

Beast Master 271

Chapter 271 Tori's Choices

Rae returned to her space, leaving the blood behind, then came back out clean and fluffy. Well, as fluffy as she got, as her fur was rather stiff and not as thick as a furry mammal's.

The High Priest smiled as he realized the beast was doing the equivalent of getting dressed up to meet them, and decided formal introductions were in order.

"I am High Priest George, of the Main Faith. I believe you already know Tori, who is an Ascended Rank senior at the academy, and these are Yuri, Petrov and Ivan." He explained, gesturing to each in order.

Tori was a blonde, who, even in this cold, was still showing cleavage, while the other three mages were all similar in their skinny and acne riddled appearance, as young men at the Ascended Rank. They should be past the youthful acne phase, but for them, it had lingered well into their twenties.

"Karl, Dana, Ophelia, Sister Tessa and Sister Lotus." Karl introduced.

For a second, Karl thought that Tori looked jealous, but she was in the mirror of his position, the only woman in an all male group, instead of the only man in an all female group.

Maybe it was the group composition she was jealous of.

Hawk came down to land on Dana's backpack, and the mage gently stroked his head, while Lotus climbed up on Rae's back.

Karl looked at the other group, who were still recovering from the battle, and too exhausted to go far.

"What are your plans? Are you going to head back to the main lines, or are you going to remain out here behind the lines and keep hunting? I know you had a tough break with your position during the fallback order, but with a bit of effort, I'm sure you can dodge the wandering Frost Giant patrols." He asked.

High Priest George looked at Karl like he was crazy. "You're planning to stay out here? We're behind the Frost Giant lines. If we get attacked, there's nobody else to come help. We didn't know you were nearby, but the other groups are together on the far side of the line, a whole day's walk from here."

Karl nodded. "Yeah, we've got things to do out here, and we have been asked to see if we can find out what is causing the change in temperature before we head back. If you have any ideas, that would be great, but the temperature seems to be dropping before the Frost Giants appear, so it has to be some sort of area effect."

The mages all looked a little traumatized, and Karl knew that they wanted to just go home and not be out here anymore. That may or may not be an option for them, but at the least, he could help them get to the human lines.

"Why don't we help escort you south, and then you can make a run across the open ground between the lines? The Frost Giants shouldn't chase you, and you'll be back in the safety of the main force." He suggested.

"And how do you plan to get away after you help us get past the main line? They're not going to just let you walk by." Tori asked.

Karl smiled, and the mages shuddered a little at the aura of a predator that he gave off.

"I think that we can handle ourselves long enough to get out of sight."

The other group shared a concerned look, then shook their heads before High Priest George answered.

"I think it's better to merge the groups until there is a better opportunity to rejoin the main force. We will assist with your mission, and the extra numbers should make it safer for everyone."

Karl wasn't convinced that was true, the other group didn't look all that competent, but telling them that would probably lead to a bout of severe depression and someone doing something stupid to prove themselves in combat.

"Alright, welcome to the party. What is everyone's specialty? I recall that Tori uses orbs that fire multiple magic missiles, but what is everyone else good at?" He asked.

One of the mages, Yuri, Karl thought, gave him a rueful smile. "We're all Fire Element specialists who know the Golem Spell. In theory, it should be as good as having three warriors with us, but that group just demolished the Golems."

Dana frowned. "They're a whole Rank higher than you. Do any of you know [Durable Constructs], or an upgraded barrier spell instead of the basic one?"

They all shook their heads in shame.

Karl shrugged. "Alright, I see where the issue is. The Special Forces Team, as you called them, simply outmatched you, even though you had the right basic stats for the mission. We can't teach you new spells right now, but with three more Golems and three more Fire Spells, we should not have any troubles with future teams."

Of course, he had a Royal Rank [Flaming Body] ability of his own, plus Hawk's fireballs. While the skill was a Rank higher, his own mana output wasn't quite up to the standard of a Royal Rank mage or beast using it. So, the maximum output was limited, but it had greater penetration and mana efficiency than the Commander Rank version had managed.

"What was that ability that you used to toss a Frost Giant across a clearing?" George asked.

"Ah, it's this fancy new hammer I got from some Frost Giants. It can stack an ability on it multiple times. It's brutal on the mana usage, but when multiple instances hit at once with the force of the maul and my upgraded strength, they fly pretty well."

Tori looked Karl over. "You don't look like the sort that got big strength increases from your class."

Karl just shrugged, but Dana laughed.

"He didn't. He's got two Giant Strength items on, and he could probably body slam a Frost Giant without using a skill." She explained.

"Speaking of which, check those bodies. The Commander Rank giants usually have good stuff on them." Karl added.

Tessa pointed to the bodies. "And take the cloaks. Not only are they warm, they blend in with the snow, so you aren't as easy to spot. If things get dangerous, we will bring up a snow storm of our own to hide in."

Even Thor was wearing one, while Rae and her Golems blended in with the snow on their own. From a hundred metres away, it was difficult to see Karl's group, even on a clear day with no blowing snow.

The cloak went well with the white cleric robes that George was wearing, and the four mages quickly got theirs on and put up the hoods to gather a bit of warmth to themselves.

"We were going to head away from the main lines to attack supply lines and keep the main lines from receiving their food deliveries. Are you ready for that, or should we allow you a bit more time to recover your mana and stamina?" Karl asked.

George gave them a confused look. "Is regenerating stamina so easy? Once you're tired, you're tired. Or do these Sisters know refreshing spells?"

"Both of them, plus the Lightning Cerro, actually. Thor, can you extend your Lightning over the whole group? They could use the help." Karl replied.

Thor didn't really trust strangers, but Karl had asked, so he covered them in Lightning, and then detached it from himself. If the barrier broke, it broke. He wouldn't use his own energy keeping it active until he trusted these new humans who weren't part of the pack.

Thor was usually much more welcoming, and he liked to bump up against people and beg for attention, so the wariness put Karl on guard. If there was something wrong with this group, he wanted to understand what it was before it got them all in trouble.

After another minute's rest, the group was ready to move again, and Karl took the point position with his bow in hand, then sent Hawk to scout.

[Find us a supply convoy small enough that our group could fight it alone. Just in case.] He directed their scout.

[Got it. There is one with these pigs, the size of Thor. Do you think they taste good?] Hawk asked.

[There is only one way to find out.]

"Alright, we have our target. It's a small supply convoy bringing boars to the Frost Giants. If we can intercept enough of those, it should destabilize their lines." Karl explained to the newcomers.

Tori nodded in understanding, while the others got sour looks, while the High Priest looked a bit defeated. That was strange, attacking supply convoys was a great way to resupply your own group, so most people should want to fight them instead of active military units.

Chapter 272 Abundant Pork

Their progress through the woods was slow, as the three male mages were dragging their feet, unwilling to go forward into battle, but not brave enough to say anything. That continued for about five minutes before Karl had enough of it.

"Look, if you don't want to go into combat, that's on you. You don't have to join our mission. But I'm not going to stand for dragging feet and dawdling. Either you get with the program or you stay behind." He insisted.

The men of the other group looked shocked and insulted, but Tori might not have noticed, as she was busy talking about magic missiles with Dana.

She did notice when the group came to a halt, while Karl waited for their answer.

"As I said, it's up to you. If you don't want to be here, then don't be here. But screwing with the attack schedule so you can slack off isn't acceptable. You've got ten seconds to decide before I leave you behind."

Tori snorted with laughter and the rest of the group glared at her, then the other three mages promptly sat down, while the High Priest glared at them.

"Understood. Brother George, if you would be so kind as to remain and keep them safe. We will come back to check on you in a few hours." Karl declared, then returned to the front of the group and moved forward at a jog.

Dana pulled Tori up on Thor with her and Tessa, while Ophelia fell in beside Karl at the front of the group.

"Are you certain that is wise?" the Berserker asked.

"It is for us. If they're too cowardly to fight, and they won't even walk toward a battle properly, they're a liability, and it is safer for everyone if they're here in the middle of nowhere." Karl whispered back.

The supply convoy was not even staffed by Giants. It was Ice Trolls and Yeti, which enraged Hawk to the point that he was ready to launch the attack on his own. These were all Ascended Rank or lower, but Karl had told him to scout the area and pick targets, not to attack before everyone arrived.

[We're about to leave the trees and approach the trail. Once I launch the first attack, you can join in and prevent them from running away.] Karl instructed Hawk.

[Finally. What took you so long?]

Karl went right as they reached the road, while Ophelia and Rae went left, with Thor charging straight up the road, while Tori did her best to hold on to Dana, as she hadn't learned the trick to remaining seated on the Cerro yet.

The Ice Trolls saw Thor a few seconds later and began to charge.

That was when Dana grabbed Tori and jumped down from Thor, tucking and rolling, while using the Lightning Barrier to prevent injury. Tessa would ride him into melee combat, but that wasn't Dana's style.

She sent her armoured Golems forward to flank Thor, and Tori began to create orbs around herself in preparation for the battle.

Karl let the first arrow loose, hitting a Troll at the back of the line. The arrow that had been coated in fire was engulfed in ice for a few seconds after it embedded itself in the Troll's chest, then the flames began to spread, lighting the creature on fire.

Trolls had no immunity to fire, and they were quite flammable once you got them lit, especially the Ice Trolls.

Hawk predictably vented his fury on the Yeti herders, while Remi went straight for the enormous pigs, unwilling to let them get away before she found out what they tasted like. Some thin slices with broadleaf spirit grass seemed like it would be a wonderful combo to her.

Karl hit one of the lead Yeti with [Chain Lightning] on an arrow right before Tessa's mace, coated in Lightning and Holy Light, collided with its face, briefly setting the beast's fur aflame. He hadn't known her ability could do that, but it was an impressive trick for these flammable monsters.

The fight only lasted thirty seconds, and Tori had three hovering orbs for her magic missiles in the air when they finished. She seemed both confused and startled as she realized there was nothing left moving. She turned to Dana for answers, but the other Mage wasn't sure what she wanted.

"That's about how it always goes. They're a rank lower than Karl and the beasts, so they're not going to last long against their area attacks."

Tori shook her head. "That level of attack power is just insane. Like those Spider Golems. They just touch things and they fall apart. That can't be normal."

Rae laughed in Karl's mind, while Lotus laughed from her back.

"They are affected by the Bloodbath Spider's [Offensive Adaptation] skill, so the more they fight a target, the more damage they do to them. They've been fighting high ranked Ice Element targets for a while now, and they're naturally higher damage than most Commander Rank skills, even before Rae added the [Durable Constructs] skill to them to increase their armour and attack even more.

It really is unfair how much damage they do, but there's only so many of them. If we had like fifty tiny ones, it would be even better." The nature cleric joked.

Tori shuddered in revulsion at the thought of a battlefield overrun by tiny murderous spiders.

"Well, it would certainly have a psychological effect." She reluctantly agreed.

"But what are we going to do with all this? It's right on the road, and the next patrol will see it in minutes."

Rae grabbed all the pigs and threw them into Hawk's space, except one for Remi, while the four Golems worked together to pile the rest of the bodies for Hawk to create a bonfire.

"They burn really well. In fifteen minutes, they'll be ash. After that, none of the other patrols will have any idea what happened here." Karl explained as the team worked.

Then he gestured south. "Let's go check on the idiots. They likely want an escort back south past the lines by now. I don't suppose you have any idea what their issue is, do you?"

The last bit was directed at Tori, who sighed and nodded.

"I may have led them on a little to get them to agree to go along on a mission with me. There were supposed to be two mages and one Paladin type warrior, but he pulled a no show and sent another mage in his place. Then, when the mages figured out that I actually just needed a group for the mission, and they weren't going to get laid, they started pouting and looking for reasons to go home.

High Priest George has been sick of all of us since about noon on day one, and I suspect that he's planning to report us all for conduct unbecoming an Elite when he gets back." She explained.

Karl's look made Tori flinch a little. "Look, I know it was a scummy thing to do, but I wanted to fight at the front and get some credits before I graduated. If they had just sucked it up and did the job they agreed to, it would have been fine."

"Well, we will see if their attitude has improved when we get back. If not, we will have to do something. Either find a safe spot to hide them, or a way to get them back to the main lines. At least you managed to get a few kills in before you had to go back." Karl replied.

Tori sighed and nodded, not eager to go back to her group, who obviously weren't going to be welcome with a proper group like Karl's who were here to kill Giants and help the war effort.

Only, when they got back to the spot where they left the group, they were gone.

[Hawk, find the idiots and let me know where they are.] Karl ordered.

[On it boss.]

Karl checked the snow, and saw three sets of running footsteps headed southeast, toward the secondary valley, and a fourth set moving slower behind them, but probably tracking the mages.

[They're still running toward the secondary valley entrance. The cleric is way behind them, but he's following their footprints. Should I keep tracking them?] Hawk replied.

[Give us a minute to decide. We might just let them leave and keep their other mage for a bit.] Karl replied.

All four pets laughed at that. Why would they want the useless ones back? Besides, they weren't even cute or scaly.

Lotus pointed to a set of symbols drawn in the snow. "That's clerical shorthand. It says the mages deserted, and he is required to go after them, then what, I think, should mean to watch over Tori."

Chapter 273 Runaways

Tori waited impatiently for Karl to finish communicating with his pets for a few minutes, before she realized that he had forgotten about informing the rest of them about what was going on.

"Care to fill the rest of us in on the details?" She asked quietly, frustrated, but not eager to insult Karl.

"Hawk found them and he's tracking them. I've got him eliminating a few groups along their escape path, so they don't get intercepted before they can make it to the empty valley. After that, they should be fine until they realize that the south pass is barricaded by the Frost Giants, and they'll have to go over the mountains.

The cleric will catch up with them soon, he's pacing himself, and the mages are nearly exhausted again." Karl explained as he listened to the updates from Hawk's side.

Tori shook her head in dismay. "What are they thinking? We signed up through the army for a deployment. If they come running back without the rest of their group, they're going to have to explain what happened. Or maybe they're expecting us all to die out here behind the lines?"

The words seemed to cause a revelation as they left her mouth. They were behind the enemy lines. Everything around them could be considered hostile, and nobody would be coming to help. Hitting the supply lines would provoke a response from the hungry Frost Giants, and there were only six of them now.

Even if the others were pretty useless, they still wanted to stay alive, and they should fight for that reason alone.

"They might think that we're in trouble, but unless they happen to find a scout team that hasn't retreated yet, they'll be the ones with issues very soon. It gets incredibly cold in that valley, and they're going to need shelter. If they're not smart enough to scout for a cave before dark, they're in for a rough night, and a fire will attract giants." Karl assured her.

Tori looked confused. "How do you keep warm, then?"

Karl laughed, and Dana patted her on the shoulder. "We start a fire. Well, a magical one. We've got a good night watch schedule, so we're unlikely to get ambushed."

"Speaking of ambushed, should we go see if anything has found our present while Hawk takes care of the lost mages?" Lotus suggested.

"That's not a bad idea. They should have multiple convoys coming down the road, and we can stock up today. I will radio in about the situation, and then we will move back to the road." Karl agreed.

[Region Command, this is team 95988, we have obtained 1 additional Ascended member from team 62345. Other members of 62345 are headed south through the secondary valley.

We have eliminated the Special Forces Team, plus one food supply convoy. Positioning for continued hunts.] Karl informed them.

[Understood 95988. Your increased member count is noted.]

Tori looked at him. "That's it?"

"Yep. They don't really need to hear all the details, they'll either get them in the debriefing, or they won't matter at all. Knowing that we have six people, five of which are Ascended and combat capable, is enough for them to make plans and record our reports.

Now that they know we're here and hunting, they will plan for the Giants to be short a few convoys, which will lead to some rationing after a week or so of continued attacks." Karl agreed.

"But you don't sound like you just want to hit a few convoys. From what I have seen of your team, you intend to keep destroying their supply lines until they go berserk and start sending teams that you can't fight anymore." Tori pointed out.

Lotus smiled. "She's a quick learner. How is Hawk doing with the path clearing for the men?"

Karl mentally checked in, and found that the High Priest had just caught up to the mages inside the valley, and he was encouraging them to get up and get southwest into the hills before dark.

"It looks like the High Priest knows what he's doing. They should be fine. Hawk is on his way back. Let's get in position near the road so that we aren't too far away to hit the next group to pass."

Everyone who couldn't run fast enough took up their seats on the two mounts, while Karl and Ophelia jogged through the trees.

[I found another group. Turn left, they're further than we expected.] Hawk instructed.

Karl turned at the same time as the two beasts, leaving a confused Ophelia to chase him.

"The next convoy made it further than expected. They didn't slow for the fire. We're going to catch them before we go back for the next one, so that the main force doesn't get any convoys from this direction today." Karl explained.

"Got it. How big is the group?" Ophelia asked as they ran.

"About the same as the last one, but they've got some wounded, I think they were attacked by monsters." Karl explained.

[That means they're likely missing pigs as well.] Rae noted.

Hawk did a quick count and gave a mental screech when he realized that the group only had seventeen instead of twenty pigs. Someone stole his pigs.

Karl laughed. [I think the rule is finders keepers. They're not yours until you find them.]

[Well, I've found them now, and there are three missing.] Hawk complained, placing the blame directly on the wounded guards that he could see below him.

Ophelia gave Karl a curious look. "You're smiling, what's so funny?"

"The group got attacked on the way here, and they lost three pigs. Hawk is mad at them for losing his pigs before he got there."

The Berserker burst into laughter as they ran. "He is a very single-minded individual. That's alright, we will rescue the rest of them for him. He can stow them in his space and snack on them as he pleases."

The best part was that Hawk likely wouldn't even eat them. The pigs were massive, a giant variety, but they were only Awakened Rank for the most part, and Hawk preferred small amounts of energy dense food to keep his growth steady.

The herd was rushing along, barely paying attention to their surroundings, when Karl's first arrow struck and Hawk began to bombard them for losing his pigs. The herders were already exhausted from the previous battle they had been in, and couldn't put up more than a token resistance.

The last of the bodies were still twitching when Rae started to strip them of their equipment, bringing efficiency to the cleanup process.

Ophelia pointed at the pile as she shifted back from her Werebear form to human. "We've got two staves if anyone wants them, that seems like a mage and cleric sort of thing."

Tessa identified them, then tossed them to Tori and Dana. "They are both for reducing spell cost, so it doesn't matter much who takes which one. They've got a lot of added mana on them as well, since they are Ascended Rank staves."

Tori looked startled as Tessa dug through the leather clothing that the Yeti had been wearing.

"Nope, all scrap quality. Alright, we can toss this on the pile, and none of the other weapons are magical." She explained.

The pigs were already in Hawk's space, so the bird lit fire to the pile of bodies, starting with the trolls. That would hide most of the signs they had been here while they ran up the road to find the next group of supplies.

Karl had no idea how many groups they were sending a day, but two didn't seem like enough for all the Frost Giants on the main line. So, Hawk was sent back out to check up the road for the next group.

Only, there was nothing for the next twenty kilometres. The road was clear, and the pigs weren't fast enough that they should be further than that.

He did find the signs of the battle that had claimed the missing animals, which were already nearly stripped down by a Warbear and her cubs. Now that he knew what had done it, Hawk wasn't mad anymore. He instinctively liked the species, and didn't begrudge them a good meal.

"Alright, Hawk says there are no more groups nearby. Let's find a good spot for the night, and get settled in. We can hunt more supply convoys tomorrow." Karl announced.

Chapter 274 Missing Deliveries

Hawk found them another good cave for the night, large enough to be comfortable, but small enough to be easily heated with the door blocked by Rae's silk.

Tonight, they went one step further, since they were in a snow-covered area, and they had Remi keep a [Blizzard] spell active for half an hour after the entry was covered, obliterating their tracks, and piling snow over the entry points.

This cave had three, which wasn't optimal, but they were all small enough that the Frost Giants couldn't get in. That was the important part, as nobody expected the escorts for the supply convoys to be wandering in the woods and looking for hiding spots where ambushers might be waiting for them.

Lotus and Tessa started cooking, which got Tori panicked again, but the two clerics only laughed.

"Hawk is still out scouting, and Rae is in the tree outside. If there is anything coming for us, we will know. There is no reason not to eat well while we're out in the field, and it saves us from having to return to refill our rations every ten days.

In fact, we haven't touched any of the ones in our packs, so they're likely frozen solid right now." Tessa explained.

Tori nodded. "That's what happened to ours yesterday. Even after the heater stopped working, the food was still almost cold, but not frozen anymore. We even had to get the priest to create water so we could have something to drink, as we couldn't thaw our canteens."

"Your other mages had fire magic, why not just get some heat going? Even if you just defrosted everything first, it would have been better." Tessa asked, with a gesture to Karl's sword, which was currently doing double duty as room heater and hot grill for the cooking pots.

The blonde mage giggled and flashed a suggestive smirk at Karl. "Well, nobody in the other team was packing the same sort of impressive weapon that you've kept hidden away."

Dana and Tessa gave her matching disgusted looks, while Karl chuckled and Tori shook her head with a rueful smile. "Sorry, it's become a force of habit. My mother always told me, use what you've got to get what you need, and I might have gone a little bit overboard with the technique."

Tessa's frown faded into a malicious smirk, and she laughed as she tossed cut vegetables into the pot. "Might have gone a bit overboard? You nearly got killed because your group only came along hoping to get laid. They didn't even have any intention of doing their jobs. That's more than a little overboard. But we won't hold it against you as long as you are trying to act right.

Our group has a magical contract to travel together for the next year, and we don't need drama or infighting. Besides, if you lose the favour of the beasts, you'll lose the strongest defensive magic that we have right now.

We're happy to have extra hands in battle, but the easy girl routine doesn't make friends with the clergy."

Tori looked somewhere between mortified and humiliated, and Karl thought that she might actually bolt out of the cave in embarrassment, but after a moment, she began to calm, and wiped a tear from her eyes as she nodded at the War Cleric.

"I understand. Thank you for keeping me around. You have my word, by the time that we get back to one of the bases, I will have it together. Karl, I apologize for how I am. Dana, I apologize for flirting with your man."

Now it was Dana's turn to blush bright red, but she didn't say anything to refute the accusation.

Lotus put strips of sliced pig meat on a pan, causing a sizzling that distracted everyone.

"I'm glad we got all that out of the way early. Now, the food is almost ready, and then we will set the night watches. I will take the first, who has second?" She asked with an impish grin on her face.

"I will." Dana agreed.

"And I will take the third shift." Karl decided.

That would put him on watch when everyone woke up for breakfast, which was the best time to send Hawk out to start their morning scouting missions.

Karl got Rae to attach all the hammocks to the cave walls with her silk, and then turned down the flames on the blade a little, so the back of the cave would stay comfortably warm, but they wouldn't melt the snow that had built up around the exits after Remi's blizzard.

"Hammocks? That's different." Tori mumbled as they got set up.

"We didn't bring an extra, but it's warmer if you share and zip two sleeping bags together. One goes over you, and one under the hammock. Shared body heat makes for a comfortable night." Lotus suggested.

Ophelia nodded happily. "Then you're with me. I'm the odd one out, and I was planning to sleep in bear form, but we can share."

Tori was skeptical about the idea, but once it was time for bed and she unequipped her boots to climb into bed, she learned that there was a reason nobody else had volunteered to welcome Ophelia by swapping spots.

Bear was a hugger, and she had the mage thoroughly wrapped up in the arms of a sleeping berserker thirty seconds later. Fortunately, she didn't snore, but there was no way that Tori was escaping without a struggle against the superhuman strength of a berserker.

Karl woke up briefly when Dana left for her watch, and then again a few hours later when she woke him to take over.

[Hawk, Rae, have you spotted anything?] Karl asked as his shift came to an end as the sun was about to come up.

[Nothing, just silence. Even the small animals are gone, the blizzard scared them off.] Rae replied from a small fort in the trees outside.

[I will go see where the morning food is.] Hawk replied, meaning the supplies that the Frost Giants would be expecting that morning.

Tessa woke up early to get started on breakfast, carefully sneaking out of her hammock without waking Lotus. Of course, that didn't last long, as once the small priestess began to get cold without the extra warmth, she was awake as well, but it gave Tessa enough time to get the cooking utensils set out and the oatmeal heating.

"What's the word from Hawk?" Tessa asked as she chopped the fruit that Lotus was creating.

"Nothing so far. They might have taken a different route than yesterday's targets as well, so Hawk is still scouting." Karl shrugged.

For another half hour, Hawk searched before he began to get frustrated.

[They have to be eating something. Where are all the supplies? There aren't even extra weapons coming down the road.] He ranted as he continued to fly a search pattern over the hills.

"Hawk can't find anything. There are no unnatural snowstorms, spots where he can't see the ground, or other issues, there's just nothing on the road today, and not on any of the other nearby roads." Karl explained as everyone eagerly awaited a new update.

Tessa took out her notepad and began to write down math calculations on it, periodically looking off into the distance, as if that would help her remember some fact or figure.

"How big do you think the average boar we harvested was, by weight?" She asked.

"About two tonnes, give or take a little. They're bigger than Thor, and fat." Karl replied.

She wrote a few more figures, then nodded in satisfaction as she began to add them up.

"You see, Frost Giants don't eat as much as humans do, compared to their size. Most Magical Beasts don't. They use mana instead, so they don't over hunt their territory. With the rough numbers we are getting from the radio on the main line, my calculation is that each of those convoys should have supplied them for two days.

So, there might not be a shipment today because we took out four days worth of their food supply yesterday." Lotus explained.

Dana looked excited for a moment, then concerned. "Then what do we do today, and what are the odds that a large group comes looking for them?"

Karl considered that. "I would say the odds are it will be a scouting group first, not a large combat unit. They don't have any reason to think that there is a large military unit here, so they won't waste resources. As to what we do today, I say we wait.

They will send giants looking for their missing dinner, and we can eliminate those as well."

Chapter 275 Ice Front

Everyone rested in the cave for the morning as they listened to the reports from the main lines, which were becoming even more dire by the minute. The Frost Giants were not just waiting at their lines, they were working together to launch ice magic, and enchanted boulders at the defenders.

While it was crude, with the strength of Giants operating the mechanisms, the Frost Giant Catapults were proving to be incredibly effective. The ice boulders exploded on impact, causing every bit as much damage as any artillery round, even against armoured targets.

The main lines sounded like they were in the midst of a disaster, and at one point Karl was reasonably certain that he heard Jodi's voice announcing a unit retreat for heavy casualties.

The line was moving back again, and sometime around mid-afternoon, High Priest George and the remainder of his team were rescued by scouts after being attacked by a Frost Giant patrol. The Cleric was heavily injured, and both teams were airlifted out with unstated casualties in an emergency rescue that couldn't have been easy that far behind the main line.

Hawk still hadn't seen anything coming up the road toward them, and the whole region appeared to be deserted.

Rae thought the same thing. There was simply nothing left here, and the temperature was dropping fast. Whatever the Frost Giants were doing, it was turning what should have been a tropical area into a frozen wasteland, where none of the native creatures could survive.

[It's too cold to fly, even with Flames. We need to leave this place.] Hawk informed them not long after.

[It's almost dark. Should we move out immediately, or will you return to the cave, and we will leave in the morning?] Karl asked.

It took a moment for Hawk to answer, but his decision was firm.

[There is a ridgeline behind these clouds, and the wind is even colder there. I think that we should move this afternoon and go further east. If we keep staying here, we're going to freeze.]

Surprisingly, Remi was with him on that decision. She poked her head out of her space to see what was going on, then promptly returned to her swamp.

[There is strong shaman magic coming.] She announced.

Well, that was something. If she could sense the magic, then they had their answer to why everything was freezing, just not where the effect was coming from, other than somewhere deeper into the Frost Giant nation.

"Everyone, pack up, we need to move. There is a wave of ice magic coming our way, and it's not suitable for any living creature, according to Hawk. That could explain why they're not sending anyone to look for the missing animals. They don't expect anything to remain alive after that wave of cold passes over us." Karl explained.

"Where are we headed?" Lotus asked.

"The nearest edge of the wave is southeast of here, so we're going to head that way and hope that we can properly outrun it. If we can't, we will have to find a cave or make a strong fort to hole up in until it has passed, and the temperature is back to just cold." Karl explained.

They were getting very well practised with loading their packs, and only the hammocks and sleeping bags had come out, other than the cooking utensils. Within minutes, they were loaded up, and Karl called Thor and Rae to give everyone a ride, while Hawk came down to land on his backpack and warm up.

[The temperature up high is so cold that the Ice Magic is wearing down my flames.] Hawk explained.

[I will report it to the others.]

[Urgent Message for the Command Group and all Mobile Units. This is Team 95988. There is a wave of Ice Magic behind the incoming storm, powerful enough to snuff out fire magic barriers.

We are relocating outside the designated zone to escape the path of the magic, and I recommend that all units unable to reach a secured camp seek immediate shelter, as the storm will be at the main lines within the next two hours.]

The already chaotic messages over the radio intensified as the Front Line Command Group realized that there was more going on than just a minor cold snap. They began issuing orders and getting troops moved, which Karl was immediately grateful for.

They could have second guessed him or delayed, but they chose to believe his report and act on it immediately, which should save some lives when the Ice Magic reached the battle.

The Frost Giants would predictably charge when the cold front moved through, forcing the humans to fight in the magical cold, but at least they wouldn't be trapped out alone in it.

Well, most of them wouldn't. There were still some scouts too far out to reach the lines, and they were reporting their moves to caverns, which they intended to barricade and hide in until the storm had passed.

The one great downside to Ice Magic was its lack of penetration. Unlike Fire Magic, which would try to burn through a solid surface, Ice Magic would coat it and freeze it. So, if you could seal your shelter well enough, the magic would naturally seal it, and you could heat the inside while the surface froze.

That's why the Frost Giants would attack during the cold snap. With the humans frozen into their shelters by a wall of ice, they were sitting targets, and could be easily smashed along with their tents and houses.

Ophelia had to transform into Werebear form to withstand the cold even now, and the others had their cloaks pulled tight around themselves as the beasts began to run through the snow, getting as far away from the incoming wave of magic as possible.

Fortunately, they were already near the edge of the storm, and as they ran, the temperature began to return to the abnormal, but nonmagical cold that they had experienced the first time that they were in the region.

By the time that it started getting near sunset, they were well away from the storm front, which had already long since passed them, and the temperature was close to freezing again. But they were so far from the front line that they had been deployed to that the radio signal was fading.

Karl checked the map, and found that there was no repeater listed in the encoded radio station guide. So, he just put the radio on scan, looking for a closer signal.

It stopped on the first rotation through the channel, and a clear voice came through the speaker, giving instructions for a counterattack. The incoming signal level was so strong that they had to be close to the source, but the number of unit movement orders that were being given made it sound like they had come across another section of the line.

Karl was sure they hadn't come that far, the next portion should be more than a hundred kilometres from their deployment point, but once he mentally calculated their movement, he realized they might only be thirty kilometres from them now.

He took a moment to place himself on the map, and then sent in a report to this new Commander.

[Zone 17, this is team 95988. We have relocated to avoid a magical cold front, placing us in your zone. Be aware, we have tamed beasts with our team.] Karl reported, along with the map code for their location.

[Wonderful timing 95988. Are you a Commander led team? We have a fire mission that has evaded our scouts near your position. I can offer additional mission rewards if you can eliminate them before dark.] The confident voice replied, along with a map location code.

Karl checked the map. It would be close, but they were much faster moving than most teams.

[Understood, we are on it now.]

He altered their direction toward a mountain, which was the logical spot to spend the night anyhow, as it had larger trees, as well as a chance of caves. As soon as he did, Ophelia gave him a concerned look.

"You're not going to ask what we're up against?" She asked.

"They can't see it, so they couldn't tell us for certain anyhow. But if they are willing to send one Commander led team, it's most likely a Special Forces team." Karl replied.

Hawk took to the sky, looking for their target and revelling in the somewhat warmer air that didn't make him strain to keep his flames warm.

[I've got them. Twenty Frost Giants, four Commanders that I can see, and ten catapults hidden behind a ridgeline. I can see the army lines too, I think the Giants are firing blind into our troops.] Hawk reported.

Chapter 276 Need For Speed

With that news, it made perfect sense that the main lines were sending them on an urgent mission to eliminate the Giants before dark, when the boulders would be hidden by the dark until they were almost in the camp.

What this bit of the line was doing so far forward was a mystery, but if they were doing better than the other main line portion, it was good work on their part that got them to that position.

"Twenty Giant artillery team with four Commanders leading them. Does the same routine as before work for everyone?" Karl called to the mages riding on Thor's back.

Tessa gave him the thumbs up, and Dana nodded, while Tori began to form the magic missile firing orbs that she used as her primary offensive ability. Spreading out the mana cost made the battle much easier on her, and if she had a bunch of them charged when they arrived, she could eliminate a number of the weaker targets right away.

[Two hundred metres, just over the next ridge.] Hawk reported.

"Get ready, we're charging after the ridge." Karl informed the team.

He took out his bow and prepared to fire while running. The Giants were at the bottom of a hill, which sucked for the defenders, but kept them out of sight of the Golden Dragon Nation scouts. Being uphill allowed Karl to let loose his first arrow just as Thor and Rae began to charge down the slope.

He wasn't particularly skilled at shooting and running, but it was possible, and he was still hitting them with [Chain Lightning] while Thor closed on the artillery emplacement.

Tori rolled off his back when they got near the bottom, and Dana stood up to cast her Golems in the Frost Giant ranks before jumping clear of Thor's back as well.

Rae and Lotus had vanished into the trees, but the Spider Golems were going for the Commanders already, leaving only Ophelia a few seconds out of combat when Thor came crashing through the catapults with a happy braying noise.

[Smashing poles!] He cheered as the Frost Giants roared in frustration.

Karl closed in, so he could provide support for Ophelia, who was going to need someone to watch her back in a battle this crowded, but he kept his bow out for now. Firing from ten metres away was even more effective than from a hundred metres, even if he was close enough that he could have used his skills through a blade.

Only when the Giants rushed him did he switch to the two-handed blade and join Ophelia in close combat.

Royal Rank [Flame Body] was making short work of the Ascended members of the group, while Hawk's fireballs and the Spider Golems kept the Commanders from assisting in the fight.

[We need more speed.] Rae complained as she called another set of Golems to replace the ones that the Frost Giants had almost finished hacking apart.

Four on two, with a few Ascended Rank assistants trying to pin the constructs down made for an unfair fight, and while they had severely injured all of them, the constructs had only killed the Ascended Rank pair when the Golems first died.

[Alright, watch this.] Karl agreed.

2 Points [10 Points for Balance] [Haste] improves the speed of the target beast by 10 percent per Rank (40 percent at Commander)

[10 points spent. [Haste] obtained.]

Karl cast the spell on all three of his pets. The sudden burst of speed from the Spider Golems caught the Frost Giants off guard, and Thor's next charge nearly tossed Tessa from his back with the force of impact when he collided with an Ascended Frost Giant.

Karl could hear the sound of breaking bones as the Giant crumpled, right before Thor smashed its face with an [Earthquake] enhanced tail.

Hawk was blocking ice attacks with his [Wind Shield] so he didn't have to take away from the flames for his fireballs, and the increased attack speed was the final straw for the Frost Giants.

All Four Commanders fell within seconds, and the remainder of the Ascended artillery operators were close behind.

Karl checked the sun, which was just touching the horizon.

[Command, this is 95988. The Artillery team has been eliminated. I will collect my rewards later.] Karl joked.

There was a short pause, then a new female voice came over the radio.

[95988, confirm count of the Artillery team.]

[20 members total, including 4 Commanders. Ten Frost Giant Catapults were destroyed on location as well.]

The voice sounded shocked when it spoke next. [Excellent work, Commander. We recommend relocation before dark.]

[Understood. We will check in at dawn.]

[It might be easier to say we're finding a spot than to actually rest in one. There are four other groups of Frost Giants in the area.] Hawk informed Karl as he returned to scouting duty.

"Hawk reports four more groups in the region right now. We're going to have to deal with them now if we don't want to fight them all night." Karl informed the team.

"Can Rae make us a Fort in a reasonable time after dark, or will we be in the open?" Tori asked.

"Yeah, she can make a quick fort after the fights." Karl agreed.

[Just watch me, I'm fast as fuck Boiii.] Rae agreed.

[Who is teaching you to talk like that? Am I going to have to speak with Lotus?] Karl replied.

Karl looked toward where they were standing, and Lotus burst into laughter. She was definitely teaching the Bloodbath Spider strange things.

[The first group is coming to you. Tell Thor to bugle, so they don't miss you.] Hawk instructed.

Thor didn't wait and let out a happy nasal bugle, which brought the sound of smashing trees from two different directions.

[Oh, we got two. Efficient.] Hawk added.

"I don't think I need to explain, everyone in position to block a charge by Frost Giants. This way will let us get rid of most of them before it's fully dark. I can fight just fine in the dark, but I know nobody else can." Karl explained.

He didn't know how well the Frost Giants could fight in the dark, but it probably wasn't any worse than what the mages would be working with, even if he used his blade to light the battlefield. Or, one of the clerics could do it. They had light spells, and their weapon and armour enchantments could make a bright golden glow.

The Giants didn't hesitate as they charged, but they were scout teams, only one Commander and two Ascended Rank Frost Giants in each group.

That wasn't even a warm-up for the Spider Golems, and Tori had stacked up a whole new batch of orbs before they arrived, so she could mass bombard them.

"Watch your stamina usage. If you're too exhausted to walk after a battle, it will be a pain. If Thor gets injured, he needs to rest in a separate space, so everyone ends up walking." Karl explained as he saw the barrage of spells chasing after his arrow.

"Thanks, I will keep it in mind. Did we have more fights tonight?" Tori replied.

"Two more. Hawk is scouting them now, so we can set up a nice secure camp."

[Go southeast toward the main lines, over the ridge. There is a group there, and I will get the training group to the North.] Hawk decided.

Karl led them over the ridge, expecting to find another large group of Frost Giants, but what they came across was a blended unit, with one Commander Rank Frost Giant walking crouched over to look smaller, and ten Yeti wearing Frost Giant cloaks, so they looked like juvenile Giants, not high Ascended Rank elite Yeti warriors.

Karl was going to launch the attack right away, but Rae decided it was no fun if she didn't get to taunt Hawk first.

[Fear not, valiant Hawk, we will avenge you.] She announced in her best grieving tone.

[What are you talking about? I'm not dying to some stupid trainees.] Hawk retorted.

[No, we found an entire team of Elite Yeti, dressed up as baby Giants.] Rae informed him.

[I will make these die right away. Don't start without me. Two minutes, just give me two minutes.] Hepleaded.

[We're starting now.] Rae taunted as she moved into position.

[Behave, you two. We will save a few for you when you get here.] Karl insisted.

"It's Yeti elites dressed as baby Giants. Be prepared, they're high Ascended or possibly early Commander Rank, and they can use quite a bit of magic." Karl warned.

Chapter 277 Sneaky Yetis

True to his word, Hawk eliminated the training group in a matter of seconds, and he was already on his way back to take vengeance on the Yetis.

Karl led the group close enough that he could get a general sense of how powerful the targets were, and found that they might have underestimated the power of the targets. What he had thought were High Ascended Rank Yeti were all Commanders, making this a ten Commander attack force.

Now that he had added the [Haste] Skill, they would be dealing much more damage for every minute of the fight, but they were still at a disadvantage in both numbers and Rank. [Terrorize] added forty percent damage, and [Haste] gave them forty percent more speed, but that still might not be enough to deal with ten Commanders at once.

The problem was that as soon as he attacked, those Yetis were going to start casting spells, which would exhaust Thor as he tried to keep everyone's barriers up. Once the barriers were down, everyone was in trouble, so Thor would have to be pulled back from the front lines to focus on the defence of the Golems.

What they needed to do was eliminate the targets as fast as possible, before they could do too much damage. It was that, or find a way to ambush the target with Golems and let them fight to destruction, then send more, preferably without being noticed. If they could take down a few targets, it would even the odds enough that Karl would be more comfortable fighting.

"Alright, I have a plan. Everyone stay back for now, and I will call when it's time to join. Rae, hide in the trees out of sight and summon your Golems into the group. Let them fight it out, but don't let yourself be noticed until I give the signal.

Once the Golems are fighting, I will start firing arrows from the other side, using [Chain Lightning] to slow them down.

The goal is to eliminate two or three of them right away, then charge in. Ten Commanders is too much, but if we can take that down to six in an ambush, it will be manageable." Karl explained.

Tessa pointed up. "You might want to be quick because Hawk isn't going to wait once he gets back."

"That's fine. If they think that this is a monster attack, they won't be ready for the mages when you approach. Thor, try not to get yourself too engulfed in the fight, the Golems are going to need your Lightning to hold up against the Yeti Ice Magic." Karl added.

Thor nodded and stomped the ground in annoyance, but he understood the order.

"Alright, I'm off. Rae, I will attack as soon as the Golems appear."

Karl rushed to get in position, so their ambush could be sprung before Hawk made it back, while Rae vanished into the woods after grabbing Dana instead of Lotus.

He activated [Terrorize] in advance, as it would spread to the Golems naturally, and then settled in behind a large bush, where his arrows would be fired without exposing his location.

The first grunt of warning marked the appearance of the Golems, and the entire patrol turned their backs on Karl, who began firing as fast as super humanly possible.

Three arrows were in the air at the same time, whistling toward their targets, and all charged with [Chain Lightning], while the Spider Golems leapt into combat with Stone Golems on their backs.

Commander Rank strength was enough that the burden hardly slowed them down, and the move put all four Golems in close combat just as Karl's first wave of arrows hit.

Lightning Arced through the Yeti Clan, but missed the Frost Giant, who had been just a bit too far forward of the main group.

But it had better danger sense than the others, and when they had turned right, it had turned left, allowing it to see Karl's arrows flying, and guess where he was hiding.

The next three gave away his position for certain, but wounded three more Yetis while keeping the others slowed.

That was good enough, and Karl whistled, calling Thor like he would an overgrown pup.

The Cerro began charging across the field, needing time to cover the hundreds of metres, but overhead, Hawk was faster.

A barrage of fireballs rained down on the Yeti Clan, ignoring the Frost Giant that was headed for Karl.

One on one, he was confident that he could win that fight, so destroying the frost armour and eliminating the Ice Bolts of the Yetis were more important priorities.

Remi brought up a [Blizzard] killing visibility, so the enemy wouldn't know that Thor was coming, and to confuse them as to why they were taking damage. Using the enemy's own tricks against them seemed like the best tactic to the Spirit Snake, even if it did annoy Hawk, who thought that the ten metres off the ground that it extended was much too close to where he was flying.

[Couldn't you teach her to cast Firestorm instead of Blizzard?] Hawk complained.

[Sure, as soon as we see it, I will have her work on learning it. Just be glad that Lotus isn't using her staff of Water Vortex.]

Karl spoke too soon. Three large water funnels, filled with ice shards from attacks and the blizzard, had appeared on the battlefield, making Hawk shriek in rage.

She was doing it just to mess with him, Hawk was absolutely certain. It was only ten Commanders, they could handle that without all this excess water magic.

[And teach the Lotus Priestess how to use Lightning.] Hawk added.

She was a cleric, not a shaman. The chances that she would be able to learn an elemental attack spell on her own were pretty slim. Maybe she could learn the Nature Golems. Those seemed like the sort of thing that a Green Dragon Priestess might be able to learn.

But once the water vortex spell was active, Lotus had begun to focus on creating binding vines to slow the Yetis, while Tessa cast attack buffs and healed the Golems of the damage they took between Thor's activations of the Refreshing Lightning barrier.

As the Frost Giant approached, Karl switched from arrows to his new Maul, and charged five layers of [Flame Body] on it, ready to swat the enemy leader into oblivion.

The Giant paused when he sensed the power of the weapon, and the Commander Rank Elite in the trees, but only long enough to switch weapons from the large club he was carrying to two smaller swords.

That would be a problem for Karl, as he still needed to actually land a hit on the beast, but Remi was ready with the assist.

Her Chain Lightning caught the Giant unaware, as it was only watching Karl for signs of a skill activation. That slowed it for a split second as the Maul streaked toward its target.

The giant crossed its blades, stopping the upward swing of the maul towards its tender bits, but Karl simply shoved forward with the strike.

It wasn't enough to cause any sort of damage with the weapon itself, but the skills activated on contact.

The Giant saw the opening and its blades flashed, striking the barriers over both of Karl's arms as the maul made contact with the Frost Giant's lower stomach.

Both combatants were knocked to the ground, and Karl was bleeding heavily from his left arm, where the second blow had landed after the barrier was weakened.

He brought [Refreshing Lightning] back up as Remi used [Healing Splash] to close his wound, and the Giant got to its feet, swatting out the smouldering wound in its chest with a handful of snow.

Now they were both more wary as they circled each other, buying time for reinforcements to reach their position.

The battle was getting brutal behind them, as the Yeti Clan realized just how flammable they could be against the targeted vengeance of Hawk's flames.

Karl sidestepped a strike and smashed the maul into the Frost Giant's right hand, sending [Chain Lightning] coursing through its body, which caused it to drop one blade.

The other was quickly discarded, and the Giant went in for the crushing blows, intending to grab Karl and simply rip him into pieces.

But [Flaming Body] came to the rescue, coating Karl in fire as the Giant grabbed his chest. It instinctively flinched, and the Maul smashed into its face, charged with fire.

Bones splintered, and the giant dropped dead, before vanishing into Remi's swamp.

There was a small pile of items left where its body was, unable to be transferred, but Karl was more interested in the actual fight.

Chapter 278 Yeti Uniforms

Lotus was using a [Refresh] spell on Thor to keep his endurance up, while Thor did his best to keep the [Refreshing Lightning] up, and the Golems tore apart the Yeti Clan to the accompaniment of dozens of Magic Missiles.

Both Dana and Tori were using them, while Ophelia kept the Yetis away from the mages.

They were winning, and half the Clan was already down, while the rest bled out onto the snow as they fought. Against [Lacerate] they were not going to win a battle of attrition without healers.

One last volley of arrows ended the already wounded Yeti Clan, and Karl quickly gathered the Frost Giant's belongings for Tessa to identify.

"Is everyone alright?" He asked as he ran over to the main fight.

"We will be in a minute. Bear is still recovering from a couple of wounds, as is Thor. Rae should be good, but everyone burned a lot of mana and energy." Tessa replied.

Remi's blizzard was slowly covering the battlefield as Karl searched the bodies for magical items to toss into his trusty loot bag. The yeti corpses all had magical weapons, but no other items on them other than the cloaks that they were using to disguise themselves as Giants.

That was good enough for Karl, as ten more weapons gave them a chance to either switch, or to turn them in later for credits. The soldiers on the line would appreciate the weapons upgrades, and goodwill from your reinforcements could never be a bad thing.

Back in middle school, when he was the last one who hadn't gone through puberty, Karl had one huge friend who looked out for him when he had time. Karl hadn't thought about Big John for a while, likely not since becoming an Elite, but him and John used to study together all the time, and John kept the bullying from getting out of hand when the teachers turned a blind eye.

John hadn't been on the train, so he was likely in the mines right now, slaving away for the pittance they made at the bottom of the hole.

The others quickly sorted through the weapons with growing disappointment.

"It looks like these are uniformly made, perhaps by a mass blessing by a Frost Giant Shaman. They're all identical, and though the [Biting Edge] enchantment is strong Ice Magic, it doesn't really grant any benefit other than the ability to cut like a Commander Rank weapon." Tessa explained.

"Well, I think that will be good enough for the front-line troops. We can drop by and give them the loot tomorrow if we have time. But right now, we need to get ourselves into shelter before we can't see what we're doing at all. Hawk, lead the way." Karl replied.

[There is a good spot not far from here, a small cave, but big enough for everyone to hide inside.] Hawk decided, not wanting to be stuck outside all night again, in case another cold front came through.

They jogged through the snow-covered hills with a blizzard raging around them, hiding their tracks from anything that might want to follow them and dispersing their scent trail. In this battlefield, it was quickly becoming their best ally, and a great safeguard against surprise attacks.

The fact that there was no surviving local monster population helped as well. Everything that lived here had run away, and the Frost Giant Army could only send so many troops to cover an entire border.

The cave turned out to be much larger than Hawk had thought it was. The front area was small, but behind it, a narrow tunnel led to a much larger room.

Out of an abundance of caution, and because they had fallen for that trap once before, the team checked all the walls to ensure that none of them were fake before settling in for the night.

With the front entrance blocked by silk and snow, and then a hanging cloth in the narrow passage to the second chamber, they were able to keep the rear chamber quite comfortably warm without having to turn the flaming blade up too high.

Tori smiled as she saw the two clerics setting up to make dinner. "You know, I could get used to this. But I suspect that when we get back to an operating base, I will be reassigned either to my old team or to a new one, depending on where they were sent."

Lotus nodded as she created spices for the stew.

"Most likely. They are so short on people that they're not going to want to let us wander around with an extra Ascended Rank mage, especially not one that is specialized in combat.

I'm not sure if that's better or worse than staying with us, though. We're guaranteed to be in danger just about every single day, so being reassigned to a different group, who is sent to deal with less powerful threats, might be safer." Lotus suggested.

"Safer than being with Thor, Hawk and Rae? That's like having three extra Commanders in your group. It might not be perfect, but it's pretty close to it. Even outnumbered two to one by an all Commander team, we still weren't in mortal danger, and we only took minor injuries."

She had a point. A Commander Rank beast who recovered stamina at an abnormal rate was a cheat code when it came to keeping a barrier active over the whole group.

After a half hour, Remi let the blizzard fade, leaving them snowed in and secure inside their cave. There was no artillery on this section of the front, and the change from the deafening barrage made it feel like they were somehow all alone in the world as they rested in their shared hammocks that night.

Rae took watch, but she was inside the cave, not interested in going outside, as they were going to have to scout in the morning anyhow, and nothing should be able to find them here overnight.

Besides, even if the Frost Giants did somehow find their cave, they wouldn't fit through the entrance, and definitely wouldn't fit through the tunnel to the second room. She could just call her Spider Golems to attack anything that disturbed their door.

But nothing did, until the morning radio reports started to come in.

The main line that they had left behind suffered massive casualties the previous night, but repelled a Frost Giant offensive without losing ground. Thousands of the Frost Giants had been killed after the Shamanistic weather spell had passed overhead, thanks to the ingenuity of the General in charge of the zone. He had the whole front line turned into a minefield with Fire Element magical resources as projectiles.

The cost was high, but they were hoping to recover many of the crystals and metals from the bodies to be reused in another round of manufacturing, and the explosives had proven to be deadly to even Ascended Rank Giants.

That left the Commanders and one Royal Rank Frost Giant for the Elites and the Holy magic enhanced infantry to deal with. It hadn't been easy, but it had been possible, and the General closest to Karl's cave was reporting that the other position was intact and unmoved.

Hawk was sent to scout while the humans ate, and quickly started making reports of enemy movements. Most of them didn't sound like they were intact units, the numbers were all wonky. Three here, seven there, and even some solo Giants were reported to be moving along the border toward what Hawk said was a city far on the horizon, visible only when he flew high enough.

That would put it at least a hundred kilometres away, directly into the Frost Giant Nation.

That wasn't a troop movement that they were going to be able to stop, but they could deal with anything that came too close to them today, with the plan to rejoin the main line for the evening and turn over whatever loot they had found.

The soldiers were going to need it, as the Frost Giants wouldn't leave anything behind after a raid.

[Hawk, you can take out lone stragglers and small wounded packs if they can't attack back. It will make the others think that there are more groups in the area than there are, and it will help keep them away from the lines.] Karl instructed.

[Got it. Free rein to kill the Evil Ice Giants. Today is going to be a good day.]

Chapter 279 Hawk Gets The Stragglers

"What does Hawk say?" Lotus asked as they prepared to move out.

"He says no easy fights today, he's going to take care of the lone stragglers, the severely injured and the trainees, but there are plenty of Frost Giants retreating from yesterday's battle toward one of their cities that will be crossing our path.

As long as the main force doesn't pull back to rescue them, we should be fine to hunt at will. Hawk will keep an eye on them for us, but the chances are they will never know that there is an issue until it's all over." Karl explained.

Remi's voice whispered in Karl's mind, as if she was trying to hide it from the other beasts.

[We should keep going into Frost Giant land. I can feel an incredibly strong shaman energy there, and I want it.]

[Wouldn't that be a Frost Giant Shaman? What good would a living Giant do you?] Karl asked, considering the fact that the Shaman in question might well be an Overlord Rank monster.

[No, not a person, a thing. I can feel it.] She insisted.

[Well, we will see what we can do, but if it's days away, that's too far for us to leave our area.]

Remi pouted as she realized that they wouldn't be taking a multiple day detour to go find her the thing she could sense, but she didn't stop working, and kept her blizzard active and low enough not to damage the Ascended Rank or stronger Frost Giants they were hunting.

If they weren't hurt, they would think it was just a snow storm, or at least that was the theory.

The first target they found was a lone Commander, lightly injured. Unfortunately for the Giant, it never even realized that Rae and her Golems were stalking it before it was dead.

Then came an injured trio, who Karl marked with an arrow before the Spider Golems got to them.

In fact, for most of the morning, it was the Karl and Rae show, and everyone else was just out for a walk in the snow. Nothing was living long enough to have a proper fight.

But, it was valuable work. They were eliminating the survivors of the failed attack before they could get to safety or heal themselves and rejoin the fight.

Around lunch, Hawk came back to take a break while the Giants who had noticed him attacking stragglers either calmed down or gave up on searching for him. They had been chasing him for hours, but the bird had been hiding among the trees to ambush the weak and then racing away.

At this point, the Giants likely hated Hawk just as much as he despised them, and it felt like an oddly balanced situation as the exhausted bird took a short nap in his space while he recovered his mana and strength with a good meal and some sleep.

In the middle of the afternoon, after taking a few detours to pick up loot that Hawk's targets had left behind, they were headed back for the nearest main line, and Thor was again loaded up with equipment, while Karl's loot bag held the good bits.

There were a surprising number of nearly identical weapons, which they hadn't seen during their previous days at the other front, though these Giants had been coming from that direction. The change and uniformity of the gear implied that they had been keeping them in reserve for the main line force, to increase their attack capabilities.

It was a solid tactic, but they had failed to create a breach.

[Regional Command, this is team 95988, we are headed to your location for a supply drop this evening. Look for the Lightning Cerro as our marker.] Karl broadcast to their allies.

Remi would drop the blizzard once they were close to visual range of the camp, so they didn't get themselves bombarded, and then they would walk in from the same area where they took out the artillery team the previous night.

As they got close to the ridgeline where they had eliminated the artillery team, Karl spotted a five-man team of Elites searching the area.

[Remi, you can end the blizzard. We've found the first scouts.] He instructed.

As the snow faded, they continued their jogging pace, headed straight for the scout team. Tessa raised a hand from Thor's back to let them know they were friendly, while Rae remained a bit behind with Dana on her back.

The Bloodbath Spider had switched riders for the day so that the Golems could all be coming from one direction, even though that meant leaving her pocket healer behind. She wasn't big enough to carry them both, or rather she couldn't carry both comfortably due to her body shape, though she was large enough for them both to fit, so she had chosen to only take one rider at a time.

"Identity?" The scout team asked as they approached.

"Commander Karl with team 95988."

The scout smiled and gestured to the wreckage of the battle. "We've been finding signs of your work all over the region today. Dead Giants left everywhere, and even a large group of Yetis that looked like they died last night. Have you been that busy, or is there another team out here?"

Karl shrugged. "We've been busy, but I can't say for certain that there wasn't another team out here. I didn't know that you were here until just a minute ago."

The scouts finished taking notes on the destruction, then turned back to Karl. "I hear that you're coming back to the base for the evening. Can I ask what you're short on, so we can get it ready for you?"

Karl shook his head. "We're short on storage space. We loot the Giants so that they can't reuse the equipment of the dead, and we've got numerous weapons and magical armour with us. I just need to drop it off for credit, and we will be on our way again."

"Weapons? We've come across a few, but most of what the Frost Giants carry is just junk strengthened with their magic when it's time to fight." The scout replied.

"We found a number of matching enchanted blades today. Here, check that out. Simple, but effective." Karl explained.

The scout examined the weapon with great interest. It was a large sword for a human, a short sword for a Frost Giant, but surprisingly light, and Karl was right, the enchantment was basic, just enough to make it cut as if it were a Commander Rank weapon.

It was the sort of thing that the army would issue to line soldiers if they had the ability to make them in large numbers.

"How many of these did you recover? Because we could use these for the warriors of the scout teams." The soldier asked, eager intensity growing in his eyes as he imagined the possibilities.

Karl turned to Lotus, who was sitting closest to the bags on Thor's back.

"Um, about thirty, I guess? There's a bunch of other gear in here, and I lost count." The Nature Priestess apologized.

Identical items normally wouldn't equip for the same person, so keeping a spare set of Giant Strength Gloves or wearing two sets, one inside the other, simply didn't work. That had led to them loading a lot of gear into the storage bags on Thor's back now that they all had a copy of what the Giants had to offer.

At least the parts of it that they could use. Dana was somewhat disappointed to learn that she couldn't use the Ring of Giant Strength.

The Giants also weren't very creative with their gear, and it was just the same thing in different appearances on every Frost Giant that happened to have a magical item. If they were trying to improve their own gear, Karl would have felt like he got scammed. However, as they could keep trading it in until every Elite they met had Frost Giant gear on, it was a great money making opportunity for them.

The scout shook his head in dismay. "You lot are monsters. We haven't even killed thirty Commanders this week, and here you are bringing us back thirty Commander Rank swords for the day."

Lotus giggled. "Technically, a bunch of these came from last night, when we came here to avoid that cold front that moved through the other main line. We weren't about to get caught out in that, so we came here and took care of that artillery group by special request right before dark."

The scout made notes, and then gestured toward the south. "We should get moving if you want to get your gear sorted in time to pick a camping spot outside the main line tonight. You know how it is, if you're there when the attack starts, you tend to get stuck on the main line."

Chapter 280 Loot Drop

The camp's patrols let them through without questions when they saw the scout team leading Karl's white cloaked menagerie toward the base. The first thought of everyone that they passed was that this was an extreme Church Guard unit, thanks to their bright white outer layer, which they had pilfered from the Frost Giants to blend in with the snow.

But once they saw who was underneath, they were simply confused. Those didn't look like church guards, and the rest of their armour wasn't covered in white. Nor did they have any sort of church insignia on them, except for the two Clerics, one in green and one in red, under their white cloaks.

Karl shouldered the bags of loot and let Thor take a break in his space, in case they encountered a fight on their way to their sleeping spot tonight. The bags were nearly dragging on the ground as they hung from Karl's shoulders, a sign that they might have gone a bit overboard with their loot hoarding. The fact he had to turn sideways to get between some of the tents was another solid hint, but nobody was too worried about it, as long as the contents of those bags were for them.

To the soldiers, it looked like they had gotten an unexpected supply run. They had no way of knowing that it was just a bunch of hoarders assembled into an Elite team.

The General, a Royal Rank warrior with a large shield strapped to his back and an axe at his hip, strolled out of his tent to meet them, then did a double take as he saw the bags on Karl's shoulders.

Karl greeted the steel-eyed warrior. "General, my apologies for the strange appearance. We had the Lightning Cerro carrying the loot, but he wouldn't easily fit through the camp."

"Not a problem at all. The scouts informed us that you had collected some gear from the Giants that we should be aware of, but we didn't expect that it would be so much." He replied with a smile that said he had just made a new friend in Karl.

Anyone who brought that much loot back for his soldiers without being asked, and while fighting their way through the enemy lines, had to be at least a half decent person, in his mind.

"Yes, check these out." Karl replied, before removing all the identical swords from the bag.

Not identical in appearance, that actually varied wildly between weapons, but the enchantments on them were all exactly the same.

It only took a second for the General to realize that as well.

"Interesting. We have known for a while that the Giants aren't big on variety, but I think you might have just found proof that they're using a very limited and precise magical tool to do all their enchanting. It may only be capable of a few different abilities, and that is why we see all the frost giants with rings and bracelets of Giant Strength, and then the rest of their gear is usually only magical because it is made of magical beast hides." The General pondered.

"Not only that, but it's also proof that they can make a lot of it. We have thirty identical weapons taken from the survivors of one assault, all Commander Rank swords. That will be useful for your troops, but it suggests that you might soon be facing them from the other side as well.

Not all of these were taken from Commander Rank enemies, some of them were on the higher side of Ascended." Karl explained.

"That's not good at all. The reason Ascended Elites can so easily go two on one against a Frost Giant of the same rank is because it can't quickly get through their barriers. But weapons like this wouldn't have the same problem.

How did you deal with it? I see that your mage is still Ascended." The General replied.

"The Commander Rank Lightning Cerro has the ability to spread his barrier to everyone in the group. Between that and the Circle of Protection, we don't have too many issues."

The General nodded. "You have a solid group. I'm not certain what we are going to do about large numbers of those swords showing up in the next charge, but we will be able to make good use of the ones you brought us."

As you have likely already noticed, despite your status as a student, Commander rank gear is hard to find. There might be a piece or two at every depot, but that's about it. When we're fighting against dozens of Commander Rank Frost Giants at a time, every weapon counts.

The mages can bring up barriers for us, and the Priests can issue blessings, but nothing truly replaces a good weapon."

Karl smiled as he gestured to the bag. "Those aren't the only weapons in there, it was just noteworthy that they were all identical. There are a number of Giant Strength items in there as well, and some Commander Rank and Ascended Rank armour."

We grabbed everything that looked decent and wasn't destroyed in battle.

Now, on to the important parts that I couldn't put in a radio broadcast. The survivors of the battle at the other front line are headed for a Frost Giant city off in that direction, but the wave of intense Ice Magic that attacked the other line came from further that way, deep within their borders.

It wasn't cast close to the border, we were already in their territory when we felt it coming on the horizon."

The General hummed as he considered the new information.

"I think I might know where it is coming from. There is a Crystal Mountain, a massive block of pure ice, that keeps their nation frozen, right at the centre of the Frost Giants' territory."

The area it could keep cold was always the limits of their borders, but now, I have reason to believe they found a way to access and enhance it.

That's not official, by the way, just this Elite's thoughts on the matter. But I've been in combat for ten straight years now, and I've seen some things.

The problem is that we don't have any more information about it than some old drone footage and a team who saw it once a few years ago. Until someone actually goes there, we can't know for certain, but it would be suicidal to ask anyone to actually do it, and we can't spare the Elites who would have a chance of survival."

Karl chuckled. "Well, I know it's not going to be me unless I'm taking your army with me."

The General laughed. "It would have to be an Overlord. That's the only combat force we have that could logically survive both the intense cold, and the powerful Frost Giants who patrol the region around their sacred mountain.

Notice that you haven't seen any of their Monarch Rank Giants? Or even any of their Royal Rank Giants on this front? They're all still guarding the holy sites, according to military intelligence. So, we deal with the soldiers, while their Generals stand back from the fight."

The General gave a rueful chuckle, as his rank hadn't saved him from a front-line posting. They needed the fighters, and he was a soldier through and through.

"I know it's outside our deployed area, but plans change in the field, so if there is somewhere that you need us to be, we can render some aid tomorrow before anyone complains that we're out of position." Karl suggested.

The General gestured back into his tent. "There are some spots, but don't worry about your position, I will have your status updated to roaming forward scouts, so you can be anywhere along the border that suits you.

If you're going to collect weapons like this every day, I don't think they would even care where you got them from, we need them that badly. Especially Commander Rank blades and Giant Strength rings. Those can be used by almost every warrior class."

Then he led them inside and stepped to the far side of a table with a collection of stones set on top of the map.

"I know it looks sketchy, but it's the easiest way to update troop movements, and if there is a chance that the camp will be overrun, the first thing we do is knock it over. It means we have to restart our map placements later, but it also means that the enemy won't be able to use the map to track our troops." He explained.

Karl nodded. "We're familiar with the trick. And the fact that most officers don't put all the assets on the map. We got a rather shocking wake-up call when we landed here and saw the discrepancy."

The General smiled sadly. "See, that's an executive level issue. They always think we're overstating the situation in the field. Perhaps it's hard to hear with their heads that far up their arse."