

Beast Master 331

Chapter 331 Who Needs Points?

The radio communications from the front line crushed their hopes within seconds. [Incoming Giant charge. All hands to the lines, prepare to repel.] They were ordering. That meant that not only had they made it past the artillery, they had made it past the first line of defenders, and the camp itself was on defence.

[Estimated arrival ten minutes.] The voice announced.

Karl looked at the passengers on his bus.

"Morgana, can you look after things here with the others? I need to go see a guy about a thing." He asked, casually, knowing only those in the front few rows would have heard the radio broadcast if they were awake.

"Seriously?" Morgana asked.

"I can make it there in ten minutes. The bus cannot." Karl replied.

"Do you think that one Commander will be the difference?" Morgana asked.

"For someone it will."

Morgana sighed and made a shooping gesture. Karl grabbed his pack, then opened the door and jumped out of the moving bus. From the bus behind him, Ophelia and Bob Mackenzie jumped out as well, with Ophelia already transformed into Werebear form before she hit the ground running.

Nobody else on either bus was likely to be able to keep up with them, not even Thor, who was quick, but not fast enough for this mad rush down the road. Like the other beasts, he would join them when they reached the battle.

As they topped the next hill, Karl gave directions to the team. "Thor, stay in behind our front-line offensive, you're watching our backs until the clerics get to us. Rae will put the Golems on our flanks. I can see the Giants from here, and we're off to the side of the main line. The bus will come in on our left by about a kilometre.

We will hit the side of the Hill Giant lines and push inward as they crash into the defenders. Make it fast and keep moving. There are enough fighters on both sides that wounding and crippling is as effective as outright killing. Someone will get to them, we just need to lighten the blow on the students."

Bob frowned. "Are they hitting the students portion of the line?"

Karl nodded. "From what I can tell, yes. They're aimed right at them, and it looks like they've focused their forces to avoid whoever is covering the sections further away."

They were all breathing heavily as they ran past the shocked front lines of the

Academy students, who had prepared a pike wall to block the Giants while the mages were beginning to rain spells on them.

"Remi, Let's see how the Hill Giants like a good Blizzard." Karl shouted, so the others would know that it was on their team.

Blinding snow filled the air, and Karl turned the group into the end of the Hill Giant lines as he called the beasts out.

The Hill Giants were stronger than the Frost Giants, and over half the group in front of him was either a strong Ascended or a low Commander Rank monster. But Karl had been thinking about his past mistakes, and he knew what he needed to do now.

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

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

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

{1 Point remaining}

[Tier 4 Attack Skills Unlocked]

Forty percent larger, Thor was a true monster among Cerro, standing chest high to a Hill Giant, and the increased size of the Spider Golems made them look much more intimidating. But more interestingly, [Brutality] had affected Ophelia in Werebear form.

It seemed to be judging by height, and not total mass, as she had gone from just over two metres tall to a solid three metres, and her axes looked tiny in her hands for a moment before they adjusted, as bonded weapons naturally matched their wielder. The first strikes of the Spider Golems' forelegs sent ripples across their targets' bodies, and the pair of Ascended Rank Hill Giants spat blood as their rib cage seemed to collapse. That must be the effect of [Shatter], Karl decided.

That was verified when his Maul hit his Commander Rank target, and the giant folded like laundry in the wind, slammed to the ground by the strike. The Giants had no time to respond, they were still being attacked from the front, and their momentum was carrying them toward the line as they tried to turn to face the surprise attack. A rain of Hill Giant spears and magical stones slammed into the [Refreshing Lightning] barriers through the snow, while dozens more missed them to dig into the soft soil, creating a tripping hazard for anyone moving across this area.

But Karl was already pushing forward with the others at his shoulders, and the Spider Golems were rampaging through the Hill Giants, while Rae darted in and out of their formation, targeting Giants who tried to get around to come at them from the back. With Thor focusing on defence, and Remi's Blizzard and Chain Lightning slowing their opponents, who were already under assault by the defending mages, they were making quick progress across the back lines of the Hill Giant assault.

For a moment, it looked like an easy clear, and then Karl saw a target much larger

than the others, the leader of the assault, and most likely a Royal Rank target. "Don't do it." He heard Bob shouting, but Karl was already moving.

With the whole herd on his side, this battle would end differently than the last one, he was certain of it.

The Hill Giant waved his hand, and the ground seemed to explode under Karl as he leapt into the air to avoid the attack. He closed his eyes, keeping the dirt out, and giving him a clear vision of the moment that the Hill Giant turned and fled, leaving a bodyguard squad of Commander Rank giants in front of Karl and the others.

"Bloody coward." Karl muttered as he parried an overhand chop by the closest of the bodyguards.

The group's progress had been brought to a halt by the concerted efforts of the Hill Giants, who were turning around to join the fight, making it obvious that they were preventing the human assassins from going after their retreating leader.

From the line, a shrill bugle sounded, sounding so much like Thor that for a moment, Karl thought they had a Cerro there as well. But it was a brass bugle, and the signal to advance, now that the charge had been halted by the ranged Elites.

The Hill Giants turned and ran, disengaging to avoid needless casualties, and Karl stopped his advance when Bob put a hand on his shoulder.

"It's over, you did good." The warrior reminded him.

That brought both Karl and Ophelia out of their battle fog, and the Berserker shrunk down to normal size as she let go of her rage, though she didn't transform back. [Oh, that's neat. She only gets affected when she's raging. She isn't beast enough when she's not.] Hawk noted from above them.

Rae and Hawk returned to their spaces as the other Elites from the Academy approached, and Karl let Thor shrink back to normal. He was too big to have his head properly patted at his enhanced size.

Tank came up and pulled first Ophelia and then Karl into a hug before gently rubbing the back of Thor's head ridge, which caused the Cerro to make a happy hum. "Good to see you. When did your team get here?" The big berserker asked. "Just now. The rest of the team is still on the bus with the clerics. We were the only ones who could run fast enough to make it to the battle on time." Karl smiled, then realized that Giant blood was dripping in his mouth from the splatters that had hit

his face.

[Flaming Body] burned him clean again as Tank looked around in satisfaction.

"Well, it was good timing. I can't believe the attack leader took off like that, they're normally as single-minded as a Berserker."

Karl nodded. "I was surprised as well. But if they gave up this easily, they've likely got another attack lined up, and they just wanted to know our strength, as this group is unfamiliar to them."

Chapter 332 You Left Us Behind

To say that Morgana and the others were unhappy with Karl taking off without half his team was an understatement.

It didn't quite violate the terms of their agreement, as the rest of the team was technically on their way to the battle and might have made it if the battle lasted longer, but he was pushing his luck, and he had left without his healers and support.

The fact that Karl came back into camp covered in ash and reeking of burnt Giants, while his companions were soaked with blood, was not lost on anyone, students or otherwise. The team had gathered at the back near the bus, and the looks that they were giving the trio said more than any words they could come up with.

The mixture of annoyance, anger, fear and betrayal let Karl know just how unhappy they were with this chain of events, but Karl knew he would likely do it again if given the option. It had saved lives on the line by distracting from the charge, and it had made the Hill Giants retreat prematurely.

Tessa glared at the trio and then sighed. "You know what, I'm not going to say anything. You already know what I was going to say. Now, go shower, you stink."

Ophelia giggled, looking quite innocent now that she was out of bear form, even if she was now even more soaked in Hill Giant blood. "Yes Mom."

The showers were fairly empty, as most of the line was still recovering and waiting to make certain that the Giants didn't change their minds. Tank was there in the men's shower, and in a much better mood than Tessa.

"That was quite the showing. Did you take any injuries? I can call over a high priest." He suggested.

Karl shook his head. "There are two healers in the group. Four of them if you count Remi and Thor, five if you Count High Priest Doug. I'm not short on healing, even if they're mad that we ran off and left them trundling along in the bus. But no, nothing broke my barriers this time."

"Well, you'll have an interesting group once you get your reinforcements." Tank chuckled.

"Reinforcements?" Karl asked.

"Didn't they tell you? I suppose not, since you just charged into combat the moment you arrived. Two Commanders in a ten-person group of Ascended is the minimal size standard. So, you'll get one of the teachers or Bureau Advisors with you when you leave camp, and a team of Ascended students." Tank explained.

Karl sighed. "That sounds like it's actually going to be more hassle than it's worth. Will it at least be the same group?"

Tank laughed. "The same group? With the amount of time that your group prefers to be in the field? Highly unlikely. The first time you go out in front of the line, you'll traumatize a group of students, and we will have to find new ones to send with you."

Karl gave a dismissive wave of his hand. "Normally, it isn't that bad, and when we've got a whole group rolling through, we can handle most things without drama."

Tank smirked. "I hear that you want to become a treasure hunter, so you should get used to working with random groups of opportunistic Elites who are just there for the payday. That's simply how the industry is. But why did you want to do that anyhow? You don't strike me as the sort of Elite that is desperate for cash."

Karl chuckled. "I've already got more money than I know what to do with. More than I would have earned in a lifetime in the mines. Ancient Ruins have all the good stuff that my beasts need to grow, and the remnants of the System that will help me gain new class abilities. You see, I realized after our last mission that the ones with the most power get the most say. Only other Overlords with influence can tell an Overlord what to do. So what happens if I can get my beasts up above that level? I have a skill that can help my beasts evolve once. If I use that when they are Overlords, we should be able to move beyond that bottleneck."

Tank looked impressed. "So, you've got a class cheat skill to break a bottleneck once? I can see how you would want to save that for as long as possible. But do you really think you can make it to Overlord without using it?"

Karl smiled. "Just try to tell Rae that she's not the most deadly creature in the area, and she will soon prove you wrong. I have no doubt that they will find a way to make it that far. Rae and Remi can make at least Commander without any outside help, and Hawk has already shown that the class can help them go well beyond their limits. Rae doesn't think that the Royal Rank bottleneck will be an issue for her, so that means that it will be growing her from a Royal Rank Princess to a Monarch Rank Queen where things get tough. However, I might be able to get another teammate to help with that.

Plus, there is Remi. Spirit Snakes seem to be unpredictable, but powerful. The stronger one of the beasts gets, the stronger the other beasts get, and I'm dragged along with them. It's a symbiotic system."

The Berserker nodded. "It's messing with your mind, though. I'm not certain if you've noticed, but you're not thinking like you used to."

Karl frowned. "That naturally changes with experience, I think."

Tank shrugged his shoulders, not pushing the point. Now that it was in his head, Karl would notice soon enough that his thinking was being influenced. It was already evident to everyone else, and he walked like a predator stalking prey, with that same sharp look as if everything around him was a potential target.

Or a potential snack.

The only time that Tank noticed him acting more human was when he was surrounded by his long term team members.

Karl patted Dana on the head as he came out of the showers, and she resisted the urge to punch him, as he was still wearing armour. Lotus poked him on the cheek, drawing Karl's attention. "We've got new people to meet. Are you ready now, or should we run away and play in the trees for a bit first?" She asked.

"As tempting as it sounds to go make a tree fort right now, we should meet the people first. There is a chance that the Giants will be back tonight, and we don't want to have to arrange things at the last second because we procrastinated." Karl suggested.

Tessa whistled, and with a gesture, four young men who all looked like they should be in the senior year, still wearing their academy uniforms with the silver Ascended Badges, came running over.

"Gentlemen, let me introduce you to the rest of the group. First we have Dana, a Golem Mage, Ophelia, a Bear Totem Berserker, Lotus, a Nature Priestess, and finally Commander Karl, a Beast Master.

Everyone, meet the second half of our mission team. The hairless one is Mick, a Sand Golem mage who is good with traps. The short black hair is Ali, a defensive warrior. The blonde is Jimmy, also a defensive warrior, but with a specialty in evasion instead of shields. Then finally we have Seamus, our new bard."

Karl looked over Seamus, whose long auburn hair was pulled back in a braid. He had a small guitar slung over his shoulder, either a mandolin or a lute, Karl couldn't tell from this angle, and he looked utterly terrified to be here.

"How are your combat buffs, Seamus?" Karl asked.

"Good, good. I mean, when I can focus enough to play. Until this week, I was preparing to go on tour with a folk music band. I'm not really a fighter. But I can use the essential bard combat spells well enough. [Inspiration] to increase attack speed and luck, [Courage] in case someone other than myself is terrified of being here, and [Mesmerizing Chant] to distract the enemy.

They have a considerable area of effect, so I'm better on the battle line, where I can just play [Inspiration] in the background.

I am also superb with a dagger, but I will tell you right now, if you try to make me stab a Giant with a dagger, I might wet myself."

Karl laughed and patted him on the shoulder. "No, I don't think that will be necessary. Just keeping a battle hymn active will be enough. I believe that you all met Tessa first, and she has the favour of the War Dragon, so a little [Inspiration] type battle chant should be just the thing to get everyone around us motivated.

The only other question I have is Mick. You have Sand Golems, right? Are they upgraded, and is there one or two?" Mick shook his head. "I have six small ones, Goblin sized and easy to disperse. I don't know how much use they will be against the Giants, but they will deal Ascended Rank damage from the knees down."

"That could be fun. They might actually be as much use when combined with your trap skills to trip, entangle and slow the Hill Giants as they are for damage. But don't underestimate how much a well-placed slice to the back of the knee can cripple an opponent, and they're small enough to run around between targets." Karl replied.

Chapter 333 The Final Reinforcement

Karl considered the new group's strengths, and wondered who they were going to get as their second Commander. Presumably Morgana, as she was his advisor from the Bureau and didn't have classes to teach, but in this camp it appeared to be the Headmaster running the show, and he didn't know her as anything other than a student.

"Why don't we sit and get to know each other before we have to work together in battle?" Karl suggested.

Mick, the bald Golem Mage, laughed. "Well, more like you get to know us. You're a bit of a legend in the Mage classrooms after your Hawk spent weeks torturing the Awakened Rank class."

Karl chuckled. "But Hawk isn't my only beast. In fact, he's the first of four now. Plus, it's more of the personality of the people than the skills. I can find that in your deployment orders, or at least the basics of your skill set, so what I need to know is how everyone will react."

Have Jimmy and Ali faced the Giants before? Will Seamus really wet himself when a spear flies past his head? You know, the little life details that determine how you react."

Seamus sighed. "You joke, but the Bard Classes normally do morale work in camp when we're assigned to combat duties. It's more like an Idol show. Well, sometimes it IS an idol show, depending on who they sent."

I don't even know what I'm supposed to be doing in a combat group, it's not part of my training, but the Academy says that every Ascended Class has some sort of utility in battle, and I've got to work on mine."

"Would it help if we had the nature priestess get you a bit stoned before we have to go to battle? Strictly medicinal, of course." Karl asked.

The other boys from his team laughed, and Seamus looked horrified, waving his hand frantically to deny the suggestion.

"No, that's a bad idea. It definitely won't help my use my skills, I can say that much for certain. Why don't we start with Mick? My own shortcomings can come later." Seamus suggested.

Karl shrugged. "I don't see why not, but I should ask, how much field work have you all done?"

Mick shrugged. "Seven missions, five of which were resource gathering. Jimmy and Ali are about the same, since they were usually with me. Having six small golems is really helpful against Common Grade wild animals or monsters and for gathering resources, after all."

"So, seven weeks, give or take, of which, two were monster hunting?" Karl asked.

Mick shrugged. "That sounds about right, but the monster hunting missions went longer than a week each, since we forgot to bring a tracker, and it turned out to be really hard to find them."

Even Tessa winced a little at that news. That meant they had done very little actual fighting.

Ali, the darker of the two warriors, gave Karl a curious look. "How much combat have you seen this year? You're still a first year, right?"

Karl nodded. "I was with this team on the Frost Giant border, as advanced scouts for about a month, and then in the field doing monster influx suppression before that for another month. Then a couple of Academy Missions to start the year.

Really, we've basically been in combat since the war started, as we got trapped behind the Frost Giant lines."

Seamus' eyes lit up. "Oh, I heard a great song about you the other day. Hawk the Giant Slayer, about how an Elite and his bird killed a Thousand Giants as revenge for making it cold."

Hawk was startled. [How did they know?]

[I have no idea. I think that they think it's a joke.]

The girls were laughing, while Seamus now looked confused.

"Don't tell me you actually did it? I heard the song from a bard class student who had just gotten back from the Frost Giant front lines. He's somewhere around here if you want to hear the full song." Seamus suggested.

"He must have been working the radios, or in the dispatch office. Hawk despises the Ice Element. Hates it with a passion. And, he's our scout, so he's always up in the air where people can see him." Karl explained.

Tessa patted the shocked bard on his shoulder.

"Where were you during yesterday's battle?" She asked.

"Right on the flank. I wasn't really in the fight for long, and I was at the back." Seamus shrugged. "Ah, that makes sense, I was wondering if you had seen Karl move through to meet with Tank in the middle where the leader of the attack was. He left the rest of us to protect the buses and ran ahead with Ophelia and a Commander Rank warrior."

Seamus just shrugged. He hadn't seen any of that, but Mick looked excited. "Bob Mackenzie, he came up with Bob Mackenzie." The mage announced.

"You know Bob?" Karl asked.

"No, but his sisters are super hot. I've had a crush on them forever, since they first got guard duty in the capital in front of my apartment."

Lotus giggled. "Oh, he's down bad."

Tessa smirked at the embarrassed mage. "I don't think that down bad even begins to cover it. But if we do well, I bet there will be a chance to meet them in person. After all, their brothers are both here, so they will likely come meet them when we return."

Then Lotus walked right up to Mick and stage whispered in his ear, loud enough for everyone else to hear. "I would suggest that you don't tell the Commander Rank warrior that you want to bang his sisters. It won't end well for you."

Mick looked horrified at the thought, and Karl took the opportunity to lead them to a seat in the mess hall.

"So, what do all of you do for fun? Any hobbies, other than creeping on cute security guards?" Karl asked.

Seamus reached into his pocket and took out a stack of collectible cards. "I enjoy playing Pocketmana."

Mick shrugged. "I just enjoy reading."

Karl turned to Jimmy and Ali, who were the quieter part of the group.

Ali frowned. "I used to play football, but I don't think there is a team at the Academy. That was always the thing for me, all day I dreamed of playing football. But Elites aren't allowed in the pro teams for obvious reasons."

Jimmy reached into his pack and took out a small wooden statue of a duck. It was only about three quarters done, and still needed details on the back half, but the front was very well done.

Remi came out of her space to wrap around Karl's arm and examine the small statue.

[That is good. I need to get that good to make better totems.] She informed Karl with excitement.

"Remi likes your handiwork and says you are very skilled. She makes totem statues with mud and basic water control, and she's looking forward to making them as detailed as your duck." Karl explained.

"That is Remi? She is adorable." Jimmy replied, smiling at the venomous Spirit Snake as if it were a normal pet.

"Did you have reptiles at home?" Lotus asked.

"And give my mom a heart attack? I don't think so. But we always had wild corn snakes in the yard, taking care of the earth mice. They're not what you would call friendly, but they keep pests under control, and that makes it hard to dislike them.

They have an entirely different pattern than Remi does, but somehow she looks friendly." Jimmy explained, running a hand through his tousled blonde hair, which kept falling across his eyes when he didn't have his helmet on.

Ali tipped his chin towards Karl. "What do you do for fun when you're not out making bards sing songs about your vengeance against the Frost Giants?"

Karl shrugged. "Honestly, I don't have many hobbies. I grew up in the Lithium Mines, so I was always at either school or work. I also didn't really have friends before coming to the Academy, I was the runt of the school year, always smaller than everyone else."

Ophelia snorted in amusement. "Now we all know why he's so violent. The repressed rage of a small man unleashed, even though he's grown now."

"I seem to recall that you were the one who scared half the hospital staff by roaring at them." Karl reminded her.

"You made the spider tickle me." She replied, her voice taking on a rather Ursine growl.

Mick laughed softly at their interaction. "I see now. Karl's pastime is actually playing pranks and pushing people's buttons."

Chapter 334 Colonel Wilkes

After a few more minutes, the group broke up, and one of the teachers came over with a note in his hand.

"You are with the new arrivals from the church, right? Commander Karl and his team?" The aging mage asked.

"That's right. What can we do for you?" Karl replied.

"We have an update for you. The second Commander for your team has been selected, and a bunk has been prepared for you in the male dorm tents." He explained.

"Is it acceptable to set up my own outside the camp? I sleep better that way, and I'll be close enough to hear mission orders." Karl asked.

"That is fine. If you prefer an individual tent, they are set up behind the line, you can pick a spot and set up. But the Commander who is assigned to the second half of your mission team has just arrived, and he seems somewhat perturbed, so perhaps you could help set his mind at ease?"

"Of course. Where might he be?" Karl replied.

The teacher gestured for Karl to follow him, and they walked through the camp to the bus parking area, where a familiar looking mage in his mid-twenties was having a smoke. He wore an officer's uniform with a Colonel's bird shaped badge on it, but Karl didn't recall meeting many Colonels in his time, other than Valerie. They were one of those ranks who got stuck either in an office or leading a very large group of soldiers, so they would be in a back line Command Station, not anywhere near Karl.

He looked up and gave them a rueful smile, which seemed odd to Karl. He didn't recall this man having anything to be apologetic for.

But then, he realized who he was. That was the silent General from the meeting that sent them to take on the Royal Rank Frost Giant. If Karl recalled right, the man was a fairly accomplished mage, which would be useful in the team to keep Jimmy and Ali off primary defensive duties.

The teacher introduced them. "Commander Karl, this is Colonel Wilkes. Colonel Wilkes, this is Commander Karl and his team. The four Ascended members you will be partnered with will be here shortly. Your teams will be working together for the next few missions."

Karl walked over and shook the man's hand. "It seems we have some catching up to do, General."

Wilkes nodded and took a drag off his cigarette, the smell startling Karl, who had gotten used to Doug's being distinctly not tobacco.

"Indeed we do. Is there somewhere private?"

"Just over here behind the bus parking is as good as it gets, I'm afraid. But I'll take the abridged version if it's necessary." Karl suggested.

They walked away from the last of the crowd, and Colonel Wilkes took a seat on a crate of food supplies. "Where do I start? The obvious, I suppose. I have been relieved of my Command and demoted to Colonel, then sent to the front lines. The same is true for General Jormundson, the warrior. General Orland is under arrest, but they likely won't demote him, just hold him until the trial." The Colonel began.

"Wait, back up. They arrested General Orland for sending us on a fool's mission?" Karl asked.

"No, General Milton threw a fit about General Orland's disrespect in telling you two to go outside for a duel, and General Orland accidentally killed him. It just happened so fast, Milton drew his blade, and before we knew it, he was dead. I don't think that Orland even realized what he was doing, it was just a reflex." Karl shook his head. "What a clusterfuck." Colonel Wilkes used the stub of his last one to light another cigarette. "Tell me about it. There was only one High Priest left in the camp, and he couldn't cast resurrection. Then, the rest of us spent an entire week in the tender loving care of the Holy Inquisition, who didn't believe that we hadn't conspired to get a ranking Elite killed, and now here I am."

"Well, welcome to the Hill Giant border, I guess. I, personally, don't hold any sort of grudge. It was a mess, but the hospital counsellor told me that I need to learn to not take those things personally, as it's bad for my mental well-being. We all recognize that it was a messed up situation, but I already met with Overlord Drake, and he informed me that you didn't know about the other group who had been sent and went missing when you sent us, so that makes the bad intel, and the fact that the location of the Royal Rank Frost Giant was off by over forty kilometres a bit more understandable."

Colonel Wilkes looked startled. "The fight wasn't at the cave?"

Karl shook his head. "No, they ambushed us where they hit the other group. They used the bodies as bait and buried an ambush team under the rocks and snow to wait for us to stumble on them. Being Frost Giants, even Thermal Vision didn't spot them under the snow. We had already located the cave, using Hawk to scout, but we were going to rest overnight and hit it in the morning."

Their conversation was interrupted by the arrival of Mick and the others from the second team, so Karl shook Colonel Wilkes' hand and gestured toward the trees. "If you need me, I will be in a spider silk fort just outside camp. But I will see you at breakfast."

"Understood, Commander. I look forward to working with you."

Karl led his group away, so the Colonel could get acquainted with his new team. The extra mage would be a good counterpart for the team, but Karl realized that he didn't know what the Colonel's specialty was. He had forgotten to ask.

Karl led his team out of the camp, getting many strange looks from the guards along the road. They were going the wrong way for a mission, and past where the tents were set up in a clearing. Tree roots made for lumpy beds, so nobody set up that close to the forest.

Then Karl led the team right into the forest, headed for a big tree where Rae could build her fort, but not so far in that they couldn't see the camp. That part was important, so they could see who was coming toward them, and react to any major movements on the line that would signal an attack.

[That's a good one. Let's use that one.] Rae announced as she left her space and skittered up a tree to begin her work.

She connected five different trees today, going all out with her fort, while everyone on the ground wondered what sort of mansion Rae thought that they needed for their home base here on the Hill Giant lines.

It was enough that even with the silk blended to match the tree coloration, it still brought over teachers, who were wondering what was going on.

Karl waved to them, and a few understood, but they were even more curious, as they understood what was happening, but they had never seen it in action before. Commander Rank spider silk could stop even skill enhanced arrows if it was layered, and they had made such a large fort that they had to be planning to spend some time here.

The line was unlikely to move, but they had made a fort larger than the fifty-person dorm tents for a five-person team.

[It's a masterpiece. They're going to love it, and I even decorated a little.] Rae announced when she was finished.

That got Karl's interest, and he motioned for the team to go up while he spoke with the teachers.

"It makes Rae happy to get to try out new designs for her forts everywhere that she goes. She says this one is a masterpiece, and it's not interfering with anyone else, so I didn't see any reason to stop her." Karl explained to the group that had come to see what they were doing.

"Can we enter? Or is it a personal thing to her?" One of the warrior instructors asked.

"That should be fine. She likes it when people praise her hard work." Karl agreed.

The teachers went up next, and Karl laughed as he heard the gasps and laughter of them discovering what Rae meant by a masterpiece.

He climbed up the ladder, and looked around what appeared to be their new sitting room, as Rae had made a half dozen hanging chairs to swing in, and found that she had decorated the tree with necklaces of gems and bits of bone stolen from the dead Frost Giants.

It had a very shamanistic vibe to it, and the magical gems glittered in the twilight under the tree branches.

That led into a kitchen area, where Lotus was already hard at work building counter space with [Plant Growth], and then open bedrooms with curtains between hammocks, and one more large open room, which Karl assumed was for guests.

"It's a whole house, built in the trees in what? Five minutes?" One of the teachers asked.

"With all new beds and swinging chairs. Those are new, we didn't have those last time." Lotus added.

"Is this how you live on the front lines?" The warrior instructor asked.

"It is now."

Chapter 335 Envy The Fort

Karl didn't miss the envious glances that the other students were casting at his fort when he came down with the others for dinner, or the gossip about the features that they had added inside, which sounded much more grand than the actual interior of the silk fort.

It was more of a suspended tent than the palace that they made it out to be, but compared to their rooms at the Academy, the canvas tents with fifty students packed inside were no luxury hotel.

The fort was much less crowded, and they actually had room to spread out when they were getting ready in the morning. The tents were so packed that you had to either take turns, or equip your armour while laying in bed if you had a bonded set.

Many of the others didn't have a bonded armour set, as it was prohibitively expensive for the average student, and not well worth the resources that they could have bought instead.

Their growth rate was normally the priority for all of the Golden Divine Academy students. Karl was just an exception to the rule, and from what the others could tell, his group was either enjoying the benefits, or they had all gained significant opportunities in the recent past.

"Do you think that they will be back tomorrow?" One of the students asked as Karl and the others were taking a seat at the table next to him with their trays.

"I guess. They're still close enough that the artillery is firing at them, so they must come back pretty often." The other student at his table replied.

"Oh, we can ask this teacher. Commander, do you think the Hill Giants will charge again tomorrow?" The boy asked.

It took Karl a moment to realize that they were talking about him. His back was turned, and he was in armour, so they hadn't realized he was a student.

Karl turned around with a smile. "Well, you got the Rank right. But I'm no teacher. However, I can say that the chances are they will launch at least a small attack every day, even if it's just to test our lines. The Giants are relatively smart. Smart enough to know that if we start to slack off, we will leave vulnerable spots in the defences that they can use to get to us."

"So, something like today will happen every day?" The boy asked.

"I take it you got here very recently? This was a smaller attack. It only lasted ten or fifteen minutes, and the enemy retreated with most of their force intact. That's just a probe to see how we're doing with our defences. I attacked forward into the lines to throw them off balance, so they didn't think that we were too predictable, and that was all it took to make them back off." Karl explained.

Tessa wagged a finger at him. "It's not nice to lie to people. You attacked into the lines because you thought it would be fun."

"Maybe a little because it was fun." Karl agreed.

The other students sitting around them chuckled, and a few of them discussed what they had seen when Karl and the warriors had charged into the lines.

That was drawing even more students into the discussion, those who had been on Karl's side of the line during the attack and had managed to see something through the [Blizzard] attack that Remi had been using to reduce visibility.

"I tell you, it was like a whole army rolled into the Giants, man. They just marched through the attack, cutting down everything like it didn't matter there were Commander Rank Giants there." One of them was telling his team.

"There is half the Academy here, how much difference could three more make?" One of the other students asked.

"Yeah, that's what I thought, and then suddenly there was a three-metre tall Werebear and a bunch of Giant Spiders, and that maul tossing around Hill Giants like they were dolls. I tell you man, Commander covers a huge range of power compared to Ascended." One of the others insisted.

That was actually true. Commander Rank went for a much wider range of power than Ascended because the bottleneck wasn't just a number but a qualitative change.

Before that, the lines were somewhat vague, but Commander to Royal was a very distinct cutoff, and once you were past the bottleneck, you would make a huge step-up in power, leaving a gap between Royal and Commander that wasn't easy to bridge without the assistance of magical devices or some sort of cheat.

Karl chuckled. "I have class skills that increase size, strength and speed by nearly half, including bonuses that will double skill damage, and add secondary damage of a different type than the main attack. Even compared to other Commander Rank Elites, I do a lot of damage."

"Are you like the World Dragon's cousin or something? What sort of unfair advantage is that when you've already got three Commander Rank Monsters with you? Wait, does that apply to all of them as well?" One of the other students asked.

Karl chuckled. "It's primarily for them. The fact I can use it is just a little bonus."

Ophelia laughed. "He says that, but he shoots arrows with Commander rank Chain Lightning on them until his arms get tired."

One of the kids pointed at Karl. "I saw that. In the snow, I saw Chain Lightning." That was actually Remi, for the most part, but Karl nodded in acceptance that was related to him.

One of the teachers gave Karl an intrigued look. "With the power that you have amassed, do you have any alternate ideas on how best to keep the Hill Giants under control?"

[We could make them part of a new art exhibit.] Rae suggested helpfully.

Karl could only imagine the level of horror that the students would have if they saw what Rae called an art installation. But it would likely dissuade the Hill Giants from coming anywhere near them.

"I can think of a few ways, but I'm not certain how viable they would be as a long-term deterrent. We could try to terrorize the Hill Giants into backing away from the border, but eventually, they would likely come back with even larger numbers and that would be a real mess.

We could try thinning their numbers as well, and I saw the numbers from the Frost Giant front, where they were summoning more Giant clones to fight. If the Hill Giants aren't cloning themselves with magic, they might not win a war of attrition." Karl suggested.

"A war of attrition? Doesn't that imply that we can kill more of them than they do of us?" The boy at the table next to Karl asked.

"That's right. It's not the best option, but if we can eliminate even fifty to one, we should be able to crush their population to the point that they simply can't attack."

The other students looked at him like he had just said the dumbest thing they'd ever heard, and Karl felt the need to defend his idea. "We were only on the Frost Giant border for one month, and my team killed well over a thousand. Given even three months, I don't see why the lot of us couldn't do it." He explained.

The teacher sighed. "When you put it that way, it sounds so reasonable. But that's simply impossible for most of us. Unless you're going to single-handedly wipe out an entire town, that math doesn't work out for those of us who are at less exaggerated power levels."

From the far side of the room, Morgana laughed. "You're not going to get to play that much on this front. You've got classes to take, rotations along the line, and even rest days in your future." The Witch Doctor informed him, but with the intent to encompass his whole group.

"Rotations on the line? Seriously?" Karl asked. "Most of the defensive tactics aren't a pike wall, that's just for slowing the charges. You will get used to fighting in a larger group soon enough. Besides, you're with Colonel Wilkes, and he summons Fire Elementals. I think that him and Hawk might become good friends after a few fights together." Morgana replied with a smirk.

[Fire Elementals? Like Magma Elementals, but all fire? That sounds neat.] Hawk agreed.

"Alright, we aren't quite Feral yet. We can play well with others." Karl reluctantly caved under Morgana's demanding stare.

"I'll believe that when I see it. Don't forget, I've met your nature priestess."

Lotus laughed and waved, knowing that Morgana couldn't see her sitting behind Ophelia.

"Oh, there she is. Good evening Lotus."

Chapter 336 Morning Combat Drills

As if speaking of him had summoned the man, Colonel Wilkes walked in with his team, and gave a friendly wave to Karl's team as they loaded their plates and sat down.

But no sooner did they get seated than the attack alarm went off, and everyone began to rise from their seats.

"Where is our spot on the line?" Karl asked Morgana as they prepared to head out.

"Last one on the right flank, where you entered yesterday."

Karl nodded, then turned to the other group, who were getting ready to leave.

"Acceptable response time is three minutes. Shovel food in your mouth fast and then jog over. You've got the time, and you'll need the energy." He instructed, then led his team out the door.

It was strange to be going to battle without his backpack, which was safely stowed in the fort, along with everyone else's. But that didn't change their arrangement, and the two clerics hopped on Thor, while Rae strapped Dana to her back and Hawk took to the sky.

Morgana was running alongside them, doing her best to keep up, and nearly succeeding. She wasn't a warrior class, but those enhancements that she had tattooed onto her body were no joke. They took the end of the line, behind the final few pikes, and waited as the Hill Giants came into view.

"Where does the Remi usually stay for the battle?" Morgana asked. "Either in her space or in my pocket. Would you like to hold her for a while?" Karl asked. The two seemed like they could be good friends, with Morgana's puppets and Remi's totems.

Morgana held out her hand, and Remi slithered up her arm to loop around her neck and put her face right beside Morgana's so they were looking at the same things.

Lotus giggled as the snake nuzzled against the Witch Doctor's cheek, and Thor's [Refreshing Lightning] barrier stretched out to encompass her as well.

"Well, it looks like you're one of us now. The barrier only works on the ones that Thor considers friends." Karl informed her with a smile, while Morgana gave the Lightning Cerro a shy smile.

It seemed to evaporate the aura of professionalism, and made it obvious that Morgana was no older than Lotus or Tessa, who had also graduated from their Academy last year.

The second team wasn't far behind, though they were running at a mage's speed, so they stayed together, and they were carrying slices of egg battered toast with them, eating on the way. Chances are, when everyone cleared out of the mess hall, they had been too embarrassed to stay, but if the fight didn't last long, their meals would still be there when they returned. It wasn't like the Academy had kept someone back to clean up the mess while they were fighting.

Everyone in the Camp was an Awakened Rank or higher Elite, including the staff, and many of the Awakened Rank students had been left behind with the Common Rank students at the Academy for their own safety. What percentage Karl couldn't say, but there weren't many of them here at the border. The camp was almost all Ascended or higher.

The group under Colonel Wilkes fell in between Karl's group and the rest of the line, looking much more nervous than anyone in the more experienced group. Even from where he was standing at the end of the line, Karl could see most of their hands shaking.

Tessa smiled at the students. "Seamus, the Giants are just over that next hill. Why don't you strum us a little inspirational ditty? Something with a nice rhythm." "Um, okay. I think I know a good one. Do you have a preference?" He stammered.

[Baby Snake Do do dah do do do] Remi sang in Karl's mind.

It was a species modified version of the theme song of a popular children's morning radio broadcast, which aired at seven in the morning, making it the bane of parents everywhere. But how Remi had ever heard it was a mystery.

Karl ignored the happy snake and made his own suggestion. "Why don't we go for something fun? Do you know any drinking songs?" "A drinking song, now?" Seamus asked.

"Definitely. See how nervous everyone is? A nice upbeat drinking song to take their minds off the battle is just what they need." Karl agreed.

Seamus strummed the intro to a popular pop song, then adjusted his lute and slid a metal tube onto his finger. When he strummed again, the tone was entirely different, and the nearby students began to laugh as he played. They were still laughing as the Giants came over the hill and into attack range. All of the nervous hesitation was gone, and when the order was given to raise the pikes, the entire row went up in unison, as if they had actually trained the manoeuvre. From the Hill Giant ranks, thousands of rocks, from baseball to boulder size, were magically hurled at the human defenders, crashing into shields as the ever present artillery fell silent, protected by the mages from the wrath of the Giants' Earth Magic.

The larger boulders exploded on impact with the shields, sending shrapnel everywhere, and forcing the mages to work to keep up the barriers over the defence lines. Thankfully, their fort was far enough back that it wouldn't be in danger from the secondary damage.

[Just hold until the order is given.] Karl reminded his beasts.

Lotus climbed down from Thor's back, and Dana got down from Rae, preparing to cast her [Golem] spell.

{Golems Forward, break the charge.} The radio announced when the Hill Giants were thirty metres away, and already under attack by the mages.

The Spider Golems only took three steps before launching themselves into the air, crossing the gap in a dull green streak of motion. But right beside them were two floating balls of fire, the Fire Elementals summoned by Colonel Wilkes.

Karl began to fire his bow, sending [Chain Lightning] through the attackers, who stumbled under the onslaught.

[Haste], [Terrorize] and [Brutality] all came online, increasing the size, speed, strength and damage done by himself and the Golems. That was enough that the [Chain Lightning] was actually stunning the Ascended Hill Giants, who died in a spray of blood as the Spider Golems raced between them.

Then the six small sand golems created by Mick, the bald mage student in the second group, reached the battle with Dana's Stone Golems, and the Hill Giants began to flail about at the ground, trying to hit the annoying things slicing at their legs.

The tactic was brutally effective, as it left them vulnerable to the attacks of the other Golems, as well as Karl's arrows and the attacks of the mages in their section of the line.

Most of the charge was continuing, but their end of the line had completely faltered under the weight of the attacks. Then Mick turned the soft soil to soft sand, and the giants began to sink and stumble, turning the rout into a massacre, where they couldn't even retreat.

Reinforcements from the back lines of the assault were on their way in Karl's direction, but they wouldn't last long, as Hawk was bombarding them with fireballs. Mick was panting with exertion as he remade his Golems again and tried to keep the sand trap active against the efforts of the Hill Giants to turn it back to stone, but Colonel Wilkes stopped him.

"That's what the pikes are for, son. Save your energy for later in the fight." The Colonel reminded him.

{Pikes Forward.} the radio ordered, sending a wave of warriors forwards into the Hill Giants with long spears in front of them, so they were out of the reach of the attackers. The mages were getting tired,

but the warriors hadn't done anything yet, so it was their turn to take over while the mages slowed and regained their energy.

[That's our signal. Forwards on me.] Karl ordered Rae and Thor.

Behind them, he saw Remi create a totem in both of Morgana's hands for the Witch Doctor to hold up, so they could fire over the crowd. Morgana was laughing, as holding the totems prevented her from using most of her spells, but Remi thought it was a brilliant idea, and she could just make more when they expired, since she was attached to the Witch Doctor anyhow.

"Seamus, we need a party song!" Karl shouted as he raced forward with the beasts.

This time the bard had a bit more confidence, and his song took on the notes of a hard rock guitar as he began to sing along, strengthening the [Inspiration] bonus as he followed the warriors forward.

The rhythm of the bow in time with the music was a comfort to Karl as he ran forward, firing arrows twice a second and spreading [Chain Lightning] everywhere.

Tessa speared a Commander Rank Giant, tilting his body back, right before Thor gored him and tossed the body back behind the lines.

That made a small gap, and Rae recalled her spider Golems to join her ahead of Thor, establishing a breach in the lines and leaving the outermost twenty Hill Giants cut off from their comrades as they were surrounded and eliminated.

Chapter 337 Whistle While You Work

Again, as they had yesterday, the Hill Giants created barriers of Earth Magic as they retreated, and left the human defenders to be tended to by the clerics.

The actual losses on the human side were very low, though the number of wounded was straining the abilities of the healers assigned to some of the sections of the line. On Karl's end, it was light, but just beside them, there had been a few Hill Giants who managed to break the pike line and get into the mages before they were taken out. They were doing their best to take down the shields over the line, as

without that, the boulder artillery would devastate the students, but the line had managed to prevent enough of them from getting through to accomplish their goal.

It would surely be the topic of their next few lessons, as that was the worst possible outcome for the defenders, but the students near Karl were in high spirits, still buoyed by the lingering effect of [Inspiration].

"Good work Seamus. That's what we need out of our bard. Now, we just need to work on your song selections, so you don't have to pick one at random at the last second. Like the bedroom, the battlefield benefits from a bit of mood music, and if I left it up to the beasts, Remi would be singing baby snake." Karl joked.

Seamus choked on his laughter, and played the first few notes, which made everyone else laugh as well, as they realized what Karl was referring to.

"World Dragon, NO! Not that song!" One of the older clerics shouted.

"Oh, I take it you are up at seven in the morning more than you would like?" Karl called back.

The man turned around, and Karl noticed the red robes, which made him laugh

"Oh, you're from the Orphanages? That makes sense. I bet that any of the orphanage supervisors view the creator of that show as their personal nemesis by now." He added.

The Red Dragon Priest nodded. "Exactly. That song is evil, and it gets stuck in your head."

Tessa and Lotus had already run off to help heal, and Doug was with a group of older clerics near a stack of bodies under blood stained white sheets. Karl was certain that they had at least one healing specialist who could resurrect the fallen instead of reincarnating them, so it took him a few seconds to realize what they were doing. They had two clerics who could resurrect, and the other High Priests were granting them mana and energy so that they could get to as many casualties as possible before they were exhausted.

If it worked out perfectly, everyone would be back on their feet by that time, and if not, they would do the reincarnation ritual and notify the church to watch out for more returned Elites. With the number of recent incidents of them returning with skills, it was obvious that they needed to be cautious, as some of them would reincarnate in a daze and think that they were still under attack.

If it worked out perfectly, everyone would be back on their feet by that time, and if not, they would do the reincarnation ritual and notify the church to watch out for more returned Elites. With the number of recent incidents of them returning with skills, it was obvious that they needed to be cautious, as some of them would reincarnate in a daze and think that they were still under attack.

Karl watched the hills in the distance, getting updates from Hawk, who had gone up into the clouds to avoid attracting the attention of flying stones, and waited for news, or the stand down order that the Hill Giants had retreated far enough that those not on duty could return to their days.

[Shit, shit, shit. Angry birds inbound.] Hawk screeched, then dive bombed Karl and vanished into his spot.

Karl was confused for a second, then he saw a group of giant winged forms incoming from the clouds.

"Everyone, heads up! We have incoming. Bring the barriers up!" He shouted.

The mages who could hear him did just that, and the radio operators spread the order down the line.

For a moment, they had no idea what Karl had alerted them about, and they were beginning to relax, prepared to call it a false alarm, when the rocks and fireballs began to rain down on them from above.

Karl focused on the incoming giant birds and let loose an arrow, using [Chain Lightning] to lend speed and distance to the attack.

The Rocs naturally dodged the long-distance projectile, but what they didn't realize was that simply not being hit wasn't enough, and the Lightning arced to them anyhow as the arrow passed by.

It didn't seem to do much to the enormous feathered monsters.

Karl had heard that Dragons were the greatest threat among all monsters, but from what he could see, they might not be the largest.

Any of those flying monsters could easily grab and carry away a bus, and while they were only Commander Rank, Hawk was utterly terrified of them.

It was most likely an intimidation skill, but that didn't change Hawk's opinion of going back outside before those things were gone.

Even Thor instinctively pressed closer to the crowd, recognizing them as a dangerous predator. Even if their magic couldn't easily damage a Lightning Cerro, if they dropped him from a thousand metres in the air, it would not be pleasant, to say the least.

Flying monsters were the most terrifying of threats to most Elites, and these ones seemed happy to hold at high altitude, hurling magic at the Elites from a distance that most of the mages couldn't reach.

Karl considered the options, and then put [Blizzard] on the next arrow. If he couldn't hit them, he could just use a larger area of effect.

With his [Brutality] enhanced strength, the arrows flew faster than any of the other spells except Lightning Bolts. It made them more difficult for the Rocs to get sufficient distance from, though they were far from being a competitor to the barrage of artillery shells coming from the flak guns.

Those were being pulled into action for the first time since Karl had arrived on the border, and the rapid-fire shells were now filling the sky with exploding shrapnel.

It wouldn't do much damage to a Commander Rank beast, but they had feathers. In theory, if they damaged the wings enough, the beasts would be forced to fly away or crash.

The [Blizzard] formed on the way up, making the attacking formation vanish in a cloud of white as the birds shrieked in rage, and Remi laughed in Karl's mid.

[Serves them right, throwing rocks at people.] The snake giggled.

The ice crystals of the Blizzard were a slashing attack, and the [Sharpness] passive boosted their damage forty percent when the skill was used by the Commander Rank Karl.

It was enough that the flight of birds began to reconsider their approach.

But Karl wasn't done firing, and he launched more [Chain Lightning] arrows as the blizzard stalled and began to come back to the ground, only to be replaced with another [Blizzard] enhanced arrow.

That sent them scattering, and they parted ways so that Karl couldn't hit them all with one spell, but that put them in the range of more mages with long-distance skills, while the dispersed formation spread out the effects of their attacks.

The birds were becoming frustrated with their inability to get their attacks through the barriers, as from such an altitude the mages had plenty of time to intercept them and nullify most of the power behind them.

Karl also wasn't the only archer with the ability to fire that high, and the flight of Rocs was slowly taking enough damage that Karl could see the blood dripping and their feathers becoming tattered. Soon, they would have to retreat, so Karl just focused on spreading [Blizzard] across as much area as he could, keeping them in the damage range. Then a lucky shot hit one in the throat, fired blind through another [Blizzard] and an enormous bird plummeted from the sky, coated in ice and leaking snow out of its mouth from the tip of the arrow.

That enraged the others, and Karl smiled as four enormous forms raced down from the sky in his direction.

[Hey Rae, how high do you think you can summon those Spider Golems?] Karl asked.

Rae laughed and vanished into her space as the birds plummeted at terminal velocity towards the ground, all headed for Karl.

They were almost on him when Rae reappeared a hundred metres in the air and summoned her Golems straight onto the backs of the diving monsters.

Their legs speared deep into the tender flesh of the birds, and Rae laughed as she vanished into her nest, avoiding falling to the ground from that height.

Karl was still firing, and when the first bird was fifty metres from him, a spear thrown from somewhere on his left cleanly pierced an eyeball, killing the bird instantly, and leaving only one to finish that attack flight.

It was being pummelled by spells and attacks, but the bird was determined as it closed on Karl.

[Jump NOW!] Hawk instructed.

Karl leapt into the air, twisting to keep the Roc in his vision, and the bird passed between him and the other Elites.

[NECK!] Hawk instructed.

Rend slammed into the back of the bird's neck, shattering it, and the last Roc skidded to a stop, carving a deep furrow in the soft dirt.

[Good work, buddy.] Karl congratulated him.

[I know all the ways not to get eaten, but those things are scary.] Hawk replied happily.

Karl couldn't fault Hawk for that one. Bird to bird, they were a hundred times his size, and they likely had a number of nasty tricks for dealing with other flying predators that they hadn't used against the humans.

Chapter 338 Pretty Rocs Obtained

The bodies of the Rocs were littered with damage, plugged with dozens of arrows, but few of the attacks actually made it past the under layer of their feathers, which Karl found to be as strong as Rae's silk when he tried to pull a few of them free.

"No wonder everyone is afraid of these things. Look at that, an arrow fired by an Ascended Archer didn't even cut through the flesh. Between that and attacking from a thousand metres in the air, most of the world couldn't even fight back." Karl muttered to himself as he examined the corpse that had landed closest to the lines.

That was where everyone had gathered to see what a bird with a fifty-metre wingspan looked like up close.

It was large enough it could prey on Hill Giants and carry them away in its claws, a true terror of the skies. But it also had magic, both defensive Earth Magic and offensive Fire.

While the students examined the closest body, Hawk flew back out and stealthily stole three for himself. They had secrets that he wanted.

He was powerful, but they were powerful and scary.

It was nearly twenty minutes before anyone noticed that the other bodies were missing, and teams were sent out to go look for them, in case they were wounded and escaping.

"Professor! They're not alive, Karl's monsters looted the bodies. They do that." Lotus shouted out to avoid being sent with a team to look for a giant bird that she already knew they wouldn't find.

"What do you mean, they looted the bodies? That thing weighs literally tonnes, how could they even lift it?" The professor asked.

"Don't ask me, it's some magic thing. They just whoosh, vanish, into a separate space. They do it with the Giants all the time." She explained.

"Why would they even want them?" The teacher asked, not following her explanation.

"You know. Snacks, growth resources, decorations."

On Morgana's shoulder, Remi nodded happily. She would negotiate with Hawk later, as she wanted some of those feathers for her space, and he had a lot of them now.

Maybe she could get some of those colourful ones from the belly with the multicoloured stripes. Those ones would make great ornaments.

"You know, there is just something about you that attracts trouble. Did you see how those things basically ignored an entire offensive line to attack you?" One of the other students asked.

Morgana laughed and patted the student on the shoulder, before he noticed Remi staring at him from only centimetres away and dropped to the ground in panic.

"Dammit, woman, that's a poisonous snake." The boy shouted.

Remi laughed, which opened her mouth and made her fangs drop, further panicking the student.

"As I was about to say before you freaked out, it's because Karl gives off the aura of a Monster, not a human. They likely thought that he was the leader of the army here, since there is nobody above Commander Rank, and he's the only one who would feel different to them." Morgana explained.

The student looked like he was considering the options much more seriously than Karl would have thought necessary, then he spoke again in a suspicious tone.

"Are we certain that he isn't actually a monster hiding in human form, like a transformation spell?" The terrified boy asked.

Karl laughed, and Lotus smirked.

"No, we had him checked, one hundred percent human. It might have occurred to the Doctors at the rehab hospital that he could be a polymorphed spy as well."

Karl put a hand over his heart and looked offended. "Such little faith in my abilities. If I were truly a monster, how could gentle souls like Rae and Remi stand to be around me? I've been framed, I tell you." The Elites who weren't part of his group all froze in place, slowly blinking as they tried to process the fact that he had used the opinion of a venomous Naga Spirit Snake and a Bloodbath Spider to vouch for his credentials as a human.

But more than that, he called the Bloodbath Spider a gentle soul? Remi, they could believe. She was actually rather adorable if you weren't terrified of snakes. But Rae? Her favourite pastime was making it rain blood.

"I think you need better character references." Morgana informed Karl with an exaggerated sigh.

"Well, I'm not sure anyone would take the word of a War Cleric or Lotus on the topic, and Dana went somewhere with Ophelia." Karl shrugged.

Lotus frowned. "Why does Tessa get her profession mentioned, but I get called out by name?"

"Because the reason nobody takes you seriously is that you're Lotus, not because you're a Nature Priestess. Your choice of Goddess is like a side effect of you being you." Karl explained.

Lotus frowned, then smiled happily. "You know, that's right. Nature Priestesses become Nature Priestesses because we're already like this. It's a calling right from the start, not something that we learn."

"You think that the Red Dragon's favour is something that is learned?" Tessa asked as Lotus finished her speech.

Lotus started to nod, then frowned. "You know, I recall that you traumatized a boy so much that he runs away and cries every time someone mentions your name, and that was before you were confirmed as an Acolyte of the Red Dragon. Maybe you have always been like that."

Karl laughed at the memory of meeting the man they were referring to.

The young cleric had been quite arrogant when Karl was making that book for the Blue Dragon High Priestess, but the mention of Tessa and Lotus had sent him running.

The Ascended Rank warrior who had remained on the ground to stay further from Remi looked around at Karl's group in dismay.

"What I'm taking from this is that you're all a bit odd. Maybe that's the secret. All of the most powerful Elites have strong personalities. Those who don't, seem to get stuck at Awakened and then don't really progress." He noted.

"Are you saying that you have a strong personality?" Lotus asked, looking down at him.

He nodded. "Yes. And an intense fear of snakes."

[Who could hate me, I'm adorable?] Remi asked.

Karl smiled, and Morgana looked between him and the snake. "She just got offended that someone called her scary, didn't she? I've never seen her try to act cute and offended at the same time." The Witch Doctor laughed.

"Is that what she's going for? She just looks offended, like she slithered in something foul." One of the nearby mages joked.

Remi tilted her head, wondering what she was doing wrong that they weren't getting the message.

"See, that is adorable. The other just looks offended." The mage added.

"Does everyone suddenly speak snake?" The snake phobic warrior asked, backing away as he rose to his feet so that there were two other people between him and Remi.

"She's really good at it. Out of all the beasts I've ever met, I think only my pet dog and Thor are better at conveying emotion, but Thor only knows happy and playful." Mick joked, with a gesture toward Thor, who was playing kickball with some of the students.

{Off-duty students may now return to your regular schedule.} The radio announcement sent everyone walking toward camp, leaving only about a tenth of their total number along the front lines.

"Alright, Karl is with me, and I think the rest of you already have your assignments. Oh, Mick is with us as well. I'm doing the ancient history lessons today." Morgana informed them.

"Great, straight from rock dust in combat to super dry history lessons." Mick sighed.

Karl patted him on the shoulder. "It's not that bad. Morgana finds the interesting parts of history to bring up. Though some of that is certainly because I'm most interested in the parts that might lead to System relics and rare resources for the beasts."

"Well, that has to be better than Professor Jones' descriptions of his times spent exploring the catacombs under the Capital. How can you spend forty years on a career without a notable accomplishment?" Mick sighed.

"Well, at least I don't need to worry about that. I have found a number of cool things already." Karl replied.

"Oh?" Morgana gave Karl a sharp look, but he knew most of it couldn't be mentioned. The dungeon in the hills near the Frost Giant border wasn't classified, though.

"There was a mission, not long before the war started, where I went to investigate an anomaly, and it turned out to be a combination of Yeti magic and a dungeon instance that had appeared beneath a cavern complex. There was a whole trial challenge series, and a village of Dark Elves, plus the Dungeon Instance itself. That's where I found Remi as an egg." Karl explained.

If they were already enthralled in the story, they would remember more of the lesson.

"Let's start there today. Why don't you describe the architecture, and we will try to match it to an era and region." Morgana decided.

Chapter 339 Ancient History

Karl focused on the interior of the Dark Elf city, the mushrooms, the glowing fungus, the crystals, and finally the dark black angular buildings. One by one, he described every element of the city as they had encountered it, with the beasts filling in any gaps they thought were important.

For example, Thor insisted that it was important they note that the short glowing grass smelled like mint, and Rae noted that the black buildings had been painted with blood in the past, but the stone itself was black, so you couldn't see it.

Both of those were good points, and they helped Morgana narrow down the era and region that they had seen replicated in the dungeon, even though the Dark Elves made it fairly obvious who had built the city.

When he got to the man standing on the platform, preaching about the dungeon being opened for the people of the city, and more specifically his outfit, Morgana knew exactly when and where Karl had been sent to.

But she wouldn't tell them right away, and she had the two students search through the books for clues until they got to the section on the Cult of the Darklight Host. They were believed to have been a world dominating army just over a hundred thousand years prior, and they were alternately believed by some historians to be the precursors to the World Dragon Church. According to their beliefs, the World Dragon had not been born as a world Dragon, and he had actually been an Ancient Eldritch Being, from the species that had helped create many of the worlds that the Great Pantheons ruled over. They believed that it was only when he decided to devote himself to protecting the world that the World Dragon had changed forms, taking on the aspects that were needed to obtain divinity and grant his blessing over the world.

That didn't match with what the World Dragon Church taught, but it didn't directly conflict with it either, as there were no teachings about the start of this world in specific among church doctrines, only that the Dragon Gods often chose or created worlds to watch over. According to the textbook, many of the ancient civilizations believed that the Darklight Host had come to this world and slowly conquered the entire planet, bringing with them the power of the System and the Ancient Training Grounds, now more commonly known as the magical dungeons.

"So, it's basically a fairy tale of the origin of the world?" Mick asked.

"More or less. It might be true, but there isn't any solid evidence. The fact that Karl actually saw one of them interacting with the ancient Dark Elves and opening a Dungeon Portal for them is the closest thing to proof of their existence that I've ever heard of.

Everything else about them is told as a legend, an oral history or religious belief passed down through the ages, and those aren't always historically accurate after a hundred thousand years." Morgana explained.

"What is with the grass, though? Thor insists it's important to remind you about the grass." Karl insisted, then took a blade out, as Thor had kept some for himself.

"Where did you get that?" Morgana demanded, eyes wide with shock.

"From Thor's space. He kept some as we passed by. My skills say it's not a growth resource for any of my beasts, so it's just growing there, looking pretty." Karl explained.

"It does smell like mint." Mick agreed, as he examined the faintly glowing blade of grass.

"Do you have any idea what that is worth?" Morgana demanded, her voice rising through the octaves. "I don't even know what it is. I couldn't find it in any of the books." Karl replied evenly, not sure why she was getting hysterical. It was an Awakened Rank magical resource, not even a great food source for a Commander Rank Lightning Cerro.

Morgana put on a pair of latex gloves and gently took the blade of grass from Karl's hands to put it in a sealed jar. She looked so relieved that it was safe that Remi couldn't resist, and picked one from her swamp, which she had planted from the ones in Thor's field, and came out to give Morgana another one.

"There are more of them? Thank you, Remi, but I can't take your treasure." Morgana informed the snake.

Remi just put it in her hands, then smiled and returned to her space.

"It is literally growing in her swamp. She planted it near her altar because the glow makes for a pretty backlight at night." Karl explained.

"So this will... grow back?" Morgana asked.

"Yeah, fairly quickly, if I recall correctly. It's one of the plants that Thor needs to prune so it doesn't spread out of its allocated space." Karl explained.

"Well, this should prove that you were really in the Underdark. This is Black Elf Grass. It only grows deep underground, and it is considered to be very nearly extinct. There are dozens of disguise and anti-aging potions that can't be made without it. You've likely never heard of the Deeplight Face Creams, but a jar goes for more than the average house, and this is the primary ingredient." Morgana explained.

Karl winked at the Witch Doctor. "Aren't you a bit young to be worrying about anti aging products?"

Mick chuckled with his hand covering his mouth. Indeed, Morgana still looked her age, and she would be under nineteen if she had just graduated. Even among the Elites, who were all of the younger generation, she was among the youngest.

Morgana smiled. "I don't care about face creams. But I am a Witch Doctor. One of my abilities allows me to make a transformation potion with that grass. I have been looking for it for ages, and now I have not just one but two whole blades. My magic can fully transform someone for one full moon cycle. Not just their face's appearance, their entire appearance." Mick gave a low whistle of appreciation, and Karl smiled. "Just think. Lotus could be not short for an entire moon cycle." Karl noted.

"Why not just say tall?" Mick asked.

"It's magic, not a miracle."

Morgana laughed. "It's a Commander Rank potion. It could have you and Lotus swap appearances for the duration if you both used it."

Karl considered that for a moment. "She would go insane with jealousy, seeing her own body get to pet all the monsters whenever I wanted."

Morgana couldn't help but laugh at the mental image of Karl transformed into Lotus, taunting her by playing with monsters all day long while she was stuck as him with no monsters.

"That's evil in a whole new way that I hadn't even considered. Only a Nature Priestess could be tortured that way." The Witch Doctor replied, shaking her head in dismay.

Mick nodded. "I don't see the issue, though the guy who freaked out about Remi could be tortured that way, I'm certain. It would be like watching a live action nightmare. Or the bimbo brigade, they're all terrified of spiders."

Morgana gave him a concerned look.

"Sorry, they're a group of girls from the senior class who are extra bitchy to us nerdy sorts. They've all got high - paying corporate careers lined up from their ultra-wealthy families, and I'm a favourite target, since I went bald long before I shaved my head." Mick explained.

Karl patted him on the shoulder. "I should introduce you to a good friend of mine, Skittles. He specializes in helping people work through internalized issues. If you ask High Priest Doug Mackenzie, he should be able to hook you up with a good referral after all this on the border is finished."

Mick smiled. "His name is Skittles?"

Karl shook his head. "No, it's just a nickname that the High Priest gave him, but it stuck, and it's better than his actual name. He's also a nature priest, and very relaxed about any sort of issue you want to work through. Very easy to talk to."

"I will talk to the High Priest later, I know who you mean. He's here as a teacher now, right? Wilderness Survival, if I recall."

Karl and Morgana both nodded, while the Witch Doctor worked to keep her thoughts on Doug Mackenzie as a person to herself. Karl seemed to recall that there was something between Mick or his group and Doug's sisters, but he let that thought fade. If it were important, it would come back to him later.

"Alright, let's get back to the lesson. Now, we have found the basics about the Darklight Host, so what we need to get into are the building styles of that era, where many of the world's Dungeons, instances and magical trials were founded." Morgana diverted them back on topic.

Chapter 340 What To Do

After an afternoon of lessons, Karl was ready for a good meal and a full night's sleep. His group wasn't on defence detail today, so they had all night to themselves unless there was an attack that made it past the artillery and the roaming scouts that the army had in front of them.

It was a strange feeling not having a battle to go to in the morning, or other immediate obligations. Karl and the other students only had classes in the afternoon, while the clerics helped out all day at the treatment facility or the kitchens, depending on their preference.

So, when the sun was already well above the horizon, Karl finally dragged himself out of bed and found a vigilant new group headed to the line, prepared for whatever the Hill Giants threw at them.

They were all well aware that the situation could change in seconds, and the first barrage of an attack was often the most deadly, as the defenders could be caught off guard and the bombardment might make it through their spells.

It was standard to relax the defensive barriers when they weren't under attack, so the mages had more mana available when they actually needed it. But that came with the risk that they wouldn't increase them enough to block the first incoming spells when the attack did come.

First up was breakfast, then a bit of physical conditioning training with the other students, with everyone making sure that while they did get their necessary workout, they weren't too tired to answer if the call came that an attack was imminent.

Mostly it was maintenance weight lifting, stretches, calisthenics, and so on. That kept all the muscles in peak form, without burning so much energy that they would lose combat effectiveness.

Then, after lunch, it was back to history and geography lessons with Morgana, but this time accompanied by a dozen other mages, who were also taking the geography class.

"Are history and geography not a normal warrior class education path? Like, do they just show up in places and add them to their mental knowledge when they arrive?" Karl asked as he looked around at all the other students in the group.

One of the mages laughed. "Actually, you might be on to something. If the warriors need to know something about an area, they learn when they arrive, or it's in the mission briefing. These classes are usually for the ones who have no intentions of going there themselves, or the ones who are the most interested in what they will find there.

So, we have a couple of other treasure seekers, mostly after legendary magical items, and you, who is here for what? Monster food? Perhaps signs of a Legendary Divine Beast's nest for your next companion?

If you can, I recommend looking for the nest of the Rocs that attacked the other day. They're like a transport and aerial attack force combined, and they're seriously powerful."

Karl considered that idea. A huge flying transport would actually be quite convenient. However, the Rocs were Commander Rank beasts, just like Rae, and if he was going to use the beasts' growth to push everyone to the next level, he would need something that was guaranteed to have a higher potential than that.

Remi might, there was no telling what power level her parents were at, as she was created inside a Dungeon, and the magic of those places was unpredictable. She might be Royal Rank, or she might peak right where she was at as Ascended. But the fact that she was born Ascended Rank did suggest that she had a lot of potential, even if she was slower to grow to adulthood than the others.

Honestly, Karl was in no hurry to add anyone more to their team. If he made it to Royal Rank, he would have the ability to add another space, but as long as everyone was growing smoothly, he would take his time and try to find just the right beast and not hurry to find another member.

Or perhaps fate would do it for him. Likely in egg form, if past experience was anything to go by.

"Alright, the first thing we will start with are the known ancient excavations within the Golden Dragon Nation. Those are the safest of the regions to explore, and while they have been more extensively visited, they are also a guide point to your future explorations.

Each of them will give you an idea by their location and construction of what the continent looked like at the time that they were built. Some of them were built along rivers that no longer exist, and that gives us an idea of where else we should be searching for similar relics.

In the past, most nations built along rivers for the abundant water sources. So, following ancient riverbeds and lakes found at known sites is an essential skill to the study of ancient geography.

For example, who is familiar with the ruins of the World Dragon Temple at Whiton in the Beastkin lands?" Morgana asked, then paused to see if anyone was familiar with the story.

Karl had never heard of it, but one of the mages had.

"I heard that it's still occupied by World Dragon priests, and they say that it has always been. Like forever, as long as there are records, the Whiton Temple has been occupied." He answered.

"Exactly. According to the World Dragon Clerics, it is one of the original World Dragon Temples, and while it has been destroyed during attacks a number of times, rebuilt and renovated, every map ever produced shows it in the same spot." Morgana explained.

She brought out a map book and began to flip through the pages for them, with the book tilted on a stand, so they could all see.

"The originals of these maps are all thousands of years apart, and as you can see, the oldest don't show Chiptonrith Lake, but a massive desert. But here in the middle, some of them show a much larger inland sea." The students looked confused. "But isn't the lake hundreds of metres deep? Like, so deep that no light reaches the bottom of the deepest parts?"

Morgana nodded. "That is correct, but apparently, that was not always the case. What happened has been lost to history, but we do know that at some point during the end of the System Era, entire mountain ranges were levelled, while others were formed.

That might be the case for the desert. The aftermath of a battle between demigods might have made the crater that became an inland sea, and then eventually levelled out to a massive lake."

One of the mages laughed. "So, geography is a history lesson as well."

Morgana smiled. "It's inevitable, really. Even the borders are a history story, and the Frost Giant border is about to be rewritten after this war. Where it will end up is a mystery, but the new territory claimed by the Magma Dragon around the erupted volcano will most likely gain its own territorial notation." Now, as you can see, the largest population centre is obviously the Capital, but there are others along the rivers, especially ones with deep water all the way to Chiptonrith Lake. In better times, that was a major trade route between not only us and the Beastkin Nation, but also down the great river through the wilds and to the ocean.

Now, most ocean shipping goes overland to the shore, which is both slower and more dangerous, as it puts goods perilously close to the Frost Giant Nation, who has a much larger oceanfront."

One of the students pointed at the wilds, the officially unclaimed lands between the beastkin nation's southern border and the ocean. The Wild's borders extended all along the southern end of the Beastkin nation, and the marked west side of Golden Dragon Nation's claim as the territory reached south toward the ocean.

"Why haven't there been efforts to claim the wilds? I mean, we could have more ocean access to ship around the continent, and get supplies." One of the other students asked.

"There have been. What we managed to claim from the monsters was that narrow strip at the south of the nation. Even that is difficult to hold, and there are constant battles around the border as the monsters try to take back their natural territory.

If not for the constant effort, we would be completely landlocked." Morgana explained.

Karl didn't know how much of what they used came from other nations, but he did recall that many of the coal mines were in the southern hills. Even if it weren't for the ocean access, that region was still of significant importance to the people.