

Beast Master 341

Chapter 341 This Feels Like... School

The next morning, there was no attack on their section of the line, but the Hill Giants tested other sections further west down the border. It was oddly serene, with the artillery in the distance giving a steady thunder, nearly below hearing, setting a rhythm for the day's activities.

Physical training, a rotation on the front line, where Karl waited patiently for something to happen, and then classes in the afternoon.

The following day was an afternoon rotation on the line, so he had classes in the morning.

The third day he was off the line again, so he had the morning free to train and work on his meditation to build the strength of his beasts.

By the sixth day without an attack on the line, it was becoming a smooth routine, but Karl was becoming nervous. They hadn't hit the Hill Giants that hard, so they weren't retreating because of the casualties. No, they were up to something, and their Earth Magic kept the Golden Dragon Army from sending scout planes far enough inland to find out where they were massing troops.

Every tiny village had at least one Elder who had been taught the trick to anti-aircraft fire, and it didn't take much to shoot down the scout planes.

"You look twitchy." Tessa noted as they finished dinner in the fort. They hadn't eaten dinner in the mess hall since the first day, only breakfast and lunch, so that they would be able to keep up with the news and orders more easily. The food was mostly canned everything. Even the bread came from cans. The idea was that it would lessen the strain on the clerics, so they could just heal and not worry about dealing with the food supply, but the quality of the long duration preserved foods wasn't always all that great.

Some things were. The preserved eggs cooked as well as any, and the barbecue beans were just as good as they were fresh out of the pot. The canned potatoes were fine, but the green beans were atrocious, and everyone avoided them like the plague unless they had been heavily spiced or drenched in a sauce.

In comparison, the dinner that Tessa and Lotus came up with was always fresh, including the meat that Karl donated to the process. Some of the meat sources hadn't been as good as others, but there were still quite a few of the giant pigs, and those were outstanding.

Karl had considered sharing one with the line, but Hawk was resistant to the idea, and they had eventually come to a compromise. It was Karl's birthday in two more days, and Hawk had agreed to donate a pig to the meal, so the line could throw a proper party.

Nobody in the Mines could really afford birthday parties that were more extravagant than a cake with friends, so that was their tradition. But with a whole Academy full of Elites, they could throw a full on barbecue, and trick the students into eating up one of the Rocs, which Hawk found entirely too stringy for his tastes.

They tasted vaguely like chicken, and weren't unpleasant, but if you didn't marinade and deep-fry them, their natural state was almost a jerky. That meant Hawk, who liked his food raw, was out of luck. The frying was an essential step to making them edible.

So, on the seventh day after their arrival, the day before his birthday, Karl went to talk to the mess hall's leader, the Professor from the culinary arts department.

"Professor Pom, could you spare me a moment? I would like to make a request and a donation for tomorrow's lunch." Karl greeted the aging chef.

She smiled at him, but the look on her face was full of suspicion, and she was ready to tell him to get the hell out of her kitchen at any moment.

"Tomorrow is my birthday, and I have saved one of the giant pigs from the Frost Giants, as well as the body of one of the Rocs. I would like to have the Roc brined and deep-fried, and the pig slaughtered and smoked for a barbecue feast at lunch.

I know that we have plenty of beans and salad to go with it, and everyone loves a good barbecue." Karl explained, before she could yell at him for wasting her time.

"Put the pig on the table and let's see it. We've got a thousand mouths to feed here." She insisted.

Karl looked at the prep table and shook his head. "It is a Giant Pig from the Frost Giant nation. It's larger than Thor, and it certainly won't fit on the table."

"Then the floor over there. That tarp has been sanitized." She offered.

Karl brought out the pig, and the chef gasped in delight, before realizing that they didn't have nearly enough smokers to accomplish the task.

They could make some of them easily enough, as they had hundreds of raw metal barrels that were used to transport ammunition and supplies for the artillery units. Or, they could wrap it and pit smoke it. That seemed like it would be the easier option.

"I will get the workers on the smoke pit right away. Did you say that you still had one of the bodies of a Roc? We've gone through the one that was brought back to me after the battle already."

Karl nodded. "It's not plucked or anything, but it has been in the equivalent of stasis, so it's still fresh."

The cook nodded slowly, lost in meal planning. "I will get the kitchens on the salads after breakfast, and the meat will need to be in the smokers by midnight, but if you cut me off a hundred kilos of breast meat from the Roc, we should have plenty to cover for a party. The smoked meat will be the main attraction, the students get enough fried chicken equivalents in their daily meals, and that's the only way those birds are edible." Hawk gave a smug squawk as the chef agreed with his opinion, then sliced off a large slab of meat for Karl to pass to the chef.

This one fit on the table, though it took most of it, and Professor Pom nodded in satisfaction. "I don't know how your preservation system works, but that looks as fresh as if the beast had just died.

However, that giant pig hasn't been cleaned or gutted, so I need to work. Get out of my kitchen and come back tomorrow."

Karl had been expecting that. She had wanted to kick him out from the moment that he had entered, and there had to be some satisfaction in doing it now, even if she was going to help him with his request for an Academy wide birthday party.

Sure, it seemed excessive, but with the majority of the Academy here on station, he couldn't really leave anyone out without looking like a massive jerk, so he had to prevail upon the main kitchens to get his barbecue.

It didn't take long for word of the party to spread through the camp. Karl knew that nobody actually cared that it was his birthday. But they did care that there was going to be better than usual food for them.

The army wasn't going to send tonnes of fresh boar meat to them, likely ever. That wasn't the sort of thing that you got on the front lines, where most of the meals were prepackaged and came with instructions for cooking in the standardized Company Kitchen.

The Academy could have brought their own gear, but the army already had supplies ready, so they had chosen to use what was available.

The only one that Karl hadn't gotten on board with the "Let's party for my birthday" plan so far was Morgana, who insisted that having a birthday was no excuse for skipping an entire day of training. They had a good, reliable schedule, and he would get all the attention that he could handle during the lunch break.

So, it wouldn't be a full day of slacking, but a morning shift on the line, and then a barbecue, before he had to go back to history lessons. Or perhaps Geography, though the lines between the two did seem to get rather blurry when you were discussing how the Geography had been changed.

Still, Karl settled into his hammock with a relaxed mind, ready to begin the precious few weeks when he could claim not to be the youngest person in the camp. Until her birthday, Dana would have that honour.

Chapter 342 Presents

The next morning, Karl woke to a surprise birthday present from the last person in the world that he thought would give him a gift.

The Hill Giants.

The attack alarms started to blare just before dawn, alerting all forces to come to the front lines. Karl was on morning shift, so they would have been headed there anyhow, but not for another two hours.

That must have been why the Hill Giants attacked now, when the predawn twilight made it hard to spot them, and when the night shift would be at their most inattentive, just before they had to look professional as the next shift woke up, and the morning light revealed them to the eyes of supervisors.

Karl and his team equipped their armour, and Karl called out the beasts to serve as mounts for the run across the distance between the camp and their assigned position.

They made it with plenty of time to spare, as the first arrivals of the attack were on the far flank, going after the artillery battery, and there were no Hill Giants in range of his position.

[Hawk, get some altitude and see what's holding up our side of the party.] Karl ordered.

Everyone was here, and the Golems were summoned, but there were no targets within a kilometre of this end of the position.

Hawk soared out over the lines and started to relay enemy positions back to Karl.

[We have more giants coming. They've got three forces. The one that is fighting, the one coming to reinforce those ones, then the one coming from the far right that should be headed to our side of the line after we send our reinforcements away.] He narrated.

Karl passed that information along to Morgana, who relayed it to the teachers in charge of strategy. The best that was likely to happen was that a few extra troops would be left at this end of the line, as the reinforcement of the side which was actively under attack would take priority.

But every little bit would count, and the third hit was intended to be against the weakest portion of the line, so they could breach the lines of warriors defending the much softer mages and devastate the human defences.

They all understood that their position was important, but watching the other end of the line fighting while they waited for the order to do something, even to adjust the lines and attack the flank, was beyond frustrating to the students on Karl's end. However, they were in for the biggest shock of the day. The Hill Giants had sent an actual strike force to them, and they were in for a much more serious fight than the other end. Morgana looked over at Karl. "Two Royal Rank leaders, fifty Commanders and a whole Company of Ascended Hill Giants. Did you do something personal to them?"

Karl chuckled, and the rest of his team looked at him like it was a very real possibility.

"Not that I can think of offhand. But we've got a whole line of Elites here, and we still outnumber them." Karl replied.

Ali, the swarthy warrior on Colonel Wilkes' half of the team, gave Karl a concerned look.

"You do understand that there are two Royal Rank Hill Giants there, right? What are we going to do against that? When they charge at the back of the line, we're not going to be able to break their Earth Magic barriers in time, we will be too busy dealing with the Commanders."

From behind the line, Tank came jogging over with a pair of other warrior class teachers.

"We will take care of the Royal Rank Hill Giants until you've handled the others." The oversized Berserker declared.

Karl shook his head. "I will come with you, and Hawk can help us from above. The others will stay with the line. Two on one is a more evenly balanced fight."

Tank shrugged, and prepared to move as the Hill Giant line charged at them.

"Shall we, gentlemen?" Karl asked, taking out his bow.

[On Karl's mark, begin the attack.] The section leader announced over the radio.

Karl buffed himself up and focused on the line. "Remember where the leaders are, it's going to become difficult to see them." Karl reminded the team.

[Chain Lightning] gave the arrows range, while [Blizzard] added the shredding ice damage and blocked the view of the attacking Giants.

Karl wasn't aiming at them, though. He was burying the arrows into the dirt in front of them, letting the lightning arc, and the blizzard spread over their section of the battlefield.

That meant their mages and archers were firing blind as well, but the wall of snow and ice gave them a range finder to their much larger targets, and as the Hill Giants began to emerge, Karl sent out another wave, moving the barrier forward.

That put the front line in range of the majority of the mages, while the Hill Giant stone attacks were horribly inaccurate, with a full half of them missing the line entirely.

Tank looked into the ranks of Hill Giants, now that they were close enough to see them through the snow.

"Alright, let's go."

[First Rank forward, pikes up.] The zone leader ordered.

The pikes rushed forward into the Hill Giants, and Karl switched to his Maul.

[Everyone, stay here and protect the group. Rae, make sure nothing happens to Tessa and Ophelia on the front row.]

[I'm feeling artsy today.] Rae replied, sounding somewhat distracted.

[Fine, make an art installation in the clearing when you've got time. But don't let anyone smash our team members.]

Rae's mental smirk let Karl know that he had been hoodwinked, and she only wanted to find a way to get him to agree to it. That didn't slow his advance, Rae would follow instructions and build her art when she had spare time, likely while the Hill Giants were regrouping for a second charge.

He moved in a defensive formation with the other three Commander Rank warriors, but when Karl and the rest of the response team advanced, the Hill Giants spread, leaving them a clear path to the leaders.

"Oh, this is bad news." Tank muttered as they rushed past the Ascended Rank Hill Giants.

"I'm not saying this is a trap, but this is a trap." Karl agreed.

The other teachers shook their head in dismay, realizing that someone still had to stop these two Hill Giant leaders from attacking the front lines, as their Earth Magic would devastate the mages if they got any closer.

[Rae, send your Golems forward to keep a hole open behind us.] Karl instructed.

The Hill Giants behind them were mostly Ascended, and the Commanders in the attack force were spread out to make a pincer and push at the students' weak points when the strongest defenders moved to fight the Royal Rank Giants.

Rae was happy to help with that, and she brought Dana and Mick's Golems along with Colonel Wilkes' Fire Elementals forward with her. That made a solid breach in the Hill Giant lines, and the warriors pushed up into it, keeping Tank's team as the spearhead of the counterattack.

That was what the Royal Rank Giants were hoping for, now they just needed their leaders to defeat these four, and have their Commander Rank teams push through the extended lines, and they would be into the mages.

But they quickly realized it would not be that easy.

When Tank raged, he grew scales. Then [Brutality] took effect on him, and he grew from 250cm to 350cm instantly. That still only made him a little under waist high on a Hill Giant, but the extra strength made him a very scary opponent.

Karl heard a musical giggle in his mind, and realized that Morgana had found a new way of working with Remi. She had planted an ankh topped staff in the ground for Remi to put the totems on, and the Spirit Snake had wrapped around it, leaving the Witch Doctor one hand free to cast her spells, which mostly required a gesture to activate.

Karl and Tank split up to engage the Royal Rank giants, with the other teachers falling in beside them. Karl would pair with a double blade wielding warrior, who dressed like an agility type in light armour, while Tank got the defensive warrior.

It was a good combo for the Berserker, who didn't really care what was in the path of his axe.

Karl aimed his maul at the Hill Giant's club, forcing the creature to change trajectory to avoid finding out what Karl had enchanted his weapon with.

The power rolling off Karl's weapon felt stronger than a Commander should be able to manage, and that put the Royal Rank Giant on edge. The Hill Giants had been informed in advance that this end of the line had the army's leadership team, and that they were Commanders, but there wasn't much other information for them to go on.

Chapter 343 It's Art I Tell You

The fact that Karl was aiming to shatter the Giant's weapon right from the first strike seemed to make it obvious that he had a weapon shattering technique, but [Shatter] didn't only work on weapons, but on anything that it hit.

The vibrations would cause bones to break just as effectively as it caused a wooden club to break.

That distraction let the other warrior get behind the target, and score the first strike of the battle, cutting a line down the Hill Giant's lightly armoured back as Karl kept it distracted.

The Giant turned to swing at the agile warrior, and Karl backed up, switching back to his bow to plug a [Flaming Body] infused arrow into the enormous target.

It was like shooting at a house from the middle of the lawn, impossible to miss.

The Giant stepped forward to keep both targets in sight, and Karl backed up again, drawing the Giant behind the lines where it could receive no reinforcements, before he was forced to switch back to his two-handed blade to deflect a flurry of attacks that he wasn't fast enough with the Maul to handle.

The teacher took advantage of the opening again, slicing the back of a knee, and going for a spot at the armpit where the Giant's crude armour exposed a weakness.

The Giant moved too quickly for that strike to land, and the warrior went rolling as he was clipped by a swing of the club.

[Rae, Golems, now.] Karl ordered as he aimed a strike for the Giant's left knee.

His blade and the Giant's club met a shower of sparks from [Flaming Body], leaving the two of them deadlocked for a split second before the pair of Spider Golems landed on the Hill Giant's shoulders and began to shred his face and back.

He reared back and flailed viciously at the attackers, throwing the first one deep into the Hill Giant lines, but his movement left him vulnerable, and Karl struck upwards, hitting him at the gap between his hanging waist armour and his chest plate.

The flaming blade buried in the Hill Giant to the hilt, and Karl used it as a conduit to cast first [Chain Lightning] then [Blizzard] from the inside.

The giant made a gurgling noise for a moment before his movements slowed, and the Spider Golem deprived him of his head.

Then Rae was on the scene, prepared to begin her art exhibition. She had prepared a dozen Commander Rank Hill Giant bodies on pikes, which she slammed into the ground, standing them up as grotesque

mannequins, before she used her silk to tie the leader up by his arms between two of the Commanders, leaving the body spread eagle and standing upright, but headless.

"What the hell are you doing?" Karl heard Morgana shouting from behind him, as every Hill Giant in the area turned to him with rage in their eyes.

He just made a "Come and get it" gesture, and then charged forward, firing arrows into the closest few Commander Rank Hill Giants, who no longer cared about tactics, and only wanted vengeance.

The bow was quickly replaced with the Maul, shattering a knee, and then crushing a rib cage before the falling Hill Giant had even reached the ground.

Then Karl retreated, forcing the attackers to come at him one at a time through the small gap around Tank and his partner, who were still dealing with their enraged Royal Rank opponent. It was more intent on getting to Karl than on fighting them, and they were hacking it apart, but it didn't seem to care.

Tessa glowed with the red light of the War Dragon's favour, and Thor's defensive blessing increased in size, granting everyone near the macabre display the benefits of [Circle of Protection].

The Lightning Cerro charged straight for the second Royal Rank Giant, who never even saw him coming before it was flung from its feet and set upon by two massive front feet and an enraged Berserker.

But this time, the Hill Giant lines didn't break and retreat. They were fighting as hard as they could, but without any sense of cohesion or tactics, and as often as not, their strikes were interfering with the fights of those next to them, throwing off timing, deflecting blows and causing arguments in the attacking line.

The students' defensive lines closed the gap as Tank and his partner retreated to catch their breath, and the Spider Golems darted off to cause chaos in the Hill Giant attack.

"Well, that's one way to get them worked up. They're not going to forget this." The defensive warrior with Tank noted.

"I hope not. The point of an object lesson is for them to remember it. They lost two Royal Rank Giants today, and we didn't lose a Command Squad member. The Hill Giants that survive will spread the word that we're taunting them, and the next waves will hesitate as they attack, allowing us more time to hit them from a distance." "Nine out of ten storytelling. If you can't blind them with brilliance, baffle them with bullshit." Tessa called from her spot on Thor's back.

"Hey, who is telling the story here? Me or you?" Karl shouted back.

Thor laughed and stomped around, motivating the warriors nearby, while Seamus started on a new song for [Inspiration]. He had moved up a little, standing in the enlarged gap between the warriors and the mages, where everyone could see and hear him while he jammed out on his lute.

Thor brayed happily, and Tessa let out a very draconic roar while holding her spear high. Karl had continued to fire his arrows now that nothing was getting through to his position in front of Rae's art installation, and even Morgana had come up to join them, though she looked less than impressed with their antics.

The clerics along their portion of the line were advancing as well, far enough that they could work together to cast an area heal over the whole spearhead of the line, while Lotus worked to keep her area [Refresh] spell active.

Dana led a group of mages forwards, putting them in range of more Giants with their area attack spells. That thinned the front row of attackers, giving the warriors a moment's rest, while the Hill Giants further down the line began to panic at the pair of Royal Rank Spider Golems who were going berserk among the Ascended Rank fighters.

They weren't even trying to fight the Commanders, they were just maiming and crippling as many as possible, then running away to do it again when anything challenged them.

"Does Rae have anger management issues?" Morgana asked as she stared at the impaled Hill Giants in the middle of the human formation.

"No, why do you ask?"

She gave a meaningful look at the display, and Karl began to laugh.

"That's her latest art exhibition. Pretty isn't it?"

Remi looked at the row of corpses for a second, and placed her next round of totems on the second to last Giant's head on both sides, then nodded with satisfaction. That was much prettier. Visually balanced, and spitting fireballs, for the true interactive experience.

Hawk laughed at her idea before dipping into his space as a massive barrage of rocks from the back lines converged on him, and then reappeared to continue hurling fireballs at them from the other side of the formation.

[This is a fun game. We should make them mad more often.] He suggested.

[I think we're going to be in enough trouble for this time.

But look on the bright side, all those reinforcements from the other end of the line are coming this way. Well, at least the ones that can still walk.

The Spider Golems have been busy.] Karl informed the happy bird.

They also weren't dead yet. They were over a kilometre away, by Karl's estimation, and they were still going wild.

"You're lost in your conversation with the beasts again. The line is signalling the retreat, the Hill Giants are disengaging." Dana informed Karl as he finished mentally searching for the Spider Golems.

"Right, sorry." He had still been shooting, but he had noticed the target selections were getting a bit slim.

[Rae, move your art installation back indoors. We're done here.]

[Grab the shiny stuff, it's still on the bodies, but it will drop when I take them.] She replied.

Karl wasn't certain what she meant, but a club and dagger, plus a necklace, dropped to the ground when the Royal Rank Giant disappeared. Karl scooped them up, and the necklace immediately bonded to him, while his sword rejected the other weapons to the point that he almost dropped them.

"Tessa, do you mind holding these for me? They're causing a repulsion reaction from my bonded blade."

Chapter 344 Buff The Tank

Tessa tossed the weapons into the pouches that were built into the harness Thor was wearing, left over from their last battle and equipped by him when he left his space, so his knight would have a saddle.

Then the group retreated to their original positions after Hawk grabbed the last Royal Rank Hill Giant into his space for safekeeping. He didn't really want it, they tasted awful, but the warriors had already looted it, so there was no point in letting the Giants recover the bodies of their leaders.

For half an hour, they waited while the survivors of the Hill Giant attack retreated, taking their wounded and most of their dead with them.

That was something that the Frost Giants didn't do, and Karl wondered if there were Hill Giant Clerics who could resurrect their fallen. He hadn't seen any sign of them in combat, but they might be somewhere in the back, as anything beyond the front lines was their undisputed territory.

Once the whistles blew to inform them that they could retreat from the line to their regular morning duties, the students breathed a sigh of relief, and Karl took a comfortable seat on a nearby rock.

His team was still on duty this morning, and the battle had lasted long enough for shift change to have occurred, as the sun was now well above the horizon.

Tank sat down on the rock next to him and looked up at the sky.

"Good work out there. That ambush with the Spider Golems was pure poetry." The Berserker congratulated him.

"I didn't know that you had the chance to see it. It worked just as well as I had hoped. There isn't much on an average battlefield that can stop them." Karl replied with a smile.

"That wasn't actually why I stayed back. I know the others think that the way my size increased in combat was one of my skills, but that was you, wasn't it?" Tank asked.

Karl nodded. "Yeah, it's the same skill that I use on myself and the beasts. You're bestial enough when you rage that it will affect you as well. It also works on Ophelia, we just didn't see it because she was behind us.

The skill is called [Brutality], an increase of ten percent in both size and strength per rank of the user."

"Do you think that you could teach that to me? I heard that you can make skill books of the skills that you know." Tank asked, becoming more eager by the word.

"Sure, if someone brings over paper and ink, that's all I need for that one. Or we can do it after I'm off shift."

Tank shook his head with a glance toward the Hill Giant side of the line. "They're likely coming back. If there is one thing that you are truly talented at, it has to be the art of angering the Giants. We've heard from our scouts that the Frost Giants are still looking for you, and they're not giving up.

I don't know how they pieced it together, but they realized that the team who was ambushing their reinforcements was the same one that had killed their Royal Rank Elder."

Then Tank sent a brief message over the radio, requesting supplies for Inscription, and the two patiently watched the horizon for signs of movement.

"I heard that you had the ability to learn more skills after the Frost Giant incident, have you learned them yet?" Tank asked after a few minutes of silence.

"Yeah, Brutality was one of them. I also learned skills that add impact damage to all my physical hits. It's a bit like [Earthquake], but internally." Karl explained.

"That sounds messy. No wonder they were so wary of that Maul. What comes next for your skills?"

Karl shrugged. "I have two options, I can learn some basic defensive skills, or I can learn one that gives my pets a chance to evolve their skills up a tier. Like, Fireball to Flame Storm, or Stun to Petrify." "It's just a chance when you learn it?" Tank asked, confused as to the nature of the skill.

Karl shook his head. "No, it's an increasing chance every time they use the skill. I don't have the ability to get it yet, but the way that my luck goes, it won't be long."

"If it could advance them a Rank, that would be even better." The berserker sighed.

"I've already learned that skill. Did you ever wonder why two Spider Golems can move through Ascended Rank Hill Giants like knives through warm butter? It's because that is a Royal Rank skill. Rae is still a Commander Rank beast, but that one skill increase is enough that Hill Giants one rank below her aren't even a challenge for the Golems." Karl explained.

"And you didn't think to mention that to anyone?"

Karl smiled gently and patted the enormous berserker on his massive shoulder. "I have come to realize that Academy Instructors are very different from politicians and bureaucrats. Telling you means I'll receive new courses better suited for my training. Telling them means they'll find a reason to say that I have Royal Rank combat power and should be reassigned to more dangerous battlefields.

And I don't have that level of power yet.

The maximum cap is still much lower than an actual Royal Rank monster, but the energy efficiency is up there."

Tank nodded. "I get it. It's an overpowered skill, but when Rae is actually a Royal Rank monster it will be better. You have to be getting pretty close yourself, though. I'm not on the weak side of Commander, and you didn't have any trouble keeping up with me."

"It shouldn't be too much longer. I just need to keep building the strength of my mental spaces, so the beasts will advance. I think that once the space forces Remi to advance to Commander, we should be very close."

Remi got excited about that. She was almost there, she could feel it. The next time that she shed her skin, she would likely advance.

She was thinking about all the wonderful things that she might be able to do as a Commander Rank Snake when the runner arrived with the supplies for Karl to start making books.

The Class skills were simple to transcribe, and Brutality didn't need anything but blood, which they had a plentiful supply of.

"What are you filling the pen with?" Tank asked as Karl got to work.

"Oh, it's Royal Rank Hill Giant blood. The book has to be written in blood, and I prefer not to use my own. I have plenty of blood available, thanks to Rae and Hawk, so I am using that."

He wrote out the Brutality 'book' which turned out to be nothing more than an incoherent and rage filled poem about tearing things apart, and watched in pleasure as the blood-red cover formed over it.

"There, try that. I don't know if it will work for you, but if it does, I should make more. At least one for Ophelia, and one for the Clerics' records." Karl suggested.

Tank tried, but could not open the cover to the book. But Karl had an idea. "Try it while raging. That's the only time that it worked on you."

Tank's eyes went red, and white scales formed on his arms and neck, then the book opened smoothly and vanished in his hands.

He surged in size to roughly four metres tall, then returned to his normal calm state.

"Did you say it was called Brutality?" He asked.

"Yeah, that's what was on the cover of the book as well." Karl agreed.

"The skill I got was a modification of Rage. [Bestial Rage] was the name. It replaced my old Rage skill."

Karl tapped the back of the pen on the extra paper. "Give me a second, I want to know if I can teach you another skill that is intended to be used by beasts. Do you know Haste already?"

Tank nodded. "I know a haste equivalent. Berserker Rush increases my speed while enraged."

Karl refilled the pen with Hill Giant blood and began to write out Terrorize. Tank with 40 percent more damage would be awesome.

"There, rage and try to open that." Karl instructed.

Tank followed the directions, but when the book vanished, the result was not what Karl had been expecting. The already enlarged Berserker grew even larger, reaching four and a half metres. Then his whole body became covered in scales, while his hands grew long claws, and his enraged red eyes turned completely black.

A roar of victory echoed through the camp, causing dozens of students to draw their weapons in fright before realizing that it came from their lines.

With that sort of buff, Tank was now nearly as large as the Ascended Rank Hill Giants. Letting him loose in combat would be a game changer for the humans.

Chapter 345 Berserk Terror

Tank stomped around in victory for a moment, then drew his axes and swung at the air, savouring his new ability before transforming back.

"It's called [Berserk Terror] and it's a full transformation ability." He cheered, pulling Karl into a hug and spinning him in circles.

"I'm glad you like it. Now that we know it really works, I need to make more of those books, and we have at least one or two more people to try it on today."

Tank laughed. "I want to see what happens when you do it to a Werebear as well."

"I'm glad we understand each other."

Karl quickly worked to make two more copies of both books, and then called Ophelia over from where she was chatting with Lotus and Dana about something, while Tessa napped on top of Thor. If anything happened, he would wake her up.

"What's up? Have you been teaching Berserkers to read? That's a noble endeavour, but not really necessary." She joked.

"Here, first, try to use this. If it doesn't work, try to use it while enraged." Karl explained.

Ophelia opened the first book and immediately shifted into bear form as it vanished. She looked confused for a moment, and then picked up the other book, apparently thinking she had dropped it during the transformation. The second one vanished, and her Werebear form surged in size, still the same three metres that she had been under the effects of Brutality before, but now with metallic claws and teeth, and fur that looked more wiry and less fluffy. Like Tank, her eyes had gone completely black, and her roar shook the ground.

This one didn't startle the students as much, but Karl could see them backing away.

Ophelia looked positively feral, and her eyes landed on Tank, seeing a challenge.

Karl was going to try to calm them down, but the other Berserker had already transformed, and the fight was on.

Tank was a full Rank above her, and over a metre taller, but that wasn't going to slow down the enraged Werebear. Sparks flew from both sides as metallic claws dragged down scales and wiry fur, confirming Karl's impression that the fur itself was now a form of armour.

They looked like they were tearing each other apart, but Karl could see that they were pulling their strikes a little, so they didn't hurt each other.

Then Tank managed to swat Ophelia to the ground, and the two Berserkers transformed back, laughing.

"That skill is remarkable. The raw power, the intimidation roar, it's got everything. How did you realize that this would work?" Ophelia asked.

"I gave Tank the Brutality skill that you get the size buff from. It changed his Rage skill, so I gave him another book, and this was the result. Pretty impressive, if I do say so myself." Karl explained.

"So, you taught [Berserk Terror] to two Elites, and you didn't think to tell the clergy?" A voice asked from behind Karl.

"I made you copies. But we had to be sure that they worked first, right? Who knows, these one might have been as particular as the [Refreshing Lightning] book that I made for the Blue Dragon Priestess." Karl replied as he turned to see one of the camp's High Priests waiting for him to finish talking to the Berserkers.

"Don't remind me of that debacle. Those books have been passed around by the Clergy more than the average offering plate, looking for someone else who can use them. It's still only the Blue Dragon Clerics, and like three Lightning Element Dragonkin, who have managed to activate the skill."

Karl smiled. "That's three dragonkin better than the last time that I heard the story, so they're making progress."

"And who can we expect to be able to use these two books?" The cleric sighed. "Most likely transformation druids, animal element berserkers, and possibly War Clerics. The Red Dragon seems like the sort that might appreciate Terrorize and Brutality as skills." Karl offered helpfully.

"Have you tried the books on your own Red Dragon Cleric yet?" The High Priest asked.

"Nope. We started with the Berserkers, as it seemed like the logical option. They are the ones that need more combat damage."

The white robed cleric was giving Karl a suspicious look as he stared down at the two books with their blood-red covers.

"Well, they are red, at least. But why do I get the feeling that it won't have any bearing on who is actually able to use these them? Could your skill actually be to make ultra-selective skill books that only work for the person you first handed them to?" He muttered.

"You know, you might be on to something. I make the skill books because I think that the skill I have might work for someone in particular. So, when they're passed on to someone else, the meaning is lost, and it's all up to compatibility with a skill that they had probably never considered or trained towards.

For the Blue Dragon Priests, their patron is an evolved form of a Divine Beast that uses lightning, so it's natural that they would. But a beast's lightning and a shaman or wizard's lightning aren't the same thing, so it's only natural that they wouldn't understand the concept as well.

You don't expect just anyone who can use fire to be able to use Dragon Breath." Karl suggested.

The cleric was going to open his mouth and say something about how the idea was ridiculous, as the Dragons were the noblest of the Divine Beasts, but that would bring him right back to Karl's point. That they were beasts, so you couldn't expect others to easily learn their skills.

"Alright, I will take these to the Inscriptionists, so they can add them to the archives and make copies for anyone who wants to try to use them. There are a whole class full of them here on the front line, as the Academy sent everyone with Ascended Rank or higher combat power, so there should be copies ready

by tomorrow." The High Priest announced, satisfied that he had gathered enough answers about what they were doing over here, scaring students with their roaring.

That left Karl and the others alone on the line again, staring at empty fields, the earth torn up by the attacks of the Hill Giants and the recent battles.

Tank was right, they were going to come back, especially after taunting them like that with their dead leader strung up for all to see. But it might not be soon. They had failed this attack, so they wouldn't take a hasty approach to the next one. In fact, Karl thought that they might focus on other sections of the line for the next few days, just in case they were weaker than the student portion, which might have seemed like an easy target because of their ages.

But as an additional torture to go with the waiting, the wind was blowing from behind them, bringing the smell of roast pig from the camp to the line and making everyone's mouth water with anticipation for what the kitchen was going to turn out for lunch today.

With the attack, it almost felt like a victory dinner and not a birthday brunch, but that was an improvement, in a way. Celebrating the day you were born was fun. But celebrating the days you didn't die was much more meaningful.

Chapter 346 Barbecue Party

The party was in full swing by the time that the shift change started, and the roast pig had been sliced, pulled, and prepared a half dozen different ways for the Academy students. The ones going to the line had eaten early, and that was the smell that had tortured the students who were coming off the defence shifts.

The Culinary Arts Professor waved at Karl as she saw him coming off the line and waved him over.

"This is considered a tradition in my home village. Take a bite of the beast's heart for good luck, and to gain some of its power." She explained as she handed him a small square of raw meat.

Karl smiled. He had a sword that granted him the beast's life force, and a Holy Stone for luck, but a little more never hurt anyone.

Plus, both Hawk and Rae agreed with the practice, while Remi wondered what the attraction was with only eating parts of things. But Remi didn't have taste buds the same way that the others did, so the taste of things was much less important to her than the texture.

Karl's team grabbed plates and found a seat with their lunch, while they watched the older students trying to distract the kitchen staff so they could spike the party punch. Unfortunately for them, the Academy already knew all the tricks, and they weren't having any luck in their endeavour.

"Happy Birthday, Commander. Good work on the line this morning. I don't think that I've seen an above rank kill go that smoothly in a long time." One of the clerics congratulated Karl as he walked by to maintain order.

"Thank you, Brother. We've got some very talented warriors here, and the more we work together, the better we can predict each other's actions." Karl agreed.

Not that he had worked with that group before, but their actions were fairly predictable because the warrior with him didn't use any skills that Karl hadn't seen before, either from other Warriors or the Spellblades.

He walked off, and one of the Berserker Class students came over to say hello. Karl didn't recall his name, but he recognized him from the group training Earthquake with Thor.

"Commander Karl. Good to see you again, and Happy Birthday. I hear that you've got the Inscription Class going insane copying books again." Karl chuckled. "Have they started trying to teach them to others yet? They will likely only work when you're raging, and partially animal transformed." The Berserker sighed. "I thought it might be something like that. Professor Tank tried to explain, but you know how he is. Not big on words."

That was not Karl's experience with the big Berserker at all. Tank actually liked to talk out his ideas, from what Karl had seen.

While the party punch was being zealously defended by the kitchen staff, the off-duty teachers had found a loophole. Someone, most likely a nature priest, had been passing them flasks of liquor all morning.

The Principal stepped up onto a small podium near the outdoor dining area, where most of the off-duty students were gathered to eat and laugh, releasing some stress after the morning attacks.

"Good afternoon everyone. I already gave this speech to the morning crew, so I know this will be short. We realize that it is unconventional to have so many students out here on the main lines so early into their career, and we would like to thank you all for going above and beyond.

The right flank had a massive victory today, eliminating two Royal Rank Hill Giants, while the left and centre managed to hold against the main assault without a single permanent casualty.

That is our goal here. Zero casualties.

So, I would like to remind you all, if you are injured, back away from the fight and let the healers get to you. I know you're all eager to prove that you're an asset to your team, but you will be a longer-term asset to them if you get prompt healing. We've got quite a few clerics here, as the Church has recognized the vital significance of the next generation of Elites.

But to top off today's celebration, I would like to add one more fact for you. Today, we celebrated the advancement of our ninth student on the lines to reach Commander Rank.

That is a new record for the Academy. Never before have we had nine current students at the Commander Rank. It is my belief that this is a sign of the favour of the Dragon Gods, blessing our students with a more complete System after the serum administration.

There are a number of other students who are getting close to advancement as well, and it is the official position of the Academy that we should have over a dozen active students at the Commander Rank before the end of the year."

He paused, and Karl smirked at Dana.

"Do you think he means you? Because I think that you can do it. Commander by the end of the year."

Dana laughed. "Well, if everyone else is doing it, I might as well. But we should likely have Tessa tested first, because I'm reasonably certain that she advanced today when she received the Red Dragon's blessing."

"High Priestess Tessa has a nice ring to it. I think that we should let her decide when to tell people, though. When she does announce it, there will be a whole series of events, and they will want her to go back to the Capital Cathedral for a while to do the High Priestess orientation and paperwork. We've still got lots of time in our contract, so it's better that we just let her pick on her own." Karl suggested.

Dana smirked and looked across the table at where the bemused War Cleric was sitting. "Why don't we let Lotus advance first? Then they will be in such a panic that they won't even register the presence of a new High Priestess of the Red Dragon. You all saw them when Doug advanced, and that was amusing enough. I can only imagine what happens when Lotus becomes a High Priestess. They might just change the rules to not automatically give the title to Commanders." She joked.

Lotus sighed. "You know, I can see them doing that. Some big speech about how the world is progressing and the prevalence of powerful Elites is demeaning the title of High Priestess, so they'll move it up to Royal Rank until I advance again."

Tessa laughed. "I can see it now, half the High Priests would be considered no longer qualified under the new rules, and would have to be grandfathered in just to keep you from being considered a High Priestess.

Maybe we will have to tame you your own monster so you can just stay as a Feral Priestess forever."

Karl laughed. "You know, at one point Rae tried to claim Dana by pulling her into her space to bond her. Tessa might be on to something. If we find just the right partner, we might be able to get Lotus a permanent companion beast."

"Why did she try to claim Dana?" Lotus asked, pouting that it wasn't her.

"Because Hawk had grabbed Remi's egg, and she thought it wasn't fair that she didn't get to pick someone." Karl replied, attempting to hide his laughter at the memory.

"I remember that day, she vanished like four times, trying to take me with her." Dana laughed, while shaking her head in dismay.

Rae almost certainly wanted her more as a trophy or accessory than a partner.

"I wonder how long it will be before one of them makes it to Royal Rank?" Ophelia asked.

They already had skills that were advanced beyond that of a Commander, so it was just a matter of energy storage and body growth.

"It shouldn't be long. I think by the end of the year, we should have at least two Royal Rank beasts. Then the burden on me will be to increase their living spaces enough to advance the others." Karl sighed.

They had been ignoring the end of the Principal's motivational speech, and hadn't noticed when the teachers had stopped to listen to their conversation.

"So, you think that Commander Karl really can reach Royal Rank by the end of freshman year?" One of the combat instructors asked.

The ladies all nodded, while Karl shrugged. "Honestly, it's a bit of a toss up when they will advance. But now that Rae has found Royal Rank targets to optimize herself against, I think that it shouldn't be long."

Chapter 347 A Relaxed Afternoon

The thought of a Royal Rank Bloodbath Spider was honestly terrifying for most of the people in the camp, even most of the Nature Priests who still had a healthy respect for their own lives. There were just some things in life that you didn't want to mess with, and two hundred kilo spiders were among of those things.

The beasts were mostly happily resting in their spaces while everyone enjoyed their lunch, but Remi was still hanging out with Morgana, watching the world from the Witch Doctor's shoulder, with her tail wrapped around Morgana's neck for security.

She had been around the advisor long enough now that Remi had decided that it was safe to take food from her, and Morgana was patrolling around the camp, free to pass Remi morsels of anything that caught her interest.

"Remi seems to have found her calling. The venomous snake really completes the creepy witch doctor look." One of the other students chuckled as the pair passed by.

Morgana smiled at him. "You have a large cut on your hand there, would you like to have it healed? Remi is working on her direct injected [Healing Splash] skill." The boy frantically waved his bandaged hand. "No, that's fine, thank you. It will be fine in a day or two."

Remi tried her pleading look, but the warrior's mistrust ran too deep, and there was no way that he was letting the snake bite him as a training exercise for a supposed healing ability.

Besides, who had ever heard of a snake that healed with a bite?

Once the food was done, the bards began to play some lighter dance music, taking the weariness from the students who had just come from the line. "Care to dance?" Karl asked Dana with a wink.

"I'd rather sleep, but a dance still sounds good." She agreed, looking tired.

Karl hadn't really been watching the back of the battle, but the mages would have been busy trying to keep the barriers up against the constant barrage of rocks and spears the Hill Giants used in place of artillery.

The students were already filing out into the open area to dance as the bards played, and Lotus was dragging Ophelia by the hand while Tessa gave a glare at a hopeful young man that Karl suspected had him frozen in terror.

He would have to ask her to dance later to see if it was personal or if she just didn't dance.

Karl and Dana danced and spun through the first song, as the energy seemed to slowly return to her from the refreshing magic of the bard's songs. The same was true all over the improvised dance floor, and even a few of the teachers had come out to join them.

The afternoon classes were on hold, as everyone relaxed a little and forgot for a moment that they were still supposed to be in training and not fighting a border dispute with the Hill Giants.

Dana bowed out of the dancing after one song, but she traded spots with Ophelia, while an unwilling Tessa was dragged into the action by Lotus.

Nobody else knew the improvised dance steps that the Nature Priestess had made up during their time at the Seminary Academy, while neither Karl nor Ophelia actually knew how to dance.

That didn't really matter, as nobody else did either, and knowing what you were doing was never an essential part of having fun.

So, they danced until they were tired, and then the instructors began to slowly pick students from the crowd to drag back to their afternoon studies.

That greatly thinned the crowd and calmed down some of the party atmosphere, which was threatening to ruin the schedules of those who were off-duty for the afternoon. The teachers didn't mind them unwinding, but if they got so into partying that they forgot to go to sleep on time, they would be tired and sluggish for their next shift on the line. These were still students, and couldn't really be counted on to be responsible with their time management when unsupervised.

That was why the teachers were here with them, instead of just deploying all the Elites from the Academy wherever they were needed.

More soldiers were coming over from the artillery division further down the line, called to enjoy the celebration once they were off-duty, and the party was going to run late into the evening. The boar had yielded far more than any of the teachers of the cooking staff had anticipated, but they couldn't keep it hot for multiple days without ruining the quality.

It was a pleasant change for Karl, having such a high percentage of happy people around. The battle lines were always fairly grim, but the impromptu party had raised everyone's spirits in a way that he hadn't anticipated when he had first thought to try to get a fancy birthday barbecue.

"This turned out rather well, didn't it?" He asked Lotus, his dance partner at the time, when the first of the artillery soldiers finished eating and joined the dance floor.

"It really did. The Hill Giants are finally learning what it is like to lose battles, and the troops who have been here since the start of the war are happy to see it.

But you should grab a couple of plates to go and sneak back to the tree fort before Morgana changes her mind and decides that you should have lessons this afternoon after all." She informed him with a wink.

Karl headed off to the fort with the food, and found Dana waiting there for him with a nest made from extra blankets in the empty extra room.

"It took you long enough. Come lay down and have a rest." She greeted him, gesturing to the pile of blankets next to her.

That was where the others found them late that night. Curled up in the blanket pile in the spare room, Dana wrapped in Karl's arms, with a magic theory text on one side of them and empty plates on the other.

"Should we wake them up so they can sleep in a proper bed?" Tessa whispered as she saw the two curled up on the blankets.

Lotus shrugged. "Or we could make a puppy pile, and just all sleep in one spot."

Thor thought that was the winning idea, but Rae hadn't made the floor of the fort to support a full-grown Lightning Cerro, as his weight would break the trees that it was attached to.

"Let the lovebirds sleep. I'm sure they won't get up to too much trouble, they usually share a hammock anyhow." Ophelia reminded them, referring to the Frost Giant border where everyone shared for warmth.

Lotus nodded. "True, and I stocked his toiletries bag with safety precautions anyhow. Let's sleep, the Witch Doctor and Remi will be here first thing in the morning to wake Karl for classes."

Tessa shook her head at the little Nature Cleric. Of course, she would have done something like giving Karl condoms before they left the Cathedral.

Of course, Tessa didn't know that Lotus had stocked Karl's bag long before this mission, but that didn't change the fact that the War Cleric was fairly certain things between the Beast Master and the Mage were still on the wholesome level, even while sharing a bed.

Chapter 348 Reporting In

Karl woke up early the next morning, thanks to his early bedtime and yesterday's activities burning off some excess energy. Dana was a warm ball in his arms, and the blankets on the smooth, slightly stretchy flooring of the fort were warm and comfortable, so he simply lay there a while, enjoying the downtime before he would inevitably be forced to get up and face the day.

His shift on the line was in the afternoon today, so he had morning exercise and a class with Morgana, who he noted still had Remi with her.

Or, at the very least, the Spirit Snake had not returned to her space last night.

He could feel her approaching just as the sun came up, and then the Spirit Snake was back in her space and ready for a long nap.

She had explored many places in the camp that she had never been to before yesterday, and she had met all sorts of people, and tried over a dozen different snacks that Morgana had prepared for her.

It was a good day, but she was still exhausted as she came home at the crack of dawn.

Karl thought about asking her what she had been up to all night, but Remi was already asleep on her altar, curled up in a protective ball around her lucky statue, with her head on the voodoo doll that Morgana had gifted her.

Karl carefully got out of bed, flipping the extra blankets over Dana so she didn't get cold, and then equipped his armour as he sensed someone approaching the fort on the ground.

[It's just the Morgana.] Rae informed him.

[Thanks. I'll go see her.]

Karl climbed down the ladder to find Morgana waiting patiently on the ground. "Alright, let's get going. I'm glad that Remi understood my message." She began.

"Wait, Remi likely understood, but she forgot and went to sleep as soon as she was home in her space. I have no idea what you've got planned this morning." Karl informed his Advisor.

"The extra fun stuff that everyone avoids like the plague. The Command Group wants you, Tank and the other pair to fill out a report on the battle yesterday morning. It's standard procedure for larger attacks, and nobody else could form a fully coherent report on what happened except you four." She explained.

"And we're doing this at the break of dawn, why?" Karl asked.

"So that it is done and sent off before the Command Group starts to whine about being kept in the dark. They wanted it yesterday, but everyone was either drunk or missing, and you were having some quality time, so I didn't want to interrupt you." Morgana replied with a sly smile.

They walked toward the camp, passing by the empty training grounds and the mess hall, where breakfast was still being prepared. "The report shouldn't take long to fill out, and then you can get back to your usual morning activities. The Academy says that three days a week of classes a week are enough while we're on the line. They think that the extra classes will burn out the students when they're needed for combat, so the actual Academy training will have to wait." She sighed as they reached one of the lesson tents.

Karl chuckled. "That has to be hard on the teachers. Or are you going to split up the students between classes so you still have duties every day? I mean, you can fill space on the lines, since you're all Commanders, but it's probably better to keep you in reserve."

Morgana shook her head. "That's about what it's going to come to. They're worried that now that we've proven we can kill Royal Rank Hill Giants, they will start sending them all the time, and that will leave us short on Commanders to deal with the actual attack."

"So, we're too good at our jobs, and they're worried that being too good at our jobs will get us a promotion in target priority? I suppose that is valid. There must have been other Royal Rank kills along the line, though." Karl noted.

"Of course. But I seem to recall someone making a spectacle of themselves yesterday."

Karl shrugged. "As I said before, Rae is an artist."

"You understand that isn't going to fly in an official report, right? You can't just tell them that you let your pet monster go all Vlad the Impaler on the battlefield in the name of art."

Karl considered that for a moment. "No, actually, I think that I can, and I will. If I inform them that it was a psychological warfare tactic designed to intimidate the Hill Giants and reduce their combat effectiveness, they might even believe that it was a good idea.

I mean, it did work. We scored an overwhelming victory against the Hill Giant attack force, and when the forms are all filled out, that is the only part that is really going to matter to them."

Morgana sighed, then began to smile. "Fine, do it your way. I want to see what happens when they read that report."

So did Karl. In fact, he would pay good money to be in the room when that bunch of aging politicians read the report and found out that he was stringing up Hill Giants to terrorize their companions.

The Giants had been known to do the same thing, leaving human heads in trees, or severed limbs and other signs that trespassers were not welcome. It was generally accepted as a barbaric practice, but nobody would say that the Hill Giants might misunderstand the meaning.

They sat at an empty table, and Karl began to work on his report, while mostly ignoring the strange looks that he was getting from the other students in the room. They all looked like mages, but none of them were speaking as they worked, so Karl wrote his report in silence and didn't disturb them.

Morgana was right, it didn't take long, and when Karl was satisfied that it was an accurate reflection of what actually happened in the battle, he passed it to her to read.

"Alright, that is fine. That as well. You actually write incident reports quite well. Did you do a lot of these in the mines?" She asked.

"Yeah. I often got nominated to fill out everyone on the day shift's reports because I was good at using the words that the shift manager wanted to see, and I didn't know him, so I wasn't tempted to tell him off in the report." Karl agreed.

"So, your coworkers just turned in made up safety reports?" Morgana asked, appalled.

"Should we have just told them that the shaft went in the wrong direction, or a hammer was dropped and broke a worker's foot because half the shift was staggering drunk?"

That wouldn't end well. So, yeah, we made up something nice and came up with a solution that didn't actually involve changing anything.

I learned how from my dad." Karl replied.

From behind them, there was a deep chuckle, and Karl turned to see two elderly Generals standing at the door of the tent. "Now I'm even more interested to see what is in that report, Commanders. I am General Stonewall, and this is General Jackson, of the War Department's Central Operations Group." The older man introduced himself, before tucking his cover into a pocket.

"To what do we owe the honour, Generals?" Karl asked.

General Stonewall shook his hand with a firm grip and then nodded to Morgana. "We are actually on a regularly scheduled line inspection, we just have good timing, it seems, as your segment is all that anyone can talk about today."

Karl nodded. "Two Royal Rank kills in one battle with zero permanent casualties, from what I heard. The soldiers who faced the main assault have a good reason to be proud of themselves."

General Stonewall nodded in agreement, and looked at the report on the table. "And where were you during this incident?"

"I went with the strike team to deal with the Royal Rank threat. Myself, a berserker and two warriors, all at the Commander Rank. The line extended forward at our backs to form a solid breach and isolate the far flank of the Hill Giant assault. All quite textbook, if I do say so myself." Karl explained.

Morgana handed the report over to General Jackson, who thumbed through it, paused, and then started over, reading it in much more detail.

"It's a shame that we didn't have video footage of the whole incident. This one sounds like it was quite the event. Especially this bit about creating a display of corpses to taunt the Hill Giants, and the way that both teams managed to duel their opponents successfully. That is an uncommon skill among the active Elites. The Royal Rank is a significant advantage over a Commander." General Jackson noted as he read, his face never losing its stern expression.

Karl nodded. "Working in large groups does have its advantages, especially in stacked buff abilities."

Chapter 349 General Knowledge

The two Generals gave each other a silent look, and then sat down at the table with Karl and Morgana, making it clear that they were going to be here for a while.

"What about tactics? It has become painfully obvious to some of us that the way that the Elites fight the Giants, and the way that the Church's Armies fight the Giants, is not the same. Too many of us had

gotten comfortable in our thinking long before the mass injections, and now that there is a new way of fighting, we're not adapting fast enough." General Jackson announced as the cook brought them coffee.

Morgana turned to Karl, as he had the most high-level combat experience in the room at the moment.

Karl nodded. "Basically, you want three things. You want someone with the defensive skills and damage reduction abilities to keep the target occupied. Then you want someone who can slow them or weaken them, and finally, you want burst damage, a skill that can deal a massive amount of damage at once to swing the battle even if it doesn't outright kill the target.

If you try to grind them down, you're going to take casualties. So, you need the first two to be strong enough that the third one can set up for the kill.

In the last battle, we split into pairs, and I started out grabbing the target's attention, while the other Commander went for the Giant's more vulnerable back, hampering the Giant's movement.

Then we drew it back away from its reinforcements, and traded roles, so I could take out one of its knees while he had the Giant's attention.

Finally, I called in the Spider Shaped Golems to attack its back and face, so I could land the killing blow. The burst damage to end the fight quickly."

General Stonewall sighed. "It sounds so easy when you put it that way, but how do we even plan that? We have the skill sets of the various Elites, but being able to tell how they'll work together is too unpredictable.

For example, look at this one."

He put a folder on the table, and Karl looked it over. 26-year-old Commander Rank warrior, with the usual cleave, shield slam, guard and slash skills. He also knew Holy Blade, which gave Karl the idea that he might be part of the Church Guard.

"Looks like a bog-standard warrior, except for that last skill. I take it that he's a Commander of the Church Guard?" Karl asked.

General Stonewall shook his head. "He's the assistant Attorney General, and he's managed to find loopholes to avoid combat deployment since he left the Academy eight years ago. He's never swung a blade in anger in his life, and he's currently being detained as a deserter."

Karl frowned. "Well, I have to say, I didn't see that answer coming, and you've got a damned fine point. If all you have to go on is their rank and skills, it's nearly impossible to effectively plan a combat deployment.

For example, Morgana and I are both Commanders, but when we go into combat, we would want very different people with us, and a list of skills isn't going to tell us who that is. There's too much that goes into building a solid team to build it from a list of dossiers in an office somewhere in the Capital."

Both Generals nodded. "Team building works best on this sort of scale, where we have hundreds of Elites in one spot, and they can pick their teams on their own. But that's never going to fly for most assignments."

Karl frowned. "But why couldn't it? I mean, there are some like that lawyer, the ones who are just slackers or cowards, but letting the Elites submit team compositions that they've worked with in the past that they know work shouldn't be that much harder to work with. Then, if you do have to requisition their services, you can do it in a way that they agree should be feasible."

General Jackson sighed and tapped the assistant Attorney General's file. "He suggested that as well, but the team that he recommended always had him with four Royal Rank Elites to take on Ascended Rank challenges, with the excuse that he was too valuable to the nation to be lost in combat."

Karl and Morgana both laughed, before Karl answered the General. "Funny how money makes people think that they're more important to society, isn't it? If he got laid off from his job, he would just be some guy with a law degree, but the money he has saved would still make him believe that he was important."

Morgana smirked at him. "You know, you've likely got more money than he does. The rewards for higher ranked combat kills are quite significant, and the pay for government employees isn't all that great. It's the political power that they enjoy the most."

General Jackson laughed along with them. "He's actually quite wealthy, or at least his family is. His father owns and operates three coal mines in the south. It was his father's influence that got him the job, and it's his father's influence that kept him out of prison for dodging his duties."

There are a number like that who we would prefer to delete from the official rolls, demoting them from Elite status and simply marking them as dangers to society, but there are too many in the government who are afraid they would be on that list."

"So, you're on a tour of the front lines, looking for real answers that might help increase military efficiency?" Karl asked.

Both Generals nodded. "Yes, that is our job. In theory, it is the duty of every member of the Command Staff, but a lot of them seem to have forgotten that. The presence of the Elites has shaken everything up, and thousands of years of practice became largely irrelevant once fighters who could solo dangerous monsters like the Hill Giants became so common."

Karl chuckled. "For me, it has been most of my life, but you're both what fifty? It's quite recent for you."

General Stonewall smiled indulgently at him. "I am sixty-four years old. I was over fifty when the first class graduated, and I was in my mid-fifties when the injections became a nationwide practice. I doubt your generation quite understands how controversial that measure was."

"It was controversial to give everyone the chance to become Elites? Like some sort of class warfare thing?" Karl asked.

General Stonewall shook his head. "One in a hundred dies from the injection. Now, most of them can be revived by the clerics, but a good portion of their souls detach from the body, and resurrection doesn't work on them. Do you know how many parents we have to send letters to every year, telling them that their child was the unlucky one who passed during the attempt to become an Elite?"

Quick math said... a lot. He just hadn't noticed because the school in his hometown only had a few dozen students per year, and they hadn't personally lost anyone.

"I guess you have a point. Plenty of Elites meet a tragic end, but they at least got a chance." Karl agreed reluctantly.

"Are you one of those that believes it's the divine will of the World Dragon that not everyone survives the injections?" The aging General asked.

Morgana looked a bit nervous, but Karl just chuckled. "I'm not the sort to get all philosophical, General. I will leave matters of theology and divine favour for the Clergy to interpret. For all I know, it could just be a manufacturing error on our side. There are people who die to a peanut butter sandwich, so whatever we made the injection out of might well be toxic to some of the recipients." He explained.

The General was a bit startled at that, and was about to retort before he thought about it. "You know, you might be right. I remember many years ago, there was a child in my class who got incredibly sick after taking a healing potion. The potion was fine, but his body reacted to it like poison." Morgana sighed. "Do none of you know what an allergic reaction is?"

"Like with cats or pollen? I don't think that applies to medicine." General Stonewall replied.

"You can be allergic to nearly anything. Even medicine. Trust me, I'm a Witch Doctor." She added.

"Well, I won't argue with an expert." The General shrugged, while Karl did his best not to laugh.

As she had said the day they met: She was a Witch Doctor, not a Witch and a Doctor.

"Now, while we have you both here, and with two such unusual classes, we have a few more questions we hope to get answers to during our routine inspection." General Jackson informed them with a smile that said he realized the knowledge gap was because she was more educated than any of the others, not her Class Marking.

Chapter 350 Twenty Questions

The Generals had made an actual list, a few dozen questions that they wanted answers to, as well as a sheet of inventory that they had already checked for before they entered the mess hall.

Karl could see that they had already checked the munitions reserves, the supply tents, spare weapons and sleeping gear, as well as dozens of other items, right down to the maintenance of the walkways between the dorm tents.

Karl hadn't realized that there were even regulations on most of these things, but from what he could see in their documents, there wasn't anything in the camp that the army didn't have a regulation or checklist for.

"First, are either of you in the nonstandard sleeping areas outside of the main camp?" General Stonewall asked.

"I am." Karl confirmed.

"Have you had any flooding or excessive mud issues with your sleeping area?" The General asked.

"Oh, that area. No, I'm in an elevated sleeping situation in the stand of trees just beyond those. If you look out the door and pay close attention, you can see the walls of my sleeping unit about five metres off the ground." Karl explained.

"You sleep in the trees? Is that an innate fondness of your class? I have heard that many Elites have particular tendencies due to their advancements."

Karl shook his head. "Yes, it's because of my class, but not a mental quirk. One of my bonded beasts is a Bloodbath Spider, and she excels in creating large-scale webs, including silk sheets that can be used to create sleeping quarters.

That is where my group is staying now. It is better to be together when an alarm is sounded at night, so we don't have to look for stragglers.

The webs are Commander Rank monster silk, and they serve as a primary defensive device as well, so there is no loss of safety in our arrangement."

"I take it that this has been approved by prior Regional Supervisors?" The General asked.

"Regional Supervisors, Battalion Commanders, and even High Clergy." Karl agreed.

"That's good enough for me. Now, as a Commander Rank Elite, what are both of your opinions on the effectiveness of the continued artillery presence on the border?"

Karl shrugged. "It's loud, but it helps keep the Hill Giants far enough off that we have time to form up when an attack starts. Without that constant harassment, they would definitely form up closer to our lines."

Morgana nodded. "Here, their primary purpose is deterrent, as the direct blasts are less likely to cause significant casualties against these targets than they are against Awakened Rank or Common monsters. I know that isn't the answer that most of the military wants to hear, but with regular munitions, you can't really expect them to do much to a Commander Rank Giant."

"So, your consensus is that it would be better to keep them active on the line than to remove them and redeploy them against softer targets?" General Stonewall asked.

They both shrugged. "Where they're needed most is above our pay grade. But we can say with some certainty that they're not useless here."

General Stonewall chuckled. "Excellent answer. Alright, next is about supplies. Are there any particular shortages that you have noticed?"

Morgana looked at the buffet that the cooks were setting up. "Well, I wouldn't call it a shortage, but if it's possible to get at least some raw ingredients here to make fresh food, it would be appreciated by the troops. Too much canned, shelf stable everything is hard on morale. Even the bread is canned, and that can be made from shelf - stable ingredients here in the camp.

We had a barbecue the other day, and you would think that the soldiers had never seen food before." She informed the Generals.

The General laughed. "That's the story of soldiers everywhere. The food always sucks, and the opportunity for fresh meat and vegetables is far too rare. But how did you manage a barbecue?"

Karl raised his hand. "That would be me. One of the secondary abilities of my class is to store food for my beasts in a separate space. Sometimes there is a bit of extra that is suitable for human consumption, so I will pull it out and share it with the others. This time it was one of the giant pigs that I grabbed for Hawk from the Frost Giant nation."

The General looked confused for a second. "Just how big is this pet in question?"

"The pig was claimed by the Dragon Hawk, so about ten kilos, give or take? I've never actually weighed him. But about normal-sized for a Dragon Hawk, large for a normal bird." Karl replied with a shrug.

"And he claimed an entire giant pig? An Awakened beast that weighs over two tonnes?" The General asked.

"More than one actually, but that's a whole other story. He's very protective of things that he believes are his food."

Morgana laughed, and the Generals smiled. "You make it sound as if they're your children."

"They are in a way. We share a mental link, so I know everything that they're thinking, and they seem to be smarter than other magical beasts of their type. They don't have any problems understanding humans, and they can form more creative answers than half of the people I meet, though the answers can be a bit predictable." Karl explained.

"Predictable?" Karl nodded. "Hawk will be hungry, and he hates all things cold or water magic. Rae has a very tortured artist dark vibe going on, and Thor just wants to meet new people, while Remi is somewhat selective, with a bias towards people who are more attuned to the Elements."

The Generals both looked down at their notes. "I don't have anything about this Remi before you arrived here. Are they very newly bonded?" Karl shook his head. "No, she's just a bit shy, and she's a Spirit Snake, a cold-blooded monster, so she's not a big fan of anything cold. Now that we're on the Hill Giant border, she has been coming out more."

General Jackson flipped the pages of their investigative report. "Wonderful, we can start there. Do you believe the weather here is causing major issues with the war effort?"

Karl chuckled. "You really do have a question for everything, don't you? No, the weather here has been cooperative since I arrived. This portion of the battle is not suffering from the weather, and certainly not in the way that the Frost Giant border is."

General Stonewall nodded. "The Mountain Giant border has been receiving torrential rainfall lately for no apparent reason. We suspect that it is magical, but it is causing major issues with the efforts to move through the mountains to find their hiding spots."

"The Mountain Giants are in hiding?" Morgana asked.

"We could only wish. No, we've been having issues trying to track them as they retreat between engagements. Without that information, it is exceptionally difficult to guess what part of that treacherous terrain will be the target of the next major offensive."

But we should focus on this portion of the Hill Giant border first. We are hoping to make changes in the ways that the Elites are deployed, but we don't fully understand their battle tactics yet. I believe that there was some footage taken lately, but most of it was taken by the infantry, and the scenes of the Elites in combat are somewhat distant.

So, we are forced to ask directly instead of reviewing solid data."

Morgana laughed, while Karl sipped coffee to hide his smile.

"What's so amusing about that?" The General asked.

Morgana sighed. "Have you ever seen a unit of Elites fighting up close? Not all skills originate at a caster, and many of the movements require enhanced eyesight to properly track. The combat techniques are completely individualized, even if they're the same on paper. In short, I'm not sure that watching will do you much good." "And we're right back at where we started, with the fact that Elites on paper and Elites in the field have nothing in common, as with the assistant Attorney General." General Stonewall grumbled.

"But we can still tell you all about the camp." Karl offered helpfully.

"Alright, let's start with that. I see that the artillery battalion is all off to one side of the line, why is that? In the technical manual, it prescribes that they should be spread down the entire line to increase the effective carpeted area of the bombardment."

Karl had no idea who had chosen that deployment or why, but fortunately for him, they weren't alone in the room.

One of the warrior class professors sat down with them. "Generals, I am Commander Smith, I teach blunt weapons for the Warrior Class Elites, but I am the one who ordered that deployment for the artillery. You see, we defend them with skills, but if we spread them out, we can't have one Elite cover more than one piece of equipment. It is more resource effective to have a small number of powerful Elites defend the artillery than to spread them out and constantly defend fifty different points along the line."

"So, it is a manpower issue. Would sending more Elites help?" General Jackson asked.

Smith shook his head. "No, you're missing the point. The reduced bombardment range is inconsequential to their actual function.

They can still provide suppressive fire when clustered. The primary original reason for spreading them was to reduce losses to enemy artillery. But we have Elites for that now, and they can erect magical barriers to stop incoming artillery, so we don't need to spread them anymore.

In fact, if we were to spread them, we would have to stop defending them for practical reasons, and they would become sacrificial targets in nearly every battle."

"Ah, I see now. So the tactics have already been updated, and Command simply didn't understand the reason. Please continue."