

Beast Master 281

Chapter 281 Hunt For the Relic

The General tapped a spot on the map, further from Golden Dragon Nation territory, and almost directly in front of this offensive line.

"That is the target I would like for you to inspect. It's too far to move the main line, as being that far forward would let them sneak behind us. But I think there is something there. A relic, or some other powerful magic.

The Giants keep moving past that point, and our scouts suspect that they are gaining some benefit from it, but they haven't been able to get close enough to verify. We're not the priority line, just the B team Elites with a bit of artillery on a quiet mountain pass, so we don't have Commanders to spare for scouting teams." He explained.

Tessa smirked as she got some sort of Divine Inspiration that made her eyes glow red.

"Well, for a day at least, you've got us. We've only got one proper Commander with us, but we've got three Commander Rank beasts as well, and that makes the fights a bit more even." She announced.

"If the War Dragon thinks it's a good idea, then we really have to go see what they're hiding out there. For all we know, it could be a massive weapons bunker. Or it could be a simple shrine to some Ice Goddess, but either way, we will take a look for you in the morning and report back." Karl agreed.

"I appreciate it. Have you picked a spot near camp? I know better than to ask you if you need a tent." The General chuckled.

"Yeah, the big trees to your east will do for the evening. We usually set up in one of the trees." Karl explained.

"Why in the trees?" The General asked.

[Because I am the thing that goes bump in the night.] Rae answered in Karl's mind.

[To engulf the silly bird in Blizzard.] Remi added.

[For better... you brat, I knew you were making the air evil on purpose.] Hawk complained.

Karl smiled as he listened to their answers. "Many reasons, but mostly it's more comfortable to be there than on the ground, and there are fewer tree climbing enemies than walking ones."

The General nodded in agreement. He might not know a technique to make sleeping in a tree comfortable, but if Karl did, that was fine by him. The Elites never wanted to stay in camp unless they were off for supplies or out of supplies, so he wasn't going to get offended that they wanted to sleep nearby.

"Alright, happy hunting, and I will expect your reports tomorrow when you leave the location." The General insisted, dismissing them to get back to work.

Rae made them a nice fort in the trees, while Hawk kept a close eye on Remi, to ensure she wasn't sneakily casting a minor blizzard spell to keep the blowing snow active around their camp. Blizzard snake was definitely untrustworthy, she must have been learning bad habits from the Frost Giants.

The worst part was, he couldn't even throw things at her because she was just a stupid snake, and she would probably eat it. If he made her sick, Karl would be mad.

The next morning, they packed up camp, leaving the double walled fort which had served them well for the evening, and began to make their way toward the spot that the General had marked on the map.

According to Hawk's scouting, it was hidden within a valley full of blowing snow, where he couldn't see the ground from above, and he wasn't going to fly down into it, in case the winds were strong enough to keep him from flying.

He was powerful, but his feathers were rather delicate, and once they were pushed out of place by extreme winds in the wrong direction, he would be forced to land.

"Hawk says that the snow is blowing too hard to see down in to the valley, so we are essentially going in blind. I will have to call him in or have him sit on someone's pack when we enter, as the high winds will cause issues with flight.

Actually, we might have to tie Dana and Lotus to Thor and Rae, or they might blow away as well." Karl joked.

Well, it was intended to be a joke, but when they got to the edge of the valley and felt the raging winds, it started to sound like a more practical idea.

They waited in the trees near the ridge line while they tried to make a decision, and watched as a group of Frost Giants left the area, headed to the other front.

Then, a half hour later, another group went the same way.

"Hey, don't you think there is something odd about those Giants?" Lotus asked as she watched the second group.

Karl inspected them more closely. "One Commander, Nine Ascended. Standard group formation, the usual assortment of weapons, blades with a few axes."

Lotus shook her head. "No, that's not it, let's wait here for another group. Memorize this group as well as you can, and I think it will make sense."

Karl did, and then they waited half an hour for another group to come out.

"One Commander, nine Ascended, an assortment of weapons. The same assortment of weapons. Same outfits as well. We must have never noticed because the groups mix later, but those groups are identical." Karl gasped.

"Exactly. That's why we were getting so many of the same swords. Not because there's some obsessive Frost Giant blacksmith, but because the groups are being cloned."

Tessa's eyes glowed red again, and Karl smiled at the War Cleric. "We're going down soon, we won't let your Goddess down. The group has just gone, so we should be alright to head in and start searching now. If they could spit out a group every few minutes, the border would have been long since overrun."

Karl led the group into the blowing snow, down the ridge and into the bottom of the valley. They could only see a few metres in front of themselves, so unless they stumbled across a group accidentally, nothing would be hunting them.

The lack of visibility, even with thermal vision, made it seem like an impossible task, but once they were close to the valley floor, the storm ended, raging above their heads and revealing an entire valley full of Frost Giants.

There were hundreds of them in the area, standing around a pulsing blue pillar of crystal.

[Yes! I need the good thing. Put that shiny stone in my swamp.] Remi insisted.

[First we need to get there, and get rid of the Giants.] Karl laughed.

The groups here were the same as the last two they had watched leave. Nine Ascended for every Commander, and now that Karl could see them side by side, identical faces on the Commanders, but with different patterns painted to obscure their features.

How that had escaped everyone was a mystery, but nobody really tried to memorize Frost Giant faces.

"Oh look, a welcoming party." Tori sighed as the Frost Giants began to turn toward the interlopers.

Tessa nodded. "Well, let's not let them down. If anyone has a hidden secret skill, now would be the time to show it off."

Karl quickly checked his points. 21 left. He had a variety of options available from his skill tree, he just had to make a choice.

[Balance Skills]

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

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

[Tier 2 Skills]

10 Points [Brutality] increases the size and strength of the target beast by 10 percent per Rank (40 percent for Commander)

10 Points [Barrier] Creates a barrier around the Beast Master or selected target at the Beast Master's current Rank.

10 Points [Bestial Regeneration] Greatly increases the target's healing factor.

10 Points [Refresh] Eliminates fatigue for 10 minutes per Rank. (40 minutes at Commander)

[Tier 3 Skills] [Will become passively activate on Beast Master and all active Beasts]

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

20 Points [Sharpness] Slashing, Stabbing and Disintegration type abilities increase in damage by 10 percent per Rank. (40 percent at Commander)

20 Points [Crushing Blows] Blunt impact skills increase in damage by 10 percent per Rank. (Effective on damage caused by Shatter). (40 percent at Commander)

Karl looked at the skills for a moment, and then the abundance of targets in front of them. There were definitely a few options there which would work out well for him today.

Chapter 282 Snowed In Valley

"Sorry, Thor. The next one will be for you." Karl apologized as he made his choice.

20 Points [Sharpness] Slashing, Stabbing and Disintegration type abilities increase in damage by 10 percent per Rank. (40 percent at Commander)

[Sharpness learned.]

[Rend] and [Shred] were both slashing type skills, as was [Lacerate]. Unfortunately, [Chain Lightning] was not a disintegration ability, but he would take what he could get.

Once Haste and Terrorize were activated on everyone, and the Spider Golems were summoned, they were ready to face the Frost Giant charge.

"Back into the snow storm." Karl ordered, intending to limit the enemy's line of sight.

Lotus yelled back. "No, don't. They're using their magic to keep it active, and it will deal damage now that they know there are enemies here."

So, they were trapped under the storm, unless they could march up out of the valley through hundreds of metres of Commander Rank [Blizzard] and blinding snow while under attack.

The Frost Giants were charging, so Karl strapped his large sword to his pack for the bonus energy steal, then sent out a flurry of arrows charged with [Chain Lightning] to slow them down.

With the benefits of [Sharpness] and [Terrorize] the arrows were punching holes clean through the Ascended Rank Giants when they hit bare flesh, and the lightning was doing its job, scorching flesh and slowing their movements to give the Spider Golems time to shine.

The two bone-white wooden constructs launched themselves into the Frost Giant ranks, and true to Rae's name, a rain of blood and body parts was the result.

With nearly twice the damage compared to a regular Commander Rank Golem that had the [Durable Constructs] bonus, and forty percent increased speed, they were eight legged whirlwinds of death through the Ascended Rank targets.

The Mages unleashed their spells on the Commanders, quickly grasping what the Spider Golems were after. They were eliminating the overwhelming numbers, while leaving everyone else to deal with the stronger targets.

Karl led the group forward, away from the storm, so they weren't ambushed from behind out of the snow, and turned his arrows on the larger Frost Giants.

Thor's Circle of Protection flared around them as the ice shard attacks came back in return. Their lightning barriers were holding, and while the Lightning Cerro was at the front, he wasn't actively fighting, he was just focusing on maintaining their defences while the Golems did all the close combat work.

"It's a good thing that you don't need arrows." Tori panted as she created more Magic Missile orbs.

The refreshing abilities of Thor helped, but she was burning mana quickly to keep up her damage rate against the Giants one Rank higher than she was.

"Cut back the individual power of your spells, we're going to be at this a while, and we can't have you exhausted." Karl reminded her.

Dana had already done that, and was relying on multiple hits to cause serious injuries, instead of putting extra effort into individual spells.

Hawk was on Thor's back, using [Rend] in wide arcs to damage anything that got near them. It wasn't Royal Rank, but it was the easiest spell on his energy, and he could keep these attacks up all day. They still cut deep into the Frost Giants, and for a moment, he envied Rae's Lacerate ability.

If Rend made them bleed like that, it would be so much better.

Rae was staying close to the group, targeting Giants who made it past the first line of defenders, or who were giving Dana's Stone Golems trouble, and the ground everywhere around them was becoming soaked in cold blue Frost Giant blood as Karl slowly pushed the group forward toward the massive crystal.

Rae's [Spear] spell, gained from the Naga Swamp, wasn't as devastating as some of her other abilities, but the small spikes peppered the Frost Giants and left dozens of heavily bleeding wounds. The combination with Lacerate was proving to be quite impressive.

Karl could see that there was a spell active at the base of the crystal, and the goal was to make it stop. It had to be the spell that was summoning more Frost Giants, and while it was slowly fading as their numbers decreased, they couldn't afford to retreat until it was gone.

Ophelia pointed to a spot to their right, and Karl adjusted the group's movement to go see what it was.

The Werebear berserker ducked down and pulled a book from the corpse of a Frost Giant woman that didn't match the clones, before tossing the tome to Karl. It looked like a spellbook of some sort, not a skill book, but it might be useful to Remi if the dead Giant was a Shaman.

If not, he would just hold on to it for their Berserker Bear.

Rae hissed in pleasure as she summoned a fresh group of Spider Golems, which appeared larger than Karl remembered them.

"Did she just upgrade her Golems?" Lotus asked.

"I think so. The same skill that allowed Hawk to improve Fire Body is active on everyone." Karl called back as he continued to fire arrows. His arms were getting sore, even with the refreshing effect, and he was mentally exhausted from the [Chain Lightning] which he was only using now when there was a cluster of targets.

An arrow caught an unfortunate Ascended Rank Frost Giant in the face, then hit the inside of his helmet, throwing the body backward into a Commander, who glared at Karl with pure murder in its eyes.

Tessa was laughing, and glowing with red light as she cast some sort of area buff on everyone. This was the sort of War that her patron deity craved. Pure controlled violence, crushing an enemy position with absolute, overwhelming power.

Every Dragon Priestess knew the ways of the dragon species. Might makes right.

They all had their own ways of doing things, though the Dragons made at least some effort to work together and keep society functioning. But when it came down to conflict, the strongest were the only ones with the right to speak.

Tessa's spell completed, and the Golems, as well as Karl's arrows, were coated in a layer of red energy that caused the Frost Giants to boil and explode after being injured. Karl had no idea what to call that Divine Blessing, but it was the most wonderful thing he could think of at this moment, as the entire valley of Frost Giants was headed their way.

Karl switched to simply coating his arrows with fire from [Flaming Body] and letting them loose into the charging Giants. With Tessa's Blessing active, the wounds began to boil, and even a hit to the leg would be fatal.

They were getting closer to the spell on the ground, and the ring of Frost Giants, who were focusing all their attention on it.

[There's a weird little crystal in the middle of the circle.] Remi noticed once they were ten metres away, with a wall of Commander Rank Giants between them and the spell.

[How lucky are you feeling?] Karl asked the Spirit Snake.

[Pretty lucky. You're totally going to get me that big stone after we finish.] She replied.

[Then grab this next Giant by the ankle, and I will send you to the circle to recover the little crystal. Once you have it, return directly to your space before they mince you into sushi rolls.] Karl instructed.

Karl switched to his maul, and Remi moved to his leg, prepared to strike when he got close.

Karl leapt into melee combat and kicked his leg forward, tossing Remi onto his target giant, who raised a shield to block the strike of the oversized hammer, but was blown backward by five layers of [Flaming Body] on the blunt weapon.

He flew right over the spell circle, even over the casters, who ducked to avoid a collision. As she passed over, Remi dropped from his body and swallowed the strange object whole before returning to her space and spitting it out.

The storm overhead instantly stopped, leaving the battlefield in an eerie silence.

"I don't think we should have done that." Ophelia muttered as the huge blue stone in the middle of the valley began to pulse more violently, making the ground shake.

"I think you're right. Everyone, get on a ride, we're leaving." Karl ordered, grabbing Dana as he ran past the mage. Lotus climbed on Rae, while the Stone Golems grabbed Tori and Tessa.

Thor tried not to laugh as he chased everyone out of the valley. This was a great game. They ran in, slapped the Frost Giants in the face, and now they ran away before they got slapped back.

Hawk fired back into the Giants chasing them, while the Spider Golems did their best to stop the tide and keep them in the valley. Now that the storm was gone, the bird took to the air, bombarding the enemy with a combination of Rend and fireballs.

[Run faster, that stone is starting to crack.] He warned, when the group was only two thirds of the way up the valley ridge.

The Giants had fallen well behind them, thanks to the defensive efforts of the Spider Golems, but Hawk was right, that glowing stone was making the snow glow bright blue with the intensity of the mana surges it was experiencing.

Remi did her best to hide her despair. That was supposed to be her prize, but now it was going to blow up, and she was left with just a cute little crystal statue of a fat lady. At least it had strong Shaman Magic on it, so she could keep it in her swamp and bask in the power.

Chapter 283 Close Call

A blast of Ice Magic washed over them, shattering Thor's [Refreshing Lightning] and dealing slamming into those caught in its path. Rae summoned her Spider Golems closer to protect Ophelia and Karl, only to watch the outer layers of them being shredded by the violent magic before she made it over the ridge and behind a huge boulder to hide.

The Stone Golems were shattered to dust, and the barriers over everyone shattered as Thor was hurled through the air, leaving a trail of damaged scales before he chose to return to his space.

Karl felt his bones creak and vainly clutched at Dana as the magic sent him flying after tearing through the Spider Golem, but it didn't feel like anything broke. He would be sore later, but his armour held. He lost his grip on Dana, but hopefully, she would be alright with both him and the Golem as a shield against the initial blast.

When the blast had spread from the stone, Hawk had returned to hide in his space, avoiding any injury, but the Frost Giants weren't so lucky. Most of them were still gathered around the stone, trying to stabilize it when it had exploded.

The blast sent a bright blue mushroom cloud up into the sky, dwarfing any mountain range. That would be visible from a thousand kilometres away, all along the front lines, as well as in the Frost Giant nation.

"Check in, is everyone alright?" Karl called as he got back to his feet.

Thor made an unhappy noise from in his space, then brought the barrier back up over everyone, while the others all groaned in pain. The Refreshing Lightning, and Remi's Healing Splash, which she was throwing out at everyone now, were precisely what everyone needed, but it sounded like there were worse injuries than those two spells could easily deal with.

Lotus cast her area healing spell over the group, and Karl heard Tessa curse as she reset her own broken arm so it would heal properly, before going to help the mages, who were in even worse pain, despite the numbing effect of the healing spell.

Karl just lay in the snow for a few minutes, catching his breath as the healing spell took its course, and the pain from his joints began to fade.

Looking over, there was some blood on Ophelia's fur, but nothing major, as the Spider Golems had taken the worst of the blast. It was the spell casters who needed the most help, and the clerics were both busy with the task.

After fifteen minutes, everyone was back on their feet with a golden glow surrounding them as the clerics worked together to cast a spell to repair their armour. It was a form of nature magic called [Mend], quite useful if the gear wasn't completely destroyed. They hadn't had to use it before, but it was considered one of the basics for a wandering Nature Priestess or a War Priestess.

Especially a Red Dragon Priestess who worked with orphans. They needed all the mending spells they could get, so the children didn't destroy the few clothes they had.

"Excellent. Job done, no casualties. I say we go back to the Front Line and take a few days to rest and recover." Karl decided.

Lotus raised a weary hand. "I vote we do anything but that. Do you have any idea how many questions there will be about whatever that was? I've never seen an explosion like that, and everyone would have seen and felt that."

From a few metres away from Karl, Dana nodded. "She has a point. I say we radio in and tell them we're not dead, then hide in the hills somewhere for like two weeks."

She grabbed the radio from Karl's chest pocked and frowned. "It's smoking."

Karl doused it with snow, stopping the smoke, then flicked it off and on again. There were no lights, no sound on any channel, nothing.

"The radio is fried. Can someone get the emergency phone out of my pack?" Karl asked.

Dana unbuttoned the side pouch, and took out the small emergency phone.

Karl hit the button for a dial tone, and got nothing. No lights on that either, though it wasn't smoking.

"Emergency phone is dead as well." He sighed.

The barrier, combined with Lotus' area healing spell, had already repaired the damage to the group, but it couldn't fix their communications gear.

"Well, maybe if we go find a scout team, we can tell them that we're not dead? That should be enough to ensure that they don't make our families cry." Ophelia suggested.

Tori looked shocked, as if she had forgotten that was a possibility. If they were presumed dead, they would be added to the war casualty rolls, and their families would receive a death benefit from the government based on their last recorded Rank.

Since they were all young, or clerics, it would go to their parents, not a spouse, but that was still bad enough.

[Hawk, can you go find us a scout team?]

Hawk left his space and flew out in search of a scout team for them to meet up with, out of sight of the main line. That way they could hold the meeting, then disappear into the battlefield without anyone interfering.

That didn't take long, as there were dozens of scouts coming their way from all along the front line, even a few two-person teams running their way from the other portions of the front line. Only the ones closest to them would be likely to suspect that there was someone from the Elites here already, but they would all need to confirm what the situation was, and if you couldn't see it, the sight would be very concerning.

They weren't at the front lines, but they weren't that far from it, so the other lines wouldn't be able to tell that the line here hadn't just suffered a catastrophe.

Karl turned the group to the closest group of scouts, and saw that there were others running toward them. They were the first on the scene, so they might have more information than the others who hadn't reached the site yet.

"Commander, was your group close when that happened? Is everyone alright?" The leader of the first scout team they reached asked.

"Indeed we were. We were tasked to scout the crater valley, and it turned into an all-out battle with the Frost Giants. Somewhere along the way, a large glowing stone got destabilized, and its destruction was what everyone saw." Karl explained.

"Perfect. I will send a runner back to the line to report."

Karl gave him a confused look. "Just radio it in."

The scout shook his head. "The explosion knocked out every radio in the base. We had no communication when our team was dispatched. They should have some fixed soon, I heard something about blown fuses, but I don't have a working radio."

"Same here. Even my emergency phone is fried. We were still in the crater when the explosion happened." Karl explained.

"You're lucky to be alive. I will have the runner explain to the General that your team is fine. Where are you headed next?"

"Into the wilderness between front-line groups. I will come grab a new radio in a few days, or poach one off another scout group." Karl replied.

The scout smiled and nodded, then led his whole team back to the line. They were Elites, they knew what was up, and they weren't going to waste their breath trying to get Karl to come straight to the chaos of a base with no communications.

For the next two hours, Karl repeated the explanation to various scout groups, who returned to the front-line camps to give explanations, as anyone close enough to reach him that fast had lost their radios to the blast.

[It's time to go. Frost Giant army, 40 kilometres out, coming for the crater from the city.] Hawk informed them as the last of the scout groups was about to leave.

"You, Lieutenant, I forget your name. There is a Frost Giant army Battalion coming this way from the city. Can you run and tell the General that he's likely to have incoming hostile forces later today?" Karl shouted after them.

"No problem, Commander. Make yourself scarce before they get close enough to spot you."

Karl nodded and led the team away, headed for the woods between the two sections of battle line, where he could take the team and disappear into the mountain caves in only an hour or two. That would keep the Frost Giants from finding them, and if Remi cast a Blizzard once they were out of sight, they wouldn't even leave a trail to follow.

[Yep, Blizzard is useful.] Remi agreed, while coiled around her new statue, trying to determine what it was for.

[Blizzard is useful.] Hawk mimicked, while Thor chuckled, startling the group members who were standing beside him.

"They're bickering about the virtues of Ice Magic." Karl explained, while the mages climbed up behind Tessa on Thor's back and the Golems were dismissed.

The trees were densely packed in the foothills here, and Thor had to be dismissed, while Rae chose to return to her space, as she couldn't climb sideways between the trees without dropping Lotus.

Remi started a snowstorm with [Blizzard] as Hawk gave them directions to a nice cave he had scouted. It was part of a large cave complex, as far as he could tell after his brief exploration, but there were spots that could be blocked off for safety, and the whole place was well underground, and warm from the stone of the mountain.

[That's good enough for me. We might even get to explore another cave and spend a few days without going out in the snow.] Karl agreed.

It probably wasn't that large, but no snow sounded good to Hawk.

Chapter 284 The Good Cave

Rae blocked the door of the cave with silk and a few entangled branches, while Remi blew snow up against it to make it look like it had been that way for some time. That was good enough for their disguise, as the tunnel ran deep into the rock, just as Hawk had promised.

And it was a tunnel, and not a natural cave, as it was carved with a smooth arch to the ceiling, and alcoves every five metres along the wall that had likely once held lanterns of some sort. The sight put everyone on edge, in case this was another trial instance, or home to some sort of intelligent monster.

The good caves, like this one, would normally be claimed by something, and there was no telling how nasty that thing might be. So, they were cautious as they made their way deeper into the complex, and into a chamber where a set of long forgotten houses stood petrified, coated in mineral stone from the dripping water.

"Hey, look at this. I think that is Dwarven writing. There haven't been Dwarves here in a thousand years. Not since the Frost Giants betrayed them and they fled the continent." Lotus noted as she gestured toward some runes written at the entrance to the cavern.

"Do you have any idea what it says?" Karl asked.

"Nope, I can't read Dwarf. But if my memory is right, it should be some sort of protective spell to keep monsters out of their village, and the livestock in. It usually didn't target humans because we're not a threat, but your Companions might have to stay in your space when we go in and out." She replied.

Tessa looked around the cavern. "And that means there is another tunnel to check. There are always two ways in and out of a Dwarven Village, even one this small."

There were only five houses, and a few smaller outbuildings, so this might have been a way station along a trade route and not a proper village, but the Dwarves were meticulous, and they would have made a second exit that led to a different side of the mountain.

Karl nodded. "Alright, stay close and try not to damage anything. This place feels like a museum, and I'm certain some historian will love to hear that it's still intact. If the houses are still in good shape and empty, we can bunk in one of them, if not, we will set up out in the open."

Tori looked at him strangely. "Why would you think that there might be something intact in those houses? It would take hundreds of years for the dripping water to coat the roof in deposits like that. One of them has turned into a proper stalagmite."

Karl smiled. "I grew up in the mines. There were always old men joking about how we were digging so deep we might find Dwarves, and how they made their furniture of stone, so they could pass it down to their grandchildren in a few hundred years.

I don't know how true that is, but it seems like it might be possible. Look at the fences. They're all stacked stones, carefully cut to interlock."

The other tunnel only took a minute to locate, as the designers weren't trying to hide it. But there would be no threats from that direction, as the tunnel had been carefully blocked over with cut stones. However, the stones weren't the same as what was in this cavern, it was a different sort of granite, darker, and with a faintly pink inclusion in it.

"What's got you staring at a stone wall so hard?" Lotus asked as Karl paused to take it in.

"The stone comes from deeper in the mountain. I think they bricked it up from the other side." Karl explained as he ran his fingers over the cool stone.

"A holdout against the allies of the Frost Giants?" Tessa suggested.

"Possibly. But, if it's still standing and undamaged, we should be safe here. I don't see any bones, campfire rings or other signs of previous uncivilized inhabitants."

If this really had been a holdout against the Frost Giants when they sent their allies against the Dwarves, it could be a very valuable safe spot for them. It was deep in the mountain, secure, warm even without artificial heating, and there was plenty of room for anything they might need to bring inside.

"You look like you're considering a long-term residency." Tessa noted as Karl surveyed the area.

"It's not a bad idea. The front lines are unlikely to move too much, so we will remain within striking distance of the Frost Giants for some time. They're going to be pissed about their valley, but they might not be able to do anything about it now that it has exploded. That's a real shame, you know. Remi wanted that big stone for her space. It would have made a great decoration."

Tessa laughed at Karl's reply, but Lotus looked intrigued. "You know, there was a big fancy stone behind the Naga Shaman boss in the Dungeon. I wonder if they were the same sort of stone? If we get to another dungeon, we will have to see if that stone appeals to her as well."

Karl led them back to the nearest house, whose stone door was sitting wide open. It was dusty, but the roof hadn't leaked, and the interior was intact, as well as being almost all stone, as Karl had suspected.

The beds had been carefully made when the last resident left, and the decayed remains were still there, though moss was growing on them, giving off the faint luminescence common to plants that grew in the underground caverns of the Dark Elven City inside the Dungeon.

"I thought that they would have packed and taken everything with them. I guess not. It would take too much time and cause too much damage to the artifacts to sleep inside. Rae, can you set us up a fort and hammocks outside?" Karl requested.

Rae popped out of her space, then looked around for a good spot. There were a number of stone pillars supporting the ceiling of the cave, so she picked one of those to build at the base of, pulling from all sides, so the weight of the people in the hammocks would be evenly distributed, as if it was a flexible tree that she was worried about toppling.

Then she returned to her space to rest. There was still light coming in from above, reflected through a crystal that lit up the cavern with the afternoon sun.

When it started to get dark, she would come back out again, but for now, it was time to nap.

The group was thinking the same thing, so Karl led them to a fire pit in the backyard of one of the houses. It had a metal grill plate over half of it, and it was obviously intended to be for cooking, with an adjustable hangar for your pot on the other side.

"This is fancy. Get that stoked up with your lucky blade and I will start on dinner." Lotus informed them as she admired the way that the metal of the griddle hadn't corroded even after a thousand years.

It would need a good cleaning before it could be used, but she wasn't planning to use it anyhow, she was just going to put her pans on it once it was hot.

Karl activated [Flame Body] on his spare short sword and went to place it in the pit. But the moment that the fire touched the stones, the pit roared to life, creating an evenly distributed fire through the whole pit.

Karl removed the blade, and the fire went out, entralling Lotus.

"Just use the skill in the pit. I think you will be able to control it directly. That had to be pretty convenient for whoever made this place." She suggested.

Karl extended the [Flaming Body] skill into the pit, which required him to touch it to get it started. But when he removed his hand, he could still control the skill, and the pit stayed burning.

"Alright, we really are set now. Cook to your heart's content, and we will rest here for a day or two."

Dana and Lotus smirked at each other.

"Don't you think this reminds you of something? Like when you accidentally broke something of your mom's and then hid until she calmed down?" Lotus asked.

"Or ate a cupcake from the batch that was supposed to be for the church potluck." Dana agreed.

Chapter 285 Rest And Recovery

For two entire days, the group rested in the Dwarven Village ruins, resting and rebuilding their strength. But Karl wasn't slacking. No, he was working hard to spread the energy from the focal points in his beast spaces and then rebuild them. The process of spreading the energy smoothly took an entire day, and then it would likely take him weeks to rebuild it back to its new peak level, but he could feel the difference in the spaces after putting it off for that long.

With three Commander Rank beasts, the energy was flowing much more smoothly through his body after the process was completed, and he had an easier time activating his skills. The Royal Rank [Flaming Body] skill was becoming much more effective, though still limited by his own capacity.

It was more efficient than the Commander Rank version for the amount of mana used, but because his cap for energy usage was lower, he still couldn't exert the maximum amount of power that someone like Prince Corbin could have. By Karl's best estimate, it was close to twice as strong as it would have been at Commander Rank, though.

The jump between the two ranks was a large one, and while Karl didn't quite understand the difference yet, the feeling of power from [Flaming Body] was definitely not the same as it was from the other skills he could use.

If it had been [Offensive Adaptation] that Rae had managed to advance, he might have a more detailed understanding, with two skills to compare, but it was her Golems that had advanced first.

Of course, if it had been Offensive Adaptation that advanced first, the amount of damage that he was doing at the Commander Rank might have made even the Red Dragon of War blush. That skill was truly overpowered to begin with, and having it a full Rank higher than the user would just be disgustingly effective.

They had no way of knowing what was going on outside, other than the silence when they went to sit by the door and listen for movement. There was nothing close enough for their senses to pick up on the first day, so on the second day, Karl sent Hawk out to scout in the morning.

[There are still plenty of Frost Giants in the area, searching for us, I guess. They're big mad about something, and it has to be us blowing up their rock.] Hawk explained as he returned to rest in his space for the remainder of the day.

With the energy stabilized in an even layer on the third day, and the new focuses forming properly, Karl sent Hawk out to scout again, updating them on the situation.

[Not so many Frost Giants as yesterday, but still plenty of Frost Giants to keep us busy all day. There are humans there now too, fighting.] Hawk informed them during his dawn scouting mission.

"It sounds like it's time to go. There are other human teams outside now, fighting with the Frost Giants that are looking for us. Well, they likely don't know it's us they're looking for, but they're looking for the relic from the crater." Karl explained.

"But it blew up." Tori reminded him.

Dana and Tessa both gave Karl matching suspicious looks.

"It did blow up, didn't it?" Tessa asked.

Karl took Remi and her new lucky statue out of her space to show to the others.

"I think that this is what they're looking for." He explained.

"A statue of the Allmother? I mean, she's the primary Goddess of Shamanistic magic, but what does that have to do with the Frost Giants?" Lotus asked.

Tessa shrugged. "No idea. But if it was in the crater, then it's not just a statue. Where did you find it?"

Remi wrapped protectively around her statue, in case someone tried to take it from her.

Karl smiled and stroked the Spirit Snake's back as he answered. "They were using it as the focus for the circle that was summoning more Frost Giants. I stole it to break the spell."

Tessa nodded in understanding. "And then the crumbling spell destabilized the Frost Stone, and everything blew up. Alright, I see what happened now. Tuck that away again, and don't let it come out. It should be good for Remi, but the Frost Giants will sense its magic if they're close."

Remi quickly vanished into her space to protect her statue, while the clerics tried not to laugh. The little Spirit Snake was growing quickly, but nobody had noticed because it was so cold that she never came out of her space. Or at least she never came far enough out that they could see her.

"Are we bringing our packs? Or leaving them here in camp?" Tori asked as she glared at the heavy bag.

Unlike the others, the mages couldn't use the rings of Giant Strength, so they were working with basic human stats, and carrying their packs all day was tiring.

"You and Dana can sling them on Thor's back. It should help mobility, and he won't mind a pair of saddlebags if Rae helps us tie them on nicely." Karl suggested.

Rae happily made a harness for the packs, and for the riders to hang on to while they sat on top of Thor's new white fur cape. It was warm, it helped him hide, and it had a hood. The hood was the best part, in Thor's estimation. Tessa had cut holes for his upper horns, so it would stay in place when he moved his head, and it kept his cranial ridge warm without blocking his eyes.

The harness kept it securely in place, with the backpacks hanging at his rear hips and the riders in front of that, with Tessa sitting at the base of his neck, where she could more easily attack their targets.

"We need to get you a lance." Karl decided, as the riders took their places.

Lotus was back in her spot on Rae again, so they could ambush from the side without the Bloodbath Spider losing her pocket healer. That put both mages on Thor's back, but they would climb down as soon as the fighting started, as they weren't physically adept enough to stay on a bucking Lightning Cerro during battle.

Karl led them down a path toward the closest group of human scouts, who were about to end up in combat with a Frost Giant hunting team, keeping the pace to a moderate jog, so that neither of the beasts was tired when they found their fight.

[Can I engage?] Hawk asked, after relaying that the Frost Giants were about to reach the human scouts.

[Go ahead, just don't get yourself attacked.]

The fireballs made it easier to track the scout from the ground, and Karl adjusted their route to intercept the Frost Giants.

The scout team had slowed their advance, wary of the insane Dragon Hawk, allowing Karl and the others to make it to the hunting team first.

It was just five Ascended Frost Giants with spears, no fancy armour or magical weapons, but they had a large hound of some sort with them, who was sniffing at the ground, searching for something.

It wasn't them, as the hound didn't make any signal that it had recognized them, but if they were tracking every group who had been near the crater, they would get to him eventually.

Karl took out the dog handler with an arrow, while the others fell to Hawk's fireballs, leaving a very shocked scout group standing fifty metres to their right, unsure as to what they should be doing now.

"Good morning everyone. I don't suppose that you have a working radio, do you?" Karl asked.

The team leader smiled, and gestured for someone to bring one forward.

"We do have a spare. All the teams do, now that we've learned the trick. The only ones that blew up were the radios that were in use at the time, the ones in storage with the batteries removed were fine. It took a few hours to realize that with all the chaos, and by then the scouts who had been near the crater had all dispersed again." He explained.

"Got it. Keep the battery removed from the spare radio when we get one. Hopefully, that sort of thing won't happen again any time soon, but you never know." Karl agreed.

"You should call in soon, Commander. The General would like to have a few words with you, and he is requesting that you return to the base." The scout chuckled as Karl tucked the radio in his pack and put the earbud in.

"I thought that might be the case, especially after two days of recovery time. Alright, I will head for the base this afternoon, so I have time to make it back to my camp before dark."

Chapter 286 Could There Be Others?

Hawk wasn't joking about the number of Frost Giants in the area. Karl could see three other groups from where they were standing, and if the Giants had better eyesight, they would be able to clearly spot his group across the open fields, even with their white cloaks.

It was a shame that he couldn't fire an arrow that far, but from Hawk's point of view, it looked like the Frost Giant front line had spread out into a search pattern, and they were combing the area looking for their lost relic.

"That thing must be significant to them, even though it's not their primary Goddess." Lotus decided, as they headed for another group of Hunters.

"Perhaps it's because she's a Shaman God, and they needed the Shamanistic magic to activate the stone that was letting them clone the warriors?" Karl suggested.

Lotus frowned. "That could be, but it might be something else as well. The Goddess is called the Allmother, and she is a god of Shamanistic magic, so it might be that only a holy relic of that one specific Goddess would enable them to use the spell they need. If that's the case, there are likely more of these statues all over the front lines, hidden in places too dangerous for most of our teams to scout.

The Frost Giants know that we don't have any Royal Rank fighters here, so they haven't deployed any of theirs, they're just wearing us out before making their big move."

Remi perked up at that suggestion. [Is she saying we have to collect them all? Like Totems for my swamp? A whole collection of magical statues to build an array with?]

"Remi wants to know if we should try to collect them all and see what happens. She seems to think that they're supposed to work together." Karl relayed.

Tessa and Lotus shared an enlightened look, both remembering something from their training.

"I think that the summoning effect really might be a set of statues. Totem Magic is a thing, but it's far beyond most of us.

If there are a whole set of Divine Totems working together, representing a pantheon, or a concept, then the totems might be creating all of the strange phenomenons that we are seeing, with the expanding borders and the appearance of new Frost Giants, as the Totem Magic tries to align the world to favour them." Tessa explained.

"And if we steal enough of them, the effect would stop, and the borders would begin to return to normal, ending their invasion. That is brilliant. We just need to find the others." Dana exclaimed.

[And I would get my own expanding Swamp.] Remi added helpfully.

How that would work was a mystery to Karl, as the swamp was a mental space, and the maximum size seemed to be tied to her Rank, but perhaps the statues would help her grow up faster.

"I think that we need to go to the base, and see if there are other places like the one that we attacked. If we tell them what we suspect, they might make a mess of attacking it, and then the totems will be moved again.

But if we can get a few more before the Frost Giants realize that they're being targeted, I think that it might be enough that we can send the army after the others." Karl decided.

"So, you're saying, get the intel, attack another hidden spot and see if there is a totem statue there, and only then should we tell the army about the threat?" Tessa asked seriously.

"Yes, I think that is the best strategic decision for us to be able to not only test the theory, but to end the war if we are right."

Ophelia looked deep in thought as she made little piles of snow with her foot. "I think Karl is right. The Totems won't do anyone any good if they're spread out. The damage would be done, and the border would just stop advancing. But if we can get enough of them together, the effect should begin to fade as the Totems align to favour us.

That's how my totems are. The more that I have active, the stronger the effect is. I don't have the strongest Totems yet, only Bear Strength, but once I have four of them out, my strength has doubled from its base level."

Remi nodded along in understanding. Totems were Shaman magic, and although she didn't know any of them yet, she was getting a much better idea of how they worked after watching them appear all around the Werebear when she was in combat.

Karl led them back toward the front lines to talk to the General, and Remi studied her statue, while trying to remember everything that she could about the totems that Ophelia made. She was close to a revelation, she just needed a bit more time to understand what she was missing.

The scouts were waiting for them as they got close to the camp, despite the fact that Karl hadn't sent any radio messages yet.

"Commander, the General would like to see you in his Command tent." The scout greeted them.

"I would have been more startled if he didn't want to see me." Karl joked.

"Lead the way, I don't want to walk in on anything unfortunate, my poor clerics have seen too much already this mission."

The scout looked confused, but Lotus giggled at the memory of the startled Artillery Battalion Commander when he was quite literally caught with his pants down.

They heard the General's laughter when the scout stuck his head in to see if he was free, and then followed him inside.

"General, good to see you again. I trust that you got a relayed version of the events from the other scouts?" Karl asked.

"Yes, all sorts of confused and conflicting reports. Now, firsthand, what happened out there? You did go to scout the location, did you not?" The General asked.

"We did, and here is how it went." Karl went through the details of the engagement, including the snowstorm that made it look like there was no valley there at all until you were in it, to the clear area at the bottom, the identical Giants, and the destruction, but omitting the bits about the totem Remi borrowed.

"I understand now. It makes sense that the Frost Giants are out hunting. They might be looking for the culprit, but also for any leftover magical items that survived the blast, shards of the Frost Stone, and other valuables. If there are still shards of that exploded stone, they will be valuable not only to the Frost Giants, but to other water and Ice Magic users." The General explained.

Dana and Tori smiled. They shouldn't have too many problems finding a piece or two of the shattered stone to help with their magic.

"One other thing. Ascended Mage Tori, you have been reassigned. There is a new group here in need of a mage, and we unfortunately don't have the resources to keep an overstrength scouting group active in the wilderness."

"But I just got here." She complained.

Karl's group was the best she had ever seen. They were competent, worked in unison without arguments or questions, and even better, they actually wanted to be there. Plus, there were three Commander Rank beasts already in the team, more than doubling their combat strength. What more could you ask for?

The group in question came in just after the General mentioned them, most likely because they had been waiting for the signal.

Two familiar Elites entered leading two others with similar faces, suggesting that they might come from the same hometown or be relatives to each other. Their entrance was silent, but accompanied by the faint smell of gigggleweed and leather oil.

The Mackenzie brothers were here with two other warriors, and they had been assigned the first free mage, as far as Karl could tell.

"Bob, Brother Doug, good to see you again." Karl greeted them with friendly hugs.

"Commander Karl. I didn't expect to see you here, did you bring us our extra mage?" Bob asked with a slight smirk on his face as he took in Karl's group.

"I suppose that we did. We were further down the line when the fallback signal was given, and we ended up behind enemy lines, so we've been poking their supply lines and attacking a couple of suspicious points." Karl agreed.

"With the help of a certain Spider and Hawk, who can spot and sneak up on Giants with ease? It looks like you've got a reliable bunch, but I don't know these two." Doug asked.

"Dana and Ophelia, meet High Priest Doug Mackenzie, of the Nature God, and his brother Commander Bob Mackenzie. Bob, Doug, meet Dana the Golem Mage and Ophelia the Bear Totem Berserker."

Doug gave Ophelia an appraising look. "I bet she's comfortable in bear form. She's just big enough to be furry and warm."

Ophelia looked vaguely offended, but Lotus was quite familiar with Brother Doug, and the other Nature Priests.

"She gets like twice that size. No worries about being cold with her around, though she's been cuddling Tori at night, so we're going to have to fix our sleeping arrangements." The tiny Priestess agreed.

Doug smiled, and lit a herbal cigarette. "Sister Lotus, you're living too good. Why don't you lend us the Berserker as well?"

Bob and Karl shared a smile while the two Nature Clerics joked with each other, ignoring the fact that they were supposed to be in the middle of a meeting, or that the people they were referring to were literally standing right beside them.

Chapter 287 Reunion Trip

Once the General was done with them, he chased both groups out of his office. He would soon have more directions for both, but a scout could pass the message before they left. He had enough to deal with already without adding the stress of dealing with a stoned Nature Priest and a bunch of miscreant Elite Mercenaries.

"Only one mage in your group?" Karl asked as he looked at the combination.

"Yeah, not great luck on the combo this time, but we've got a Ranger, who's good with longer distance attacks. Our sisters were both sent to the Capital for security detail, so we can't get them for the team this time." Bob sighed.

"Well, Tori is good with multiple target attacks, but it's a bit of a shame that you don't have a second caster."

Then Karl paused. There was a spell that Rae knew which could likely be used by Brother Doug. The [Skill Book] ability required that he study and have some understanding of the skill, and he had certainly fulfilled that requirement, though it wasn't one that he could use himself.

"If you wait a moment, and find me some paper and ink, plus one of those cigarettes, I think I can make a spellbook for Doug. It's a nature spell, so a Nature Priest should be able to use it." He added.

Doug didn't hesitate, and brought out a stack of paper, intended for reports, as well as his good pen and a rolled herbal cigarette.

Karl crushed the herb onto the paper as he took a seat at one of the tables in the dining tent beside the General's, and began to write out the spell book.

"Rae got this in a Dungeon instance as a reward, but I think it will be compatible. I managed to make a [Refreshing Lightning] version for the Blue Dragon Priests." Karl explained.

Doug laughed. "I heard all about that. They're so excited to have a new spell to teach that they've been trying to get everyone they meet to learn it. The problem is, it only works for the Blue Dragon priests. Not even the Shamans have managed to learn it straight from the book."

Thor laughed at that one. He didn't know how human shamans played with lightning, but Remi's Lightning and his Lightning were totally different things that just looked the same. He was also eager to come out and play with his old friends, but the camp was so crowded that there simply wasn't space for him.

Karl needed Rae to help him with the book, for the parts that he didn't understand, but between them, they quickly got the spell completed, and it formed itself into a Skill Book with a simple wooden cover, and a spear tip on the front.

Doug took the book, and flipped the cover open. That was all that it took for the book to vanish, while the others looked on in envy.

"You know, there is a supply tent here with the essentials, why don't you get a Golem book?" one of the warriors with Bob's group asked Tori.

"I've already tried, I'm incompatible with the book. I can use arcane spheres that fire multiple magic missiles, though. I'm not great at defence, but I've got strong offensive abilities." She replied sadly.

"That's alright. We've got a High Priest with us, and a Commander Rank defensive warrior. Golems are nice to have, but they're not the only way to deal with Frost Giants." The warrior consoled her.

Lotus raised her hand. "I would just like to say, what the heck, dude? You could teach Nature Priests to use [Spear] all this time, and you didn't make me a copy like two weeks ago? I've been right here, riding on Rae's back while she casts it, and you didn't once think to teach me?"

Karl blushed in embarrassment. "Would you believe me if I said that I forgot it was possible? I have to study and somewhat understand the skill to transcribe it, but I've seen it cast a thousand times now, by Rae and her Golems, and with her help, it wasn't hard."

Lotus made a 'get on with it' gesture, and Karl started over with Rae's help to make her a copy of the book.

Lotus grabbed it and did a little happy dance the moment they finished. "This will be perfect. I will have vines and spikes."

The book vanished in her hands, and the little Priestess frowned. "I have been robbed! Oh, wait, no. This is just as good."

Karl tried not to laugh at how similar her response was to his beasts when things didn't go as expected while he waited for her to calm down.

"The two spells combined to give me a third option, which replaced the other two. [Thorned Vines] are basically the two at the same time, but the spears are thorns, and don't fly out, they just stab when the vines grab something."

That seemed like it would actually make things easier on Lotus. She was already used to using the vines to restrain targets, but they didn't do any damage. Now they would restrain targets while doing damage, a two for one combo package.

Bob came over to Karl's side while Lotus and Doug did a little happy dance together.

"Why did you come in so early? There are still plenty of hunting hours for the day, you could have come at the end of the afternoon." He asked, while the two Nature Clerics celebrated their new skills.

"I'm not planning to stay. Now that we've given them their report, I'm going to leave again. We've got a good spot in the forward operating area, where we can engage the Frost Giants easily, but still remain safe to sleep at night." Karl explained.

"We found your other fort on the way in, the one in the trees near the camp. At least, I assume it's you. It is spider silk, and I didn't see any sort of monsters in the area other than the Frost Giants." Bob replied.

"Yeah, that was almost certainly the one made by Rae. It's far enough outside the camp that you don't get suckered into a front-line rotation in an attack, but you're close enough to assist or return to inform them of your destination when you head out in the morning."

Suddenly, Doug and Lotus both turned back to the group.

Lotus had a huge smile on her face as she made her announcement. "We have an idea. Why don't we head out together tonight? The safe spot is big enough for both groups, and we can have Remi hide our tracks every night. Then we can work out of the same area for support, and compete to see who can eliminate more Frost Giants?"

Bob looked impressed. "That's actually not a terrible idea. Two scout groups to protect a camp, which means we can split resources, and we will only need to warm one space, and we won't have to lose as much sleep to watch duties."

It would also keep the two groups close together if there was a larger threat, so if they sent a radio call, the other team could come quickly to assist them. The official stance was that they didn't have enough Elites to have large teams, but their two teams working out of the ruins was no different from all the teams that returned to base at the end of the day.

The ranger on Bob's team immediately became suspicious, and began looking back and forth between the team leaders and the Nature Priests.

"What are you not telling us? We all saw the scout reports, why do you think that we need two teams with multiple Commander Rank members working together?" He demanded.

Bob patted him on the shoulder. "Bless your heart, you don't get out much, do you? The official scout reports don't include anything from teams that were lost, or teams that haven't reported in, or any of the enemy reserves that are too far for our scouts to get a confirmed number for.

In short, it's about a quarter of the total combat power that the enemy has in the area at any given time, and only gives a general idea of what you're likely to see on patrol.

But the Frost Giants are all worked up today, so they're going to start sending more attackers forward. When they do, we will be glad to have the support nearby. Their team is fast, and if we call when we see a major threat, we can face it as a group instead of taking risks, then spread out to continue scouting."

The Ranger sighed. "I work for the bureau of natural resources. I run an animal shelter for unwanted and abandoned pets. I didn't expect to get a draft notice in the mail so soon after the conflict started."

That was truly unfortunate. Nobody wanted to be in the first round of draft notices.

It did, however, solidify Karl's opinion that he had done the right thing by picking a team and coming in advance.

Chapter 288 And Then There Were Ten

The trip to the cave took longer than Karl had expected, as the other group was on foot, but they still managed to make it there before dark, and got Remi to use a [Blizzard] to hide their tracks.

"That's some serious paranoia you have, you know that, right?" The other warrior in Doug's group asked.

"The Frost Giants are out here hunting for whoever blew up their Holy Relic, and given that we're the ones who did it, I thought it might be better if nothing could track us back to our sleeping spot.

But you will like this place, it's an old Dwarven Village, deep in the mountains, and it's got all the creature comforts. Or will once we have Rae set up a second fort with hammocks for you all." Karl explained.

Tori smiled. The hammocks were a wonderful thing.

Her mind briefly went to the muscled physiques of the men in her group, then she shook her head, dispelling those notions. She was here to work, and after that last fiasco, she had learned her lesson about leading her group members on.

No more flirting to get favourable treatment, it wasn't worth it.

This time, she was going to prove to a group that didn't know about her past indiscretions that she was truly worthy of her place on the team, and that she had the skills to make a name for herself as a combat Elite.

As they got settled in, Rae started to work, building up a second tent in the town for the second group, again arrayed around a pillar using Spider Silk at the Commander Rank anchored to the floor and wrapped around the stone pillar as the structure.

As they relaxed, the warrior, whose name Karl had learned was Harry Kim, began to dig through his pack for a dinner ration. The clerics burst into laughter, and the warrior stopped, confused as to what was so funny. It was definitely dinner time, and they might as well start cooking before it got dark.

Doug explained with a grand gesture at the two Priestesses. "We have not one, not two, but three clerics here, including a High Priest, who can all use advanced food creation spells. There will be no eating lousy ration packs in this camp. In fact, you might eat better here than you do at home."

Harry smiled and put the ration pack away. "Now that is good news. Me and Lao Tie, we're not used to eating ration packs, it would likely mess up our digestion for months. I eat almost all my meals at the office cafeteria, since they're free, and I only recently got the raise for my promotion to Ascended."

The High Priest chuckled and ran his fingers through his short beard. "It has been a season for promotions. I just made High Priest, Commander Karl was promoted in the last few months, Dana made

Ascended recently as well. With you, that's almost half the group that has made a milestone right before the war."

Ophelia chuckled and raised her hand. "I made Ascended two weeks before we left, but I was only officially promoted at the end of term exams the next week."

Harry laughed. "I'm not sure if that makes me feel better or worse. Usually, the Ascended members are pencil pushers with a lot of involuntary experience, not promising students."

The ranger joined in the laughter and shook his head. "If I didn't know better, I would say that half of you were still in the second year. And before we get too far, my full name is Lao Tie, but please call me Ty."

"Well, I can say for certain that you are wrong, but not for the reason that you think." Doug joked.

Karl nodded. "Ophelia is in the second year, but Dana is in the first year."

Ty gave her an assessing look that narrowed, his black eyes almost looked closed. "First year and Ascended? What the hell were they thinking, even letting you out of the Academy, much less to a forward scouting team?"

Now both the MacKenzie brothers, and all of Karl's team, were laughing.

"Commander Karl is also a first year student. The monster of the Academy. Compared to sending him out, sending Miss Dana with him was a small thing." Bob finally explained.

Thor saw that as his opportunity. Everyone was laughing, that must mean they want to play, so he came out to bump up against Doug, begging for head pats.

"Who gave Thor a cloak? That is adorable." He asked as he reached under the hood to scratch between the Lightning Cerro's horns.

"It's cold outside, and it helps him blend in. I'm the one who cut the horn holes for the hood." Tessa replied with a soft smile for the happy Cerro.

Bob and Doug tag teamed Thor, showering him with attention as he pranced around happily. It was good to have happy people around again instead of serious people.

Ty stared at Thor for a few minutes, then turned to Karl. "That's a Commander Rank Lightning Cerro, isn't it? No wonder you've grown so powerful. How did you manage to bond a beast that strong?"

"He actually started as an Egg, as did the others. No, that's not a restriction of my class, just an oddity of fate. A combination of resources, combat experience and training made him into the Cerro that he is today."

Ty looked amused at the phrasing, but more intrigued by the mention of others. "They said that you had a Commander Rank beast. Was it actually more than one?"

"Three actually, and one more that's still at Ascended.

Thor you have already met, then there is Hawk, a Dragon Hawk, who does our scouting duties, Rae the Bloodbath Spider, who is our resident attack Golem Specialist, and Remi, a newborn Naga Spirit Snake, who is still at Ascended Rank."

The ranger nodded in understanding. "Now I see why they let you out of the Academy. The beasts need it, and with them, you might as well be with a full Commander Rank team, plus some extra support. How much trouble do you have with the Frost Giants? None of your team members are Giant sized, and only Thor is particularly durable."

"Against the five Commander teams, we are a bit slower than we are used to when fighting teams with only one Commander Rank Frost Giant, but we are still not in any real danger. With Thor's barrier over the whole team, plus the blessings of the Clerics, the Circle of Protection and the Golems from both Rae and Dana, we're actually at a reliable advantage."

Ty smiled. "In that case, I won't hesitate to call on your team if we find ourselves in a bind. Normally, it's considered bad manners to pull another team from their mission unless it's an emergency, but if you've got strength to spare, you will probably be able to finish up and come to us in time."

Rae headed back to her space for a short nap after she finished creating the second fort for the Mackenzie team, and the Clerics made their way to the fire pits to start cooking. Doug had a skill that created a small fire, and that was enough to control the cooking area, where they were happily scrubbing away centuries of dust and preparing the area for an elaborate meal.

It was going to be fairly late when they finished cooking, but neither team was rushing to head out in the morning. They would head out when they were good and ready, then hunt until mid-afternoon and return here. With the number of Frost Giants that Karl's team had reported, they wouldn't be short on targets, and they would be exhausted well before the sun went down.

"This is quite the fortification. How long do you think that we will be able to continue to use it?" Harry, the Ascended warrior with the Mackenzie brothers, asked, his ice blue eyes glinting with curiosity.

Bob shrugged. "For at least the next few weeks, unless the Frost Giants mount an offensive that puts the main battle line out of reach of it. I don't see them pushing the line that far back, especially now that their Holy Relic in the area is destroyed, but unless we can find another and destroy it as well, they are unlikely to retreat either.

So, it is a stalemate, and we just continue to wear them away and keep them from building up enough of a force to challenge the General."

Karl nodded. "We are almost certain that there are more locations like the one that exploded, most likely near the other main lines. But what we suspect is that we need to pull the cores of them together to be able to reverse the changes they have made.

Simply destroying them likely won't be enough. So, my team was planning to scout further, to try to find similar hiding spots near the other lines."

Bob smiled. "And with the two of us sharing a fort, we can cover for you when Command wants to know what your status is."

Chapter 289 Relic Hunting

Hawk went out extra early the next day, intending to make it to the next pass, so he could check the Frost Giants that had gathered near the next portion of the main defence lines. That was the most likely spot for there to be another of the relics, and he would happily help them steal it if it was going to make the cold go away.

Even if Karl gave to the snake again.

He was in luck, they weren't even hiding this one. Or, maybe they were, but not from above. It was just like the other one, a magical circle next to a big stone, but this one was in the caldera of a dormant volcano, and it didn't feel the same.

Instead of so much snow, it was bitterly cold, and the monsters around the magical circle were different. It was still Frost Giants, but not strong ones. They were making the Awakened groups, led by Ascended, and sending them back into the Frost Giant nation to regroup and mingle with more powerful groups that were coming back to the front-line groups as a combined force.

With his enhanced eyesight, and a lot of silent cursing at the effort needed to fly in the thin air, Hawk had managed to get high enough that he could see most of the process around that same Frost Giant city.

Quick math, which the Windspeed Hawks developed to help them guess where Earth Mouse holes would be relative to the last ones they had found, told him that there should be one more likely hiding spot on the far side of the first spot they had found a magic stone.

That was an almost equal distance, but it was too far for him to fly this morning.

So, he set a shallow dive that would build up speed as he went back to create the morning reports on the closest groups to the fort. There were still too many Frost Giants nearby, and it would take time to get to the volcano where the next stone was hidden.

Karl tapped his spoon against his canteen to get everyone's attention. "I have the preliminary scouting report from Hawk. He has found another Frost Stone location.

It's in a volcano that is a full day's travel from here, near the next major engagement. The distribution appears to be near the main access valleys to their territory, to better spread the effects.

If we can get the next one, and then find a third, we might be able to cause a whole section of the effect to collapse.

Normally, Hawk would be cursing the cold if he had to fly up that high to find a position, but he's not, which tells me that the effect isn't as strong as it was before. That's with just one spot inactive. We will hunt today, going in that direction, but we won't return to the camp tonight, we will leave that for the Mackenzie group.

If they're calling for a report from us, fake it and let them think we're still in the area and not on yet another battlefield. We will be back tomorrow, hopefully with good news."

Bob gave him a sloppy salute. "Good luck, Commander. We will cover for you today, and if you aren't back tomorrow night, we will go looking for you."

That was the best that they could offer. It might be that the aftermath would take out communications again, or Karl's group might not make it out as smoothly this time.

Both groups left together after breakfast, and Remi kept the snow active until they were out of the trees. It would make it harder to find their way back to the caves, but most of the Elites had good memories, and they didn't want anything else following their footprints back to their fort. It was too good of a spot to have it defiled by monsters or taken over by some random group who would smash all the relics for firewood and make a mess.

For the first few hours, they passed in front of the main lines, hunting the roaming groups of Giants which were still searching for shards of the Frost Stone.

The numbers of both the stone fragments and the Frost Giants searching for them were dropping dramatically with the efforts of the teams that the main group was sending out, and Karl managed to lead his team into the hills on the far side of the line before noon, after which he brought them up to a jog with Hawk leading them on a relatively trouble-free path toward their target.

The Frost Giants weren't interested in the actual hills, as a river ran along this portion of the border, leading to the lake where Karl and his team had crossed. The steep valley along the majority of the border would make it nearly impossible for a human attack force to cross, so only where there was a gap in the mountains passable enough for vehicles did they set up defences.

"Don't you think this is a bit too easy?" Ophelia whispered as they ran through the trees.

"Like this second location is a trap, and they're going to spring something on us the moment that we try to go up the mountain? Yeah, I got that feeling as well. But Hawk hasn't seen any sign of what the ambush might be yet." Karl agreed.

"And we're going anyhow?" She asked.

"I know, you have a good point. But even if it is a trap, the Frost Stone should still be real, as we know the Frost Giants that are leaving the area very much are real. The soldiers in the area are currently engaged with them." Karl replied.

"Alright. It is what it is, just approach cautiously, so we don't end up ambushed by something invisible."

That was a good point. They might have found a way to make the threat invisible.

[Hawk, can you send a couple Rend attacks down to ground level on the hill? If they hit ground with no issues, we're good to go. If not, there is a barrier or an illusion.] Karl suggested.

They were only a few kilometres from the base of the Volcano, but Karl didn't want to launch the attack tonight, as it would likely continue until dark, and then they would still need to find an escape route while exhausted from a day's travel and fighting.

[Rae, find us a good hiding spot for the night, and we will go up in the morning.]

Rae rushed out with Lotus on her back to find a good spot to build a fort, and ended up finding a small cave buried under a snowdrift when her foot knocked the opening clear.

[Found the spot. Bring everyone, and have Remi keep her blizzard up to hide it again.] Rae informed them.

The cave was tiny and cramped, but with a bit of a silk dome at the entrance, the snowstorm buried it deep, and everyone huddled together for the night with the heat of a dagger covered in [Flaming Body] keeping the cave warm.

They ate quickly the next morning, and sent Hawk up once again to check the area.

[All good, many weak Giants. I flew low through the trees, and they didn't see me all the way to the ridge.] He reported.

"Alright, it looks like we're good to go. Is everyone prepared for this?" Karl asked.

"As ready as we can be." Tessa agreed.

Once they were out of their snowy sleeping location, Karl called out Rae and Thor so that everyone could get a ride on their way up, and began carefully following Hawk's route up the mountain.

He had found a route that should be easily walkable, even for Thor with passengers, and if they didn't fall into a trap, they should be at the peak within two hours. There were very few Frost Giant patrols in the area, possibly to hide their presence near the human lines, but that didn't mean that Karl and the others wouldn't run across one and set off an alarm if they were unlucky.

Their first test came only ten minutes after leaving camp, when they came across a group of ten Awakened Rank Frost Giants with an Ascended Rank leader.

It wasn't easy to eliminate them all fast enough that none of them could shout, and without causing so much noise that other groups would come running, but with the help of the Spider Golems and one Magic Missile to the throat courtesy of Dana, they managed the task and moved on, leaving the bodies for the next patrol to find.

There was too much damage to the trees and snow to hide that there had been a battle, and taking the bodies would only emphasize that they were trying to hide their tracks, and that it wasn't a wild monster attack, so they simply left them and continued on their way. The [Blizzard] spell that Remi kept active would make it hard to tell when the attack had occurred as long as nothing happened across it too quickly.

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Karl looked up the mountain. "There aren't many patrols, so let's keep going, with Remi's blizzard covering for us, it will be difficult to tell when we came through. Speed is our friend until we reach the caldera."

They kept moving, using the blowing snow as cover, both for their tracks, and to keep them from being noticed. It seemed to be working well enough, and they made it most of the way up the mountain without being intercepted again, but the closer they got to the top, the stronger the feeling that there was something seriously wrong grew.

[Rae, is there any sign that we're being tricked by an illusion?] Karl asked.

[No, it all looks good, not like that strange situation underground. This place just feels wrong, like something bad is about to happen to us, but I can't see anything that could cause us problems.] She insisted.

Then she paused. [Whatever is wrong, it is here.]

Remi stared out of her space at the same time. [Stop, there is something here.]

Karl signalled for everyone to pause. The beasts had senses they didn't, and a few moments to understand what they were sensing wouldn't hurt anything.

Karl closed his eyes, focusing on his mental space, the one he used for mediation, in hope that he would gain some understanding from the void.

As he focused on nothingness, he felt something staring back at him. The feeling made his skin crawl, as the sensation of attention grew.

They weren't joking, something was?really wrong with this place.

Then, the ground began to shake under their feet, and the Thermal Vision that Karl only paid minimal attention to during the day began to show him hot spots everywhere on the hillside, and even more potently above them.

"Oh shit. The volcano is about to erupt." He realized.

"U-turn, it's time to leave." Lotus announced, pointing back.

Ophelia was momentarily frozen, but when Thor began to turn around and run, she joined the group.

The first spout of hot gas vented only a few metres from their path as they ran, and the rumbling of the volcano got worse.

Thor and Tessa were glowing with golden Holy Light, which was unusual, as they would normally spread the effect to everyone. But, as most of the group was on Thor's back, it might be the best way to protect them from venting gas from below. Rae was doing a better job of dodging the vents, as she could see them coming, but Thor could feel the rumbling in the ground before they erupted, and he wove through the trees as he ran down the hill, struggling not to topple over forward.

Like a Warbear, with his build he was a bit top-heavy, and the steep slopes were hazardous for him when running downhill.

The top of the mountain exploded in a shower of rock and fire, firing high into the sky. That almost certainly spelled the end of one of the statues, but this time they weren't lucky enough to have recovered it.

A sense of power drew Karl's attention behind them, and what he found was the horror of every Frost Giant in the world.

There was a massive mottled red dragon bursting free of the volcano, flying easily among the explosion of magma and stone.

"Lotus, look back. What is that?" Karl shouted over the roar of the volcano.

She only looked for a split second, then shuddered and looked forward.

"That is a Magma Dragon, a form of Chromatic Dragon. But I don't think they're supposed to get that big. Even an Ancient Forest Dragon doesn't have a wingspan that large." She shouted back.

"Do you think it might be on our side? It looks pretty mad at the Frost Giants." Dana asked.

Lotus just laughed and shook her head. "Magma Dragons aren't really known for their kindness or humanitarian actions. It's better that we just get out of here before it turns its attention in our direction."

As if to prove her point, the Magma Dragon tail swatted an enormous glowing red boulder in their direction, headed straight for their group.

Everyone scattered as it crashed down between them with an impact that shook the ground even better than Thor's earthquake skill. Karl was momentarily blinded by the steam from all the melted snow from the impact trench, but quickly realized that they had fully evaded the attack, and they could keep going.

[Wait, shiny rock for me.] Thor cheered as he picked the boulder up with his horns and moved it to his space.

It was still radiating huge amounts of heat, but as it cooled, Thor could see that it was a naturally blue crystal, a large portion of the Frost Stone from the top of the mountain, that the Dragon had used as an artillery projectile.

It would look good next to Thor's pond once it cooled enough to regain its natural blue appearance, Karl decided as they ran down the hill and away from the tidal wave of molten stone making its way down the slope behind them.

But the flow was not the greatest danger, at least not to the common people who weren't on the volcano's slopes. The massive cloud of ash and fire had blackened the sky, turning day to night, and blanketing the snow in a thick layer of ash.

"Maybe this was their plan all along? That volcanic eruption is going to throw the entire region into an artificial winter. It will take months for that cloud to clear, and even longer for the temperature to start coming back up." Lotus noted, looking backwards from her perch on Rae's back.

[Remi is a Shaman, tell her to make the cloud go away. Shamans do weather, right?] Hawk insisted.

An extra winter, when they were already in winter, seemed like it should be prohibited by some sort of rule. That was just too much winter in one place for Hawk to accept.

Remi thought about it for a while and then shook her head. [If there is an Overlord Rank Shaman, they could blow all of that back away from us, but I don't have that much power, I'm just a small snake.]

Remi was doing her best cute and innocent act, even curling the 'hood' of scales around her head to make it look like she was hugging herself. Hawk wasn't buying it, but Thor thought it was adorable.

However, neither opinion changed the fact that Remi simply didn't have the power to change the weather over hundreds of kilometres and blow the ash cloud away from the Golden Dragon Nation. But worse than that, the prevailing winds were blowing out of the Frost Giant Nation, and would be moving more of the ash into human territory, and after that, into Stone Giant territory, where Lotus knew it would stagnate as the air off the ocean halted its momentum.

The Stone Giants would not be happy, but this had to count as a Force of Nature, unstoppable and not preventable. It might not have happened right now if the Frost Giants hadn't either deliberately or inadvertently upset the Magma Dragon, but it would have risen from its slumber eventually and the result would have been the same.

"I hope your stamina is beyond impressive because both the lava flow and the ash cloud are gaining on us." Karl informed Ophelia as they reached the bottom of the hill, over half an hour later.

"It's good enough to run all day, but what way do we run?" She asked.

"Upwind. That will take us back over ground that we've already covered, and toward the first incident, but we know there is a force there, even if everyone is busy with the chaos." Karl explained.

"Does the wind even matter to that?" She asked, pointing upward at the mushroom shaped cloud.

"Honestly, I have no idea. Later it should blow the ash away, but it does kind of look like it doesn't care."

The volcano was making its own weather now, and the wind was blowing outward from the eruption, rapidly heating everything and melting the snow all around them into slush.

"Do we go for the main line?" Lotus shouted as they moved down into the open, hoping to make better time than they had through the hills and trees.

"No, go for the Dwarven Village." Karl called back.

That seemed safer, and if it wasn't for their barriers, the ash would be burning their clothes already.

There were spots on the trees that were already scorched, despite the snow which had built up on them, and to Karl, that meant there was likely to be a massive wildfire.

How to escape an erupting volcano had not been one of their school subjects.