

Beast Master 261

Chapter 261 Back In The Snow

Two days later, Karl found himself standing in the snow at the base of the mountains again, just as he had been on his last mission, only this time, instead of the frigid cold and silence, he could hear the distant sound of Frost Giant war horns, the sound carrying over fifty kilometres through the hills as they staged for an attack along the front lines.

The group had just landed, and the intelligence on their area looked good, but the numbers that his keen eyes had detected along the main lines were far larger than the number of stones that had been placed on the map.

If each blue stone had been five hundred, not one hundred, it might have been an overstatement, but much closer to the truth of the situation, while here in the hills, their newly arrived group had yet to spot anything threatening.

"Which way should we search first?" Bear asked as she surveyed the trees in front of them.

Like Lotus, she was more comfortable here in the wilderness than she was in the Academy or in a city, and Hawk wholeheartedly approved of her naming sense. Karl, on the other hand, preferred to use her actual name, so he didn't get into the habit of treating her like one of his pets by calling her Bear.

Karl brought out the folded map from under his tabard. "The first sweep should go east, away from the Frost Giant front lines, to see what might be coming around to look for better routes, then we will double back and check for hidden scouts before the sun goes down.

I got them to agree to allow us to operate in a wide area, so we're not going to be easily tracked back to the same routes, but that will also mean that we need to set up multiple camps and be finished with our route before the sun drops behind the mountains.

That doesn't leave us a lot of time to do our work, so we might as well get to it."

What he had failed to consider was how much the magic of the Frost Giants had changed the area from its natural state. There was normally no snow in the mountains within the Golden Dragon Nation, but now, even in the middle of the afternoon, the temperature was below freezing.

Hawk was out, sitting on Dana's backpack and surrounding them both with [Flaming Body], which was generating an area of warmth that the others were standing in, while Karl kept his own active and moved ahead.

[You're going to have to go scout soon.] He reminded the bird, who was just getting comfortable on top of the mage's backpack.

As a replacement for Hawk's warmth, Karl lit his sword with flames and passed it to Ophelia, who was the largest of the group other than Karl, even when she wasn't transformed.

"Here, that will stay lit as long as my barrier is up. The effect should be enough to keep the team warm if you hold the blade in the middle of the group, and you're the only one in the group that has superhuman strength other than myself." Karl quietly informed her.

"Got it. I'll take good care of your sword. We're going to have to work on something for the future, though. My armour keeps me plenty warm, but the others will need regular breaks, even with the winter gear they packed." She replied.

The Golden Dragon Nation did not have great winter gear, Karl would admit that. But he hadn't mastered the art of spreading the [Flaming Body] ability, which Hawk could only do by touch, so they were going to need to stop and warm up every few hours.

"I will think of something. If there are caves nearby, perhaps we can set up in one of them to make it easier to sleep at night." Karl agreed.

Hawk disappeared over the trees, and within minutes he was sending back reports of Frost Giants moving near their path.

[Three Ascended and seven Awakened in this group. They look like trainees.] Hawk reported.

[Anything else nearby?]

Hawk paused for a moment. [One Commander and two Ascended about four kilometres past them, moving south along a trail.]

"Alright, we have our first targets. A training patrol with three Ascended Giants and seven Awakened Rank juveniles. If we can make a quick and clean job of it, there is a Commander led smaller group a few kilometres beyond them." Karl explained.

Thor and the Golems were all being held in reserve, only to be brought out to fight so that the group could move silently through the woods.

Karl had gained the skill [Silent Movement], which allowed him to lead from well in front of the group without alerting the Frost Giants, whose sense of smell was no better than a human's, but the sound of a Cerro or a Stone Golem in the woods would give them away far too early.

Karl paused and motioned for the group to come forward when the patrol came in sight.

"Rae will move up on the left flank with her golems, Ophelia, prepare to rage and charge with Thor and Dana's Golems toward the pack. Sisters, you are with Dana, just get close enough to keep them in healing range. I will circle right, and keep them from running when they realize they're in trouble." Karl whispered.

He didn't have much training with a bow, but this one didn't need it. Once you activated it and drew the magical string, it gave you a mental impression of where the arrow would strike.

Karl silently raced through the trees, getting in position as Tessa rode Thor into battle, with Ophelia in her half bear form running alongside them. The Golems were still a bit slow, and would arrive a second or two later, but that gave Karl time to prepare for his first-ever combat shot with the crystalline bow.

The bowstring appeared as Karl made the drawing motion, and the solid crystal flexed as he aimed the shot. Since it was a day for firsts, Karl decided to use Remi's Chain Lightning, the one skill he gained from bonding the Naga Spirit Snake.

It made the arrow crackle with energy, and Karl released, hitting the closest giant square in the chest as it turned to scan the area.

skill he gained from bonding the Naga Spirit Snake.

It made the arrow crackle with energy, and Karl released, hitting The Lightning spread through the entire group, leaving them shaking and partially paralyzed, as if they had been hit with a Taser, which allowed Thor's charge to shatter a Giant's femur, while Tessa's flanged mace glowed with golden light and crushed its sternum.

Rae was there before the Giants had realized what was going on, and Ophelia only had time for one swing of Karl's sword, cutting deep into a Frost Giant's chest before everything was dead.

Karl went to rejoin the group, and Tessa gave him an enthusiastic thumbs up.

"Was that a new skill from Remi? I like it. Stunning the enemy makes the fight so much easier." The War Cleric congratulated him as Rae began to rifle through the bodies, emptying them of loot before stealing the bodies for her art exhibit.

One each went to Hawk and Remi, so they couldn't complain, but the rest were scheduled to be strung up in the trees for Rae's diorama.

"I didn't know that it would stun them. I was just going for the damage. That arrow hit a lot harder than I expected, though. It punched through armour and all the way through the Frost Giant. Sure, it was Awakened, but still." Karl replied.

There was a lot of blood on the snow, but Remi had a plan to fix that. Once the group started to move toward the second group, the Commander with the two Ascended Frost Giants, she cast a [Blizzard] over the battlefield, freezing the blue blood and covering it in a fresh layer of snow.

That was enough to satisfy her that nobody would suspect that there was a battle until they actually stepped on the location and revealed the blood. She wasn't a cleanup specialist, but hiding your kills from sight was just good practice in her mind.

The second group was facing away from them when Karl reached their position, so he didn't wait for the others, and unleashed an arrow into the leader's back. The Chain Lightning spread, slowing the others, but the Commander shrugged it off.

It bellowed in rage and turned just in time to catch an arrow to the chest, which caused a fountain of blood before the third arrow struck home only a few centimetres from the second.

By now, the other two were twitching on the ground, and the Spider Golems raced in to finish the job.

[Make it quick and hide your tracks, that shout brought more patrols this way.] Hawk warned as Rae borrowed the bodies and Karl picked up what couldn't be brought into her space.

"Remi, work your magic on the battlefield. Ophelia, these are for you. Vambraces of Giant Strength. I've got two strength type items already, so these are all yours. You will make good use of them in combat." Karl whispered as he motioned for the group to retreat from the forming blizzard.

Chapter 262 Hunting Frost Giants

Hawk led them away for a few minutes, then directed them to turn left to hit another of the weaker patrols. The stronger groups had gone toward the shout, while the weaker one had carried on their mission.

Hit-and-run was the name of the game that day, and Karl was intending to do as much damage, and make as many groups go missing as possible.

The second Awakened Group went down even more smoothly than the first had, as Karl got used to his bow, and the others got used to working together without Prince Corbin or Alice around.

Being without the Spellblades and their rapid movements and magic changed the way the group had gotten used to fighting, as did having Karl in the distance instead of right up close.

Interestingly, while Ophelia couldn't store the blade the way that Karl did, it had no resistance to her using it in combat, and it happily transferred Karl the energy from the monsters that died near it.

That was far better than he had expected, and with Karl's newfound ability to stun or slow the Frost Giants, the use of a single large weapon wasn't a hindrance to the survivability of the Berserker.

Remi had refused to come out and see things with her own eyes. She was a monster, but a cold-blooded one, and she would have to burn mana to keep from freezing. She could extend her powers out just enough to cast [Blizzard] when needed, and that was enough for her as she hid in the tropical heat of her swamp.

Thinking about that made Karl realize that the others were getting cold, so he instructed Hawk to find them somewhere to hide and reheat.

[Go north. There is a small cave in the mountains there. It looks dry and unoccupied.] Hawk instructed.

"Follow me. There is a cave ahead, and we will rest for a while and warm up before we head out again. This cold is unnatural, and I don't want anyone getting frostbite." Karl instructed.

Hawk settled into a tree outside as they hid in the cave behind one of Dana's barriers. It didn't have the illusion factor that Prince Corbin's did, but there had been vines partially obscuring the cave entrance, and the barrier would keep any nearby monsters from smelling them inside.

Karl turned up the heat from the sword to warm the small cave, and took out his map to note the battles that they had been in. The instructions were to make reports no more than once a day, and only right before you moved on from a location, in case the Frost Giants had found a way to track communications.

They weren't known to have any such technology, or really any technology at all, but if they had gotten their hands on one of the military radio phones, they might be able to decrypt all the nearby messages or even track the source of the signal.

That could be disastrous for the teams who were operating in the field, so the standard procedure was to send the message then move on, leaving the area where they might be able to track the team to.

Of course, this didn't matter to the main lines, as they weren't hiding from anyone, but for Karl's team, anonymity was their friend. Even just being able to collect the bodies of the fallen Frost Giants and have

Remi coat the area with new snow would make it incredibly difficult for the enemy to track their movements.

They would know that their teams were missing when they didn't sound the horns at the next random interval, but they wouldn't easily stumble across them either.

[Hawk, what else do we have in the area?] Karl asked once the group was beginning to get warm again.

[Nothing close. You've only got an hour and a half until it is dark, and the closest group is over six kilometres from you now.]

[Alright, you can come into your space to rest, or stay in the tree, whichever you prefer. We will stay here the night, and then go hunting again in the morning.] Karl agreed.

"Short day everyone. There is nothing close enough to hunt before dark, so Hawk recommends that we stay here. We will head out in the morning and get back to work." Karl explained.

They had two communication devices on this trip. The emergency phone, and the standard open channel radio. The first was safely stored in his pack, but the second was tucked into Karl's armour, with the earbud in one of his ears.

That way it wasn't loud enough for anyone else, or any nearby enemies, to hear, but he could keep up to date on what was going on around them.

The battle lines were active, but there were no major changes that day, just a few skirmishes.

What he was waiting for was a report of an enemy troop draw down, or a redeployment, which would likely mean more enemies coming through their patrol area. As long as the Frost Giants were busy on the main battle lines, he would only have to deal with scouts here.

But there was a second part to their mission, and it was to try to determine how they were spreading the frozen area out of their nation and into the Golden Dragon Nation. The hope was that it was some

sort of device that could be destroyed, forcing the weather back to normal and putting the Frost Giants at a disadvantage.

There wasn't any sign of that within the patrols, and they were deployed well within the frozen area, so if it was something that happened near the edge of the advance, it would be beyond their reach.

But what they could do was keep hitting the Frost Giant scouts until they started to send more troops into this area, weakening their front lines and giving Karl and the others the chance to earn a massive amount of rewards once they were back home.

Dreaming of being able to advance beyond Commander in one deployment was insane, but that didn't mean that they couldn't gain anything. For one, there was the credit for the kills that they could trade for resources, and the other was the Skill Master upgrade that Karl had chosen during the Dungeon hunt.

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

That was his goal on this mission. The beasts were going to be using their skills nearly constantly, and finding new ways to expand their combat skills. That meant abundant practice opportunities, and the chance that one of the Commander Rank skills might actually improve in power by a Rank.

If Rae's Golems improved, they would have something akin to low Royal Rank combat power, without having to wait for Rae herself to improve.

Then, when she did improve, the skill should improve along with her, and she would become even more deadly.

Or perhaps it would be Thor's [Refreshing Lightning] or Hawk's [Flame Body] that advanced first, as both were in constant use. The condition of practice wasn't all that clear, so it could mean just keeping it active, not actively trying to improve it.

Though Thor had proven that he was improving it, when he learned to expand his skill to everyone, and step into his desired role as the team's healer.

Tessa laid the sword flat on the floor of the cave and gestured for Karl to turn up the heat. It was already reasonably warm inside, but she didn't want to waste their precious fuel canisters, and there was no wood in here to create a cooking fire from.

"Alright, I'm not going to do anything that will mess up the dinner schedule. We've got a long night before we have to move again, but while you cook, we should come up with a better plan for dealing with these groups.

I am thinking that we have Hawk scout a larger area tomorrow during the early morning hours, and then he can inform us of their general movement patterns, and where they are likely to be so that we're not wasting time looking for them.

We will be able to go out, hunt, and then return somewhere warm to rest before we go out again." Karl suggested.

Lotus nodded. "That's not a bad idea. We could also have Rae set up a spot in advance if we knew that we were going to be circling back to it later. It would allow us to go straight inside without waiting around.

I'm not sure the forts will be the best option, though. The cold is getting insane out there, and spending the overnight in a cloth fort, even with the blade for heat, might not be the most comfortable thing ever.

If we can keep returning to caves that we can properly heat, that might be best. But like a heated tent, it is possible to keep the forts warm."

Rae thought about that for a while. [If I double the layers used to make the fort, we can keep the wind out, and the floor will stay warm under everyone's bodies. That will keep the wind down, and the blade will keep the inside warm.]

"Rae says she can make a fort that will be warm enough. Once Hawk scouts in the morning, we will start making plans for where we will rest tomorrow. I think that switching between caves and Forts hidden high in the trees would be a smart move, so the Frost Giants don't have as easy of a time guessing where we might be hiding.

A few more days of eliminating their patrols, and they are going to start trying to do something about it."

Chapter 263 Taunt The Giants

The next morning's scouting report revealed that the Frost Giants had caught on to the problem much faster than Karl had been expecting them to. They were not known for being particularly bright, but this morning there were no fewer than twenty teams in the area, and it appeared that they were doing a methodical search for the missing teams.

From Hawk's report, they had spread out along a ridgeline very early in the morning, and they were moving south through the valley and past the cave now.

If the team moved out in twenty minutes, they would be attacking the Giants from behind, and they could kill multiple groups quickly before retreating.

That seemed like a good plan to Karl. If they picked one of the stronger groups to eliminate as a group, Rae could use her Golems to take out a weak group nearby, starting with their Ascended leader, which would leave the Awakened Giant trainees helpless.

[I can play too.] Hawk suggested.

[True, but you're our scout. I don't want them associating you with the missing Giants. Can you do it cleanly enough?] Karl asked.

[No problem. I will wait for them to get close enough to you that I can throw the bodies in my space. We're going to need to do something about all the excess Frost Giants, before they start getting in the way.] Hawk reminded him.

[Oh, don't worry about that. I have just the plan to get rid of them, which will ensure the Giants are in chaos when the main line decides to advance.]

Karl led the group out of the cave toward the closest powerful group, which was flanked by two weaker groups.

The patrol line went on like that all the way across the valley they were working in. One group with a commander leading it, and then two groups of Ascended and Awakened. That should realistically give the Commander and his smaller group time to react to any attacks on the weaker groups, but with Karl's divide and conquer strategy, it was about to become a feeding program for the beasts.

Remi was already overjoyed by the amount of Commander Rank food that she could gorge herself with as she waited for her body to grow up to fighting size, where she could crush and swallow her prey whole.

That was an odd bit of logic for a venomous snake, but that was how she preferred to eat, even after biting them. Biting was actually a last resort for the Spirit Snake, as she insisted that it made the food taste funny, but if she was threatened and her magic wasn't doing enough, she had no problem getting physical.

But for the most part, she didn't come out of her hiding space, and just poked her head out to cast Blizzard after fights.

[Remi, how long can your blizzard spell last?] Karl asked.

[About five minutes if I need it to, then I will cast it again.] She replied.

[In that case, cast it at the start of the fight, and just let it continue as we move away. Keep it centred on the group, and it will hide both the fight and our footprints, so the other groups can't find us as easily.]

[Got it boss.]

The next group was just coming into sight when Karl caught a change in Rae's thoughts.

[Tremble before the coming darkness.]

She was laughing at her hapless targets.

"Rae found her group. Let's get to work. Remi, you're up. Keep us hidden." Karl instructed.

He charged forward with Thor, and the roar of the Frost Giants who were being damaged by a snowstorm out of nowhere echoed through the valley. That might not have been his best call, but they were already damaged when he made it to combat, and Dana's twin Golems had no problem holding off the two Ascended Frost Giants while Karl fired arrows into the Commander's chest and Thor prevented it from going after any of the other group members.

Ophelia had no problem assisting the Golems with one of the Frost Giants, and even Tessa had dismounted and come forward into melee range, attacking with her mace while Dana cast [Magic Missiles] and Karl's [Chain Lightning] slowed the giants.

Karl felt two groups of Giants reach his space, one from Hawk and one from Rae. That was their signal to move, and Karl quickly stripped the giants of anything of value and threw the corpses into Remi's mostly empty swamp.

Tessa identified the items left on the ground, and stuffed the magical ones into a pair of pouches that she slung over Thor's back.

"We can sort them later. Where are we off to now?" She asked.

"There should be another three groups like those on their way here. Remi is keeping the blizzard active to hide our movement, and Hawk is scouting their locations as they approach." Karl explained.

The groups had moved into the same formation as the ones they had attacked, weaker groups on the flanks with the stronger one in the middle as they searched for the attackers.

"Same pattern as last time. Tessa, did you want to ride Thor into combat?" Karl asked.

"Sounds great. I will start with the Commander, and Dana can focus her attacks on one Ascended, while Bear gets the other." Tessa agreed.

Ophelia made a pleased grunt at the plan, still caught in the berserker rage, and still transformed into her half bear form.

As she fought, small wooden totems would appear on the ground around her. Karl wasn't certain if they were buffs, or some sort of skill, but they vanished after ten seconds or so and didn't seem to affect anyone but her.

Remi came out of her hiding spot to climb into Karl's armour, leaving only her head exposed. That was warm enough that she could comfortably fight, and secure enough she wouldn't fall down and into the snow.

Now they had an extra [Chain Lightning] at Ascended Rank to go with the Commander Rank version on Karl's arrows. With the [Blizzard] damage being so negligible to creatures with cold damage resistance, the Giants had barely begun to understand that they were in serious trouble before they were paralyzed and cut down.

Two more batches of bodies entered the space, and Karl sent Hawk scouting down the line, getting a location for any other groups that might have been alerted to the battles.

[They're all still moving forward. Should I bring some this way, or do we ambush them the same way again?] Rae asked as Hawk reported the location of the groups.

[Same pattern. Wait for us to get in position.] Karl instructed.

[But you're so slow. Why don't you just chase after me, and I will take out all the weak ones to throw in your space, then we can come back to the group for the Commanders?] Rae suggested.

[Because we can't leave the rest of the group unprotected. There's a reason for this group size and composition.] Karl reminded her.

[If I could just access the space from more than a hundred metres, this would be way easier.] Rae complained, eager to keep hunting.

[Work with what you've got. We will clean up all along the line today if we can, and then retreat somewhere warm.] Karl instructed.

That was all the motivation that Rae and Hawk needed to go off mission and start hunting the weaker groups on their own.

Before Karl had even reached the first Commander, they had cleared the weaker groups and had started on the next pair, racing through the snow-covered trees to avoid detection and then brutally ambushing their hapless prey.

Remi was stuck on cleanup duty, spreading her [Blizzard] as wide as possible, while collecting the bodies, which Karl was doing his best to run past as the group chased the rampaging pair of beasts.

"Why are they in such a hurry?" Ophelia asked as they reached their fifth group of the day, who were standing back to back, already paranoid and on alert after all the shouting from the other groups under attack on both sides of them.

"I may have promised them that once the line was clear, we could go somewhere warm for the night." Karl laughed.

"Well, that sounds good to me, but the casters will not be able to keep this pace up forever. Even if they're riding on Thor most of the time, that much magic will wear them out mentally."

Karl nodded. "We're almost done. I will call the two hooligans back once we clear this group, and then we can hide the battles in the snow and look for a good spot to spend the night."

Chapter 264 Thor's Loot Bags

By the time that they had finished clearing the last battlefield, the bags on the side of Thor were overflowing with loot, and he looked more like a pack mule than a combat pet. They had simply killed so many Frost Giants today that they couldn't resist grabbing anything remotely magical looking, with the plan to identify and sort it later.

The Frost Giant scouts should have been sent into battle with decent gear, and that gear would be very close to what the group needed to fight them. It wouldn't be the fire Element attack gear they wanted, but if even a few of the armour pieces could be bonded, and assuming there were some Giant Strength type enchantments, they could make massive gains.

Hawk sent them an update on his scouting mission.

[To the south, four kilometres, there is a large cave. That will be perfect for the night.]

That would also put them in front of where the patrol lines had been slaughtered, so it would be unlikely that the next day's reinforcements would start there in the search for the humans killing off their scouts.

As they were making their way to the cave, Karl began to hear disturbing news on the radio. The Frost Giants were redeploying, and sending a huge number of troops into this valley. It looked like their efforts had gone overboard, and now the enemy thought that there was a major military force here.

Of course, as they were sending a large force to the valley, the Golden Dragon Nation was also sending an entire artillery regiment to the other end of the valley, to ensure that the Frost Giants didn't advance past the lines.

That put their hiding spot in the middle of no man's land in what was likely to become an artillery bombardment the next day.

"It looks like we might need to be cold for a few more hours. Keep heading south until Hawk finds you a new hiding spot along the southern end of the valley. The army is redeploying artillery here, and I don't want to get caught in the middle of a bombardment." Karl explained once he had a full grasp of the situation.

"You make it sound like you won't be leading." Lotus noted.

"For the next hour or so, I won't be. I will follow Hawk's guidance back to you, and you've got Rae and Thor for extra protection. I've got Remi with me to hide my movement. I'm going to put out a distraction to slow the Frost Giants' advance." Karl explained.

"Alright, see you soon. None of us can run fast enough to keep up with you anyhow." Tessa joked.

That was true, and he had [Silent Movement], so he didn't need to worry about making a commotion.

[What's the plan? Are we going to ambush them from out of a blizzard and just boom pow smack down a bunch of Giants?] Remi asked as Karl ran toward the point where the Giants should be entering the valley.

[Not exactly. You see how we've got all sorts of extra Ascended and Awakened Rank Frost Giant bodies? We're going to pile them all up at that end of the valley and set a bonfire for the Giants to keep warm by.]

[Oh, we're doing something nice to apologize. That's kind of you.] Remi replied proudly, thinking that they were doing a nice thing for the enemy.

[Frost Giants are terrified of fire, and the heat causes them pain. Sorry, Remi.]

For a moment, she was disappointed that they weren't doing a nice thing, then she decided that it wasn't worth being sad for monsters that would lose a fight to a bird.

[Well, they get back most of their dead, so they can't be too mad, right? Even if it's not their usual ritual?]

[That is true, they're getting most of the bodies back.]

That was enough assurance to make the naive young snake play along with the plan, and keep her Blizzard active on its lowest setting, creating a snowstorm that would only really damage Common Rank monsters. It did dump a lot of snow, and the winds were high over a large area, so it would hide their movement once they were gone, as Karl was leading them right to the mouth of the pass.

[This is the spot, you start piling up the bodies into a huge hill, and I will cut down some trees to get the fire started.] Karl instructed.

Starting a fire when you were whittling deadfall logs for kindling with a flaming blade was a simple task, and within minutes, Karl had a good, hot fire burning, and Remi was piling bodies all around it as Karl hacked down more trees to place in a second layer around the outside.

The smoke was billowing up into the clouds, thick and black, and it would be impossible to miss the smell, which reminded Karl entirely too much of wet work socks drying by the fire without being cleaned first.

Once the outer logs were burning steadily, Karl headed south at a run, hoping to catch up to the group before they made it too far. Remi's Blizzard was reactivated as soon as they were out of range of the bonfire, hiding their tracks, but even the howling winds couldn't hide the rage of the Frost Giants when they realized that the fire they had come to destroy wasn't a human army camp but a massive funeral pyre.

The army wasn't sure what to make of the situation, so Karl sent a brief message, letting them know that it was a diversion.

[Regional Command, I can confirm that the fire is set by our side. Repeat, the fire is a distraction to slow the Frost Giant advance.] Karl informed them.

[Understood. Report all sightings for ongoing bombardment as the line is extended.]

That was terrible news. He had deliberately picked a deployment spot well away from the main battle line, but they had already expanded to meet him only a few days into his mission.

Worse, there was no real reason for it, other than a single day worth of increased activity. There was something going on behind the scenes that he wasn't aware of, and it wasn't making logical sense based on what he had seen of enemy deployment strategies during their flight in.

If they were going to bombard the area, he couldn't scout it. But the mountain ranges further from the line were too inhospitable for either humans or Frost Giants to traverse in large numbers.

The best bet was for Karl to take his team behind the enemy lines, where he would still be within his appointed zone, and they could attack Frost Giant supply caravans.

Hawk would like that. They farmed monstrous boars and giant goats.

[Hawk, where are you leading the team?] Karl asked as they began to turn toward the human military unit.

[There are soldiers everywhere. Unless we're going to take a cave near their camp without talking to them? Tessa thinks we should say hello before we move on.] Hawk replied.

[Alright, I will catch up to you before you reach them.]

Karl had Remi stop the blizzard when they got close enough to see Hawk above the trees, and then caught up to the group just before they reached the outer patrols of the incoming military camp.

Once the beasts, except for Thor, who still had a pair of massive packs full of magical items, were all safely back in their spaces, he led them out into the open, where soldiers were surrounding the camp, all carrying swords glowing with the holy light of a Cleric's blessing. So, not Elites, but regular infantry, relying on Holy Magic to be able to injure anything that came their way.

That could make it difficult to get back out of the camp, as they weren't going to want to lose the protection of a Commander Ranked Elite and his team, especially just for Karl and the others to go scouting in another region.

"Identification." The patrol guard requested, with a hint of reverent respect in his tone.

"Commander Karl, 95988. Deployed to the region with my team to control scout movements away from the main lines." Karl replied.

"And how did that go?" The patrol leader asked.

"We're up by about seventy Frost Giants for the day." Lotus cut in with a smile on her face.

The man froze as if she had slapped him.

"Did you say there were seventy Frost Giants in the zone today alone? I will need you to report to the battalion Commander asap. I don't think that they are aware of the threat level."

Chapter 265 Commander Dalton

Karl and the team were quickly escorted to the Battalion Commander's tent, where they found a Commander Rank soldier with his secretary bent over his desk when the scout burst in unannounced. Karl stopped the team and let the scout be the only one to go inside while the tent flap swung closed, and Tessa did her best not to laugh out loud.

"Dammit, knock." The man shouted, as the secretary, who was in civilian clothing, hurriedly rearranged her skirt.

"It's a cloth door, sir. We have a report that you need to hear. A Commander led mercenary scout team took out roughly seventy Frost Giants in the zone just today. It has given us reason to believe that the deployment orders understated the severity of the threat." The scout announced in a dry tone as Karl and the team waited outside.

Hawk and Rae had kept a bunch of the heads for just this reason, and they quickly piled them up outside the Command Tent, creating a five-metre tall mound of Giant skulls still dripping with blood.

The scout and his Commander stepped outside and saw the massive pile of heads, then turned in shock to Karl.

"Where the hell did those come from?" The Commander demanded.

"I have a skill to keep body parts from defeated monsters in a separate space for the day. I use it to provide proof of kills, as we are on commission, not salary." Karl informed him.

"Someone count those and do a Rank check on them." The Commander shouted.

Nobody was hurrying to do that duty, but they would get to it, Karl was certain.

The Battalion Commander gestured inside. "Please, come in. I need a report on the situation, and anything you know about that fire burning at the other end of the valley."

Karl took a seat across from the other Commander, while the rest of the team sat in the chairs along the wall.

"The fire is easy. I used Frost Giant bodies to light a bonfire and slow the enemy advance so that they wouldn't follow us toward you. I got the message that you were moving in an artillery battalion, and I really didn't want to get caught in a bombardment while we slept tonight." Karl explained.

The Commander smiled. "That was the right choice. We had no idea where you were in the zone, and the bombardment will start with the morning light. Not that your group wouldn't be able to outrun it in most cases, as long as you were listening to the radio, but still."

Karl heard some commotion and stomping outside, and realized that the soldiers were trying to unload Thor, who had distinctly not given them permission to touch his bags.

"Tessa, Lotus, can you take Thor outside the camp and deal with his burden? Pick what might be useful and bring it back. The rest can be turned in for credit." Karl instructed.

They disappeared out of the tent flap, while the Battalion Commander waited for Karl to explain.

"We didn't just take heads. I've got a Lightning Cerro outside with bags full of unidentified magic items. Someone tried to get into his bags, and he was getting upset to the point of considering stunning them with [Earthquake]." Karl explained.

"A Lightning Cerro learned Earthquake?" The Commander asked, completely confused.

"Not only that, he learned Circle of Protection, and he's almost to Commander Rank now. Give him a little longer, and I think that we can teach him a healing circle as well. It will be glorious, a self-healing, self shielding, self buffing tank." Karl agreed.

The Commander shook his head in dismay. "Even I never managed to learn Earthquake, much less a Circle of Protection. Instead, I mastered the basics up to Commander Rank. Slash, Guard, Shield Bash and Commanding Shout."

"You didn't get the scribes to at least make you a Rend skill book? I believe all warriors can use them." Karl asked.

The man laughed. "No, by the time that I wanted more skills I had become an officer, and it was 'Lieutenant Dalton go here, Lieutenant Dalton, go there'. I was never in active combat anymore, so I never needed to upgrade."

"Well, that does make some sense. Desk officers and unit officers don't spend a lot of time fist fighting Frost Giants, they have other responsibilities. My group, on the other hand, spends all our time fighting. That's all that we've done since Awakened Rank, with a few pit stops back at the Academies to remind people that we're still alive." Karl explained.

Commander Dalton sighed. "Well, that's one way to live. But aren't you worried that one day the mission will go wrong and all that credit you earned will be for nothing?"

Dana looked nervous, as she had certainly considered exactly that when she was thinking about joining Karl outside the Academy. But Ophelia was a Berserker, and ending in glorious battle when you were too old or crippled to fight was basically a life goal for her class.

Karl smiled. "It's a chance, and if that's the way that Nature wills it, that's the way it will be. Nevertheless, I have faith in the World Dragon that we will live to a ripe old age."

Dana smiled. That was precisely the sort of non-answer that Lotus would have given.

The two clerics came back in with one large bag of stuff, and Thor retreated to his space.

"Done already?" Karl asked.

"Yep. There were only a few truly good things in there, since we were already stocked up. We have a ring and boots for Bear, Lotus and I have taken a bracelet each, and there is a brooch for Dana. The other boots are for you, if you can use them." Tessa explained.

They were Commander Rank leather boots with fur trim at the top, and an increase to his cold damage resistance. But most importantly, they were warm.

Karl also noticed that she had a bundle of weapons behind her back that she wasn't speaking about, possibly just so that the soldiers wouldn't get upset that they took all the best for themselves and didn't leave anything exceptional for the base to skim off before it was officially submitted.

"Will you be needing space within the camp, or do you prefer to camp outside?" Commander Dalton asked.

Karl thought of the nearby caves that Hawk had found. "I think that we will set up not far from your position, within the caves. They're easier for our group to keep warm and comfortable than a tent, and they're sheltered from some of the sound of artillery."

Dalton nodded. "I will leave you to it, then. Remember to inform me of your patrol route before you leave again so that we can avoid shelling your position."

"That won't be a problem. We will likely leave later in the day tomorrow, once we know how the Frost Giants are reacting to the presence of an artillery battalion in the area. They sent reinforcements yesterday when we started to target their trainees, so there is a chance they will transfer even more, or even retreat entirely once your teams get to work." Karl explained.

Commander Dalton ran a hand through his short brown hair, then replaced his cap. "Understood. We will call for you over the radio if they decide that an offensive is the answer. We're a bit short on actual fighters, as you might have noticed, and we only have four clerics with us to keep the weapon enchantments active and do part-time healing duty."

Karl nodded. "Alright, if we're still around, we will see what we can do. We're not a front line, stand and fight head on sort of team, it's better to just let us work from the shadows. We can go through quite a few Frost Giants that way without them finding us."

Dalton smiled and gestured to the door. "Good luck, we have space if you can't find somewhere comfortable."

Karl led the group out of the Command Tent. It wouldn't be a problem to find a spot. Hawk had already scouted them, they were just too close to the military camp for them to arrive at undetected. But since the Battalion knew that they were there, they didn't have to put up a tent, they could just have Rae make a cover for the door and keep the interior of the cave heated.

It took time to get a cave properly warm, but once the rocks were holding heat, it would stay warm for quite a while. Warm places to sleep were in short supply in this unnaturally cold region, but Hawk was getting quite skilled at finding them.

The cave that Hawk had found today turned out to be fairly deep, and ran nearly ten metres into the cliff face, where running water had cut away the limestone over the years. That would work out well for them. It was protected from the elements, but there was still plenty of ventilation, and an easily defensible single entrance.

Chapter 266 Shadows In The Snow

With Karl, Hawk, and the sword all adding heat to the cave, it warmed up quickly, and they were able to comfortably hang the hammocks using Rae's web to attach them to the walls.

There would be no sleeping on the cold floor for his group, and they could get away with a minimal watch, as there were artillery battalion patrols ten metres outside their door.

As they finished dinner, Karl noticed that the patrols were lingering outside the entrance to the cave, which was located about a metre above ground level, and four metres above the cavern that they were in.

The stone walls of the cavern were already warm, not frozen by the suddenly frigid air outside, but with the flames they were using for heat, Karl suspected that the guards were lingering where the warm air was venting before moving on with their patrols.

It had to be torture to keep walking by while the group was roasting meat and cooking up a stew, but the majority of the scent would go up the air vent in the chamber and be filtered through the trees instead of flowing out the main entrance to torture the patrols.

Rae took the entire night watch, ostensibly because she was sleeping most of the afternoon after they arrived at the base. In reality, it was mostly because she enjoyed watching everyone gently sway in her web hammocks.

The hammocks were comfortable, and with the flaming blade set against one wall, the room was luxuriously warm all night until Rae fell asleep as Lotus started breakfast to the accompaniment of the sound of artillery fire.

As promised, they had started the bombardment of the Frost Giants promptly at dawn, so Karl turned up his radio to listen to the morning broadcasts.

They had a scout team in the mountains, looking down at the valley with high-powered binoculars, and they could see the majority of the region well enough to target the shells. They had also determined that the number of Frost Giants had grown again overnight, but mostly on the weaker side of the spectrum, trainees at the Awakened and Ascended Rank, not their Commanders.

That was a relief to the artillery, as their shells didn't do much to the Commander Rank Frost Giants, they had to call in the Elites, or wait for them to engage in melee combat with the Holy Magic enhanced soldiers to be able to kill them without relying on large amounts of luck.

"Are we going to go out and scout?" Dana asked as they packed up after breakfast.

"Not yet. The Giants are building some sort of defensive structure right now, and the artillery is going wild on them. Even if we wanted to go out, there isn't anything that we could do except dodge shells." Karl explained.

Then he unplugged the earbuds from his radio and turned up the volume, so everyone could hear what was going on with the messages.

For the next few hours, it was the same pattern of radio transmissions as the main line. Just target, fire, target, fire. Then when it was almost time for lunch, and Tessa was about to unpack their cooking gear again, the reports slowly began to change.

The Frost Giants were no longer coming out of their bunkers, they were hiding behind stone, snow and barriers, with a blinding snowstorm raging all around them to hide troop movements. That wouldn't stop the bombardment, but it would make it impossible to tell if the enemy was building their strength for an offensive.

"Once we finish lunch, I am taking us to the far side of the valley to check the mountain passes and the next valley for Frost Giants. That's still within the range we agreed to work, and it's pretty obvious that they're up to something if they're keeping a Blizzard active along the entire north end of the valley." Karl informed the others.

"We're not leaving them to their fate, are we?" Tessa asked cautiously.

She was a priestess of the Red Dragon, The God of War, and anything deemed cowardly in battle was anathema to her faith.

"No, we will actually be closer to the enemy lines when things do go sideways, but I want to be coming in from a flank that I know is clear, and not crossing no-man's land with a bunch of terrified infantrymen in a snowstorm."

With lunch finished, and their gear packed, Karl headed to the camp after stuffing bits of moss in his ears as earplugs against the noise of the artillery.

He stopped at the supply tent and got a notepad and pen so he didn't have to remove his own from his pack, then wrote a mission description for the Battalion Commander to read.

There was no way they were going to be able to have a discussion here beside the artillery, so Karl just handed him the letter with the crude map on it and patted him on the shoulder to say good luck.

Dalton nodded and waved him away, letting Karl rejoin his team and head into the hills.

The reports were that the snow storm was spreading, coming in from the Frost Giant's side of the border. However, with all the strange atmospheric anomalies, and the Ice Magic of the Giants, nobody knew if it was a natural storm or a massive artificial one.

[What do you think, Hawk?] Karl asked as the bird floated high in the sky, barely a black speck in their vision.

[It's a natural storm, the wind is carrying the clouds this way, and I can feel the cold moisture already. But that doesn't mean there's nothing in it. I keep seeing shadows, but they're too far for me to tell what might be casting them.]

[Keep an eye on them and let me know when you can tell what is casting shadows in the snow storm. It might be nothing, it might be something important. Chances are, human eyes can't tell that there are even shadows to begin with.] Karl reminded him.

Their route quickly took them into the hills, and that was where their smooth progress ended. The paths were narrow and steep, winding along the side of cliffs, while a river gorge made up the bottom of the canyon.

"Do you think that something might try to move down the river? I mean, they could freeze it over, right?" Dana asked, directing her question at Lotus, who would be more knowledgeable about the weather than anyone else here.

"They probably can with their ice magic. But we can see the river from here, and this path would be a nightmare for Frost Giants to navigate, so it's better that we don't follow the river ourselves.

I mean, we will because that's where the canyon goes, but not along the river itself." Lotus explained, with a gesture along the path.

They walked at a careful pace, not wanting to lose anyone down the hill if the path under the snow was loose or icy, and by the time that it got dark, they still had an entire kilometre to go before they had made it up the valley's length.

"Alright, there is a path between the mountains ahead, according to Hawk, which will lead us back into the other valley close to the Frost Giant lines.

There are no caves on this side of the fault, it's slate and not limestone like the other side of the hill, but Rae can make us a double walled tent in the trees, and we will call it a night." Karl instructed.

Rae was happy to run ahead of the group and test her theories on a double walled fort. You couldn't see out of it, so her and Hawk were on night duties in the cold again, but it would be warm, and sheltered from the increasingly frigid winds.

They were just about to finish their scans and head into the fort when Hawk sent a final sunset update.

[I can see what's casting the shadows. It's Frost Giants in white suits, hundreds of them. They're hidden in the snow, but they can't hide their shadows.]

[Where are they headed?] Karl asked.

[For our valley. The one that the artillery is making a mess of right now.]

An exceptionally loud mess, Karl noted, now that they were so close to the edge of the bombardment zone.

[I will call it in.]

[Battalion Command, this is team 95988. We have spotted reinforcements on the other side of the mountains, headed for your bombardment zone. Two hundred plus Frost Giants in snow camo outfits. Strength unknown.] Karl broadcast.

[Received.]

It was probably better that Dalton let go of the mic button at that point. It would never do to curse that much over open airwaves.

Chapter 267 Artillery Lullaby

The sound of artillery shelling the area continued all night, and then just after dawn, the sound of Frost Giant war horns blared across the north end of the valley, interrupting breakfast and causing the radio communications to go crazy.

Karl had left his earpiece out so that everyone could hear the radio during the night, in case the Frost Giants attacked early, but from the sound of the broadcasts, their reinforcements were just arriving.

The bunkers had greatly reduced their casualties last night, and with the addition of hundreds more warriors, the Frost Giants were preparing a charge on the south end of the valley, which would put them in position to flank the main army lines.

The problem for Karl and his team was that the shelling continued, so they couldn't safely approach the Giants to get to work.

[Hawk, fly up and double-check the area, I want to be absolutely certain that nothing is trying to come down this valley before we leave.] He instructed.

First, Hawk flew south, to make sure that nothing got by them in the night, as unlikely as that was. Then he headed north up the valley, where only ten kilometres from the camp, he found a large group of the Giants in white building rock hurling siege weapons and building barricades.

Karl checked that against his map and found that the location should be the Golden Dragon Nation side of the neutral zone, or contested zone, between the two countries. The lake that was directly behind their barriers had been the boundary marked on the map.

The army almost certainly wouldn't want to push that far, and if they were setting up artillery, the Frost Giants weren't going anywhere. The river wouldn't support the weight, and it was too much trouble to have to disassemble and reassemble them for half a morning's march.

But as Hawk circled back, he saw that the group at the lake wasn't the only one that was digging in for a long battle. On the other side of the ridge, the Frost Giants were building a massive ice fortification within their raging blizzard, visible to the keen eyes of Hawk only because they weren't trying to hide it from the back.

Karl sent in the message, and got back a quick response. Not from the Battalion Commander, as he had expected, but from the main line's regional Command.

[Please remain on site to secure the secondary valley against enemy incursion. Reinforcing troops have been delayed.] They informed him.

[Understood, we will be holding our monitoring position.]

Karl looked at the others and shrugged. "Well, we're up the side of a hill, in the trees, where we can see half the valley. I would say that's a good enough position for what they want, and we can just wait here where it's warm.

Until we get other directions, Hawk and Rae can take turns watching for movement, and we can all stay well rested.

I know that we're not military, so we can theoretically decline the order, but it wouldn't hurt to wait here and see what happens next."

Tessa laughed. "If we move and something comes down the valley to cause problems for them, you know that we're going to hear it from the High Priests as well. They despise it when they get messages complaining about the actions of their clergy, and they're already stressed by the current situation.

Lotus might be used to getting yelled at all the time, but I prefer to avoid it."

Lotus giggled at the insinuation, but Tessa was right. She got yelled at on a fairly regular basis for getting side tracked when she wasn't with a Green Dragon or other type of Nature Priest. They got side tracked just as much as she did.

The artillery never slowed, only staggered its rhythm so that the enemy wouldn't find it as easy to predict. The sound carried through the mountain valleys, impossible to escape as the battle raged on.

The Frost Giants were active on the main line, charging forward to eliminate artillery emplacements and scout bunkers, but in their valley, the enemy line was stationary.

The big fear of everyone, both in Command, and in the fort with Karl, was that this was just a buildup. That the main line would get fully engaged, and that would be the signal for the troops that had built up along the secondary valleys to move into combat.

But they couldn't put that over the radio, or they would be accused of trying to damage morale, so they had to wait and watch as the hours passed, and the two positions that they could scout remained patient and the battle along the main lines intensified.

At dark, Hawk returned to the fort to rest inside and out of the cold, while Rae went out to scout and made herself a secondary fort, up near the ridge and built into a tree. It kept the wind off her, and allowed her to see both the end of the valley and the main valley's access route, though she couldn't see the actual fortress built there.

It was enough to be able to see if anything was moving in their own zone, as the army already had scouts all over the hills lining the other valley.

To Rae's eyes, the Frost Giants were the opposite of what most living things should be, a mass of cold in the distance, not freezing, but much colder than most living things. If the weather wasn't so frigid, they would be hard for her to spot, as they would blend into the background temperature variation, but as it was, she was certain she wouldn't miss them if they moved.

Near dawn, right when night patrols would be switching for morning patrols among the human armies, the radio reports of massive movement among the front lines began. The Frost Giants were beginning their full offensive, accompanied by ice magic enchanted boulders that smashed apart artillery wagons and brought area freezing magic with them that both damaged the infantry and caused blinding snow.

With the blinding snow, the rest of the forces couldn't see what was coming for them, and the reports were rather grim, with an entire armoured battalion reported lost in the first hour.

That was seventy kilometres from where Karl and the others were, too far for them to do anything about it, but close enough that it made them paranoid about what might happen to their positions.

If the main line was breached or forced to retreat, that would put the unit under Commander Dalton behind enemy lines. That was not where an artillery Battalion wanted to be, and he would have trouble even retreating with such a large unit and so much heavy equipment.

[If they leave one behind, I want an artillery.] Thor announced, thinking of ways that he could pull one of the wheeled cannon batteries for long ranged combat.

[What's this? You've gone for Tank position, and the Healer Role, and now you want to be artillery too?] Karl joked.

[Remi is just a tiny snake, how could she take up our ranged combat role all by herself? Well, by herself or with Hawk if he doesn't have to scout.] Thor asked.

Hawk silently laughed at the thought of an overgrown afternoon snack becoming their ranged damage member, but refrained from saying anything that might make Thor sad. He was excited about helping, so Hawk let him have it.

Thor's idea made good sense to Remi. She wasn't even big enough to see over people, she had to hide in Karl's armour or in her space just so she could see to cast her spells. If she was a flying snake, she could do like Hawk and target them from above, but her minor water control only allowed her to make simple appendages, not wings.

But one day she would be big, and then she would be able to see everything in her swamp.

[We just need to teach her a new skill, so she can see further. If she could find targets when they were further away, Remi could be our tiny blue artillery snake.] Hawk suggested, hoping to keep Thor happy even if they couldn't get an artillery.

That didn't sound like a bad idea to Remi. She just didn't know how she was going to do it. Maybe if her water control was better, she might be able to sense what her blizzard was hitting, and then she could target more spells without needing to see them.

As an added benefit, she would know where everything in her swamp was. She just had to find someone who knew how to teach her that skill. Or have Karl torture one of the Frost Giants until they told him. The Frost Giants should know.

Only, nobody spoke Frost Giant.

Learning was hard, Remi decided.

Chapter 268 The Line Retreats

For the first few hours it almost seemed like they were going to be able to repel the Frost Giant attack, but then the units that had arrived in the snow made their move. Three hundred white robed and hooded Commander Rank Frost Giants appeared from the storm and rampaged through the main lines of the Golden Dragon Army's formation.

[All secondary units, this is a general retreat. All secondary units, this is a general retreat. Form at Checkpoint Bravo for counterattack.] The radio repeated.

[Hawk, is that causing Commander Dalton to move?] Karl asked.

[They are already packing up their gear. It doesn't look like they are planning to leave a cannon for Thor, but we might get lucky.] Hawk replied.

[Cannon, cannon, cannon.] Thor cheered, while Rae and Remi laughed at his optimism.

"That doesn't sound good." Tessa sighed as the radio went silent to allow the units to relay their progress.

"It's not. The armoured Battalion is retreating. We could probably make it back to them if we ran, assuming that the Frost Giants aren't moving. But if they come down this valley, and we're not here, things will get bad very fast for the infantry." Karl replied.

While a general retreat order did give them permission to leave, the fact they were the only ones blocking an entire valley meant that it might also lead to mass casualties.

Tessa's eyes glowed red for a moment before she smiled. "How much attention do you think that the Frost Giants are paying to their border patrol? I get the feeling that they have good stuff just waiting there for us to take it."

Her eyes were glowing with the influence of the Red Dragon, and everyone in the group knew that meant the odds were excellent that she was right. Either there was good loot or a strategically beneficial fight. The War God wouldn't be interested if there were neither of them present.

"I will send Hawk to see what the next valley is doing before we move. If they're advancing, we will move north toward the border. If we're lucky, it might make them hesitate and save some of the artillery Battalion." Karl agreed.

Hawk soared out over the mountain peaks, looking down over the next valley, where the Frost Giants were beginning to get up out of their bunkers now that the artillery had stopped. They were forming up for a charge, which would be faster than the infantry, which didn't have enough transport trucks to leave except on foot.

"They're forming up for a charge. If we leave now, they should be about halfway down the valley when the alarm goes up that we're attacking the border defence teams." Karl informed the others.

Dana gritted her teeth and nodded. "Let's do this. How bad is the battle at the border going to be?"

Karl thought back to what Hawk had seen.

"Bad. But nothing that we can't handle. Just keep your shields up so that the ranged team members don't eat a boulder to the face from the catapults."

They all grabbed their packs and Karl led them down to the river. There was a bend just fifty metres from the Frost Giant lines, which would hide them from view until they were close enough to attack. That was when he would start the charge, and with a bit of luck, their shields would hold long enough.

There was no cover in front of the line, it was all knocked down and removed, so they would have to come through the open, no matter what tactic they wanted to use.

Lotus caught a ride on Rae, while Dana hopped up behind Tessa on Thor, which brought the speed of the group up to Thor's full running speed. With her strength enhanced, Ophelia had no problem keeping up with the Lightning Cerro, and Karl was faster than either of them. The deployment would put

everyone in the right spot when the fight started, with Dana's Golems forming up around Thor, while Rae brought her own out a little further down the line as a distraction.

They were the most deadly in the group, so the Frost Giants wouldn't be able to ignore them, and that would turn them away from Thor and the others. A few extra seconds should be all they needed for Karl to Stun the more vulnerable members and give them an early advantage.

"I will distract them away from your advance. Good luck, everyone, and I will see you in a minute." Karl instructed as they got close to the final corner.

While the group went left, he moved to the right through the woods, and prepared to shoot the Frost Giants that were immediately in front of the main group.

He was the first one out into the open, and his arrow was loose before anyone had seen him, plunging straight into the heart of an unprepared Ascended Rank Frost Giant.

[Stun] hit the creature's heart directly, and the Giant twitched as it hit the ground, dead. That wasn't quite the plan, but Karl already had another arrow in the air, going for the Giant beside the one that fell.

To the defenders, it looked like he was taking out the reinforcements before he charged a weak spot in the line, and they began to shift positions while the rest of the group charged out of the woods.

The distraction was just enough, and only three catapults managed to hurl ice magic infused boulders at the group as they charged. None of them were close enough to damage the group, firing hastily had cost the inattentive Giants their advantage.

Rae's Golems appeared in their ranks, attacking without hesitation, while Dana's appeared a second later, flanking Thor as he knocked his target to the ground.

Karl sent another round out, hitting the closest Giant to him with [Chain Lightning] which slowed the Giants' response even further. Remi took that as her cue, and cast a [Blizzard] over the far side of the defensive line, while using her own [Chain Lightning] on the closest Giants.

The ice element attack would do very little, if any, damage to the Giants, but it would block their vision and stop them from using ranged attacks against the much smaller human attackers. The risk of hitting their own people while firing blind was too high.

There was a whoop of victory, and Karl saw Ophelia in bear form hacking both arms off an Ascended Rank Frost Giant with her axes. Giant strength combined with the buffs of a Bear Totem Berserker was a deadly combination, and the small wooden totems on the ground were pulsing with energy as she fought.

Karl let loose another arrow, catching a Frost Giant in the throat. It fumbled at the arrow as the Lightning arced between it and those nearby, but the next arrow went straight to its chest, ending its struggle and leaving the others nearby staggering in pain.

A sweep of the bow itself cut an arc of [Rend] through the air, slicing the front of the Giants open and dropping the weaker ones. For a moment, Karl had a clearing around him, so he turned his arrows on the Frost Giant Commander headed for Thor.

The creature moved with surprising speed, catching the arrow. Then it howled in rage as [Chain Lightning] activated and Karl smirked in his direction.

That was what Karl was after, drawing the leader to himself. Even with Rae around, the others would have enough trouble with the Frost Giants. They had far too many Commanders in their ranks, and Rae wouldn't be able to take them all out fast enough for the clerics to keep everyone healed indefinitely.

Hawk's fireballs were raining down from above, causing immense pain wherever they landed, but he had learned his lesson, and he was far above the battle, out of range of any Ice Spike type attacks that might knock him out of the battle.

Karl started to retreat toward the remainder of the group, intending to give Thor some reprieve while he could. But it appeared that the Cerro didn't need it. The Frost Giants were having a hard time getting to the battle, with Thor casting constant Earthquakes and Lotus using her [Water Vortex Staff] to create spinning water funnels that pulled them off their feet and knocked them to the ground.

Rae's Golems were showing no mercy, making full use of the [Spear] skill that they had gained in the Naga Dungeon to turn anything they couldn't reach into a pincushion. As it was their only active skill,

they didn't seem to have any issues firing them while fighting. Eight eyes that never blinked were a spider's great advantage, as they could see everything going on around them in a 270-degree arc, and fire spears at anything showing vulnerability.

"That's nearly two minutes to rejoin us." Lotus noted as Karl rejoined the group.

"But I saw you a minute ago, so it still counts." She added.

Chapter 269 Border Jumping

Tessa's eyes were glowing red as she buffed the group with Holy magic, adding damage to all their attacks, even Karl's lightning and the Golems' blades.

With the Golems in place, Karl didn't have to switch back to his sword, but it was still transferring energy to the group from its spot on Ophelia's back while she used her twin axes to block and attack at the same time.

The Giants were beginning to reform their lines, and Karl was considering giving the order to retreat as they worked together for a group spell. His [Stun] couldn't deal with that many of them, and he wasn't certain what they were casting.

He fired as fast as he could, targeting different areas of the group, but at the last second, a surge of golden Holy Energy surrounded them all, and the power radiating off Thor surged. The Lightning Cerro had made it to the Commander Rank, and with it, his Circle of Protection and Refreshing Lightning Barrier had improved a Rank.

Karl noticed that the golden streaks on Thor's scales were becoming more pronounced, and now his horns were beginning to turn golden from their natural ivory.

"Looking fancy, buddy." Karl laughed as a barrage of Icicles slammed into the hastily erected barrier Dana had placed in front of them, and then shattered against the barriers on their bodies.

None of them took more than minor wounds, and these icicles weren't as insidious as the attacks of the Yeti Clans, as they weren't trying to freeze them now that the damage was done.

Tessa shouted in victory as the Giants roared in frustration, but the battle was far from over. Karl's group was still vastly outnumbered, and most of what was left was the Commander Rank and the stronger Ascended Rank Frost Giants, who hadn't been annihilated by Chain Lightning or Hawk's fireballs.

The water hating bird was going insane overhead, launching fireballs as fast as he could, three at a time, into their ranks. They had ice barriers erected over themselves, but the fireballs weren't weak, and the barriers were having a difficult time keeping up with the incoming damage.

Karl wasn't ready to rest yet. Even with the barrier refreshing them, Thor would run out of mana eventually, and they had to have the Frost Giants dead before then.

Tessa was fully focused on offensive buffs, and was mostly out of combat and not attracting attention, while Lotus was focused on keeping Thor and Rae at full efficiency.

That meant Ophelia had the worst of it, with Dana not far behind, though the clerics were keeping them both fully healed, and they weren't showing any visible injuries, despite the splatters of red blood on Ophelia's armour.

The enraged Berserker knocked both of a Frost Giant's arms wide, and Karl put an arrow into its forehead, shocking all the enemies gathered behind it with [Chain Lightning].

The Berserker laughed as she charged into the body and tossed it backwards to get at more targets. But Karl noticed that she carefully stopped before she got out of range of Thor's Circle of Protection.

The Giants had no problem coming to her, and now that the group was getting surrounded again, it was getting easier to shock large groups, slowing them to the point that they were barely effective fighters against the speed of the Spider Golems.

Stun was an option, but as it only affected a single target, it was less effective in a group fight, where slowing everything made life easier for the offence than stunning one target.

While they focused on herding and eliminating the Frost Giants, Hawk had set fire to all the wooden siege weapons that the Frost Giants had constructed, and the orange glow was giving the blowing snow a hazy look, like streetlights on a foggy morning. At the very least, that would make it safer to retreat if it became necessary.

Lotus whistled to get his attention, and pointed toward her staff. "I need time to recharge."

That meant no more water funnels, but the number of enemies was dropping rapidly.

Karl realized that something had changed, and the enemies were dying much faster than they should have been, given the group composition. Commander on Commander, it generally took five or six solid hits per enemy to disable your target, but the back ranks were nearly completely gone.

He knew he had missed something, but not what, until the last of the Frost Giants turned and ran back into the hills with Hawk in hot pursuit. His fireballs were burning straight through their armour and into their bodies, causing massive damage even to Commander Rank giants.

Karl thought he might have learned a new skill to optimize himself against water or ice element targets, but a nagging feeling in his mind brought his attention to his status.

[Skill Master Rank 2 Activation] Flame Body skill advanced to Royal Rank by Hawk

He actually hated Ice Magic so much that he had forced his Flame Body skill to the Royal Rank so soon after reaching Commander Rank, just to spite the Frost Giants.

Never again would Karl underestimate the benefits of the beasts having an emotional attachment to their advancement.

But more importantly, now that the advancement was complete, Karl could feel the shared skill advancing as well. The retreating Frost Giants were too far for him to hit with an arrow already, but the next time they were in combat, he would have to try to use the improved skill in melee combat.

Tessa made a pleased noise as she looked around the battlefield. "Well, that was more than enough to keep the War Dragon happy. Plus, it looks like we made a pretty good haul today. There are plenty of magical items on the battlefield for everyone to take their pick."

Everyone spread out and collected all the potentially magical items that they could, and then Tessa dumped out the bag of weapons that Thor had been carrying around, which had been dropped in the trees when they charged.

"We should have time before anything gets close enough to give us trouble. So, I will identify everything, and we can try to bond what works best for us. It looks like we're behind enemy lines, so if there is anything that might even be a little improvement, don't hold back." The Red Dragon Priestess reminded them.

There had to be fifty pieces of gear in front of them that had been identified as possibly useful, not counting the ones that had been tossed to the side as too damaged to be salvaged.

Ophelia passed Karl's sword back to him as she found another two-handed blade, this one with a proper life leech effect, so she would heal as she attacked. For a Berserker, that was definitely close to optimal gearing. She also found a few pieces of Commander Rank armour, and a ring of fire resistance, not that it would do her much good here.

Lotus and Tessa both managed to finish upgrading their armour to Commander Rank, while Dana claimed an Ice Barrier Ring that added strength to her already impressive advanced barrier spell. Karl found a ring of agility and a set of bracers that improved damage reduction.

They were an odd-looking bunch now, as they were all wearing the Frost Giants' preferred boots with fur trim, as well as Commander Rank leather pants, with mismatched armour pieces. Tessa and Lotus hid them mostly under their robes and new white cloaks, while Dana hid them under her mage dress and a large fur cloak with a hood. Karl and Ophelia had found fur trimmed cloaks that helped resist cold damage and cold weather.

More than anything, they looked like they were from one of the arctic barbarian tribes. Those didn't live anywhere on this continent, but Karl had read about them in school and saw pictures. They were one of the stories that teachers told about human resiliency.

"Well, at least we're all warm now." Lotus giggled as she looked around at the collection of white fur cloaks.

Then she grabbed one of the excess cloaks, which were sized for Frost Giants until they were equipped, and tied it around Thor's neck. It didn't bond to the Lightning Cerro, but it did cover him in a huge fur blanket that matched the snow. That would make it easier to sneak up on future enemies, and it was a Commander Rank piece of beast fur, so it would resist some wear and tear without issue.

Rae took one look at it, then adjusted her body colour to match the cloak and lay on top of Thor with a happy buzz of her mandibles. He was like a giant pillow now that he was covered in fur.

"Now we just need to pick weapons, and we should be good to go. There has to be enough Commander Rank weapons there for all of us."

Ophelia had already grabbed one, while the others looked dubiously at the assortment of clubs, massive sword and other weapons. If they didn't adjust to human sized, they would all be useless to them.

Dana hesitantly picked up a dagger the size of a short sword, and after a moment of concentration, it vanished, then returned at dagger sized in her hand.

"Oh, that's a relief. I have no skills with a sword, but I can use a knife well enough." She sighed.

Karl looked over the pile with his hand on the hilt of the Vampiric Sword. Most of the weapons he got close to produced a repulsion effect, but when he got to the far side, where a massive maul with a blue crystalline head on it was sitting, he nearly got dragged off his feet by the attraction between the two weapons.

Karl put the sword away and hefted the Maul, which instantly adjusted to be just over two metres tall, and comfortably usable with a double dose of giant strength items. That seemed a bit excessive, but when he noticed the stats on the weapon, he decided it might be worth it.

[Crystal Maul of Resonance] Applies the effect of spells imbued into an attack up to five times when a strike lands.

Chapter 270 Left Behind

There were still so many weapons left over that it would be a shame to discard them for the enemy, but none of the ones that remained appealed to any of the group members.

"Why don't we have Rae make a fort back in the trees, and we can load the excess into that, so we can come back for it later? We can't keep carrying everything we find, there is just too much. But we can hide the good stuff and destroy the rest, or bury it here, so whoever comes looking will be convinced that's all that there was." Lotus suggested.

"That's a brilliant idea. Alright, we will have Rae find a good hiding spot for the excess loot, and we will bury the rest, then burn the bodies. We don't need to fill the entire valley with scavengers looking for a Commander Rank meal." Karl decided.

With the Flaming Body Barrier over his folding shovel, it only took a few minutes to dig a hole in the frozen ground deep enough to bury all the excess weapons that were either heavily damaged or just not great quality. Rae took the rest back into the trees an unknown distance and created a cocoon to hide the loot in.

While she was finishing her work, the team listened to the radio messages. The Artillery Battalion under Commander Dalton had made it safely out of the secondary valley, but were briefly engaged with a Frost Giant scouting unit as they rejoined the main line at the fallback point.

Casualties were light, and the unit was still mobile, while the Frost Giants had stopped at the mouth of the valley and had begun erecting new fortifications.

That left the valley scouts taking the hard way out of the hills that they had set up on, but that was to be expected with such a rapid retreat.

Unfortunately, while they could rejoin the main lines once they got to the west side of the mountains, there were three units trapped well behind the enemy lines. Two were forward observation units, led by Commander Rank Elites, and one was Karl's team.

[Team 95988, continue scouting operations where possible. Enemy intelligence from your location is invaluable.] The regional Command Centre informed them.

Karl confirmed the order and then laughed. "Well, it's not like we've got many options here. Hawk says that nothing is chasing after us from the larger valley, but they've fortified again between us and the main lines, so we either go the long way around or we follow the river along the border and see what we can find."

"Do we go behind the main lines, or further away from the battle?" Tessa asked.

That was a good question.

"Well, further into the mountains, and we very well could find ourselves cut off and trapped. But behind the main lines will be the supply lines. That many Giants are going to need a lot of food, so we might be able to do some good if we can strike fast and return to a hiding spot." Karl offered.

Everyone was quiet, thinking about which way they would prefer to go when the radio crackled to life.

[Team 62345 is under heavy attack by white cloaked Frost Giant Special Forces. Attempting to retreat east toward the border from grid B3 sector 8.]

Karl checked the map, and that was only a few kilometres to their west, between them and the main lines.

"Everyone pack up and get ready to move. We will go give them a hand." He instructed.

Rae quickly rejoined the party, letting Lotus take up her riding position aboard the spider's back, while Tessa and Dana climbed aboard Thor.

They ran toward the battle, not worrying about the noise that they were causing, though Karl was running silently thanks to his skill. The noise of the Elites and the Frost Giants in battle was loud enough that they didn't need Hawk to tell them exactly where they were going, so the scout was instead circling the area, making sure they were the only reinforcements that were going to show up to the party.

[It looks like it's just two scout groups fighting it out.] Hawk informed them as Karl got close to the battle.

[Perfect. Now, it's time to see what your advanced Flaming Body can do with the shiny crystal hammer I just got.] Karl replied.

Charging five spells into it at once took more energy than he had been expecting, but the weapon was primed and ready to go when they entered the clearing, and found that the human team was one High Priest in white robes, and four mages.

Who had picked that composition was a mystery to Karl, but it was not a good combination to fight the Frost Giants.

All five of the Giants were not only Commander Rank, all five of them were well into the Commander Rank as well. The white cloaks that blended into the storms appeared to mark the most competent of warriors, and the Giants were startled to see Karl charging in their livery.

One of the mages had five blue orbs active, firing magic missiles at a furious rate, a trick that was rather familiar to Karl. One of the mages at the Academy knew that spell, and she had shown it off during the first week they were training Hawk with the mages.

As he got close, Karl realized it wasn't just a familiar spell, it was Tori, the Ascended Rank blonde mage from the Senior Class, that was using her signature spell here.

The magic missiles put the Frost Giants on the defensive, and Karl slammed the Crystal Maul into the closest Giant's chest. The head of the hammer pulsed five times in rapid succession, like the pulse arc welders that they used to fix mining equipment back home, and the enormous monster was thrown clear across the battlefield, to crumple against a tree.

The sight shocked the humans even more than it did the Frost Giants, and one of the mages had his barrier shattered when he delayed a bit too long. The sound of breaking bones was a sickening one, but a golden glow was already surrounding him as his team's cleric got to work.

"Don't you have Golems?" Dana shouted as she summoned hers to fight the Giants.

Rae's were already in combat, and Hawk was sending down a rain of fire from above. It wouldn't be long before the situation was under control, but it made no sense that they didn't have any golems out if they didn't have defensive warriors.

The cleric pointed to the far side of the group, where two exhausted mages were doing their best to avoid attacks and keep their barriers up. That was enough for Dana to understand that yes, they did have Golem Mages, but the Frost Giants were too smart for that trick, and they had targeted them first, exhausting them and draining their mana.

[Lightning Next] Remi shouted in Karl's mind as he approached a wary Frost Giant.

This time he only put three charges of Chain Lightning in, to test the theory of whether the stunning effect stacked while saving some energy.

It was harder to hit the Giant with a huge and slow maul, and it wasn't going to try to take the hit for a chance to counterattack after seeing what happened to its friend, so the first six tries were parried before Karl managed to get a swing up and under the warrior's guard, only lightly clipping its hip, but enough to activate [Chain Lightning].

The power arced between the four remaining Giants, which twitched a little, but weren't slowed any more than one strike had. They were smoking and visibly blackened at the point of contact, so the damage was all there, but the stun effect didn't appear to be any worse.

The reprieve was enough for the mages to regain some mana and catch their breath, which allowed them to bring back two more Ascended Rank Golems. That wasn't going to do much in this fight, as they weren't enhanced in any way like Dana or Rae's Golems were, and they were still a Rank below the enemy, but it was a good shield to hold the Frost Giants in place while the Spider Golems and Hawk's flames dealt with them.

Their Cleric enhanced the Golems with a golden Holy Blessing, increasing their armour and attack power to Commander Rank, as was done for regular human soldiers on the line. That gave the ambushed team a bit more of a chance, but the High Priest's blessing simply wouldn't have been enough for two Golems to take on five Commander Rank Giants.

The Giants were quickly dispatched, and the High Priest came over to give Karl a grateful hug that made Lotus laugh.

"Thank you, Commander. We were in real trouble when those five happened upon us at the end of a fight. We have heard much about you and your team of monsters and beauties." The High Priest informed him.

Karl smiled. "You hear that, Rae? He says you're a beauty."

Now Lotus was laughing so hard she was holding her sides, while Rae stood up a little taller and subtly wiped the blue Frost Giant blood off her limbs in the snow. She was still covered in it, blood was splattered on every part of her body, but it was a small improvement.

The Cleric was obviously confused as to who Rae was, and why he was being laughed at, but at that moment, it really didn't matter. He was safe, nobody was dead, and the Frost Giant threat was ended for a moment.