

Beast Master 251

Chapter 251 Commander Karl

As they stood in the snow near the foothills of the mountains, Karl checked his body for obvious changes, and immediately noticed the differences. His power had made a notable jump, likely when Hawk advanced, at least twenty percent from where he was before, and the feeling of his power was slightly different, the same way that Hawk and Rae had changed when they advanced.

"How can you tell that without a test?" Rose asked skeptically. She still viewed Karl with a level of distrust, but it didn't seem personal. She treated all men the same way, just not as obviously as with Karl.

"He feels like a Commander Rank beast. If I wasn't familiar with him, I would think that one of the local monsters had just advanced." Prince Corbin explained.

That was what one of the nearby Elite groups had thought as well, and they came running into the area, searching for the beast that had just advanced, hoping to catch it while it was still vulnerable during the aftermath, the way that Rae had been when she shed her chitin.

"Where did you all come from? We were informed that everyone else had evacuated from the mountains. We're just here to prevent the spread of the anomaly monsters." The team leader, a Commander Rank warrior, asked.

Karl's group was larger than usual, nine people, and the Spellblade outfits suggested that it was two groups mashed together for safety. To the patrol, that meant their information that the region was clear of Elites was incorrect, and they needed some answers.

"We were on a mission in the mountains. Dispatch code 025678." Prince Corbin replied.

The team leader punched the code into his phone, sending a text message to someone, and promptly got a message back.

"I see the issue. You've been gone ten days, and were presumed lost when the monsters surged. It's good to have you back, Prince Corbin." The Commander replied.

"Not it." Karl shouted as the man finished speaking.

"Not what?" He asked confused.

"I'm not taking the blame or doing the paperwork for this one. It's someone else's turn." Karl laughed.

There were definitely going to be questions about what they were doing for ten days, though it only felt like two in the minds of the group.

"I will call for an extraction team. Where will you all be returning to?" The Commander asked.

"My team will be going to the Golden Divine Academy, and I believe the others will be going to the Capital." Alice announced.

That would be a change. Karl hadn't been back to his room in ages, and he could use a nice long rest.

They simply waited as the extraction helicopter came to pick them up. Karl knew there would be all sorts of questions when they got back to the Academy. Like how he made it to Commander, how Dana made Ascended so fast, where all this new gear came from, and what they were going to do with him now.

That reminded Karl of the warning that Prince Corbin had given him. Once he was back, he would have to learn to stand up for himself. Even if he was still a student, he was also a Commander Rank Elite, and theoretically on the same social standing as the Professors of the Academy, or even Alice.

He might not have the usual record and accolades to go with it, but he did hold the Rank.

Their ride was one lone helicopter, a smaller one and not one of the larger cargo helicopters that would transport fifty Elites at a time to multiple locations.

Everyone piled in, and the copilot made a motion for them to buckle up. The large sliding doors on the sides were open, so they could attack out of the vehicle if there were flying threats, or ranged attacks, but the pilot was keeping fairly close to the treetops.

That wasn't normal, from what Karl knew. It was safer to be way up in the sky, where attacks from the ground couldn't get to you, and this only made sense if you were hiding from a threat in the air.

They were unable to hear anything being said over the noise, but the helicopter was headed straight for the Academy, if his sense of direction was correct.

Karl was in the middle seat at the back, so he chose to meditate while they flew, establishing the power level of his newest space, and getting to know Remi.

[So, you're a Shaman. What sort of skills can you use?] Karl asked the tiny Spirit Snake.

Her rich blue scales faded to pale gold along her belly, with black swirling patterns on her back, making her look a bit like a python, though the pattern of the black markings wasn't right for a python and the blue of her scales was more like a gemstone than the camouflage of a common snake monster.

"I know Minor Water Control, and Chain Lightning, and Blizzard, and healing splash. It's not a big healing spell like the clerics use, but it closes cuts well." She announced proudly.

Hawk was glaring at her from the moment that she said Blizzard, but he wasn't trying to break into her space, and he wasn't hurling mental insults at her. At least, not anymore.

Remi was still hiding under the plants in her space, in case he came for her, but Thor had been sneaking her chunks of meat, and Karl had just realized that he had stolen a corpse from Hawk's space to get it from, as his didn't have any.

Remi made sure to dip them all in the water and wrap them in leaves from one of the tall grasses before eating them, like she was making sushi rolls out of meat bits that she chopped with her spear.

It was adorable, and it didn't interfere with her mental communication.

Thor gave her more plants, to see what she liked, and the Naga got very excited, before folding one of them into a simple leafy crown that she tied with vines. Rae donated some bones to the cause, and the little shaman added them to her crown, then made a necklace of them.

Even Hawk, though he pretended that he absolutely hated her, donated a few small but shiny stones to her outfit.

[I will get you a proper hat later so that you don't destroy your leaf crown.] Karl informed her.

The supply room at the school would have something for her that was rank appropriate and would hold up to combat damage.

[Thor will give me a Lightning Barrier and that will protect it for a while. There are lots of the big leaves. They're growing here.] Remi dismissed the concern for her decoration, which would likely fall off her head the moment she came out into the open anyhow.

She didn't actually care about the coverage, it was the decoration she was after. She was a Spirit Snake Shaman, not a common monster. She needed pretty things, so everyone knew she was impressive.

Once she had filled herself with the meat rolls, Remi promptly passed out on a rock with a large leaf bent over herself, so she couldn't be seen from above.

[You scared her.] Thor chastised Hawk.

[She was supposed to be food, not friend.] Hawk retorted.

[But she's a friend now.] Rae countered, ganging up on Hawk, who was still upset about the incident.

[Fine, fine. I will be nice. At least she's only part water magic. She's got lightning as well, and lightning is warm.] Hawk reluctantly agreed.

Karl meditated the next four hours away, waiting for them to reach their destination as everyone rested. The amount of power flowing both into him and into his spaces was twice what it had been a few days ago, when he last had time to properly meditate.

The feedback from the two Commander Rank beasts had proven to be a real boon to his development.

The energy level in both Thor and Remi's spaces was growing at a noticeable rate, as was the newborn Snake. She had been absolutely tiny when she hatched, and the influx of food and energy had grown her by about a third, to the point that she would actually fill Karl's palm now.

She was still no thicker around than his pinkie, except at the base of her head, where the hood flared out like a cobra or a Naga.

When she was asleep, the hood of scales around her head was gone, tucked flat instead of spread to make her look larger. Or perhaps it was more than a threat display and worked like ears for a Naga? Karl didn't know much about their biology.

Hopefully, Sergeant Rita would be here already, he couldn't wait to tell her about all the things he had seen. But any side quests would have to wait because there was a large group of government vehicles sitting next to the helipad on the Academy grounds as they approached.

Karl hadn't really had to deal with them before, other than Colonel Valerie and her people from the Bureau, who wouldn't need to assemble a group to greet their team, unless there was some formality to welcoming Prince Corbin and the Spellblades.

Chapter 252 Government Officials

The helicopter landed, and the copilot motioned for them to wait inside until the blades spun down. That gave them time to see who was waiting for them, and it appeared to be a rather illustrious group of dignitaries from every branch of the government.

[Remember what I told you. You're going to need a backbone here, firm but polite, or they'll walk all over you and treat you like an unruly child.] Prince Corbin whispered to Karl.

Alice gave him a questioning look, wondering what he was talking to Karl about, but before she could ask, the Royal Rank mage stepped down from the helicopter and greeted the crowd.

"Ministers, Chief Researcher Davies, Generals, what brings such an illustrious group here today with their assistants?" Corbin asked as he walked toward the crowd.

Corbin had been seated next to Karl, who followed Alice out of the door, with Larry right beside him. As he turned, Karl could see that the staff were holding the others back, having everyone disembark by rank, so the Ascended would be at the back of the group.

When they reached the gathering, they held those ranks. Prince Corbin was in front, with Larry and Alice flanking Karl, and the others in behind.

Lotus and Tessa didn't stay there long, and went to greet a High Priest in the crowd personally. That gave the teachers the opportunity to whisk Dana away along with Rose and Darryl, leaving just the four senior members to greet the politicians.

"Oh, have you found a promising junior to introduce to us today, Corbin?" One of the men asked.

"Who? Commander Karl? Yes, he is quite promising, but hardly a junior anymore, Ascended Minister Gerald."

From the look on the young minister's face, you would think that Corbin had slapped him. Karl guessed that bringing up the fact that he was Ascended was considered to be an insult, despite his position as a government Minister, which was among the highest of appointed positions.

"Oh, a young Commander, is he? I'm certain that we can find some suitable work for him." The minister simpered in an unsightly display of sucking up that made Karl's skin crawl.

"I will see where I can fit you into my schedule, Minister. Thank you for the offer." Karl replied politely, and saw the split second where Corbin's neutral look flickered to a smirk.

In his peripheral vision, Alice was doing a much worse job of hiding her amusement, while Larry was stone faced, simply standing there like a statue, perhaps hoping that they would forget he was present.

A man in a General's uniform stepped up and shook Alice's hand. "Agent, good to see you again, tell me, how is the Colonel?"

Alice gave him a genuine smile. "The last that I saw her, she was dealing with an incompetent forward operations base manager. She wasn't in a good mood, but her health has been well."

A rather fragile looking person in a vibrant peach-coloured suit stepped up, holding a clipboard. "Prince Corbin, would you like to sign up for one of the assistance groups? I have all the paperwork prepared for you, ready for signature." They asked, with a tone of demand in their voice.

"No, thank you. I am quite busy with the Spellblade training program, you see."

Karl was beginning to see what he meant. If you didn't say no to them, they would monopolize every minute of your day with their pet projects, using your power and reputation to earn themselves bonuses at work.

Alice was relatively safe as a member of the Bureau, and Larry had Prince Corbin as a shield, but Karl would have been thrown to the wolves if anyone had known in advance that he had made the Commander Rank.

"Should we proceed to the official Commander Rank testing, Elite Karl?" A deep voice asked from behind him.

The voice was familiar, and Karl turned to find Tank, the Berserker training instructor, standing there with a smile on his face.

"That sounds good. It's best to get the little formalities out of the way first." Karl agreed.

Tank smiled as Karl made his escape, headed back toward the warrior training grounds.

"You don't need a mage area, do you? I don't know what you've been up to since you left here." The big berserker asked.

"No, a warrior training area should be just fine." Karl agreed.

He must have called ahead because they were already setting up the energy measuring equipment when the pair arrived.

"You know the routine, power up, no summoned creatures. Then activate your skill against the target and we will measure the energy output." The instructor who was manning the station informed them in a dry tone.

At first, Karl thought that the man didn't know or care who it was that had made Commander, then he realized that there were whole lines of students awaiting tests. It was exam week, and he just happened to be here for it. The examiner didn't even look up as Karl grabbed the two-handed training sword and activated [Refreshing Lightning] and [Flame Body].

"Pass, low Commander." The man informed them in the same bored tone.

"Respectfully, I haven't even activated an attack skill yet." Karl informed him.

That made the man look up and see the energy coated weapon still tip down against the ground. He gave an odd look for Karl being in armour, with a backpack on, instead of in school uniform, but didn't comment on it before getting back to business.

"Oh, sorry. Please, proceed."

Karl focused and added [Shred] to the ability stack, then realized he had gained new abilities from Remi. He could use her [Chain Lightning] which seemed as if it would go better with [Refreshing Lightning] than Shred did.

So, he switched and slammed an attack into the armoured plate.

"Pass, still technically low Commander energy, but the damage output is Mid-Commander."

"Thank you, examiner." Karl replied, then put the test weapon back.

Tank smirked and handed Karl a golden badge. "You can put those on your uniform when you change back. You will need a fresh set, by the way, as Commander Rank students wear the teacher's business suit around the Academy, not the plain black school uniform. If you make it to Royal before you graduate, you get a cape."

"Well, I'll try to escape to my room and get changed. What time of day is it? It should be almost dinner, right?" Karl asked.

It had been daytime since they got out of the Portal, so he wasn't entirely certain what time they started their day.

"It is almost five in the afternoon. We got the message that your team members were coming back just after lunch."

Karl smiled. "Perfect, then I will be done changing just in time to eat."

Tank shook his hand and looked toward one of the other testing areas. "I will go register your results, you go get changed, wandering around the school in armour and a backpack attracts attention."

Karl made for the supply room, and found the halls of the dorm building curiously busy with gawking students. Sure, class would be out, but nobody hung out in the hallways like this. The rumours didn't take long to reach his ears, that he was the next famous prodigy of the school. Reaching Commander in the first year, and that he was the reason all the government people were here for the exams.

Of course, that was unlikely to be true. They had gone straight to trying to wrangle Prince Corbin into deals when they arrived, but that didn't change the students' rumour mill.

"Hi, I'll need a new uniform." Karl greeted the older man at the counter.

"Wrecked one during exams, did you? No worries, I've got plenty." He replied.

"Actually, I passed the Commander Rank test, so I need a change of uniform." Karl replied, holding up the golden school badge.

"Oh, easy-peasy. They might be dusty, as I don't go through many, but they're always in stock."

The old man took out two bags, then looked over Karl and changed them for two others.

"There you go, a new uniform plus a formal suit. These ones will bond once you wear them, so do take care of them, as they'll cost you to replace. The daily wear uniform is black, and the other one is the formal white for official events." The clerk explained.

"Thanks. I will see you again soon. I will need a few equipment pieces when I have a bit more time to talk." Karl replied, with a subtle nod toward the students openly eavesdropping.

"Of course. See you soon."

Chapter 253 Special Treatment

Karl checked on the plants that filled his balcony and found them freshly watered, then changed and showered quickly, before trying on the two new suits. As promised, they bonded the same way that armour did, allowing him to dismiss them with a thought, and get dressed again just as easily. Now, he wouldn't have to worry about the spare clothes in his bag, as he had something to change into other than armour for when they got back to town, but he did notice that there was one oddity about these two outfits.

The badge, the golden emblem of his Commander Rank, bonded separately from the suits. He could take it out and show it to people without changing, or put it on whichever outfit he wanted.

That was truly convenient.

It still marked him as a student of the Golden Divine Academy, which should be no shock to anyone, given his youth. However, the mirror on the wall was showing him a much less childish face than he was used to.

That babyish peach fuzz was becoming a proper beard, and the childish look was fading toward what he would call young adulthood. Like his beasts, the advancements had helped him through the adolescent awkward phase, and he was looking more like a proper adult.

He quickly shaved, and put a bit of pomade in his hair as he brushed it, keeping it in place now that it was beginning to grow out from the crew cut that he had finished middle school with. His parents would be proud of how far he had come, so Karl sent a message to them, as both would be out of the house at this hour of the day.

When he went downstairs in his suit, none of the students recognized him right away, they simply nodded politely as he walked by, mistaking him for one of the part-time teachers' assistants that came and went.

But the cafeteria ladies weren't nearly as easily fooled.

"Student Karl, welcome back. We've got some Ascended Rank bear meat in, if your wee beastie would like to give it a try?"

Hawk wasn't feeling enthusiastic about the prospect with all the meat he already had, and Remi wasn't sure what a bear was, so Karl shook his head.

"We were lucky enough to stock up on meat while we were out. But I could use a double serving of your Shepherd's Pie, and a coffee."

The worker nodded happily, and gestured toward the seating area. "You can take a seat, we will bring it out. Or are you going to be in the staff lounge?"

"I'll sit here. I must say, I'm getting all the special treatment today." Karl replied.

"You're all fancy now, you get the privileges." She laughed, then waved him over to the tables.

The students were beginning to realize who he was, and the excitement to talk to him was building. To prevent utter chaos in the cafeteria, Karl picked a table in the corner, where he would be able to talk without being surrounded. Having to turn around to answer questions from behind would be a pain, as well as blocking most of the room, so it seemed like the best option.

At first, it was the generic congratulations on having made Commander from people whose faces he barely recognized, then some of the mages from Hawk's training class came in to have dinner and saw Karl in his suit with the gold badge.

"What the hell? How is that even fair? I haven't made it to ascended yet, and he already made Commander." One of the water mages complained.

Karl felt hawk's smugness in his mind at the man's comment. The victory over that particular bit of water was complete.

"What are you going to do now? I mean, once you are as good as the teachers, is there really much that you can learn in the Academy?" One of the other mages asked.

"There's always more to learn, and combat isn't the only subject that we need to know. Sure, I could and will likely spend a lot of time doing mercenary hunting jobs because I have beasts to feed, but the other courses, martial arts training and theory classes are all still valuable." Karl replied.

The mage laughed. "I suppose that's right. They'll expect big things of you now. But did you hear the news while you were away? There's a big thing happening with the Frost Giants' nation. Apparently, they've been using some sort of Ice Magic to attack neighbouring countries and spread their borders. I saw it on the news the other day."

That got Karl's attention. When they were sent, the thought was that the anomaly was what was causing the cold in the region, but the anomaly ended up being some sort of Dark Elf village trial, and a Naga Dungeon.

Neither of those was of the Ice Element, though there were frozen battlefields in some of the trials that they faced.

Finding out that it was most likely the beginning of an attack by the Frost Giants along that border made sense of a number of things. Like the fact that when they came out, the mountains had been evacuated, and the people left behind were feared dead.

With an ongoing conflict between them and the Frost Giants, it wouldn't be safe to go train there for the foreseeable future.

The staff brought his dinner while Karl answered questions, and after a few minutes, Dana came to join him at the table. So far, nobody else had been brave enough to take a seat, but Dana looked more concerned about the meal on her plate, while her curly hair slowly dried and turned into a giant mass of frizz.

"We've been in the field too long, it's weird seeing a meal with no rice and beans." She commented as she began to eat.

It was, actually. They were such a common staple in Lotus and Tessa's cooking that he didn't even think about it, but they were missing from the Academy meals.

Karl cut up a bit of roast chicken and wrapped it in lettuce, then brought Remi out of her space to say hello to everyone.

The baby Spirit Snake was growing fast, now over thirty centimetres long, and starting to take on more of a dull sheen, which Karl suspected meant that she would be shedding her skin soon.

"Is that Remi? The baby Naga Spirit Snake, or whatever she was?" Dana asked.

"She is. Remi, this is Dana. Would you like to say hi?" He asked as Remi grabbed a chicken ball and manoeuvred it toward her mouth.

Remi flicked her tongue in greeting and used [Minor water control] to make a pair of tentacles to wave at the mage before filling her mouth to prevent any more questions.

"Wow, I didn't think that you could bond a Spirit Snake. They're technically magical beasts, since they can't speak a language, and they're not much smarter than dogs, but still, when they evolve into Naga, they grow up to look partially humanoid." A mage from the morning training commented.

Dana looked up. "The ones we saw in the dungeon could communicate well enough."

That startled the mage. "They were speaking? Like hissing at each other to coordinate attacks? I grew up near the swamps, and there is a theory that in ancient times, Naga were semi-

intelligent beings, but now they're basically snakes with arms. They can't even be trained to perform labour tasks."

Dana nodded. "There was a whole village full of Naga in the Dungeon, complete with tents and furniture. That's wild, I wonder if Remi will be that smart or if it was just the magic of the dungeon making a home for them?"

Remi looked up at Karl. [Slap him for calling me a snake with arms.] She demanded.

Karl chuckled, catching the mage's attention. "She is quite insulted to hear the Naga called snakes with arms. But I can communicate with my beasts much more clearly than with regular animals, so being bonded to me most likely brings up their intelligence level.

Hawk speaks in my mind, speaks in a human language which his body could never make, so it's hard for me to say how smart the other Naga actually are. But Remi, for certain, knows when people are insulting her."

Remi nodded as she ate, and took out her spear to wave it at the mage using the water control tentacles.

It should have been menacing, but given her size, it was smaller than a chopstick, and much of the effect was lost in translation.

"Got it, no insulting the tiny snake girl. Is she a warrior, then? I see that she has a spear already." The warrior beside the mage asked.

If Karl was going to be sending his pets to train with the other students again, he wanted to know how long he had before some crazy snake girl with a spear was coming to beat his classmates up.

"She's actually a Shaman. The spear was a birthday gift." Karl replied.

Dana hid her laughter with a mouthful of food. Yes, a birthday gift. On the day that she was born, from the dungeon that she was born in.

Chapter 254 Rita

Once dinner was done, Karl took Dana back up to his room to relax, away from all the excitement of the Academy on exam day. Rae came out as soon as they opened the door, and went to improve her living space using the new design ideas she had gotten since they left, including the forts they had been sleeping in.

She had the space, and she could attach them to the whole wall of the building, since she didn't care about anyone else's windows.

Unfortunately for her, Karl caught that line of thought and stopped her before she could web up the entire side of the Academy to make herself a mansion.

She did upgrade their hammocks, and check on the plants she had been waiting for. Some of them had been picked by whoever was watering the trees, but there was a lot of ripe fruit here for her to stuff in her space for later.

That gave Rae a great idea.

Hawk threw Remi into the space, and they got to keep her.

Rae walked over to Dana, picked her up and then vanished into her space, leaving Dana behind to drop back to the ground. Three times in a row, she tried before giving up and complaining to Karl.

[If Thor gets to pick a Naga Egg, why can't I pick a Dana?]

Karl and Thor both laughed, while Hawk rolled his eyes.

Thor mumbled a response, half asleep in his pond. [Karl is a beast master, not a Dana Master. If you find a way to turn Dana into a puppy or a kitten, then you could probably keep her.]

Karl really wished they would stop giving each other strange ideas. Remi was already wondering if Shaman magic could shape-shift people so they could invite friends over to show off their homes, and Rae was making plans to find a way to turn Dana into a tiger.

[Don't you think you should ask her before turning her into a tiger?] Karl teased Rae, disrupting her train of thought.

[It's easier to ask forgiveness than permission. I read that in the ethics textbook.]

While he was fairly certain that Rae had misinterpreted something in that textbook, Karl left them to their own devices and pulled Dana down into the newly expanded hammock.

"It's good to be home. We can finally get some real rest, and maybe we might even sleep in." He whispered to the mage in his arms.

Dana just laughed. "Did you forget that Sergeant Rita and Jill are both here at the Academy? We're guaranteed to be pulled out of bed at the crack of dawn."

With all the stress of the long trip, they both drifted off to sleep early that night, still sharing a hammock. That was where they were found when Sergeant Rita and Jill came looking for their students the next morning.

Karl woke up to the sound of careful footsteps on the balcony.

"Agent Jill, good morning." He whispered.

"You have good hearing. I was coming to wake you up, but I didn't want to wake Rae." Jill quietly replied.

"She already knows you're here. Don't worry, she's not going to tie you up today." Karl joked.

Not that she hadn't considered it.

Karl equipped his new uniform as he swung himself out of the hammock, waking Dana up when she suddenly found her arms empty. Rita shook Karl's hand when he reached her, and her usually stern look turned to a big smile.

"Well, it looks like you've outgrown my tutelage. I remember when we first met, Hawk said that one day he was going to be more powerful than I am, and what do you know, it hasn't even been half a year, and he's already there." She informed him with a mixture of sadness and pride in her expression.

"I take it that you're being reassigned now that I've advanced?" Karl asked.

Rita nodded and gestured to her uniform. "They've made me a warrant officer, and I'm being reassigned to the Ministry of Education as a liaison officer. I will be tasked with helping rare classes and special cases make their early benchmarks, in the hopes that I can replicate your success."

"How much time do we have, or have you already been reassigned?" Karl asked.

"I meet my new student today, a transfer from out of the country who will be moving here. I think you might already know her." Rita replied.

"I might know a foreign transfer student?" Karl asked confused.

He didn't know many people at all, so the odds of him meeting a random transfer student in advance were pretty low unless...

"It's Rose, isn't it? The Ascended Rank Spellblade?" Karl asked.

"Good try, but not quite."

Rita stepped out into the hallway, and came back in with a young teen girl who looked oddly familiar to Karl. He had seen her somewhere recently, but it was taking him a second to figure it out.

"The Seminary Academy. You were serving breakfast." Karl announced once he put the pieces together.

"But how does that make you a foreign transfer, Sister? It's not that far to the Seminary Academy."

The girl smiled. "My name is Cora, and I'm not a Sister of the orders. I grew up in a Red Dragon Priestess run orphanage, and I was in the process of transferring to work at one near here when you came through the Seminary Academy with Thor.

Since I'd only missed the injection by a month, they decided last week to give me the shot early instead of waiting for next year. They didn't want to risk letting me go through training, then losing me if I gained a class marking.

Is Thor here somewhere? Can I meet him?"

Dana laughed. "That's the answer I was waiting for. Everyone loves Thor."

Karl nodded in agreement. "What class did you get?"

"Hunter. The one with the bow and the wolf head." She announced proudly.

That mark should be for a type of Hunter that summoned a companion animal. The summoned pets were not strong combatants in the long term, as they never left the Common Rank, but they could be very useful in many situations.

"Do we have any feathers? If I can get a feather quill and some Ink, I will make you a skill book with my talents as a welcoming gift." Karl offered.

Rita blinked slowly, staring at Karl.

Right, he had a bird.

[Hawk, have you moulted a feather that I can have? I want to make her a skill book for Rend.]

Hawk pointed to a feather sitting in his space, which Karl pulled out before realizing it wasn't one of his own. It was a feather from one of the damaged Naga necklaces that Hawk had been hoarding. Broken magical items had been useful before, so he didn't want to let them go to waste.

"Alright, I have my quill, I have ink in the school supplies, I have paper, and this is an easy one, only four pages. I hope everyone can wait a minute." Karl explained.

He quickly wrote out [Rend] and passed the thin manuscript to the newly minted Hunter.

It vanished from her hands as soon as she tried to open it, and Cora pulled Karl into a hug.

"Thank you so much. That is an incredible skill, and it's going to work so well with my Night Vision skill."

Hawk made a happy noise. That was all that a true Hunter needed. Rend and good eyesight. Every Windspeed Hawk knew that.

"Alright, Commander Karl. I think we've taken enough of your time, and Jill needs to bring Dana to be tested for her Ascended Rank badges this morning. We will see you around the Academy, but you are welcome to drop in to give lectures if you have some spare time." Rita announced.

"I will see you soon."

The ladies all left, and Karl realized that maybe he really would be expected to give lectures about something. He was a Commander Rank Elite, he knew his skills. Asking him to teach others who had similar skills didn't seem too outlandish, and they would likely give him school credits for it.

Left alone in his room, it didn't take long to discover that he had no plans at all for the day. He could go get breakfast, then just relax and meditate, catch up on sleep, and get reacquainted with the pace of life in the Academy. It didn't sound half bad, and Thor was on board with the idea that there was no harm in a little more sleep.

Chapter 255 Bossy Bureaucrats

Of course, simply sleeping the day away when you were the talk of the Academy was easier said than done. Karl hadn't even had time to sort through his gear to see what was depleted and what needed replacing before there was someone knocking at his door, then another, more insistent knocking.

"Good morning, was there something you needed assistance with?" Karl asked the stern looking woman at the door.

She was wearing a visitor's pass, which she would have needed to get up the stairs without being redirected by the spell, and she was holding a briefcase in one hand and a clipboard in the other.

"Wonderful, you are still here. Come with me and we can get started." She announced.

"Started on what? Perhaps you can explain what you are talking about over breakfast." Karl responded.

"I'm afraid that our time is short, so if you would, we need to be going." She replied.

"Madam, I have no clue who you are or what you want. If you wish for me to go anywhere except to the dining hall for breakfast, you are going to need to provide more details." Karl retorted, exasperated by this stranger, who wasn't even authorized Academy personnel.

If she had been clergy, or from the Bureau of Elite Development, she would have gone to the Headmaster and had herself put on the staff list, so she would have a staff badge and wouldn't need the visitor's pass to get around.

It didn't take long to realize what she meant by time being limited, though. Karl could already hear running down the hallway, and it was hard soled shoes, which only an office worker would wear. The students wore running shoes or boots, and the staff wore either soft soled shoes or military boots, depending on their preference.

The woman looked annoyed as a half dozen more government workers ran up, all wearing visitor passes with their clipboards and briefcases.

One night was more than enough time for their departments to find out about the new Commander, and come up with a plan to try to rope him in.

Karl looked at the massed group of recruiters with his best fake smile.

"Wonderful, we can all go for breakfast together, and you can make your pitches." He announced, closing and locking his door behind him.

He started to walk, and one of the men in the back, with a nasal voice that made even Thor wince, asked the question that was on all their minds.

"Who might we be competing against? Has anyone already made a pitch for your time?"

Karl turned to smile at him. "Indeed. One High Priestess of the Blue Dragon Clerics, no fewer than two bishops, one Spellblade Clan, and the Bureau of Elite Development have all beat you to the punch and are in consideration. If you don't think that you can compete with what they are likely to have offered, I won't be offended if you choose to withdraw politely."

All but one of them looked a bit nervous at that list of names. They were from smaller special interests, they couldn't provide the sort of benefits that the church or the Bureau could. The best that they could hope for was that one of their projects caught his interest.

They had been counting on the fact that students are generally naive and unprepared to get him to sign on to a time - intensive commitment, but if he was already calling them out, then the bumpkin from the mines wasn't nearly as clueless as they were led to believe by his background report.

That had to be that damnable Bureau Agent's fault. If she had prepped him for this situation before they returned, of course the Bureau would have a head start.

The fact that they were competing against the Church was a given, the clergy used the blanket method. All-inclusive recruitment, everyone welcome.

Everyone who was anyone, and some who would never amount to much, were all approached by the Church, and every Elite tried to keep friendly ties with them because they had all the healers.

Little did they know that it was the Church or the Bureau, but a rather jaded Prince Corbin who had warned Karl that saying no was in his best interests, and then proved it when they got off the helicopter. The fact they were still going after Corbin, despite the fact he had a faction and commitments, showed Karl very clearly that they would never give up.

Alice was waiting at the bottom of the stairs with a gentle looking High Priestess of the Green Dragon, the Nature God. The High Priestess smelled heavily of gigggleweed smoke and incense, and her eyes were slightly glazed, but her smile was warm and friendly.

Alice nodded to Karl as he came down. "Do we have room for two more for breakfast. I didn't hear screaming, so I assumed that things went fairly smoothly upstairs."

Karl chuckled. "If I had gotten frustrated, I'm quite certain there would have been screaming, yes. I would love to have you and your friend join us for breakfast. High Priestess, you must be hungry."

As hunger was a side effect of the herbs she had been smoking, that was guaranteed. But the High Priestess curtsied quite formally as she looked up at Karl.

"That sounds lovely. I have brought some tea."

Alice led them to the staff dining hall, which was nearly empty already, and away from prying ears.

Once they were seated, Alice gestured for the staff to bring them all the breakfast special and drinks, then turned to get the morning chaos started.

"Colonel Valerie will be here in an hour, but she has asked me to inform you that she's looking to formally recruit you for the Bureau. I don't know the terms, but it would be full-time agent status, with conditions, probably including finishing your classwork to cover the core subjects."

A few of the others saw that as a chance to challenge the Bureau Agent. If they were just trying to hire him, that wasn't much of an offer. He made Commander as a first year student, not like Alice, who only made it to Commander years after graduation.

The green robed High Priestess sipped her coffee, then poured herself some hot water from the insulated pot on the table into a teapot and started to steep her tea.

"I'm sure Agent Alice is omitting some important details because that sounds boring. Even I can offer you a generous stipend and a cute cleric to play with."

The others looked scandalized, but Karl laughed. "And did the cleric in question phrase it exactly that way, or did she say that she was bored this morning and wanted to go to the woods with Rae and play instead of whatever she's supposed to be doing."

The High Priestess looked thoughtful. "It might be the second one. But if you're Ray, it's the same thing, really. She's out in the yard somewhere, exploring."

[Rae, go find Lotus and keep her from getting lost or injured.] Karl instructed.

The recruiters hit the ground, diving out of their chairs when the enormous spider suddenly appeared in the room, but Rae just ran outside, looking for Lotus so they could make a fort in the woods and look for flowers.

"What in the seven hells was that?" One of them wailed, her eyes tearing up in fear as she cowered under a table.

"Oh, that's Rae. She's my partner, and the one that the team's nature Priestess wanted to play with."

The High Priestess pointed at Karl as if he had just made a great revelation. "You know, that makes so much more sense. Nature Priestesses rarely want to play with humans."

The man with the nasal voice glared at Karl and the High Priestess. "If you just wanted us here to mess with us, we can come back later."

"I would rather you didn't. Now, please, feel free to make your presentation, and I will give you some warning before more giant monsters appear in the room."

The High Priestess smiled. "You should warn them about little ones, too. Because even if they insult the little Spirit Snake Shaman, it will still be prohibitively expensive to have them resurrected."

The man cleared his throat. "As I was about to say, I represent the seventh bank and investment conglomerate, who are working on an expansion into the Southern Wilds, and we think you could be just the person to head security for our new facility."

A banking conglomerate could likely put up some decent pay, but full-time compound security for a Southern outpost? No, thanks.

Chapter 256 Contracts

Sadly, that might have been the best out of the six proposals, but they only got through four, as two of the others excused themselves to "take a call" and didn't return.

"I appreciate you all taking the time to make your presentations today, and if you will leave a copy with me, I will look them over at a later date, when my time is not so limited, and I can properly consider their merits." Karl informed the remaining four recruiters once the final pitch was done.

"Thank you, Commander. We look forward to your positive response." A young woman, who had tried to sell Karl on spending three days a week being the spokesperson and security chief for their exclusive gated community, replied.

The others offered similar sentiments as they left, and the Green Dragon High Priestess turned a smile on Karl.

"Well, that's the nicest way I've heard to tell someone to go fuck themselves all day." She announced.

"Which implies that you've heard less polite versions today." Karl replied.

The aura of inebriation suddenly vanished, and the woman's sharp eyes turned on him. "You know, we really did suggest that Lotus should stay and entertain you to keep you aligned with the church."

Alice cleared her throat. "For legal reasons, I am going to pretend that I didn't hear any of the questionable implications behind that comment. But I don't think that he's ruled out keeping the clerics around yet. They work very well together, and they have both made good friends with his beasts."

The High Priestess shrugged. "They're too young for what you're thinking that I'm thinking. Dirty minded Elite. But where did that spider go? Did you really send her to find Sister Lotus?"

Karl nodded. "With instructions to take her to play in the woods, but not to let her get lost or harmed."

The High Priestess sighed. "Great, now we're going to have to look for them both at the end of the day."

Karl chuckled and did his best to imitate his Uncle, who had seven children of his own.

"They'll come back when they're hungry."

They relaxed for a few minutes and finished their coffee before anyone came up with another good reason to bother them. That ended up coming from the church, in the form of Tessa and a Red Dragon High Priestess.

"Good, we found you together. Have you come to an arrangement?" The muscular High Priestess asked.

Karl had never seen muscles like that on a woman before. She was built almost like Tank, the Berserker. Her arms were the size of Lotus' torso, and she was wearing her robe parted up one leg, showing off a massive, muscular thigh.

"Sort of. Rae and Lotus are out playing in the woods." The Nature Dragon High Priestess replied happily.

"I should have expected that it would end up like this. I will make our proposal much simpler. The Red Dragons would like to leave a War Priestess with you to assist your adventures. Specifically, this one. If you agree to take the deal, you will be responsible for ensuring that she has the chance to serve her Goddess, while we will provide her with the standard stipend for her living expenses. With this, you will get priority access to church missions you wish to take." The Red Dragon High Priestess explained.

"Church Missions with no forced dispatches, so we can take them on my schedule, and at my discretion?" Karl asked.

Her eyes flashed red as the woman glared down at him, but Karl waited patiently, hoping that she was just communing with her Goddess and not looking for reasons to squish him like a melon.

He still had the Giant Strength Ring on, but he wasn't convinced that it would be enough.

After a few seconds, her eyes faded. "The Goddess wants a minimum commitment. Either to war or to caring for Orphans from wars. If you agree to either at least one mission every three months, of your choosing as long as it pleases the War Dragon, or foster an orphan child under the age of selection, it will meet the requirements of the Goddess."

The muscular woman smirked. There really was only one option there, unless he was going to become foster parents at fourteen with Tessa.

"If you draw up the contract, I will read it over and consider it carefully." Karl agreed.

The High Priestess' eyes flared red again as she nodded, and then she took a rolled contract in a red jade tube out of thin air.

Karl took the tube from her hand and rolled it out. The details on the scroll were actually simple and specific. Karl agreed not to leave Tessa in danger except in life or death emergencies, to ensure she was receiving proper treatment, take at least one mission that pleased the Red Dragon every three months, and then the contract guaranteed that the Red Dragon's followers would provide her living expenses.

Karl couldn't see a reason not to agree to the deal, but he read it over again, just to be certain that he didn't miss anything. The delay made Tessa laugh quietly. The Red Dragon wasn't big on tricks and doublespeak outside the battlefield.

He hadn't noticed that Dana and Lotus had come back in while he was reading, or that Rae had returned to her space.

"What's all this, then?" Lotus asked as she saw Karl holding the scroll.

The Red Dragon High Priestess shrugged. "You went to play, so we came over first."

"And you were just going to leave us out of the deal? Party foul!" Lotus announced.

"You want in on the deal?" The Red Dragon High Priestess asked, intrigued by the unexpected actions of the nature Priestess.

They were notoriously flaky, and getting one to go along with a deal that lasted longer than one day was sometimes an issue.

Lotus nodded happily, and her own High Priestess gave her a stern look. "This is a long-term agreement. It's not for one or two trips, it's a magical contract, so you will have to pay a penalty to break it in less than a year and a day."

Lotus gave her a thumbs up, and the Red Dragon High Priestess turned to Karl.

"Is that everyone in agreement, then?" She asked.

"Agreed." Karl, Lotus, Tessa and Dana all replied at the same time.

The scroll flashed red, and a red ring appeared on the wrists of the four teammates.

Dana smirked, as Tessa and Lotus realized that she wasn't just here to watch, and that she had gotten herself attached to the deal. Now they couldn't leave her behind to train with the other students, or to be reassigned to other missions.

Karl looked at the three girls and smiled. "Well, it looks like we will be working together for some time. It's a pleasure to have you."

Lotus giggled. "How about you show us to our room? I want to see the plants."

"Our room? I'm fairly certain that the Academy can manage to find you a room of your own." Karl reminded her.

"But it wouldn't have silk hammocks or a balcony full of magical plants. I don't really care where I sleep, but I want to see the room." Lotus countered.

That was when Alice, Colonel Valerie, and what looked like half the staff of the Academy burst in.

"Stop, before you sign, let us see that contract." One of the Professors shouted.

The Red Dragon High Priestess laughed. "Too late, we got verbal agreement. But it's not a work contract, at least not in the conventional sense."

She turned over the magical contract, which Colonel Valerie grabbed from her hand and rolled out for the others to see.

"No leaving them in danger, ensure proper treatment. Alright, it's not as bad as we had feared." The Professor who had shouted replied with a sigh.

Colonel Valerie glared at Karl. "I thought we had something going here?"

Karl smiled back. "I think we do. There's nothing in that which prevents us from having an arrangement, only that once every three months or less, it must please the Red Dragon."

Colonel Valerie smirked. "Well, isn't that a coincidence? Because what I have in mind just might please the Red Dragon. How would you like to lead a team back into the anomaly area and find out what the Frost Giants have been up to, and where the extra ice is coming from?"

It might take some time, but it will please the God of War. They made a formal declaration of war less than an hour ago."

Chapter 257 Learn When To Say No

The words that Prince Corbin had spoken to Karl while they were on night watch suddenly came back to his mind. 'If you don't learn to say no, they will keep sending you on nearly suicidal missions until one actually is.' That advice seemed to fit this situation very well, and the pressure to please so many important people and go along with their requests was strong.

"I am going to need some more details about this mission and the situation in the area before I can agree to go anywhere. The last I saw, that entire region was unfit for human habitation, and that was before the Frost Giants showed up." He replied.

One of the ministers gave him a disgusted look. "Refusing your first mission as a Commander doesn't portray your character in a very good light. Cowardly, some might call it."

Karl rolled his eyes at the man, who was no Elite, just a pencil pusher. "And what words do they use for a Commander who takes his team into a war zone without a clue or a care in the world?"

The Minister stammered for a second before Karl continued.

"A martyr, that's what they call them. Because they wind up dead. Now, who has the details, or am I headed to the Church's mission board to occupy my time?"

For a second, he thought that he saw respect on Colonel Valerie's stern face, but when she motioned for someone to bring forward the map, that was long gone and her standard working glower was back in place.

The official who brought forward the map rolled it out on the table between Karl and the High Priestesses, and Karl immediately noticed that there was almost no detail on it.

"This is the most recent official map." The man insisted.

"With no troop deployments or enemy combatant numbers?" Karl asked.

Tessa looked over at the map and shook her head before turning to her order's High Priestess.

"Do we have numbers for this? If they're not cooperating, it might be better to go through you." The War Cleric asked.

"We were speaking to the Commander." The official informed her in a dry tone.

Karl shrugged. "And we operate as a team. Now, are you going to quit messing around, or are we going to have to decline your request? If you want us to deploy, you're going to have to share enough intel for us to make a proper combat assessment."

Colonel Valerie raised her hand to stop any more arguments, and took out a small box from her pocket.

Inside were two sets of rocks, one in light blue and one in green. First, she set out about a hundred blue stones near the border. Then she began setting out green stones of various shapes and sizes.

"This is the current deployment situation, as of my last meeting. The stone sizes are the maximum detected rank within the enemy formations, each stone represents roughly a hundred Frost Giants.

The round green stones are Elite teams, the diamonds are Military Elite Companies, and the squares are conventional artillery batteries."

Karl looked over the map and did some basic math.

They were screwed.

There were more stones measuring Frost Giants by the hundred than Commander Rank led teams in the area, and Karl wasn't certain how useful artillery was going to be. It was great against Common Grade and Awakened Threats, but There were Royal Rank Giants in the Frost Giant nation, and they were Commanders when fully grown.

"The teams that are already there. Are they being sent ten or twenty at a time?" Tessa asked.

Valerie remained silent for a few seconds while the Cleric waited.

It was the official who brought out the map that cracked first in the tense atmosphere.

"They're being sent in five-person teams."

That was just an all around terrible idea, in Karl's opinion. But they could link up once they were in the field and make stronger teams for actual operations, the same as they had to do last time.

"Why are we so pressed for numbers? There are far more Commanders than this, and there aren't even a significant number of soldiers. When is the rest of the army being mobilized?" Tessa asked.

The official looked to Colonel Valerie, as he wasn't approved to give out that information.

"The other Giant Clans have been pushing the borders as well. They have declared a grand alliance of the Giant Tribes, and we believe that they intend to take the entire Golden Dragon Nation in one offensive push." Valerie informed them.

"Then Prince Corbin?" Karl asked, digging for deployment information, as there were no larger stones along this border.

"Has been deployed next to the Stone Giant Clan's border. That is where the Spellblade Sect's towers are, so he has chosen to defend his home territory along that stretch of border."

You couldn't fault him for that. The Lithium mines were near the centre of the nation, so they would be one of the last spots to defend, unless there was some massive breach. Karl's family would be one of the safest.

Colonel Valerie took out another map that had hundreds of marks on it, and showed the entire nation's borders. There were only three spots that they weren't under attack. The magical nation had marks noting that they were deployed along all the borders they had with monster populated nations, the beastkin nation appeared to be in full lockdown, and the Divine Beast Nation had no marked forces deployed anywhere on either side.

That was still the vast majority of the border under attack at once.

If they were using this angle to guilt the more powerful Elites into fighting, they had a pretty good sales pitch, now that they actually started to show the details and not just try to demand that he help out without any information.

"My team will need a fifth if we're going to agree." Karl sighed.

If things got any worse, there would likely be an official draft, and then he would really get thrown into the worst of it along with all the bookish sorts like the ones at the last deployment with the Mackenzie family.

Alice nodded. "You have your pick of the Ascended Rank students to fill your team with whatever role you think that you need."

She already knew that Karl had a fairly well-rounded set of pets, so they weren't particularly short on anything if the two clerics and Dana were all going with him. She assumed he would pick another mage

to take her place, as she would be taking care of more official government business and arranging deployments of their agents with Colonel Valerie.

"Can you give us a few minutes to discuss this in private?" Karl asked.

"Of course. We will be waiting here when you return." Colonel Valerie agreed easily.

Karl led everyone up to his room, and Lotus immediately flopped on his bed.

"Well, this is a clusterfuck, isn't it? We will all be fighting soon enough, so it seems better that we pick the spot we want to fight from the start." The tiny nature priestess announced with a deep sigh.

Dana nodded. "She has a point. I definitely didn't expect to be sent straight to war the minute that we agreed to stay together, but if we are going to have to go, we should pick our spot."

Tessa smiled at her. "You're still a student, so it would be an option to stay here for likely another year before you got too close to the Commander Rank, and they started pushing for you to go wild with the supplements."

"Sure, stay here as the second string genius, falling further behind by the day while the other students only look up to me because the one with real power is gone? I don't think so."

There was definite bitterness in Dana's tone. It made Karl wonder how often she found herself compared to him and his insane growth rates. It was just unrealistic to expect any other Elite to keep up with this pace. He not only had the beasts pulling him forward, but he had more access to the System Interface than most.

He could see his skills and add them. He even had enough to get another one right now. He could actually get two, if he picked from the defensive side, or the first rank of the offensive side, but he wasn't sure what they would need yet, and he didn't want to leave his team unbalanced.

Chapter 258 And When To Say Maybe

Tessa cleared her throat. "The real question is what sucker are we going to take to their death with us?"

Lotus giggled. "As much as I appreciate your optimism, I don't think that any of the mages would actually agree to go with us. Even the tank type warriors wouldn't fall for that, and we can only pick from the Ascended Ranks, so we can't recruit an experienced Commander from the Mercenary groups.

That rules out calling for any powerful old friends or connections."

Karl had considered that for a moment as well, but Bob Mackenzie would be too powerful to be pulled into their team, and if Karl's guess was right, the entire family would be out somewhere already.

"Then who can we even get?" Dana asked.

Karl smiled. He knew just who to ask.

"I think I know who we can get. Thor learned Earthquake from the Berserker Class. I bet that we can get one of their Ascended Rank members to come along with the promise of battle and rewards. The Berserkers don't get out much during class because they're a bit wild in combat, and teams with no healers can have issues.

But we have all the healing that we could need, and Thor's [Refreshing Lightning] spread over everyone, so we don't have to worry too much about them taking damage, unless we find an overstrength enemy."

Lotus looked pensive. "How are your credits looking? You've got a beast of a weapon, and you can coat it in attack spells all the time. But not everyone can do that. We might need to equip a new member before we head out."

"I don't know exactly now that we're back from this mission and those rewards will be processing, but buying armour didn't change the first two digits on the balance, so we should be good for me to get someone Ascended Armour and a weapon if they don't have a good one." Karl agreed.

Tessa frowned. "Alright, we will go talk to the Berserkers. Does that mean we're going to agree to this idiocy?"

"I have an idea. There is a spot in the mountains, not too close to where we were earlier, but not in the most populated passes. I don't want to go into an abandoned area, that just seems like idiocy, but if we go somewhere near the edge of a secondary pass, we can aim for their scouting teams.

They should be smaller and weaker, as they will need to be agile and able to make it through the mountains. Giants shouldn't be good at that when they're excessively large. There are obvious clusters to their strength on the map, and as long as we avoid that, we can do a lot of damage and help everyone upgrade their gear and skills before anyone tries to change our mission." Karl offered.

Lotus raised her hand. "It's all well and good to say we're bringing a Berserker, but I'm not travelling with some creepy guy who thinks that sweat is a form of shower."

Dana smirked, knowing that described a lot of the Berserkers, and Tessa nodded her agreement with Lotus' sentiment.

"Then I will leave it to you ladies to find our fifth member, while I deal with the details of the deployment. If you need to bribe them, let them know I will find them armour and a new weapon." Karl agreed.

Before going back down, he spent a moment mentally preparing himself for the influx of questions and pressures to go to the very worst of the combat zones to add bodies to the main lines.

The group had gotten even larger when he got back down, and there were two groups of senior class students added to the chaos, all Ascended Rank with a Commander from the Bureau of Elite Development leading them. Namely, Jodi and Josh, two of the team members who had gone with Karl to go looking for his second pet.

"Jodi, Josh. Good to see you two gentlemen again." Karl greeted them as he entered the room.

Jodi smiled back. "You've gotten all fancy on us. Tell me, how is that bloodbath spider doing?"

"Rae? She's doing wonderful. Commander Rank already, and she made good friends with a nature priestess so they can play in the woods together. Thor, the Lightning Cerro is also doing well, and Hawk is making the best of the evolutionary resources we have found." Karl informed them.

"Where are they sending you?" Josh asked, concern obvious in the blue eyes that looked much too old for his youthful face.

"We were just about to discuss that. I have a particular spot in mind, where my group composition would be well suited to hunting scouts from the Frost Giants, and to prevent the movement of surprise forces around the main battlefields." Karl explained.

"And what makes you think you have a choice in your deployment?" An older bureaucrat, decades past his prime, demanded.

"Who are you to think that you get to tell me what to do? Will you be joining us on the front? I don't think so. Now shut up and let the warriors speak." Karl replied.

The room fell silent as the man's face turned red in rage. Even Alice backed away from Karl, seeing that this was going to do downhill fast.

"I am the undersecretary to the deputy minister of defence!" The man shouted.

"Then, dear undersecretary, get your boss's boss here, and we can speak on even terms." Karl replied, emphasizing the man's junior role.

"That was a bit harsh." Jodi noted as the undersecretary was hauled away by other government officials before he could start a fight he couldn't possibly win.

Karl shrugged. "He knows nothing of our capabilities, nothing of our personal experience, and he has never seen combat in his life. He shouldn't have been here in the first place, puffing up his chest and making demands above his station like a newly promoted shift manager."

"And if I made a demand as to where you would deploy?" One of the Elites from the government, a Commander in his late twenties who would have been one of the earlier graduates, asked.

"Then we can discuss the reasoning behind it. I am not part of the military to be ordered around, and we all know that ordering students to the front lines would require an official decree, as we're still underage.

I came down to tell you that my group has gone to look for our fifth member, not to pick a fight. Now, would you like to hear what I had in mind?" Karl replied.

There was a new map on the table, and it had ten large red rings placed on it. One of which was over where Karl was planning to have his team deploy.

"These are the spots where we need teams. What were you planning to request?" The Elite asked.

"This spot here. It's close to the mountains, and challenging to scout by normal Elites on foot, but not too far from reinforcements if we do find something we can't handle. That is the spot that I was going to request, based on the troop deployment map."

The Government Elite smiled. "So you did have an actual plan in mind, and you weren't just pulling the Elite card on the Undersecretary. Alright, we can grant you that deployment area."

A quiet voice cut through the conversation, and a sense of power filled the room as someone entered unannounced.

"Dealing with rogue and unaligned Elites is always a tricky matter. It looks like some of you underestimated the situation at hand, but I commend the others." The man spoke.

"Overlord." Alice greeted the man, while the other Elite bowed.

"Minister of Defence." The man who had shown Karl the map greeted their new arrival.

Like Drake, he must have been one of the early test subjects for the Divine Injection, as he was at the Overlord Rank and well into his thirties, meaning he was much older than usual for recruits when the injections were made public.

At first, they had given them to anyone under eighteen, but that was still only ten years earlier, so very few of the Elites were over thirty.

The Minister held out his hand to Karl. "Congratulations on making Commander while still in the Academy. I don't believe that we have met. I am Defence Minister Orleans."

"Karl, first year student, originally from the Lithium Mines, and the Academy's newest headache at the Commander Rank."

That made the Minister smile. "I got a missive from Prince Corbin, asking that you be assigned to his battlefield, so I had the Mage Council send me over to see what was so special about you. That man lives to be a pain in my ass, but his Clan has the skills to back up their arrogance."

Chapter 259 Cold Front

"Do they need us over there?" Karl asked.

Overlord Orleans shook his head. "They have three times as many defenders per likely enemy unit as this front does, and the Spellblade Clan has a number of old masters who they can pull out of retirement if they are in real danger."

So, he was still on the worst front, just in a decent spot along it. That should be alright. From what he remembered of the Giants, they should be near his own team's power level, mostly ascended, with Commanders leading larger teams on occasion. But there was one more question that needed to be asked.

"Other than what was on the map, what is the strongest Frost Giant that has been seen in the past few years? Not what we know is deployed, but what could be coming at us unexpectedly." Karl asked The Defence Minister.

"There are Royal Rank Frost Giants, nearly thirty of them within the nation, and three known Monarchs, but their Immortal King, as they call him, is a Totem Rank monster, one step above the Overlord Rank.

He has been alive for hundreds of years, and we are unsure of his combat power these days, but there is a theory that they organized this alliance with the other Giants to eliminate the threat of the humans before the Immortal King succumbed to old age.

The leaders of the other Giant Nations are similarly impressive, though the Stone Giants are taking the majority of our strongest warriors, as they have dozens of Overlords in their ranks, and their average warriors can grow to Royal Rank in later adulthood."

Karl nodded and made notes as Defence Minister Orleans outlined the issues. Now it made sense that there weren't any Overlords on this front. They had all been deployed to keep the Stone Giants and Hill Giants at bay.

The Frost Giants were more numerous, but not as domineering at their peak strength.

The other two teams looked a bit relieved at the news that there weren't many Frost Giants above Commander Rank, but Karl had already seen the deployment numbers, and no matter where they went, it was not going to be an easy battle.

"What are the chances that they are going to stand down after a prolonged stalemate? Should we be aiming to push them back, or just to limit casualties on our side?" Jodi asked, distracting the Minister from his explanation about the difference between Giant Nations.

"Limited losses are the aim right now. If they make a full offensive against the artillery lines, that might change. The artillery is powerful enough for the Awakened Giants, and will have some effect against the Ascended beasts as well.

But if they make a full push, none of our conventional weapons will be able to hold against them, and it will be up to the Brothers of the Church and their blessings to allow our line infantry to fight back."

He was obviously trying to push them to do as much as they could to keep the Giants from attacking, as the casualties involved in regular infantry fighting Giants were guaranteed to be catastrophic. That was just basic history, and for millennia, that was how the less magical nations of humans had survived.

During those times, even when the average family had ten children, the nation had barely managed to increase its population after casualties in the wars against the monster tribes.

In the last ten years, they had made huge strides in the stability of the nation, and it was honestly surprising that the Giants had waited this long to start to team up to eliminate the human's power base.

The rest of Karl's team came in with a rather unassuming looking girl in an Ascended Rank school uniform. He had thought that they were going for a Berserker, but if she was their choice, Karl would work with it.

The most important thing was that everyone got along, and she didn't look like she intended to cause any friction among the team members like some flirtatious male warrior might.

"Karl, this is Bear, an Ascended Rank Berserker from the senior classes." Lotus introduced their new member.

"Bear?" Karl asked.

"I am a Bear Totem Berserker. I transform when I use the [Enrage] skill, and the nickname kind of stuck. My name is Ophelia."

"Good to meet you, Ophelia. Now that our team is ready, we can head to the supply room and start packing. I have arranged our deployment point already, and the government sorts will inform us when our ride is ready." Karl explained.

He led them out of the room, along with Dave, Jill, Alice and Daniel. The four Agents from the Bureau who had been looking after Karl and Dana were rightly concerned to be seeing them going to war so early into their training, but they were also going out to make sure that other promising talents had a bit of extra protection when they were in the worst spots.

So, this would be the last they would be able to see each other for a little while, unless the situation near Karl changed.

"It looks like you've formed an enviable group. Take care of them while you're out, and we might see you soon. We're all being assigned to strike teams to rescue Elites in trouble. That's one of the primary duties of the Bureau. It's difficult to have Elites develop if they're dead.

But you're in a good position, so as long as you don't get into the main lines of the Frost Giant army, you should be alright.

Don't try to play hero, and ... I'm sure there was something else I wanted to say." Alice ranted.

Daniel patted her on the back.

"They will be fine with Karl along. I have read all the reports, and I don't know many who have more skilled scouting abilities than him and Hawk. When it comes to avoiding ambushes, they're top-notch." He comforted his partner.

Jill smiled at Dana while pulling her blonde hair back into a ponytail.

"Are you certain that life as a pop music idol sounds that bad? It's not too late to back out and find a replacement to go to the front lines." The mage joked.

Dana nodded enthusiastically. "Anything sounds better than that. As Daniel said, we will be fine. I just hope that Jodi and Josh will be. They're taking student teams out, and it sounded like they weren't going to get to pick the good locations."

"They will be alright. They're going to be attached to military units, so they're not out alone. The lines are dangerous, but there is support. Most of us have been there before. That's how Rita got all but her last promotion, it's not as bad as the historical battles were." Alice assured them.

A call from inside the meeting room drew the Agents away, and Karl led the team to the supply room, then looked at their newest member.

"Does your transformation preclude wearing armour?" He asked.

The Berserker shook her head, knocking some of her straight brown hair loose from its tie. "Not if it's bonded. Sister Lotus said you would splurge and cover some bonded armour for me, and a new weapon."

Karl smiled. "Of course. We all need to be equipped to go to battle, and I will check on the others as well. What is your transformed shape like?"

Ophelia made a vague gesture upwards. "I'm about 250cm tall, standing on my back legs, half bear, half human. I can still hold things, but I've got claws on my hands, and a bear head. It's the rage that causes problems because I can forget who is an ally if they look too much like the enemy."

"That shouldn't be a problem while fighting Frost Giants, but we can put you on the far side of Thor if that makes you more comfortable. I don't think anyone has ever mistaken him for a Frost Giant." Karl laughed.

"There is another member?" She asked.

Karl turned to Lotus. "Did you forget to give her details?"

The nature Priestess just shrugged. "We got the important parts."

Karl sighed as he turned back to the Berserker. "Thor is a Lightning Cerro, one of the four beasts I am partnered with. He's full-grown, bright green, and provides everyone a Lightning barrier that refreshes stamina, as well as providing basic healing.

Then we have Hawk, our scout, who is a form of Dragon Hawk, and Rae the Bloodbath Spider, who usually fights with two spider Golems made of vines at her side."

She nodded along, then counted on her fingers. "You said four, that is three."

Karl called Remi out into his hand.

The little blue and gold snake looked up at Bear, then activated [Minor Water Control] to make herself a pair of arms to wave hello.

"Oh my Goddess, she is adorable. But I can see why you don't count her as a combat pet. Why did you pick a common grade water snake?" She asked.

"Remi is a Naga Spirit Snake. When she grows up, she has a high chance to evolve into a Naga, but she is an Ascended Rank shaman already. Her skills are limited due to her age, but she isn't entirely incapable.

In fact, as she can cast Blizzard, she might even help us blend in with our surroundings on this mission." Karl explained as they reached their destination.

"Commander, what brings you back so soon?" The supply room manager asked when the group entered the room.

"We're heading out on a mission, and one of our team members needs gear. Possibly two, if Sister Lotus has been worried about everyone but herself." Karl replied.

"We've got just what you need. Just give me a moment to pull up the inventory."

Chapter 260 Bear Chops

The screen changed a few seconds later, and there was an assortment of plate armour displayed.

"This should all bond to the user, as Miss Ophelia will need. Now, were you fronting the credits, or did she need to take a battle credit loan?" The staff member asked.

"I will be purchasing her new armour and a weapon to match. There are also a few items we will need for our packs, which Lotus will inform you of later. Those can all go on my tab." Karl explained.

"Alright, I will let you sort out the repayment terms on your own. It's not like you're hurting for money the way that you keep turning in reward materials. But speaking of which, do you have any more of the tea moss? We're running low, and it has been in high demand since the first outing's members began to run out."

Karl checked Thor's space, and then Rae's space, where it was actually growing in abundance on the trees. He collected a few kilos of fresh moss and passed it over to the supply room clerk, along with some of the herbs that were growing within Thor's space and beginning to spread beyond their intended area.

"Here, you can put those on my account to help offset the cost. If you need more of anything that might be growing along the border with the Frost Giants, just let me know, and I will see if I can bring any of it back when I return."

The staffer nodded as he sorted through the various armours that were available.

"This one has a flame enchantment on it. That will be good both for hunting Frost Giants and for keeping warm in the mountains. Did you have a mobile source of heat?" The Clerk asked.

Karl smiled and activated [Flaming Body] over his hand.

The clerk nodded. "That will about do it. No need to worry about freezing when you can just set yourself on fire for fun. Alright, why don't we have Miss Ophelia try this one on. If it bonds, she will be armoured, and then we can move on to finding a suitable weapon.

What are you using now? Will it hold up to the rigours of Commander Rank combat?"

Karl took out the two-handed blade, and the Berserker gave it a look that Karl could only describe as lust. That was definitely her preferred weapon, but the energy leech effect that it had was really pushing Karl's beasts forward with all this fighting.

His mental spaces were almost ready to be equalized again, and that should push Thor nearly to the Commander Rank, as the spaces naturally tried to push the beasts to the same point.

The supply clerk frowned as he examined the blade. "It's not particularly high quality, and I'm guessing that you use a skill to protect it from direct damage, but it's not going to hold up to your increasing abilities for much longer.

The enchantment is strong, but the material quality is definitely on the lowest side of Awakened, so even as sturdy as it is against physical strikes, too much skill power being channelled through it will damage the weapon."

Karl sighed. It was a bonded weapon, but if he was going to outgrow it, he would have to find another weapon to use in general combat, and leave it to passively draw the life force of their enemies.

He had the bow now, so he could fight at longer ranges, but depending on the fight, he might still be needed as a frontline combatant.

Possibly not, if they used Dana's Golems with Thor, but they would have to adapt their strategies.

"I have this bow as well. But I'm more often needed to hold back the enemy, so I haven't had a chance to use it." Karl explained.

The clerk assessed it with a trained gaze. "That's a good one. Low Commander Rank, infinite arrows, and it will grant your strength modifier to the arrow damage. As I recall, you had a strength ring."

Karl nodded. "Indeed. It's a good item, but I could likely use another sword, as the only other one I have is also getting outdated."

It was still strapped to his pack, but he rarely used the short sword for anything, it was just an emergency spare.

The clerk went into the back and came back with a cart full of weapons.

"I don't have much at the Commander Rank, but I have one that has a life steal ability that should be similar to the one you're using. The rest of these are all for Miss Ophelia to choose from."

Karl refrained from mentioning that it wasn't exactly a life steal effect that his existing blade granted, since they only had one similar quality weapon anyhow. If he had one that healed and one that granted life force to help them grow, that was twice as good.

Karl went to pick it up to check it out, and energy sparked from his hand, forcing the weapon away and nearly knocking over the rack.

The clerk hurriedly saved the weapons cart from tipping as he cursed.

"I was afraid of that. Some equipment will interfere with others and prevent you from bonding them. It could be that the two blades are too similar, and the old one won't let you replace it. If that's the case, just keep a spare of some sort and use it until it shatters." He explained.

The blade looked better than when Karl had gotten it. Much better, in fact. If he kept using it and letting it absorb energy, he might not need to replace it. It was falling behind his power level, but as long as it wasn't so far behind that his skills broke it, the blade should be fine to keep using.

Bear chose a pair of matched axes which granted fire damage on hit, a perfect counter for Frost Giants, and suited to her fighting style. They could be used both in her normal form and in her Werebear transformation, and they bonded to her, so they could be safely stored when not in use.

Everyone else had Ascended Rank or higher armour on already, though Dana wasn't particularly happy about her incredibly ornate mage robes from the Naga dungeon. They were good robes, though, and she wasn't willing to give them up for an inferior option just because of the style.

"What is your front-line combat formation?" The back room clerk who brought out most of the weapons asked.

"Thor, who is near peak Ascended Rank, and two Ascended Stone Golems with the [Durable Constructs] bonus. Then we have two Commander Rank attack Golems." Karl explained to the aging veteran.

The man considered it for a while, then nodded. "So, you count on the weaker Golems to hold the line, while the more powerful ones are able to go all out on damage? That's not a bad plan. You've got four constructs with the group, after all.

I was going to recommend something to add barriers, other than your one mage."

Karl smiled back at him. "We have a group [Refreshing Lightning] and a Circle of Protection, as well as the holy protections from the War Priestess. That should be enough to hold."

Dana actually had a very advanced barrier that she used on her Golems, it was just that until recently when she made it to Ascended Rank, she was so far behind the group leaders that the main threats could shatter it faster than she could rebuild it. It simply wasn't mana efficient when they had Alice's Golem there as well.

"As long as you are sure the barriers can hold. With no Commanders to take the brunt of a charge, it could get dicey for your tanks." He replied.

"If needed, I can join them, and the two Commander Rank spider golems can as well, but it shouldn't be necessary most of the time. If I can stand back of the fight, I should be able to greatly increase my damage instead of spending all my time blocking strikes and keeping targets occupied." Karl explained.

Lotus sneaked up to the counter with her wish list of supplies for the mission, which the other clerk quickly filled, then swiped Karl's card to pay for everything.

"The supplies you provided covered three quarters of what you spent today. Not a bad deal, if I do say so myself. Good luck on your mission." The clerk announced.

"Thanks. We will see you when we get back."

The old man laughed. "Kind of a Commander like you to come make a pity visit to this old man. Just bring back the young ones in one piece, and we will call it even."