

Beast Master 291

Chapter 291 Chain of Disasters

As they ran, the radio communications made it clear that the erupting volcano was neither the only, nor the worst, disaster that the border region had undergone that afternoon.

Along the border, seven other locations had either exploded, collapsed, or undergone dramatic events involving Dragons. It was nearly impossible to piece it all together, but from what Karl could decipher, the location where the Frost Stone had exploded when they looted the statue had exploded again, only this time it had released a massive Frost Dragon, every bit as angry as the Magma Dragon at the volcano was.

It had rampaged through the front lines, uncaring of whether the target was a Giant or a Human, and then flown off into the Frost Giant nation surrounded by a storm that hid everything within fifty kilometres from observation.

Karl couldn't see any logic in the Frost Giants setting those dragons free, and from the number of incidents, it did seem likely that it was their intention to set the Dragons free. Either that, or they had been trying to steal the powers of sealed Dragons, and that was even more insane, as the other Dragons would see that as an insult to their entire species.

The humans might have successfully hid through such blunders, but the Frost Giants wouldn't be capable of finding a safe spot to hide and wait for the Dragons to calm down.

They didn't quite have to travel past the spot they had gotten the first statue from, but it was still nearly dark when they made it to the Dwarven Village on their "Fastest Travel" route.

The entrance was heavily snowed in, and they had to have the Spider Golems dig to uncover the entrance of its layer of hardened ash and snow before they could enter. Then, they piled it back over the entrance, and let Remi's Blizzard layer more snow on top to hide the fact that they were ever there.

They could hear the other team inside, the Mackenzie brothers laughing and joking, while the three other voices were much more nervously making remarks about the radio messages.

"Good evening lady and gentlemen. We have returned." Karl announced as they walked down the tunnel and into the village, forcing him to return his beasts to their space, as they could not cross the threshold between the tunnel and the cavern.

"Good to see you all intact. We thought for certain you were going to be blasted to the moon when that mountain erupted. How did you make it out in time?" Bob asked, curiosity clear in his pale eyes.

"We never made it to the top at all. The Magma Dragon broke free while we were climbing the slope, so we turned around and ran." Karl replied with a shrug.

"Good call. Doug here has been doing some research as a Nature Priest, and he has found an interesting fact about the dragons that were spotted today." Bob agreed, then gestured for his brother to explain.

"Not all the spots that we heard of incidents from were known to have a Dragon present, but the ones that did were the prisons of Dragons who had gone against the Gods or the Elders. They are the Rebels, who would kill without reason or mercy.

Now, it doesn't take a genius to realize that there aren't enough Frost Giants to take this border in any sort of reasonable timeframe. Their allies are the real threats here, and they might be the driving force behind the invasion.

All that Command can tell us is that the Frost Giants attacked first, and that the Giant Clans are working together, so I've made a few conjectures of my own.

First, The Frost Giants are idiots, but strong with Shamanistic Magic. They're using that to expand their borders. Second, they set up a bunch of locations of power on top of buried rebel Dragons, and the general assumption would be that they intended to set them loose against the human armies.

But that's not what I think. I think that they were set up. That they were told that these were places of power, and not that they contained insane ancient Dragons, who would kill their soldiers as readily as ours."

Doug paused to catch his breath, while everyone else absorbed the ideas that he had shared.

Dana looked confused. "You think the other Giant Clans set them up to fail, and just wanted the Dragons to make this entire area uninhabitable?"

Doug shook his head. "No, I think that they intended to make this area the territory of the Rogue Dragons, and wipe out the Frost Giants, while also giving the humans nowhere to retreat to when the other Clans moved in to crush us.

It's not a secret that the Giant Clans never got along all that well, and they only ever cooperated because they viewed themselves as better than everyone else.

This could very well be the Giant Clan version of politics, and we're caught in the middle of it."

Karl frowned. "Then what do we do?"

"Do? We try not to die. The main lines are gone, dispersed, in hiding. If the Frost Giants arranged this, they will be marching through here in a matter of days with an entire city full of Giants. But from the direction that those two dragons were going, and the amount of fire off in the distance, I don't think that is the case.

If their plan was to gain allies in the Dragons, they picked the wrong ones. That Frost Dragon might be on their side, but the Magma Dragon? They're essentially mortal enemies. Their elements are completely opposed to the point that one cannot survive where the other one lives." Doug explained with a deep frown as he tried to make sense of the situation.

"Well, if the amount of ash that is dropping on the area is any indication, the snow won't last for long. The fires were already starting as the snow melted, and the volcano is still going off. How long do those eruptions even last, anyhow?" Karl asked.

Doug and Lotus both shrugged, before Doug answered. "Usually, it's just one big blast, and then there will be lava flows for a few more weeks, but with a blast this massive it will take days or weeks for the sky to clear. Perhaps that's why the Frost Dragon flew away, it wouldn't have wanted to be in that ash cloud any more than we do.

But if that eruption is being fuelled by an angry Magma Dragon, the ash won't cool, it will get hotter, and the cloud will continue to spread. Soon, we won't have to worry about being cold."

Bob looked toward the direction where the eruption was still taking place, as if he could see it through the stone of the mountain. "That's all well and good, but it doesn't answer the question that both of our teams were sent here to learn the answer to. Where did the Frost Giants get the power to expand the borders, and how do we undo it?"

Karl smiled. "I should have guessed that you got reassigned here for the same reason that I was here. We thought that it was the Frost Stones, and that if we could reverse whatever we were doing, or steal enough of the focal points, it would reverse the effect, and let the snow begin to recede."

Bob smiled. "Of course, our missions weren't quite the same. We were strictly here to find a way to reverse the effects, while I am under the impression that you were here to find the underlying cause. That wasn't what they asked of us."

Lotus giggled. "I wonder if [Huge pissed off dragon melted everything with a volcano] is enough to get the bonus for reversing the cold effect?"

That made Bob's whole group laugh. "I suspect that they won't let us claim credit for this one without explaining how we set the dragons loose, and then we would have to take responsibility for that as well."

Lotus waved her hands. The word 'responsibility' was anathema to the Green Dragon's followers and other Nature Priestesses.

Harry, the warrior with the ice blue eyes that came with the Mackenzie Brothers, looked toward the entrance, which was now ominously silent as the door had been buried by ash and snow.

"Hey, how long do you think that we will be stuck in here? I mean, we have radio signal still, but I get the feeling that going outside in the next few days will not be easy or wise." He asked.

Doug just shrugged. "It's a volcanic eruption, they can't give us crap for being buried inside. But fortunately, we have a spot far inside the mountain because that hot ash would make it distinctly uncomfortable in a smaller cave, even if you escaped the fires."

Chapter 292 In The Mountain

[All units along the volcanic line, we are reforming one hundred kilometres from the border. When it is safe, make your way back toward the reformed line outside the burn zone. Units who are unable to retreat, sound off for attempted rescue.] The line General requested over the radio the next morning.

Karl looked over at Bob Mackenzie, who just shrugged.

"We're pretty much fine where we are, we're not going to be affected by the fires in here, the Dwarves planned for things like that. So, we might as well just wait it out, as we're already in front of the main lines." He suggested.

[Line Command, this is 95988, we are isolated in front of the lines, past the fire threat. We will shelter in place until the situation is resolved.] Karl informed them, right before Doug called in to inform them of the same thing.

If Command suspected that they were together, they didn't say anything, only confirming that they wanted the two teams to continue daily check-in protocol, so they could confirm that they were alive and well.

The other soldiers and Elites were quickly escaping from the area as the snow melted, and the forests began to burn under the hot ash, which seemed to be intensifying, instead of dissipating, as it should have after an eruption.

The Magma Dragon was still somewhere in the area and staking his claim on the region around the volcano, adapting it to more perfectly suit his personality and racial environment requirements.

He was a proud and ancient being, locked away for a millennium, and now that he was free, it was obvious to the two nature priests that the Dragon intended to make himself a new home right where he had been imprisoned.

"It would be nice if we could get communications from further away. Now that they're retreating, it's not going to be easy to even get the daily communications out to the lines. There is a channel for long distance, low-quality communications, but that won't let us hear any of the news from the other fronts, only get our signal through to the lines in Morse code." Bob explained.

The rest of the group gave him blank looks and he laughed.

"There is a translation on the radio, it's a series of long and short tones. It makes it easier to understand distant signals, and the Command Staff will have both an automatic decoder and an expert on hand to translate signals. It's only to be used for urgent messages, and you keep it brief.

Normally, what we would send would be something like our name and then all alive." He explained.

Not long after, the radio signals on the main channels started to get less frequent, as the teams that could be recovered were led to safety. The ash was clogging up the vehicles and making it hard to breathe, but a mage or cleric barrier made it relatively safe to keep moving, as long as you weren't too close to the volcano, where the Dragon's magic was already imbued into the ash, and causing it to burn through barriers.

Bob laughed as the radio finally had a moment of silence, with nobody attempting to transmit. "This might be the most relaxing mission I've been on in a while."

Tessa chuckled at the notion. "Only for the next few days. Things are going to get hectic again after the Frost Giants regroup and try to eliminate that Dragon from their border. They might even come back with the Frost Dragon."

Karl considered that for a moment. Their elements lined up, and the dragon had flown off into their territory, but that was no guarantee that they were on the same team. In fact, if they really had been trying to siphon power from the Dragons, they might have made a new enemy of the creature.

Karl took some time to work on rebuilding the energy focus in all the beast spaces, and noticed that Remi had made some interesting alterations to her swamp. There was a miniature swamp within the swamp, using sprigs of the various plants and small rocks, so she could slither through it like she was a giant snake, as tall as the trees.

It was cute, like a child's playhouse, and Remi looked happy with her construction, so Karl didn't mention anything about it as he continued to build the power in the spaces. It would still be quite some time before she was fully grown, but the other three were slowly moving up through Commander rank and didn't seem to be limited by anything yet.

It was simply a matter of time, lots of time, until they managed to advance again.

The large Frost Stone that Thor had obtained had been transferred to Remi's space, and was serving as the focal point behind a platform like the one that the Naga Bosses in the dungeon had been standing on.

Remi had the book that Ophelia had found opened on the platform, where she had built up a set of strange statues. They had been placed around the perimeter of the space, and she was currently working on some sort of skill, Karl assumed. She was intensely focused on something, and she was adjusting the position of the items on her platform, then focusing again, and making more adjustments.

Comparatively, Hawk was making small flying mice out of his fire, Thor was napping in his pond full of Holy Stones, and Rae was carefully rearranging the corpses strung up in her forest.

It took a while for Karl to understand what the little snake was up to, but Remi was trying to create a Totem. Each of the stacks of stuff was designed to represent something, and she had even made a bunch out of mud, then adorned them with shiny things to get them just right.

He couldn't tell what sort of effect she was going for, but it looked like the Frost Stone had been permanently changed by the magic of the Magma Dragon.

Even now that it had cooled her her swamp, the stone was still glowing red and not ice blue, though it was still giving off a strong sense of magic. Perhaps that was why Remi was having so much trouble trying to get her totem experiment to work, but as she was basing it off the ones that Ophelia made, there was a chance that she would need to make extensive modifications anyhow to make a Shaman type totem.

It didn't really matter if she was successful, though. Remi had found a learning project that was keeping her attention for more than five minutes, and that alone was impressive.

Even if most of it was just making statues of herself out of clay and then decorating them to see if they would become magical. It seemed a bit silly, but it was making her happy, and the fact that there were dozens of little Remi statues around the platform now was highly entertaining to the other beasts.

Among the humans, everyone had a hobby to pass the time as they waited. Karl had chosen to meditate to work on his strength, as had the three clerics, though they had taken a mid-afternoon break to play with the beasts before focusing again.

They were just beginning to relax for the evening, secure in the fact that they were underground with the entrance to their bunker buried under ash, when a roaring from above them caught everyone's attention.

It wasn't the deep roar of the Magma Dragon, it sounded smaller, but similar in tone.

Then there were more roars in the distance, and the sound of flapping wings.

Doug laughed as the dragon flew away. "I hope that's a territory fight about to break out. Because if that idiot of a Magma Dragon has attracted a mate already, it's going to take forever before it's safe to leave the mountain."

That was a thought that hadn't occurred to them before. The Magma Dragon was turning the area into a perfect nest for himself, but what if there was another single Magma Dragon in the area?

It seemed unlikely, as there were no other volcanic areas that Karl knew of, but anything could seem possible if you knew little enough about how the world worked. And he knew exactly zero about how Magma Dragon mating rituals worked.

Whatever happened, it was in the distance because they didn't hear anything else that night other than a few more messages from the lines, reporting that there were no Frost Giants approaching their new position today, and that the black cloud of ash was still blotting out the sky.

Once that changed, and the ash began to cool, they would head out to see what survived.

Chapter 293 Remi's Dedication

The first of them to see success in their endeavours that week was Remi. On the third day after they had hidden inside the village to wait out the volcanic fallout, she managed to reach a level of success with her Totems that none of the others had expected.

"Well, did you find something good in the book?" Karl asked as the overjoyed Spirit Snake came outside to show off for everyone at the same time.

Remi shook her head, and gave a smile that made her fangs drop, startling the members of the other group, except for Doug, who had been expecting it.

She focused hard, glowing with red energy for a moment, and then a small Lamia statue appeared on the ground.

It was four-armed, with brown scales and a cream underside, where Karl had been expecting it to be blue and gold like Remi herself, but the head definitely looked like Remi.

The statue just sat there, looking almost lifelike, until Remi asked Karl for some help.

[I need a target.] She explained.

"Remi needs a target for her spell." Karl informed the others, causing Dana to create her two Golems for the Spirit Snake to work with.

"There you go, Remi. Show us what you've got." The mage laughed, unsure what the statue was actually going to be able to do against a Golem. Unless it was a form of Golem itself.

The totem rotated to face the Golems, and then began spitting flaming balls at the Golems, leaving them scorched and dripping with some sort of thick burning liquid.

[Flaming Serpent Totems. They burn and poison!] Remi declared proudly.

After a dozen fireballs over the course of thirty seconds, the Golems were looking ready to crumble and the totem vanished, but that was more than enough for the group to see what they could do.

"Burning poison? That's a new one, I thought she was an Ice Element creature with a secondary lightning attack?" Doug asked.

"She's a Shaman Class creature. A natural-born Spirit Snake Shaman." Karl explained.

"So, she's basically an Elemental caster, with a full range? Those totems will be a game changer for ambushes. They can be left behind, and they will attack enemies without putting anyone in danger." Doug realized.

Remi's shock startled Karl. She had never considered using them that way.

[How were you thinking they should be used?] Karl asked the little snake, curious as to how her mind worked.

[You put them on your backpack, and they fire poison fireballs at anything trying to bother you.]

Hawk laughed in amusement. There was no doubt about it, he had been the inspiration for that totem, sitting on Dana's backpack and firing fireballs.

[Maybe stupid snake isn't as stupid as I thought.] He mused, keeping the communication as a whisper between him and Karl, so Remi couldn't hear him.

"Remi says she thought they would be good if you put them on your backpack, so they would go where you go, and protect the group. They only last thirty seconds or so right now, but I think that with some practice and time, that can be extended." Karl relayed to the group.

"Oh, that's not bad. A defensive snake totem." Ophelia agreed, then frowned.

The totems were too small to see over her head when she was in bear form. But they could at least watch her back or something, she guessed.

But just casting them on the ground to the sides of the fight would be good enough for most situations. It would allow them to attack without being in the way, and like her own totems, which expired quickly when she wasn't fighting, they could be constantly moved to be in the best position for the current situation.

Totems were easily crushed, and these ones would be targeted because they actually did damage, so you wanted to keep them some distance away from the main fight.

If the enemy had to turn their back on you to crush the attacking totems, you got free swings at them while they were defenceless.

"Once things calm down, I will work with Remi to show her all the ways that you can use Totems in a fight." The Bear Totem Berserker announced with a smile.

She didn't have any offensive totems yet, but her class was known to gain them once they reached Commander Rank.

The advancement made by Remi served as motivation for everyone else, and they all increased their training that week, as they waited for news from outside that the ash cloud was beginning to dissipate.

The fires were raging through the mountains, only stopping when they reached natural firebreaks like rocky cliffs or wide rivers. That had turned a huge chunk of the mountain range around the Volcano into an uninhabitable nightmare, and there were reports from the scouts that there were Fire Elemental creatures roaming the area when they went to inspect it.

If nothing else, that should keep the Frost Giants away, but the ash cloud was lingering much longer than it should have, and wasn't spreading out to darken the skies over as wide of an area as the radio reports suggested they were expecting.

The Dwarven Village had proven to be an incredible radio antenna after Doug had attached their antenna to a vein of metal on one wall, and they were able to receive, but not easily transmit, clear signals even the hundred kilometres from the new front line.

The rest of the front line wasn't that lucky. The spots where there was no massive ash cloud, or enraged Magma Dragon, were facing intensified assaults from the Frost Giants, who had been displaced from a few unfriendly areas along the border.

Now that they only had a few areas to launch their assault through, the Frost Giants hadn't given up. They had only focused their reinforcements on the more hospitable areas, which was giving everyone a headache.

The defenders couldn't afford to transfer too many soldiers, in case the Frost Giants moved back to the less friendly portions of the border, but they needed as many as they could get on the portions of the line where the attacks were still taking place.

From what Karl could tell, further down the border between the two nations, there had been another incident of some sort, and the Frost Giants had completely retreated, ceding the area to the Hill Giants after the snow melted.

That put their current position near the southeastern end of the battle lines, with a large Frost Giant city supplying new troops constantly, as a staging point for their invasion.

On the tenth day, the ash cloud began to dissipate, and the temperature of the falling ash dropped until it stopped sparking spontaneous wildfires. There was still a layer of blowing ash all over the region, sustained by the Dragon's magic so it would never truly fade, but what was blowing out of its territory wasn't harmful to anything but a housekeeper's sanity.

That was their sign. The worst of it was over, and the reports said that they were outside the dragon's territory, so the falling ash should have mostly ended, though they were still close enough to get some blowing at them.

"Shall we go see what is outside, and get back to work dealing with the Frost Giants? We can strike what dares to come close to these hills and return here every evening." Bob Mackenzie suggested.

Karl nodded. "That works for me. We can work our way into the Frost Giant nation and attack troop patrols as one large unit, to cut down on the number of reinforcements that the main line is getting.

They're still being drowned in numbers by the weaker Giants, so there is almost certainly at least one more of the summoning spots active. If we can trace it back, we might be able to do something about it."

Tori and Ty both gave Karl matching looks that said he was insane, but a strong desire for vengeance burned in Tessa's eyes.

"I owe them for the broken arm. Do you have any idea how much that hurt? If it wasn't for Tessa being clear of the ridge, I likely would have lost it before I could get it in place and healed." She growled.

The Ranger sighed, narrowing his black eyes as he stared at the War Cleric, trying to decipher her intentions.

"Well, if there are the ten of us, we should be alright. They normally send their reinforcements in groups of ten, so even if we hit an all Commander group, it won't be too bad." He eventually agreed, holding his objections when he saw how serious the Cleric was about her vengeance against the summoning spells.

Chapter 294 The Path More Travelled

Getting out of the cave required shovels with a magical barrier over them, as the falling ash had hardened into a layer that would put the average concrete wall to shame, and the layer was over a metre thick.

That didn't bode well for what was outside, where they found that the trees had been mostly spared from the fire this far from the volcano, but there were still signs of scorching, and the undergrowth was completely gone, so the trees themselves might be dead within the next few months if they couldn't get water through the ash.

Karl wasn't certain how porous the newly fallen ash would be, but once they were outside, he realized that the upper layers were all soft black dust, like an upper layer of dirt, and there would likely be things growing here soon enough. If that was the case, the trees would likely be able to grow new roots to survive, even if the ash layer didn't let much water through.

Doug looked around. "Well, this isn't as bad as I feared. We're outside the dead zone, and the ash didn't burn down the forest around us, though the trees are pretty scorched, and I see that some of them boiled off and exploded.

If we head a few more kilometres, we should be out of the ash entirely, and that will be where we run into Frost Giant reinforcements skirting the destruction. They don't deal well with heat or Fire Magic, as I'm sure we all remember."

Hawk laughed in his space. No, they did not like Fire Magic at all.

The combined group made their way forward, now able to keep Rae and Thor out, as the smaller trees were gone, and all the underbrush was buried under the ash. It would make it a bit harder to hide their tracks back to the Dwarven Village, but the Frost Giants would be hesitant to follow them inside anyhow.

They weren't too concerned about humans finding the place and making a mess, as there weren't any others reported to be in the area. They were way behind the enemy lines, and the Frost Giants hadn't been attacking through the ash zone at all, so the scouts stopped where the ash started.

It was the perfect setup for them to hunt. Nobody in the way, nobody to ask questions if they did something strange, or give them trouble about going in a combined group instead of as two separate teams.

Karl sent Hawk up, and the bird immediately found that there were teams of Frost Giants spread out all the way to the horizon, and all headed this way from the city, going for the next section of front line, near where the first explosion had happened.

With the hills and scattered trees, most of the groups couldn't see each other, so if they timed their attacks right, they wouldn't even alarm other groups, despite the hundreds of Frost Giants that were spread out through the hills.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, we're in luck. There are more Frost Giants out there than we know what to do with, and they're free for the taking. We're inside their borders without a scout in sight, anything we kill is ours." Karl announced.

"And what are you planning to gain from this?" Harry Kim, the warrior with the Mackenzie brothers team, asked curiously.

"Hopefully, another smashing tool, or maybe a chopping one. I've got a two-handed blade and a Maul from the Giants so far, but I think that there is a chance we can all load up on special weapons before we run out of Frost Giants to kill." Karl laughed.

Tessa smirked. "Plus, there is a maximum of two Giant Strength type items that a warrior pattern Elite can use. A ring and a bracelet or bracers. You can't double up on identical items for each arm, they won't grant you anything, but you can use them with a different effect on the other hand.

I notice that neither you nor Ty have one yet, even though we dumped a bunch of them with the main lines, so we should get you some loot."

Lotus nodded. "Plus some of the good white cloaks. These things are nice and warm, and they blend in with the snow very well. We might not be the most stealthy, but if they even confuse us with allies for a moment, it can help us get close."

Karl led the group toward the closest team of ten Frost Giants, who looked like the Ascended type with a Commander in charge.

They met with them just as the Frost Giants reached the bottom of a valley, letting themselves be easily ambushed by the Spider Golems, while Remi got the chance to try out her backpack totem theory.

The totem appeared on Dana's bag, and for a few seconds, it was spectacular. The totem was firing just as intended. Then Dana moved, and the totem fell to the ground, still working fine, but no longer mobile.

[Noted. They need to be attached or something. But they don't last long enough. Maybe the Bear lady was right. I should put them at the edge of the fight.] Remi decided.

That was what she did with the second batch, and it worked much better. Three of the Frost Giants turned to face the new threat, and were promptly stabbed through the back by the Spider Golems.

"That's just brutal." Tori gasped as she saw the fountain of blue blood from the heart strikes by the Golems.

"Effective though." Dana agreed.

Even with Hawk up high and scouting for their next target, the fight was over before the second group of Totems faded away, leaving Harry and Bob with smiles on their faces.

"Now that's the sort of fight that a defensive warrior appreciates. Short and brutal, not drawn out while a Frost Giant kicks my ass." Bob chuckled.

"It's certainly an improvement on fighting them while outnumbered. Where is the next group? We might as well keep moving." Harry agreed.

"This way. Don't forget to check the corpses for magical items. We will leave the bodies, so we can get as many as possible here today." Karl reminded them.

In this formation, Thor was moved to support, protecting the clerics and mages, while moving to keep everyone in his Circle of Protection. Ty and Karl stood on the flanks, as they both had bows, while Bob, Harry and Dana's Golems were the front line, with Rae and her Golems as the ambush attackers. Ophelia moved wherever she felt needed, keeping the warriors from being pressed too hard, or joining the Spider Golems in their attacks from behind.

The second group went much like the first one, but the third they timed incorrectly, and they managed to make a stand on top of a hill, which attracted other Frost Giants, who saw that they were under attack.

"Do we try to fade into the trees, so that those two groups waiting for each other don't come at us together?" Harry asked as they saw the Frost Giants adjusting their course and speed.

Bob shook his head. "We have the advantage in attack power, we move left and go to them. Hit them just as they're beginning the search for us, before they can get settled into their roles on the combined team."

"This one has a Giant strength ring, for whoever needs it." Tori cut in, and Karl could see the effort it was taking her not to fall into her customary flirting routine. She really was trying to be a proper party member.

Or so he thought. She had slipped and made a suggestive comment to Bob on the second day in the cave. In response, he told her that he didn't like flirtatious little girls, which was a harsh blow to her ego. But Tori did like big, muscular, stoic men, so she was trying to show him that she wasn't just some ditsy teen mage.

The end result was that she was turning into a competent team member, so everyone else assumed she really had turned over a new leaf, which made it a small victory all around.

"Same pattern as before. Remi, make sure your Totems are far enough from the group that the Giants can't just stomp them. We will strike as soon as Rae is in position." Karl instructed.

Remi could only keep two totems active at a time, but two streams of fireballs while she cast her Chain Lightning was more than enough to put her on even ground with the Ascended Mages in the group.

That was enough for Karl, but Hawk and his opinion that beasts were better teammates than humans had stuck in Remi's head, and she wanted to prove to Karl that he could rely on her, even if she was still small.

Chapter 295 Totems and Spears

The group rushed the Frost Giants, who were ready for their approach, but not for the dirty tricks that the team was about to pull on them.

First, the appearance of the two snake totems pulled their attention to one side, as fire and venom invaded their bodies, amplifying the pain of the Chain Lightning. Then, once the left flank was distracted, the Spider Golems hit from the back, causing chaos in the ranks before Rae herself was into the right flank of the Frost Giants.

She was laughing as she dodged a long spear that one of the Giants was holding, completely removing one of the two Commanders from the fight, and forcing the formation to spread out, to avoid being in the way of his attacks.

With [haste], the Giant had no chance of actually landing a solid hit on the nimble Bloodbath Spider unless she got closer to him, but that wasn't her goal. She just wanted the real fighters out of the way while her minions took care of the weaklings.

Then, she got a brilliant idea. A stream of silk wrapped the spear, and with her forelegs, she pulled it free of the Giant's hands as he lunged forward on the attack. Then she fired her own volley of [Spears] back at him, small spikes that peppered him with heavily bleeding wounds.

[Where is your spear goddess now?] Rae laughed, and Karl felt an ominous sense of attention in the back of his mind, as if they had insulted something that could look down on them from another plane of existence.

[Maybe don't insult war goddesses?] Karl suggested as Rae hurled mental insults at the enraged Frost Giant, who was finding it impossible to catch her.

[Then I will make him give the pointy stick to our War Cleric and have her teach the Frost Giants how to use one.] Rae retorted.

She whipped the strand of silk, sending the spear flying clumsily toward the clerics.

"Tessa, catch. She says it's for you, since a Cerro Knight needs a lance." Karl joked.

Though she was confused, Tessa caught the flying spear, which instantly bonded with her, creating a golden shafted and silver headed spear that looked infinitely more impressive than the crudely enchanted item the Frost Giant had been using.

Instead of a crude metal wedge, the spear now had wide, three sided blades as long as her forearm at the tip, with a hooked crossbar, like a boar spear, to keep it from running all the way through the target.

The spear glowed with Holy Light as she hopped up on Thor's back and led the Lightning Cerro on a charge into the Frost Giant Ranks with her spear levelled and her shield in her other hand.

The warriors laughed at the sight, but when she thrust the spear forward, and the blade sunk into a Commander Rank Frost Giant to the crossbar, then carried him off his feet with the momentum of a charging Thor, they couldn't help but be impressed.

The Spider Golems closed on Thor's flanks, so nothing could attack him as Tessa shook the spear free of her target, and they came around for a second charge.

"It's a spear, not a lance, you don't have to run them through." Bob yelled as the duo charged at the Giants again.

Thor bugled an annoyed response. Running them through was way more fun than just stabbing them. But with quick thrusts of the blade, Tessa attacked the Frost Giants, letting Thor run down the ones he wanted, so she could stab them while they were on the ground.

If Thor was going to remain as a charger, he was going to need some practice. The happy prancing was not at all dignified.

The second charge carried them out of Rae's side of the battle, while the Ascended Rank Giants scattered and tried to survive the affections of the Spider Golems chasing after Thor. As for actual damage, it might not be the most effective. But as a chaos tactic for breaking an enemy formation, Thor's method was unparalleled.

The Frost Giants didn't last much longer, and the next group was still over a kilometre away, on the other side of the ridge, when the last of them fell.

"Check the bodies quickly for other good things. There are more Giants coming. Thor, this time you and Tessa are in reserve. Stay back unless you need to charge to rescue the warriors, but no charging right through the lines." Karl admonished.

Thor nodded and stomped his feet. He was a good Cerro, he would help however they needed, even if it meant all barriers and no smashing.

[You can come forward and smash them with Tessa if they try to run away at the end.] Karl allowed, knowing it would make Thor happy.

The next group came over the ridge as they were finishing the looting process, and Thor promptly forgot his instructions, and opted to go with Tessa's motion to charge into battle with the Spider Golems.

Karl realized that he really should have told Tessa as well, to prevent exactly this, but the Stone Golems were on their way forward, and the combination of a rampaging Lightning Cerro and two Spider Golems had taken out the Commander before the reinforcement group even realized that they were in trouble.

Then the arrows from Karl and Ty reached them, sending Lightning and fire into their ranks, while the warriors moved to flank the existing front-line formation. The spear seemed to have an affinity for Tessa, and it adjusted from two to three metres long with a thought as she fought the Frost Giants, giving her the reach she needed in battle, while also shortening enough that she could still stab them when Thor got up close and personal.

Insulting war deities might not be the brightest thing they had ever done, but it seemed to have worked out well for their War Cleric.

Once the battle was over, everyone took a break to refresh while Lotus made them a light snack and some fresh water.

Harry smirked at Tessa as she rested against Thor's flank.

"You know, you have to be the least cleric like Priestess that I've ever met." He joked.

"You just aren't around the Red Dragon Priestesses enough. We love to fight, we just don't often get as many great opportunities as I do. If I was the only cleric in the group, I wouldn't be able to charge into combat with Thor, I would have to hang back, as the group couldn't afford to have me injured.

But with two others, including a High Priest, it's no problem at all if I buff up and head for the front line. During the consolidation wars, many of the Red Dragon Priests fought that way, with healers in the back

and the War Clerics up front among the warriors, keeping offensive buffs active and defensive blessings spread through those who needed them most."

Harry nodded. "The War Clerics have always been a bit nuts, but nobody doubts their bravery. The golden standard for military units is that they shouldn't retreat until the War Clerics tell them to. If they can last until the Red Dragon's Clerics think it's best, then they've done all you could ask of them."

Harry held up a blade, then caused it to vanish into his inventory, coming back as a slightly oversized sword, but still usable single-handed with a shield.

"Nice, nothing too special, but a freezing effect on a Commander Rank blade will serve me well for many years after I get out of this frozen shithole." He explained.

Bob gave him a celebratory pat on the back. "You can't argue with that. Once we finish here, freezing the enemy will work much better."

He had a good point. Once they were outside the Frost Giant Nation, freezing effects were going to be incredibly effective. Most creatures could be easily slowed or encased in ice if the magic was strong enough, it just didn't affect the Frost Giants and Yeti the same way, due to their Ice Elemental nature.

"How many more groups will we hit today?" Lotus asked as they finished the cleanup work.

Karl shrugged. "I say that we head back just after lunch. We're going to have to start moving back and forth to get the groups, as they're not all following the same path, so we will want to be back for an early dinner."

There were no arguments to that suggestion. They had been sitting for days, and the first day back they had been working hard to eliminate the Frost Giants. An early dinner and a long rest were just what they needed to be ready to target a new region tomorrow.

After all, hitting the same one every time would only cause the Frost Giants to avoid it.

Chapter 296 Still The Same

Tessa frowned down at the body of their last kill of the day. The Frost Giant was a Commander, one of the many team leaders that they had killed that day, and unfortunately, identical in appearance to the others under the war paint.

Doug stepped up beside her, and turned the corpse's head to one side with his boot.

"It would have been better if they were different looking." He grumbled, agreeing with Tessa's silent complaint.

"Well, we can say for certain that they still have the means to summon more Frost Giants, and we now have a decent idea where they are coming from." Lotus added helpfully.

Karl checked a corpse for magical items before he joined the conversation. "And once we radio in for the evening, Command will know as well, but I'm not certain what they will be able to do about it. From the sound of things, this front is being withdrawn further every day, and the number of actual elites on the line is nearly nonexistent now.

They have been called away to the other fronts, and the regular army has been left to deal with the Frost Giants."

The battle wasn't lost. In fact, it was far from it. What the army was doing was luring the Frost Giants down out of the mountains, where they could shell the enemy lines with impunity.

They did have to evacuate a few villages, but that was a minor loss in the grand scheme of things, and the relocation would cost them less than a day's worth of wasted munitions if the Frost Giants continued to hide in the hills.

The same General was responsible for this section of the line, and it sounded like he had gotten a single Elite strike team to stay with him for security reasons, but almost all the other scouts had been swapped for regular soldiers with a battle cleric.

The change was obvious to anyone in range, as the radio call in patterns were different for the Elites, who gave their number, and the Clerics working for the army, who gave a team designation by regiment and company.

Theirs was the only regular daily check-in that was still coming to that position by Elite number, and they were considered to be too far behind enemy lines to be extracted, so the army just accepted the numbers that Karl and Bob gave for the day without question.

They certainly weren't going to send anyone out here to find out for sure, and they didn't want the teams to stop hunting if they were giving accurate numbers. Intercepting them in small groups before they got to the main lines was much more effective, it seemed, than hitting them with artillery.

Once they were safely back in the village for the night, they began drawing up a map of the Frost Giant reinforcement routes, and marking them the same way that the officers marked the battle lines. It still seemed like the best way to do it, but with so few details on their map, anyone else who read it might not even understand what they were looking at.

"So, what do you think, should we go for a spot near the other attacks, or should we go all the way over here, to make it look like there are multiple groups hidden in their territory?" Karl asked with a gesture to the map.

Bob pointed further down the border. "I think that we should hit them over here, so they believe that it might be something coming out of the ash zone and killing their reinforcements. They would naturally suspect it, and it would make for a good cover, instead of sending them looking for humans immediately."

Karl looked to the others, and they nodded in agreement.

"Alright, that sounds like the best plan we've got. I will have Hawk scout the area in the morning, and we can attack the Frost Giants further down the border, closest to the ash wastes, first."

With their plan made, they settled in for the evening, keeping a light watch from inside the village. The cave mouth was open now, as the presence of snow over the ash would actually make it easier to find them instead of harder.

But when they arrived, the cave was open and nothing had ever disturbed it, so none of them were too concerned about it, especially with the Spider Golems standing watch in the tunnel all night, prepared to deal with anything that might try to attack them.

Karl didn't have a turn on watch that night, so he woke up to the smell of breakfast cooking, and Hawk's first morning scouting report.

[We don't need to go down by the border. There are no Frost Giants there. The glowing red things ate them.] He reported.

[Glowing red things?]

[Maybe Fire Elementals? They are red, they burn everything they touch, and they really like turning Frost Giants into ash when they get too close to the border.] Hawk replied.

"Hawk says that there are Fire Elementals in the ash wastes, and they are attacking the Frost Giants who get too close. Going there to fight them might get us attacked, but there aren't any more Frost Giants there this morning, even if we wanted to go look for them." Karl explained to the others.

"How did he describe them?" Doug asked.

"Red and glowing, on fire, and they burn everything they touch."

Doug nodded. "Ask him if they look solid. They might be Magma Elementals, a hybrid earth and fire species. They're common in magically rich volcanos, and the Magma Dragon might have been nurturing them. It makes sense that they would serve as the guards for his territory, but we need to know for certain before we report it.

If it is a proper Fire Elemental, it looks like living flames and just moves through the air without anything to burn."

[Yeah, that first thing sounds right. They're kind of small, but really hot. They go dark red, almost black when they touch the Frost Giants, but when a bunch of them do it, the whole giant burns to nothing.]

Karl relayed the message, and Doug relayed it back to the main lines.

"We are going to have to change our plans. If we're working near the ash wastes, we should burn all the bodies, so the Giants can't tell if the group was eliminated by us or the elementals. If we're further out, we can leave them like usual and work through them at a higher rate.

More importantly, we need to pick a new area to target for the day. If this is the first time that the creatures of the Ash Wastes attacked out into the snow, then it might be the start of a new conflict as the Dragon attempts to expand his own space as well.

Or, they might have just been too close for comfort, and his minions were defending their border. The Elementals have an innate hatred for water and ice element magic." Bob explained as Doug sent the reports back to headquarters.

[Understandable.] Hawk replied as Karl explained the situation to the beasts.

When it came to elemental affinities, Hawk was definitely on the side of the Magma Elementals, but it was more important that the Frost Giants not know that they were being hunted from this particular edge of the Ash Wastes.

If the Frost Giants thought that this was the weaker end of the Dragon's defences, and not just an outlying area covered in ash, then they might well send a full offensive here, and the ten of them didn't stand much chance if they were caught in the open by that.

Everyone knew it was a dangerous game they were playing, taunting so many of the Frost Giants. But the odds were strongly in their favour, as long as the Frost Giant army didn't know where they were sleeping.

[Combined team Mackenzie. Your intel is received. Hold for further updates. Three.]

The last bit didn't make sense to Karl when he heard it over the radio, but Doug smiled happily.

"Three is the number of days before they plan to take action. As that action involves us, we can guess that it's going to be an offensive of some sort, to try to push the Frost Giants back.

For all we know, the freezing enchantment might have been broken not only near us, but all along the line, and the borders might be returning to normal." The Nature Priest explained.

"Or they could be running short on clones, and the front lines are actually making progress." Tessa reminded them.

"Right. That brings us back to the topic of the day, what route are we going to ambush?" Karl agreed.

Chapter 297 Inland Route

Bob looked at the map and pointed well inland of any of the major routes.

"What if we don't ambush any of them, but instead, we zigzag across the pattern, as if we were a wandering monster pack being chased from place to place. It would confuse them with its disorganized nature, and it would let us search their territory to see if there are any signs of where they might be making the new clones.

I suspect that it is actually in the city, where we won't be able to easily get to the next summoning spell, but if it is still out in the wild, then there is a chance that we can break their reinforcements a little more, and not just by killing them in vast quantities.

If one spell can make a group every half hour, we would have to kill them every fifteen minutes during daylight hours just to keep up. That isn't feasible in the long term, so it would be better if we could find a way to either distract or delay them, assuming that there isn't a good way to stop the cloning."

Karl nodded. "That works for me. The main lines will thank us for every Frost Giant that we kill, and if we happen to find something that can stop them from continuing to make more attackers, it will be even better.

I know that we reported it, but who knows if High Command took it seriously enough that they are going to actually do something about it and not just throw more bodies on the line to face an unending tide of Frost Giants.

Eventually, even we will get tired and worn down by the fight, so anything that has a chance to change the balance is worth trying."

They led the group out again, hunting groups of Frost Giants, who were no more on guard than the first day back had been. That made no sense, as they hadn't cleaned up the bodies. They had to have passed at least a few dead groups of Giants on the way, but they hadn't taken any additional precautions, and they were barely paying attention to their surroundings.

But their inattentiveness began to make sense when the group reached the second path. The Giants there were almost running through the tundra toward their spots on the main lines. So, it wasn't that the first group was inattentive, they were all rushing, and the Frost Giants were just doing the best they could while following orders to make it to the front as soon as possible.

"Well, we should kill a few groups this way. We will still be fighting when the next group shows up at this rate, so we are going to eventually have to rush a fight so we can break free and make it to the next path." Bob realized as they prepared to fight again.

Doug shrugged, unconcerned. "We will do what we can. If it turns into a huge fight here, then it is what it is."

Ty and Harry gave him a look that said he should be concerned, as it would lead to an all-day fight until they were exhausted and made a mistake. But the Nature Priest had a level of confidence that they could only aspire to.

Today, Thor was pulled back to the second line, defending the casters, but by the time that the fourth group made it to their battle, that proved to be a valuable bit of foresight.

The Frost Giants pushed past the warriors, taking light wounds to shoulder them aside. If it hadn't been for Thor, they might have made it into the much less durable magic users, and that would have been a disaster.

With Thor's Lightning Barrier on them, they weren't just squishy and easily killed, but they didn't have Giant Strength, so they could end up being grabbed and hurled through the air, while they were unable to fight back.

But with Thor blocking, the Giants ended up boxed in, and were quickly dispatched by the arrows fired by Karl and Ty.

"This is a mess. Rae, finish those quickly, and we will withdraw to the first line, but further toward the city. That way, we can make a fighting retreat at the end of the day. We're not going to make it any further with so many Giants on the path today." Karl announced.

Hawk broke away from the fight to scout them a route to the next fight, assuming that they could get away from this one, but came back with bad news.

[There is no more first line today. They're all on this path. The Elementals have chased them away from the Ash Wastes.] He explained.

"Hawk says we have two routes worth of Frost Giants to fight. They abandoned the line closest to the dragon's territory." Karl informed the others.

Bob nodded. "Finish these as quickly as we can. If we can charge into the next group, we can take them by surprise. Advancing into them, so they don't see the other bodies, should give us a little bit of an advantage, and we can use all we can get.

When the day starts to wear us down, we will retreat toward the ash and see if they follow."

Karl burned extra mana to add [Flaming Body] to all the arrows, in addition to [Chain Lightning]. The extra damage took the Giants out fast enough that they still hadn't heard or seen any sign of the next group when the fight ended.

So, they charged forward, away from the growing pile of corpses and into fresh snow, where they could ambush the Frost Giants from inside of Remi's [Blizzard].

The change of pace was just what they needed, and the group picked up a new rhythm, hitting the Frost Giants hard, and then taking a short breather before charging into another group. They didn't move far between fights, just enough that the next group didn't realize that the blinding snow wasn't a natural phenomenon, as the day was windy, and blowing snow was a constant phenomenon in their lands.

They managed to keep the pace until the middle of the afternoon, when Hawk informed them that the flow of Giants was slowing, and that would give them a chance to retreat and hide before they got too hungry.

There wasn't enough of a break for them to sit down and eat a proper meal, so they had been snacking between fights. That was enough to keep going for a while, but it wasn't good for a whole day's worth of combat.

They weren't uncaring bureaucrats who saw fighters as data on a sheet, just numbers to be added and subtracted, so they would let the rest of the Frost Giants go, and take care of themselves first.

They were about to retreat when Lotus pulled an interesting item from the body of one of the Commander Rank team leaders.

"Check this out. I think that it's a drawing of the statue of the Allmother that Remi is holding on to. They're still looking for it, so there has to be something special about that particular statue." She announced as Rae flipped the tiny cleric onto her back for the run.

"Did we find anything similar on the others?" Karl asked as they jogged off toward a stand of trees closer to the ash covered lands near the volcano.

"No, The tube that it was in caught my eye because they never have scrolls or anything with them, and I'm not sure that they even have a written language to read. But it's just the drawing, so I don't know what they are planning to do when they find it. For all I know, it might be a drawing to get someone to make another statue." Lotus realized.

Karl shrugged and slowed his pace once they were out of sight behind the trees and headed into the ashes.

"Anything is possible, but my guess is that they can't recreate whatever magic is on the old one, so they want it back, and they've got the reinforcements looking for it. We just happened to find someone who didn't dispose of the instructions before leaving town." He offered.

Bob frowned as he replied, an expression that made him look much older than he actually was. "We will know more tomorrow. If there are more scrolls, then it's a new thing. If there aren't, then it was a one-off, and likely not so important.

But I get the feeling that the Giants are getting desperate. They are running to the lines, which could only mean that they are urgently needed. None of us heard anything on the radio, but that's no surprise, we can barely hear the messages from the closest front, and during the day, we can't even hear that."

[Despair is good. Let them suffer.] Rae cheered.

Chapter 298 Light Reinforcement Day

The radio reports of the soldiers on the line were so happy to have a reduction in the Frost Giant numbers that it felt cruel to report in their numbers that day.

The main lines were celebrating that the Frost Giant reinforcements were finally slowing down, but that all came to a crashing halt when they found out that it was only because Karl's merged group had killed hundreds of Giants today, and nearly prevented them from resupplying their lines.

That news was a shock all through the Command Structure. There was something definitely amiss with this double strength group, but none of them were privy to the details of the group's strength, other than their official rankings.

On paper, they didn't look like anything special. There was one extra cleric from the usual composition, but that shouldn't change the outcome of the fights in a highly positive way. If anything, it would normally reduce their efficiency, as the Clerics weren't known for their damage output among well-equipped Elites.

It was only among the average soldiers and the faithful on the line that they really shone as the beacons of power with their blessings.

So, the Generals in command of the Theatre were thoroughly baffled by the number of Frost Giants that the ten Elites were managing to kill. So much so, that they even sent a scout up the mountains to watch the Frost Giant city through binoculars.

They could see that the Giants were leaving the city, and then at various points, they just stopped coming over the hills. A few times, they did manage to get a view of the fighting, but it was so far in the distance that none of them could make it out clearly through the blinding snow.

Seeing all those Giants disappear before they could make it to the front lines was a wake-up call for the soldiers. The Elites in whatever group was hunting out there were even more scary than the groups of Frost Giants that they had been hoping not to run into during this mission.

But more than that, they could keep up their kill count all day long.

They seemed to have left the battlefield mid-afternoon, but you could only be in combat so long before becoming exhausted, and by the preliminary count of the scouts, they had killed hundreds of Giants in a single day, just as their reports had insisted.

Most of the top brass would not be happy to hear that, as they had thought that the threat was tapering off, and they could claim credit for their stalwart defence. But if it wasn't the case, then they were only resting while the Frost Giants found a new way around to attack their lines.

But for groups that had retreated, other than the two who were closest to the Volcano, it was a golden opportunity to move up to a better position. They could retake the best defensible spots and fortify them as much as possible while the numbers coming at them were lower than usual.

It might be their only chance, and they didn't know how long that group would be in the area. The suspicion was that it was an unannounced Royal Rank elite, and not two Commander led groups working together, as the official reports said.

If they had a Prince with them, it would make sense that they could mow through Frost Giants so quickly. But even two on one at the same rank, it would not be easy to defeat the groups fast enough to get out of the way before the next group was on you.

The sun faded from the sky, and the scouts bedded down for the night, hoping that Karl and his group would be back out in full force the next morning.

The next morning brought the Generals just the reprieve that they were hoping for. More disappearing Frost Giant reinforcements all along the paths leading to the closest sections of the line.

But what Karl and the others found was not nearly as encouraging.

Tessa sighed as she picked up a wooden tube with her spear. "That's the fifteenth one this morning. Every group leader, whether it's a Commander or an Ascended, has one of the drawings of the statue.

They are definitely hunting for it, and that means they're not going to give up until they either find it or run out of soldiers. But if they're still making more clones..." She trailed off, letting that sentiment linger.

If they were making more clones, they would never run out of troops, they would just keep hunting for the statue, or whoever had taken it.

Lotus shrugged. "At least the flow is lighter today. There are only a third as many groups as before, and that is with the first route blockaded by the Magma Elementals. I think that we might be able to push further forward, or up into the other routes, soon.

If we can find out where the ones who aren't coming this way are going, we can relay that back to the lines and maybe save some lives."

"Don't you think that it's getting warmer here? I mean, it's still frigid, but it is definitely warmer here than it was a few days ago." Doug noted as they fought.

"I think it is. That warm breeze coming from the volcanic ash area is taking the chill out of the air, and it's only a little below freezing now. At this rate, it might actually be comfortable to wait on the front lines, instead of a constant struggle to keep from becoming an ice cube." Bob agreed.

Karl looked up at the faint haze of ash still in the sky. "But the Giants don't do well in the heat, so it might change their deployment routes. If they stop coming this way entirely, then what do we do?"

Tessa chuckled. "Then we kill Giants somewhere else until they give up and go home. If a Magma Dragon wants to hold this portion of the border for us, I have no objections to that.

However, I do want to see what is in that city. If they're still cloning Frost Giants, it would be best to find a way to destroy another of the statues or crystals."

The group paused for a snack, as the groups were so far apart today, and Karl looked off in the distance, where the city should be if it wasn't hidden behind the horizon.

"If the rate drops again tomorrow, I say that we head for the city and see what's going on. Perhaps they're sending them on a different route, further from the Dragon. If the combination of us and the Elementals has completely rerouted reinforcements to this portion of the line, then the army should know so that they can push their advantage."

[Want me to go look?] Hawk asked.

[Yeah, go ahead. We will do our own scouting here for the next few hours. Let us know what is going on in the city.] Karl agreed.

"Hawk is going to go take a look. We will keep clearing what we can while he is gone, and then we can use whatever he finds to make our plans for tomorrow." Karl explained.

Dana frowned at him. "We're not seriously planning to raid a Frost Giant city, are we?"

Karl shrugged, and the clerics laughed.

Doug shook his head. "The chances of that are very low. The summoning stone will likely be placed outside the city limits so that they can gather the troops and send them on the way without bothering the citizens.

If it's right in the middle of the city, there isn't anything that we can do about it, and the army isn't going to press all the way out here into Frost Giant territory to attack a city. They would rather save their manpower to defend the existing border and hope that we find a way to return the cold to the area it covered before the war.

If that happens, then this front will be considered a resounding success and the army will focus on the other fronts where there is much more danger."

[Then we should smash the city and make the giants go away. I want to be warm again.] Thor complained.

"Thor says he's all for driving the Frost Giants away if it means he gets to go to another front." Karl laughed.

This might be the supposedly easiest front, when judging purely by the rank of the opponents, but the pure numbers as well as the freezing cold certainly didn't make it the most popular.

Chapter 299 They Ran Away

What Hawk found in the Frost Giant city was not at all what anyone had been expecting. The city itself was nearly demolished, with a large breach in the wall that faced the Ash Wastes near the volcano.

He was not the first one there, the Elementals had beat him to it, and from the look of it, they had either taken the city or done enough damage to make the civilian population retreat. There was still a sizeable military contingent nearby, so the Elementals might not have won the battle, but the city was demolished anyhow.

That began a search for the summoning spot. If he could find that, they could smash it and stop the reinforcements entirely. There was nobody on this team who wanted to leave more than Hawk did, and that included Remi, who couldn't survive the cold for long in her current state.

The logical place for him to start was where the remaining Giants were. If they were still being summoned, the stones had to be there.

But there was no big stone, no Giants standing in a circle to cast a ritual spell, just a bunch of weak Frost Giants standing in rows.

[Hey, these Frost Giants are strange. They're not identical to each other.] Hawk informed Karl.

[Of course they're not. There is a whole city full of them. How is the military situation there?] Karl replied.

[The city is empty and most of the buildings are smashed and burned. All that is left are a few Awakened and Ascended Giants standing around outside, but they're the ones who aren't identical.] Hawk explained.

[Do you see the path where the other Frost Giants left? They must have sent the ones who can't fight, the very young and the elderly, out of the city when things got bad.] Karl asked.

[Yes, back further into their lands. Lots of them went that way, too many to tell by footprints.]

[And they're gone over the horizon already, even from your altitude?] Karl confirmed.

[Long gone. Not even traces left, except the stomping that broke all the little bushes and flattened the snow.]

[That is excellent news. If we can find where they were summoning from, we might be able to gain another statue.]

Hawk snorted in annoyance. [I am looking. It's not by the soldiers, and it's not in the fields near the city, but there aren't any more Frost Giants.]

[Well, there is a chance they took it with them when they left. But we will head there tomorrow and clear the area if there is a small enough group left for us to fight.]

[That sounds good. There can't be more than three hundred left, but they're almost all Awakened, and they don't even have the good weapons with them.] Hawk agreed.

Now, Karl just needed to sell the idea to the others, who would naturally be very wary of approaching a Frost Giant city, even if it looked abandoned.

They might not have taken their slave species, who would have been ordered to defend what was left, and whatever took the city would not be happy to see random humans either, so no matter what they ran into, it was likely to end badly for them.

Karl didn't realize that everyone was watching him so intently until he turned to talk to them, with the intent to sell them the plan to go check the Frost Giant city.

"Well, out with it. I can tell that it's a bad plan already, but we might need to do it." Bob insisted.

"The Frost Giants have abandoned their city after it was attacked and mostly razed to the ground. That is why the number of attackers dropped today, they were too busy fighting to send anyone to the front lines.

However, there is still an Awakened Rank garrison of Giants there, plus any slave species or possible attackers who might still be in the city.

What I am thinking is that we need to find out if they managed to take the summoning materials with them, or if they were destroyed in the attack." Karl began.

Bob nodded. "Because if they left with them, the attacks won't slow, they will just be reinforced from a new direction, and that doesn't help us at all.

But if the materials were destroyed, the Frost Giant front lines could very well be in full collapse within the week.

They've already lost most of their summoning ability with the spots near the front lines that were destroyed, and while they could theoretically make more, if it were just that easy, there would have never been peace with them."

"Exactly. Now, is there anyone who has a good reason why we shouldn't at least go check it out tomorrow?" Karl asked.

Tori rolled her eyes as she glared at him. "Other than the fact that you're insane, that is a suicide mission, it's a city full of Frost Giant Magic traps and possibly thousands of lesser ice monsters?"

"Yeah, other than the obvious. Hawk says the city is mostly empty, and I really do want to know what they did with the summoning equipment. If it's destroyed, that's perfect. But Hawk can't tell from the air, there's just no sign of it." Karl explained.

The mage looked around for support, but everyone else was either resigned to the fact that they were going to have to search for the summoning location, or kill off the rest of the Frost Giants in the area and then wait to see where the next batch were coming from.

"Alright. I suppose it's not actually more dangerous than fighting them in the fields, as long as the city is actually empty. Hawk wouldn't lie to us about that, would he?" Tori asked.

"No. If there was anything to kill there, he would have informed me. So, anything that is still in the city is in hiding." Karl replied.

Tori looked suspicious, but Doug had a knowing smile.

"If he had found anything alive in the city, he would be hounding Karl to go kill it. Hawk hates all things water and ice element. He wouldn't hold out and miss a chance to attack them." He explained, while straightening his robes to check them for stains.

Karl began to draw out a new map in the dirt, relaying what Hawk was telling him about the situation, and the lack of new Frost Giant reinforcements from the city, as well as the location of the forces that were still in the area.

He would return before it got dark and the glow of the Elementals would give them away, but for now, he wasn't seeing any of them lingering in the area at all.

Of course, there was a chance that the city had been destroyed by something else, like one of the other Dragons that they had upset, but as it had happened while they weren't watching, they would have to get someone more skilled in forensics to make the determination.

Hawk knew that the walls were breached and the houses burnt, but that was about the extent of his analysis ability when there were so few bodies visible during his high altitude scouting loop.

"This is the situation now. The remaining forces are here by the wall, and there is a flat section of ice there which should be a lake. There are entrances to the city here and here, both of which are open, and the wall is breached here, closest to the volcano, and there is a smaller breach on the other side of the city.

The bodies are most prevalent near the wall breach nearest to the volcano, but there are some scattered all through the city.

Hawk reports that there is a stomped down section of land headed over the horizon in this direction, which we can assume is the refugees. Is there more that we need to know, or can I call him back for the evening?" Karl asked.

Bob pointed to a spot behind the city. "There is a valley there, roughly round, like a crater. Can you have Hawk check it out before he returns? It's not part of the normal search area, but there is a chance that the Summoning might have been done there to keep it out of sight of the scouts."

Hawk flew over the area a few minutes later, and relayed his findings back to Karl.

[There might have been something here. There are signs that Giants were in the valley recently, but there is nothing there now except fresh snow and fog.]

"No sign of occupation, but you were right, they were there recently. Why, we can't tell, as they didn't leave anything that Hawk can see from the sky, but they were there." Karl relayed.

"Well, that's one more spot to search. Central Command is going to owe us big time for this one."

Chapter 300 A City Razed

The next morning they were moving with the first light, before proper dawn, so that they could get to the city before the Frost Giants could see them coming. Hawk had been sent out early to scout their route, and had informed them to stay further from the ash, as the heat was increasing, and the areas closest to it were becoming muddy as the snow melted.

That was bad news for the Giants, but there weren't any of them out at the moment. The flow of reinforcements had entirely stalled, and the only enemies that Hawk could find were patrolling around the city's perimeter.

There was no sign of activity in the city, and the signs of previous occupancy were fading as the wind blew the snow over the roads and paths.

A few hours after dawn, Bob gestured into the distance. "Turn right a little, but stay out of the slush. The valley that I was referring to should be over there, and I'm curious to see if it's still frozen."

Karl led the group forward, with the less physical members all mounted, though that meant that the Spider Golems had to take passengers to bring their travel speed up to standards.

Ty was a Ranger, not a warrior, and while he was quick, he didn't have the sort of stamina for an all morning run the way that the warrior classes did. So, he needed a ride, and Doug was more than happy to take a place on the other Spider Golem, so that Thor wasn't overburdened.

The Lightning Cerro had hit a minor growth spurt after reaching Commander Rank, and he could easily accommodate four on his back with a suitable harness, but it was better to just have Tessa, Dana and Tori, so their bodyguard didn't get too tired to fight.

Karl slowed the group as they got close to the valley that Bob had mentioned, and had Hawk circle the area.

[That place isn't right. It's all melted now.] Hawk reported.

[What's there? Just slush?] Karl asked.

[A small lake.]

Karl led them cautiously forward, in case there were still more Magma Elementals or other servants of the Dragon around. The temperature was rising rapidly as they approached, and Lotus was getting excited.

"I know what this is. This phenomenon is common after a volcanic eruption. There was an underground fissure here, and now the frozen lake is a volcanic hot springs." The little nature cleric declared.

Her hair had changed to an icy blue today, nearly matching her cloak, but looking more like thick ice. That seemed somehow appropriate to their situation as they came over the ridge, and saw that the whole valley was covered in ash, while the lake was gently steaming.

"That's too hot. The water is nearly boiling. I was hoping for a spot to swim, not to become soup." Lotus sighed.

"Check everything. There might be magical items dropped by the Giants, possibly fire element infused gems, and if we're really lucky, the remains of a summoning circle." Karl announced.

Tessa laughed. "Flag on the play. You can't just ask for the prize to be in the first spot you look, that's definitely a red flag."

If there had been anything in the valley, it was long gone now. There were some signs that the Frost Giants put up a fight, bits of obsidian stone that Doug assured them were the remains of a dead magma elemental, and a few charred bones, but no loot, and no sign of the summoning circle.

"See, what did I tell you? Now, let's take out a patrol and see if we can sneak into the city. I have a good feeling that there is something left to kill hiding in there." Tessa declared.

Karl thought that should be counted as a flag as well, but it was most likely divine guidance.

There was a small stand of trees between them and the city, so that was where Karl led the group to wait for a patrol to pass and then attack the next once they knew the timing. If they were patrolling in sight of each other, it would be a huge fight to enter the city, but if they could find a way to sneak past, their search would go much more smoothly.

The first group didn't reach the open area between them and the city for nearly ten minutes, then went down the hill and out of sight.

"That valley is a blessing. If we attack there, we will be able to take out a scout patrol without them seeing us coming, and then we can make the city before the next one arrives." Bob noted.

The team moved into position, and when the next patrol came over the edge of the valley, Thor led the charge out of the trees, letting Karl and Ophelia fall in on his flanks with the warriors outside of them.

"You'll enjoy this, just watch them work." Tori joked to Bob and Harry as Thor ran, and she tried not to fall off.

Karl fired two shots as they ran, causing the Awakened Rank Frost Giants to stagger under the effects of [Chain Lightning], and killing two of them with the arrows themselves. Then he switched to his hammer, coated with [Flaming Body]. The first swing shattered bone and sent the Ascended Rank leader of the team flying like a rag doll while Thor charged through the lines, and Tessa stabbed at everything she could reach.

Ophelia leapt into combat with an axe in each hand, hacking at the Giants in a frenzy that would make Rae proud, and caused nearly as much of a mess as the Bloodbath Spider usually did.

In seconds, it was over, and the rest of the group didn't even get a chance to engage in the fight before Remi pulled the corpses into her space and intensified the snow of [Blizzard] to hide the battle.

Ty whistled in appreciation from his spot on the back of a Spider Golem.

"No wonder everyone said that your team were monsters. Even without the advantage of numbers, your attack power is just stupid. What sort of skill one hit kills an Ascended Frost Giant?" The Ranger asked.

"The maul lets me stack layers of the same skill on it before I attack. That first hit was five layers of Flaming Body at the same time. Even if he was a Commander, taking that hit square to the chest would have killed him." Karl explained as the group ran for the wall of the city.

The blast went outward, so whatever had attacked had already been inside the city. That was not a good sign for the residents, who were sensitive to even normal heat.

Their entry point was a small secondary breach, where something had melted the stone and caused it to run in liquid form.

The blast went outward, so whatever had attacked had already been inside the city. That was not a good sign for the residents, who were sensitive to even normal heat.

The team made the wall without being detected, and paused just inside the city to take in the level of destruction that had come for the residents.

There were bodies everywhere, and not just Frost Giants. There were Yetis, some sort of Satyr species, and even Mountain Ogres, who lived in the hills before the border expanded.

Each and every one of them showed signs of fire damage, and they were all long dead, likely two days, as they were frozen solid and covered by a layer of snow.

"The Dragon wasn't holding back." Karl whispered as he looked over what used to be a residential area of the city, and now didn't have a single standing building.

Not even the little ones had been spared, everything had been levelled as the invaders had passed through. From their entry point, they could see the main breach, so this was the start of the fighting, but that meant that the destruction didn't make much sense. If they had seen the attack coming, they would have at least evacuated the vulnerable to the other side of the city, so there wouldn't be many noncombatants near the walls.

Tessa looked over the destruction, and drew little lines in the air with her finger, as she worked to recreate the battle in her mind.

"They attacked from the other wall first. A diversionary attack that breached the walls, and made the Frost Giants retreat. Then they breached this wall, probably from the hot springs valley, where they wouldn't have been seen. This side of town should be nearly completely destroyed, and the number of bodies might be more than everyone is prepared for." She explained.