

Beast Master 301

Chapter 301 Survivors Found

The group spread out a little, and everyone dismounted as they moved through the ruins of the city, looking for signs of survivors, loot, or any indication that there might have been a summoning ritual in the region.

That was their primary goal, and if they didn't find it, then they would have to warn the lines that they were likely to see an influx of Frost Giants from a new direction in the next few days.

[There is something strange under here. Bring your shovel.] Rae insisted a few minutes later.

"Rae found something. Let's check it out." Karl informed the others quietly. It just felt wrong to make noise here, like the city was a tomb and deserved a level of reverence, even if they were here to loot it.

Dana took out the shovel from Karl's pack and passed it to him, so he could dig through the rubble to get to whatever Rae had found.

With the barrier on it, the shovel cut through stone with a little effort, and it only took a few minutes to clear the rubble, while Rae got more excited by the second.

"There is a door. A stone door that leads downward." He informed the others when he realized what he was digging towards.

[Yes, open it. There are treats inside, I'm certain of it.]

Karl was about to move the last of the rubble to open the door when Tessa stepped between him and Rae with her eyes glowing red. "No, Rae. You can't eat them." She insisted in a booming voice laden with holy magic.

The spider glared at the cleric, who was obviously under the influence of the War Goddess, unwilling to relent so easily when she had been the one to detect the hidden treasures. But after a few seconds, she backed away and turned her back on the tunnel, letting Tessa have this victory. [Fine, I didn't really need them for the art anyhow. I will just use the frozen ones.] She pouted.

Karl cleared the door and led the way down a set of hidden stairs, with Tessa right behind him.

What he found was a small room with a few dozen liquor barrels and a dozen Satyr children, huddled together in terror, and looking malnourished far beyond what two days in a hiding hole would justify.

Tessa held out a hand to them. "Relax, little ones. We're not going to let them eat you. Do you have a guardian with you?" The closest of the Satyrs, a young boy in filthy blue shorts, shook his white furred head. "Alright, let's get you out of here." The War Cleric insisted.

Karl had forgotten for a moment that the Red Dragon had a soft spot for war orphans, and the Satyrs were considered to be beastkin, not an enemy to humanity, even if they weren't harmless young slaves like these ones appeared to be.

Karl stepped to the side as the cleric led the group up the stairs, and then did a final check to make sure they didn't miss anyone who was too terrified to move.

The place was empty, and then completely empty as Remi looted the barrels. She didn't care what was in them, they would go well with her current decoration of her shrine. Like a nice wooden plinth collection for her statues.

The group was giving Tessa looks that ranged from confused to annoyed, while Rae resisted the urge to drool as she looked at the Satyrs. If they had been in better shape, she might not have been able to resist, but these ones didn't look juicy at all.

"And what the hell are we supposed to do with these?" Tori demanded when she saw the horde of small children.

A full-grown Satyr was under a metre and a half tall, barely chest height on Karl. These were all less than waist high, malnourished and terrified.

"They are valuable witnesses. When they're not so terrified, they can tell us what happened, and then we can lead them back to the lines, so they can be turned over to the church for relocation somewhere safer." She explained.

[Those aren't the only ones. If the Cleric Knight is going to collect them, we might as well get them all. Like an army of little furry blood bags.] Rae suggested.

[How did you find them anyhow?] Karl asked.

[Scent, mostly. But the edges of the door were a bit warmer than anything else.]

"Everyone, Rae says there are more hiding. If we're going to collect refugees, we might as well get a whole bunch of them." Karl informed the group with a sigh.

The warriors frowned in resignation. That meant they would also be nominated to dig through the rubble to rescue them. They had the superhuman strength, and with the War God pressuring Tessa to fulfill her duty as a cleric, they wouldn't be able to leave them behind without at least trying to look for survivors.

Rae pointed out more spots, and the group began to dig, finding more Satyrs, and a few other species of beastkin, and then finally a small group of terrified human children, dressed the same as the Satyrs, and suffering from frostbite.

"Thor, can you surround them in a barrier to keep the cold off them? I would ask Hawk, but he can't spread his fire skill to large groups, it doesn't work like that." Karl asked.

The Refreshing Lightning didn't actually warm you, but it did heal and refresh stamina, so while the cold was still painful, at least the frostbite was healing.

Bob stepped up beside Tessa. "Greetings everyone. We are Elites from the Golden Dragon Nation, here as a scout team investigating the situation. Now that the city is destroyed, we will take you all back with us to be placed in the care of the Red Dragon Clerics, or the church's healers, who will find a suitable permanent home for everyone, or settle the children in orphanages among others of their species. You might not know if you were born here, but the servants of the Red Dragon are active in both the human and beastkin nations."

He gestured to Tessa with the last bit, and she smiled as she gave them a slight bow.

There were some confused looks, as not all of them had a solid grasp of the human common language, but the message was quickly relayed to everyone, and hesitant smiles came to the mass of filthy faces.

Karl cleared his throat. "Now we just need to finish searching the city, and we will be ready to leave once we have as many survivors as we can find."

That brought a bit of enthusiasm to the group. They knew the spots where the others would have tried to hide, and they were willing to go down and help encourage the groups to come up and join the growing tide of refugees.

There were very few working age adults here, and the ones who were older were all women.

From what Karl could tell, those left behind were the children and pregnant women, who would have slowed the pace of the fleeing Frost Giants.

Karl had expected to see the Elderly as well, but after a moment, he realized that there was no such thing as Elderly for these people. When they could no longer work due to age or infirmity, the Giants simply ate them.

When they made the far side of the city, they had nearly a hundred people in their care, and Bob was looking concerned about the chances of making it back to the front lines with the poor condition that so many of them were in.

"Thor, do you see a large wagon anywhere? The bigger, the better. We will load everyone in it, and you can pull it back to the lines." Karl asked out loud, so everyone would know what he was thinking.

Lotus pointed behind them and toward one of the open gates. "There are a bunch of supply caravan carts over there. They should hold plenty of people. It might not be comfortable, but the goal is just to get everyone back to safety." [Are you ready to be a cart Cerro for the day?] Karl asked.

[Like with the bus, but we can string a bunch of them together, and then I can be a whole train.] Thor suggested.

The image in his mind was hilarious. He saw himself as a locomotive, pulling the train of wagons through the fields with his looted beastkin. Satyrs didn't attack the Lightning Cerro in nature, as they were both herbivores, so Thor didn't see them as a threat. There were some arguments over the good food when they met, but not enough to consider them an enemy.

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With that in mind, Thor donated some of the [Mount Feed] plants that he had gotten from Doug the first time they were together. They were growing in his space now, and he could spare enough to give all the plant eaters a meal.

[I will pass it out once we get to the wagons. That will keep everyone occupied as we travel, so they don't panic when the patrols attack us.]

Chapter 302 March of Ash

Overhead, Hawk laughed at their plan. It was like a huge face slap to the giants. First, the Dragon's friends smashed their city, now the humans showed up, and they were going to loot the place dry, leaving with a wagon caravan full of pilfered people and supplies.

It was kinder than the Frost Giants deserved for being Ice Element creatures, and he was looking forward to roasting any of them who tried to stop the caravan from leaving.

There were a half dozen wagons there, and everyone understood the plan without too much confusion. The carts were moved to link up in a chain, with a harness made by Rae for Thor to pull the whole convoy. They were strong, made to pull huge loads of gear and food for the Frost Giants, not just to carry a load of small Satyrs and starving humans. Thor looked at the six wagons with pleasure. That was more than enough to make a proper train behind him, and the General would definitely be impressed with him when he made it to the camp. Karl caught that thought, and realized that it was genius. Instead of going to the active lines, they could go through the smooth ash at the edge of the Magma Dragon's territory. The Frost Giants wouldn't follow them, and it was the fastest way out of the combat zone, though there was a long walk to the front lines, which had retreated away from the destruction, and they would have to rest or walk all night to make it there.

"Everyone into the carts. I will run along with Rae, but everyone else can rest while they protect the convoy. Once we exit the city, the patrols will see us, but stay with the caravan and let me and the beasts take care of them. We will catch up with you soon enough." Karl explained.

"Wait, we didn't find the summoning stone." Dana realized.

One of the satyr boys looked at her in terror, shaking his head. He whispered too low for her to hear, but Lotus relayed it for her. "He says that the stone is gone. The burning things smashed it into a million pieces, then melted the pieces."

Well, that was one way to guarantee that it wasn't used again.

With everyone loaded, Karl sent Thor out of the open gate and into the open.

The convoy was unmistakable, and a round of shouts went out as the patrol realized that the hidden survivors were escaping with a Lightning Cerro.

Thor took the convoy up to a gentle trot, which was as fast as he was comfortable going without tipping the wagons or throwing anyone out of them when they hit a bump.

[Rae, it's your time to shine. We made you behave all day, but you can make a mess now if you'd like.] Karl suggested.

Hawk laughed at them as Rae and her Golems sped toward the scouts, then the ice hating bird began to bombard the hapless Frost Giants with fireballs, intent on killing all of them before Rae could get to them.

But Rae was fast, and so were her Spider Golems. The Frost Giants hurled themselves to the side to avoid the bombardment, but that left them on the ground when the spiders arrived and tore them apart before moving on to everything else that they could see.

[Thank you for bringing them down to my level, that was much easier than jumping up on them.] Rae taunted Hawk as the bird moved to attack the next group before Rae got to them.

The refugees in the wagons didn't see a friendly sibling rivalry. What they saw was an Elite with a flaming bow in his hands, and a group of monsters tearing apart the Frost Giant patrols that had kept them captive for most of their lives. They didn't know what they had done to deserve this rescue, but they were definitely thanking the Dragon Gods for the assistance.

"Thor, where are you going?" Tessa asked from her spot on the Cerro's shoulders.

He had turned for the ash wastes between the volcano and the Dwarven Village, which would take them through the Ash Wastes, where the Dragon's minions were in charge. It was the best flat route that he had found, and it was faster to not have to pull the wagons uphill, so that was the route he chose. A little extra time in the ash was no big deal in Thor's mind, so he just snorted happily and gestured with his head toward the valley that was their target.

"Alright, big guy, I trust you to pick the best route for us." She agreed, stroking his horns in encouragement as he continued to trot along with his precious cargo.

The Frost Giants hadn't even tried to chase after them. They were too concerned with the full-scale assault that Karl and the spiders were launching on their patrols. There were none of them above Ascended left, and that was barely one in twenty among the mostly Awakened Rank trainees who were assigned to prevent exactly this sort of incident.

But none of them had expected the human Elites to be so brazen as to assault their city, even if they somehow learned that it had been razed by the Dragon's minions.

In the distance, Thor heard a Frost Giant war horn blow the tone for retreat, and knew that they wouldn't have any more pursuers for a while. But he didn't slow down, and kept to the pace that his barrier could refresh his stamina at, so he could travel all night.

Karl and Rae would catch up soon enough, as they were much faster than his wagon train. They just had to finish playing with the fleeing Frost Giants, and then they would be satisfied.

[Hawk, go scout for Thor and keep the path clear. I don't want any delays on their retreat.] Karl instructed as he watched the last of the Frost Giants following the same retreat path as the others into the distance.

That was valuable information, as it told him that it wasn't a random retreat in the only safe direction, but a deliberate choice where they were going. He didn't have a map of their territory, but that should be toward the centre of the nation, and presumably toward a larger safe zone.

That should also be where their Royal Rank elders were waiting for the battle's outcome.

They weren't something that Karl would look to go challenge without a good reason, so he just asked Rae to let them run and to scout the area between them and Thor for anything that might delay the convoy.

[That was fun. We should do that more often. Did you see their faces when they realized that we stole from them? It was even better than Hawk when he realizes that someone is stealing his food.] Rae commented as she searched for signs of life.

[Stupid Yetis, losing my pigs.] Hawk complained, still not over the betrayal by the supply caravan, who had been attacked in advance.

They caught up to the convoy within thirty minutes, and paced alongside it at a distance, with the Golems on one side, Rae and Karl on the other, and Hawk leading.

That put Thor's train in a bubble of protection, but they didn't see anything all afternoon, and Thor had just passed back piles of feed to be spread among the wagons for dinner when they reached the edge of the ash.

"Thor, pause here for a moment. We will all eat and rest a moment, then we will head through the ash tonight. If we press all night, we can make the lines in the morning. It won't be fun, but it will be the safest way. The Magma Elementals glow in the dark, so we will be more easily able to see them coming. We might not see any this far away from the Volcano, but following Larkin's Law, anything that can go wrong will go wrong."

Lotus giggled. The legend of Larkin the Unlucky was a common children's story. According to the legend, he had been an aspiring adventurer, who had been brazen enough to try to see a nature goddess in the bath. He had been caught, of course, and from there, his misadventures only got worse, with every plan

that he attempted to form failing in ever more spectacular fashion, until the World Dragon took pity on him and calmed the ire of everyone the unlucky man had upset along the way.

Then, true to his name as Larkin The Unlucky, he had been caught peeping into the baths again.

Chapter 303 All Nighter

Once everyone had food in them, the atmosphere among the wagons drastically improved. But when they learned that Thor intended to push through the night, with Rae to lead him past any pitfalls they might find in the ash, the atmosphere was nearly ecstatic.

They were already out of the freezing cold that marked the Frost Giants' territory, and by morning, they intended to be at the human battle lines, where the World Dragon church would gather them and take them somewhere safe.

That notion was a bit dubious among the Beastkin, who were less likely to trust the humans at all, but the Dragon Gods were worshipped all over the world, and that was enough for the refugees to trust Tessa's word that the Red Dragon Clerics would take them in and care for them.

"Are we really going to travel all night, even though we're out of the frozen lands?" One of the human refugees asked softly, with a heavy accent.

"Yes. This area belongs to a Magma Dragon, and we're not certain how his servants will respond to our presence, so we are going to pass through at night and not linger. The sooner we can get you to the safety of the Golden Dragon Nation's border, the better." Tessa explained.

The girl smiled. "I have heard so much about it, and now, I have actually met someone from there. I must say, I didn't know that humans could be so strong."

Tessa laughed. "It is a blessing from the World Dragon. You're still young, so perhaps you will get a chance to try one day as well. We all see if we are compatible when we are fourteen years old."

That was great news for the humans. None of them were fourteen yet. In fact, most of them were not ten yet. Anyone who was grown enough to keep up with the forced march had been taken away by the Frost Giants when they fled. Well, that or they were dead in the streets because they couldn't get to safety fast enough when the attack started.

"What about us? Do we get a chance at the blessing?" One of the satyr children asked.

Tessa shrugged. "I honestly don't know. Our country is almost all humans, and I haven't met anyone else who was compatible with the blessing. But I also can't say if you will remain in the Golden Dragon Nation, or if they will arrange to have you join a Red Dragon orphanage in the Beastkin Territories."

That made sense to them. While being anywhere safe was a thousand times better than their lives yesterday, there was a certain appeal to living among other beastkin. Like, they wouldn't be a minority group, they wouldn't be treated as lesser, and they might actually get to live the sort of idyllic life that slaves told stories about.

Thor began pulling them forward, and Rae returned to her space to sleep, while the Spider Golems were instructed to follow Karl's orders. That should be good enough, and then when Hawk turned in for the night, she would come out again to lead Thor.

Not that Hawk couldn't do it. From the sky, he would be able to see much more, but there was no reason for them all to suffer a sleepless night if they didn't have to.

[Oh, this is better already. The ash here is soft and warm on the feet. I like this place.] Thor announced as they began to move through the destroyed aftermath of the volcanic eruption.

[Just be careful if you see solid stone. Many of the volcanic stones can be slippery.] Karl warned him.

Of course, most of them were heavily textured and provided firm grip for the feet, but it was better to be safe and not take any chances with wagons full of people. A slippery side slope could spell disaster for their little adventure.

As they trudged off into the night, Hawk kept a careful eye out for anything that might pose a threat to their group. But what he found was much more exciting to the bird than any elemental.

[There are squirrels and mice and small monsters in the forest again.] He declared a few hours into the ash.

[Already? I thought that they would still be far away from here.] Karl replied.

[Me too, but I can see them. I think it's a good sign. If the Elementals hated all monsters, they would chase off the little ones first, right?] Hawk replied.

Karl wasn't certain how sound that logic was. It was easier to scare the little monsters away, but they weren't really a priority, as they weren't a danger to anyone or anything.

Not long after that, Rae woke up from her nap, and came out to lead the caravan down the path that Hawk had scouted for them.

[Are you certain that you're not going to sleep yet, Hawk?] Karl asked.

[I will stay up until we reach the edge of the dangerous area. Once we're out of that, I will sleep and you can deal with the human soldiers.] He replied easily.

Well, if he wasn't tired, Karl would let him keep scouting. Between him and Rae, they shouldn't miss much, if anything.

Thor pressed on well past midnight before they came across their first real obstacle. The remains of a magma flow that were much thinner than they looked, according to Rae's eyes. Her thermal vision showed the intense heat below the surface, and if they had only been looking at the top layer, they might have gone right over it without noticing, and possibly collapsed it.

[Is there a better spot nearby?] Karl asked as the Bloodbath Spider raced down the magma flow searching for a crossing point.

He was headed in the opposite direction, doing the same thing, but he was headed toward the core of the territory, and the flow was only getting more intense.

[Yes. Thor, turn right and come to the base of the hill. The flow spread out, and there is a nice thick crust on it here. That should be more than enough for the wagons.] She instructed.

Thor adjusted course, and Karl made his way back to the wagons.

[I think we might need you here.] Rae muttered as Karl was nearly to the convoy.

[Don't tell me it fell through and burned up the wagons.] Karl sighed.

[Nope, we made it past that. Now, we're just a bit stuck. The ground on the other side, to get back to the main path Hawk scouted, is really rough with waves of stone, and the wheels are getting stuck in the ruts.]

That was easily enough solved, Karl thought as he approached the wandering line of wagons.

"Gentlemen, and Lady Ophelia, can I get you down here for a moment? We need some strong arms to take the weight off the wagon wheels while they get over the waves in the stone. Thor is losing traction." Karl explained.

It was a moonless night, and they hadn't lit any lights, to avoid attracting attention, so to the eyes of everyone else, they were still making progress, and they hadn't realized there was an issue.

"No problem. We will each lift one from underneath, just enough to get them to move over the ridges. How far do we need to do it?" Bob asked.

"Not far. Twenty metres should put us back on smooth ash again."

It was a slow and careful process to ensure that they didn't break a wheel with a side load, and Tessa set a light spell over them so they could all see what they were doing as they worked. Then, when they were on the old road, which was now a smooth spot in the ash, everyone got back on board while Karl moved ahead with Rae to check the area for dangers again.

The progress wasn't as great as they had hoped, and it only got worse as they left the ash in the small hours of the morning. The ash ended before the snow had, and the result was that the tropical weather

on the other side had turned the entire area into a mud bog, which Karl repeatedly had to wake the others to help pull them through, as Thor couldn't get enough traction on the slippery hills.

But they did eventually make it out of the worst of the mud and onto a hard-packed section of road, where they took a break to let Thor snack and rest while the sun came up. The radio transmissions were clear now, and the army lines were within Hawk's visual range, so they would only be four or five more hours before they arrived at their destination.

Chapter 304 Orphans Delivered

Karl took a fifteen-minute nap as they were preparing a proper hot meal for everyone's breakfast, and woke up to the smell of roasting meat and pancakes.

"Good timing. We're just getting ready to serve everyone. Thor passed out food for the Satyrs, who need roughage, or they get stomachaches. They can and will still eat with us, but not large quantities." Lotus explained.

Karl nodded blearily before Doug passed him a strong cup of coffee to bring his brain back online. That was just the thing that he needed after an all-nighter. Most of the team had slept, though he had to wake some of them up to help with the rough patches.

"Get a bit of sleep. Thor can lead us in, and we will guard the caravan now that the sun is up. At least that way, you will have a few hours sleep while we finish the trip. The ground is getting more solid by the kilometre, and the army knows that we are coming. They arranged to have Red Dragon Clerics airlifted to this location while you were napping, and they will be there to take over the refugees when we arrive." Doug explained as Karl sipped at the glorious black nectar of life and cleared his thoughts.

The Satyrs happily made a spot for Karl in one of the wagons, and Karl leaned back against the side in the corner, so he would be able to see out if anything required him to wake up.

He ate breakfast there before passing out, and what seemed like seconds later, a light tap at his shoulder brought him awake.

"Sir, we are ten minutes from the army camp. The warrior man just met with a scout, and they're escorting us in." One of the boys whispered.

"Thank you. I will join the others at the front." Karl replied quietly, then gently shifted so he wouldn't rock the wagon too badly when he vaulted out.

Karl checked his spaces, and found that both Rae and Hawk were asleep already. There were no more threats that needed their attention, so they caught up on sleep while they could. Inside the army camp might have its own dangers, but those were human dangers, and the humans could deal with them on their own.

They didn't have to go all the way to the camp, as fate would have it. A large group of red robed clerics ran out to greet them, drawn by the presence of Tessa on the back of Thor.

"Priestess, where did you find such a magnificent steed?" Asked a sharp-eyed High Priestess, who had dragon horns above her ears, and a ridge of spikes down the centre of her head, along with slotted golden dragon eyes.

That was a sure sign of either dragon blood, a lot of favour from her Goddess, or more likely both.

The appearance set the beastkin at ease. If they had sent someone who was obviously not human to meet them, then these people might not be too bad.

"He's a bonded companion to Commander Karl, on my left." She explained.

The High Priestess looked at Karl in shock, making him wonder if he had something on his face. He hadn't shaved in a while, and he had been sleeping in the wagon as they drove through the ash, so he likely looked like one of the miners coming to the surface after a shift right now.

Fortunately, he had unequipped his white cloak when they entered the ash, as it was too warm for the environment, so he could at least put on a clean layer.

Then he realized that he didn't have to. He could swap into the Commander Rank student's suit when they reached camp if he had to go indoors somewhere.

The refugees were quickly sorted by age, and Rae erected a wall of spider silk to make a changing room for them, while the clerics hung bag showers so they could get clean before changing into the traditional visitors' hassocks that the church passed out to everyone.

"Have they eaten?" One of the Priests asked quietly.

Tessa nodded. "We stopped a few hours ago for breakfast. I don't think that they'll be able to eat much again so soon afterwards, but by afternoon they will certainly be hungry and exhausted." Karl could hear the laughing as the refugees got washed and changed, not entirely in that order, as some of them didn't quite get the idea of showering.

It wasn't something that you could do in the Frost Giant lands. Just getting enough liquid water to drink was a chore, so there was none for washing, and they would usually just use handfuls of snow.

After a few minutes, they were back out in matching white hassocks, with clean faces and wet hair, or fur, in the Satyr's cases.

The High Priestess raised her voice a little, catching the kids' attention. "There we are. Everyone is looking much more refreshed. Now, we have set up tents for the day, and then the church will be sending buses for us all tomorrow to bring us home.

For those who didn't meet me earlier, I am Matron Millie, head of the Acheson Orphanage, not far from here inside the Golden Dragon Nation, but near the Beastkin Nation border.

A messenger has been sent to see if the orphanages there have enough space for those who want to transfer, but you are all more than welcome to stay with us.

If you would like to say goodbye to the kind Elites who brought you back, you may do that now, before we begin your processing."

There were many tearful goodbyes from children who had only known the Elites for less than one full day, and didn't even know everyone's name. But nobody would hurry them.

They had been through enough, and the Church wanted them to feel safe in their transition.

The affectionate goodbye meant that now they were all dirty again, but the Priestesses didn't mind much. Even Thor didn't miss out on the affection, and might have actually been the most popular, as he had pulled their convoy all the way here.

That was what the Lightning Cerro had been waiting for, and once the kids were led away, he vanished back into Karl's space, leaving the convoy of empty wagons alongside the road.

"Elites, please come with us. The Generals would like to speak with you about what happened inside the Frost Giant Territory." An officer with a Lieutenant's Gold Bar insignia informed them.

Karl pointed to the shower bags. "Give us a few minutes to get refreshed, and we will be with you. Like the kids, we crossed the ash last night, and we're not quite fit to be meeting with the high brass."

The man looked like he was going to argue that he had orders to bring them immediately, but something about the look on their faces told him that discretion was the better part of valour, and he simply nodded.

Rae had made two rooms for the kids to shower in, which were now split into men's and women's showers. It was a short shower, as the bags weren't large, but the amount of ash and filth that was washed off was incredible. Once he was certain that there weren't tracks of ash mud down his face anymore and the crud was gone from his hair and beard, Karl switched into his suit, and Doug switched to a formal set of High Priest robes, while the others simply equipped their armour again, leaving it fresh and clean, though still combat damaged.

"Change back to your armour. They don't know how to deal with combat Elites. They will push harder if they see you as a suit sort of person." Bob whispered as he put his own armour back on.

Karl chuckled as he changed back to the armour, and carefully rinsed off his pack so he didn't get ash all over himself again.

"Alright. How annoying do you think this is going to be on a scale of one to ten?" Karl asked Doug, who had the most experience with authority figures.

"I will put it at a solid eight. They will want a lot of information, as we've been behind the lines so long. But they won't push too hard because honestly, you two look a bit scary right now." Doug laughed, then created a herbal cigarette which he put to his lips, then motioned for Karl to light.

Karl laughed and used [Flaming Body] to get it lit, before leading them out to wait for the ladies, who had longer hair to deal with. Karl had to wash his hair three times before the ash stopped running out, so he knew that it would not be a fast process for them to be clean again.

Chapter 305 General Orland And Company

As expected, it took another ten minutes before the ladies were ready to face the world again, freshly washed, and with their hair loosely braided so it wouldn't go wild as it dried. Their travel packs weren't exactly loaded with the finest of hair products, so frizz was just a fact of life for adventuring Elites, but after the effort to get rid of the ash, it was worse than usual.

"Alright, that is everyone. Lead the way, Lieutenant." Bob announced once the group was back together.

Karl decided to let Bob take the lead on this one, as he had all the experience on his side when dealing with military leaders. He was out here all the time, preferring to be on a mission to being anywhere else, so he was constantly in contact with the military leadership, and knew more about just where his role as an Elite fit into the social framework. Karl hadn't had enough experience with that yet. Though he was certainly one of the more powerful Elites now, and everyone granted him the respect that a Commander deserved when he had the badge on his chest, there was a lot to be said about knowing how hard you could push before someone would push back.

But the one thing that they had all missed was the word "Generals" not "General". When they entered the Command building, which used to be the council building of the small town that had been commandeered as the military camp when they lines were pulled back from the volcano, they found four men in highly decorated uniforms waiting for them.

By the change in Bob's expression, Karl knew that this could mean trouble. So, he gave the officers a closer look, to see if he could guess which would be the issue. Not all Generals were Elites, most of them were too old for that, and commanded based on experience. But these four were all Elites, and surprisingly, one was a Royal Rank Elite as well.

That must be the cause for Bob's change in expression.

In a room full of Commanders, military Rank didn't matter much to the Mercenaries like Bob. But even for regular civilian Elites, the Royal Rank General still had authority over them due to his power level.

Not the sort of power that a General had over his troops, but enough that he could easily change their deployment orders and nobody would question it.

Bob stopped in the middle of the room, with Karl and Doug on either side of him. "Generals, it's a pleasure to see you all again, though I must say I'm surprised to see you all in the same spot." He began.

The Generals chuckled at his comment as they looked between the trio of Commanders.

The Royal Rank General replied with a straight face and a gravelly voice. "Yes, seeing three Commanders in the same spot is somewhat unusual, isn't it? But let's skip the pleasantries. What happened to the Frost Giants? The reinforcements have stopped, Our scouts tell us that the city looks like it's been destroyed, and you were the only forward team in the entire region."

Bob shrugged. "I wish we could take credit for all of that, but we're only partially responsible. We were killing the reinforcements as quickly as we could, but they were using a Shaman Magic type cloning spell to create more every day. It was the servants of the Magma Dragon that attacked the city and presumably either destroyed the spell, or some of its components, and forced the Frost Giants to abandon the city.

The Magma Dragon's influence is spreading inland, and soon that whole region will be thawed.

There is a volcanic hot springs under a kilometre from the city, and from what we can tell, it is increasing in intensity. That alone will keep the Frost Giants from returning to the region unless their magic can overcome whatever the Dragon has done."

The Generals nodded as their assistants took notes.

"Similar events have taken place all along the border. For whatever reason, it appears that most of the Summoning Spells were placed on top of trapped Dragon Elders, and now that they are free, the Frost Giants are in real trouble.

What we need to know is how much trouble they are in. The Hill and Mountain Giants are giving us enough trouble along the other sections of the border that we can't spare manpower to sit around here if we are not being attacked." The General insisted.

"Has the new snow began to retreat?" Bob asked.

The Generals nodded. "In fact, not only has it begun to retreat, the natural weather is nearly back to the old border, except for the region around the volcano, where the snow has retreated even further.

That volcano was well within the Frost Giants' border before the war, and now everything up to thirty kilometres inward of it has melted."

"Then what is left of the actual battle lines? There was nothing here, we would have passed it on our way if there was." Bob asked directly.

"This portion of the line is only still in place to secure against invasion by the Magma Dragon. The next pass is also now completely unguarded by the Frost Giants, as our soldiers finished a push just this morning and eliminated all resistance. The next two passes are still fighting, but north of that everything has been abandoned by the Frost Giants, and nobody knows if they are ending the battle or withdrawing for a larger offensive."

Bob nodded in understanding. "Well, we can't tell you much about that. But we can tell you that this section of the line is unlikely to see Frost Giants in the near future. They already lost a major city to the Magma Elementals. It doesn't appear as if the Dragon's allies are hostile in this direction, though. We saw no evidence of attempts to expand in our direction, only toward the city, where the core of the Frost Giants' force was located. Once the battle was won, the forces of the Magma Dragon retreated and did not attempt to occupy the city. There were no combatants left when we entered, only a token force of Frost Giant guards outside the city, left when the rest of the occupants fled."

The Generals brought out a rolled map, which an assistant set up on a folding table, along with a number of blue stones. "These are the known population centres of the Frost Giants. The red stones are the number of Frost Giants that have been reported killed during this conflict." The General explained.

The red stones were still being set up, but already they vastly outnumbered the blue stones, and there was a concentration of them right where Karl and the others had been fighting.

Karl might not have liked math class much, but it was fairly obvious that the known population of Frost Giants was about a third as many as the number of Frost Giants that had been killed on their battle lines since the conflict started.

"They have summoned three times their population to send to war?" Doug asked, startled by the scale of the devastation.

"Not all of them are summoned, but close to that, yes. That is why it is so imperative that we find out what happened to the summoning ritual materials. Not hearsay or guesses, we need solid proof of how they are doing it, and of any locations that have been forcibly stopped.

The problem is, many of the suspected locations have been the site of natural disasters in the last few weeks, and now we don't have the troops to search them all." The General agreed.

Doug gave a rueful laugh as he took a long drag on his smoke. "I suspect that there is a 'however' coming up in your next sentence."

The General's face turned up in a slight grin as he watched the unconcerned High Priest becoming a very high Priest in the middle of their meeting.

"You would be absolutely correct. We have an official mission for all of you. We have a location for you to scout. This location previously generated large troop movements, then suddenly stopped without any visible signs of attack.

The spot is well within enemy borders, and the complex is suspected to be currently occupied by a Royal Rank Frost Giant and his retinue." The General replied.

"So, it's a trap, we know it's a trap, and you want us to go spring it anyhow, for the chance that we can kill a Royal Rank Frost Giant?" Doug asked with a vague wave of his hand.

"There will be appropriate compensation." The General agreed, his raspy voice making the promise sound more like a threat, or a promise of restitution for the grieving families.

One of the other Generals, a portly young man with a blotchy face that spoke of years of alcoholism, smirked at them as he joined the conversation.

"It is non-optional."

Chapter 306 Sent Back

Karl rolled his eyes at the smug General.

"Well, I still don't have a Royal Rank head as a trophy for my dorm room. I suppose a Frost Giant will have to do. A bit large for the display case, but such is life." He answered while everyone else paused, not taking the bait as the General tried to goad them into something that would give him an excuse to put a black mark on their records.

General Orland, the Royal Rank General with the harsh voice, which Karl suspected might be due to a previous throat injury that was hidden below his collar and tie, gave him a knowing smile.

As always, when the Elites with bureaucratic titles met with the Mercenary Elites, it had turned into a dick measuring contest. The battle hardened General knew full well that his smug counterpart couldn't even keep up with the pace of their group, and he had likely never killed a monster his own rank or higher in his life. So, the easiest way for Karl to get a rise out of him was to treat the death of a Royal Rank enemy as just another trophy hunt.

And it was working.

"If it's such a trivial matter, then I will be expecting to hear positive news of your success very soon." The portly man replied.

"Good things take time, General. Like a well cooked meal, you must be patient until everything is just right. I suspect you're familiar with that particular anticipation." Karl agreed.

General Orland glared between the two of them and raised his voice for the first time.

"Enough. Both of you cut it out or take it outside to hold a combat trial. The mission has been demanded by the Central Government, and approved as necessary by the Bureau of Elite Development and the Army. Your combined team has been volunteered by regional draw, so I will provide you with the information that we have on the situation." He insisted.

Then he said the words combat trial, the portly General turned his head away, no longer feeling like fighting, so Karl focused on the task at hand.

"He's a spicy one, isn't he?" The General seated on the far right whispered to Doug as General Orland began to outline the situation around the cavern where the Royal Rank Giant was suspected to be hiding.

"He used to be so humble and polite. I think he's getting it from his bonded beasts. He's got a Bloodbath Spider with him, and if it were up to her, there would already be someone shouting for a medic." Doug whispered back.

Karl could clearly hear him, as could General Orland, but the others were both mages, and lacked superhuman senses.

The quiet General nodded without changing his expression. In a confined space, not even General Orland was likely to be fast enough to prevent a Commander Rank Beast like that from carrying out at least the first strike.

[What would they need a medic for? I'd eat his face without even needing to ambush him.] Rae chuckled in amusement.

Karl ignored her taunting to focus on the intelligence reports, and found that while the indicated spot was a fair distance from the border, there were no major forces or cities in between them and the site. At least that part had been well judged. The threat inside the cavern complex under the ruins was

unknown, but thought to be at least ten Commander Rank Giants, plus their Royal Rank leader. That would normally be enough to take out any team that the humans might send to try to destroy the summoning ritual, but there was no guarantee that they hadn't saved a last batch of summoned Giants underground as well.

The reports said that it should no longer be active, as there hadn't been any troops sent out since the volcano incident, but that was no guarantee.

"How long do you need to prepare?" General Orland asked once his briefing was complete.

Bob looked over at Karl and subtly shrugged. They were already intending on heading back to the battlefield, but they could tell the General that they needed a few days, or some particular supplies, before they returned if Karl wanted to delay a little.

"Just a quick restock of our hygiene and other supplies, and we should be good to go."

They had been in the field far longer than usual, and it was normal to only carry a small amount of unscented soap and shampoo with you. But, with the warm Dwarven Village, they could wash regularly, so they were running out, and hadn't been filthy until they crossed the ash plains to get here to the front lines.

"The supply tent is fully stocked with anything that you might need. Will you be leaving in the next few days?" General Orland asked.

Karl looked at Bob, and the older Elite's face took on a deceptively innocent smile.

"I'm afraid that we have much to do, General. Once we have resupplied, we will be leaving again within the hour. If you could ensure that one of the wagons our team and the refugees arrived in is still available, we would appreciate it."

The overweight General glared at the team with growing suspicion. There had to be a reason that they were rushing right back into battle after only recently having returned to civilization. But the part that he failed to realize was that they were more comfortable in their hidden camp than in the small town that the army had taken over as their base.

General Orland waved his hand toward the door. "In that case, don't let us keep you. It's a long walk back to the border, and you don't want to be caught out in the ash overnight."

Once they were well away from the command building, Tori sighed and turned back to glare at it.

"Are we the only Elites on the entire front? If they had already developed such a detailed plan, complete with routing and estimated numbers, they could have sent someone a week ago." She muttered.

They likely had, and it hadn't worked out for the last group, which was why they had such a detailed plan this time, but nobody wanted to say that out loud.

"Well, at least we will have plenty of soap and shampoo again. I hope that nobody took the time to shave because we're about to go right back into the heart of the cold." Doug laughed.

Ophelia took the nearly depleted smoke from his hand and finished it off with one long drag. "At this point, I'm not certain whether my legs are hairier in this form or as a Werebear." She joked.

The soldiers passing by did a double take when they heard that from the muscular berserker, who they hadn't expected to be a shape-shifter.

The supply Sergeant gave a similarly startled look at the group as they approached. There hadn't been anyone coming or going from the base in a while, they were only holding position near the ash, so new faces were an unexpected sight for him.

"What can I do for you?" He asked as Karl led the group in.

"Mostly hygiene supplies for everyone. Then one new multitool for me, and whatever the others need." Karl replied, then shifted, so the man could scan the Commander Rank badge he had pinned to the tabard of his armour. "Got it. Combined team with ten members in total, on official military assignment. That makes it easy, I'll grab the kits while the Corporal takes the rest of the orders."

The Sergeant disappeared into the back room before the Corporal on duty could even put his book down and realize that he had just been volunteered to take the orders of ten Elites in need of supplies.

Everyone had broken or worn out something during the trip, and this was their last chance to get it fixed before they headed back into the cold. Plus, as a military assignment, as long as the item they requested was regular military issue, they could just have it. For the Clerics, that was bonus loot. They could replace any worn out tools or utensils and nobody would ask any questions. The army had some good stuff that the Clergy always wanted to have, lightweight and made for durability, but more expensive than what the Clerics were issued by the church.

"I have a list." Lotus announced with a smile, passing over the running tally of damaged and worn items that her and Tessa had been keeping since the war started. If the Army was offering, the Priestess wasn't about to hold back.

Chapter 307 Through The Snow

Once they were resupplied and everything was packed carefully into its assigned spot in their packs, the group headed back for the edge of camp where they had left the wagons. The soldiers seemed startled to see them heading back out only a few hours after they had arrived, but the ones who had been around longer understood that the group was likely just running away from something annoying.

The plan was to hook Dana's two Stone Golems up to the lead wagon to pull the group along, while they left the others behind. That would make the trip back much easier on everyone, and faster, as the Giant's comfortable jog was a running pace for the mages and clerics.

Plus, with only one wagon, and a path to follow, they would be able to avoid the worst of the delays that had slowed them during the trip out, and the Golems might even be able to get enough traction on the muddy hills to make it up without assistance this time, when Thor's larger feet had struggled.

It only took a few minutes to get them hooked up, and they were on their way back into the ash, with the intentions of stopping overnight at the Dwarven Village to get a good night's rest and finish refining the plan to attack the cavern,

Obviously, the army thought that you could just march in there and wipe them out with enough firepower, but that was the last resort. Pretty much any other plan than charging into the cave was likely to be a better one.

They waited until the town was out of sight over the hills before anyone said anything, but they weren't in a big hurry to start making plans when they hadn't even seen the area around the target.

Finally, Doug broke the silence.

"Your group has been randomly selected from those in the region." He mocked the pudgy General. "As if we weren't the only ones in the area at all."

The others chuckled, and the Nature Priest took out another smoke for Karl to light. It was the most that anyone had seen him smoke at work, and it was a sure sign that he was feeling the stress, but didn't want to outright say anything about it.

Lotus smirked as she joined the rant. "Well, we will have all the bragging rights when we get back home. Imagine how jealous all those white robed battle clerics and guards are going to be when they find out that it was a pair of the Green Dragon's Clerics who got the first Royal Rank team kill of the war.

In fact, I'm not even certain that the main lines have managed to get one yet, so it might be the first at all."

Doug laughed. "Wouldn't that be something? If we find out that we've got the first one of the war, I say we go get another, just for funsies."

Karl knew that it probably wouldn't be that easy, but if they could get not only the first one, but the first two of the war on this front, then they would certainly live up to any level of hype when they got home.

But more imminently, Karl noticed that everyone in the group was becoming much more powerful than they had been when they started the battles. Officially, practice did help the growth rate, but it was supposed to have more to do with the individual how rapidly they advanced unless they were using some sort of magical aid.

That didn't seem to be the case with their group. If Karl had to hazard a guess, another month of this, and there wouldn't only be three Commanders in the group. The Golems were already noticeably more impressive than they had been at the start of the war, but Karl didn't have a standard to judge them against, so he couldn't really tell how far through Ascended Rank they were.

He would judge them against the Spider Golems as a Commander Rank standard, but Rae had advanced them to Royal Rank, and they were multiple times more powerful than they had been, so that still didn't actually help.

He couldn't even go by the ease with which they killed the Frost Giants, as they had so much practice now that everyone knew where their vulnerable areas were, and they could target them with minimal thought.

But while he was thinking of power levels, Karl had a good idea. Since they were going to be keeping the Golems active most of the time after they left the safety of the Village, they should give them some of the Frost Giant weapons that were enchanted to cut like proper Commander Rank weapons.

That would give them an extra bump in combat power, as opposed to the single blade that came with the [Durable Constructs] buff. They would have to carry Giant sized spare weapons with them to give to the Golems, and give them back every time the Golems were summoned, but it would increase the speed that they could clear the weaker groups, where the Golems rarely sustained serious damage.

They had their loot wagon now, so they might as well make good use of it.

Everyone rested as the Golems trudged steadily through the mud near the ash wastes, doing their best to avoid slipping on the muddy slopes.

But it seemed that the logic behind using Golems instead of Thor was right. Thor's feet kept him from sinking as deeply in the mud, but they also reduced his traction.

The Golems were pulling them smoothly along the path that the wagon train had followed to get to the lines last night, and with the sun up, they were able to avoid some of the worst areas, where they could now see that the mud was worse than it was a few dozen metres away.

That let them make it into the ash in good time, where their speed improved, and by the time that it got dark, they were almost back to the Dwarven Village.

The last few kilometres were a bit more difficult, as they were getting far enough from the volcano that the trees had survived, but they managed to get the wagon to within a hundred metres of the entrance to the tunnel.

They left the Golems to guard the wagon, and everyone made their way back into the Dwarven Village.

"We're not leaving at first light or anything crazy, are we? Because as nice as it is to not walk, that wagon is not soft." Tori asked.

Karl and Bob looked at each other and shrugged.

"I don't see any reason to rush that much. We should head out before noon, but it's less than a day's travel, and we don't want to get too close at the end of the day" Karl

suggested

Bob nodded. "Alright, then we will double-check all our gear in the morning after breakfast, then head out. It will get us in place early enough to check their scouting situation, and then we can make a proper plan based on what is actually there." "What are you thinking? Pick off the scouts and see if we can lure out what's actually in there instead of going into the cave ourselves?" Tessa asked.

Bob nodded. "That seems like the better option. There are ten of us, and fighting in a cave sucks. You never want to fight in a cave if there is another option. Out in the open, we can make proper use of tactics. In the cave, we are limited by the space we have to work with, and even if it's big enough for a Giant to pass, it's unlikely to leave us room to flank them, or even make a proper defensive formation."

Karl frowned. "Monsters generally get smarter as they grow in Ranks, so the Royal Rank Frost Giants might not fall for simple tricks like luring them out a few at a time by killing patrol members."

Bob ran a hand through his hair and sighed. "That is certainly a possibility. They might send out everything that they have the moment that we're detected, and that will be a

nasty fight.

So, before we get anything started, we will have to make some preparations. Depending on the terrain, we might be able to have the two Greenies make a vine field

to slow their approach."

He gestured to the two green robed clerics, who smiled at the chance to show that

they could do offensive magic as well. "But we won't know until we get there."

Chapter 308 Clever Girl

The next morning, everyone took a leisurely shower, courtesy of the free use of cleric magic, and then checked all their equipment after breakfast while they mentally prepared themselves for the day.

Hawk was sent out to scout, and he hadn't found anything for the first twenty kilometres, so the start of their journey should be an uneventful one. They didn't waste any time getting Thor hooked up to the wagon so that the Golems were free to fight while he protected the casters in his cart. It was connected with relatively weak spider silk, strong enough that it wouldn't break during use, but weak enough that Tessa could easily slice it with a wave of her spear if Thor needed to be cut free during battle.

This way, he was the only one walking, and everyone else could rest in case of emergency. It was the most efficient method that they had come up with so far, and Thor was delighted with his new toy.

[How far is it to this hiding hole for the Frost Giants?] Hawk finally asked after lunch.

He hadn't seen a single living thing all morning, just snow, snow and more snow. Plus, the temperature was dropping even further with every hour he travelled, and it was putting him in a terrible mood.

[From the location on the map, about a hundred kilometres from the ash. So, about the same as from the lines to the Dwarven Village. When you see two rivers meet, that will be where the cave is.] Karl replied.

[When we're done, I'm burning this entire country to the ground just to make it warm again.]

Thor plodded along, periodically looking back to see if everyone else was having as much fun as he was. There wasn't anything to bother him today, he just got to pull his wagon around, and nobody tried to rush him.

Only an hour before dark, Hawk sent back a report that, for the first time that day, was not about the easiest route for the cart.

[There are human bodies over here, and they are in armour. They might have something important on them.] He reported.

[Are we near the cave? How far is it to the spot where the rivers meet?] Karl replied, just to be safe.

[Thirty more kilometres. Their math sucks. But I can see it, and I can see the Giants in the distance.]

This location was entirely too far for humans to be inside the Frost Giant nation. If they were in armour, they weren't prisoners of the Frost Giants, so they must be another scouting team that had been sent in.

"Hawk found bodies ahead. They're in armour, so there is a chance it was another Elite team." Karl reported.

[Twenty of them in total. Three in white robes, two in red, the rest are not clerics.] Hawk amended.

"Yeah, almost guaranteed they were an Elite team. Hawk says that there are five clerics, including two war clerics, among the twenty bodies." Karl added.

Everyone grimaced as they heard the news, but he was right, they might have important information on them. If nothing else, they could load them in the wagon on the way back out so that they weren't left here for the Frost Giants or monsters to eat.

That seemed like the least that they could do for them once the threat was dealt with.

[Is there any sign of what attacked them? It might lead us to a second group of Giants.] Karl asked Hawk.

[Nothing. It's been snowing down there, and the footprints are all gone.]

Thor led them toward the site of the attack, while Hawk circled in the sky, waiting for any sign that the Frost Giants were still nearby.

They shouldn't be too far from where they were supposed to find that Cave, but he hadn't seen it yet. All that was out here was deep snow, deep enough that Thor had been avoiding going over hills, as it would drag on the bottom of the wagon and make it hard to pull.

Thor pulled to a stop next to the bodies, and Karl got down from the wagon with Bob and Harry. They would check the bodies while the others waited on guard. With no sign of what attacked the group, there was no telling if this was actually a frequently travelled path, where Frost Giants might come across them while they were searching.

Not that they didn't trust Hawk's scouting ability, but he could only be in one spot at a time.

Karl made his way through the bodies of warriors and mages, all of which were showing signs of losing a fight against the Frost Giants. There were missing limbs, massive crushing damage from clubs, and general carnage.

Karl felt his stomach turn at the scene, and tried to forget the fact that these were all Ascended and Commander Rank Elites only a few days ago at the most.

He had been in battle a relatively long time, but not like this, not with these massive casualties.

It was horrifying to think that an entire group could be wiped out like this. There were twenty bodies, so the chances are that none of them had managed to escape to warn the army about the situation or threat that they had met.

Karl was about to turn back to the cart when he noticed a slight puff of warm breath from one of the bodies. Someone was still alive here, but not by much.

He whistled, drawing the attention of the others, and made a waving gesture toward the legless body that Tessa immediately guessed meant healing.

A golden glow surrounded the cleric an instant before Lotus' area healing surrounded the entire area. But only the one body glowed with healing light, it was too late for the others.

Once the survivor had some time to heal, Karl knelt beside the body and brushed some of the snow off the man's face.

"High Priest George? What the hell are you doing here?" Karl asked softly.

The man's body didn't move at all, but it was still glowing with healing light, repairing the damage done.

George's eyes opened weakly, and he silently mouthed a word.

[Trap]

Karl stood up and drew his blade, surrounding himself with a layer of [Flaming Body] in addition to the [Refreshing Lightning] that he always kept active.

That seemed to trigger the trap, and from all around them, Frost Giants burst up out of the ground, showering the area in rocks and snow. They were surrounded, and the bodies were bait for whichever human group came next.

The warriors and the Stone Golems circled the wagon, while Tessa cut Thor free. The Frost Giants hesitated, but not like they were afraid, more like they were waiting for something.

The side of a hill collapsed, and a massive female Frost Giant strode out of the previously buried hiding spot.

{Look what I have caught. Stupid sentimental humans.} She spoke with a heavy accent, in a booming voice that somehow made her feel larger than she was.

And she was not small. She towered over the Commander Rank Frost Giants by an entire head, and Karl was hardly more than shin high on her, his head didn't even reach her waist.

Karl saw Bob nod in his peripheral vision. They would hold off the ambush while Karl took care of the leader.

[Rae, guard the wagon. Thor will be sad if they break it.] Karl instructed.

"Well, there is no point in waiting, let's get to it." Karl shouted up at the Royal Rank Frost Giant.

Rae appeared on the wagon, and called her Spider Golems in to ambush the Frost Giant lines as Karl leapt forward with the two-handed blade flaming in his hands.

{Puny human, I will enjoy eating you.} The leader laughed as she moved with astonishing speed and blocked Karl's attack.

Frost and fire clashed as the magic on their blades met, sending Karl sliding backwards as he lost the test of strength.

Using [Shred] layered with [Flaming Body] Karl hurled three fast arcs at the Giant leader. A twist of her blade blocked two, while one cut a gash in her side.

Blue blood dripped down her torso as the Giant roared in rage and the encirclement closed on the group, stomping the bodies of the unfortunate group who had come before them.

Ice magic was building around them, then fading as Remi used [Blizzard] to offset the leader's identical skill. She wasn't nearly as strong, but the Royal Rank Giant couldn't focus on the skill with Karl attacking her, and the snow was merely blinding, cutting visibility to under ten metres, making it hard to even see her head when he retreated between engagements, but not damaging his barriers.

If she had only been bigger and faster than the others, this fight might not have been so bad, but she was fast, and even with Agility bracers on, Karl was struggling to keep up.

Chapter 309 Duel

Every attack, Karl was forced further from the group, isolated from any chance of reinforcement, but the Blizzard was fading as the leader felt that her mana would be better used on combat than distraction, now that they were fifty metres away from the main battle, and well outside the encirclement.

Karl flicked his blade down, parrying an attack coming for his legs, but couldn't react fast enough for the left hand that she took off her blade and punched him square in the chest with.

His barriers held, but he was rolling in the snow, and the blade was coming for him again, while he didn't have the footing to force it away.

Remi intervened, hitting the Giant with [Chain Lightning] and making her arm twitch, sending the attack wide as Karl rolled to his feet.

Her expression was startled, not having expected the attack from what she thought was a defeated opponent.

Karl sent a flurry of [Rend] attacks at her, coated with [Flaming Body] the same as Hawk did it. There was no way to block them all, but the Giant twirled, sending her cloak billowing and taking a large part of the damage before the thick monster fur was destroyed, leaving it in shreds on the ground while the remainder of the attacks hit her back.

Karl almost fell for the fake opening, and leapt to the right, back in front of her as her blade shrieked through the air, right where he would have been if he had tried to attack her vulnerable back.

His jump had given him a little distance, and Karl quickly switched to his bow to fire a [Chain Lightning] Arrow into her stomach.

It only sunk in a few centimetres, and made her eyelid twitch before she pulled it out, but it bought Karl a second to retreat further and keep firing.

Her snarl shook the air, carrying some sort of magic with it, and Karl felt his mind go blank, while his hands continued to fire arrows.

[Mental Fortitude] kept him from cowering in fear before the might of the Frost Giant leader's [Intimidation] ability, and well-trained hands kept his attacks going, while Remi set up her Poison Flame Totems on either side of the Giant.

The pain had to have been incredible as the first balls of poison and fire hit her body, and the Frost Giant turned, looking for the insect that dared to try to ambush her while still at the Ascended Rank.

But all she found were the totems, and one of Karl's arrows buried itself deep into her ribs, sending numbing Lightning through her body, slowing her reactions.

Powerful strides brought her back to Karl, who hastily switched back to his blade and clashed with the weakened Giant, who was still taking fireballs to the back, distracting her from the fight, and coating her in agonizing poison.

The damage might be negligible, but with every attack it stacked, and when she tried to stomp the totems out of existence, Remi simply moved them out of reach, another dozen metres away, and behind her again.

Then, their knight in shining feathers was there to take his vengeance on the Ice Element, and Hawk was bombarding her from above with Royal Rank fireballs.

Those ones were causing real damage, and while Karl was still on the defensive, she was slowing.

A direct hit to the back of her head dropped her to one knee and made her eyes roll back, giving Karl the opening he had been waiting for. His blade streaked toward her neck, aiming to decapitate the Frost Giant, or at least slit her throat and take her out of the fight. Three on one, even a Royal Rank Frost Giant was no match for them.

That overconfidence was what cost him the most dearly. Without looking, her blade flashed out, slicing cleanly through his left arm and burying itself in the chest plate of his armour.

His strike came up short, barely clipping her throat, but sending out a fountain of blood as the artery was severed.

Pain shot through Karl's body as he watched the Frost Giant woman fading in the distance. He realized that he was flying through the air from the force of the strike, and he could still see his severed hand holding his sword laying on the ground in front of her.

But the fight was over. Hawk's [Shred] hit the back of her neck, and the Giant's head rolled free of her body, coming to a stop next to Karl's sword.

Karl slammed into a tree, and his barriers shattered along with his ribs, but he landed on his feet, before falling to his knees gasping for air.

Everything around him was fuzzy, and he could feel the world fading, but there was one thought in his mind.

He needed his sword back.

That drove him to crawl through the snow as the buzz of Remi's voice in his head faded in and out.

The last thing he knew before the world went dark, and he felt himself fall to his side, was his hand grasping his sword.

Karl's entire world was pain and blackness, then there was a strange pressure on his arm, and a voice in his ear, saying something that he couldn't understand.

Rae had hurled Lotus over the battle, sending her flying into the snow next to Karl, where the Nature Priestess got to work, pinning Karl's arm in place with a number of hasty stitches and a bandaged splint before she began her healing spells. That was her only chance of reattaching the arm. If it healed with the arm off, it would have to be cut again to reattach the two, and that would just be unnecessarily painful.

At least it was clean, as the deep white snow had nothing but mixed purple blood in it.

"Stay with me. You need to stay awake." Lotus was shouting at him, dragging Karl back out of the darkness.

"There you are, open your eyes. We need to move, my vines will only hold off those Giants for a few more seconds." She explained.

Karl blinked away the fuzziness, and saw that there were two Commander Rank Frost Giants being torn apart by Thorned Vines, while Remi was sitting on the ground in front of him, hurling lightning at them.

Karl staggered to his feet, using his sword as a crutch, and realized that while his arm was back, and in a sling across his chest, he couldn't use it. It was just there, numb and motionless.

Using the oversized blade one-handed wouldn't be easy, but it would be impossible to use the maul or the bow. He took a deep breath as [Refreshing Lightning] cleared his mind a little and prepared to fight again.

The two Giants smirked at him as they realized the warrior was heavily wounded, and wouldn't be able to recover fast enough to stop them. But Karl didn't need to lift his blade to fight.

Arcs of [Rend] coated in [Flaming Body] raced for the two Commander Rank Giants, who laughed and easily blocked the strikes, then fell forward, dead, as Hawk's strikes from behind broke their necks.

[The classics are always the best.] Hawk bragged as the flame enhanced [Rend] attacks did their job.

There was a braying noise, and Tessa ran back toward the main battle, leaving Karl to scoop up Remi and stumble after her.

The fight wasn't over yet, but the number of Giants was much lower than it had been.

Karl felt the power transferred from the sword sinking into his body, bringing a tingling to his immobile fingers, and a rush of clarity to his mind.

Karl attacked from behind, joining Hawk in ambushing the Giants and making a path to Thor, who was standing on three legs, while one hung limply, broken by a Frost Giant club.

Rae was protecting the Wagon still, and magic missiles were still casting steadily, with all four Golems on defence.

Harry was under the wagon, nursing injuries, while Ty was kneeling in front of him, firing his bow into the Frost Giants from the relative safety under Rae.

The sudden assault from behind distracted the attackers, and two fell in quick succession to the Spider Golems, then two more from Karl and Hawk, followed by another from Rae herself.

The last few tried to run, but Hawk and the Spider Golems were on them, and before they had made it a hundred metres, they were all taken down.

Lotus vanished into the wagon, which her healing spell was centred on, covering the whole group. Tessa ducked under the wagon to check on Ty and Harry, and Karl did a quick head count. Bob was still standing next to Ophelia, who was panting as she leaned against a Frost Giant corpse, with all her limbs intact. Tessa was in the wagon, as was Lotus. Thor's leg was visibly healing, Dana's Golems were still active, and Rae looked fine.

But there were two that he couldn't see.

Doug and Tori.

Chapter 310 Mad Dash

Karl stumbled back to the scene of his battle and grabbed the head of the Royal Rank Frost Giant. He had told the General that he would mount the head on his wall, after all.

Somewhere in Karl's muddled mind, he knew that made no sense, and that there was something wrong with his thinking, but he dragged the head all the way back to the wagon before Tessa sat him down in the snow, and shone a flashlight in his eyes.

"Can you hear me? How many fingers am I holding up?" She asked.

Everything was a bit blurry, and it took him a few seconds to focus, as her image kept swaying in front of him, but Karl confidently held up two fingers in the V for victory.

"Definitely a concussion, plus whatever other internal injuries aren't healed. Lotus, what is up with the sling?" Tessa asked, far too loudly, as it was causing him intense pain in his head.

"It was severed. I pinned it in place and put a localized healing spell on it, but it won't be ready for at least a day." Lotus replied.

"Can you move your fingers?" Tessa asked, and Karl tried his best to focus on his hand. Then realized he didn't have to, he just had to wiggle his fingers aimlessly.

"Well, they're all moving. Alright, you should keep the limb." Tessa informed him.

"Doug and Tori?" Karl asked.

"Doug is recovering from a blade across the chest, but he will be fine." She replied, then patted Karl on his good shoulder.

"Alright, time to get up. Can you send the beasts back into their space to rest and recover? Or do they need more healing first?" Tessa asked quietly.

Thor returned to his pond to sleep, followed by Rae and Hawk, though Rae left her golems out. Remi remained in Karl's sling, periodically casting a healing splash on his arm, in hopes that it would help it heal properly. She hadn't been injured during the fight, and the inside of the sling wasn't too cold after Tessa adjusted Karl's cloak to cover most of his front.

Karl remained sitting for a few minutes as the others worked, and then a motion to his left caught his eye. The movement of a Frost Giant had him on his feet in a flash, ready to attack, but it was only Bob and Ophelia, wrapping the Royal Rank Giant's head in a bag to hang off the back of the wagon.

Bob quietly addressed the team. "Alright, we've got everything cleaned up, and the bodies are in the wagon to go back with us.

Let's get everyone in, and the Golems will take us back. Rae, can you come out and make a new harness? Wait, can she even hear us when she's not out?" Rae came out and quickly harnessed Dana's Golems to the wagon, which was now half loaded with bodies, and created a harness for the humanoid Golems. Then she returned to her space, where her stamina would recover more quickly, and curled up to sleep, while Hawk kept watch on the outside world.

Everyone was seated a few minutes later, and Karl found himself in the corner, with Dana leaning against his side, unnaturally quiet, while Tessa directed the Golems to get the cart moving.

Karl wrapped his one good arm around the mage, and looked across the wagon, where High Priest George gave him a weak smile. Somehow, the man was still alive, having avoided being crushed during the ambush, but he had lost both legs above the knee, and his own magic was only enough to stop the blood flow and keep himself alive with the injuries he had sustained.

Somehow, the man was still alive, having avoided being crushed during the ambush, but he had lost both legs above the knee, and his own magic was only enough to stop the blood flow and keep himself alive with the injuries he had sustained.

Doug was doing better. His staff was shattered into splinters on the floor of the wagon, and he was wrapped with bandages all around his chest. He had wrapped himself in a fur cloak for warmth while he mixed some sort of herbal concoction, but Karl's headcount still didn't find Tori.

Reluctantly, Karl turned to look at the back of the wagon, and saw the telltale mage robes and white fur cloak under the pile of bodies. They had defeated the Royal Rank Frost Giant, but Karl couldn't call this a victory, not when they weren't all coming back home.

For some reason, Tessa was pushing the wagon at a full run across the snow, headed for the closest section of the line, while Lotus continued to maintain her healing spell over the wagon.

Karl faded in and out of consciousness for the next few hours, being briefly jostled awake by larger bumps as the wagon raced across the frozen plains.

The sun had set not long after the battle, but still, the cleric didn't slow the wagon, keeping the Golems at a full run, heedless of the bouncing that they were doing. Nobody was saying anything about it, so Karl assumed that there was a good reason for the rush, and continued to fade in and out until finally the bright spotlights of a front-line encampment lit up their wagon.

There was a lot of shouting, and people were moving around frantically, unloading bodies from the wagon, but he just sat where he was with Dana under his arm as the mage sobbed silently and pretended that she was asleep.

Eventually, a hand landed on his shoulder, shaking Dana awake in the process, while bringing Karl out of his stupor long enough to turn to see who was looking for him.

"It's your turn, if you two can walk to the triage tents." The man in the white robes of a High Cleric of the main faith whispered.

Karl was thankful for the consideration, as loud noises were still hurting his head, but his body was feeling better with that much time in Lotus' healing spell and the [Refreshing Lightning].

Remi was still in his sling, half asleep, but randomly mumbling and casting [Healing Splash] on his arm until Karl stroked her head and let her know that she had done a good job, and she could go sleep in her space.

The cleric passed Dana off to a female High Priest, and brought Karl to a small diagnosis room, where he repeated the 'light in the eyes' thing that Tessa had done.

"Still a concussion?" Karl asked.

The priest nodded. "It's healing, but won't be finished until morning, most likely. You did good getting back here as fast as you did."

Karl gave him a rueful smile. "We didn't make it fast enough."

The High Priest put a gentle hand on his shoulder. "No, you did. High Priests George and Doug are both going to be fine by morning, though George's legs are a lost cause without months of treatment spells or a Royal Rank healer.

But more importantly, with them, we had the six High Priests necessary to cast a resurrection ritual. Tori should reappear somewhere familiar to her in the next forty-eight hours."

Karl just blinked at the High Priest, so he explained.

"There are two basic resurrection spells. One brings them back to life within ten minutes of death, but only a Royal Rank Cleric or a select few of the healing specialist High Priests such as myself can use that. The other is a six-person ritual that puts a soul that's still linked to its body into a new body with its memories intact. They usually show up somewhere which they associate with good memories, and then they have to explain to someone who they are, or come to the church, where we can verify it and update their records."

"So she will be fine, and back at the Academy soon?" Karl asked hopefully.

"Not back at the Academy, most likely. I have never heard of the new body forming with the effects of the injection, so she wouldn't be an Elite anymore. But she's still a student, so there is a chance they will make an exception, and she will be able to start over if her new body is compatible, just a little older than the others. It's not like the injection doesn't work anymore if they give it later."

Well, that was better than dead, he supposed.

The cleric finished giving Karl a checkup, which found that other than his head, everything seemed to be fine, and he was recovering well, but would need to eat a lot to recover the energy that he had burned while healing his body.

That was something that he could do. Dana was waiting outside the tent with a faintly hopeful smile that said she had gotten the same news about Tori, so he led her toward a large wall tent where he could hear Bob arguing with someone. That was most likely the mess hall, and if it wasn't, it was still the right place to be, as that was where their team was.