

Beast Master 361

Chapter 361 Break The Stalemate

After half an hour of the stalemate, with the mages and Hill Giants exchanging ranged attacks, it was becoming clear that this battle was not going to end any time soon, and all that the Hill Giants needed was one section with mages who were less capable at ranged attacks to make a breach.

"Professor, should we go cause a bit of chaos on the flank? It will get them moving before our mages get exhausted." Karl suggested.

"I seem to recall that you have done that here once before. How did that work out for you?" The Professor asked.

"Well enough. The target ran away before we made it to him, but we managed to clear out the majority of the Commander Rank threats on this flank, and it effectively ended the battle for the day." Karl replied with a shrug.

"I will run it by the battle leaders and see what they think. If your team really can break the stalemate, or even get them motivated to move, it should be worth it." The warrior class professor agreed.

It only took a few seconds before the answer came back to them. [Ten person volunteer strike forces are approved to charge the lines in ten minutes. Last rites should be prepared before departure.]

Karl looked at the teacher in shock. "It sounds like they're not as optimistic about this mission as I am."

Karl paused a second before raising his voice. "But with that in mind, I will need nine volunteers to go with me. Teams don't matter, but Command says the odds are you're not coming back."

It only took a second before Karl's whole team was standing beside him, followed by Morgana, Colonel Wilkes and Tank.

But then the influx stopped.

Everyone heard the radio message. This was likely to be the end of the line for the volunteers who went to break the balance and stop the Hill Giants from exhausting their mages before launching an assault.

Karl was about to say something when two more men came jogging into the camp.

"Good, we made it on time. We didn't think that Karl would wait the whole ten minutes before leaving with a team." Doug Mackenzie's smile was contagious, though Bob's look was grim as he ran beside his brother.

"Well, that makes ten. Time to go, ladies and gentlemen. Let's show the Hill Giants how it's done." Karl announced.

The slower moving team members loaded themselves on Thor, Rae and the Spider Golems, while the others moved to the front of the line.

The section commander called after them. "But it hasn't been ten minutes!"

Doug gave him a thumbs up. "Clearly. Tell the others to wait an extra two, just to throw off the Hill Giants. Nobody expects a twelve-minute timer." The teacher didn't know what to say as the group charged at the Hill Giants, he just motioned for the mages to keep a barrier over them for as long as they could, to save the group a bit of energy on the way in.

"Are we really going to lose a high Cleric and so many Commanders just like that?" One of the students asked.

Though the others weren't as well known, Tank was a beloved figure at the school, despite his insistence that he was only a part-time teacher. Mick gave his classmates a sad smile. "Don't underestimate them. They're all batshit crazy, but every person in that group is a monster in combat. Just watch what happens when they get close, it's going to be an enlightening experience for us all."

The other students looked at him like he was crazy. The last thing they wanted was to watch what happened when that group reached the Hill Giants' defensive fortification.

As they ran, Karl moved to the front and took out his Maul. Thor would be right behind him, so as long as the Maul shattered the stone, they were good to go. When he was two steps from the wall, the Spider Golems vanished, leaving their riders in the dirt, while Lotus and Dana hopped down from Thor's back.

Karl's hammer smashed into the wall, and the stone exploded as the effects of [Shatter] sent a shockwave through the construct, breaking a five-metre section of the barrier into small pieces. Then the resummoned Spider Golems were flying over his head at the Hill Giants, while Karl aimed at the knees, intending to cripple the nearest targets to establish a beachhead.

But the majority of the Giants in the area were Ascended, and the Golems were tearing them apart even before Thor and Tessa made it through the wall with a shockwave of [Earthquake] that split around Karl and knocked a dozen Giants from their feet.

Ophelia and Bob went right, with Morgana and Remi behind them. A massive [Thunderstorm] was forming over the area, punctuated by streaks of lightning and fireballs as Hawk attacked, surrounded in his often neglected [Wind Barrier] to keep his feathers dry.

Remi was placing totems on the wall to attack the Giants from above, and spitting [Chain Lightning] into the crowd as she slithered along beside the Witch Doctor, who was surrounded in a dark cloud of magic that sent beams into the Hill Giants which seemed to corrupt and rot their flesh.

Dana advanced away from the wall with Thor, flanked by her Golems and aiming for the faces with her [Magic Missiles] to distract them, while the War Cleric and the Lightning Cerro stabbed and crushed.

A stacked [Flaming Body] attack sent a Commander Rank Hill Giant flying as Karl moved to the left, blocking the reinforcements while his team dealt with the right side of the line.

He switched to his bow as he advanced, shooting point-blank into the Hill Giants and impaling them with flame coated arrows that made their bodies ripple as if they had been hit with the Maul and not a small arrowhead.

[Shatter] didn't care how large the physical impact was, only that it happened, and the effect on Ascended Rank Giants was devastating.

Karl heard the whistle behind him that said they had cleared the last few Giants at this end of the line, and he began to push faster, using the erratic movements of Rae and the Spider Golems to his advantage, taking out Giants who turned away from him to defend themselves.

The Fire Elementals raced past him, engulfing their targets and burning them to ash in seconds, even with the Earth Shields that the Hill Giants tried to establish.

They were a surprisingly brutal attack force, and nearly impossible to defend against, as they had no real physical form.

Ophelia and Tank were raging alongside Thor, who didn't seem to attract their ire the way that human teammates often did in battle, but Bob had come over to join Karl as they began the sweep. Dana retreated from the insanity that was two Berserkers and a rampaging Thor, bringing her Golems to flank Bob and protect the clerics from attacks.

But Lotus and Doug weren't slacking either. Spiked vines shot up from the ground, tripping and entangling the Giants, as Karl shot them full of arrows and Bob hacked them apart.

The strike force was moving at a walking pace through the Hill Giants for now, but more of the defenders were turning their way, realizing that the first group hadn't stopped the attack.

That was the primary goal of the Academy's attack, to cause the Hill Giants to stop their attack and change tactics.

But so far, the team was only attracting attention from those near them behind the wall, and none of the Giants was charging at the rest of the defenders where the students could more easily hack them apart.

There were thirty kilometres of line in total under the purview of the Academy if you included the artillery section. There was no way that Karl's team alone could shake up that much distance, but in a few more minutes, the other teams would charge as well, and that might be enough to get the Giants moving.

But in the immediate area, they had more than done their job. There was a huge breach in the wall, the end of the Hill Giant defence was obliterated, and the Elites were rapidly making their way across the line.

At this rate, they might actually make it to the next team's location before they even attacked. But Karl knew that was wishful thinking, there was no way that this force would be made up so heavily of Ascended Rank Giants.

Not when they routinely reached Commander by the time they were in their prime.

Chapter 362 Crush Them

As Karl's team advanced, the Hill Giants retreated, creating a proper defensive formation behind their barrier wall. It wasn't going to matter for long, as the Spider Golems were headed for the side of the group furthest from the wall, with Thor between them and the Warriors. The chances that something was going to get past that moving steamroller were slim to none, especially with [Earthquake] and [Thorned Vines] pulling giants to the ground every second. The vines were spreading faster than Karl was walking, making it nearly impossible for the Hill Giants to move freely, and leaving them vulnerable to the attacks of the Golems and Karl's arrows.

The radio on Morgana's coat was silent as they fought, with the leadership not wanting to miss a call for support due to unnecessary chatter.

The Witch Doctor was really coming into her element as she advanced, and after she had Remi fill a bottle with venom, her curse turned from simply being necrotic to being venomous, leaving the affected Giants in convulsions or screaming in agony.

Karl reminded himself not to get into any serious fights with that woman. Her magic was insidious, and if it made it past your barriers, even carried on the air, you were done for.

Over and over, the Hill Giants brought up stone barriers to slow the humans, but they were just as quickly shattered to gravel by the Golems, while Dana and Colonel Wilkes worked together to keep an umbrella barrier up over the group to deflect thrown stones.

Even if the [Refreshing Lightning] barrier held, it would be a mess if someone was knocked to the ground and off their rhythm.

A horn sounded in the distance, and Karl sensed the shift in the Giants as they began to attack the advancing teams instead of focusing on moving toward his group. Doug's voice echoed through the group, amplified by his magic. {Push faster. Double time, and we will break the defence in front of the next group.} He announced. His attunement to nature made it easier for him to tell where living things were, and nobody questioned his judgment as they focused on making progress and not just steadily pressuring the Hill Giants.

{Attack the wall on your left. Shatter it with the Maul.} Doug called half a minute later.

Karl followed the instruction, and found that there was a group twenty metres away, running toward him. "Good to see you all. Take your positions." Karl called to the closest warrior.

This team had no mages in it, only one druid that was in Owlbear form to run faster.

Karl suspected that would be the case for many groups. The mages couldn't keep up with the pace, so they wouldn't have volunteered to come along and drag the group down.

The Owlbear surged in size as he approached Karl, and [Brutality] was extended to encompass his group.

Unfortunately, none of them were animal type berserkers, so it was only the druid that was enhanced, but nine more warriors, all close combat sorts with heavy armour and shields, made the progress even faster.

"The groups are staggered. If we can make the next spot in two minutes, we will be able to pick them up as well." One of the warriors shouted as he moved past the Golems to join the fight.

"Got it. We will keep up the pace as much as we can." Bob called back, as Karl was focused on his archery.

They were just passing the new gap in the wall when Karl heard more shouting from the human side of the lines, and Hawk relayed him an update.

[It looks like there are Spellblades here. These ones are wearing Red. I wonder if that means they're all Tessa?] He asked.

[I think it's just like the colours of our uniforms, not like the clerics.] Karl replied as he kept up his attack speed. More mages would be a wonderful addition to their group, but he had no idea when the Academy force had gotten Spellblades as reinforcements.

Karl's team wasn't that far along the line now, barely up to even with the main camp, so they weren't coming from some remote location.

The mages moved swiftly with their magic, and fell in behind the group, reinforcing the weakening barriers over the team before sending a few of their members forward to use ranged sword attacks from the second line, where Karl was firing his arrows.

No words were spoken, just an increase in the volume of attacks and the pace of the fight, with each Hill Giant only lasting for a few strikes before the massed attacks cut them down.

With thirty of them in the team, they were no longer struggling, even when the Hill Giants started to try to encircle the group. The Spellblades moved to intercept them, creating a defensive semicircle, with the wall on one side, while the vines surrounded the group and progress momentarily ground to a halt. The Giants were falling in record numbers, but they still hadn't found the leadership group, so Karl began to check faces as he fought.

Hopefully, these weren't groups of clones, sent to cause chaos before they died.

Karl could sense the worry from their lines as the group halted, and then the relief as they began to push forward again.

The vampiric blade waiting in the mental space where bonded gear went while not in use was thrumming with energy, so Karl took it out and slung it across his back with a loop of leather on his armour.

It wasn't properly secure, and it would swing about as he ran, but the energy began to flow from the blade to him, flooding his space with power as the blade shone with power.

Finally, he couldn't ignore the pull anymore, and Karl put away the bow, taking the blade in his hands to charge into the Hill Giants.

The blade looked like it was better quality than Karl remembered, and the flood of power that it was absorbing was causing Karl's body to sing with refreshing power.

Water vortexes swirled through the Giants as Lotus activated the enchantment on her staff, and Karl laughed as water ran down his face from Remi's [Thunderstorm]. The whole area was turning into a swamp, complete with Thorned Vines, and the Giants were starting to sink in the mud as the earth softened.

It had been churned by weeks of battle and artillery fire. There was no unturned dirt here, and the constant downpour was turning it all to a thick and sticky soup. Even the humans were having a hard time moving through it, while the Giants were barely mobile as they sunk to their shins.

Then, it was suddenly easy to walk again as one of the Spellblades cast a movement spell on the team, allowing them to step lightly on the soft ground.

More shouting was coming from the line, and it sounded like it was a little behind them.

[Hawk, where is the next team coming from?] Karl asked.

[Behind us a little. But they have a huge guy with a smashing tool as well.] That was good enough for Karl. There were no Giants behind them, so the team could make a breach and storm in to join the group at their own pace.

The wall shook and rumbled as the warriors hammered it repeatedly, then it slowly crumbled, letting them through, but already thirty metres behind the advancing force, and late enough that the mages running behind them had caught up.

Karl knew they were frustrated, and he decided to hammer a hole for the next group, no matter how much Hawk thought that they should be able to deal with it themselves.

Five layers of Royal Rank Flaming Body was far more damage than most Ascended or Commander Rank warriors could do, even without the buffs or [Shatter].

The next few kilometres of the Hill Giant lines were already in motion now, rearranging themselves and creating rows of defensive fortifications behind the main barrier wall between them and the human lines. It would slow the advance of Karl's team, but if they weren't going to send large numbers of reinforcements to the front, that was all it would do. Slow them and not stop them.

The primary objective of the assault, to stop the Hill Giants from throwing boulders from their protected position, had been largely achieved. Now, they just needed to keep them from going back to it the moment that the human team retreated.

A few minutes worth of delay wasn't going to change the pressure of the advance, and the rest of the suicidal charge plan had been altered to join the main force already pushing through the Hill Giant lines.

With the holes in the wall, they could retreat and return to the main force any time that they wanted, leaving a large portion of the Hill Giant defences empty, or allowing a change of shifts, with new fighters coming in to replace them.

Chapter 363 Momentum

The charge into the Hill Giant lines had gathered enough momentum now that they were easily clearing the defenders, but the more that they eliminated, the more uneasy the attackers felt.

They had to be missing something. The Hill Giants weren't this stupid, they should have retreated when they realized that their tactic wasn't working.

But it was only when a stone barrier in front of them collapsed that Karl and the others on the attacking team realized that the Hill Giants had brought a secret weapon.

Traitors.

Ten human men, all at the low side of Royal Rank, and looking unstable, with insane eyes glaring back at the Elites above the distinctive tabards that Karl recognized as the uniforms of church guards, minus the white robes, which had been replaced by black ones.

They must have been given a resource to boost their power, perhaps temporarily.

Their leader pointed a blade at Karl. "The Titan Gods demand his head. Bring it to me."

Karl spun his blade to a defensive position, ready for the incoming attack, but from behind him, the Spellblades were even faster.

The ten of them soared over his head, aiming for the traitors, and the fight was on.

The Spellblades were unflinching in their attack, but they were outmatched, and as Karl sent the first [Chain Lightning] into the attackers, the Titan God followers quickly split apart, so each of them could hold off two of the Commander Rank Spellblades, leaving five to deal with Karl while the rest of the Elite group fought the Hill Giants.

But Karl wasn't alone either, and Rae sent her Spider Golems to his sides while the traitors carefully advanced, making preparations to deal with the added threat.

"Too weak." Karl laughed as the closest of the warriors' blade shattered as it failed its attempt to absorb [Chain Lightning.]

He dropped the shattered blade and pulled another from reserve, while two more moved to engage Karl and two moved to block the Spider Golems.

Four quick strikes from the traitors shattered [Refreshing Lightning] but not [Flaming Body] and the attackers' smiles turned to glee while they parried Karl's furious counterattack.

The man in the back took a moment to gloat before rejoining the fight. "Any last words?" He sneered, wiping his soaked hair from his face as the [Thunderstorm] continued to rage overhead.

[Blood for the Spider God.] A streak of distorted air flashed by Karl as Rae moved to attack. Blood flew as her foreleg pierced the chest of her target, and the gloating man's eyes turned wide in shock as the blood spray made the outline of Rae visible again.

Skill Upgraded: [Perfect Adaptation] grants the user the ability to mimic their surroundings so perfectly that they become invisible to those with lesser senses. Royal Rank progression of [Camouflage]. Rae had evolved another skill to Royal Rank, but it couldn't deal with the blood spray on her, so she darted back into the swarm of Hill Giants while the man gasped and tried to staunch the blood flow, unaware that he had been hit with [Lacerate] or that the wound extended out his back.

The two traitors fighting Karl renewed their attacks, hacking away at his defences faster than Karl could parry their blows and leaving him no chance to make an attack of his own.

For a most of a minute, it seemed that there was nothing that Karl could do to gain the upper hand without having the Spider Golems cover for him, but they weren't finished with their own targets yet.

The melee was turning into a drawn out and losing battle as his barriers were repeatedly diminished, then refreshed, even with the effects of [Circle of Protection] active. Individually, the traitors weren't much stronger than Karl was, but they had years of experience fighting together, and when Karl moved to defend against one, the other always seemed to get a hit in.

Karl was forced back on the defensive, and [Refreshing Lightning] was taken down by a glancing blow to his face just after he got it reactivated for the fifth time.

But the two traitors fighting the Spider Golems weren't faring as well. They were no faster than the spiders, and they didn't have eight sharp limbs, four of which the spiders typically used to attack their targets while balancing on their hind half.

Then Rae flashed across the battlefield again, and another traitor fell with a pair of forelimbs through his back, before being hurled across the battlefield.

The Spellblades weren't as outright powerful as their targets, but they were all exceptional fighters in their own right, and considered a battle against an average target above their own rank to be the minimum standard for their members.

At the moment, they weren't winning, but as Rae aimed at another target with his back to her, it was clear to Karl that wouldn't be the case for long. This was Rae's perfect battlefield, and assassination was in her very nature.

Karl rolled backward to avoid the next attack, as his defences were failing and Refreshing Lightning wasn't back up yet. The blades whistled through the air where he had been standing, then two huge feet stomped down between Karl and the traitors as Thor intervened with an [Earthquake] that threw the attackers to the ground, while Tessa sent out a wave of Golden Light that empowered everyone on their side.

Then the Cerro retreated to charge the Hill Giants who were trying to take advantage of the situation to get at the mages while Thor was out of position, and Karl hurled a [Chain Lightning] through the rain as he got back to his feet.

One traitor backed away, using [Guard] to absorb the blow, while the other moved to attack, raising his blade over his head.

Then tragedy befell the aggressive traitor, and he lost his footing in the mud, sliding past Karl toward the mages as his strike was parried.

Remi didn't hesitate, and her fangs sunk deep into the man's throat before she retreated to safety behind Ophelia, who simply kicked the man back away from the group, sending him flying out into the melee.

The remaining traitors began to glow with a purple light, doubling in height as they fought, but becoming thinner by the second, wasting away as they burned their life force to achieve their goals.

Four of the Spellblades fell in the first seconds after the change, while the others regrouped into a defensive circle to reinforce each other's magic and wait out the remaining life of the traitors.

Traitors who were never truly interested in them.

As one, they all turned to Karl, who braced for the worst, before a strike to the back sent him flying. Not just tumbling across the ground, flying through the air and over the Hill Giant defenders, out of combat.

The berserk traitors turned to chase after him, and Karl felt Thor's immense pleasure that his catapult trick worked.

It might not have been the answer Karl was looking for, but the distraction cost the traitors three more of their members as Rae and her Spider Golems took advantage, leaving the last few traitors outnumbered and outmatched.

Strategically, it was brilliant, and the last of the Titan God followers died with a bellow of rage. However, that left Karl on the wrong side of the battle, fifty metres from his team, with an army of Hill Giants between him and the others.

He was getting that odd feeling that someone was laughing at him again, back in the back of his mind, but he couldn't quite put his finger on where it was coming from. Not from one of his beasts, that was for certain. They were laughing at his situation, but it wasn't the same feeling. Their laughter was more due to a sense of amusement that he made such a good projectile.

Karl looked at his options, deciding what the best way to get back to the group would be.

They had lost a total of six Commanders during the last fight. Four to the Royal Rank traitors, and two to the Hill Giants, but Karl couldn't tell which two from Hawk's updated headcount.

But there were more mages and healers incoming from the main line, now that the progression had stalled, and hopefully, they would get someone who could resurrect. The teachers had to have sent messages back by now, letting the others know the situation.

Karl was about to move back into combat when he looked down at his gear, and noticed that his armour was absolutely shredded, cut in over a dozen different spots and soaked with his own blood from shallow wounds that had already healed under the effects of [Refreshing Lightning] as well as Lotus and Doug's area healing abilities.

If he was lucky, those with magical repair abilities might salvage that mess, but he might have to replace his gear after today.

Chapter 364 Battered But Not Beaten

The demise of the traitors marked the end of the Hill Giant force's plans, and they began to back away from the attacking force, disengaging from combat before those further down the line began to retreat out of artillery range.

That was good enough to call it a win for Karl, so he just waited for the Hill Giants to run away as he did his best to absorb the massive influx of life force that his blade was giving him. It merged smoothly with the power cores in the spaces, and they were quickly coming to a peak again, but there was more power coming in, so he was going to have to spread it through the spaces soon, and start reforming the cores once more to continue the process. They had to be getting close to peak Commander now, with Rae advancing her species traits to Royal Rank, but Karl couldn't feel the bottleneck that he knew was coming when he reached the peak and had to learn how to adjust his power to Royal Rank.

Once the Hill Giants were a safe distance away, Karl made his way back to the group and took out his Maul to open a new hole in the wall. They would have to do something about that eventually, as the next group of Hill Giants to arrive would also take shelter behind it.

That wasn't Karl's problem, the Academy had Earth Mages as well, and they could disassemble the wall with ease once nothing was protecting it and the magic barriers had faded.

With the battle over, Tessa and Thor began the work of looting the good bits, as did many of the others who were in suitable shape for some scavenging. Loot was loot, and the group was loading Thor's bags with anything magical.

By the time that Karl made it to the line, most of the fallen had been brought back to life, and only one body bag was being carried away on a stretcher. It wasn't one of the team members that Karl knew, which was a small blessing, but a lot of the attack team were looking even worse than he was.

They slowly made their way back to the line, moving at the speed of an exhausted mage. It was the only pace where nobody was left behind, as many of them were supporting each other while the healing spells worked their magic.

Healing magic closed wounds quickly, healed muscles and bones more slowly, but the aches and pains usually lingered.

If they really wanted, the clerics could heal a body full of broken bones in a second, but the mana requirement was extreme, and as Karl understood it, the healed body often suffered from lingering trauma and phantom pains that were more severe than if it were healed more slowly.

So, it was sometimes necessary to save a life, but they did their best to avoid it.

As they approached the Academy defensive line, all of the students and the reserve soldiers who had been called up stood to salute the returning Elites.

Nobody had expected that fight to go even remotely well, but still, they had volunteered.

The Headmaster himself came up to welcome them back and check everyone for damage, to assure himself that they were fit to continue their duties.

"Welcome back, everyone. You have the rest of the day off, so go get something to eat and some rest to let those freshly healed wounds settle." He greeted them.

"Thank you, Headmaster. We could use both. Plus an armourer with magical repair skills. I'm told that my gear can be fixed, even in this bad of shape." Karl replied.

"Well, that bad of shape might be more than most can hope to fix, but we will get someone on it right away. All of you are in need of repairs, and bondable equipment is in short supply these days."

As they were talking, Generals Stonewall and Jackson came jogging over, looking positively overjoyed at the outcome.

"Commanders, Ascended Elites, wonderful work out there. You have defied every expectation that we had for your abilities." General Jackson announced the moment he arrived.

"General Jackson, it's good to see you again. The Elites really did work wonders today, especially the healers. But we should get some food in us before we start answering your questions. I know that you must have a lot of them for us." Karl offered.

The Generals paused as they took in the battered state of the Elites and nodded silently.

"Please, forgive our enthusiasm. We are having a proper meal prepared now that the trailers have arrived, and the butchering is well underway."

Karl nodded. "I had my beasts gather a huge amount of meat for the stockpile as well, multiple trailers worth, and all from the beasts that are considered fairly tasty." He didn't stop walking, and just continued on to the mess hall, where they had a number of large pressure cookers making stew for dinner, and a new addition to the mess hall, dozens of baking sheets in the newly created smokers cooking what appeared to be fresh dinner rolls, so they didn't have to eat the strange canned bread or hardtack.

The armourers were waiting there for the strike team as well. They were not usually considered combatants, and were mostly Awakened Rank soldiers who had gained crafting based classes, with a few clerics who had repair skills mixed in. "If everyone can change out of their armour and pass it over, we will have one of the armourers look it over. We will salvage as much as we can, but we will pass it all back to you when we're finished, even if we can't repair it back to perfect before tomorrow.

We have plenty of supplies, but it looks like a lot of your gear is completely demolished." One of the men with a Staff Sergeant's chevrons on his arm announced.

It didn't take long for them to change, and the supply staff had sent as many armourers as there were team members. It might be the majority of their team, given how much gear was destroyed compared to an average day, but it shouldn't be all of them.

As much as they needed the gear fixed, they didn't want to leave the others without a single repairman.

Lotus and Tessa stepped forward, and Tessa addressed the armourers. "We will take care of our team's gear if you provide the materials. We have the skill to fix everything that they have been using." "Of course, just let us know what you need. The whole armoury is available to our Commander Rank members and High Priestesses." The Sergeant informed them.

Tessa gave Karl a wink that said she would be taking advantage of that to fix absolutely everything to the best standard that she could, and Karl was eager to see it in action.

It was a blessing of the War Goddess, but she hadn't needed to use it since they met, as their armour had only gotten a little battered in that time, and it was mostly the cloth or leather items that needed mending.

Those were Lotus' specialty as a Nature Priestess, though Karl suspected that Doug could do it better now that he had advanced.

The staff brought out bowls of stew for the early dinner, along with a load of the fresh buns, which were much denser than they looked, more like a scone or breakfast biscuit.

It made sense, they were line cooks, not a bakery, and they needed to make thousands of them per meal, so there was no time to let a nice fluffy bun rise.

But the stew was just fresh meat, plus potatoes, onions and carrots. All of which tasted right when they were prepared for storage. It was simple, but nutritious and filling, and everyone prepared to head back to their bunks well-fed and ready for sleep.

Of course, that wouldn't be happening quite so soon for any of Karl's team. Morgana was still limping from a leg injury, Lotus and Tessa were going to repair the gear, while Ophelia was too wound up from her Berserker Rage and Dana needed to meditate.

One of the Mage Class teachers spoke up as the Elites began to rise from their tables. "Before you go, we have the books prepared for anyone who can use them. Terrorize and Brutality. We're told they work best for those with animal aspects, so the Clerics are all trying them, with variable results."

The Druid who had been an Owlbear for most of the battle looked stoked at the news, as he could go fully animalistic, but most of the others dismissed the comment as unlikely to help them.

"You might need to be in animal form, even if it's just a bit of scale or an eye transformation, to get the books to work. They were designed for beasts and are only cross compatible with humans." Karl added, so nobody would miss out.

Tessa held out her hand for the books and quickly flipped the first one open. Her eyes shone red as they transformed to the slotted eyes of a Dragon, and an oppressive feeling filled the air. That would be [Terrorize] working for her, but no matter how she tried, the [Brutality] book would not open for her.

The next to try was Lotus, who had high hopes as a Nature Priestess who really loved animals. But no matter what she tried, including putting Remi on her shoulders, she couldn't get either book to open for her.

The same went for Doug, who was unable to get either of the spells to work. But the moment that the Druid touched them in Owlbear form, he instantly enlarged and keened a proud cry that was eerily similar to Hawk.

[He says, 'fuck yes, it worked.'] Hawk relayed.

[Tell him congratulations.] Karl instructed, and Hawk screeched a reply that startled the Druid.

He pointed at Hawk in shock, and then the two had a brief conversation of shrieks that would have annoyed anyone with ears if it weren't so funny to see.

"Now that we have established that Owlbears really do speak the same language as Dragonhawks, let's move on." The Inscriptionist announced with a pained look.

All around the room they tried, even having the Berserkers Rage to try to get the skill, but only those with an animalistic transformation managed to get the [Berserk Terror] transformation that Ophelia, Tank and the Druid had accomplished.

"Well, at least it isn't as bad as the other one. We are going to pass these out all down the lines today, and hopefully, we can get another dozen or so Berserkers and Druids educated." Karl chuckled at his optimism, but Doug thought it might be possible. "You should also look for the clerics who have transformations, especially the white robes and the nature priests. Many of them have an animal based sensory spell that will partially transform them, but neither of us here have learned that sort of blessing."

General Stonewall looked at Wolfe before he could turn to leave, and raised an eyebrow in a curious expression.

"What was your plan if there had been Royal Rank attackers hidden among the Hill Giants." He asked.

"Have you ever stepped on a ketchup packet?" Karl replied. "It would go something like that."

The Berserkers laughed as Karl turned to leave, but he could swear he actually felt Morgana rolling her eyes at him.

He walked out to get the clerics to fix his gear in the fort, but as Karl left the mess hall, he heard the General ask the real question. "But for which side?"

The fort was quiet as everyone sorted out their armour after putting it into storage to remove the filth and then taking it back out, but not equipped.

"Do you think that Rae really did advance? She vanished in the middle of the fight, and we could hardly see her. It was like she became a screen projecting the surrounding scenery, and she just vanished until you touched her." Lotus asked as she started to mend the leather on Dana's armour.

Karl shook his head. "Not yet, but very soon. She's already advanced at least one of her Innate Skills, so it won't be far. I think she just needs a bit of time to finish adapting, and she will be there."

"What about the others?" Lotus asked.

"Well, Hawk and Thor are both close, but I'm not certain how easy their potential is going to make the process. Remi still needs some time to grow. Royal Rank is likely going to be an evolutionary bottleneck for her, so she might get stuck for a moment." Karl shrugged as he lay the last of his armour flat to assess the damage.

It looked even worse now, laid out on the floor, than it had when he was wearing it.

Tessa sighed as she looked at the torn chain links and steel plates torn into pieces.

"You really did a number on this suit, didn't you? How did you manage to get through a battle without any major injuries when your entire armour set is Swiss cheese?" She asked as she started to work.

"I've been thinking about that, and I've realized that it's an issue with my technique. You see, [Flaming Body] prefers to keep tight to my skin, except where it's extended over my weapon. But that means that it's under my armour and only [Refreshing Lightning] is over the top.

So Thor's barrier takes the first round of damage, the armour takes the second, and the Flaming Body barrier is the third. So I didn't take too many serious wounds, but the armour took a beating.

It's just how the spell wants to work, so I didn't think much of it, as I normally use it more for offence than defence." Karl explained.

"How does your weapon look?" Tessa asked.

Karl took it out, and noticed that the broad blade looked much better polished and with fewer imperfections than he remembered it. The blade's inscription said it was intended to absorb the life force of defeated opponents to grow the power of its wielder, to make them a Champion of their people, but it appeared that the blade itself grew with them, so they didn't discard it along the way.

Not that it would let Karl easily discard it, with the way that it kept rejecting every other bladed weapon he touched.

"It looks pristine to me. The weapon is a bit special, so I don't think that I need to worry much about pitting in the edge or cracks." Karl noted.

Tessa gave it a cursory look, then nodded and gave it back.

"Yeah, it looks like it survived the battle much better than your armour did. This will take a bit, and there is a leather backing, so I will have to pass it to Lotus once she's finished."

"Well, I had Thor drop a load of gear at the base of the trees, so if mine is too messed up I can try to bond something from the Hill Giants. The Gauntlets have a particularly good strength enchantment, though, if we can fix those." Karl offered.

"Right, there is loot and spare parts below the tree. Go look for a chest plate that will bond to you, and I should be able to get the rest done in the next hour or two. Nobody else's gear is this mangled, and I barely even took damage, so mine is all still serviceable. I will fix it last, so we have everyone operational at the very least." Tessa replied.

Karl climbed down the ladder to check the piles that Thor had placed at the bottom of the trees. They would have someone come clean them up later, but for now there was a lot to pick through. The Hill Giants also wore better equipment than the Frost Giants did, as they used Earth Magic, and could easily make their own metal plate armour. Not much of it was actually enchanted, but the pieces that were enchanted tended to be fairly good quality, even if most of them were so large that it was a pain for even Thor to bring them back here.

Chapter 366 Spare Gear

Karl looked through the pile, looking for chest plates. There were only a few to choose from, as the ones worn by the Hill Giants were too large to be easily brought back.

But there was a decent one without any visible damage that Karl matched with its backplate and tried.

Unfortunately, It didn't bond with him.

So, Karl kept digging through the pile until he found a human sized one that was made of light blue metal chain with a shining steel or silver chest plate over it.

Karl knew this one, it had a single hole over the heart both front and back. That made it the first one that Rae had ambushed after her skill advanced, the guy who had died while trash talking.

It wasn't undamaged, but it was in better shape than what he had been wearing, and the materials looked both powerful and exotic.

There was no actual restriction on having spare armour, as far as Karl knew, so he tried to bond it, and the armour easily slid into place under his shirt and jacket.

It was lightweight, comfortable, and once the holes were fixed, it should be good protection that could be somewhat stealthily worn at all times, not like the heavy leather and plate combo he had before.

That might also mean that it wasn't actually great armour, but it was bonded now, and he could get Tessa to fix it quickly while the mangled pieces waited.

"What you up to down there?" Bob Mackenzie called from somewhere in the distance.

"Sorting through armour pieces for something that won't make Tessa cry when she sees the condition." Karl called back, then heard the Cleric laugh from above him.

Bob came over and looked at the loot pile. "Mind if I look as well? My gear was pretty beat by the end of the fight, and we loaded a literal tonne of stuff into Thor's bags."

"Have at. I've got a new chest plate the bonded. It's this, and only a little damaged." Karl explained as he took it off to show the warrior.

Bob whistled. "Now that's pretty. It looks like a Commander Rank piece, but the Clerics will be able to tell you better if it's any good."

"Throw it up here, and I'll tell you." Tessa called as she extended her hand out the entrance.

Karl tossed it up to her and heard the cleric curse.

"This has to be Rae's work. Or is that your sword that went through and through? It had to suck to be whoever was wearing this last. But it's an easy fix with the proper application of repair magic.

It's Commander Rank, and it's actually very sturdy armour, despite being designed to be worn under cleric robes without adding visible bulk." She announced.

So, it was a church created piece that the traitors had taken with them.

Karl saw similar blue metal in the pile. "Oh, there are the matching pants here as well. Check these out."

He equipped them to ensure they would bond with him, then removed them and tossed them up to Tessa.

"Yeah, this is the matching half of the set. Help Bob find what he wants, and if you see more of those pieces, save them. They're good for the other clerics and mages." Tessa replied happily.

The pants weren't damaged at all, so she could fix the chest and put Karl's original set of armour on the back burner, to be done when she had the others combat ready again.

She was quite familiar with the pattern of the clergy produced armour set, though the quality was higher than she was used to having access to. Commander Rank armour was normally reserved for High Priests, and they had their own armourers at the Cathedral, so she hadn't had the opportunity to test her skills on their equipment.

She could likely take a set for herself to be less conspicuous than the chain and plate set that she wore now, which layered around her robes, to leave shining golden plates on the outside, and dull metal chain under her robes, making her look only partially armoured.

Bob stopped as he reached the pile, and immediately picked up the plate set that Karl had set aside as incompatible with him.

It vanished as soon as he picked it up, and a freshly polished steel plate, complete with arm guards, which hadn't been part of the original set, appeared on the warrior.

"Now pants. I need to find some new pants. One leg is totally mangled on mine, and the repair team won't have that ready for days.

They say that we can take a few shifts off if our gear is still too damaged, but I would rather be back in battle." He explained.

"Here are some undamaged ones, but they're smaller, so they're likely Ascended, possibly even Awakened." Karl explained.

Bob looked the gear over and shrugged. "Ascended is good enough until I get my own armour back. Having a spare set will be a huge improvement, even if it's not as good as my primary gear."

Tessa stuck her head out to see what they were talking about.

"No, that's Commander Rank as well, but made for a younger Ascended, or Awakened Giant. Likely some young master of the clan." She announced.

Bob put it on, and the armour completed his look, making him look like a proper knight, covered in shiny steel armour.

"Did you break anything else?" Karl asked as they both began to sort through the pile for the cleric pieces that Tessa wanted.

It appeared that the scavengers had managed to save most of the traitors' armour, minus the set from one that had been yeeted off into the distance somewhere or completely mangled.

Bob was not answering, but he was still digging after Karl was sure that they had all the repairable pieces of gear from the traitors that they were going to find. He was intent on something, so Karl just waited patiently as he hunted.

Then he came up with a helmet that had a beaked front, like the plague doctors wore to keep the smell from reaching them as they worked, but made of polished steel, with two black horns on the sides.

He equipped it on his head, and Karl couldn't help but laugh. "That hat is glorious. Absolutely ridiculous, but glorious." He joked.

"Right? I saw it going into the bag and knew that I had to try to get it when none of the teachers were watching. You know that they would all want it for themselves once they saw its glory."

Their conversation drew curious looks from above, and Morgana laughed as she saw Bob all dressed for work.

"What in the world were you thinking? That hat is ridiculous." She laughed.

"Come down here and help me find a matching shield. I've got a black tabard and cloak to go with the look." Bob demanded.

Morgana rolled her eyes and pointed to the far side of the pile. "There is a black oak one over there. Try that first."

It was round, with a metal central dome and banding. Simple, but effective enough, and hopefully a reasonable size once it was equipped. It had better shrink when equipped because right now, it could double as a dinner table.

Bob slid his arm through the straps to slide the pile of armour off the huge wooden platform, while Karl wondered what possessed Thor to bring that back with them. Unless he was using it as a platform to hold more bags of loot.

The final look of the replacement armour set was simple, and once Bob equipped his tabard over the top, it was a good blend of steel and black. Other than the helmet, he looked like a proper knight, and the shield was large enough to keep using in his role as a defensive warrior.

Chapter 367 Repair Party

Karl climbed back up into the fort, followed by Bob, and found Doug already relaxing next to Lotus as he wove spells over Dana's robes.

The mage was looking at the armour that had been recovered from the traitors with great interest.

"You know, this looks like it would be easy to move in, and wouldn't interfere with my casting. Do you suppose that I could start wearing normal clothes for a change, instead of enchanted mage robes, if I had something like this for defence?" She asked.

Doug shrugged. "I don't see why not. What did you have in mind?"

"I would appreciate it if I could just wear pants and a hoodie like a normal human being. Mage robes feel far too much like a dress, and I'm worried that I'm becoming too used to the skirts." Dana replied.

"Why is that bad? I kind of like the breeze." Doug asked.

"I'm not a Nature Priestess. I am actually fond of wearing pants."

Doug shrugged. "That's a bit weird, but I can make you a normal outfit to go over your armour if you like? Pants and a hoodie."

Lotus bonked him on the head with the side of her fist. "I will do it. I have seen your fashion sense, and it's better that I pick out her outfit. We both use the same spell to weave cloth anyhow."

They bickered as they finished repairing the armour, and then Dana changed out of her robes to reveal that she had claimed one of the traitors' armour sets for herself.

Lotus booed her as she removed her spare robes, and Dana poked the cleric in the forehead.

"I'm changing into my armour so you can make normal clothes to go over it, not giving everyone a strip show."

Lotus shrugged. She was already bored, sitting here repairing armour for over an hour, and she needed entertainment.

Dana had changed from the fur boots of the Frost Giant campaign back to the black combat boots that the Academy issued students for missions, So, Lotus was about to make a matching black hoodie for the mage, but Rae was faster.

Dana was rapidly engulfed in a cocoon of silk as the Bloodbath Spider wove her magic from the exterior wall of the fort, aiming through the door. "What is Rae doing?" Lotus whispered to Karl as the mage vanished.

"Decorating her Dana, I guess." Doug tried and failed to stop his laughter, while Lotus rolled her eyes.

"Aren't you supposed to be a good father, raising them with values and morals?" Ophelia asked.

Doug tried and failed to stop his laughter, while Lotus rolled her eyes.

"Aren't you supposed to be a good father, raising them with values and morals?" Ophelia asked.

Karl shook his head. "I don't think that's how it works. They already have morals and values, I just teach them the human rules."

"Have you taught them about bodily autonomy and the value of consent?" Lotus asked.

"I mean, they're a bit young for that..."

Now it was Karl's turn to get thumped on the head. "Not like that. You're supposed to teach them to ask before doing things like wrapping people in a ball of web."

Rae gave Lotus a look that said she definitely didn't understand.

[That's not how gifts work.]

[I know that, and you know that, but I don't think Lotus understands that this is a gift yet.]

"Rae says it's a gift. You don't ask before giving gifts, you just give them." Karl explained.

"A gift? Alright, I suppose that makes sense." Lotus relented.

She was actually excited to see what the mage was going to come out looking like, given Rae's unique personality. For all that anyone knew, Dana might come out looking like something out of a vampire romance novel.

Officially, those were Vampire Species Propaganda, but they still managed to get a rather large following among the dark fantasy readers and goth girls.

After most of a minute of manipulating her webs, Rae gave the cocoon a slice with her foreleg, revealing Dana in all her newfound glory. She was wearing cargo pants and a hoodie as promised, both in jet black, but the hoodie was short, showing the chain mail around her midriff, while the pants were loose, with plenty of pockets.

Both were made of Commander Rank spider silk, woven thick, and in the case of the hoodies, loosely, to give it a soft surface, similar to fleece.

Dana turned to inspect herself, and Karl noticed that there was a huge picture of Rae on the back of her hoodie in white thread.

"I have pockets." Dana noted with pleasure, before stepping to the door to give Rae a hug.

"Is that not normal?" Karl whispered to Doug.

"Women's clothing never has pockets for some reason. It's one of the reasons that Priestesses like wearing their robes so much, there are proper pockets." The High Priest whispered back.

Dana pulled her mass of curly hair up out of the hoodie and pushed the hood back.

"Ah, that's better, it's too warm to have the hood up. But this outfit is wonderful. Oh, it even has a front zipper, sort of."

It wasn't actually a zipper, but a laced front tie because Rae didn't know how to make a zipper. But it did let her untie the hoodie a little for ventilation when she wasn't in combat.

Dana focused, and the outfit vanished, replaced by her school uniform, then returned. "That is incredible, it's even bonded, so I can just change clothes. Thank you, Rae. This is a wonderful gift." Dana removed her armour and leaned back against the soft wall of the fort, completely satisfied with her new look.

"You know, before I came to the Academy, this was much more fancy than anything I got to wear. My dad had a hard time holding a job, and mom was home with the kids, so we never had new anything, and we always ended up with those horrid coveralls that the clergy pass out to impoverished kids." She reminisced.

"I knew you lived in a small town, but I didn't know it was that bad." Karl noted.

"Sometimes it was, sometimes it wasn't, but dad was always cheap, so he always went to the church for clothing donations. They were used to seeing us at every handout from the times he wasn't working, so nobody asked questions.

You know, I never expected to be the one to be compatible with the Serum. My older sister was always the one who was good at everything, the gifted child who could do no wrong. At least, she was until she ran off with her boyfriend a little over a year ago." She laughed.

Ophelia smiled at some memory and nodded in agreement. "You know, I always used to be so certain that I would become a powerful mage. I could see it, my whole future as an Idol, singing and showing off my magic. Imagine my shock when I was actually an Elite, but I became a Berserker."

Dana laughed. "Honestly, your dream is my nightmare. I hate being in the spotlight, or having people staring at me. But the moment that I got to the Academy, they decided that I had that 'girl next door look' and a voice that they wanted for the next round of Idols, so I got shunted off into the idol training courses despite my protests."

Ophelia frowned for a second. "You know, we don't have many female bards at the Academy. Just Seamus and a bunch of horny bards, who want to use their music to pick up girls."

Chapter 368 House Guests

The group sat and joked for most of the afternoon as the three clerics finished repairing everyone's armour, including the mangled remains of Karl's original suit. It had better buffs on it than the new gear did, but it didn't have the advantage of comfort or being able to be worn under normal clothing. Eventually, the Clerics moved from fixing gear to cooking dinner. This was their horribly overworked day, and Karl hoped that they could at least get a day off afterwards.

It was the great downfall of being indispensable. Everyone needed you for something, and on days like today, someone needed you for everything.

But on the bright side, nobody came to bother them as they ate and relaxed after dinner, until it started to get dark, and Morgana sighed while looking out the door.

"If you would like to stay the night, we can hang extra hammocks for you. We have plenty, so you can stay here the night." Karl offered.

They also had extra blankets from their time on the Frost Giant front, so they weren't short on sleeping gear.

Doug nodded happily and Bob shrugged.

"We might as well, since we're already here. I can make a cute fuzzy blanket for our resident princess if she needs." Doug teased.

Morgana's hand glowed with black magic, and the Nature Cleric just laughed harder.

"Alright, we need to hear this story. What is it between you three?" Karl insisted.

Bob patted Doug on the shoulder, and gestured to Morgana. "She can tell the story, and we will fill in the gaps."

Morgana sighed. "I can see that letting them tell it would be a mistake. It was my second mission, after a single day resource gathering trip. I got paired with these three idiots and two horny morons from my magic combat class.

I grew up in government employee housing in the Capital, I had never been in the wilderness before. I just loved plants and potions. But from the first hour, they were making fun of me."

Doug cut in as she paused. "You should have seen her. She was smaller than Lotus, and she kept getting lost as she went to look at flowers."

Morgana glared at him, and Doug made a zipping motion over his lips to let her continue.

"We were out for three days, and all four of them teased me relentlessly. I didn't know how cold it was going to get in the forest, so I had packed my lucky blanket from my room, a black fuzzy blanket. That's what Doug was referring to.

He called me Princess for the entire trip."

She paused, likely intending to finish it there, but Doug wasn't done.

"Tell them about the next time as well."

"Why do they need to know that?" She replied suspiciously.

"Because if you don't tell them, I'm going to."

Morgana sighed. "Fine. The second time we went out, we deployed by train, and the train was attacked. It wasn't major, but I lost my pack. In fact, all of the students did. We had put our packs in the baggage car while we went for lunch.

Hey, I see that judging look. We didn't know any better, and nobody warned us. Well, the baggage car took a direct hit from a Gryphon, and all of our gear was lost. So, the only ones who had any gear were Bob and Doug, while the rest of us had nothing.

My class basically relies on potions, especially in the early stages. I didn't have a single attack spell that didn't require a reagent of some sort, and now I didn't have a tent or a ride home to the Academy.

It sucked, and I didn't want to be there.

But we had to walk back to the Academy, as the tracks were damaged, and we were under a hundred kilometres away. But that part was alright, we even managed to find some of the resources we came for on our way back the first day.

At dark, Doug made two tents with his magic. We drew lots to see who had watch, and I got first shift. At that point I didn't have any of these tattoos, it was the catalyst that made me decide to do something permanent to improve my abilities as an Elite. I was exhausted by the time the shift ended, and we had been instructed to keep the fire low, but burning, so it didn't go out before morning.

At the time I wore thick glasses, and I couldn't see much of anything in the dark, but the ones on watch were all sleeping by the fire, so I woke my replacement for his shift and then went to the girls' tent to sleep."

Dana facepalmed, and Ophelia laughed, knowing exactly where this was going.

"That's right. She got the wrong tent, and because she was exhausted, she just climbed into the bed closest to the door and went to sleep." Doug interjected.

"Which one of you?" Dana asked while Lotus turned away from the conversation.

It couldn't hide the shaking shoulders or faint sound of her stifled laughter, though.

"Me, of course. I always sleep next to the door, in case there is an attack and someone needs healing. But more importantly, did you know that our Princess prefers to sleep naked?" Doug replied.

Morgana did actually attack him this time, a bolt of black magic that Doug caught with a handkerchief that turned to ash instantly.

"Then she slapped Bob in the face when he tried to wake her up in the morning, and buried herself under my hassock for warmth." Doug continued with tears rolling down his face.

Morgana gave a defeated sigh. "And now everyone knows the shameful reason I can't stand these two lecherous brothers."

And the reason she never wanted to leave her balcony room, Karl suspected. The boys in the group would not have quickly forgotten that story, and given their usual assumptions, it was likely to have given her a rather unfortunate reputation among her classmates.

"That is... unfortunate..." Ophelia stammered.

"And that was before she cursed me with misfortune." Doug agreed.

"Every day for a month. Until he came to the Academy to apologize to her in person, and the teachers made her stop." Bob added.

Morgana glared at Karl. "You are suspiciously silent."

"There is nothing I can say at this moment that will not make the situation worse."

"Oh? If you had to say something, what would it be?" She asked, and all the women turned to Karl to see what he could come up with to calm the angry Witch Doctor.

"Well, Doug is kind of hairy, so at least you were warm, right?"

Now, Morgana's ebony skin didn't really allow her to blush, but if Karl had to guess, she would be red from ear to ear if she were as pale as Dana.

Doug puffed up his chest. "The only one here who can beat me in the chest hair department is Ophelia, and she has to transform to do it."

Morgana snapped her attention to him. "You're not supposed to be proud of that, you idiot."

Chapter 369 Wayward Thoughts

Tessa quickly changed the topic away from Doug's prodigious copse of chest hair, and motioned for Rae to make more hammocks in the empty room. Everyone was gathered in the living room, with everyone but the clerics and Karl sitting in the swinging chairs, so there was no need to move as Rae got to work, making the expanded sleeping arrangements.

Karl couldn't help but notice that there were black fuzzy blankets on all three hammocks, but he didn't say anything as they all prepared for bed. The fort had a night light, but it was better not to stay up too much past dark, in case there was an attack first thing in the morning. Tessa gestured to the back, where the shower bag was set up in its own curtained room. "Men can shower first. Karl, who is on watch tonight?"

Karl gestured upwards. "Hawk is in a nest in the tree, pondering the mysteries of the universe. He's trying to understand something about the advancement to Royal Rank, and thought it was better to be outdoors."

"Alright, say goodnight to everyone for me."

Thor made a happy noise in his spot, knowing that she was talking about him, and then settled back into his pond to sleep.

Karl meditated in his hammock for most of the evening, taking in all the new knowledge about his companions, as well as the newfound understanding that half of the conflict between the Mackenzie brothers and Morgana was actually just embarrassment. It might have been sexual tension, but Karl was fairly certain that should have faded by now. It had been two years, after all.

First thing the next morning, they were all headed for the mess hall for breakfast, and Karl noticed that Morgana was sneaking looks at Doug, who had the laces at the neck of his robes a bit looser than usual to show off just a bit of chest.

If this was flirting, perhaps Karl was doing it all wrong. Or maybe they were somehow worse at it than he was.

The students in the mess hall all looked exhausted, though Karl didn't recall most of them having gone to the line yesterday.

"Long night?" He asked a boy at the next table as he sat down.

The boy nodded grimly. "Yeah, nobody slept well until the walls were all disenchanted and torn down. There was some talk of making our own, but the Hill Giants have better Earth Magic than we do, so there was a chance they would turn it against us if we used their specialty as our fortifications."

The boy beside him chuckled. "I guess your group didn't have that issue. You all looked half dead when you returned past the lines. Did you manage to get all your gear repaired?" Karl shook his head. "Most of it is fixed, and at least the group of us here managed to find spares among the loot we grabbed from the Giants, but our primary gear still needs some work."

From the next table over, an equally exhausted looking young man nodded. "We've got about eight hours worth of work before we will have everyone's armour back to them after the battle yesterday. I'm just hoping that we won't have another attack today because the repair teams can't take that again. There were only three dozen of you, and there was so much work, and at a priority rush, plus what they turned over was mostly Commander Rank gear, which is so much harder to repair than the Awakened stuff that most of the army has."

"I take it that the repair difficulty is based on how powerful the one doing the repair is?" Karl asked.

The tech nodded. "Yeah, repairing above your rank takes about three times as long for every rank. It's still possible, but you need to put a huge amount of work into it for the magical repairs to take, and there is a chance the ability will only be partially successful. If it's really bad, we send it to the forges first, and have them do most of the patches before we start with the abilities to blend it and fix the enchantments.

That's the downfall to getting good gear in advance. Even if you've got it, you usually need someone to repair it for you, and if you're paying the shops, that gets expensive. At least here on the lines, it's free."

Everyone who filed in for breakfast after that looked similarly bedraggled, and it was obvious that his team were the only ones who didn't take the warning about the dangers of the attacking force all that seriously.

Now, part of that was Hawk's scouting telling him what was actually there, but Karl could see that in the eyes of the other Elites, there was a somewhat concerning level of confidence behind his actions, and Karl was reminded of Tank telling him that his thinking was being influenced.

[Don't worry about it too much. Look at all the ones who weren't brave enough to go, even when we won so easily. It's not a loss to forget to be stupid and cowardly.] Rae reminded him helpfully.

She made an excellent point. It was no loss to get rid of aspects of his personality that didn't serve any purpose.

Today was supposed to be Karl's team's off day anyhow, as they had the afternoon shift the day before, so they all ate slowly and chatted with the teams who were coming through to eat.

There were no signs of the Hill Giants coming back yet, but that wasn't too surprising given their recent patterns.

An hour after breakfast ended, they were still sitting around the camp, using an empty teaching tent as a meeting room. That was when the ten red robed Spellblades came in, clearly looking for them.

"Ah, good. We were hoping to see you all before we left. Thank you for the assistance in dealing with the traitor forces. I'm sure you all know already, that this issue is confidential and shouldn't make it into your official reports. At the very least, not the nature of the Titan Clerics that were defeated. If the public thinks that they were Hill Giants, that is fine." The leader of the group informed them.

Karl nodded. "I suspected that might be the case. None of us have started our reports yet, so there won't be any issues when we do turn them in."

"Don't worry too much about the reports. Keep them simple and the Defence Department will take care of the rest." The leader of the Spellblades shrugged.

That made sense. All these reports were most likely going to vanish anyhow, in case someone let slip a detail that insinuated that someone from the Church had changed patrons and gone over to the Hill Giants to hunt their own people.

"We might as well write those now. Did you all still need to write? There is paper on the shelf." Morgana offered.

The Spellblade shrugged. "We might as well. We talked to the others about the situation already, and they've all turned in their reports on the mission. They used Clerics of the Titan Gods as the code for the special team we encountered. That should be clear enough for everyone to understand."

Simple, safe and efficient. There were plenty of Titan God clerics among the Giants. Oddly, they didn't seem to specialize in healing, but in physical power enhancement and regeneration, as Karl understood it. But the Giants regenerated more like beasts than humans, so enhancing their natural abilities might be more effective.

There was far too much that he didn't actually understand about the Giants, even if he was getting pretty good at killing them.

Chapter 370 Calling Cards

Once the reports were finished, the Spellblade Clan gathered them and put them into a folder to turn over to the regional Command Group.

"Alright, that is done. What time do you have to be on the line?" The head of the Spellblades asked.

"We're on our day off today. We just decided to come relax around the others, so we didn't have as far to go if there was an alarm. Our sleeping spot is outside the main camp by a few dozen metres." Karl explained.

The Spellblade nodded, and Karl heard his armour shift under his robes. "Did you have any connection to the Divine Beast Nation? I wouldn't be shocked if they had taken some interest in an Elite with your particular skills." He asked.

Karl shook his head. "I've never been out that way. Two of my beasts came from down south in the Wilds, though." "Now that is interesting. What made you choose to go south for beasts, instead of trying to appeal to the Divine Beast Nation for fast power? They might have been able to get you a cub of a powerful Divine Beast."

Karl shook his head. "Bonding a beast above my Rank won't work well. If I had gone there at the start, and gotten a beast like Remi, who was born Ascended when I was Common Grade, it might have killed us both. One Rank ahead of my own growth should be fine at this point, but two or three Ranks would be suicide. If I went there now, and they were to present a beast that is born Royal or Monarch Rank, I might be alright for a bit, but I don't know if I could adapt fast enough for their growth rate.

But more importantly, I would owe the Divine Beasts a favour. The Bureau of Elite Development took me south, and I believe that we've mostly squared up on debts these days."

The Spellblade almost choked when Karl finished speaking. "A beast born at the Royal Rank? If that's your goal, you must be expecting your class to carry you to the peak of Overlord along with them. But even most of the great Dragons aren't born above Commander Rank, they grow into their power over an extended time." The mage laughed.

Karl shrugged. "A man can dream.

But if you don't mind, I have a question for you as well. When did you get here? I don't recall there being any Spellblades in the Academy Camp during the days before the battle."

The red robed leader chuckled. "And officially, we weren't here at all. We arrived during the fight, after Military Intelligence gave us the location of our targets. We didn't know that they had been forcibly advanced, though. That was an unpleasant surprise.

But all is well that ends well. They were eliminated, and by tomorrow we will be off on another mission."

"So, Military Intelligence knew that they were here?" Morgana asked quietly.

"For nearly two hours. They were sighted by a spy drone at high altitude.

If they had been a bit more discrete, we would have only suspected, but they didn't even bother to take off the Church's defensive warded tabards, so the drone spotted them right away.

Bunch of idiots."

Karl looked down at the stack of papers. "Wait, shouldn't we edit those? Because if that was ten Royal Rank Hill Giant Clerics, they would probably still be beating our faces for sport. Ten forcibly advanced humans doesn't really measure up to the same number of well-trained Hill Giants."

The Spellblade shook his head. "No, it's important that the number be correct because they are looking for it for verification of mission completion. That's how they will know that we actually eliminated them all.

And I do hope that was all of them because if they had time to stabilize and learn some of the special combat techniques of the Titan Gods, they would have been much more difficult to fight."

The Spellblades headed out to do whatever they needed for the afternoon, perhaps to be relocated to another hot spot, and Karl's team retreated to the tent, still up three more members, as Morgana and the Mackenzie brothers followed them.

"What is the plan for the afternoon? Meditation and spell study?" Morgana asked, as it was a day off from training.

Karl nodded. "That's the plan for me. I think that with a bit more work, I can let Rae advance to Royal Rank. Once she makes it, it will only be a matter of time until the rest of us do."

Rae was certain that she was already very close to breaking through, and she just needed a bit more time. The extra energy from the fight was enough for her to complete her change, it was just a matter of time now.

[Is there something that you're still working on before you advance?] Karl asked, wondering if there was something that he could do to help.

[Nope. I've got the skills, I know what to do, now I'm just waiting for my body to adapt. What I really need is a better catchphrase.]

[Why do you need a catchphrase at all?]

[You can't just kill people without a catchphrase. Otherwise, how would anyone know how great you are?]

[The stab holes from your legs are already pretty distinctive. Even Tessa knew right away that it was you the moment that she saw one of your wounds on an armour plate.

If you want to leave a calling card, I would say that you already do, and anyone who knows you would know that those were your kills. But even if they don't know that it is you, they would recognize your kills if they saw them again.]

Rae considered that fact. Her legs weren't really shaped like any sword she had ever seen. So the puncture wounds were pretty distinctive, even if the tearing wounds were just gruesome and indistinguishable.

That was the secret, Rae decided. She was having too much fun tearing them apart, and she wasn't leaving a distinctive stab mark, so people knew it was her kill. But if she went back after the battle and stabbed them all, it would feel like cheating.

That was it, she could just step on the bodies as she passed by, and give them one distinct puncture wounds so that someone could keep count of the kills for her when they cleaned the battlefield later.

That was brilliant, and she wondered why she didn't think of it earlier.

It didn't need to be a damaging wound, just something visible so that it would be recognized after the battle.

That final mental distraction seemed to be the last thing holding her back, and Karl felt Rae's power beginning to progress once her mind was at ease.

Perhaps a sense of self, knowing who you were, and what your place in the world was, might be essential to the breaking of the Royal Rank bottleneck.

That would explain why it was easier for beasts. They knew their place in the world, they didn't have self-doubt about their own reality, their abilities or their future. They simply were, and that was enough for them.

Hawk laughed at Karl's moment of introspection. [You're overthinking it. Rae just wants people to know that she's the greatest without actually having to interact with strangers in the daylight.]

Even Rae couldn't argue with that logic, but Karl suspected that they could both be right. After all, Rae didn't doubt her place in the world, only if anyone had noticed how glorious it was.

Which led to thoughts on ways to ensure they appreciated her glorious carnage.

