

Beast Master 311

Chapter 311 Mess Hall

The remainder of the group had gathered at a table in the nearly deserted mess hall, where Karl and Dana joined them after loading their trays with random items. Karl still couldn't think clearly, and every light source made his head hurt, but not enough that he couldn't just leave them mostly closed while he ate.

"What's the prognosis, monster man?" Doug asked as Karl attempted to operate a canned drink one-handed, as his other wasn't working properly, even if he removed it from the sling.

"They say my head should be better tomorrow, and my arm will work eventually. Good work, by the way, to whoever put that back on. I distinctly remember that it was not attached for a while." Karl rambled.

Lotus smiled and gave him a thumbs up.

"I did the best that I can. I'm a good healer, but that was a pretty gnarly injury."

Karl smiled at the little cleric. "Where's George?"

Doug frowned. "They took him for more intensive treatment. He was somewhat coherent once they drugged him, and we got the ritual done, but he's in bad shape. I take it you've worked with him before?"

"Briefly." Karl agreed, not wanting to get into it too deeply, as that was when they had picked up Tori, whose current fate was uncertain.

They were eating quietly when a commotion outside drew all their attention. The feeling of a powerful creature or Elite approaching put them all on guard, but the feeling was familiar to Karl, with his heightened senses, and he just returned to his eating.

"Someone you know?" Doug whispered.

"I'm fairly certain that is Prince Axel and Overlord Drake." Karl agreed.

That surprised the high Priest, as they should have been on the Mountain Giant front, keeping the most powerful of their foes under control.

The two stormed into the mess hall, followed by over a dozen officers, and then paused in visible relief as they saw the group eating.

"Ah, there's a sight for sore eyes. When we heard that the group sent to subjugate the Frost Giant Royal had been annihilated, we feared the worst." Prince Axel blurted out with a relieved smile on his face.

"I take it that you got the news about the same time that you got the news that we had been sent out?" Karl asked, while the others looked unsure how to respond. Karl and Dana were the only ones in the group who had held a proper conversation with either of these two leaders, and Overlord Drake had quite the reputation as a fighter.

"We were meeting with General Orland when the news that a group had been wiped out and their tracking spells were all disabled within five minutes of each other. But the report was incomplete, and we only knew that it was the church who put the trackers on. They didn't include the team leader's name." Drake explained.

Karl winced at the loud noise, but smiled. "We will have to send the Generals a message and let them know that I got that head for my trophy case."

Axel and Drake both burst into laughter.

"You really did it? Orland told me about your little spat with the Generals, but I didn't think you would actually manage it. The Frost Giant Royals aren't just a little bit above Commander Rank, they're skilled leaders and cunning monsters." The big warrior asked.

"You really did it? Orland told me about your little spat with the Generals, but I didn't think you would actually manage it. The Frost Giant Royals aren't just a little bit above Commander Rank, they're skilled leaders and cunning monsters." The big warrior asked.

"That's no joke. They were hiding down under the snow and rocks, laying perfectly still in an ambush ring around the bodies of the first group when we arrived. They had been there for days, and they were deep enough that not even thermal vision could spot them until they moved, and by then it was too late." Karl explained.

Prince Axel whistled. "Damn, that's just evil. The Mountain Giants camouflage well with the stone, but at least you can see them on thermal. What else can you tell us about the Royal Frost Giant?"

Everyone turned to look at Karl, as he was the only one with the opportunity to get a good look at it while it was still alive.

"Middle-aged female Frost Giant, a full head taller than a Commander Rank Giant. She was fast, stupidly fast, and even with a Commander Rank agility buff, she was nearly faster than I was. Stronger than a Commander with two Giant Strength items on as well. She spoke common, and understood combat tactics as well as common battle traps intended to put her off balance.

Still vulnerable to fire, but able to take an immense amount of pain from poison attacks with no noticeable decrease in combat efficiency until fire attacks began to damage her back and shoulder muscles." Karl explained.

"She spoke human common? What did she say?" Axel asked.

Karl took a second to sort through the fuzzy memories for exactly what she said. He couldn't get it, but Remi filled him in with the details.

"She said, 'Look what I have caught. Stupid humans.' then told me that she would enjoy eating me after I landed the first blow." The Prince nodded. That much was expected of the Giants, and not enlightening or shocking, even if it was uncommon for them to bother to learn human language.

"Alright. I just need a basic overview of the battle, who was where?" Axel asked.

Karl gestured to Doug, as he hadn't actually seen the battle. He was too busy.

"Karl was lured off to fight the Royal Giant, while I was in the wagon with Dana and Tori. Tessa was mounted on Thor at the front of the wagon, with Harry and Bob on either side.

The stone Golems started at the back with Ophelia and then spread to Harry's side when he was injured. The Spider Golems that Rae makes attacked from behind at first, while she guarded the top of the wagon. Hawk was on scout duty above, and I think that's everyone."

Axel was briefly confused as he counted the number of combatants.

"Hawk, Rae and Thor are beasts belonging to Karl. Commander Rank magical beasts." Doug explained.

"Ah, I see now. Alright, how many Frost Giants were there?"

Doug counted in his head for a moment. "Thirty Commander Rank Frost Giants, plus their leader."

Everyone in the tent fell silent at that announcement.

"Not the ten that were reported, but thirty Commander Rank Frost Giants, and a Royal Rank leader? And you returned with one half casualty? They just might give you all a commendation for that." Prince Axel declared.

Karl hadn't realized that there were so many, and it was a miracle that anybody had made it through, even with multiple healers. The first group was twice their size, and they had been massacred. But there also might have been even more Frost Giants before that fight.

One of the officers from the back stepped forward with a frown. "Not to question the integrity of a High Priest, but how is that possible? If one of the Commanders was fighting the leader solo, and the other was on defence, protecting the wagon, how did you manage to kill thirty Commander Rank Frost Giants while surrounded?"

Doug sighed and had Karl light him another smoke. "Partially the berserker, Ophelia, who lives up to the reputation of the Bear Totem Clan, and did a massive amount of damage with the War Goddess' blessing

on her weapons, but mostly it was our ability to hold them off while the Spider Golems summoned by Karl's Bloodbath Spider tore them apart and the Dragon Hawk set them on fire.

Both of them have combat power well beyond what you expect of the average Commander Rank monster, and no matter how many times you kill a Golem, if you don't take out the source, they don't stop coming.

The Frost Giants thought that both mages were summoning the Golems, but it was one and the Spider. So, they targeted the mages first, before deciding that the second set of Golems belonged to the one fighting the leader.

They weren't speaking Common, but some hand gestures are universal to all humanoids."

Drake looked curious. "And the Ascended Rank warriors and Golems were able to stand up to the attacks of the Frost Giants long enough for the Commander Rank Golems to eliminate them?" Doug gestured at Karl, and Thor brought up [Refreshing Lightning] over the cleric.

"This is [Refreshing Lightning] the Lightning Cerro's primary defensive barrier. Thor can spread it to the entire group, and between that and [Circle of Protection] at Commander Rank, the incoming damage was low enough that we could hold." He explained, then motioned for Thor to lower the barrier so he could smoke.

Chapter 312 Prognosis

Overlord Drake silenced a round of incoming questions from the other officers. "Is it possible that some of you might have advanced since you were sent to the battlefield?"

Bob shrugged. "Not me, but I suppose that it's possible one of the clerics might have. The others are all still too new to their advancement, so it seems unlikely that they would have achieved the next rank."

Drake was looking more at Karl than anyone else. Karl shook his head. "No, while my class is an oddity, and I might count as more than one Commander, I am not at the Royal Rank. Not even close. I was told that when I get close I will feel the bottleneck in my mental spaces, where I will have to adjust my technique, and they still have a long way to go before that."

The others nodded, but Tessa shrugged. "I have gained some favour from the War Goddess for my work, but I'm not certain if it is enough to qualify."

Drake nodded. "Alright, I will put it in my notes. Intervention by the War Goddess should quiet any calls for a verification mission, but someone will likely use a truth spell on you to verify." One of the officers snorted in laughter, and held up a green disc. They had already verified Doug's words as truth.

Prince Axel looked excited. "Do you think we have a new High Priestess of the Red Dragon coming soon? Tessa, have you noticed any new draconic features? I would like to know what you have been up to that would have attracted so much of her attention to you, the War Goddess has seemed rather uninterested in this battlefield."

Doug burst into laughter, and nearly dropped his smoke before Ophelia stole it from him and smirked at the officers as she took a drag.

"Who do you think that the War Goddess likes better than murder hobos on a battlefield? We have been halfway down the border since we arrived, and our total kill count has to be over a thousand by now." The muscular brunette laughed, then frowned as Doug stole his smoke back and thumped her on the head.

Overlord Drake made a gesture to the officers behind him, and someone brought forward a large red folder.

Inside were typed transcripts that looked like copies of radio transmissions, along with mission reports and the usual paperwork that went with most missions.

Karl wasn't certain why the folder was red, but he was still having issues thinking clearly, and it didn't really matter, as Drake was skimming through the contents, so it was all within his security clearance.

"What is this? This string of triple digit kill counts? I'm assuming that is for the combined group?" Drake asked, and the officer shrugged.

Tessa snapped her fingers. "I know what you're reading. Those days we went hunting reinforcement groups, and split the kill count between the two groups so that we didn't have to file paperwork for a combined Elite Recon force."

"So, it's not just the same number, misreported? Your groups killed the total of the two numbers that day?" Overlord Drake replied.

"Exactly. We didn't want to mess with the total, as that would change the expectations of the main lines, so we split the kills between us when reporting."

The officer held up his green disc again, and Drake shook his head in dismay. "And they call the Overlords the monsters among the Elites. Is one of you perhaps auditioning for a position with the Black Dragon, Goddess of Death?"

Doug shook his head. "No, we're keeping things balanced, we rescued a town full of refugees too, if you check a few more pages in. We're a bit behind on the good works, but helping reset the climate back to normal has to count for a few balance points.

It's just that they were sending Awakened Groups with an Ascended leader, and we have a Commander Rank Bloodbath Spider who summons Golems, and a Dragon Hawk with a pure hatred for all things water and ice element. The reinforcement groups died so fast that sometimes the rest of us wouldn't even get to fight."

One of the officers chuckled. "What's next? Stacking so many giant corpses that you create a beacon fire that can be seen from two valleys away?"

Karl's mouth was moving before his brain realized what was happening. "That's in the records for sector G-4C. We already did that."

Doug choked on his coffee, then did his best to return his expression back to neutral.

"So it is. But they didn't actually see it from two valleys away, only one." Drake informed him when he found the file.

"Murder Hobo." Lotus mouthed in Karl's direction, with her back to the officers.

"You should have seen how sad Remi was when she learned that they wouldn't appreciate our nice warm bonfire. I almost felt bad about setting it." Karl whispered back, possibly louder than intended, as a few of the officers gave him amused looks.

"You're taking this exceptionally well for a novice Elite." Prince Axel noted, looking at Karl.

Doug shook his head. "He's got a major concussion. Nothing has actually sunk into his mind yet, and probably won't until he has a few days to unwind and return to reality."

The Prince sighed. "I suppose that makes sense. Everyone else but Doug looks some level of traumatized, so I thought he might have some skill that helps with processing and compartmentalizing traumatic experiences."

A High Priest in white robes cleared his throat from the doorway, and Overlord Drake nodded.

"We will wait until you're done eating, and then you are all being evacuated back to the Capital for medical assessment and recovery. For those of you who are still in school, your personal tutors will be there when you get there."

Karl was not looking forward to a helicopter ride with the condition that his head was in, but it seemed inevitable. It would take days to get there down the gravel roads in a bus.

"How is their recovery prognosis?" Overlord Drake asked. "90 days to full recovery." The white robed High Priest explained.

"That long? We were hoping to get them back in a combat position once the healing was finished." The Overlord sighed.

The High Priest frowned. "If it's an emergency deployment, then fourteen days. But surely, we don't need them back on the line that desperately. The Frost Giants have been devastated by dragons, and

this line has almost gone calm over the last few days. Unless they come up with something new tactic or weapon, then we can spare two teams of Elites."

Overlord Drake rolled his eyes. "Do you think I care about a bunch of Ascended Rank Frost Giants? No, we still need more people on the Hill Giant lines, while I am with the other Overlords, keeping the Mountain Giants at bay.

The Hill Giants are all worked up for no good reason, and they've been hitting everywhere along the border. Unlike the Frost Giants, they don't need to change anything to move their border, and they're stronger. So, if this combined team can reliably take care of teams made mostly of Commander Rank Giants, then we need them on the other fronts."

Karl sighed, and Prince Axel smirked. "You shouldn't have told them that. I know that sigh, it means 'I foresee complications that might stretch that maximum recovery duration in my future'."

As if they had practised it, the whole group turned to Karl with looks of clearly fake concern. "That poor severed arm, and the lingering head injury, certainly we won't be able to deploy so soon." Lotus joked.

Now it was Prince Axel's turn to sigh in frustration. "Alright, enough of that. You're not even trying to fake it properly. But the next time, you shouldn't be in a scouting role, you will be in a main camp where it's safer, and you will have support to deal with larger attacks."

Karl couldn't help but smile at the sour looks on everyone's faces. "No offence, Prince Axel, but it's likely safer for us not to be on the front lines with the rest of the Elites. I have heard on good authority that that's where the monsters attack.

If we're in the field, we get to be on the offence, and with one notable exception, where we were outsmarted by a bunch of angry popsicles, it's been working out well for us." Karl explained.

[Angry Popsicles, I like that one.] Hawk laughed.

Chapter 313 Evacuated

The Church worked fast, or perhaps their timing was simply impeccable, as that was the moment when the Clerics came in to inform everyone that the evacuation helicopter for the wounded Elites was landing, and that it was intending to return to the Capital as quickly as possible.

"Where in the Capital will it be landing?" Overlord Drake asked.

"The University's Wounded Veteran Treatment Hospital." The cleric responded immediately.

That was likely one of the many facilities that were actually connected to the University and Cathedral, but hidden in the woods, to preserve the feeling of natural surroundings.

"Alright, we will come with you. We would like to be present for the official diagnosis from the resident experts." Prince Axel declared.

"Did we do something to piss off Colonel Valerie?" Karl muttered to himself, making the Prince and Overlord both laugh.

"Probably. Goddess knows I likely did, but that's just how she is. But we were tasked to ensure that the students were safe and to impress upon the Church that we can't afford any lingering damage that will hinder their growth. We had to be on this front for an inspection anyhow, so it was no big thing." Prince Axel remarked quietly.

"So that's how it is. I don't think that we have much to worry about. My arm might be mostly useless right now, but it will almost certainly recover in a reasonable timeframe." Karl replied.

Axel smiled and gestured toward the door. "It's that almost that the brass finds unacceptable. Now, I suppose we should be leaving, as the Church specifically made space for everyone in the evacuation flight."

That made sense to Karl, especially when they had started with the speculation that one of the others might have made it to Commander Rank. The church did almost all the testing once you were out of the Academy, and two of the most likely candidates were Tessa and Lotus.

The thought of Lotus, the tiny wild child of a nature cleric as a High Priestess brought a smile to Karl's face, which drew the attention of the others.

"Something amusing about an evacuation flight?" Harry asked.

Karl shook his head. "No, I was thinking that they likely expedited it, hoping that one of their own had reached Commander Rank. Now, it might be Tessa, but can you imagine Lotus as a High Priestess? I mean, nature Priestesses are known for being a little out there, but Lotus in charge of stuff that involves sitting and paperwork?"

Lotus gasped in horror and Doug laughed. "There are at least fifty pages of reports to write after you officially advance. You should mentally prepare yourself, little one." The High Priest teased his counterpart.

"And how long did it take you to do them?" Tessa asked.

Doug shrugged. "I got through the first assignment that day, and I'll get them the rest of it later."

Meaning that he still hadn't done it, even months after the advancement test was completed. Either the paperwork wasn't all that important, or the Church just gave up on the Nature Priests and let it slide. Karl had thought that they were going to force him to be responsible for at least a whole week before letting him escape again.

Once they were loaded, the helicopter began to spin up the rotors, and Karl's head began to pound in time with the thumping of the air.

"Here, take one of these. It will help with the headache. Head injuries are tricky, since so much healing magic depends on what the body thinks is its proper state. It knows what a healed arm should be like, but when the brain is injured it gets confused." One of the clerics explained as he handed Karl a small white pill.

Karl swallowed the medicine and immediately his headache began to fade as his whole body became numb.

Fortunately for him, the ride ended long before the pill wore off, and before he knew it, Karl had his arm around Dana, leading the group into the hospital while she grumbled about it being a waste of time as she wasn't injured.

"Physical wounds aren't the only thing that we treat here." One of the clerics informed her with a gentle smile.

Lotus pulled Dana out from under Karl's arm with a smile, and gave her a spin. "Relax, I've been here before. It's good to get things off your chest, and they have the good food, as long as you're not sick."

Dana smiled softly. "Is it common for Nature Priestesses to be sent for mental health evaluations?"

Lotus nodded happily. "All the time before we are confirmed as followers of the Green Dragon or one of the other Nature Gods. People usually think that we're crazy or scatterbrained, when we're really just bored."

"Or stoned." Ty muttered.

"That's a definite possibility. The others tell me that I don't need drugs, though. I'm fun enough without them. Speaking of which, once we are settled in for the night, can we get Karl to let Rae out again? I want to swing in a hammock." Lotus agreed.

The cleric in front of them in his doctor's robes gave her a concerned look while the group laughed.

Karl gestured to her bag. "You know there is a hammock in there. You can just hang it up in your room if Rae isn't around to make you a custom one."

"Oh, right! I forgot that there was one in here. We haven't had a chance to use them in a while since we've been in the same spot with new ones made for us."

The doctor pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes to take a deep breath before dealing with them again.

"I would ask if this was new behaviour, but it clearly isn't. Are there any other oddballs in the group that I should know about?" He finally asked.

"Other than the Werebear Totem Berserker who gets super growly if you tickle her, the guy who talks to his pet monsters, the War Priestess who treats a Lightning Cerro as a pet, and Doug? Not really." Lotus replied happily.

Harry and Ty gave each other knowing smiles, while Bob smirked at Doug.

"See, brother. I AM the normal one." The warrior laughed.

Lotus shook her head. "That honour definitely goes to someone else in your family. But you don't really qualify as an oddball."

Doug gave Lotus a high five, while the Doctor shook his head.

"You know what, I'm bringing in a specialist team for this. I'm not doing this on a Monday." He muttered as he tapped a button on the wall by a door.

It seemed to be some sort of pager, and after a second, four aging hippies came jogging down the hall, as if there were some type of emergency.

"You paged?" The first one to them asked, panting a little from the exertion.

"They're all yours. I am clocking out." The first doctor informed them, while the four confused Nature Priests looked at the group.

Karl saw the moment that the realization hit them, that the first guy just wasn't up to dealing with the shenanigans of a green robed High Priest and his friends, and they spread their arms in a welcoming gesture, indicating that the group should come forward.

"Alright, we have your notes from the flight. Who is Commander Karl, the one who ... No, that can't be right. It says here you were punched in the face by a Frost Giant." One of the clerics in the back asked.

Lotus shook her head. "Technically, she punched him in the chest, and his head hit a tree when he was finished flying. The initial diagnosis was a concussion."

"Alright, was that before or after he lost the arm?" The doctor asked, directing it at Lotus, as the first responder on the scene.

"After, but not long after. The fight was over when I got there, but it couldn't have been more than thirty seconds apart. I did my best to put the arm properly in place, and he's got motion in the fingers, but they're still weakened and not responding properly." She explained.

The man with the most prodigious of the beards among the group nodded in understanding and cast some sort of spell over Karl.

"That's an easy fix. It's just nerve damage, and we can fix that as we deal with the head injury. It would sort itself out in a few weeks of treatment anyhow." The bearded Doctor agreed.

"Why does nobody have name tags?" Karl asked Doug, who was standing beside him.

"So that we can't yell at them by name. It helps keep things impersonal. Once we're settled in, and they know that we're not in the middle of battle rage or psychosis, they will usually introduce themselves. But these are Dale, Jerry, John and Skittles." Doug replied.

The bearded man burst into laughter.

"High Priest Xander Moonbeam Rainbow. Doctor Xander to most, but this impertinent whelp made up a nickname for me when he was still one of my more promising students." He explained.

Well, that was an unfortunate name. Perhaps his parents were nature priests as well.

Chapter 314 Capital Checkup

They walked down a hallway, and found High Priest George, as well as a number of other injured clerics sitting around a radio, listening to a broadcast of the Capital's latest Idol singer, an Ascended Rank, bard Class Elite known only as Su.

She sang in an upbeat pop rock style, and the clerics were enthralled, even through the radio. In person, the Bards could draw the whole crowd in with their magic, and she had an astonishing voice that was helping the wounded recover, if their smiles were anything to go by.

Karl smiled at George and patted him on the shoulder as they passed, and the High Priest smiled back from his wheelchair. He had loose hospital issue pyjama pants on, but it would be some time for his legs to grow back.

As they walked, the group members were taken away one by one, escorted into various rooms. Most of them would be in and out quickly enough, but Karl knew that he would be there for at least a few days while they sorted out whatever was still going on with his head.

Eventually, Doug was the last one with him, and Doctor Xander turned him by the shoulders, into an examination room while two aging High Priests in the white robes of the main faith under their coats escorted Karl into the room across the hall.

"Alright, we will start with the physical injuries, and then we will ask you a few questions about your time in battle. It can do strange things to people, and it's as much for our peace of mind as your own.

Keeping things bottled up isn't healthy, after all. Now, this is going to feel bright, but it's actually in your head and not a physical light." The doctor explained.

He wasn't joking, it was like the whole world went Gold, but underneath the light, he could sense something paying attention to him.

[I told you that Mental Fortitude was an important skill, didn't I?] The voice asked.

[I can't argue with that. At this point I feel like I should be freaking out and breaking down. In fact, it doesn't make sense that I'm not. But like, it's in the back of my head, you know?] Karl replied, used to the sensation of mental communication from interacting with the beasts.

Karl sensed multiple sources of amusement, and then the sensation faded with one last bit of wisdom.

[Even the smallest beast knows when to run and when to fight. Don't forget that.]

The light faded not long after the voice did, and Karl opened his eyes again. He was staring at two very concerned doctors, but he didn't recall any pain or anything other than the voice and the light.

"That wasn't as bad as expected. Bright lights have been my nemesis all day." Karl explained.

"What do you remember?" The doctor asked. "There was a voice in my mind, the same as when my beasts speak to me, but not one of them. It made a joke about one of my class skills, and then reminded me that every animal should know when to run away." Karl shrugged.

"That's all?" The doctor asked.

"I mean, yeah. What were you expecting?" The Doctor frowned. "You were surrounded by Golden Light for over two hours. We expected a longer timeline."

Now it was Karl's turn to frown. Thanks to Rae's shared echolocation, he had a fairly good sense of what was going on around him, even with his eyes closed, he should have noticed if hours had passed. Losing situational awareness was more concerning than anything else.

[What happened while I was out?] Karl asked the beasts.

The only one who had been awake was Remi, and she was as confused as he was. [What do you mean? I didn't even have an opportunity to fix the eyes on this new Totem, and then you were done with your thing.] She asked, unsure what the doctors were talking about.

"Are you trying to remember something?" The doctor asked.

"Oh, sorry. I was conferring with the beasts. But their sense of time is the same as mine, and they think it has only been a minute or two since we arrived in the room. Have you conferred with someone outside to see if it were you whose sense of time was warped?" Karl replied.

The doctor pointed at a side table with a pair of empty plates and coffee cups.

"Point taken. If everyone else had hours, then it had to be me. But on the bright side, my head feels wonderful again." Karl informed them.

"Well, we will continue our checks, and verify that the damage from the concussion is healing properly. But the reaction of your pupils is back to normal as the light in the room adjusts, and that's a good start."

Karl knew what they meant, he had seen miners with head injuries before after the many minor collapses, and they always had one huge pupil and one tiny when the lights got bright again.

"Alright, now for the part that's going to be much more difficult. We would like to talk to you about your time behind enemy lines. What was that like, being cut off from support, alone with only a few strangers?" The doctor asked.

Karl laughed. "My team aren't strangers. We might not be family, but we've been through a lot together, and this was not our first mission together. In fact, even the Mackenzie brothers are familiar faces, as I have worked with them recently as well.

Being behind enemy lines was partially our choice. We wanted to be away from the main lines, where we could start fights on our own terms, not wait for the Frost Giants to charge and then respond.

But when the lines were pulled back the first time, we were guarding a spot along the border. We would have had to go through the enemy lines to get back to our side, but as I mentioned, we didn't really want to be involved in that shit show anyhow. So, we set up a nice den in a cave, and went out daily to hunt the Frost Giants and their allies."

"A den?" The doctor asked, taking notes.

"That's really the best way to describe it. We didn't make physical upgrades to the caves we stayed in to call it a fort, we just had Rae, my Bloodbath Spider, create hammocks, a proper door, and such. Then the Clerics added the residential touches, setting up proper tables with nature magic, while I used Fire Magic to keep the caves warm.

All in all, it wasn't all that bad. Do you know how many nights I slept in the cold in the Lithium Mine village because we couldn't afford more coal for the stove than we needed for cooking? Having Fire Magic to keep a cave warm all night is pure luxury."

The Doctor gave him a gentle smile.

"Do you resent the Lithium Mines?"

Karl shook his head. "They suck, but the job of a miner will probably never be a good one. I have transferred money home for my parents, but I heard that the day I made Ascended they promoted Dad up out of the hole anyhow, so he's in the office and doing better."

"Any other siblings?"

Karl shook his head. "My mom wasn't big on children. She liked me, but she wasn't the sort that wanted to raise an entire football team on her own."

The priest chuckled. "It sounds like you know a few of those."

"There are always a few families like that in any town, right? I heard from some of the other students that the farms are way worse, as they need the extra hands, but more hands means they need even more help, which leads to more kids, until they have a small army on the farm." Karl laughed.

That made the cleric give an honest laugh. "I grew up on one of those farms. Tenth of what are now fourteen children, and most of my siblings already have at least five of their own. I showed an

exceptional affinity to Holy Magic even as a small child, and when I managed to actually cast a healing spell at sixteen years old, they brought me to the church for training."

"Then you understand. Not everyone wants all the family. As the nature priests would say, some people relate better to the Warbear and her lone cub than the Earth Mouse and their litters."

Chapter 315 Roommates

The Cleric made notes as they talked, and when he had finished with his list of questions, he stood from his chair and nodded in satisfaction.

"Let's get you moved to a recovery room so that your head can recover. As far as I can tell, that is the most pressing issue. The rest is all incidental, and it should sort itself out with only a few more sessions." He declared.

"Well, that's all that we can really ask for, right? But can I ask a favour? Our tenth group member, Tori, underwent a resurrection ritual, and she should be showing up somewhere soon. Could you please let me know when she is found? I'd like to do something for her, regardless of whether they're going to see if she's compatible with the Injection again in her new body or not." Karl asked.

"Of course. The Church is keeping an eye out for her, along with a number of others. The Hill Giant war front has been brutal lately, and they have resurrected a number of Elites. It's a common enough request, so I will put it on your notes, and when there is news, someone will come to inform you.

But you should really rest first. Nothing is better for healing than time, and we will have a specialist come to check on you in the morning." The doctor informed him with a smile.

"Wonderful. Where are we all staying?" "We all? Commander, this is a hospital, and you are a patient. You will be in a recovery room, while the others will be in their own rooms, though you will likely all be in the same ward, as you came in for the same evaluation." He chuckled.

Karl laughed. "You make it sound like I'm some sort of invalid."

The Doctor looked from his arm, which was still in a sling, to his head, which still had a visibly healing scar on one side. "Alright, point taken. Where is this room?"

The doctor gave a sigh that spoke of released tension, and left Karl with even more questions. Why was he so uptight? They had just finished the meeting about his experiences, and Karl didn't think that it had gone that badly. The man shouldn't have a good reason to be so nervous.

The room that he led Karl to had three other Elites already there, all Awakened, and all sporting visibly missing limbs.

"Gentlemen, we have your fourth roommate. Welcome Commander Karl to your little group, please. He will be here for a bit, but not as long as you, since his cleric managed to find and reattach his old limb." The doctor informed the men in the room.

The hospital beds didn't look comfortable, and the room was full of strangers, not exactly prime sleeping conditions. Karl considered asking them to reconsider the arrangements, but coed naps in monster made hammocks didn't seem like they were a hospital approved activity.

"Hey everyone. Good to meet you." Karl greeted the three other Elites in his room for the evening.

"Dude, you're a freaking legend. It's an honour to meet you." A bearded blonde man missing one leg informed him.

"A legend? I just got here." Karl replied with a smile for the enthusiastic Elite.

The three all shook their heads, and the blonde man continued. "Word spreads fast here. We don't have anything to do but gossip. Word is that your team killed a Royal Rank Frost Giant, even after being ambushed, and made it back to tell the story. But even before that, we all knew who you were. We were on the front when your team blew up the Frost Stone and knocked out communications for an entire battlefield, then just chilled in the wilderness killing Giants until someone brought you a new radio."

Karl smiled. "What should we have done? We've been running away from Command Staff interrogations and paperwork since before the war started. We came straight from monster subjugation missions to the border when it all kicked off, and I've been doing my best not to be in a main camp overnight ever since."

Their laughter caught the attention of the staff, who sent a white robed acolyte with a nurse's hat on to yell at them.

Only, when she arrived in the room, the first thing that she saw was that they weren't arguing and that Karl was still in his armour.

"Would you mind putting your gear in the locker, and changing into a hospital gown, or one of the many available recovery outfits?" She requested.

"If you try getting me into one of those silly paper hospital gowns, I'm putting it on backwards." Karl warned her.

"The white hassock is fine, but the short-sleeved one, as you have an arm injury that's still in a sling. Or you can wear the lounge pants and loose shirt from the lockers. They are acceptable as well, but there is no need for armour or backpacks in the hospital." She reminded Karl with a strained professional smile.

Karl used his good arm to open one of the lockers and set his backpack inside, then grabbed a white visitor robe and looked for the shower. If he was going to change, he might as well get clean again.

"Can you shower without assistance, or would you like me to call an orderly?" The nurse asked.

"I should be fine. My arm isn't completely dead, I just don't have good control of the fingers yet. The doc said that once my head starts to heal, the fingers should sort themselves out. Nerve damage, according to the healers." Karl agreed.

The nurse nodded and left the room, closing the door behind her.

"They're so much nicer to you." The man in the back left corner of the room sighed from his bed.

"That's because he's a Commander, and he's got monsters with him. They'll have the room under surveillance with a High Priest down the hall, since he's got a head injury. Head wounds are tricky like that, you never know when someone is going to snap and forget that they're in a hospital and not in the middle of a battleground." The blonde laughed.

Karl stopped and gave the man a shocked look. "And yet, they put me in a mixed room?" "We're all warriors. We might not look like much right now, but we can take a hit or two, and there aren't any spare rooms right now. Normally, all Commanders get the private rooms, but if you're here with us, then there are zero left."

"It's likely more fun here than in a solo room anyhow. They told me that they're not going to put the group back together in a dorm while we are in the hospital, so it's better here than bored alone. But I will be back in a few minutes."

Once Karl was washed up and refreshed, he was feeling much more human again, but he did notice that there were no shaving implements in the bathroom, and he had forgotten to get his from his bag. He didn't grow a great beard, it was still fairly thin, but now that he was out of the Frost Giant Nation, his face was warmer than he would have preferred.

He came back out in the plain white robes, and watched as the other men traded money, clearly having bet on something.

"Did you really think that I wouldn't manage to change? My armour is bonded." Karl laughed.

The blonde shook his head. "We were betting that you would take out a razor and trigger the emergency response. Head trauma measures, remember? My bet was that you forgot it in your bag."

Karl chuckled. "That's exactly what happened. Now, what is there to do around here?"

"Well, you can walk, so you can likely wander around until they yell at you, or get the nurse to bring a book, or meditate, if that's possible with your head injury. Sometimes they tell you not to. Mostly we just sleep and sit around telling jokes and war stories.

It helps pass the time. You'll see soon. Time passes either very fast or very slow here."

While they talked, Thor was mentally measuring the room. There were plenty of people here to meet, but not enough room for him to stand between them. The blonde man was right, hospitals really were boring.

The man in the back corner smiled at Karl. "I suspect that with you in the room, things will be much more interesting than the last week was. There was a huge fuss on the radio after you left for your mission, when General Orland found out that not only had another team been sent, but they were missing."

The other two glared at him for a second. "Sorry, I didn't mean to bring up bad memories."

Karl shrugged. "It's not all bad. We got the target, and we brought back a survivor. There was still one High Priest from the first group alive at the ambush site. He's here in the hospital already, I saw him on the way in."

Chapter 316 Light Sleeper

Karl had just sat down on his bed to meditate when he felt someone casting a spell to calm them, or possibly to put them all to sleep. He wasn't sure if it was hospital policy for this time of day, or if they had annoyed someone with their joking around, but he decided to lay down to meditate anyhow.

The mattress was hard and uncomfortable, and Karl frowned as he relaxed onto it.

"Cushy, right?" The blonde asked.

"I've been sleeping in spider silk hammocks that stretch to match your body weight distribution. I don't think that a regular mattress will ever feel right again." Karl explained slowly as he felt the spell settle over him.

The others were slowly drifting off, and didn't seem to notice the spell. Either that or they were used to the effect, and it didn't startle them, but Karl's mind rebelled against the magic, wanting to force him awake. So, instead of sleeping, he put [Refreshing Lightning] back up and continued to meditate.

For the next six hours, by Karl's rough estimation, that worked out well, and everyone else in the room slept and recovered while he worked on rebuilding the power focus in the beast spaces. Then the doctors came in to make their rounds, and cast a plethora of healing spells to help rebuild and regrow the lost limbs of the others. But when they got to Karl, he heard someone cussing, and the sound of a wall being punched. He focused on Rae's version of echolocation, which didn't require him to open his

eyes to see, and noticed that someone had tried to give him an IV drip. It appeared that they punched the wall in frustration after they had burned themselves on the [Refreshing Lightning] barrier.

"What the hell are we supposed to do now? The order says IV fluids for the next six hours with an antipsychotic, and then another forty-eight hours of sedation until the head wound heals." The burned person, an orderly by their outfit, whisper shouted at the others in the room.

"You're lucky to be alive. Did you even think to check for protective spells before you tried to jab him? That one is a fresh Commander Rank battlefield trauma case, of course he will be paranoid enough to keep up defensive spells while he sleeps."

Thor giggled to himself as he spread the barrier over the whole group again. Karl hesitated for a moment, as he considered not stopping him. The others would likely appreciate the extra healing spell, but the staff definitely wouldn't. So, he had to say something.

[Let them rest without the spell until they're awake again. We don't need to make life harder on the healers. Healers are our friends.] Karl eventually reminded the Cerro, who was still resting in his pond, where the Holy magic from the stones would heal his leg faster than being outside with healing spells.

The spaces were the perfect space to recover, and with his pond, he would be fine in no time at all if he wasn't already. Thor had no intention of getting up to find out. It was more relaxing to simply float here and wait for something to do.

"What do we do now? If we can't administer the medicine, do we just make a note or send someone else in?" The burned person asked.

From outside the door, someone laughed softly. "Or you could simply ask him to take the barrier down. He's been awake the entire time, you distracted him from his meditation when you tried to stab him with the IV needle."

It was obvious that his sleeping act was not fooling whoever was outside, so Karl opened his eyes to see the Acolytes in the room with one doctor, while the doctor who had walked Karl's group in and turned them over to nature priests stood in the hall.

"I thought you weren't up to this on a Monday?" Karl joked.

"It's Tuesday now. I just came back on shift and already your group is giving me headaches. The War Priestess is studying instead of sleeping, the Nature Priestess is bored and asking for her imaginary friend, and the Mage girl had to be moved in with the Berserker to keep her from breaking down." He sighed.

"I should likely go check on her then. Being around others helps, and I've got a barrier that will accelerate the recovery process, both mentally and physically. Of course, it also shocks people who take a stab first, ask questions later, approach, but it's not really harmful." Karl replied, prepared to get up out of bed.

"You think that you can help more than the doctors?" The old man asked, amused.

"Friendly faces always help. You do the medicine, we do the moral support. But I'm guessing that the problem is that they're in a women's ward." Karl questioned.

"It seems that you do actually understand the issue. It is highly irregular to allow a male patient into a woman's room during the night. But it looks like your mind is healing smoothly, and there is a minimal risk of a psychotic break.

You should get some real sleep and not just mediation. That's the whole point of the spell, but it appears that you have some resistance to mind-altering effects." The doctor replied.

"It seems so. At first, I thought that I was under attack, but nobody else was concerned about it, and they all just settled into bed."

The doctor nodded. "That's part of the compulsion of the spell. It tells you to get comfortable and ready for bed, and it suppresses nightmares so that the veterans can sleep more easily. It doesn't seem that is a problem for you, but many of the others are not so lucky."

One of the Acolytes gave Karl a curious look. "How do you do it? Accept all that bloodshed? You've got to be younger than I am, and yet you're not even rattled by the thought of being stuck in combat against enormous monsters."

Karl chuckled. "That's kind of why they call them Giants. They're large. They're ugly too, and that helps. If we were fighting against an enemy that was cute or more relatable, it might be worse.

But the Frost Giants are just ugly and mean, it's not hard to fight them."

The older doctor who had entered with the Acolytes nodded. "Some people just have a punchable face."

The Acolytes looked a little horrified at the notion, but Karl laughed. "You have no idea. There was this fat General with General Orland when we were sent on the mission, an absolutely obnoxious jackass. If Orland hadn't intervened, I would have happily taken him out behind the woodshed for a lesson."

The doctor chuckled. "I will make a note of it in your files. But General Orland isn't likely to apologize for the attitude of the other Generals. It's a bit of an ongoing issue between the military and civilian Elites lately, and the problem is getting worse."

Karl shook his head. "That's inevitable, really. When someone has this level of power, it is always going to go to their head. Like the foreman at the mine lording it over the workers on his shift, the temptation is inevitable.

But a lot of the problem is that there are two types of Elites, and it's not civilians or military. It's the ones who embrace their Class, versus the ones who embrace the benefits that their rank grants them.

Here in the hospital, everyone has to play nice, and we all know our roles and our ranking, and things move smoothly. But there, you have Elites who would never have the guts to take on the missions that they are assigning others to do, and those who have done it themselves. Only one of those two types of Elites gets respect in a war zone, and quite frankly, it would be better if they sent the others home before they got anyone killed.

Orland knows what it is to fight. Most of the Clerics know what it is to be on the front lines with nothing more than regular human soldiers and the grace of their Gods. But when they press bureaucrats to do their time in some front-line camp, they just make a mess of things."

One of the Nurses laughed. "They're still Generals, and Commanders. Where else would you have them?"

Karl shrugged. "We could put a fancy uniform on them, and they could guard public buildings in the Capital. It would be a nice show of civic virtue for the citizens."

The nurse choked trying to stop her laughter, and the doctor shook his head. "We can't just be asking Ascended and Commander Rank Generals to stand around on honour guard duty because they're not well suited to the actual battlefield."

From behind him, one of the hippie Nature Priests laughed. "We ask civilian Ascended and Commander Rank Elites to do security details and honour guard duty at the government buildings. Maybe it would do the officers some good to get back to their roots."

"What brings you over here?" The first doctor asked suspiciously.

"One of my patients says that if she can't have the spider, she wants to at least pet the snake. Can I borrow your patient?" The old hippie asked.

Chapter 317 Morning Visitors

Karl smiled at the old hippie. "Of course, I will come with you. I've had plenty of sleep, and if I don't go visit, then we will have to guard against marauding Nature Priests all night anyhow. Sitting still indoors isn't in their nature, and from what I know, she wasn't injured."

The white robed doctor did that pinching the bridge of his nose thing again, and Karl knew that they were stressing him out only minutes after his shift had started.

Karl patted him on the shoulder. "I recommend that you just go with the flow. It's the nature of things. The harder you fight against it, the more problems you will cause for yourself, and it's not like anything you could do would prevent it if we were actually determined to make it happen."

That's one thing that the Nature Priests have right. You need to embrace nature, and accept that rigid rules aren't always the right answer for every patient. Just let the nature priests cuddle the monsters, and they will be happy again. It's better than any medication you can give them."

The old hippie snorted in laughter as he nodded in agreement. "This one is practically custom-made for followers of the Green Dragon. Do you know how many of our people have been mauled or killed trying to pet the unpettable? Now, he shows up with dangerous monsters that will actually accept their affection, you can't just tell them 'no' all of a sudden."

That was a real danger to the Nature Priests' lives. Their brains had a hard time accepting that not all friend shaped things were friends.

The white robed doctor waved Karl out of the room, and he followed the old hippie into a large empty room that he thought might be an empty storage room. Lotus and Doug were already there, along with a half dozen other green robed clerics, all sitting around telling jokes.

"Karl, you're already awake. Good timing. I just realized that we haven't actually gotten to properly meet Remi yet, even though I saw her on the battlefield." Lotus announced.

"Of course. Remi, how about you come out and say hello?"

Remi came out of her space to coil in Karl's sling, and then poked her head out to take stock of the room before she decided if she was going to actually come out in the open.

The old hippie that had led Karl here burst into laughter, shaking his head in dismay.

"It's a good thing that I led you here. Can you imagine the white robes reaction if they met her? Remi, wasn't it? They get panicked enough when we bring in cats and Earth Mice for comfort, but a venomous Spirit Beast? We might need the crash cart for them instead of the patients."

Remi giggled in Karl's mind as she heard him ramble, but the little snake recognized that he was looking at her with adoration, while Lotus had come up in front of them with a pleading look and her hands out.

The little snake slithered out of the sling and wrapped herself around Lotus' arm to take a better look around the room.

She was bigger than Karl remembered, well over a metre long now, and beginning to get properly snake thick, not pencil thin as she had been when she was born. But, if she stayed as a Spirit Snake, she would be twenty metres long fully grown, and if she evolved into a Naga, she would be at least human sized in the torso.

Karl thought that if she was going to evolve, there should have been some signs of it by now, but Remi was happy as a snake, even if her totems were of a four armed Naga Shaman.

While Lotus was leading her around the room, introducing Remi to all her new friends, more people came in to join them. Ophelia was escorted by another Nature Priest, and a nurse escorted a delicate featured teen girl with a mass of bouncing blonde curls into the room. She looked to be about thirteen or fourteen, possibly a freshman at the Academy, if she was an Elite, but Karl didn't recognize her.

"That's them. I tell you, I'm not crazy. Karl, tell this crazy woman that I am Tori." The dainty girl demanded.

Everyone went silent as they turned to look at her.

[She still smells like Tori.] Thor agreed.

[Yup. It's a tiny Tori.] Hawk added.

[Can I keep her?] Rae asked, thinking how much fun it would be to run around with an even tinier human on her back.

Lotus and Dana were only a minor burden for the extra firepower they provided. But the new Tori was two thirds their size and just as Stabby. Or, she had been. Rae recalled the clerics saying that she might not be an Elite anymore.

"Yeah, that's Tori. She was ritual resurrected. The beasts confirmed it, she still smells like herself." Karl agreed.

That was enough for the nature priests. If the family pets recognized you, then it didn't matter what disguise you had on, it was probably you. Not many disguise spells were powerful enough to fool the finely tuned senses of certain animals.

"How did you get younger?" Karl asked.

"Would you believe it if I told you that my last thought was that I would like a chance to do things over again if I was reborn?" She sighed.

Karl felt the familiar amused presence in his mind, and he smiled at the annoyed mage.

"I one hundred percent believe it. With the Dragon God's own luck protecting us, that's only a small thing. Between all the Dragon Scale luck charms and Holy Stones that our group carries, it's only natural that you got a small wish granted when you were resurrected." Karl agreed.

Tori smiled, and a [Magic Missile] orb formed in front of her. "Not just a small wish. I kept my powers, but from what they tell me, I'm not an Elite anymore, just an Ascended Rank mage."

Karl shrugged. "Semantics, really. You could use magic before because of the injection, you can use magic now because you had it before."

The nature priests all nodded in agreement, and the nurse gave Karl a suspicious look.

"You're encouraging them to team up on me, aren't you? There is no proof yet that she is who she says. We need to finish the testing and psychological evaluation." The Nurse insisted.

Lotus giggled. "Just annoy them until they stop. It worked for me."

"Can I trust you to keep her here while I talk to the administration?" The Nurse asked suspiciously.

Lotus gave her a thumbs up, but the nurse looked at the green robed doctor.

"Of course. I will make certain that all the patients and visitors in the room remain here until someone returns for them."

The nurse nodded and left, while Lotus ran over to hug Tori, who recoiled from her, and the Spirit Snake on her arm.

"What the hell did you bring into a hospital?" She demanded, and Lotus pouted at being rejected.

"Oh, this is Remi, Karl's fourth pet, who doesn't like to come out in the cold. She's the Chain Lightning source. We've all seen her Poison Flame Totems, remember?"

Tori's eyes lit up in excitement. "Oh, you're Remi? You're beautiful. Sorry, I thought you were some random snake that the nature priests had found."

Remi's laughter made her fangs drop, and Tori backed up again, while the nature priests chuckled.

Karl stroked Remi's head. "That's a laughter response. She might not be able to speak, but she understands us just fine. Ignore the fangs, she's not likely to bite anyone here."

"How is Thor's leg?" Doug asked as the other priests came over to meet Remi, who was happily curled around Lotus' arm.

"Better. It's all healed, and while he hasn't tested it to make sure that it will hold weight, it seems to have set properly, and it doesn't cause him pain anymore.

The separate spaces are an optimal recovery spot for the beasts, with everything they need to heal. Thor also has a pond full of Holy Stones, and that seems to help his healing ability." Karl explained.

"A whole pond full of Holy Stones? How did he even manage that? You can only pick up one."

Karl just shrugged. "He scooped them up and dumped them at the bottom of his pond. There was a whole lake full of them on a resource gathering mission we accepted, and he wanted to recreate it in his space. I have no idea why the stones didn't stop him."

Doug nodded skeptically. "Well, at the very least, it does explain why he managed to learn [Circle of Protection] as a Lightning Cerro. The influence of that much constant Holy Magic was bound to have an influence on him."

Chapter 318 Gathering Friends

Over the next few hours, news spread that Tori was here in the hospital, and the rest of the group came to the Nature Priests' sitting room to come greet her.

Her memory was mostly intact, and there was no question that she was who she claimed to be once she started talking to the others.

Then the nurse came back in with a Commander Rank Spellblade Elder, wearing the combat robes that Karl recognized from his time with Prince Corbin and the others.

The man glanced around the room, pausing when Remi wiggled her head flap at him in greeting, and then turned his gaze on Tori.

"Miss Tori? I am Elder Khalil of the Spellblade Sect. We would like to invite you to finish your training with us." The man greeted her with a soft smile.

"Spellblade? I don't know anything about swords?" Tori replied.

The Elder laughed. "How many mages do? That's the point of training, to learn things that compliment your abilities and close holes in the skill set of a mage. With the abilities of a Spellblade, mages become an even more potent combat force.

I can't promise that it will be fast or easy. In fact, I can't even promise that it will be particularly enjoyable. But I can promise that we look out for our own, and you will learn what you need to know before your training is finished."

Tori looked skeptical, but Karl thought it might be a good idea. She wanted a fresh start, away from her reputation, and she didn't have one with the Spellblades.

Karl nodded to the Elder. "They do train the girls just as well as the boys, and they're well suited to the techniques. I duelled one of their Acolytes, and she was much more impressive than most of the Awakened Elites that I have seen. The combination of blade and movement techniques along with mage spells was incredibly impressive."

That calmed some of Tori's fears.

"And how are the Spellblades regarded?" She asked.

"We're less present here than we are in many of the magical nations, but officially, we are treated the same as Elites of the same Rank. In the magical nations, the Spellblade Clans have a status equivalent to Elite Soldiers of their armies, and the Elders are granted respect everywhere they go, unless it's the territory of a rival Clan." Elder Khalil chuckled.

The politics of the Clans in other nations were much more complex, as everyone fought for influence among the many factions of magic users. But in the Golden Dragon nation, and the other nonmagical human nations, the respect for their powers was less conditional, and more linked to their Rank.

But that was a lot to explain to someone that he was trying to recruit for his Clan. It wasn't often that they not only got the chance to take in someone with proven potential, but someone who already knew the basics of magic.

The first few years were normally spent building the base of their magical knowledge, as without the Divine Injection, they were starting from zero without a cheat code, and it all came down to the accumulation of knowledge and hard work.

Tori knew a little about the Spellblade Clans, but only as hearsay, and hadn't met any that were from the Golden Dragon Nation before. The Elder did seem like a decent guy, though, and everyone in the room seemed to have a positive opinion of his group.

"What would I have to do to join your Clan?" Tori asked.

"We have two requirements. An oath of loyalty, that you will not betray the secrets of the Clan or its members, and secondly you must give up your past. All our Acolytes take on new names when they join the Clan so that they can't be as easily tracked by those who might hold a grudge against their lineage.

Now, I doubt that your parents have enemies that would challenge a Spellblade Clan, but the rule is the same for mages who join from other nations as well." He explained, then straightened his long white beard with one hand, making him look ancient and wise, in a stereotypical mage way.

Tori hesitated for a few more seconds, then extended her hand. "I agree to your proposal."

The Elder bowed politely to her as he shook her hand.

"Wonderful, I will escort you back to the Sect complex. Don't forget that your name will be changing when you arrive, so those friends that you have here won't be able to easily look for you. We won't deny them, if they arrive looking for you, but if anyone asks about your old name, we will deny knowing your old identity." he reminded her.

Karl gave the now young mage a hug. "Don't worry, if you need us, we're easier to find than you are. In a pinch, just ask Prince Corbin to send me a message. We've worked together in the past, and he is a good man."

Elder Khalil nodded. "He actually requested for Commander Karl and his group to come fight on our battle lines during the war. I do wonder what you did to Rosalind that made her hate you so much. She hates men in general, but Karl in a very personal and particular way."

Dana and Lotus both laughed and gestured for Karl to explain.

"When we first met, she challenged me to a duel to prove that Spellblades were the superior training method. Now, I was Ascended to her Awakened, and it didn't end well for her. She didn't take the loss well. She was still quite professional while we were in danger, but I suspect that we're not going to be lifelong best friends." Karl explained.

Lotus nodded. "That sort of public humiliation won't be quickly forgotten. Her team was there to fight a monster above their rank as a training exercise, and Karl is definitely a monster and above her Rank. Prince Corbin had to intervene to save her at the end."

Karl gave Lotus his best innocent look. "Monster? I am a sweet and gentle young man."

[No, that's me.] Thor interjected.

Karl couldn't even argue with that comeback.

The Elder nodded, and Tori gave a tearful bow to the others before turning to follow him. Long tearful goodbyes would only make this harder than it had to be, and everyone was already waving farewell to her.

"I can't believe she was so cute as a kid. Those ringlets." Bob chuckled once the Elder and Tori were well away from the room.

"Right? She's going to be a heartbreaker once she gets to the Spellblade Clan. But worse, she's like six years older than she looks. She will be ready to stab someone within a week for treating her like a child." Karl laughed.

Bob smirked. "That's kind of the point, isn't it? I mean, she's there to learn to blend blades and magic. She knows some magic, so making her better with a sword is their definition of success."

"How is your head?" Dana asked as Karl settled into a chair along the wall.

"Much better. I've had the Refreshing Lightning barrier up all night, and it's helping, but they said when I got here that the healing spell should have it sorted in a day or two.

I doubt that they're going to release us that quickly, and my arm is still a bit numb. My fingers are working as instructed now, which is a good start, but it will need a few more days to be back up to fully functional.

How about you? You were pretty shaken when we arrived." Karl asked.

Dana gave him a thin smile that made it plain that she was planning to lie to him.

"I'm alright. Actually seeing Tori helped. At least I know that she's alive and well." She replied.

That second part sounded like the truth, but Karl didn't know what had happened in that wagon during the fight, other than that it had ended badly. The first part was clearly a lie, and even the clerics that didn't know her could tell, judging by the sympathetic looks they were giving her.

"Well, we're all here for the same reason. Have you considered herbal remedies?" One of the nature priestesses suggested.

Doug laughed. "I know that everyone thinks we're just getting high, and they're not really wrong. But we're not just getting high. It's a spell to bring the mind back in balance with nature. But do you know what would help even more? If we could all just nap against a Lightning Cerro."

[YES! Finally.]

Chapter 319 New Advisors

When everyone woke up from their nap, they found that they had three more visitors to their group. Jill was sitting and waiting for Dana to wake up, while Colonel Valerie was entering with a dark haired young woman whose light chocolate skin was completely covered in tattoos, visible through the lace sleeves of her floor length black dress, and all along her chest and neck.

"Good morning, sleepy. I brought you your new advisor. I think that you two might already be acquainted in a way. You took over her old room after she graduated. Meet Morgana, the Witch Doctor, the newest member of the Bureau of Elite Development." Valerie greeted Karl in her business tone.

"It's honestly a pleasure to meet you. While I haven't been home to take proper care of the balcony, it has got to be the best room in the entire Academy." Karl greeted her.

Karl was going to give her a handshake, but when Remi came out on his shoulder to check out this odd woman, she pulled him into a hug, which put her face centimetres away from the snake.

"She's beautiful. What is your name, lovely?" Morgana asked.

"She's Remi, a Shaman Class Naga Spirit Snake." Karl explained.

"A shaman? You know, Witch Doctors are a type of shaman as well." Morgana replied.

"I thought that you were a witch? The others said that it was a Goth Witch in the room before me."

Morgana laughed. "That's because they're idiots. I'm a highly fashionable Witch Doctor, not a Witch and a Doctor."

She gave a little twirl, showing off the lace back of her dress, which exposed even more tattoos, and then summoned a small cloth doll, which she gave to Remi.

The snake coiled around it and hissed happily as she examined her new toy.

"Don't worry, it's not bonded to anyone. It won't cause any damage if she plays with it." Morgana assured them.

Karl gave her a slight bow, then addressed the Colonel, who was waiting patiently for them to finish.

"Are you certain that there will actually be time for lessons? From what I hear, they want us back on the lines again soon." He asked.

Valerie nodded. "There will be plenty of time. After the scare that you gave High Command, who didn't realize that your group had been tasked to take out the Royal Rank target alone, they're not going to let you go scouting alone again."

The group that you found was not sent to hunt the Royal Rank Giant, at least not officially. They were supposed to be scouting the region for a buildup of Giants because the cold was preventing us from high altitude flights over the Frost Giant nation. Losing them while you were tasked to the region hit the Command Group hard.

So, you're going to have to suffer in a main line camp with us and the Seniors from the Academy. It won't be attached to the army as you have been, instead it will be treated more as an Academy mission, with teachers present. Plus Bureau Agents, of course." The Nature Priests all made sympathetic gestures toward them, and the Colonel glared at them.

"You know, you could join them if you wanted." She informed them in a snarky tone.

"We're happy working here in the hospital. But I suppose that moving to a triage camp might be more in tune with nature. We will discuss it, and see if there are enough others available to balance out our movement." One of the Nature Priests replied.

From what Karl had learned last night, they specialized in treating elemental damage and mental health. With so many young Elites facing mortality for the first time, the hospital wasn't going to send away half their mental health staff.

Karl nodded toward the door. "I take it that you talked to the staff before you got here? I get the feeling that we're not going to be leaving anywhere in a hurry, so I wasn't expecting to see you so soon."

"That is true. They're not planning to let you out of here without at least a few more counselling sessions. I offered to take over for them, but apparently they doubt my credentials as a trauma counsellor." Colonel Valerie complained.

Most of the doctors who had been assigned to them were twice her age, and Karl wasn't certain that she had actually taken any higher education classes at all, so they might have a point.

Remi crawled down Karl's arm to go sit on Morgana, who was making soothing gestures, and holding out bits of food for her.

[Didn't anyone tell you it's not safe to take food from strangers?] Rae asked.

[But they just said her name is Morgana, and she's the new advisor.] Remi countered, staring at the large bug in the witch doctor's hand.

[And how long ago was that? You have to know them for long enough to trust them before they're not strangers anymore.] Rae warned her.

Remi considered it for a few seconds, while Morgana gave her a curious look. The snake definitely wanted the food, but she wasn't taking it.

"The others are telling her not to take food from strangers. Remi is still very young, and doesn't know all the practical advice. She did manage to make some lovely totems, though." Karl explained.

Morgana put the food away and stroked Remi's head. "That's fine, we will get to know each other better, and then you can try the snacks."

Lotus smiled at the Witch Doctor. "Nature lovers are taking over. First we get two Nature Clerics and a Cerro Knight, now we've got a snake charmer." Morgana got excited about the comment. "The Cerro has a Knight? Does Karl ride him into battle? It sounded like he preferred to fight on foot or from a distance."

"The War Priestess, actually. She rides the Cerro into combat, so they can spread their buffs along the front lines. She's pretty good with a spear and a shield, but with Thor's barrier, they're quite durable." Lotus explained.

"A Red Dragon Priestess, riding a Lightning Cerro into combat? Now that is not what I had expected." Morgana replied, becoming even more curious.

"Riding monsters is fun. Sometimes Rae will let me or Dana ride her into combat, but more like an accessory, depending on if she wants to equip more damage or healing." Lotus added.

The clerics all laughed at the thought of equipping a priestess, but Karl thought she might be right. Rae liked them best because they were smallest and easiest to carry, and she traded between them depending on her need.

She liked sleeping next to Dana better, but playing in the woods with Lotus.

Mostly, she didn't play favourites as much as Thor did with Tessa going into combat, but in Tessa's case, she was the only one suitable for the role.

Colonel Valerie waited while they got sidetracked before giving them the update that she had come to deliver. "Karl and Dana will be taking classes with their tutors beginning this afternoon after your session with the doctors. They're still concerned about Karl's head and arm, in particular. Then after a week, they will reassess the situation and determine how much longer you need to rest for." The Colonel informed the room.

Lotus cheered. "Oh, that works out wonderfully. If we get Rae to set up hammocks for us here, we can all hang out in the lounge during our off time and unwind."

"Rae makes hammocks?" One of the clerics asked. They had folding cots in the break room, for when they were too busy to go home after their shift, but Spider Silk Hammocks sounded pretty good.

Rae happily came out, and Morgana did a double take when she saw how big the Bloodbath Spider was.

"You know, when they said 'spider' I was thinking Wolf Spider, or a tarantula. It appears that I have vastly underestimated what the word spider can mean." She mumbled.

Insects, spiders and snakes were involved in many of her spells, though not like Karl's. The Witch Doctors often used them to deliver curses and poisons, so the summoned creature was nothing special, but the magic on it was deadly.

Rae used the corner of the room to make racks of six hammocks with a climbing rope attached to the walls, and then made a large webbing net along the ceiling that you could climb out of the top bunks and play in.

The Nature Priests always appreciated a good spot to relax, and being at ceiling height meant that anyone wanting to bother them would have to come up to them or risk being ignored. Plus, it was a stretchy web, so it was soft and more comfortable than the floor.

Hawk flew up into a larger hole in the net, and took a perch to watch the people, just seconds before Karl heard cursing in the hallway.

"This is a staff break room, not an animal sanctuary. Where did you even find them? Is that a Bloodbath Spider? Dammit, I am filing a complaint with the Deacon." Someone was shouting, while the nature clerics laughed.

"I guess I should bring everyone back inside in a few minutes." Karl chuckled.

Chapter 320 Break Rooms and Evaluations

The doctors showed up a few minutes later to get everyone for their morning treatments, which were mostly psychological, but Doug needed to have the internal wounds under his ribs checked to ensure they had healed properly, and Karl needed to have his arm checked as well.

The concussion treatment mostly fell under psychological evaluations, other than the first scans by the clerics to ensure that the healing spells hadn't left any lingering pressure or pooled blood inside his brain that might cause a stroke.

"Well, it looks like the physical damage to your head has healed well, but after healing magic is used, the areas can be tender and sensitive for a while. The rest of your body looks like it is doing well, though I see that you had some recently broken ribs that were also set with magic, so you should avoid taking any more hits to the area for the next month, just in case." The Doctor began after the scan.

Karl chuckled, and the doctor shrugged. "Whether anyone actually follows our recommendations or not is an entirely separate matter from the fact that we give them. Logically, they are healed, and they should be as strong as ever, but the nerves in the area remain sensitive, as they remember the damage. So, we recommend not to take more injuries in the near future, as it can lead to phantom pains and other psychosomatic effects, which are nearly impossible to cure."

Karl nodded. "That makes a lot of sense. The whole body can be trained, so if your body remembers constantly being in pain, then it will be trained to respond with pain."

"Exactly, but you Elites all abuse your bodies constantly. When you get to my age, all those old injuries add up, and you end up slow and nearly crippled without doing anything at all. That's why the hospitals still encourage the Elites to take care of their bodies. I know that none of you are old yet, and with the advanced healing abilities, and superhuman bodies, you might never be as old and slow as a cleric like me, but you will still feel it in time." The Doctor warned him.

"Don't worry, Doc. I am listening. It might not be possible to avoid all injuries, but you already know that here at the Veterans Hospital. I will do my best to avoid allowing the injuries to stack up, both on me and my beasts. I wouldn't want to hinder their growth with battle damage."

The doctor nodded, more concerned about Karl than about his pets. But if that was what it took to get the Elite to take the medical advice seriously, then that was what he would go with. Too many of them didn't take their lives seriously enough, in his opinion.

Of course, that had always been a problem with soldiers, according to a doctor.

"Alright, we've finished with the concussion and the rest of the body, let's see that arm." He announced.

Karl took his arm out of the sling, showing off the smoothly stitched seam, where they hadn't taken Lotus' handiwork out yet. She hadn't sutured him like a doctor, she had sewn him back together like she was fixing a blanket, with crossed running stitches.

The doctor smiled and shook his head. It was very neatly done, and he had no doubt that whoever had done this was a very skilled crafter, but if it got snagged on something, it wouldn't just tug one stitch free, it was all connected.

"First, I will remove the stitches, and then cast another healing spell, to ensure that the last of the damage is repaired. Then we will have to scan the bone. For Elites who have undergone treatments with various magical remedies, their bones can be quite different from a standard human physiology, so I need to do an intense scan to see what I'm working with and how well it has healed." He explained.

"Oh, I can do the stitches, if you'd like." Karl offered.

"You can do them?" The doctor asked. Karl activated [Flaming Body] on his arm, and burnt the stitches away instead of coating them, then used [Refreshing Lightning] to push the inner parts out for the flames to burn them away. When he was done, there wasn't a mark on his arm. There wasn't any hair either, but that was just a minor miscalculation on what the flames would burn.

"Well, that is unexpected. Do you have some sort of healing ability as well? I don't see any scabbing or scars left from the repair, and the fact that it healed without scarring is incredible." The doctor asked.

"I have a regeneration effect on the barrier that I use, but it has taken a lot of healing along the way. One of my beasts has a minor healing spell, [Healing Splash]. It's not up to the standards of a healing cleric, but it's good for closing small wounds." Karl explained.

The Doctor smiled. "That spell is often underestimated. It's a healing liquid, and it will continue to work for a few seconds after contact if it isn't washed away. It's primarily used through an IV or multiple needle injections, to heal damaged veins."

Karl had never considered that. Healing the inside of a person wasn't easy with most magic, as he had learned. But if you could just fill them with a healing liquid, it would do the job much more effectively. Introducing it into the blood would let the body circulate it everywhere, healing whatever it touched.

Of course, Remi wasn't a doctor, and neither of them knew how to set up an IV, or even find a vein with a needle. But that wasn't the point. The point was that they had a skill that would make it possible for the real healers to do better work.

Remi considered the implications for a moment. [Emergency response snake. I even come with built-in needles.]

Karl burst into laughter, and the doctor gave him a look that said he was going to send him for another psychological evaluation.

"Sorry. Remi, the Spirit Snake Shaman that has the Healing Splash ability, pointed out that she comes with built-in needles if the spell is supposed to be directly injected." Karl tried to explain.

The doctor's face went blank for a second, and then he also began to laugh.

"The thought of a snake biting you to inject a healing spell is just so ridiculous that I can't help but laugh, but it would actually be incredibly effective if they could avoid poisoning you. Their fangs are made for the precise and rapid injection of liquid into muscle tissue." The doctor stammered.

Then he paused. "So, you have multiple voices in your head all the time?"

Karl made a noncommittal gesture. "There are four beasts linked to me, but they're not always sharing everything. It's more like, when they want to talk, I hear it, and vice versa."

The doctor made a note of the description before continuing.

"That has to be distracting in combat. How do you deal with that?"

Karl shook his head. "Like anyone else, when there's actual fighting going on, there is no time for talking. They comment with vital information, kill celebrations, and confirmations that they heard directions. But none of them is really a chatterbox.

If they could talk to more people, I suspect that Thor, the Lightning Cerro, might be. He loves people. Especially people who will rub his head."

Thor was nodding enthusiastically in his space. If he could talk to more people, that would be outstanding. He had a whole lifetime of things to tell them that Karl already knew.

The doctor cast a spell over Karl's arm, and then focused on his magic for a few minutes as he examined the formerly wounded limb.

"I think that it's good to go. The healing spells bonded the bone properly, and I don't see any unhealed secondary fractures or floating bone fragments. Those often don't heal properly. From today, you should be able to remove the sling and begin to use the arm again, just take it easy.

As we talked about, all the nerves will either be somewhat numb or oversensitive. It will just take a few days for them to adjust again.

Now, we can start the grip tests, to make sure that everything really is functioning properly."

Those tests of manual dexterity, grip strength and fine motor skills took them right until lunch, when Morgana came to come get Karl so they could get to know each other before the afternoon classes.

He had basically skipped the entirety of his Academy Education, and Colonel Valerie had tasked her to get him up to speed on all the things he would need to know as a Commander.