more cleansing before any of us can leave the area. Especially for the Cerro and the spider, who actually came into contact with it." Tessa explained.

She was still riding Thor, and hadn't gotten down when he had charged into battle, she had decided that it was better to give him combat instructions instead, to avoid having him dig his horns into the beast and end up infected himself.

He had fought the whole battle with his tail, and with Tessa enhancing him while she rode on his back, but mostly they remained at the edge of the battlefield, where Earthquake could reach the target, but they wouldn't suffer any splash damage.

The battle was long finished before the rest of the team made it to them, and the Guard Commander gave his report to the High Priest, who cast an additional cleansing on the area, as the creature was Commander Rank, and might have survived the flames of lower ranked Elites somehow.

"This is worse than I feared. The blight is a terrible thing, but more importantly, we don't know where it started, or how many other creatures it might have spread the disease to." The High Priest sighed.

The Captain of Karl's team nodded gravely. "That sounds like a real conundrum for the Church. This is the first signs I've seen of the blight here as well, but it's only our third day. Would you like to split a team off to search for the source while we deal with the other ranking monsters that the Dragon Hawk has reported?

There are still more threats that the Awakened Rank teams here are not prepared to deal with, and plenty more that the Common Grade teams with Awakened leadership won't be able to deal with at all."

The High Priest shook his head. "I will call in a scout team to these coordinates, and they will track the blighted troll back to its source. They have the skills to do it. But we are assigned to you and your team until the other matter is settled."

## Chapter 200 Guided Hunting Tour

For the remainder of the day, Hawk led them on a merry chase around the mission area, chasing groups of Ascended Monsters, and the occasional Commander Rank monster. As fast as the teams could kill them, Hawk would lead them off to another location.

It was getting so out of hand that they had to reassign Thor to pull the litter full of heads from the defeated high rank beasts, their solid evidence of the Base Commander's incompetence.

Karl had offered to put them in Thor's space, but the High Priest wouldn't hear of it. The trophies going into a separate space introduced the possibility of tampering, and that was not up to church evidence standards.

[I think that's all of them. But the humans look tired, we should go to the camp now.] Hawk suggested.

Karl sensed that the desire was not so much because of any empathy for the ones in the group without superhuman strength, but because he could see his nest above the fort from where he was patrolling, and he wanted to go to bed.

As the day had progressed, Thor had moved from Cerro Knight, to beast of burden, to noble pack steed, and now had not only the litter full of heads pulled behind him, but Lotus on his back, as well as both her and Tessa's packs slung over his back.

The extra weight was no burden to the mighty Cerro, but it was funny seeing him all loaded up like a pack mule in the mines, when in reality he could rampage through three quarters of this military unit without any real resistance.

[Lotus doesn't count as cargo, she knows all the best spots to scratch my scales.] Thor countered Karl's line of thought.

The small nature cleric was essentially giving him a free massage as they walked, and earning herself envious looks from the average soldiers, who had been at a jog for most of the day trying to keep up with the number of attackers Hawk was finding.

The sight of the camp was a welcome relief to the unit, and as the outer patrols came into sight, Karl could hear the mages and rogues giving sighs of relief. The warriors had better stamina, but they had still been worked hard today, even if they were late to half of the fights because Hawk had been speed running them through the battles so they could eliminate all the major threats in one day while the Church Guard was with them.

"Unit, prepare to stand down and set camp for the evening. There will be formal questioning tomorrow, along with possible formal punishment announcements. You will be notified of the schedule as you are required." The High Priest announced as they reached the patrols around the camp itself.

Alice looked toward the fort, and the Guard Commander followed her glance.

"Does your team have a camp built nearby?" The sandy haired Guard asked.

"Up in the tallest tree over there. It's some distance from the ground, but perfect for long-distance scouting. We will be available by radio if you require our presence. As I understand it, this is a military matter being adjudicated by the Church for impartiality, so we might not be involved, as we are dispatched Elites, and not a military unit." Alice replied.

The Guard Commander gave her a soft smile. "I doubt that you will get that lucky. As your team is the reason that most of the soldiers in the group are still alive, they are going to want you as material witnesses, and then they will want your team members to corroborate some of the information because when military brass hears a report that says a War Cleric was riding a Lightning Cerro into combat, there will be questions.

The hearings will be live cast back to the Department of Defence."

Tessa laughed. "I am going to enjoy repeating that part of the day. The other Red Dragon Priests are going to be so jealous.

Would you like to follow us to the fort so that you can find it again in the morning when they call for us? Or is it fine if we just find our own way back once we are summoned?"

The Guard gestured for her to lead the way, but he fell in beside Alice, subtly flirting with the mage as they walked.

He looked up into the tree as Karl quickly scaled the ladder, only now realizing that there was a whole fort built up there, hidden in plain sight.

"That is quite the scout base. How did you even assemble that all the way out here? That looks like some sort of fishing net? Did you pack all that out here?" He asked, confused.

"It's all spider silk, spun by Rae, the Bloodbath Spider you met today. The outer layer is sticky, but the insides are not, and they make a proper fort for us to rest in at night, with a waterproof roof and full visibility all the way around for evening scouting, since we have members with night vision." Alice explained.

The Guard looked impressed. "Well, we can't accuse you of slacking on your scouting duties. You're not even technically on duty at night, but you're still keeping tabs on the situation. We have your radio logs, and they will go in the report."

He gave Alice a smart salute, and then turned to return to his unit while everyone climbed onto the ladder.

"We know that you can haul us all up at once, you knocked an Ogre off his feet with a sword strike, and the ladder isn't going to break." Sergeant Rita called up to Karl as they got in place, preventing him from splitting the group in two parts as he had last time.

"You know, we could have Thor throw you up here, and I could catch you as well." He suggested.

Lotus laughed, but nobody else seemed to think that idea was amusing.

Lotus and Tessa got started on dinner, while the others started to clean their gear, and check everything for damage. They had been in a lot of combat lately, and gear wore out at the most unexpected moments if you didn't keep up on it.

Karl found that was true of his belt, which was starting to wear through where his one-handed blade was hung from it.

That seemed like it was too early, but he set it aside for Lotus to patch up with her magic, and began inspecting his blades. Both of them appeared to be in perfect working order, with no damage to them, despite the crude construction of the less used single-handed blade.

His combat outfit was still in good shape, though it could use a good wash. If he had been thinking, he would have washed it with the shower water before he changed and let Alice dry it with wind magic.

The only issue was that you didn't actually want freshly laundered clothes on patrol. Not only did you stand out, but the scent of laundry soap was so out of place that every monster for miles would pick out your presence and be ready for your approach long before you knew they were even present.

Not long after they started cooking, the scout patrols were adjusted so that they passed outside the tree, instead of stopping thirty metres before it. There might not have been an official announcement yet, but it was obvious that things were already being changed in how the base was operated.