

Witch Monastery

#Chapter 81: The Murderer... Is Sophia? - Read Witch Monastery Chapter 81: The Murderer... Is Sophia?

Chapter 81: Chapter 81: The Murderer... Is Sophia?

Charles froze, then looked utterly shocked. "What did you say?! Force Grey's squad was wiped out?!"

That was Blackstaff Tower's subordinate unit—Liberl Port's most prominent enforcer of order, a force of over five hundred mages who had mastered 3rd-level spells! A group powerful enough to level the entire city if unleashed!

By the gods, who would dare such a thing? And who possessed the strength to pull it off?!

Though Liberl Port had declined from its former glory as the southern gateway of the Empire of Sein, now reduced to a puppet city serving international conglomerates, a dying camel was still larger than a horse. If the city's creaking, corrupt bureaucracy truly stirred to action—if they deemed the events in South Harbor District a threat to all of Liberl Port—and dispatched a real Mage troops, no one in South Harbor would survive the reckoning!

Even Amazon Fisheries Company could face utter annihilation with one misstep!

The thought sent a shiver down his spine. All desire to gift the witches something to lift their spirits vanished. He hurriedly asked, "What exactly happened? Hattie, give me a detailed account of how you uncovered this, and what befell Force Grey's squad."

Hattie quickly replied, "Well, this morning, shortly after you left, Andny's worms noticed that Blackstaff Tower's investigation team hadn't appeared as expected."

"We conducted a more thorough search based on their previous investigation sites and found multiple traces of blood around an abandoned timber yard."

"After cross-referencing with the blood samples from the mosquitoes Andny controls, we confirmed the blood belonged to members of Blackstaff Tower's investigation team!"

"They likely met their end in that timber yard—most likely, the entire squad was wiped out."

Hattie delivered the conclusion coldly, and Charles' face paled slightly.

It was over. The matter was decided. Blackstaff Tower's wrath would soon descend upon South Harbor District...

"Wait!" His brow furrowed sharply. "Who in South Harbor has both the strength and the audacity to strike at Blackstaff Tower's people?"

Hattie hesitated. Beside her, Sephera's delicate eyebrows knitted together as she listed them off methodically: "Though South Harbor is crawling with gangs large and small, only three factions could possibly pull this off."

"Amazon Fisheries Company, Xanathar's Guild, and the Zhentarim." She counted them on her fingertips. "As for the smaller gangs? Against that female paladin leading fifteen elite warriors? They wouldn't stand a chance."

Charles frowned. "True, but would any of those three actually do it?"

"Even Xanathar's Guild only bullies city guards at most. Would they dare confront Blackstaff Tower directly?"

Others might not know, but Charles, as a player, was fully aware—even aware that Xanathar's Guild was led by a beholder! He knew its strengths and weaknesses inside out.

That guy might be a long-established Beholder Tyrant with legendary-level strength, but against Blackstaff Tower and its artifacts? He wouldn't stand a chance. The current Blackstaff could crush him with a single fingertip!

As for the other two? Even less likely.

Sephera's expression faltered, her voice hesitant. "Well... probably not. So then... who else could have both the ability and the nerve..."

Her words trailed off. Charles swallowed hard as a bold suspicion formed in his mind. "Everyone... what if this was..."

"The work of an out-of-control Sophia?"

The moment he spoke, silence fell. It was as if an invisible hand had seized every throat in the monastery, leaving the air deathly still.

Yes. That seemed the most likely possibility.

A Sophia at her peak certainly had the power. And a Sophia who had lost her memories and gone berserk... might act without restraint.

The nuns felt their hearts tremble. They could already envision it—Blackstaff Tower's mages storming the slums, capturing Sophia, and unraveling the truth until they uncovered the monastery's existence...

Everything they had worked for would be ruined.

Charles realized this too and immediately made a decision. "We must prepare at once. After sunset, we head straight for that timber yard to see what really happened!"

As he began preparations, a similar conversation was just beginning at Amazon Fisheries Company's South Harbor District headquarters.

"Blackstaff Tower's investigation team—along with our people—vanished near that timber yard?"

Gale Porter, a female executive about to leave for the day, listened to her subordinate's report, her thick brows furrowing deeply. The woman before her nodded urgently. "Yes. And judging by the blood trails we found... they likely met a grim fate."

Troublesome!

Porter cursed inwardly. She wasn't afraid of Blackstaff Tower investigating that night's monster raid—after all, her company had nothing to do with it. At worst, the investigation team might demand a bribe, something she could easily handle.

But if the investigation team had been wiped out here? That meant slapping the faces of Liberal Port's higher-ups.

Sure, their pride had been bruised more than once over the years—but always by major conglomerates like Golden Dragon Bank, entities powerful enough to shake the world with a gesture. Not some small-time company like hers!

Inevitably, this would provoke the higher-ups' fury. They'd dispatch their most elite forces to turn South Harbor District inside out, making an example of someone to deter future defiance...

And that would ruin years of the company's careful arrangements!

Amazon Fisheries Company was powerful in South Harbor District, even making the District Office bow to its whims—but on the grand scale? It was insignificant. The Amazon Kingdom backing it was a fledgling archipelago nation, barely a century old and far behind superpowers like Golden Dragon Bank or Blue Dragon Bank, whose slightest actions could shift global politics.

This couldn't escalate. It had to be crushed tonight.

"Alert my team. We move out now!" Porter stood abruptly, eyes blazing. "Those bastards can die anywhere—just not in South Harbor District!"

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Chapter 82: Chapter 82: Storm Warhammer and the Level 4 Warlock

In Xanathar's Guild's hidden outpost, the guild's commander Kendrz—a burly man with a thick beard who had recently appeared to have lost weight—stared at the parchment before him. Its clauses were written in ink as red as fresh blood, and his heart trembled at the sight.

Across from him, a lean figure clad in a black leather trench coat and a round-topped hat watched with keen interest.

Had Charles been present, he would have recognized the man instantly—Regolas, the cambion agent and apostle of Mephistopheles, who had once retreated before him.

Though nothing had been stated outright and they had never met before, Kendrz faintly understood the true nature of the being with whom he was dealing.

He also knew that by signing this pact, he would become a traitor to humankind. Without extraordinary fortune, his soul would never be cleansed of this sin!

But did he have any other choice?

Remembering the cold visage of his "Eye Hand" lord and the vicious expressions of his employers from the Cassalanter Family—who seemed ready to tear him apart—he took a deep breath. Suppressing his dread, he raised his hand and signed his name.

A crimson glow erupted from the parchment, seeping into his body. His organs strengthened instantly, and the crushing fatigue from days of relentless pressure vanished.

Yet at that moment, he realized with despair that his soul had been permanently marked by something foul.

"Excellent, Mr. Kendrz."

Regolas, clad in black fingerless gloves, gave a slow, mocking clap. "Your courage is... admirable. Rest assured, we honor our contracts."

With that, he extended his right hand forward. A silver flash—and suddenly, a roughly thirty-centimeter-long, silver square-headed hammer materialized in his grip.

"This is the Storm Warhammer, imbued with the fury of thunder. Once wielded by Dwarf Kings to strike down Giants," he explained.

Kendrz eyed him coldly. "The real thing?"

"Of course not. A replica," Regolas admitted freely—after all, the genuine article was a true artifact. "But for your purposes? More than sufficient."

"It retains three charges. Feel its weight—you'll understand how to wield it," he continued. "Use it well. No one struck by this will keep their senses. With this, any foe before you will fall."

Kendrz said nothing. He reached out, took the warhammer, and slid its haft into the leather pouch at his hip.

"Do as I say. Lie in wait near the Timber Yard, and you will reclaim your lost cargo," Regolas grinned. "The Cassalanter Family, even those Amazon Guild bitches—they'll be on their knees, begging for your mercy!"

Kendrz remained impassive. "When do we move?"

Regolas opened his mouth to answer—then froze. After a pause, his expression shifted, something subtle flickering behind his eyes. "Tonight. Now. Kendrz, gather your men. We strike at once!"

...

In the monastery dorm, Charles sat by the bedside, with Hattie, Ruth, and Sephera keeping him company.

Staring at his remaining 3,600+ Purification Points, he gritted his teeth slightly at the thought of the challenges he might face tonight. Finally, he tapped lightly on the "Level" column.

Buzz—

1,800 Purification Points were consumed. Then, a milky, purified light glowed as new power surged into his body.

The next second, his Spell Slots cap expanded to seventeen, and the system interface before him transformed. A new line of text appeared at the top:

"Please select your Attribute Value Improvement or learn a new Feat."

Below it, two lengthy lists unfolded.

Perfect—free choice!

A surge of joy rose in Charles' heart as he began carefully scanning the options. At the top of the list were the six Attribute Values. He could either boost one attribute by two points or two attributes by one point each.

However, while the other five options glowed green—indicating they were selectable—the "Charisma" attribute was grayed out. This meant his Charisma had already reached the mortal limit and could no longer be improved through leveling up.

To enhance it further, he'd need rare artifacts or ascension to legendary status.

Naturally, Charles had no intention of wasting his choice on attribute boosts—they were the least efficient option. Scrolling down, he searched for a suitable Feat.

Many Feats were also grayed out, signaling unmet prerequisites—perhaps insufficient attributes, incompatible class, or missing a required prior Feat.

But overall, the options aligned closely with the game's mechanics. Charles quickly grasped the possibilities, and soon, his decision was made.

Metamagic Feat: Extended Spells!

Its effect: When casting a spell with a duration of at least one minute, he could spend an additional Spell Slot to double its duration—up to a maximum of twenty-four hours.

After evaluating his current situation, this was the optimal choice. With it, his combat strength would nearly double!

He selected the Metamagic Feat without hesitation. Instantly, soft white light flared again, and a flood of knowledge rushed into his mind.

Charles closed his eyes, carefully perceiving the newly acquired wisdom. Only after fully mastering it did he reopen them.

Then, he began casting spells on himself:

Upcast Spell.

2nd-level Armor of Agathys.

Extended Spell!

Low-level spells could be upcast. For example, by spending three Spell Slots, he could cast the 2nd-level version of Armor of Agathys.

Though it only cost one additional Spell Slot, both its protective strength and retaliatory damage doubled!

While it still couldn't match true 2nd-level spells in overall value, it was the best option available to him now.

Combined with Extended Spells, Charles spent a total of four Spell Slots to gain a two-hour duration for the 2nd-level Armor of Agathys.

Good. Now, next...

He then applied Extended Spell to Mage Armor, the 2nd-level False Life, and the 1st-level Longstrider, spending a total of thirteen Spell Slots.

This granted him formidable mobility and near-impenetrable magical defenses—but it also drained his seventeen Spell Slots, leaving him almost devoid of combat strength.

Yet Charles remained utterly calm.

Okay, mana's gone. So now...

Sleep!

Ahem—

Mana recovery!

"Hattie, Ruth, Sephera....."

He called softly, then closed his eyes. Beside him, Hattie moved the fastest, beating the still-shy Ruth and Sephera—who hesitated in front of their sisters—to press her lips lightly against his.

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Chapter 83: Chapter 83: Mana Recovery and the Sacrifice Site

As magical creatures, witches may not master many spells, nor are their spell tiers particularly high—but their mana reserves are often outrageously vast.

This, precisely, is why Hattie couldn't share many spells with him yet dared to grant him so many spell slots.

Of course, it's also the root cause of their losing control on the Night of the Witches.

For now, though, Charles didn't have to worry about the side effects of excessive spell slots.

With their aid, he needed no more than an hour to fully replenish his spell slots and return to peak combat readiness.

And the time that remained would be his moment of greatest strength!

This—was the optimal solution he had devised after weighing all factors.

The dorm brimmed with an almost sacred energy as the ancient ritual of mana recovery unfolded in hushed solemnity...

...

In the Timber Yard.

Anno and her warriors were bound roughly against the wall. Her golden, wavy hair was disheveled, her delicate face smeared with blood. Her big blue eyes burned with humiliation as she bit her crimson lips, silent yet powerless.

Her finely crafted plate armor had been stripped away, leaving only a thin layer of cloth armor beneath the coarse ropes that bound her. The restraints dug into her curves, leaving little to the imagination—especially the deep cleavage forced upward, its fullness unmistakable, enough to stir desire with a single glance.

Born a noble maiden, though still young, she had never lacked for nourishment—meat, eggs, and milk ensured her body developed far beyond the scrawny frames of common-born girls.

Yet hers was not the soft, plump elegance of a pampered lady. Years of training had honed her arms, waist, and calves into taut muscle, radiating raw vitality.

Had it been ordinary bandits, thieves, or gang members who captured such a young and beautiful female knight, they would have long succumbed to their raging lust, torn open her cloth armor, and defiled her untouched, pure body without mercy.

But alas, her captors were none other than a group of deranged cultists. In pursuit of their elusive grand ideal, they had willingly excised a part of their own brains, completing their spiritual self-castration. Thus, they no longer harbored such worldly desires, single-mindedly devoted to their glorious cause.

"Bring forth the next one!"

At the center of the timber yard, a lavishly dressed cultist—the small boss—barked his order. Beside him stood a wooden plank bed, surrounded by an array of knives, while behind him loomed a three-meter-tall wooden statue, carved in the grotesque image of a devil.

The fiend bore jagged tusks and hollow eyes, but the crown of its head was dominated by a massive brain, twice the size of its lower face, etched with intricate, arcane patterns—both eerie and horrifying to behold.

At his command, the remaining cultists dragged forward an unconscious member of the investigation team, forcing him onto the plank bed. Then, the small boss produced a scalpel and drove it straight into the back of the man's skull!

"Guh—!"

Agony jolted the man awake, a choked groan escaping his throat as his body convulsed violently, limbs thrashing. Yet the other cultists pinned him down effortlessly, rendering him immobile.

Unfazed, the small boss swiftly pried open his skull, extracting a still-throbbing brain before turning toward the statue. With pious reverence, he placed the organ into a small compartment at its rear.

Blood gushed freely as the warrior, now bereft of his brain, gradually ceased struggling, his breath fading into silence. Meanwhile, the statue's hollow eyes suddenly blazed with a bright, crimson magical glow.

"Success!"

"As expected, these minds far surpass those of ordinary people!"

"Quick, the next one—bring another!"

The remaining cultists erupted into cheers. These investigators were all at least Level 2 warriors—elite by any measure—and thus their brainpower naturally dwarfed that of untrained, malnourished slum dwellers!

In the corner, Anno, who had witnessed the entire ordeal, felt her vision nearly split with fury: "Woo——!"

She longed to scream, to resist, but with her mouth gagged and limbs bound, she could neither utter a word nor lift a finger in defiance. All she could do was watch helplessly as the cultists hauled yet another comrade onto that accursed operating table.

Buzzzz—

A mosquito drifted lazily through the air—until the cultist small boss's hand shot out with uncanny speed: "Smack—!"

A tiny trail of blood splattered across his palm as the insect was instantly reduced to a lower dimension. Frowning, he glanced upward and muttered in irritation, "It's already autumn—why are there still so many damned mosquitoes...?"

"That was no mosquito."

A hoarse, grating voice rasped from the darkness. At once, the cultists dropped to one knee, their voices feverish as they chanted in unison: "All hail the Great Lord of Wisdom!"

Pressed against the wall, Anno narrowed her eyes. The sun had fully set, and the crescent moon's glow was feeble—even with her keen vision, she could barely make out the silhouette of a house-sized monstrosity writhing slowly toward them.

Her heart pounded violently—she already knew. This abomination was likely the mastermind behind everything... the very culprit responsible for the massacre of countless innocent commoners on that cursed Twin Moons Night!

At last, the thing drew near. And when its true form came into view, Anno nearly choked on her own breath.

What a grotesque, horrifying monster it was. At its core, it resembled a three-meter-tall massive brain, its convoluted surface sparsely dotted with elongated flagella. Beneath it, countless worm-like pedipalps squirmed, dragging its bloated, gelatinous mass forward with agonizing slowness.

Anno's scalp prickled. Merely looking at it summoned an overwhelming terror from the depths of her soul.

By Tyr's grace... what manner of abomination is this?!

This—this was the thing that had slaughtered hundreds in the South Harbor District. The architect of this vile cult!

I must... I MUST destroy it!

She clenched her fists, her palms slick with sweat, her back drenched. Across the clearing, Sophia—now revealed in her true form—continued her sluggish advance. A rasping, guttural voice seeped from the tiny orifice at her base:

"That was a witch's apostle... Ah, yes. I remember her. She was called—"

Suddenly, her voice trembled, then twisted into unmistakable agony:

"Ah... I cannot recall! That evil witch... ah...!"

The cultists jerked their heads up, their master's distress forgotten in an instant. Horror flashed across their faces as they stammered:

"A witch?! A witch is hunting us?!"

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Chapter 84: Chapter 84: Sophia's Believers

The legends of evil witches they'd heard since childhood now surged through the cultists' minds, making their hearts tremble.

Most of them were natives of the South Harbor District—uneducated, barely literate, unable to even distinguish between undead and fiends. Naturally, they couldn't possibly

discern that the so-called "witch" was, in truth, the same kind of being as the Master they worshipped!

"Master, if it's a witch, then grant us permission to exterminate her!"

The lead cultist suddenly spoke, his voice thick with hunger. "This is the perfect chance to test the statue's power!"

Ahead, Sophia's flagella swayed faintly, as if she were deeply confused and indecisive. "Mmm... Very well. Go."

The cultists immediately rose, working together to haul the completed statue onto a four-wheeled cart. Two of them began pushing it forward, their momentum furious as they prepared to charge outside and eliminate the "witch."

Sophia remained in place, eight cultists standing guard beside her. Meanwhile, the rest continued slicing open the brains of the investigation team members, crafting yet more statues.

No one heard the massive monster muttering to herself, her voice dripping with confusion:

"Ah... A witch who commands mosquitoes... So familiar... Who was she again...?"

...

Deep within the slums, Charles and a group of nuns raced toward the Timber Yard at full speed.

The three witches' collective mana recovery spell had worked better than expected—within just half an hour, his spell slots had gradually refilled to full. He was now completely combat-ready.

Without wasting another moment, he changed clothes and set out, following the path Andny had scouted earlier, heading straight for the Timber Yard.

As they hurried, Andny suddenly stiffened. "Master! New developments—Sophia is definitely at the Timber Yard!"

"Not only that... she seems to have founded some kind of cult. Right now, she's revealing her true form, accepting worship from those fanatics while dissecting captured investigation team members alive!"

Her voice trembled by the end. Though her worldview had been corrected, the sheer brutality of the scene still sickened her.

Yet instead of alarm, Charles' face lit up with relief. "The investigation team members are still alive? How many?"

This was genuinely good news. If the entire team had been slaughtered, even successfully purifying Sophia wouldn't prevent Blackstaff Tower from unleashing its wrath—dooming the South Harbor District to further chaos.

But with survivors, there was still room to maneuver. This disaster could still be contained.

"There are... ah—!" Andny suddenly cried out in pain, her face contorting as tears streamed down her cheeks. "Sophia attacked me. All the mosquitoes I controlled... they're dead."

"I'm sorry, Master. I couldn't get a clear count, but... roughly seven or eight are still alive..."

Her small frame shook with guilt. Her abilities had limits—anyone with moderately strong spellcasting could detect her controlled mosquitoes, destroy them, and harm her true body in the process.

Charles quickly reassured her. "You've done perfectly, dear. Now, what about Sophia's cultists? How many? Are they strong?"

Andny shook her head weakly. "Unclear. Best estimate... thirty to fifty."

"They're using the captured warriors' brains to craft some kind of massive magical statue. I don't understand its purpose, but it radiates powerful magic—definitely Sophia's work..."

A magical statue?

What kind?

Charles frowned. He knew of too many—gargoyles, cruciform idols, arcane constructs—and couldn't immediately place what the Insects Witch meant.

"Everyone, it seems we're not just facing Sophia's threat. Prepare for battle!" His tone turned grave. "Andny, how's your recovery? Keep scouting. I need more intel to plan our strike."

Wiping her tears, Andny forced her bloodshot eyes open. "Understood!"

Focusing, she summoned another swarm of mosquitoes and sent them toward the Timber Yard.

Then her expression twisted in shock. "Wait—Sophia's believers are fighting the Amazons!"

"And... there are twenty or thirty Amazons, but they're getting crushed!"

Charles paled. "We need to move faster. Now!"

If the cultists could overpower Amazons, their strength far exceeded expectations.

This demanded overwhelming force.

...

The streets outside the Timber Yard.

Whoosh—whoosh—whoosh—

Globes of multicolored magical energy, each about the size of a football, streaked through the air before smashing into nearby walls, the ground, or fragile houses—then detonated with thunderous force!

BOOM—!

The dull explosions came in relentless waves. These magical orbs functioned like grenades, each producing different effects upon impact: some erupted in flames, others released shards of ice, bolts of lightning, or even sprays of acid and poisonous gas!

The raging fires illuminated the night streets, heating the surrounding air while a putrid stench mixed with toxic mist spread through the wind, assaulting everyone's senses. Even the approaching reinforcements couldn't help but gag at the foul odor.

Under this terrifying barrage of firepower, the hastily arriving Amazon warriors had no choice but to take cover behind buildings, forced into a frustrating defensive position as they waited for the enemy's magical energy to deplete.

Occasionally, one or two tried counterattacking with thrown spears—but their sporadic efforts were like trying to put out a wildfire with a cup of water. Not only did they fail to threaten the enemy, they only exposed themselves to return fire!

Taking cover behind one of the houses, Amazon executive Gale Porter ground her teeth in frustration.

With her experience, she immediately recognized the magical orbs being launched by the cultists—they were Chromatic Orbs, a 1st-level spell!

This spell had excellent range, formidable power, and could be tailored to any of the five damage types—making it perfect for battlefield adaptability or exploiting enemy weaknesses.

Aside from consuming spell slots and having a somewhat small blast radius (which slightly lowered its cost-effectiveness), it was practically flawless!

But this wasn't the time to critique spell efficiency. What weighed on Porter's mind was a far more pressing question:

How in the Nine Hells were all these enemies spellcasters?!

There had to be at least twenty cultists on the opposing side. Since when did the South Harbor District suddenly have twenty-plus spellcasters lurking around?!

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Chapter 85: Chapter 85: Soul-Touched Statues

Porter had lived in South Harbor District for over a decade. Just from their clothing, she could tell these were slum-born commoners - she even recognized which tailor shops some outfits came from!

But how in the Nine Hells had these penniless wretches become spellcasters?!

Before she could ponder, another volley forced her back into cover.

BOOM-BOOM-BOOM!

The street shook with explosions. Gritting her teeth against the toxic mist's putrid stench, Porter barked: "Javelins - loose!"

She led the charge, her spear flying true.

These couldn't be real mages. South Harbor's illiterate poor could barely afford bread, let alone arcane training.

And any novice spellcaster would be spent after two 1st-level spells.

Now was their moment.

WHOOSH-

Her javelin skewered a cultist through the chest. Though her warriors' aim was rougher, three more found their marks.

A solid counterattack-

Then the impossible happened.

From the rear, cultists wheeled forward two grotesque wooden statues on carts - three meters tall, covered in blasphemous carvings. As they chanted, one statue pulsed yellow.

"Ghhhk-!"

The speared cultists - already dying - jerked upright like marionettes. With feral snarls, they yanked the javelins free, spraying gore and viscera across the stones.

Mortal wounds? Meaningless.

Their gaping injuries squirmed - bleeding ceased, flesh knitting before her eyes.

What unholy sorcery was this?!

Before she could react, the second statue's crest flared blue.

BUZZZZ-

"AAAAAGH!"

"POWER... GIVE ME POWER!"

An invisible wave of magic rolled outward. Wind howled through the slums as cultists tore off their shirts, revealing emaciated frames covered in glowing blue-white sigils.

The azure motes dove into those markings like starving piranhas.

Empowered, the cultists shrieked in unison:

"CHROMATIC ORB!"

WHOOSH-

Another barrage. The Amazons barely ducked in time.

Trapped.

Outmatched.

Facing unkillable fanatics.

...

"...That's the situation, Master. What are your orders?"

Andny stood less than a hundred meters from the battlefield, verbally relaying the chaotic scene. Her face showed clear shock, while the other witches wore equally troubled expressions.

Having hunted here for years, they knew the slums could never naturally produce twenty-plus spellcasters - and these were clearly not all their forces. The Timber Yard undoubtedly held more!

The only explanation? Sophia, leveraging her immense witch's mana pool, had shared her spellcasting abilities with believers, turning them into 1st-level warlocks en masse.

What extravagant generosity!

But this revealed two truths:

First, Sophia's mind was truly compromised - the arrogant witch would never share power with commoners otherwise.

Second, she must have regained peak strength to sustain so many spellcasters simultaneously!

Though mere novice spellcasters, their numbers alone made them formidable.

Charles frowned. Even without seeing it firsthand, he recognized what Sophia's cultists were using.

Soul-Touch Statues.

These artifacts could rapidly gather ambient magical energy, channeling it to tattooed "receptors" among spellcasters - instantly healing wounds or replenishing spent spell slots.

The most potent variants could restore three spell slots per minute - far surpassing even his recovery rate during the Night of the Witches.

But the cost was staggering:

First, originating from mind flayer technology, each statue required a living, high-level brain as its core component. No substitutes existed, making creation impossible for anyone with morals.

Moreover, the receptor tattoos contained fragments of the wearers' own brains - meaning each cultist had willingly lobotomized themselves, trading sanity for power.

The statues' instability brought further horrors:

Healing often caused grotesque mutations instead of proper recovery.

Mana replenishment accelerated mental deterioration.

The cultists fighting Amazons already showed severe madness. None would survive till dawn.

They were literally fighting with their lifespans.

Charles couldn't help but sigh inwardly. Taking a deep breath, he laid out the plan:

"Those two statues are the key to this battle. Hattie, Ekta, Sephera—the four of us will handle the common cultists. We can't let those Amazons die out—they're still drawing fire for us!"

"Ruth." His voice turned sharp. "Break through their blockade at all costs. Those statues must be destroyed first!"

"Understood!" Ruth nodded firmly. With Sephera weakened, she was now the strongest among them—without question, she would take on the most critical mission.

"One more thing, Ruth," Charles added sternly. "If you're forced to kill, remember—change your usual method."

Ruth inhaled deeply, her expression grave. "Understood."

Her signature decapitations would immediately draw suspicion if used today.

"Then," Charles gave the signal, "Move!"

The group advanced, entering the battlefield from the opposite flank before unleashing their assault. Charles was the first to strike—raising his hand from a distance, two magical circles materialized midair as twin beams of crackling energy lanced forward.

Eldritch Blast.

With the longest range, it allowed him to engage first.

Thanks to the Illusionist's Bracers, even as a 4th-level warlock, he could fire two beams simultaneously—without revealing the bracers' existence.

For now, at least.

Eldritch Blast had a unique scaling—rather than gradually increasing in power, it gained additional beams at specific levels: two at 5th, three at 11th, and four at 17th.

Firing two beams now wouldn't raise eyebrows. He could easily pass as a 5th-level spellcaster who hadn't yet mastered 3rd-level spells.

Of course, this ruse wouldn't hold once he actually reached 5th level and fired four beams with the bracers' aid. But that was a problem for later.

For now? Unlimited, consequence-free Eldritch Blast spam.

BANG—!

Whether by luck or improved aim after all this time, both Eldritch Blasts found their marks—two cultists were sent flying backward instantly!

Almost simultaneously, Sephera made her move. With her spellcasting abilities severely diminished, she could no longer cast Cloudkill—the infamous 5th-level spell that killed with a single breath.

Following Charles' strict orders to avoid hitting the Amazons fighting the cultists, she settled for a simpler option—a sickly green ray lancing from her fingertips.

Ray of Sickness.

The beam struck silently. The cultist clutched his chest, coughing up blood violently.

Despite the yellow glow from the statue attempting to heal him, the toxins ravaging his internal organs were unstoppable. His death was now inevitable.

"Aganazzar's Scorcher!"

Ekta was the third to strike. Alongside Hattie and Ruth, she closed in before reciting an arcane incantation. Raising her right hand, a searing pillar of fire erupted from her palm!

Aganazzar's Scorcher!

While its heat matched the 2nd-level Burning Hands, its range dwarfed the latter—the flames roared forward nearly thirty meters before fading, cutting straight through the cultists' formation.

Robes ignited. Cultists rolled in the dirt, howling. The battlefield was split in half within seconds.

Seizing the chaos, Hattie and Ruth charged forward.

Hattie summoned writhing dark tentacles around her body before plunging into the fray, draining the cultists' already-frail vitality.

A simple 1st-level spell—Arms of Hadar.

As the second strongest witch present, Hattie knew her true mission wasn't to waste energy on these novice spellcasters. Her real target was Sophia, who might have regained her full power.

Meanwhile, Ruth moved like a steel dagger—slicing through the crowd straight toward the heart of the cultists' formation.

Schlick—!

Her small hand rose, purple-red nails poised to decapitate a blocking cultist—then froze mid-motion.

Remembering Charles' warning, she redirected the strike, driving her razor-sharp nails straight through his chest instead. A quick twist turned his heart to pulp.

"Ugh...!"

The man gasped as blood fountained from his chest. Before his body hit the ground, Ruth had already leaped over him, sprinting toward the two statues.

"Now's our chance!"

Seeing reinforcements storm the battlefield, Gale Porter's eyes lit up. No longer willing to hide, she vaulted from cover: "Warriors—charge!"

Her powerful leap carried her nearly four meters high. Mid-arc, she hurled her spear downward—

WHOOSH—!

The razor-sharp point pierced a cultist's chest, severing his aorta instantly. Blood fountained—no magic, not even the statues' power, could revive him now.

Caught between sudden raids from two fronts, the previously confident cultists began faltering. Leaderless and confused, their Chromatic Orb volleys became sporadic—too scattered to suppress either attacking force effectively.

Seizing the advantage, the remaining Amazon warriors charged fearlessly. At close quarters, their brutal melee skills turned the tide completely.

These female warriors weren't just rigorously trained—they'd grown up nourished by ample meat, eggs, and dairy thanks to their nation's prosperity. The newer generations stood taller, stronger, and more robust than their mothers ever had.

Against these malnourished, barely-trained cultists? It was a one-sided slaughter.

Charles nodded approvingly. The battle was turning decisively in their favor—total victory was only a matter of time.

Advantage: ours.

As he glanced toward the Amazons, Gale Porter—bloodied but triumphant—turned as if sensing his gaze. Recognizing his distinctive white hair and handsome features, she flashed him a fierce, approving grin.

Charles returned the smile with a raised hand, acknowledging their impromptu alliance—

Then Andny's panicked cry shattered the moment:

"Master! Emergency—Sophia's... she's coming out!"

While others fought, Andny had been straining to infiltrate the Timber Yard with her worm scouts. Now she delivered earthshaking news.

What?!

Charles' body tensed instantly. He spun toward the Timber Yard, his expression grave as if facing imminent doom.

The other witches heard the cry and turned as one.

Then they all saw it—the Timber Yard's massive doorway seemed to distort unnaturally.

Emerging slowly, surrounded by eight cultists in ornate robes, came a horrific sight:

A gigantic brain-shaped monstrosity covered in writhing flagella, moving ponderously on worm-like pedipalps as it exited the abandoned Timber Yard's doorway.

Sophia had voluntarily stepped out from the Timber Yard.

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Chapter 86: Chapter 86: Sophia's Confusion

Sophia's mind swirled with confusion. The explosions, roars, and screams outside made something within her tremble.

What am I doing?

Is any of this truly worth it?

That witch controlling mosquitoes... she feels so familiar...

Why? Is she my friend?

I feel such warmth, such recognition—yet why can't I remember her name?

Who am I? Who are they?

Driven by these swirling questions and the familiar energies calling to her, Sophia slowly emerged from the Timber Yard where she'd hidden for over half a month, stepping onto the bloodied streets.

Her appearance brought the entire battlefield to a standstill.

The cultists stood awestruck at their Master's emergence.

The Amazons froze, the monstrous form triggering traumatic memories of the Night of the Witches.

Charles and his witches felt their hearts leap into their throats—this was their worst-case scenario unfolding. Sophia had revealed her true form publicly!

Damn it! This is spiraling out of control!

Ruth's blades flashed one final time as she dismantled a wooden statue. "Strike now?" she whispered.

Through the mosquitoes Andhy had placed near everyone's ears, the message spread: "Ruth asks—do we attack?"

"Negative! Too many witnesses!" Charles gritted his teeth. Purifying Sophia here would revert her to nun form, exposing the monastery's darkest secret.

As everyone stood paralyzed, the eight high-ranking cultists at the doorway acted.

They raised crystal orbs in unison, chanting arcane incantations. Seven-colored light erupted, blanketing the battlefield.

BUZZ—

Color Spray!

The 1st-level spell, upcast for massive area coverage, left every Amazon warrior blinded—rendered instantly combat-ineffective.

The once-chaotic battlefield fell eerily silent. The warriors clustered together behind shields, helpless as lambs for slaughter.

The cultists wasted no time. Eight more Chromatic Orbs—larger, more powerful—streaked toward the blinded Amazons.

BOOM-BOOM-BOOM!

Direct hits vaporized bodies. Even near misses tore limbs apart.

Deafening explosions rocked the battlefield. The Amazons, unable to dodge, were torn apart by the blasts. One unlucky warrior took a direct hit—her body vaporized instantly.

In moments, the tide of battle had completely turned.

Charles felt his heart clench.

Thirty spellcasters...?

Just how powerful is Sophia now, to create so many in half a month?!

The spell hadn't affected him. Color Spray, like Sleep, preyed on the weak-willed.

At its core, it was an illusion—meaning those with strong mental fortitude or anti-illusion measures could resist it.

Charles, with his Eldritch Mind training, was immune. So were his witches.

But seeing the cultists brutalize the Amazons, Charles gritted his teeth. "Hattie, Ruth—break off! Subdue Sophia. I'll handle the purification!"

"Understood!"

Hattie immediately disengaged, rushing toward Sophia without a backward glance. Ruth abandoned her efforts to destroy the second statue and followed.

Truthfully, the second statue wasn't necessary anymore. With the mana-restoring statue already destroyed, the cultists could no longer spam Chromatic Orbs endlessly. Their combat effectiveness had plummeted to barely above common street thugs.

Now it took four or five of them working together just to restrain a single Amazon warrior - their threat level had become negligible.

Abandoning the cleanup of these minions, the two witches unleashed their full magical power, streaking toward Sophia's position.

At the Timber Yard's main entrance, the eight high-ranking cultists immediately assumed defensive postures, their crystal orbs glowing ominously with magical energy.

With Sophia at full strength and eight spellcasters backing her, even Hattie and Ruth felt uncertain of victory.

Yet surprisingly, the eight cultists didn't attack immediately. Instead, they maintained a tense standoff.

Behind them, Sophia's flagella twitched as she sensed familiar presences and magical signatures. "...Hattie...Ruth...?"

Suddenly, her grotesque mouthparts produced a series of guttural, barely intelligible sounds. Though distorted, the two witches who knew her well could discern - Sophia was calling their names!

They skidded to a halt before the eight cultists, exchanging confused glances.

What was happening?

Did Sophia...still retain some shred of consciousness?

Ruth hesitated uncertainly. But Hattie reacted instantly, responding in a voice filled with gentle warmth: "Yes, it's us. We've come to help you, Sophia - just as we promised."

As she spoke, she urgently signaled Ruth with her eyes.

Catching on, Ruth added firmly, though somewhat awkwardly: "We're not your enemies. We're your most loyal allies. Come, Sophia—stop wasting your magic power. Leave with us!"

Guiding her carefully, they tried to steer Sophia away from prying eyes. The agitation in Sophia's flagella gradually stilled—the nuns' soothing words were clearly working. Slowly, she began to move forward, as if ready to embrace them.

The eight cultist leaders parted in perfect unison, creating a path. Their movements were eerily synchronized—less like well-trained soldiers and more like puppets on strings, controlled entirely by Sophia.

The battlefield had taken on a surreal quality. Blinded Amazon warriors flailed helplessly, still managing to pummel the magic-depleted cultists in close combat through sheer instinct. Chaos reigned, yet neither side could gain the upper hand.

Charles watched from afar as the mosquito at his ear whispered: "Hattie has Sophia under control." His gaze swept across the tumultuous battlefield, anxiety mounting.

There were still too many witnesses. If he purified Sophia now, the Color Spray effect would break. The newly sighted Amazons—and any surviving cultists—would see Sophia's true form revert to human.

His greatest secret would be exposed!

Unless...

He could create an impenetrable barrier—one that blinded all observers.

An idea struck him.

"Sephera!" He turned, calling out sharply. "Toxic Mist!"

This was his only solution: a noxious cloud to shroud the battlefield and block all vision.

After all, he and his witches were toxin-resistant. Everyone else—Amazons and cultists alike—were vulnerable ordinary humans.

A thick, ink-green fog would force them back while obscuring the view. Perfect—unless some ill-timed gust of wind ruined everything.

"I... I'll try!" Sephera clenched her teeth. Her spellcasting had weakened drastically—she could no longer cast Cloudkill, the devastating 5th-level spell that killed with a single breath.

"Not Cloudkill!" Charles clarified urgently. "Something milder—just enough to repel them and block vision!"

Hearing this, Sephera relaxed slightly. "That I can do."

If not a 5th-level spell, but still wide-ranging, nauseating, and vision-obscuring...

There was only one choice.

The 3rd-level spell—Stinking Cloud.

"Stinking Cloud."

Sephera recited the arcane incantation. Instantly, a vile, yellowish-green mist erupted from her palms, spreading rapidly through the streets. The acrid stench burned eyes and triggered instant gagging.

"Ugh—!"

Even with Sephera's blessing granting some toxin resistance, Charles nearly retched from the overwhelming stench.

Damn, this really lives up to its reputation as the "stinkiest" spell in the game!

Talk about friendly fire...

If it affected him this badly, others fared far worse. Those farther away barely held on, while anyone closer immediately vomited violently.

"Fall back!"

Blinded Amazon warriors stumbled away from the putrid cloud, many collapsing in their frantic retreat. The battlefield descended into utter chaos.

The cultists, already mentally compromised, couldn't overcome their bodies' instinctive reactions. Some doubled over, vomiting profusely, while others turned ghastly pale from poisoning.

Within moments, the noxious cloud had divided the Timber Yard into two distinct zones—only Charles and his witches remained functional.

Perfect. Just what we needed.

"Sephera, maintain the mist!" Charles ordered. "Andny, monitor the perimeter. Ekta, keep suppressing fire. I'll handle Sophia's purification!"

He strode toward the Timber Yard's entrance where eight cultist guards raised their weapons shakily. Despite trembling from the toxic fumes, they stood ready to cast spells.

Hattie quickly reassured Sophia: "Don't fear. He's my apostle, here to restore your memories and strength."

Ruth added softly: "Relax, Sophia. Trust us—we're your truest sisters."

Sophia's flagella twitched agitatedly, but she complied. The eight guards parted reluctantly as Charles approached her monstrous form.

Holding his breath, Charles placed his hand on her grotesque body and whispered: "Purification."

BUZZ—

Holy white light erupted, seeping into Sophia's flesh and soul. Her massive form convulsed violently as her mouthparts screeched:

"No—!

You're hurting me!

You lied! Not allies—ENEMIES!"

Her flagella thrashed wildly as dark energy surged. The eight cultists simultaneously raised hands wreathed in black magic, forming enormous shadowy blades aimed at Charles.

But Hattie was ready:

"Evard's Black Tentacles!"

Inky mist pooled at her feet before erupting into massive ink-green tentacles that ensnared both the cultists and Sophia's bulk. Necrotic energy drained their vitality.

Ruth moved like lightning—her blade piercing the nearest cultist's heart.

"SKREEEEEE—!"

Sophia's shriek grated like metal on glass. Charles' ears bled from the piercing noise, but he maintained contact, pouring every ounce of will into sustaining the purification.

Purifying peak-strength Sophia would take far longer than Ruth had required.

Come on! Faster!

His urgency proved justified.

Even ambushed, Sophia counterattacked. Dark mist crawled up the restraining tentacles, withering them to husks.

Then—

BOOM!

A tremendous repulsive force exploded outward from her body!

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Chapter 87: Chapter 87: Sophia's Escape

BOOM—!

The explosive force sent Charles, Hattie, Ruth, and all remaining cultist guards flying backward like ragdolls!

THUD!

"Cough...! Damn it...!"

Charles hit the ground hard, rolling several times before stopping. He didn't know what level Thunderwave that was, but it had shattered both his Armor of Agathys and False Life protections—even the purified life energy was nearly depleted.

As for Sophia's eight cultist guards? Pulverized instantly.

Sophia... still terrifyingly powerful...

Damn this inefficient purification system!

At this rate, purifying Theresa will take forever!

Charles cursed inwardly, but now wasn't the time to blame the system. Scrambling to his feet, he saw Sophia's massive form retreating into her lair, only the lingering black mist marking her escape route.

"Andny! Tell Sephera to flood the Timber Yard with toxins—no humans get through!" he commanded. "Hattie, Ruth—with me! We're going in!"

Recasting two 2nd-level protective spells (his remaining spell slots dropping instantly to eleven), he charged into the Timber Yard without hesitation.

Inside the Timber Yard

Anno and the six remaining investigators still lay bound in the corner. Shame over her arrogance and recklessness warred with renewed hope as explosions and battle cries echoed outside.

Whoever's fighting these cultists... please hurry...

Free us... Let me wield my sword for justice once more!

Then the stench hit.

Her delicate brows furrowed violently.

"What's that?"

A team member held his breath and asked, "What the hell is this smell?"

"Are they roasting durians out there? Or boiling fermented herring?!"

"My eyes! It burns! What kind of witchcraft is this?!"

"Poison gas!" Another investigator jerked as yellow-green fumes poured in. "Don't breathe! Ugh—!"

Anno gritted her teeth. "Hold fast, comrades! If we succumb—"

But her own face contorted unbearably.

"I can't—!" One investigator finally broke, gulping air—

The magical toxic mist flooded his nostrils, attacking his nerves like acid.

"Hnnngh... HRRAAAGH—!!!"

His tortured howl echoed through the stinking cloud.

...

High above the Timber Yard, a lean figure cloaked in a black trench coat observed the battlefield below - none other than that infuriating cambion agent, Regolas.

When he witnessed Charles firing two Eldritch Blasts yet only casting 1st-level spells, his eyes narrowed sharply. Producing a forked branch, he let it float before him while weaving complex hand signs and muttering obscure incantations.

After ten minutes of this ritual, he finally completed the foresight spell, his mind attaining perfect clarity to perceive the hidden truths.

At last, he nodded slowly.

Just as suspected - this mysterious, overly knowledgeable human had stolen the Illusionist's Bracers!

His caution had been warranted. And so...

"Mr. Kendrz," he activated a Sending Stone and spoke into it, "it's time for you to move."

"Tonight's target is a human male mage - approximately 1.7 meters tall, slender build, white hair."

"He's currently charging into the Timber Yard. I want you to spare no effort in ensuring his death!"

"Smell? Do you want fresh air or do you want to keep breathing?!"

"Unless you want your soul compromised, get moving NOW!"

After this furious tirade, Regolas deactivated the stone and took a deep breath to calm his rage.

Then his face contorted.

"Damn it, Stinking Cloud!" he spat. "Who the hell casts that? Disgusting - hurts everyone including themselves!"

Cursing, he quickly ascended higher and wrapped his trench coat around his nose and mouth, barely tolerating the stench as he continued monitoring the battlefield below.

...

Sophia's pedipalps shuffled laboriously as she moved. Her massive form—optimized for storing vast Knowledge—had sacrificed mobility. Relying solely on her true body's pedipalps, her speed was pitifully slow; even a child learning to run could outpace her!

But this was unavoidable. Sophia's strength had never been movement, but the depth of her Knowledge and reserves of magic power.

Under normal circumstances, with near-limitless spells and overwhelming spellcasting abilities, she could have annihilated every enemy here without taking a single step.

But now? She was compromised.

Sharing too much magic power with her believers was one factor—but the critical issue was the recent devastating blow she'd taken.

That milky light... it ravaged both my true body and consciousness...

I must replenish myself... quickly...

With this thought, she slowly wriggled back into the Timber Yard. Inside, several cultists were still at work, having just completed two new statues. Seeing her, their faces lit with fanatical devotion:

"Master!"

"Activate them!" Sophia ordered.

The cultists rushed to obey, chanting the incantations she'd taught them. The two statues pulsed with blue magical light, channeling swirling, chaotic energy into her body.

"Ugh..."

A satisfied groan escaped her mouthparts—

Then the cultists gagged. "W-what's that stench—? UGH—!"

Their faces twisted in disgust. Sophia turned toward the Timber Yard's entrance.

Just as expected: three figures strode in, their hostility palpable.

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Chapter 88: Chapter 88: Storm Warhammer

Charles burst through the Timber Yard's doorway, his heart lurching at the sight of the two erected Soul-Touch Statues.

Sophia had backup plans after all.

This complicated things.

If ordinary humans couldn't withstand the statues' chaotic energies without going mad, for witches—beings inherently aligned with chaotic magic—absorbing this power was like gorging on rich steak: overwhelming but revitalizing.

Charles inhaled sharply but remained composed. "Ruth, flank around and destroy those statues. Hattie, bind Sophia with your Black Tentacles—just one second of control is enough!"

He adjusted his footing, grateful his Longstrider spell still held. "Coordinate perfectly. We'll whittle her down through repeated purifications!"

"Understood!" Ruth exploded into motion, her human form even faster than her true body's terrifying speed. She arced around Sophia, blades aimed at the wooden statues.

"You—!" Sophia's flagella thrashed in rage. Her mouthparts screeched:

"Slow—!"

A 3rd-level spell erupted—not powerful but brutally effective, reducing movement to a crawl. Its counterpart, Haste, was every warrior's dream buff.

"Stop her!" Sophia commanded. The nausea-wracked cultists tried casting—

Only to vomit violently. "Blegh—!"

Both sides found themselves equally crippled in combat effectiveness.

"Hattie, now! Break her concentration!"

Charles shouted as he charged straight toward Sophia. He recognized this spell—Slow, along with its counterpart Haste, were among the most famous 3rd-level buff and debuff spells.

Their only weakness? They required the caster's continuous focus to maintain.

Meaning—they could be interrupted!

Behind him, Hattie rapidly completed her incantation. Dark tentacles erupted from the ground, binding Sophia's body completely.

Charles rushed forward without finesse, slamming his palm against Sophia:

"Purification!"

BUZZ—

Milky light enveloped her form.

"SKREEE—!" Sophia's mouthparts emitted a piercing shriek as her body convulsed. The Slow spell collapsed instantly, restoring Ruth's full speed.

"You! Die!"

Black mist surged from Sophia's body, dissolving the tentacles. One whip-like appendage shot toward Charles' neck—

"Shield!"

The protective barrier flared to life, deflecting the attack effortlessly.

"One... two... three..." Charles counted silently. The Shield spell lasted only six seconds. He maintained the purifying light until "five," then retreated—

WHOOSH!

The flailing tentacles grasped empty air. First exchange: two spell slots expended, no substantial losses.

Ahead, a visibly weakened Sophia twitched her flagella, preparing to pursue—only to see Ruth already behind the statues, her blades carving through the wood.

"Begone, wretch!"

Sophia's mouthparts screeched. Abandoning Charles, she recast Slow and unleashed a basketball-sized Chromatic Orb at Ruth.

BOOM—!

The orb detonated midair. Fortunately, even slowed, Ruth's innate speed allowed her to evade the direct hit—only suffering minor splash damage.

After this exchange, the trio remained virtually unscathed. Sophia, however, found herself overwhelmed by their coordinated assault while her cultists remained incapacitated.

Good. Two or three more rounds like this—destroy the remaining statues—then we focus Sophia down.

The advantage is still ours.

Charles allowed himself a moment of relief as he assessed the battlefield—

KRAKOOM!

A deafening explosion erupted at the Timber Yard's entrance. Blinding lightning flashed, followed by Ekta's piercing scream:

"AAAGH—!"

Charles whirled toward the sound. Rapid footsteps pounded closer as dark figures burst into the Timber Yard, hands clamped over their noses and mouths.

Who are they?

Reinforcements? Enemies?

Before he could ponder further, a silver flash cut through the haze. Primordial danger screamed through his nerves—

He's targeting me!

"Shield!"

The protective barrier materialized just as a silver square-headed hammer struck—

BOOM!

A violent surge of electricity exploded across Charles' body, the concussive force sending him flying uncontrollably backward.

"UGH—!"

He crashed to the ground with a pained grunt, rolling several times before coming to a stop. Dizziness washed over him.

Thank the gods for Eldritch Mind and his dual 2nd-level protective spells—without them, he'd be unconscious at best, completely combat-ineffective at worst.

Still, it took several seconds for the world to stop spinning.

When his vision finally cleared—

He found himself lying right beside Sophia.

The intruders were none other than Xanathar's Guild thugs, led by their near-feral commander, Kendrz.

His eyes burned crimson, body radiating an ominous red glow. Infernal power—bestowed by devils—coursed through his veins as Regolas' voice echoed like a curse in his mind:

"That white-haired man...

He's the source of all your troubles...

Kill him... sever his left arm...

Complete your mission... reclaim what you've lost..."

"DIE—!"

Kendrz roared, the relentless whispers driving him to madness. With no outlet for his rage against the cambion, he charged—shield and warhammer raised—toward Charles!

"Master!"

Hattie's startled cry slipped out, revealing their true relationship. She'd seen the silver projectile but couldn't intercept its lightning-fast trajectory.

"You bastards...!"

The witch's eyes blazed with fury. Dark energy swirled around her as she prepared to annihilate these Xanathar interlopers.

"Ignore me!"

Charles scrambled away, rolling through the filth to escape Sophia's reach.

Miraculously, Sophia remained focused on casting—desperately trying to stop Ruth from destroying her precious statues. Had she prioritized eliminating Charles over preserving them, his unprotected state would have made him easy prey.

But fate often hinged on such split-second choices.

Covered in grime, Charles bellowed: "Keep pressuring Sophia! Let Ruth wreck those statues! Andny—tell Sephera to intensify the Stinking Cloud!"

No time to check on Ekta. Survival took priority over healing.

Hearing his strong voice, Hattie suppressed her worry. Weaving through the new threats, she summoned more tentacles to harass Sophia.

Charles finally got a clear look at his attacker—

The silver square-headed hammer had already returned to its master's grip.

Recognition dawned.

Storm Warhammer.

The crowning achievement of hill dwarf craftsmanship. Using their unique runic magic, they bound the power of lightning and storms within these hammers. Upon impact, they unleash terrifying electrical discharges and concussive force—capable of knocking targets unconscious while hurling them backward.

What's more, these weapons possess a homing enchantment—when thrown, they automatically return to their master's hand. This allows dwarves to use them as ranged weapons, striking enemies from afar before recalling them.

Just as Kendrz had demonstrated moments ago.

Legends say the Mountain King himself wielded such a hammer to vanquish all giants in the Gauntlgrym Mountains, securing a peaceful homeland for his people.

To this day, the crafting methods remain a closely guarded secret of the hill dwarves. Only they may possess such weapons—humans must earn the trust of an entire dwarven kingdom to obtain one.

But gaining dwarven trust is no simple feat. Their long lifespans and conservative nature mean centuries of friendship may not earn a single dwarf's confidence, let alone an entire kingdom's.

The alternative—theft—invites generations of relentless vengeance from every hill dwarf clan.

Yet somehow, this Xanathar's Guild thug possessed one...

A nasty piece of work.

But not unbeatable...

Charles' eyes gleamed as thicker yellow-green toxic mist flooded the area, watching most thugs stagger. Sephera's making her move. He immediately raised his hand, firing two Eldritch Blast energy beams straight at the hammer-wielder.

BANG—!

The thick-bearded Kendrz raised his magically-imbued shield, effortlessly deflecting both blasts. He took just one step back to absorb the impact, completely unharmed.

Charles gritted his teeth.

Damn it! Single Eldritch Blasts are useless against magical shields!

Why don't I know Agonizing Blast yet?!

With that, I'd reduce him to ashes where he stands!

No time for regrets. Seeing thrown hammers were ineffective, Kendrz switched tactics—advancing behind his shield in a controlled charge.

Charles backpedaled while firing again, but the shield absorbed the blasts effortlessly. The warrior barely slowed before accelerating toward him.

Shit! How am I supposed to fight this?!

He didn't realize he faced a 6th-level warrior freshly empowered by devilish pacts—a 1st-level warlock hybrid three levels his superior.

Better equipped too.

Normally, a prepared 4th-level spellcaster could challenge such an opponent. After all, well-funded mages usually outgear impoverished warriors—not the reverse.

Yet here, the tables had turned completely.

Outmatched in attributes, levels, and equipment, the scales tipped overwhelmingly toward Kendrz. Without reinforcements, victory seemed impossible.

Charles kept retreating through the cluttered Timber Yard, maneuvering space shrinking fast. One misstep toward Sophia's battle, and he'd be finished.

Irony—I'm usually the flanker.

Now I'm the one surrounded.

His hand found his spellbook—maybe a Thunderwave could—

Then—

A tall silhouette leaped three meters into the air with a roar:

"Kendrz—DIE!"

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Chapter 89: Chapter 89: Kill Kendrz

Timber Yard, corner.

The warriors of the investigation team unleashed every trick they had—some buried their heads in their clothes, others shoved their faces into the dirt. In the face of the overwhelming stench, their survival instincts flared like never before. By sheer desperation, they managed to lessen their torment, if only slightly.

But their relief was short-lived. Soon, more yellow-green Toxic Mist flooded in. This time, it was thicker, heavier. In an instant, the warriors' faces turned sickly green, teetering on the brink of collapse.

"I can't—ugh—!"

One retched violently, but nothing came up except bile. They hadn't eaten or drunk in a full day and night. The cultists, of course, had no concept of "humane treatment." The fact that they hadn't actively tortured the prisoners was mercy enough.

"I... hrk..."

Another's eyes rolled back, foam bubbling from his lips. His body convulsed before his legs stiffened—he'd been outright knocked unconscious by the fumes!

"Everyone—everyone—!"

Anno's voice was frantic. As a paladin, sacred power surged through her body, granting her some resistance to the assault.

But that resistance couldn't be shared with her comrades. Watching her teammates collapse one after another, her expression twisted into despair.

"Hey—!" she screamed toward the battlefield, voice raw. "Someone! They're going to die in here!"

...

Whoosh—

A thrown spear shot toward the thick-bearded brute from behind. The same man who had fearlessly weathered Charles' Eldritch Blast now refused to take this attack head-on. Instead, he spun into a frantic roll, barely dodging with an undignified stumble.

Charles blinked in surprise but quickly raised his hands and fired two more Eldritch Blasts—

BANG—!

"Tch—!"

The man hit the ground in another roll. One blast struck the earth, sending pebbles scattering with a sharp crack. The other slammed squarely into his back, forcing a pained grunt from his throat. Yet the guy was built like a wild boar—he clambered back up, unharmed, and resumed his stance as if nothing had happened.

Charles eyed him warily. From the corner of his vision, he spotted a tall, shield-strapped Amazon woman descending from above. She landed smoothly, strode forward, and fell in beside him.

A single glance was all it took to recognize her.

...The leader of those Amazon women?

Why had she joined the fight so suddenly?

To save him?

Unlikely. And given how her first move had been a lethal strike, there was no mistaking the blood feud behind it.

His mind raced with wild theories—until the fierce woman spoke.

"Boy, I'm Gale Porter, executive of the Amazon Company," she said. "I don't know what your purpose is, but I have only one goal - to kill that man!"

Her eyes remained locked on the thick-bearded commander of Xanathar's Guild ahead, her voice dripping with undisguised hatred and naked killing intent.

Charles looked at her, momentarily stunned. His mind flashed through countless stories of betrayal and abandonment, but he ultimately suppressed these thoughts and nodded solemnly. "I came to eliminate monsters, yet he ambushed me without warning. This proves his allegiance to the cult!"

"Destroying him is my sacred duty!"

Though he didn't understand what grudge existed between them, this opponent had initiated a raid against him while wielding a powerful magical weapon like the Storm Warhammer...

There was no way to continue fighting without dealing with this guy first!

"I'll provide suppressing fire - you flank him from the side!" he commanded. The tall Amazon woman beside him laughed boldly. "Got it!"

With that, her muscular legs bent slightly before launching her forward like a swift lioness charging straight at Kendrz!

Damn it, she's not following orders at all!

Charles cursed inwardly, but didn't hesitate to consume three spell slots to cast False Life (2nd level). His already limited spell slots immediately dwindled to just two remaining.

He'd soon lose all combat effectiveness...

The thought made him sigh internally.

Normally, a spellcaster with seventeen spell slots could last quite long in such low-level combat.

But Charles's weak constitution couldn't withstand much damage. Both Sophia's damaging spells and that Storm Warhammer strike could easily grievously wound him, forcing him to always preemptively stack protective spells before engagements.

This outrageous spell slot consumption meant he'd nearly exhausted his combat strength after just three exchanges!

After this mission, he absolutely must unlock the Training Grounds. Starting tomorrow - specialized constitution training!

Having made this silent resolution, he cleared his mind and raised his hand, firing two more Eldritch Blasts at Kendrz.

Kendrz raised his shield to block, but Porter had already closed in, her iron spear thrusting straight at his face.

Forced to prioritize defending against the more immediate threat, the two Eldritch Blasts struck him unimpeded.

BANG—!

Even the mightiest warrior struggles against multiple opponents. While being flanked, his only option was to tank the Eldritch Blasts to defend against the Amazon's attacks.

Though...

This guy was surprisingly tanky!

Seeing Kendrz still standing strong - even continuing to trade blows with the Amazon woman - Charles couldn't help another internal sigh.

Though he hadn't mastered the Agonizing Blast invocation, his high Charisma made his Eldritch Blasts hit with force comparable to a heavy crossbow. Ordinary Xanathar thugs would be sent flying from a single hit, either incapacitated or killed outright.

Yet this guy had already tanked three direct hits and still fought vigorously with no signs of slowing down.

They needed more firepower!

With this thought, Charles began advancing. By now, exhaustion was setting in noticeably. Gritting his teeth against the stench, he panted heavily while continuing to bombard Kendrz with Eldritch Blasts.

Ahead, Kendrz struggled to simultaneously fight Porter while dodging. The pincer attack was proving troublesome even for him.

Truthfully, his Strength - whether physique, technique, or equipment - slightly surpassed Porter's. But Charles's constant harassment prevented him from fighting at full capacity - those energy beams hurt!

"Ugh!"

Another blast struck his back, the sharp pain drawing a grunt from Kendrz. This finally solidified his resolve.

No more delays!

He had to eliminate this Amazon woman immediately, then kill that white-haired boy!

With this decision, Kendrz abandoned all defense. Instead of retreating from Porter's attack, he stepped forward, consuming the last charge on his warhammer as he swung it with lightning-infused fury!

Sssshhkh—!

Porter never anticipated this move. Her spear continued its momentum, piercing clean through Kendrz's left shoulder in a spray of blood that nearly crippled his entire arm!

As for the incoming warhammer, she instinctively raised her round shield—

BOOM—!

The deafening explosion swept through the Timber Yard, the shockwave rippling the yellow-green fumes. Porter's body went flying, her already fume-addled mind succumbing to unconsciousness as she crashed to the ground.

Charles barely registered the sudden turn. On reflex, he unleashed two more Eldritch Blasts at Kendrz. With his left arm useless, the commander could no longer raise his shield, barely twisting away to avoid one blast while the other struck his chest!

"Gaaah—!"

A rib snapped as Kendrz howled in agony. Blood gushed from his ruined arm, but his eyes burned with feral rage as he charged Charles like a wounded boar.

Flickers of lightning reappeared along his Storm Warhammer's silver surface—yet this time, he didn't throw it.

Having been a warlock for less than three hours, he still didn't understand how to recharge the hammer's magic. He couldn't guarantee it would fly true if he forced his own power into it.

Nor could he risk missing against this unpredictable mage—after all, his earlier throws had only knocked out the women, while the white-haired man remained unharmed!

This foe was clearly different. If his final throw failed, allowing the mage to resume those painful spell attacks from a distance... that would be disastrous.

So he charged instead, determined to finish this in melee.

Some primal instinct whispered that mages were weak in close combat—get within striking distance, and victory would follow.

Thus, within the Timber Yard's foul haze, a bloodied warrior lunged at an exhausted spellcaster. The endgame had arrived.

Seeing the frenzied charge, Charles wheezed through burning lungs, knowing escape was impossible. Two Eldritch Blasts likely wouldn't stop Kendrz now, so he forewent the cantrip to instead cast Blade Ward.

If melee combat was inevitable, then melee combat it would be.

Thank the gods he'd chosen the Pact of the Blade—at least he wouldn't be defenseless!

With this thought, his hand flew to his hip as he stepped forward to meet the charge. Kendrz swung his warhammer one-handed, the square-headed weapon crackling with lightning as it descended toward Charles's chest with thunderous force!

Come then!

Charles was ready. His incantation finished just in time: "Absorb Elements!"

Absorb Elements.

Similar to Shield in duration but specialized—where Shield countered physical attacks, this spell neutralized elemental damage: fire, frost, lightning, acid, and thunder.

BANG—!

The hammer struck. Blade Ward's sigil shattered, absorbing most impact before the weakened blow connected with Mage Armor and False Life's protections.

Meanwhile, Charles's left hand slapped his spellbook pouch—Thunderwave erupted!

BOOOOOM—!

The concussive blast hurled Kendrz backward as the shockwave reverberated through the Timber Yard.

Gasping for air, Charles felt the hammer's residual sting. Lightning crawled across his torso—only to be absorbed by his spell. Just a tingle, no worse than winter static!

Perfect. It worked.

His lips curled as electricity danced across his skin—all that absorbed energy waiting to be used.

Absorb Elements didn't just mitigate damage—it harnessed the very forces meant to harm him.

This was a spellcaster's true power. Their vast arsenal could turn any enemy's strength against them. Even wielding mighty artifacts, non-casters often found their efforts backfiring spectacularly.

Like right now!

Charles raised his right hand. The stored lightning coalesced, threads of energy weaving into the form of a longsword—his Pact Weapon manifestation.

The simplest use of absorbed elements? Channeling them into his blade.

"Die!"

He growled through clenched teeth, eyes flashing with lethal intent as his crackling longsword arced toward Kendrz's throat - moving with the practiced grace of a seasoned Sword Master!

CRACK!

The fallen Kendrz twisted aside at the last moment, avoiding a fatal blow - but the pact-forged blade still cleaved through his leather armor and bit deep into his right shoulder!

A surge of raw lightning coursed through Kendrz's massive frame. Every muscle locked rigid, his hair standing on end as his face contorted in agony: "ARRGH—!"

The hunter had become the hunted.

Paralyzed and helpless, Kendrz could only twitch upon the ground as Charles immediately adjusted his grip and swung for the killing stroke—

SHNK—!

The magically conjured Pact Weapon weighed nothing, allowing even Charles's frail arms to achieve blinding speed. The paralyzed warrior stood no chance as the razor edge found his carotid artery.

A hot geyser of blood erupted, drenching Charles from head to toe. The crimson deluge instantly doused his battle fury - leaving him standing frozen, eyes wide with shock as icy realization washed over him.

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Chapter 90: Chapter 90: Purification Complete

High above, Regolas hovered far out of range of the Stinking Cloud's effects, keeping watch. But the distance blurred his vision—only after Charles's blade had already slit Kendrz's throat did he realize, with a jolt, that the warrior he'd pinned his hopes on had fallen to a mere human!

Witnessing the carnage below, fury boiled in his chest. He spat in disgust, cursing inwardly: Pathetic humans—always churning out worthless, incompetent trash. Handed power and equipment beyond their worth, yet they still lose to some whelp half their age and skill!

Rot in the Nine Hells, you miserable wretch. Your soul is mine to torment forever.

Yet as he glared down at the battlefield, hesitation flickered in his eyes. Should he descend and finish this himself? Claim the Illusionist's Bracers and Storm Warhammer by force?

But one threat gave him pause.

Somewhere in that timber yard, a paladin lurked.

His gaze slid to the corner where Anno, though half-blinded by the fumes, clenched her jaw and strained to pierce the gloom. The dim firelight offered little clarity, but her determination to rejoin the fight burned undimmed.

Her. She was the problem.

Were it not for that damned paladin, he'd have intervened long ago. But paladins carried that accursed gift from Order itself—Divine Sense—the ability to pinpoint every undead, fiend, and extraplanar being in their vicinity.

And worse: identify them.

He couldn't risk it. If she had that sense active, if she detected a devil skulking in Liberl Port and reported it to Blackstaff Tower, triggering a city-wide purge—

Everything would unravel.

Months of meticulous planning, all to frame this cult as the sole culprits, to divert suspicion from his true allies—gone in an instant. This operation was meant to save their other cells, not doom them.

Useless Kendrz. Meddlesome paladin.

With a final glare, Regolas chose discretion. His coat billowed as he dissolved into white light—gone without a trace.

Below.

So this... is what it feels like to kill someone up close?

Charles wasn't sure. The blood coating his hands, Kendrz's terrified expression frozen in death, the body crumpling to the ground—his heart pounded so violently his ears rang. His fingers trembled, barely able to grip his weapon.

"Master! Sophia's pinned—purify her now!"

Hattie's shout snapped him back to reality. "R-right. I'm... coming."

Teeth clenched, he forced down the terror gripping his chest. He snatched up the Storm Warhammer and charged toward Sophia.

The scene there was no better. Hattie and Sophia had burned through their magic in their duel, both nearly tapped out. Ruth, still slowed, had taken multiple Chromatic Orbs to dismantle the statue—now lying in ruins, its cultist defenders dead.

Sophia, bloated and barely mobile, was out of spells.

A spellcaster without magic was just... prey.

"Master, go for it!" Hattie gasped.

Charles checked the warhammer—empty. That bastard wasted every last charge.

No matter. He hurled it anyway.

Whoosh—

The warhammer clattered at Sophia's base. Her flagella twitched in irritation—a feeble response.

Meanwhile, Charles circled, leaping onto her flank. He grabbed a flagellum, scaling her grotesque form like some monstrous cliff. Once atop her, he pressed a hand to her flesh and whispered:

"Purify."

Bzzzt—

White light erupted, enveloping her entirely.

"GYAAAA—!"

Sophia's mandibles shrieked as her flagella lashed out, coiling around Charles's ankle to drag him down.

But her strength was spent. Gritting his teeth, Charles resisted her weakening thrashing, pouring every ounce of purification energy into her corrupted form—scouring away the filth and sin festering within.

Bzzzt—

At last, the monster's wails ceased. Her consciousness slipped into slumber—her soul, finally cleansed.

Only then did the purification's effects begin manifesting upon her physical form. Her grotesque bulk shrank gradually, contours shifting until all that remained was a slumbering nun collapsed upon the ground.

As the white glow of purification dimmed, Charles rose shakily to his feet and lifted Sophia's unconscious form. Relief flooded through him.

A clean landing.

No matter what chaos had unfolded, his primary objective—to purify Sophia undetected—was complete.

Now came the cleanup.

Pulling a spellbook from his belt pouch, Charles tossed it weakly to Hattie. "Check on Ekta. She should be fine, but wake her up."

The book contained Cure Wounds. Though Ekta had taken a direct hit from the Storm Warhammer, her injuries likely weren't severe—a minor healing would suffice.

"Mm."

Hattie caught the book, then addressed a mosquito perched on her ear. "Andny, use this to treat Ekta."

Clearly, her own spell slots were depleted—only another witch could perform the healing now.

Unfortunately, as the monastery's weakest witch, Andny had little magic remaining despite avoiding combat. "I... can't. Sephera, how much power do you have left?"

Sephera, entering through the timber yard's doorway while supporting Ekta, looked exasperated. "I'm the most drained of all! That massive Toxic Mist took everything—how could I possibly heal her now?"

"Ruth? Any reserves?" she called out.

From a distance, Ruth grimaced. "The Slow spell's restrictions forced me to burn magic counteracting its effects..."

Faced with their collective helplessness, Charles sighed. "Is there truly no one who can wake Ekta?"

Suddenly, an eager voice rang from a shadowed corner: "I can! Where's the injured? I'll treat her!"

Charles squinted toward the source. Muttering an incantation, he cast Light—illuminating horrors that nearly made him retch.

Corpses. Dozens of investigators with skulls pried open, brains removed.

Don't look. Don't look.

Forcing his gaze away, he finally spotted the speaker—a golden long wavy hair maiden bound with coarse ropes, her face smudged but undeniably beautiful even beneath the grime.

"Over here! Hurry!" she urged.

Charles blinked. Wait—monster dens actually imprison gorgeous adventurers? That's not just game tropes?

He'd just dismantled a cultist stronghold—one Sophia built in under a month—yet here was a classic damsel-in-distress scenario?

Hiss...

Interesting.

Waving, he called back: "Coming!"

After entrusting Sophia to Hattie, he issued rapid orders: "Hattie, Ruth, Andny—scour the battlefield. Destroy anything linking us or Sophia to this place. Sephera, bring Ekta and follow me."

Approaching the bound woman, he suddenly paused. "Ah... who exactly are you?"

Better to ask, even if she seemed harmless.

The woman—Anno—winced before answering stiffly: "We're an investigation team from Blackstaff Tower, probing the Twin Moons Night massacre. These cultists... ambushed us."

Her explanation grew increasingly flustered, cheeks burning with shame as she exaggerated the foes' tactics to salvage dignity.

Charles exhaled. "I see! You've all suffered greatly!"

Perfect. The investigators survived, the cult's crushed, and the monastery's safe.

Surveying the Blackstaff agents—some foaming at the mouth, others unconscious—he genuinely pitied them. "How vile, torturing you into this state!"

Sephera nodded vigorously. "Cultists are the worst!"

Anno gritted her teeth. "Actually, it was poison gas that—"

Charles cut in knowingly: "Using stench as torture? Monstrous!"

Sephera gazed skyward. "Cultists are the worst!"

Defeated, Anno sighed. "Just... untie me?"

Once freed, she brushed dirt from her clothes—still strikingly beautiful despite the grime—and extended a hand.

"Anno Amcastra. Paladin, and captain of this investigation." Her smile was warm. "We owe you our lives. Might I know your name?"

Charles froze.

"Paladin?"

Not a warrior or eldritch knight—a full-fledged paladin?!

Did she already discover...?

Noticing his sudden tension, Anno blinked. "Yes? Is something wrong?"

Charles hastily schooled his features into solemnity. "Ah... nothing. Just... have you sensed anything unusual? With your Divine Sense, I mean."

"Monsters employ countless tricks, and my methods are limited. I'd hate to think some remnant might have escaped..."

His gaze locked onto her with razor intensity. If this paladin has seen through Hattie and the others' true nature...

I'll have to kill her right here.

No matter the consequences. Frame the cultists later. Expose Regolas if needed. Anything to keep the monastery's darkest secret buried.

The witches come first. I won't lose them.

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