

Beast Master 231

Chapter 231 Yeti Clans

Karl followed Hawk's directions to the pack of what turned out to be Yeti, which were essentially furry Orcs in Karl's mind. They were the same size, and though they didn't use weapons and preferred their claws and Ice Magic, they were on the same near human intelligence level.

The group of them stared down Karl as he approached alone out of the trees, then growled when he brought up [Refreshing Lightning] and [Flaming Body]. The Fire magic enraged them, and the pure gall of this human to think that he could take on an entire Yeti Clan on his own showed them that he did not respect them nearly enough.

But Karl wasn't alone, he was just the distraction, and the others had surrounded the group while he postured and wasted time.

[We're in place.] Rae informed him, and Karl launched into action.

His blade swatted away a flurry of ice bolts as the mages summoned their Golems, then Rend blocked the claws of the largest Yeti.

The beast was fast, blindingly fast with the swirl of snow and fog that surrounded it, making it hard for Karl to properly target as they traded strikes.

He saw an opening, and went in for the kill, driving his blade straight into the chest of the oversized beast. But the blade found no purchase, and the ice covered fur simply turned it aside with a cloud of steam as the clashing Elements fought for dominance.

The two of them were evenly matched in power, and the yeti's claws caused Karl's lightning barrier to flicker as it took advantage of his overextension.

The two of them moved back to regroup, completely focused on their own battle, while the other, weaker members of the Yeti Clan were handled by the others.

The Yeti's claws were surrounded by Ice Magic the same way that Karl did with Rend when he was fighting with claws, but against an opponent so much larger, it was better to use the two-handed blade. It could still throw attacks just fine, and he had the skill to use them without an actual weapon now.

But the Yeti was born to the power of Ice. It was no slouch in combat, and for a few minutes, neither of them could get through the other's defences.

The advantage changed as they fought, and Offensive Adaptation began to give Karl the edge, allowing him to reduce the power he was using in the fight, while the Yeti was getting tired. But the final decision was made by Rae, who finished her opponents and drove both sharp forelimbs through the back of the Yeti, impaling it through the heart and lungs, killing it before it even realized it had been ambushed.

[You were taking too long.] She complained.

All the other Yeti were dead, and the group had moved up to make certain they were within range of [Circle of Protection] in case something was attracted to the noise.

[Hawk, what do we have out there?] Karl asked.

[More big walking furry things. Once you get past the next hill, the mountains are all covered in snow, and they're scattered everywhere. I think they live in the caves.]

"Hawk says there are many more Yetis around, and that they're living in caves in the mountains." Karl explained to the group.

"That means this might be the spot. There shouldn't be Yeti here. There shouldn't even be snow here. But there is. I think that we will need to find a safe spot in the mountains and check for entrances to the caves tomorrow morning." Alice instructed.

They still had a lot of daylight left, which would give Hawk time to search for a safe spot for the evening.

[The black clothes people are fighting Yeti ahead on your left, then there are more Yetis coming from every direction except yours toward them.] Hawk informed him in a helpful tone.

"Hawk says that a fight between the Spellswords and the local beasts has attracted every Yeti for a few kilometres." Karl sighed.

"We should go help. If there are that many, it could spell trouble for them. They're here to challenge a beast above their level, not do a mass clearance of the monsters. That's closer to our mission, though our primary purpose is to look for opportunities." Alice agreed.

The way to the battle was clear, as everything was already headed their way, and Karl could hear the frantic battle, and feel the crackling of magic up ahead as the Spellswords fought.

"I will lead the way in, so they don't attack Thor and the others." He called back to the group.

Tessa climbed on Thor, and Rae grabbed Lotus, while Dana and Alice caught rides from Dana's Golems. It was the most energy- efficient way to travel for them, and it would get them to the battle much more quickly than walking.

When Karl arrived, he found that the commotion was focused around Larry and Darryl. They were similarly built, dark haired young men, though the Commander, Larry, was a solid decade older, and Darryl was still a student close to Karl's age. The pair were engaged in a desperate battle against five Ascended Rank Yeti, similar to the one that Karl had been fighting earlier.

The battle was not going well for them, and they were reduced to fighting back to back, despite Larry having a Rank advantage on the beasts.

"The Cerro and spider are mine. We're here to help." Karl called as he charged into the battle, activating the flames on his sword to distract the Yeti Clans.

Again, there didn't appear to be any females in the group, and what Lotus had said about the male monsters getting aggressive when there were no females around seemed to be true.

The monsters charged Karl, but with the experience he had from the first fight, he knew the easy way to get one over on them.

With the [Flaming Body] effect on his blade set to somewhat weak, Karl charged straight in. The weak attack would give the monster a false sense of superiority, and then at the last second, Karl launched [Shred] to break the ice barrier on the monster, before bringing the flames to full output and driving the blade deep into its chest.

He kicked the beast away from him, sending it flying with his blade in its chest, knocking two more of the Yeti over.

That took a lot of the pressure from the beleaguered Spellswords, who looked concerned that he had just kicked his blade across the battlefield.

Karl dismissed the blade and brought it back to his hands, refreshing the flames over it as he used Rend to block the next three attacks from the other beasts.

Thor was there now, and Rae's Golems, which meant that Lotus and the spider were somewhere nearby.

"Damn, it's good to see you. Can you get the clerics to treat Darryl? He's half paralyzed from the ice attacks, and he's too slow to fight properly." Larry asked.

Thor charged over with Tessa, knocking the last of the Yetis away from the magic warriors, and giving her a chance to dismount while he fought.

Tessa assessed the young mage. "I will take care of him, you help Thor. He's got a Circle of Protection active, and it should include you. But his attack power is lower than his defence."

The group moved to the middle of the clearing, while Karl and the Spider Golems forced the enemies back to give the mages time to recover and prepare for a drawn out battle.

Alice turned to the other Commander, and Larry frowned.

"I take it that you have bad news for me?" He asked before she could speak.

"All sorts of it. Your battle here attracted every monster for kilometres. Or perhaps something else in the area did, but they're all coming here. Don't burn through your mana too quickly, you'll need it soon." She warned.

"Is there any good news?" Larry asked, smiling in a way that said he knew they were in trouble.

"We've got five Golems to fight for us, a Circle of Protection, two clerics, and a Lightning Cerro, who regenerates stamina. That's the best that I can offer. Some of these beasts are a match for an Elite on the same level." Alice replied.

"Some of them are a match for an Elite above their level. I had trouble with a high Ascended Rank winged wolf earlier."

As if summoned, Lotus dropped down from the trees on a string of spider silk.

"Do you know what those things are? I didn't recognize them." She asked.

Larry shook his head. "No, I've never seen anything like them. But it's as good a name as any."

Chapter 232 Swarmed

There were more sounds of combat coming their way, as if someone were fighting a running retreat, so Karl had Thor bugle out a greeting that should bring the humans their way.

If it were the other Spellswords, they should know that he had beasts with him, and if it were other Elites, they might come to what sounded like a Cerro pack for safety. The animals were herbivores, but they would fight back viciously if other monsters attacked them.

A second later, Prince Corbin was next to them, with a blood covered blade in one hand and an unconscious Rose in the other.

Tessa immediately began a Healing Prayer spell, and golden light surrounded the injured girl.

"What happened?" Karl asked.

"The damned tunnels happened. The entrances were covered in ice until we passed, and then the Yeti Clans came flooding out to fight. I killed hundreds of them until I started to run out of mana, and they broke the barrier over Rose." He explained.

If they broke the barriers of a Royal Rank mage, that meant that they likely had multiple Commanders with them, and that was bad news for everyone.

"How many are still following you?" Alice asked, forming a battle plan that didn't involve being here in the trees when the Yeti attacked.

"Not more than ten, but I ran into more that were already headed this way." He sighed.

[About thirty now, counting the ones from the other sides.] Hawk updated.

"Our scout says thirty in total, coming from three sides. The way we came from is still clear." Karl relayed.

Corbin looked suspicious. "Why are they all over us like fat kids on a cupcake, and there is no horde of angry monsters coming your way?"

Karl shrugged. "They are now that we're standing next to you. It might be a smell thing, either your magic or something about all of you."

Rae sniffed the air, but didn't detect anything. She could sense their magic, but that wasn't a long ranged ability.

The monsters spread out to circle them, roaring and grunting in a primitive language that was effective enough to arrange the battle.

"Any words of wisdom?" Lotus whispered to Karl as the monsters came into view.

"Yeah, I don't think they can climb trees, so if things go sideways, get Rae to pull you up out of sight." Karl whispered back.

The tiny Nature Priestess smiled and patted him on the back, and Karl shifted position, so that the Golems, plus him and Thor, made up the outer rank of defenders.

Prince Corbin needed a moment to catch his breath and recover his mana, while Rose was still recovering under the effects of Tessa's magic, and the other Spellswords were not tank type fighters, so they would join after the first charge was blocked.

"We could use some more room to fight." Prince Corbin sighed as he assessed the dense trees in front of them.

Thor gave a whistling snort in response, and when the first of the Yeti began to move forward, he smashed the ground with his tail, dropping a dozen trees with [Earthquake].

"Well, that's one way to do it. Alright, once the fight starts, I will clear a few more trees from our path, so we don't have to dodge them as we fight."

Rae was not a fan of that plan, she was intending to use the trees as a chance to ambush from above, but even if she had to go a few extra metres, it shouldn't hurt her tactics too much.

The attackers paused as they saw the destructive potential of the Lightning Cerro, and the formation of humans arrayed against them. The Yeti Clans might not often fight in large groups, but that didn't mean they were incapable of it, and after a few seconds, they began to shift positions, intending to swarm the two Awakened Rank Golems, which were the softest target on the outer loop.

That was a monumental mistake, as right behind them was Prince Corbin, and no sooner had the Yeti attack reached the Golems then they were sliced clean in half by a blade of wind.

The ones behind them couldn't understand what went wrong. The wind blades were nearly invisible, and with the swirling snow and fog, they had never even seen them coming. To the others, it looked like the two Awakened Rank Golems had taken out the first to attack.

So, they all charged at once, intent on overcoming the humans by pure force if a targeted strike wasn't going to work.

Thor's Circle of Protection flared, surrounding the defensive formation. That was all the courage Karl needed as he sent the strongest [Shred] that he could into the incoming wave of Yeti warriors.

[Hey, these other ones have weapons.] Hawk warned them just as Karl's [Shred] took out a trio of furred monsters.

"Hawk says that the next ones coming have weapons." Karl warned as he sent a [Rend] attack straight forward with an overhand slice.

"Yeti don't use weapons." Corbin called back as he defended the point behind Dana's Golems.

"Do you think someone forgot to tell them that?" Karl asked, using a Rend attack to highlight the fact that there were ones with weapons already in sight.

"Shit. That's not right at all." Alice cursed as she saw what Hawk was informing Karl of.

"How is our count?" Tessa called as she refreshed the buffs on everyone's weapons and stamina.

[Not more than twelve, all extra strong with weapons.]

"I don't think that the count will matter for long. Darrel and Darrin just paged for emergency rescue. They're too far from here for us to get to, but there are other Elites nearby, and they're all having issues." Corbin informed them.

He had an earbud in, so he could hear all the radio updates, and things were suddenly chaotic for everyone who was within communications range.

Karl stared down a pair of oversized yetis, who were wielding short swords in both hands, with eyes glowing like blue gemstones as they channelled magic.

Karl stepped forward to give himself room to fight, but mentally made a note of Thor's Circle of Protection. If he was going to go two on one against Commander Rank monsters, he was going to need all the help he could get.

He wasn't the only one that was about to be in trouble, all the armed monsters were Commander Rank beasts, and their ice magic was resonating with that of the ones near them, creating a swirling vortex of ice around the battlefield.

[Hawk, find us a way out of here. A nice cave, somewhere that we can't be surrounded by these things.] Karl instructed as the bird circled overhead, still scouting until he was given orders to attack.

[Got it. I will look for something.]

The creature in front of Karl turned up its mouth into a sneer, and the two attacked in unison, sending a wave of ice Karl's way.

A flick of his wrist sent a wave of flame toward them, intercepting the icicles, but most of them still made it through, slamming into his [Refreshing Lightning] barrier and draining his energy. That was the insidious part of the ice attacks, they tried to slow you until you were frozen, and they could eat you at their leisure.

Tessa's magic warmed him from the inside, and Lotus had cast a spell over the area that was counteracting the ice magic with plants, but it wasn't enough, as each of the beasts were individually stronger than she was, and their magic resonated.

Another volley was partially blocked as Karl switched to using [Rend] which had already optimized itself against the Yeti magic, and cut deep gouges into the closer of his two targets, but in return, Karl took a

direct hit that punched through his lightning Barrier, leaving a bleeding wound in his side that quickly closed under the effects of Lotus' magic.

"We need to get out of here." Alice called as she took out one of the monsters fighting her Golem.

Larry was with Thor still, and Corbin was with Dana's Golems, which she was using all her focus to keep active as they took continual hits from the ice magic.

"Hawk is on it. He will have something soon." Karl called back as Rae crept down the trees to launch a surprise attack on the Yeti's back before vanishing again.

They weren't healing quickly, and within ten seconds, the blood was beginning to pool at its feet from the wound. That was a good sign, and Karl expanded [Flaming Body] to cover all of himself over the Lightning barrier.

It would break first and wouldn't be available to attack for a bit afterwards, but the fire did a much better job of negating the damage from the ice attacks, and Karl couldn't afford too many more hits like the last one.

If it wasn't for the flying spells, and the two Spellswords darting in and out to slice and chop at the beasts, it would almost look like a stalemate on the battlefield, but when Rae got a flurry of attacks into the back of the second beast that Karl was fighting, and her golems went on a Kamikaze mission to support Larry on Thor's side of the encirclement, Karl knew that it was almost time for them to go.

[When there is a chance, run to Thor's side. Five hundred metres that way is a cave with nothing inside.] Hawk explained.

"Everyone, get ready to move. Punch through on Thor's side and keep moving five hundred metres to a cave."

"Got it. I will shift sides for a hard push, you take the rear guard. Everyone else, run as fast as you can, but stay together." Prince Corbin instructed.

Chapter 233 Escape Encirclement

Prince Corbin attacked through the breach on Thor's side of the circle faster than most of the Elites' eyes could follow, cutting down a swathe of yetis and burning through his mana to get everyone clear of the encirclement.

Tessa pulled Alice and Dana up on Thor's back, while Rae grabbed Lotus with a strand of silk and pulled her into the trees, escaping the encirclement before the furry monsters could even realize that the Nature Priestess was unharmed.

The Golems held their positions around Thor, while the Spellswords used their magic to increase their movement speed and keep in the protective circle around the Lightning Cerro.

Karl chased after them, using fire to keep the monsters at bay as everyone ran, ignoring their injuries and exhaustion to keep up with the Royal Rank mage and the rampaging Cerro.

The Golems were the first to fall, forced to stop to hold off the wave of attackers. Then Darryl took an ice bolt to the knee that dropped him to the ground, leaving him far behind the main group.

Karl picked up the wounded Spellsword as the man downed a healing potion, then hurled him back ahead and into the main group.

At the back of the pack, they were taking too many attacks for the exhausted mage to keep his armour up, but Karl's Lightning was still holding strong as he hurled attacks at the monsters approaching the sides of the group.

The monsters were as fast as Thor, and they weren't giving up the chase, but the constant barrage of attacks was keeping them from closing in again, as three hundred metres passed, then four hundred, and the cave came into sight.

Lotus and Rae were already waiting for them, along with the Spider Golems, which Rae could only summon next to her after they had fallen in battle.

Once they were closer, the mages created new Golems to defend the cave mouth, and everyone dismounted from Thor as he stopped to guard the entrance.

But the Yeti Clans were no longer following them. Once they got within fifty metres of the caves, the beasts broke off the chase, milling about, but unwilling to get too close to the caverns.

That was probably not a good thing, Karl decided. But for the moment, it was keeping them from being attacked, and Rae had disappeared inside to scout, but didn't find anything at all other than stone walls and some dripping water from the melting snow above.

Once everyone was inside, they dismissed the golems, and Karl called Thor back into his space.

The Yeti Clans still weren't approaching, so it wasn't the defensive force that was keeping them away, but something about the area around the cave.

[Hawk, do you see anything threatening above? Something that might actually be a danger to a Commander Rank Yeti?] Karl asked.

[Nothing. Other than them, there is nothing here. Not even mice.]

That didn't sound promising, but they would have to work with it.

Rae returned empty-handed, but with insight about the caves.

[They extend another fifteen metres, then they stop at a stone wall with water flowing down it. The water runs out somewhere at the bottom, but I'm too big to fit in there. We should be safe in here.] She explained.

"Rae says the caves are empty, but there is a water drain at the back wall, so they're not completely sealed. We should be able to hide and rest here, then continue in the morning." Karl whispered to Alice, so he didn't alert anything outside.

Corbin cast a spell over the entrance, creating a false stone wall, and Karl called Hawk back to his space.

[The three of you, get some sleep. If we're attacked, we will likely need all of you in your best shape again.] He instructed.

The trio settled in to rest, and Karl turned his attention to the conversation between the Commanders and Prince Corbin.

"There shouldn't have been Commanders here at all, much less dozens of them with weapons. The anomaly was strong enough when we saw snow start to fall in these mountains, when it has never done that before, but to have sudden appearances of an entire force of Commander Rank Yeti? That's far too unnatural." Prince Corbin was muttering.

"For once, I actually envy Darrel and Darrin, they managed to get a ride out of here." Larry replied quietly.

Corbin shook his head. "No they didn't. The helicopter was attacked and was forced to turn back. They joined up with the other Elite units in the zone to gather and retreat on foot. The radio communications say that they're still alive, but they've been attacked multiple times as well.

The strength of the attackers is falling as they head out of the hills, so we have to be close to the core of the problem, but I have no idea how we're going to even investigate it.

Darryl and Rose are in no shape to be going anywhere, and likely won't be until some time tomorrow afternoon, and as we learned today, it's not even safe for me to travel alone here.

I might be at the Royal Rank, but ten or twenty on one, Commander Rank magic users are still going to overwhelm me."

As he watched, Karl noticed that the healing of the group wasn't complete. Both Corbin and Larry were still showing distinct zones of cold, where the damaging ice magic was lingering in their body, weakening them internally.

The strongest fighters had been on the front lines, so they had taken the most damage, and while Lotus and Tessa were excellent healers, they weren't strong enough to immediately The strongest fighters had

been on the front lines, so they had taken the most damage, and while Lotus and Tessa were counteract the magic of the Yeti Ice. So he made his way over to the whispering group.

"Pardon my intrusion, but I think it might be best if none of us moved too soon. I have thermal vision, and I can literally see the lingering ice magic damage to your bodies. The magic will resonate with the next attack you suffer, freezing you more quickly. Once that starts to happen, we're screwed." Karl whispered.

Larry cursed, then softly laughed. "You're one to speak. I can still see the ice on your armour."

Karl looked down, and realized that he had ten times as much lingering damage as they had, despite the [Refreshing Lightning] that he still had active working to nullify it.

The spell itself had cold spots where it was fighting off the lingering spell effects, and Karl frowned at the pernicious nature of the attacks.

It had been hours, and the magic hadn't even made it through his defences, but it was still lingering, and if he took down the lightning, it would succeed.

Instead, he coated himself in [Flaming Body], lighting up the cave like a beacon, and rapidly warming the area as well.

That nullified the lingering magic on his body in only a few seconds, leaving a nice even warmth in the cavern.

"Problem solved."

Karl checked on the beasts in their spaces, and found that both Hawk and Rae were predictably fine. They weren't frontline fighters, but Rae looked distracted. She was trying to learn something again, so Karl left her to it. She was the smartest of the three, and if it was possible for her to learn a new skill, she would have it soon.

Thor still had cold spots all over his body, but he had increased the temperature of the springs in his space, and the Holy Stones were dissipating the lingering magic at a visible pace.

The others in the group looked alright, though Rose was exhausted from the after effects of all the healing magic that had been used on her, and Darrel was hiding bruises all over his body that Karl could see as slightly flushed areas, where the warmer blood was close to the surface.

Lotus still had an area healing spell active, so a few minutes ago, everyone would have been much worse, and Tessa looked like she was already half asleep after the effort of keeping everyone buffed and the healing work she had done during the battle.

While it was their most important ability, saving someone of their own rank from a near death state, or closing multiple critical wounds, was an energy-intensive activity. Doing it every ten seconds for four different people must have stretched her abilities to the limit.

As Thor relaxed in his pond, he activated [Circle of Protection] which helped restore stamina, as well as reducing damage. That was what everyone needed the most right now, and it was no trouble for him to keep it active while he napped.

Chapter 234 Spaces Maximized

"Who is in shape for first watch?" Corbin whispered to the other Commanders as the Circle of Protection settled over them.

"I am. My skills refresh stamina, so I will keep first watch while my beasts rest. I can also see in absolute darkness, so there is no need to keep a light on for me." Karl replied.

Larry chuckled. "But it is for the rest of us. This place will be unnervingly black without one. Can you keep that flame spell of yours active, or is it draining even when it's not taking damage?"

Karl smiled and took out his bonded sword, then walked to the wall beside the entrance and stuck it into the stone, with the flames surrounding it. He reduced them to a faint glow and returned to the conversation.

"That should be a good enough night light for everyone, as well as a decent space heater. It doesn't take any effort to keep active, as it was intended to be a passive skill. Only when using it to attack or taking damage does it take effort."

The blade was positively humming with energy today, after all the fighting that it had gotten to do. Karl hadn't noticed with his injuries, but the amount of life that it had stolen was really rather excessive. It was only a small portion of the energy from each kill, but Karl had downed a significant number of monsters alone, including multiple Commanders toward the end of the battle.

The energy hadn't been fully assimilated by his body yet, but it soon would be, and he was focusing it all into the three focal points in the beast spaces.

It didn't take all of his focus, so as everyone ate their dinner, for which the Spellblades were happy to have a Nature Priest, and then settled into bed, Karl continued the energy transfer.

Once everyone was asleep, or on their way to it, he put most of his attention into it, leaving just enough to keep watching the tunnel entrance and the back wall, in case something came from that direction.

The back wall of the cave was only very dimly lit, even to his night sight, but the trickle of water was steady, and as Rae had said, it had to be going somewhere, as it wasn't filling the cave.

Karl let them sleep a bit longer, as they had started the rotation of night watches early due to exhaustion, and waited four hours before he woke Tessa for the second watch.

"The light will stay on while I meditate. I need to absorb the leeches energy from the battle." He whispered as she straightened her robes and brushed her hair.

"Is there anything to report?" She asked.

"Nothing at all. It is eerily silent out there, and I don't hear anything moving near the cave mouth. The wind has died down a bit, so the noise of the trees is quieter, and I can hear some small animals, but nothing else."

Karl settled into a deep trance while laying in his sleeping bag, and was only vaguely aware that at some point Tessa had traded spots with Alice for the third watch.

Alice had just traded spots with Prince Corbin when Karl felt something changing in his spaces.

He had been stuffing them with excess energy that his body couldn't absorb quickly enough all night, and it was then, with a feeling that spread through his body like the ringing of a bell, just a subtle vibration that made every bit of his body sing with energy, they stopped changing, and a fourth space began to form.

It already had a small focus in it, though it was otherwise barren and no larger than a bedroom, instead of the acres of space that the others now encompassed.

The change immediately woke the beasts up to see what was going on in their homes, and they all noticed the new addition.

"So, our homes have reached the standard. Now, we just need to make it to Commander Rank, and we will be the powerful ones on the team." Hawk preened, already imagining the majesty of his feathers when he reached Commander Rank.

"Yes, all shall bow down before us when we are Commanders." Rae agreed.

She mentally added [Maybe not that Overlord Drake guy], but she was otherwise confident that the humans would no longer be her match.

Karl sensed Corbin's attention on him, and opened his eyes to acknowledge the Royal Rank mage, who had carefully arranged himself, and even trimmed his beard a little to look more youthful and less dishevelled than he had at the start of the evening.

All signs of lingering Ice Magic were gone, Karl noted with pleasure, meaning that their strongest fighter was back in top shape.

"Did you make an advancement, or gain an epiphany of some sort? I sensed the surge of power." Prince Corbin asked.

"My beast spaces made a breakthrough. They shouldn't be holding the beasts back anymore, and in due time, the team will be able to make it to Commander Rank." He explained quietly.

The mage looked impressed. "You know, it's a shame that someone with your potential wasn't scouted as a mage. With that level of mental fortitude, you should have a rather easy time learning new spells."

Karl smiled at the thought. "The beasts have an even easier time. I have a skill that helps them learn by watching or being instructed by others. If it's a compatible skill, then within a day or two of watching they can usually get the basics of it down.

We haven't had enough time to just stop and study new skills, but we also haven't come across many compatible skills so far, and that has limited the expansion of their talents."

That made Prince Corbin a bit suspicious. "So you're saying that your beasts are watching us and trying to steal our skills?"

Karl tried to laugh quietly so he didn't wake anyone else up. "Doubtful. None of them have thumbs, so sword skills aren't exactly their forte, and none of them are actual mages. Hawk has an affinity for the Fire Element, but I didn't see any of you using it during the fight, but he's the only one who uses actual magic other than Rae's ability to summon Golems."

Corbin smiled at the memory of the wooden golems charging out of the trees to tear apart the Yeti Warriors. "Those are quite impressive, by the way. If they could use defensive magic or ranged attacks, they would be incredible."

Karl nodded. "Give us time, and we will find a spell that either I can cast on them, or that Rae can use herself to protect them. When they make it to Commander Rank, they might pick up a new skill, though. According to the studies I've done, many beasts do."

Corbin nodded. "It's common for them to get a skill at Commander, and almost mandatory that they learn something other than their Racial Ability to advance to Royal Rank.

Royal Rank beasts can all use some sort of advanced magic, though for some it is hidden either as insane defence or some sort of physical change.

Like the Yeti that we faced today. There is something called a King of Snow, which is an evolved version of that species. They can control ice and snow in all its many forms, but they can also use powerful wind magic, usually including either Tearing Winds or Tornado."

Karl understood the concept, and his pets should all be well on the way to that standard. They had all learned skills that weren't part of their Racial abilities, and they just had to make it to that power level, unless there was some barrier to them as well, the way there was for humans.

But the immediate concern was getting them to the Commander Rank standard.

They were growing fast with the input of the Vampiric Sword, but Karl was certain that there was more he could be doing, other than hunting randomly for monsters to kill and random items to feed them.

Prince Corbin smiled at him. "Relax, you're thinking too hard. Sometimes what you need is not to push forward, but to build your base good and strong. Once you have a better foundation, you will find that it is easier to build the levels that come above it.

Think of your potential like a pyramid. It needs to be broadest at the base to grow properly. You can make it look like an obelisk, but they're unstable, and a good hit can knock them over. That's not what you need for steady growth.

Everyone else will be up soon, so if you want a bit more meditation time, get it now before they start cooking."

Chapter 235 Check The Cave

Karl focused on his meditation while the last shift of the night ended, and the newly formed fourth space began to rapidly expand in his mind, absorbing everything that it could get, along with the lingering remnants of energy that Karl's blade had provided during the previous day's fight.

With the other three spaces waiting for their occupants to advance, and this fourth space being so small, the change was immediately obvious, and the enhancement of the focus was expanding the area much more efficiently than simply pouring energy into the space had.

The Monks knew what they were doing for certain, and this was so far superior to trial and error that Karl felt silly for not having thought to ask them in the first place.

The others began to wake, and Karl could smell food cooking, so he shifted most of his focus to the outside world, and let the new space form naturally.

[What sort of new friend are we getting?] Thor asked as he took his cue from everyone else and began to eat breakfast.

[I have no idea. What sort of friend would you like?] Karl asked.

[More Lightning Cerro.] Thor replied confidently.

He really should have seen that one coming. Thor was a pack animal, so of course he would want to be with more of his kind if given the option.

Hawk chimed in with his opinion. [All that we're going to find here are snowy things. Oh, the fluffy snow cats are alright, I think. They never finish their food.]

Rae wasn't picky. [Just pick someone cool.]

[Alright, so we're looking for someone cool, maybe a snow cat, and potentially a friend for Thor. But we should cover for holes in our skills. We don't have anyone who enhances the group, except for defence, we don't have a healer, and we only have one long ranged attacker.]

[Ooh, ooh, I can be the healer. Healer sounds like a fun job.] Thor volunteered.

[Well, alright, as soon as you learn healing magic, I will let you try out a run as the team's healer, and I will tank with the Golems.] Karl replied, indulging the Cerro's idea.

[That shouldn't be hard. I have felt lots of healing already.] Thor replied, optimistically.

If he really could manage it, the new cleric students at the Seminary Academy would never live down the shame. Outclassed in their own class by a Lightning Cerro.

Karl was contemplating what would be best for the next addition to their team when breakfast was served, and it was time to start the serious part of their planning for the day.

Everyone could use a bit longer to recover after yesterday, at least a late morning start, and the cave had been safe so far. That led to the natural idea to make it their base for the next few days of exploration.

After the fiasco yesterday, they needed to know what was going on here, and if it was going to be an expanding threat to the surrounding areas.

If the ice continued to spread, it would be everyone's problem soon, and they had a responsibility to at least try to find out what the situation was so that appropriate forces could be sent to deal with it.

Lotus gestured to the back wall of the cave as she was finishing breakfast. "Can you go grab some water and boil it for coffee? The runoff should be pure after being filtered by the sandstone around the cave."

Karl walked to the back of the cave and extended the larger canteen toward the water flowing down the back wall. However, the moment that his fingers touched it, the wall vanished, revealing an extensive tunnel network extending from the room on the other side.

[I thought you checked the area.] Karl asked Rae as the spell vanished.

[You look with your eyes, not your limbs. Did you want me to check the water temperature when I could already see it was cold?] Rae retorted.

[Sorry, you're right. But now we need to be on guard from this side as well.]

"Um, minor issue." Karl called to the group, who turned to face the back wall that no longer existed.

"Fuck." Prince Corbin breathed.

"Couldn't have said it better myself." Alice added as she prepared defensive magic.

A stale odour was coming from the caverns, and in the distance they could feel a pulse of magic, as if there was some grand spell active in the heart of the mountain.

"We will explore it after breakfast. The barrier over the entrance should keep anything from following us, and Corbin will feel if it is attacked, so at least one side is secure." Alice sighed as she looked at the meal that was just waiting for water to make coffee.

Lotus made the water with magic, already heated, and got the meal served. Nobody wanted to go anywhere this morning, but now that they were looking at a huge tunnel complex and not just one small cave to hide in, they had to be proactive and ensure that they weren't about to get ambushed.

Alice looked at the group they had assembled.

"Are you lot going to head back out and try your luck to finish your goals?" She asked.

Larry and Corbin shook their heads.

"If you don't mind, we would prefer to stay with your group, strength in numbers. Yesterday's fiasco nearly cost our Clan its most talented proteges, and we really can't afford to have another ambush when it's not safe for the helicopters to come extract us." Corbin replied.

[See, he knows. Strength in numbers.] Thor agreed.

This day's trip might be rough on him and Hawk, neither of whom would have an easy time in the caves, so they would have to spend most of their time in the beast spaces. But Alice's Golem would have issues as well, unless she knew how to shorten it. They had been fighting all taller enemies outdoors since he met her, so there really hadn't been a reason for her to do it before.

Dana's golems were only a little taller than the tallest members of their group, but even their normal height would be a tight fit once they got further into the caves if Karl's guess was right.

He had a lot of experience underground, and he was likely the only one who would be truly comfortable there, especially if the ceilings were high enough that he could stand properly upright and not have to use the miner's duck walk.

Once the meal was finished and everything was cleaned and packed away, Karl led Rae in front of the group, as she was still a bit shorter than he was in her normal standing position, though much wider and longer. They could both see perfectly well no matter the light conditions, so they were the obvious choice to scout the area, and they could move ahead of the group to check the multiple tunnels that joined the room on the other side of the now vanished barrier.

Something felt wrong the moment that he stepped through, and when Karl turned to check on the group behind him, he saw the stone wall that had vanished on their side.

His hand passed through it, so he wasn't trapped in here, but he would have to remember where it was, or they would end up lost in the tunnels.

Rae had the answer to that. She used her forelimb to carve her name into the stone by the door, so they would know if they saw it again.

"You check the left side first, and I will start from the right. Don't get out of sight of each other, but look as far down the tunnel as you can." Karl instructed.

The first one on the right made a steep downward slope, then a hard left, so he couldn't see far until he moved down the ramp a way, then saw that it was a continued spiral downward.

So, he returned to the main room and checked the next. It extended for a hundred metres before making a ninety-degree left turn, obviously constructed and not natural. At the far end of that hallway was a closed door, but he could see the flickering of flames on the other side, so something was likely alive in there, and probably not Yeti.

Rae found a dead end, with a nice pit trap that she avoided due to her body design walking along the edges of the floor, and then another downward spiral that she didn't fully explore before returning to Karl.

"Well, we know what is in the area now. Let's ask the others what we're doing."

Chapter 236 Enchanted Caverns

The rest of the group came to join him in the main room, and were briefly startled when the doorway appeared to be gone. Like Karl had, Alice stepped back through and found that she had no resistance, it was just an illusion, and touching the other side had broken it.

The real question was whether the one who made it was trying to keep something out, or to keep something in. It hid the only way out of the tunnel complex, so it could be either.

"Should we see what set a fire in the room on this level, or should we see what's below us first?" Alice asked Corbin and Larry, conferring between the three strongest fighters to see what they felt was safest.

"Go with what we know could be a threat first. The room with fire." Corbin suggested.

Nobody else had an objection to that, and they wouldn't want to leave it unchecked when they went down, in case the tunnels were a dead end and whatever was in there either blocked them or did something like vent poisonous gas down them.

Karl moved to lead the way, but Corbin stopped him.

"If we're going into an unknown room, I should go first. I might be a Spellblade, but I'm also a Royal Rank Mage, and my barriers are much stronger than yours are." He whispered.

So, Karl and Rae moved to the second and third position, ready to flank Corbin once the door was open, and the others followed them down the narrow corridor to the decrepit wooden door.

The coarse yellow sandstone had been crudely hacked at to create the doorway, and the fitment was terrible, suggesting that whoever made it was no skilled craftsman, but when Karl peeked through the gaps, he didn't see anyone inside, only a few flaming braziers near the walls.

He shrugged at Corbin, indicating that he couldn't see anything, and the Prince kicked the door open, rushing inside with Karl right behind him.

Only to find that the room was empty.

Five metres on each side, with two braziers lit, and one door on the far side.

The others followed them inside as Karl scanned the room for hidden traps, and the moment that Larry entered and everyone was inside, the door slammed shut and a set of runes appeared on the wall.

"Shit, we triggered a magical trap. How did I not notice that?" Corbin muttered, trying desperately to decipher the writing.

[Trial begins in ten seconds.] He read out loud.

Then, in front of Karl's watchful gaze, half the group disappeared.

He was left with Rae, Tessa and Lotus. Everyone else had vanished.

"Ascended." Lotus informed them, pointing at the wall.

"It says Ascended. The trap split us up by Rank."

That should mean that Dana was with Darryl and Rose, while Alice was with Larry, but Corbin might be trapped alone in a trial.

The room wasn't comfortably large enough for Thor or Hawk to be called out, even Rae was enough to make it a bit cramped in here, so the Awakened Group, with Dana's two Golems, would be similarly crowded.

Then, the room surged with magic, and a whole battlefield appeared around them, an open, snow-covered field, with the bodies of slain soldiers and Yeti Warriors scattered all around them. One last group was approaching, and Karl hesitantly called out Thor and Hawk, unsure how the magic worked.

Hawk soared into the sky, confirming that inside this trial, there was actual room to fight.

[Tribesmen, embrace the curse of the beast. Drive these interlopers from our lands and return the eternal snow.] The leader of the group, a massive warrior with a scar that ran from the left side of his chest to his right hip, was shouting.

That was new. The Yeti couldn't speak.

Once his encouragement was over, the warriors surged with power, and Thor activated [Circle of Protection] as he prepared to meet their charge.

Tessa climbed onto his back, while Lotus moved to stand behind Karl and Rae summoned her Golems.

They still had the numbers advantage, but these warriors were all on the low side of Ascended, other than their leader.

Lotus spoke softly to the group. "Attack in 3,2,1."

Vines shot up from the ground, tripping the warriors when they were ten metres away, close enough for Shred to make it to them in a split second, right before the spider Golems were on them and Hawk's fireballs began to bombard the leader of the group.

It wasn't enough to kill them, but the beasts were heavily wounded by the time that they fought their way free of the entanglement, and then Thor's charge reached the left side of their lines, impaling two and holding them in place for Tessa's chain mace to crush their skulls.

Thor kept moving, circling back for another charge as the ice magic began to swirl around the warriors, forming the early stages of a blizzard.

Karl drew his sword and charged, hacking deep into the chest of one target, then parrying the blade of another as the blizzard faded before it was even formed.

These yetis were terrible combatants, they lacked fighting instinct and experience. In half a minute, it was all over, and the beasts rejoined Karl and the clerics.

Nobody said anything, not wanting to jinx their chances of getting out of here, but it looked like their odds weren't that good to begin with.

There was more writing, this time appearing on the snow in front of them.

[Stage Complete] Lotus read.

"Now what do we do?" Karl asked, as Tessa rubbed Thor's scales, getting him psyched up for another fight.

The words vanished, and new words replaced them.

[Rewards earned. Beginning Stage Two.]

Karl wasn't certain what he got as a reward, but he did know that there were now two of those groups, with five low Ascended and one high Ascended fighter between them.

If the other groups were facing these odds at their own power levels, this might be a nasty fight, and Karl hoped that they were going to get everyone back in one piece.

"Thor and Rae, take left, I will take right with Hawk." Karl instructed.

Their opponents were weak to fire, and they hesitated as they saw Karl's body burst into flames, coating the lightning and melting the surrounding snow.

Then the barrage of fireballs came down from the sky, and they charged, knowing that in order to focus on their ranged attacks, they were going to have to deal with Karl first.

In the back, the leader was attacking Hawk, but between one spell caster and a very agile bird, none of the attacks were even getting close to hitting.

Tessa was chanting some sort of enhancement spell as they fought, and Lotus had trapped the leader's feet with vines on Karl's side, preventing him from avoiding the barrage of fireballs that Hawk sent his way.

Karl hacked into the bodies of the warriors, using his overwhelming strength to overpower the beasts which were at the bottom of Ascended, while he was near the top.

It could hardly even be called a fair fight when he had so many magical items on his side, and two clerics granting him buffs and restraining the enemies.

The fight was quickly ended, and the group gathered to make a plan as for how to deal with the third trial.

Tessa considered the likely outcome of a third stage. Three groups, the same as the first. "That's going to be a lot of incoming enemies, and three of us isn't enough to cover every side, unless we have Rae and the Spider Golems split up, which leaves me and Thor short on damage dealers."

[Bah, send more of them, I'll give them an extra dose of Find Out.] Hawk muttered in Karl's mind, getting annoyed by the constant ice attacks.

Ice was just the evil cousin of the water family, and he was about done with their nonsense.

[This would be more fun if the lights were off.] Rae agreed as she waited for the next development to take place. Even if there were more, it wouldn't be difficult to sneak up on them if it wasn't the middle of the day.

Though, it was rather pleasant mixing all these whites and greys of armoured bodies and snow with the blood-red when she adapted her coloration to match the battlefield. As far as settings went, this was about the most pleasant one she had seen that wasn't filled with trees.

Chapter 237 Round Two... Fight

The words changed again and Lotus frowned.

"It says Rewards granted, basic testing passed." She explained.

"That sounds a lot like we should be let out, doesn't it?" Karl asked.

"It does, and I'm wondering why we're still here." Lotus agreed.

Then the symbols changed again.

[Beginning Advanced testing.]

"Advanced." Was all that Lotus said, as Karl and Tessa sighed.

[Oh, they want some of this, do they? Yeah, I'll give them some, stupid cold water magic people.] Hawk cheered.

Rae laughed at his enthusiasm. Of course, he was ready for the fight, he was way up there above it, where he had plenty of time to dodge the attacks.

Again a Clan of Yeti Warriors appeared in front of them, but this time it was only one Clan, but nine warriors and a leader. By Karl's estimation, they were all low Commander Rank, including the leader, though he might qualify as mid-Commander.

"Oh, this is going to suck." Tessa sighed as she realized what they were up against.

It was basically a poorly version of the same force that chased them into the cave yesterday, but only ten of them instead of three dozen or more.

"Alright, we can do this. Stay close, so we're all in the Circle of Protection, with Lotus in the middle as our primary healer. Tessa, I'm not sure if you still want to be on Thor, since these ones are a bit taller, but that's your call. Everyone else, you know what to do." Karl insisted.

The warriors began to spread out to surround the group, and Karl launched himself forward the moment they reached the edge of Thor's Circle of Protection. His sudden strike shattered the crude blade of his opponent, and the combination of Shred and Flaming Body let the blade cut deep into the Commander Rank hide of the beast, leaving it gushing blood from the wound in its chest.

The beast collapsed backward, holding its chest and trying to plug the wound, while Karl turned on another.

Thor charged forward to assist, bringing the rest of the group running after him, while Rae's Golems went after the one behind the Yeti that Karl was fighting.

They traded one round of attacks with it, then went for their true targets. One leapt on the furry monster, blocking its sight, while the other went for the back of Karl's opponent, tearing it open with [Lacerate].

These monsters regenerated slowly, and they would likely bleed to death if the group could hold out long enough. They just needed to inflict the necessary wounds first.

The spiders broke off to defend Rae, who was now under attack from the monsters who had come around the back of the fight, and Karl noticed that one had doubled back to cast Ice Magic on the chest of the downed fighter, freezing the wound and stopping the blood flow.

That might work to stop the damage from Lacerate, but that particular target had its organs punctured and burned. Sealing the leak wouldn't help for long.

Still, with the damage patched, the beast carefully got up and retreated from the battle.

He didn't get far.

Once he was away from the others, still too injured to defend himself, Hawk was raining fireballs at him from above, while taunting the monsters with his agility.

Unfortunately, his arrogance cost him dearly, and Hawk took a direct blast with an icicle that sent him directly into his beast space, frozen stiff. He was still alive, but he had taken heavy damage, and Karl worked to increase the temperature of the space and thaw him as quickly as possible.

"What happened to Hawk?" Lotus called.

"Icicle blast." Karl called back, without enough time to explain.

He was facing three of the Yeti Warriors now, each more powerful than he was, at least on the basic skills level. He still had the advantage in brute strength, and Karl was using that to keep them from being able to dictate the pace of the fight.

Karl couldn't go far, or he would leave Lotus open, but he could move a few metres in a flash, out of the range of their attacks, and then back in to hack at any openings they left.

A lucky strike took the leg off one of the Yetis at the knee, and though it was quickly frozen over by his companions, the warrior was out of the fight and dragging himself away.

Two on one, Karl stood a much better chance, and he spared a glance to see how the others were doing.

Lotus still looked reasonably fresh, she wasn't sweating or panting with exertion, and she had the whole area encompassed in a green glowing healing circle. Tessa was still riding Thor, as it was the best way to get at the vitals of the larger opponents, but they hadn't managed to take any down yet that he could see.

The real winner in this fight was Rae with her Golems.

Not only had she crippled one near Karl, and blinded another, she had killed two of them outright since the battle began.

There was a copious amount of black blood on the ground that could only have come from her, but the Bloodbath Spider was still fighting with all her might and relying on Lotus to keep her healed.

Unexpectedly, blue light flashed over everyone, including Rae's Golems, as Thor's [Refreshing Lightning] spread from himself to the whole group.

[I did it! I am the healer now!] The Lightning Cerro screamed mentally while bugling in victory.

While it wasn't technically a healing spell, it did increase your regeneration speed, so Karl was going to give him this victory.

With the extra barrier, Rae no longer had to hold back as much, she could take some extra risks to land blows on the attackers, and one of her Spider Golems came to assist Karl, going for the back of his opponents after quickly using [Lacerate] across the throat of the blinded Yeti who had retreated a dozen metres from the battle.

Karl searched for the leader of the group, but couldn't see where he had gone, they all looked the same when you were fighting them, but Thor was having problems with his opponent, the only one he had left after everyone else had gone to support the fight against Rae.

With a shout, the opponent on Karl's left cast a spell, and an ice spike launched up from the ground, slamming into Lotus and throwing her into the air, which caused her healing circle to fall as the Priestess was knocked unconscious.

Thor got the barrier back up before she hit the ground, but she would need time to recover, and Karl quickly realized that everyone had been relying on her to keep casting refreshing spells, and they were quickly running out of Stamina due to the Ice Magic trying to freeze them.

Karl could feel his body getting sluggish as another of the Yeti Warriors fell to the Spider Golems, leaving him and a Golem against only one opponent. But Tessa had been knocked from Thor's back, and was now fighting on foot while casting buffs that would hopefully counteract the freezing effect and heal Lotus enough to bring her back to consciousness.

Karl tackled his opponent, leaving its neck open to the Spider Golem as its blade shattered both layers of his shield and cut into his armour. That was the end of another Yeti, and he turned to face the last few monsters just in time to see Thor gouged down his side, shattering his remaining Lightning, and sending him frozen into his Beast Space.

"Rae, guard the clerics. It will just be me and the Golems on offence." Karl instructed.

He was still fast enough, faster than any average human, but no longer faster than their opponents. It shouldn't matter, though, the Golems were freshly summoned and not suffering from any ill effects, and both remaining targets were wounded.

Lotus was conscious again, but barely, while Tessa had retreated to stand over her so the area that she needed to cover with her magic was reduced.

Karl led the two Golems forward as the Yeti Leader roared, and suddenly, they were all standing in an empty battlefield.

[Task successfully failed. Partial Reward Granted.] appeared in the snow in front of them.

"It says that we ... failed successfully?" Lotus commented, not quite sure that she had translated the ancient language properly.

"Well, nobody is dead. At least, I don't think they are." Karl replied as he checked on Thor and Hawk.

Both were in bad shape, but the magic of the Beast Space had called them home on the verge of death, and they were slowly recovering. The ice was gone with the end of the trial, and the healing waters of his pond were rapidly bringing some life back to Thor as the hundreds of small wounds that had either cut through or slipped under his scales were closed.

His personal lightning was active again, so he should be fine, but Hawk was looking pretty listless, and Karl couldn't call him out of the space for Lotus to heal.

"Hawk needs time to recover before I can ask him to come out again, but he is better than when he went in. Thor has his lightning barrier active again, so he will be fine soon enough." Karl explained.

Rae was exhausted, but still functional, when Karl both felt and heard something snap inside her body, before the rear half of her outer carapace fell away, moulted like some insects do, and replaced with an identical looking body from underneath.

Rae worked to pull the old layer off her legs and upper body, then shook the goop from her fur as Tessa cast a healing spell on her to help the new carapace recover and harden.

[And that's how a Bloodbath Spider reaches Commander Rank.] She announced.

Chapter 238 Rae The Invincible

"Did she just shed her carapace to take on her adult form?" Lotus asked weakly, excited to see Rae's transformation, but too weak to get up and inspect her properly.

"She did. Rae, come closer, you know Lotus wants a better look." Karl laughed.

The Bloodbath Spider dismissed the Golems, and then called them back, revealing drastically changed bodies.

For an Elite, the progression was a smooth one. The beginning of the Commander Rank was only a fraction above the top of the Ascended Rank, but for beasts like Rae, it was an entirely different phase in their life cycle.

Her power as an Ascended Rank Juvenile was far below what she could wield as an adult, and the spiders reflected that. They had gone from being made of woven branches to being covered in small leaves, which were quickly shifting from their natural green to white and grey with red spots, to better match the battlefield.

Just like Rae, they could adapt themselves to their surroundings now, and the aura that they gave off was much more intimidating.

There was no low Commander Rank for Rae, she had evolved past that, and now that the fight was over, Lotus had plenty of time to get a good look at her.

Or, Karl hoped she did, anyhow.

They had failed the last trial. Successfully failed, whatever that meant. But it had promised them rewards, so they could be waiting on that to happen.

The first Trial Instance he was in gave them a chest when they returned to the starting position, but this one wasn't returning them at all.

"I wonder if everyone has to be present to return? Like if we have to call Thor and Hawk back out?" Lotus wondered.

That could be possible. They hadn't been out when they arrived at the trial, but they were when the first announcement that they got rewards was made.

"It will still be a while before Hawk is conscious and able to come out, so we might as well rest a bit." Karl decided.

Lotus created a patch of wide leaves for them to sit on, out of the snow, and Karl meditated to help everyone recover, while he also checked on Rae's space to ensure that it was suitable for her advanced state.

It seemed more alive now, with natural wind, and a sense of vibrancy that wasn't there before. Focusing on the Dragon Scale in his mind, and letting that filtered energy flow to the spaces seemed to be the most efficient method, but even after warming Hawk's space it still took him fifteen minutes before he was up and moving again.

[That was a close one, buddy.] Karl whispered, as Hawk began to stretch his no longer frozen wings.

[I thought I was done for, that the evil cold water had won. How long was I frozen?] Hawk asked.

[About twenty minutes in total.]

[Oh, that's too long for you to fight without me. How did you survive without fireballs?]

[Flaming Body and a lot of luck with the Golems. But you missed the big news. Rae advanced to Commander first.]

[NOOOO! It should have been me, I was here first. I will never forgive them.] Hawk cried, while Thor made consoling noises.

It was a painful moment during an already painful event for Hawk, but putting off telling him would only make him depressed later when they might need him to fight again. Getting it all out of the way at once gave him time to recover and gather his wits before coming back out into the real world.

[We think that everyone needs to come out to get their rewards before we can leave this place, so once you are recovered, everyone can gather. Until then, just rest a little longer.] Karl suggested.

[Give me like five more minutes until the cold leaves my wings. Then I will come out, and the healers can heal me. If I go too early, I get the feeling that the Ice Magic will take effect again.] Hawk explained.

He did still look freezing all over to Karl's mental sight, even in the tropical warmth of his space, which he would normally find stifling.

The first five minutes of meditation weren't enough, but they did go a long way toward improving the four spaces, adjusting them according to the changes that were made when Rae advanced.

Now that he had seen it once, it was easy to adjust the other spaces to be more like the proper Commander Rank space. Hopefully, that would pull the others toward their breakthrough at a faster pace, and help them along their way to the next bottleneck between Commander and Royal Rank.

Karl was actually looking forward to seeing Prince Corbin at his full power, and not exhausted and defending weaker party members. He was certain that the Royal Rank Spellsword would be a real marvel to behold in all out combat.

The little that he had a chance to show his skills on the push to the cave was already impressive, clearing a smooth path for the group, but Karl was certain that was only a fraction of his power, as he had already been injured and near exhaustion.

The more that he could observe that power, the better his partners would understand it, and the easier it should be for them to understand the changes they needed to push through to the next rank.

They should already meet the minimum requirements, but for humans the Commander Rank was a major bottleneck, so it might be for them as well.

Rae didn't think so, as Commander Rank was her natural state, and Thor would naturally make it to Ascended Rank. Hawk was a bit of a mystery, as he was evolved from his base state, but it shouldn't be too much harder for him.

The first five extra minutes weren't enough, so Karl gave Hawk ten more before checking in on him again, and found the bird gingerly flying around his space, shaking off the aches in his muscles.

[Are you ready to go see the healers?] Karl asked.

[Let's go. Just tell them to warm the place, I'm still too tired for flames.]

The trio came out to meet the others, and the scenery around them faded away, replacing the battlefield with a plain black void, with a stone platform that held them all with room to spare.

This time the words didn't appear in ancient script on the ground, but in Karl's vision, in the increasing familiar font of the System interface.

[Ascended Round One and Two Trials] Complete

[Commander Round One Trial] Successfully Failed

[Calculating rewards]

[Reward Calculated] 6 Skill Points

[Skill Menu Activating]

Karl gasped as a beautiful picture appeared in front of his eyes, then turned suspicious when he realized that all but the bottom row was greyed out and unusable. But there were lines between all the skills, so perhaps he just needed to learn some of them?

So, he looked at the bottom row. There were only three options. [Offensive Specialist], [Defensive Specialist] and between those two [Balanced Combatant].

Each of them cost ten skill points, so if the next round cost the same, or worse, twice as much, he wouldn't be adding too many skills, but the descriptions were interesting, to say the least.

[Offensive Specialist] Gains access to the offensive beast skills, which can be freely transferred to bonded partners by touch.

[Defensive Specialist] Gains access to the defensive beast skills, which can be freely transferred to bonded partners by touch.

[Balanced Combatant] Pays a premium price to gain access to any beast skills, which may be utilized with the [Command] ability or transferred freely to bonded partners by touch.

That last one sounded the best to him. If he could just pick and choose abilities and write them in skill books, he would be a living legend by the time he was an Overlord. But he didn't know what the Command ability was.

It wasn't listed under his class skills, which were now visible, and he couldn't read any of the other skill descriptions until he picked a path.

Hawk and Rae were cheering on full offence, while Thor thought it might be better if they all had more defence, so they didn't get smashed again.

[I will go for Balanced Combatant, so we can all get something we like, even if it costs extra.] He informed the team.

[Balanced Combatant] chosen.

[Command] skill gained.

[Command] allows the Beast Master to use their known skills on bonded partners which are not within the standard range.

Chapter 239 Skillz

Choosing [Balanced Combatant] opened up an entire row of pictures representing new skills. Three from Attack, three from Defence, and one more that was the progression skill for the Balanced path.

That was the one that he checked first.

[10 Points] [Beast Space Upgrade] upgrades the mental spaces to match the needs of the beasts residing within.

Karl simply stared in annoyance at the description for a few long minutes. Was that why he got no guidance on how to advance his Beast Spaces? Because it was a skill that he could just learn?

No, there was no skill like that attached to the other two trees, they would still have to improve their own, but they would get many more beast skills in exchange. Quite a few more, as he quickly realized.

On the Defence side, he had the option for [Barrier] [Bestial Regeneration] and [Refresh]. All of those were skills to be used by the Beast Master on his team, and all of them were currently being provided, in some basic sense, by Thor's [Group Refreshing Lightning], so Karl turned to the offensive side.

2 Points [10 Points for Balance] [Haste] improves the speed of the target beast by 10 percent per Rank (30 percent at Ascended)

2 Points [10 Points for Balance] [Terrorize] improves the damage done by the target beast by 10 percent per Rank (30 percent for Ascended)

2 Points [10 Points for Balance] [Brutality] increases the size and strength of the target beast by 10 percent per Rank (30 percent for Ascended)

That points cost differential was completely, insanely unfair. The next rank also looked like it contained all sorts of actual attack abilities that he could grant his pets for a period of time, all of which could come in useful in the future, and Karl was tempted to pick [Terrorize] just to get to see the descriptions.

But the first that Karl wanted to spend some of his thirty remaining points on was [Beast Space Upgrade].

The three spaces quickly adjusted, changing the setting inside to be more elaborate and detailed than what Karl had created on his own, though the actual energy level didn't change much. It felt like it didn't actually improve the power level of the space, except for Rae's which adjusted up to better match her power.

So, he would still need to meditate to improve them, he just wouldn't have to worry about the bottlenecks anymore.

That was spectacular, but not as earth-shattering and overpowered as it had seemed at first.

Choosing that skill caused two new skills to appear as available above it in his skill tree.

50 Points [Evolution] Cause any bonded pet to evolve into a form one Rank Higher than when the skill is used. Usable once per beast, some materials may be required.

That one was out for now, he didn't have the points.

10 Points [Skill Master Rank 2] Usable only by those with the Skill Master Learned Ability. Allows learned skills to improve to one rank above the bonded partner's current Rank with practice.

Now that was the sort of ability that he couldn't turn down.

[Skill Master] Upgraded to Rank 2

[Skill Master Rank 3 Available] 100 Points. Allows all skills to evolve to a related skill one tier higher than their current tier with practice.

If Slash was Tier 1, while Rend and Shred were both considered Tier 2 abilities, as was Lacerate, improving any of those to Tier 3 would be devastating on the battlefield. Even [Refreshing Lightning], if it was improved by an entire Skill Tier, would be something fearsome. If it were improved by two Tiers, Thor might actually be unkillable at the same Rank.

But not only that, the way that the skill was worded made it sound like the potential was limitless. One Rank higher than the current Rank with practice. So, if they just kept training their skills, they might move up even further.

That left him with ten points, and a desire to know how to obtain more. Once he focused on the need for knowledge, he noticed a small circle with a question mark in it. Just what he needed, answers to common questions.

[Skill Points are awarded for quests, achievements and accomplishments. Each Rank improvement increases the maximum points range of the available awards.]

That made sense. The higher the risk, the higher the reward, and the more powerful you were, the stronger the skills you would need, so the larger the number of points that would be required.

That left him with ten points, and a conundrum. He could do as Rae was pleading, and use them for [Terrorize], or he could do as Thor was suggesting and use them for [Bestial Regeneration] Which would grant the target a rapid healing ability.

Both were good to have, but ultimately, they were still mostly working in a group, and they had basic recovery abilities. The most important part was being able to effectively deal with threats above their Rank. If they could eliminate them even a little faster, a lot of damage could be prevented from ever being taken.

So, the decision was a fairly clear victory. 10 points were spent on [Terrorize], which Karl found was an active skill, but with no specified time limit, so it could just be left active. He would find out the actual conditions when it deactivated for the first time, but even if he just had to activate it when he called them out, that would still be fine.

Of course, there could be some timer built in that it didn't warn him about, but Rae was so happy to have a skill called [Terrorize] that it would be worth it even if he had to reuse it every few minutes.

[Of course, you should reactivate it all the time. What could be better than Terrorize?] Rae asked, listening in on his thoughts.

Purchasing Terrorize opened three options from the next row of abilities, and a note.

[Tier 3 skills activate on Beast Master and all deployed Beasts]

10 Points [20 Points for Balance] [Shatter] physical strikes cause vibrations through the opponent's body that damage organs and may break bones.

10 Points [20 Points for Balance] [Sharpness] Slashing, Stabbing and Disintegration type abilities increase in damage by 10 percent per Rank. (30 percent at Ascended)

10 Points [20 Points for Balance] [Crushing Blows] Blunt impact skills increase in damage by 10 percent per Rank. (Effective on damage caused by Shatter). (30 percent at Ascended)

Karl finished his changes and found that everyone was waiting for him, and they were still in the same spot.

"Alright, I'm done with the changes. I got some new skills." Karl explained.

"That's just unfair, giving out skills like candy to you." Tessa sighed.

She had the battle armour spell that she had learned not long ago still active, and if Karl was right, it looked much more draconic, and that golden glow around her was also a new skill, but there was an unspoken "don't ask, don't tell" policy in place, and everyone liked to keep something in reserve for emergencies.

If they underestimated what you could do, they wouldn't be as likely to put you in a situation that you couldn't survive.

Karl stood and stretched tired muscles, while Lotus flopped out on top of Rae for a nap and waved a hand at Tessa.

"Alright, come up with an idea for how to get out of here. I will be here."

Tessa smiled at her. "Alright, we're finished." She called out to nobody in particular.

The snowy battlefield vanished, and they found themselves back in the room where they started.

Dana and the two Awakened Spellswords were already there, heavily wounded, and doing their best to stop the flow of blood with minor healing potions and bandages.

Lotus activated her area healing spell, closing their wounds in seconds.

The little cleric didn't even look up from her spot on Rae's back as she spoke. "I take it things didn't go as well as you had hoped?"

Dana gave a bitter laugh. "The first and second waves went from bad to terrible, but we almost died the moment the third one appeared. We used the Golems as shields and ran until it kicked us out."

Karl nodded. "That's similar to what happened to us, only we could fight the third wave, but it still kicked us out at the end of it. That freezing effect was rough."

The Spellswords looked at him strangely. "Freezing effect? We were in the middle of the desert."

"Oh, we were on a frozen battlefield, covered in snow and bodies." Karl explained.

Prince Corbin was the next one back, and Tessa jumped into action, adjusting his position and checking his body while using her more powerful healing magic and whistling for Lotus to do the same.

Between the two of them, they barely managed to save the heavily injured Royal Rank mage, but fortunately, his severed left arm had come back out with him, and Tessa held it in place during the healing, so it reattached without issue.

The Prince was out cold, but breathing steadily when the last two came back, exhausted but uninjured.

"Well, good news, if you run when things get bad, it will let you out." Alice joked with Larry, then realized that everyone else was already here, and mostly covered in blood.

"Goddess, what happened to you all?" She asked.

"No, we want to know what happened to you all that wasn't a disaster." Prince Corbin countered, without opening his eyes from where he was laying in the double healing circles.

Larry frowned. "There was another space that said Commander Rank trial, and then an endless wave of Ogres coming our way. We fought them while retreating, and then we were returned here."

Chapter 240 Do We Move On?

From their description, it didn't sound like they had gotten any sort of reward. Karl suspected that the Awakened Rank group had gotten something, as they had at least finished the first two waves, though they nearly died on the third. That was nearly as good as his team had managed, and they got new skills.

It was impossible to tell how Prince Corbin had done, as he was in no shape for questions, but the rewards that Karl's group had gotten seemed pretty impressive.

"What do we do now? We finished the challenge in the room, but do we dare to keep going?" Karl asked.

Prince Corbin laughed. "Finished? Oh no, that wasn't what finished looks like, at least not from my side. I suspect that was intended to be a group battle."

"Well, technically we lost as well, but it's over now and we're out. Three people was barely enough to get through, but I think that five at the same Rank would have been better." Karl agreed.

"Even with the beasts?" Dana asked, leaning against Rae, who still hadn't retreated to her space.

"At first, it was alright, but as the numbers increased, and then the power, it was rough, even with them. Maybe it keeps going until you lose?" Karl suggested.

Alice gave him a curious look. "Well, let's hope that we don't have to find out. There is a second door to this room, and if we're going to explore the caverns, we will have to move along once we're all healed and rested. If not, we will have to report it and give up any chance at the hidden loot, so they can send in matched teams to face this sort of trap."

The Awakened group and Prince Corbin both sighed, suggesting that they had indeed gotten something out of their time.

Corbin got to his feet, signalling for the others to get up now that they were healed.

"Alright, we should get a move on. We need to search more than one room of the cavern complex per day if we're ever going to get through it. Leave all the doors open after we pass through, and I will mark the walls so that we don't get lost on the way back.

When it gets later in the day, we will return to the area near the cave mouth for safety." He explained.

How safe that would be was questionable, as they had been chased in here by monsters to begin with, but after the challenge that they found in the first room they entered, there was no guarantee that they wouldn't have a harder time trying to navigate the complex than they had outside.

Corbin opened the next door, and Karl took up the back of the column with Rae. She was Commander Rank now, and while Thor and Hawk had both retreated to their spaces, Thor had kept the [Refreshing Lightning] active around her, which he had now spread to the rest of the group.

The mages had created a light to float above the group, giving them enough light to see by, and Corbin was moving one along in front of them, which Karl still thought was a terrible idea for the man on point, but only a dozen metres down the hallway, they found doors on both sides again, though without any light behind them.

The Royal Rank Spellblade motioned left, and Karl noticed that there was a large chunk of his blonde beard missing where his face had been freshly healed. The Cleric magic looked like it had prevented scarring, but it didn't regrow the hair that had been removed by whatever had hit his face.

He breached the door with a gust of wind magic, and stormed inside, while Karl waited at the back of the pack to see what happened.

"Clear." He called out, just loud enough for the group to hear him.

Alice breached the one on the right, also finding it empty. It was better than finding out that every room in this place was a trap, but everyone had been hoping for some sort of treasures to be left behind in these caverns.

[There's something ahead. I can see the temperature change in the next room, it doesn't match this hall.] Rae warned, catching on to clues that Karl would have missed.

He whispered his warning just loud enough for the group to hear. "The next room is a different temperature. It might be warmed by something inside."

That put everyone on guard, and they doused the lights to the bare minimum, which revealed the fact that there was glowing plant life in the next room, providing faint illumination, but enough for everyone to see by.

It was dim to most of the group, except Karl and the Clerics, who had their own ways to enhance their eyesight. But it was enough to see by, and Corbin cast a spell to silence their footsteps.

He stopped just short of the entrance to the room, and whispered back to the group.

"I count thirty red goblins. I've never seen anything like them, but they're strong."

If the Royal Rank mage said that they were strong, then Karl would take his word for it. He obviously didn't mean that they were just stronger than regular Goblins, which wasn't a hard standard to meet.

"Keep the Awakened in the middle of the group, I will lead the way in." Corbin instructed, and the group shifted their positions to protect the more vulnerable members. That had to mean that these were on the strong side of Ascended at the least, or the Awakened members wouldn't have had to retreat to protected positions.

The ceiling was low in the room, low enough that the Golems were going to have to be shortened, and Karl couldn't use Thor to fight. His horns would get caught on the roof, and he would barely be able to move.

Rae's body shifted colours to have a bit of shimmering soft blue in it, looking like she was covered in the luminescent plant, and she summoned out her Golems.

They took on the same pattern, and the [Refreshing Lightning] spread over them as a soft blue glow, preparing them for battle.

"Now." Prince Corbin ordered, and Karl surged forward with the group, moving to the right to cover the flank while the Golems went left.

As he passed her, Karl could see the furious look on Rose's face, mad that she had to stand back from the battle against what looked like regular goblins in a new colour.

But when the first of Dana's Golem blades hit one, and it only left a deep cut and didn't eviscerate the creature, it made much more sense.

Thirty wasn't many regular Goblins. Thirty Ascended Rank mutant Goblins were an actual concern for the group.

Not so much for Rae and her Golems, who had already begun a reign of terror, as she got to test out her combat skills as a Commander Rank beast and the new [Terrorize] Skill that Karl had activated for her.

Interestingly, when he cast it on her, the spell spread to her Golems as well. The spell must consider them to be part of the same whole, and forty percent extra damage for the three Commander Rank beasts, who were nearly invisible in the room, as they looked so much like their surroundings, was more than enough.

To distract the Goblins from the presence of Rae and her minions, Karl activated [Flaming Body], filling the room with faint red light that caught the attention of all the Goblins at the same time.

That proved immediately fatal for five of the beasts as his teammates took advantage of the lapse, and then Karl was throwing [Shred] into the deceptively small and weak-looking beasts. Two of them actually managed to parry it, while one took a deep cut across its face that left it blind in one eye.

Larry moved to Karl's side of the fight, as Prince Corbin was holding the centre, but there wasn't much immediate threat. The beasts had been stopped by Karl's attack, and the three spiders were coming at their backs already.

The Commander Rank Spellblade pushed forward, throwing Lightning from his blade into the Goblins, so Karl charged with him, squeezing the Goblins into a pincer between them and the Spider Golems.

That let them move to encircle the survivors, and within minutes the Red Goblins were dead.

"Good work, everyone. Let's see what they had on them."