

Witch Monastery #Chapter 111: A New Pact - Read

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Novices might not know better. Ruth and Sephera might be unaware. But Charles, having played every class under the sun, knew full well that a hunter of her skill should easily recognize the traces left by creatures in the wild. There was no way she'd "stumble" into the nest of such dangerous foes.

A first-level hunter could avoid this. How could she not?

Especially against ogres—massive, clumsy brutes that left obvious signs and made no effort to conceal their presence.

At the very least, as a druid, she could have spoken with the surrounding plants to ensure their resting spot was safe.

Yet she'd deliberately led them into danger. Her intentions were clear.

Nidalee met his gaze steadily, unfazed even with a blade at her throat. "Mr. Charles, I apologize for my oversight. Please, forgive me."

She lowered her head, feigning remorse.

Behind her, Sephera let out a derisive snort. "Oversight? An apology? Ha! If we'd been even slightly weaker, those ogres would've dragged us off, stripped us bare, and rutted into us until our eyes rolled back and our tongues lolled out—bellies swollen with their seed like overripe melons. Tell me, druid—do you really think an apology would undo that?"

Her words painted a grotesque but all-too-plausible scene. Half-ogres weren't born from consensual encounters—human women rarely survived the ordeal, most dying mid-birth before the ogres tore the infants free.

Few spoke of it openly. Fewer still described it as vividly as Sephera just had.

Ruth's cheeks flushed, and she averted her gaze. Nidalee, however, turned scarlet, stunned that such vulgarity could spill from the lips of someone so elegant.

City folk truly are vicious.

"Then—then as a gesture of sincerity," Nidalee gritted out, "I'll return all your advance payment. I'll still guide you to Zenith's castle afterward. Does that satisfy you?" Her pained expression suggested the coins hurt more than Sephera's words.

Sephera glanced at Charles, signaling him to play along. She didn't know enough about hunters to dispute Nidalee's excuse—this was just haggling.

But Charles remained unmoved. "The money isn't the point. Tell me the truth, druid. Why lead us here?"

His gaze sharpened, and the blade's edge pressed closer, grazing Nidalee's wheat-colored skin.

The color drained from her face. She knew partial honesty was her only way out.

Drawing a steadying breath, she replied, "I... I meant no real harm. I only wanted to gauge your strength. You're seeking Zenith, that blood-soaked bandit lord—surely you plan to end him?"

"Let's be frank: so do I. Your power—yours and these ladies'—astonishes me. Together, we could crush him."

"I know a hidden path into his castle. We could dismantle his forces with minimal risk. The spoils? We'd split them fif—"

"Enough!" Charles cut her off coldly. "Who said anything about my plans? Don't presume, and don't drag me into your mess with pretty words."

A lie, of course. Now he was haggling.

His unspoken message was clear: I've no stake in this fight. If you want my help, the price goes up.

Nidalee hesitated. Then, urgency outweighing caution, she blurted, "Fine—60-40! No, 70-30! You take the lion's share, first pick of everything. Deal?"

Charles studied her. "You're really in it for the gold?"

Druids, by his understanding, seldom craved wealth. They lived in forests and wilds—what use had they for coin?

Her hunt for Zenith hid another motive.

Treasure? A vendetta?

Reading his shift in tone, Nidalee relaxed slightly. "To be honest, Mr. Charles, wealth isn't my aim. If you insist, we can make it 80-20."

"But Zenith must fall. His usual pillaging? I'd overlook it. But now he meddles in forbidden power, disrupting nature's balance. His faction must be purged!"

Her righteous fervor mirrored her guild-hall pitch days earlier.

Charles' eyes glinted as he considered. Knowing he'd eventually need to assault Zenith's castle anyway, he weighed his options briefly. With a subtle flick of his wrist, the longsword dissipated into mist, returning them to a peaceful standoff.

"Eighty-twenty... Fine. For nature's balance, I'll join you on this venture." He gave a curt nod. "But make no mistake - Zenith's no pushover. I expect you've done proper reconnaissance before extending this... invitation."

Nidalee exhaled in visible relief, stepping forward to extend her hand once more. "Of course, Mr. Charles. Truth be told, your party's strength surpasses all expectations. I'd anticipated a grueling fight against those brutes - perhaps even needing to retreat. Never did I imagine you'd dispatch them with such ease!"

"This changes everything. My confidence in our mission has doubled!"

Charles maintained his smile, eyes glittering with unspoken calculations. Having been deceived once already, he'd be a fool to take this Nidalee at face value. Whatever game she played, her cards remained partly concealed.

The agreement stood - but when the time came, he'd adapt as circumstances demanded...

Nidalee's smile mirrored his, though her thoughts ran simpler. Let the others squabble over gold and trinkets. If she could claim that holy sword fragment, no price would be too steep...

With their new pact forged, the four returned to the creek, resting for an hour before setting out again.

This time, Nidalee kept up their brisk pace, pushing onward. They trekked for another two hours, covering over twenty li of mountainous terrain before the sun dipped southward, hinting at dusk. Only then did she halt.

"Everyone," she asked, "shall we regroup? Ahead lies Zenith's territory, and this area is patrolled by his scouts."

Charles gave a slight nod. His magical effects were nearing expiration, and he needed time to renew them. "Agreed."

They settled on the spot, unpacking rations—but this time, Nidalee proactively offered her remaining goodberries. "Please, have these. With a druid present, ordinary food is beneath you."

Charles accepted without ceremony, swallowing one whole. A burst of sweetness flooded his mouth, followed by warmth spreading through his stomach and limbs, soothing the fatigue of their journey.

Ruth and Sephera likewise partook, each taking a berry before settling into quiet repose.

After another hour, once fully recovered, Charles rose. "Nidalee, lead on."

Nidalee nodded, taking point. The sun now burned crimson, though true night hadn't fallen—yet the dense woods grew dim, and eerie winds whispered as if ghosts stirred within.

Even Nidalee slowed, stepping cautiously to avoid noise.

"Follow my footsteps," she murmured. "Hobgoblins litter this area with traps. I can't mark them all—for efficiency, tread only where I've trodden."

Charles trailed closely behind. But avoiding trouble didn't mean trouble would avoid them.

Rustle... rustle... rustle—

Slow, deliberate footsteps crunched through dead leaves. The party ducked behind a tree, peering out to see a humanoid silhouette lurching toward them from the gloom.

When the figure came into view, Charles' pupils constricted.

A zombie.

Like something from Resident Evil, the thing wore tattered rags, its skin ghastly green. A lolling tongue, one eye dangling, and the reek of rotting flesh left no doubt—this was undead.

But...

Gods, it's ugly.

He'd known zombies prowled these wilds, that Zenith dabbled in such filth—yet seeing one in reality versus a game was viscerally different.

Was this the defilement Nidalee had mentioned?

Indeed, resurrecting the dead violated every natural law druids revered.

Time to put it back in the ground.

His peripheral vision caught Nidalee crouching, poised to strike when it neared—but Charles gestured for restraint. Ignoring her puzzled look, he stepped forward to meet the zombie.

Nidalee's confusion deepened as the creature lurched within reach, jaws unhinging to reveal yellowed fangs—

Charles slid behind it in one fluid motion, hand clamping its shoulder as he whispered: "Purified."

Humm—

Milk-white light erupted. The zombie stiffened, a guttural screech tearing from its rotted throat: "Gyaa—!"

Then, amidst the radiance, its body crumbled to ash—barely a handful remaining.

Charles checked his system, nodding at the newly gained 50 Purification Points.

Confirmed. Not just living witches—even undead yield purification.

That "Agatha" he'd purified... had she been undead too?

The architect of the Rubble District massacre, perhaps?

Had she, like this zombie, been utterly annihilated?

Hmm. Probably.

Tch. If undead work, what about fiends? Purifying one of those might net a fortune in points...

And this castle... might prove even more lucrative than expected.

As his mind raced, the three women approached. Nidalee's expression brimmed with awe. "You... are you a paladin?"

The white light had unmistakable echoes of divine radiance—enough to kindle genuine reverence.

This changes everything. A paladin would never tolerate such evil. He might even cede the Holy Sword Fragment willingly...

Charles blinked, then chuckled at her misconception. "Ah... no sworn oaths here. But think of me as... a clergyman devoted to eradicating darkness."

Behind him, Sephera's lips twitched.

Eradicating darkness?

More like 'eradicating chastity.'

Regardless of Nidalee's interpretation, Charles—driven by his hunger for Purification Points—pressed on: "Are there more zombies nearby? I cannot tolerate such undead roaming freely. Find them, and I shall purify them!"

His declaration only solidified Nidalee's belief that he was a paladin. Yet she remained composed, adopting a grave tone. "My lord, I understand your zeal. But the necromancer Zenith employs still works within the castle."

"If we waste time scouring these woods for stragglers, more innocent lives will be lost!"

Her words, carefully crafted to appeal to a paladin's sensibilities, struck their intended chord.

Charles pondered briefly. These mindless zombies lack both intelligence and speed. Even if they wander, they won't get far. No need to rush.

Better to eliminate the source first—secure the Holy Sword Fragment and complete our original mission.

With a nod, he conceded. "Very well. Lead us to the castle—we infiltrate at once."

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Chapter 112: Chapter 112: The Dark Elf

This was a castle abandoned for years, its outer walls long crumbled and buried by the earth. The main gate faced west, flanked by towers to the north and south. Beneath the towers, arrow slits allowed archers to fire from behind the walls' protection.

Though much of the structure had collapsed, the remaining construction still offered ample cover. Those atop the walls could survey the surroundings—making the castle's front nearly impregnable. With their party's current strength, a direct assault would be futile.

Fortunately, with Nidalee guiding them, a frontal assault wasn't necessary.

"This way, hurry!"

In the small woods north of the castle, Nidalee crouched low, carefully using the trees for cover. Her green eyes, enhanced by magic, pierced the darkness as she scouted the castle ahead.

Charles followed, his expression grim. His consciousness warned him that the castle's sanitation system had likely failed long ago, and its current inhabitants had repurposed the area for their own needs...

But the mission came first. Gritting his teeth, he trailed Nidalee, moving silently closer.

Between the woods and the castle lay a clearing less than ten meters wide, dotted with remnants of the outer walls. Beyond that stood the side wall of a castle chamber, partially collapsed where a window once was, creating an opening.

Nidalee peered through this gap, observing the hobgoblins inside.

By now, the sun had fully set, plunging the forest and castle into darkness. Only a few scattered torches provided light, allowing the robbers within some semblance of nighttime activity.

"That's the hobgoblins' dorm," Nidalee whispered, still watching. "They've likely finished dinner and are gambling now. They'll probably retire soon. A hunter's greatest virtue is patience..."

Charles' face tightened. Waiting longer in these woods was unbearable. Glancing at the ruined walls ahead, he clenched his jaw and suddenly said, "Perhaps I can help them sleep early tonight."

Nidalee turned, puzzled, as he scanned the woods to ensure no one was nearby. Then he dashed to the castle wall, pressing against the collapsed edge like a thief, cautiously peering inside.

The chamber spanned sixty or seventy square meters, with a wooden door leading east on its southern side. Near the collapsed opening lay a large plank—likely intended to seal the gap come winter.

Thankfully, repairs hadn't begun yet, or this path would've been lost.

Thick straw and bedding covered one corner, where six figures in undergarments rolled dice, oblivious to the danger approaching.

These were the hobgoblins.

Like bugbears and goblins, hobgoblins belonged to the broader "goblinoid" classification, though greatly weakened. They stood near human height but bore crimson skin, pointed ears, massive noses, and deep nasolabial folds—traits that clashed with human aesthetics.

Compared to humans, they held slight physical and intellectual advantages, but their true strength lay in their rigid hierarchy, ruthless discipline, and mandatory military training for all members.

Though less brutal than Amazon warrior training, every hobgoblin—male or female—underwent rigorous drills from childhood: weapons, armor, shields, marching, logistics, formations, and more.

Thus, every adult hobgoblin was a versatile soldier. In the Rubble District, hobgoblin-led mercenary groups were synonymous with reliability. Even Zenith's bandit crew, led by hobgoblins, struck fear as a formidable criminal gang.

But even the fiercest criminals needed ale to endure lonely nights.

This close, Charles could hear their drunken dice rolls and slurred voices: "Roll Perception... critical failure! Nice—you tumbled down the stairs..."

The others grumbled complaints. Clearly, those off duty tonight had enjoyed one too many drinks, leaving them dazed.

Hearing their tipsy voices, Charles' lips curled slightly.

Perfect timing.

Then, sleep tight...

He murmured an incantation, then vaulted through the collapsed wall, appearing before the group. As they gaped in shock, he raised his hand and unleashed his spell: "Sleep!"

The second-tier spell's magic surged forth, engulfing the chamber. Already drunk and seated on bedding, the hobgoblins succumbed instantly, slumping into deep slumber.

Flawless.

Charles smirked inwardly, then beckoned to the others. "Come. It's done."

Stepping inside, he noted the hobgoblins' bedding—less than clean due to mountain living—but the well-ventilated room held no stench.

Then again, with a gaping hole in the wall, icy winds scoured away any foul odors.

The three girls hurried in. Ruth and Sephera leaped ahead, joining him swiftly. Nidalee trailed, her eyes wide with awe. "To think you're also a master mage..."

Charles chuckled lightly. "I've always relied on spellcasting as my primary combat method."

Brushing past the topic, he pressed, "Enough chatter. Do you know the castle's layout? Specifically, where Zenith and the necromancer reside?"

He had some idea from memory but preferred not to reveal his knowledge. After all, reality might differ from the game—where Zenith had never dabbled in necromancy!

Charles also had no intention of waking the hobgoblins for interrogation. These creatures were fiercely loyal and proud of their race.

If one woke, it would likely shout to alert its comrades—a risk he refused to take.

For respectable enemies like hobgoblins, the most honorable solution was to kill them all.

Hearing his words, Nidalee snapped back to attention. "I'm not certain, but we could capture a few goblins for questioning."

Her gaze turned westward, piercing through the wall toward the arrow towers. "A few goblins should be stationed there. If we move carefully, we can grab one or two and extract the intel we need."

Hobgoblins, the cleverest among goblinoids, often ruled over their lesser kin—bugbears and goblins—using them as laborers, thugs, and cannon fodder for their armies.

This let their forces swell rapidly, but these underlings could also become vulnerabilities.

Charles nodded. "Then it's settled. Ruth, you'll move with Miss Nidalee. Capture a few goblins alive for interrogation—just like last time."

Ruth nodded. "Understood!"

The two agile women sprang into action, first eavesdropping to confirm the coast was clear before silently slipping out. They split left and right, soundlessly darting toward the towers.

Two minutes later, they returned, each dragging a gagged, terrified goblin into the room.

"Cleared them out," Ruth reported first. "I killed every other guard there, leaving just this one. He's scared witless—should answer anything we ask."

Nidalee's expression was complicated. "I only took this one. The others were knocked out, not killed."

Sephera smirked. "Oh? How merciful of you."

Nidalee scowled but didn't retort. Charles ignored the jab, taking the trembling goblin from Ruth and hauling it outside.

"You saw what happened to your friends. I've got questions. Lie or try anything, and you know the consequences."

The goblin nodded frantically. Charles yanked out the gag.

"Where's your boss, Zenith? And the necromancer?"

"Z-Zenith's in the deepest room on the second floor," the goblin stammered. "The dark elf's resting in the northeast room on the first floor—the one with the basement."

Charles' eyebrows shot up.

A dark elf?

Huh. Different from the instance... No, that wasn't quite accurate. The instance never specified the necromancer's identity. This castle was just a minor instance after all...

So Zenith has connections to the Underdark?

The Rubble District did have a path to the Underdark - deep in the plateau, in an abandoned mine shaft called the "Haunted Gold Mine." The locals avoided it like plague, terrified by the rumors.

But as a player, Charles knew the truth: it wasn't haunted at all. The miners had simply tunneled into the Underdark, only to be enslaved by mind flayers who claimed the mine as their secret passage to the surface.

Years later, the mine's terrifying reputation persisted, though on the Underdark side, the territory had changed hands multiple times through constant warfare. So encountering Underdark denizens here - dark elves or duergar - wasn't entirely unexpected.

Nidalee's eyes visibly lit up, her expression turning eager. She seemed about to say something, but after a moment's hesitation, she bit back her words and adopted an indifferent expression, waiting for Charles to continue the interrogation.

Charles noted her reaction but gave no outward sign as he pressed on with the questioning.

"Good. I like your attitude, so you get to live," he said. "Now, exactly which room is the necromancer in? How do we get there? And what enemies stand in our way?"

The goblin's eyes lit up, visibly encouraged. His speech became clearer: "From the room where the hobgoblins rest, go east through that door to reach our storage room. East of the storage room, a small door leads through a dark corridor straight to where we sacrifice to the deities."

"Our priest and two acolytes are usually there. From the sacrifice room, head further east and you'll see three rooms - the dark elf resides in the central one."

He paused, his beady eyes shifting, then added: "Alternatively, you could take the southern dining hall route, but it adjoins several dorms. You'd risk being noticed there."

Charles nodded. "Good."

Producing two gold coins, he continued: "Answer one more question truthfully, and not only will you live, but you'll earn these. Understood?"

The goblin nodded eagerly. "Understood! Understood!"

"How many bodyguards does Zenith have?" Charles demanded. "Where are they stationed? What equipment do they carry? Tell me everything you know."

"There... there are two hobgoblin officers," the goblin stammered. "They sleep upstairs near Zenith. They're our captains. Oh, and Zenith recently acquired an owlbear kept caged downstairs, though he never releases it."

Charles nodded. "Good. Anything else we should know? Traps? Ambushes?"

The goblin hesitated, then shook his head. "Nothing..."

"You're lying," Charles stated coldly. "In that dark corridor you mentioned - there's a grick lurking there, isn't there?"

Gricks - monstrous worm-like creatures with stubby beaks surrounded by four palps.

Their wall-crawling ability lets them lurk on ceilings, and they can adjust their skin tone to blend seamlessly with surrounding stone. Only the most skilled scouts could detect them!

This particular one served as the priest's pet. Not only was it formidable in strength, but its alarm would alert the entire castle. Many novice adventurers had fallen prey to ambushes in that dark corridor.

Charles might not know the castle's approach routes (the game instance only permitted frontal assaults), but he remembered its interior traps quite clearly.

At Charles' accusation, the goblin turned deathly pale, his pupils contracting. "Y-yes! There is a grick! I forgot - I rarely visit the altar-"

Shink!

A flash of steel. Charles slit the goblin's throat. Scalding blood sprayed as the goblin's body stiffened, swayed briefly, then collapsed to the ground.

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Chapter 113: Chapter 113: Bloody Night

Kicking the goblin's corpse aside, Charles took a deep breath, steadying his racing heart after the kill. He turned and shrugged slightly at the three girls. "I gave him a chance. He didn't take it."

Nidalee's expression darkened, but she said nothing further: "Should we interrogate this one, then?"

She still clutched another goblin, now unconscious, its eyes rolled back in terror.

"No. Kill it." Charles shook his head. "I've learned enough. It's useless now. Better to eliminate loose ends."

Not a shred of mercy remained for these brigands. As a player, he knew better than anyone the unspeakable horrors adventurers suffered at their hands.

Especially now—with a dark elf necromancer from the Underdark among them. Their atrocities had even stirred the typically reclusive druids to action. The scale of their crimes defied imagination.

Sword in hand, his gaze hardened. "Patience. We wait until the goblins in the southern dorms fall asleep. Then we clear the venue before guiding Zenith."

Nidalee stared, stunned. She glanced at the other two girls, but neither opposed the "clear the venue" directive.

For a moment, her heart quivered—then her fists clenched tight.

...

Bugbears, true to their race name, are the most formidable among goblinoid kin. Their bodies are covered in coarse brown fur, their arms so long they hang past their knees—giving them not the look of the feeble, but rather of some great, brutish ape.

Savage by nature, belligerent and crude, they possess monstrous strength yet move with unsettling lightness. Thus, wherever hobgoblins muster their legions, bugbears lurk as their enforcers—thugs clad in fur and malice.

But tonight, these brutes would find no chance to prove their might.

The dormitory door creaked open. A lean figure slipped inside, silent as a shadow. The room was packed with over a dozen slumbering bugbears—castle space was limited, crumbling in places, forcing them to cram into whatever intact chambers remained.

The intruder moved to the nearest bugbear. Leaning over, they pressed a hand over the creature's muzzle—then drove a longsword straight through its heart.

The bugbear's eyes snapped open. It tried to roar, but the assassin slammed a knee onto its throat, stifling all sound. Death's chill seized it; limbs spasmed. Then—stillness.

One down.

The shadow in the room was, of course, Charles. After extracting every scrap of intel from their captives, his team had waited in the hobgoblins' quarters until the last torch guttered out. Only then did they move, ghostlike, to begin the culling.

His pulse hammered after the first kill—yet days of bloodshed had hardened him. Without pause, he pinned the next bugbear, repeating the thrust. A struggle. A second corpse. Then a third. A fourth...

Blood seeped through straw bedding, pooling across the floor. Outside, clouds swallowed the moon. In under twenty minutes, a dozen more lives ended by his hand.

"Done."

Charles rose on unsteady legs, hands slick with gore. Sweat beaded his brow; his thighs trembled with adrenaline. Fear had gripped him—not just of waking the pack, but of the raw, intimate brutality of blade meeting flesh.

"Phew..."

He wiped his forehead with a wrist and stepped outside. Ruth, Sephera, and Nidalee stood waiting, their own sectors cleared.

Nidalee's face was ashen. Though she hadn't wielded a blade, the weight of slaughter pressed on her. The two witches, however, showed no strain. Seeing Charles' pallor, they flanked him, gripping his arms.

"Are you alright?"

He forced a smile. "I need a moment. Nidalee—you too?"

She nodded stiffly. "Ten minutes. Then we press onward."

With those words, she turned and swiftly departed northward, as if fleeing this Acheron-like hellscape. Meanwhile, Charles - following the goblin's directions - led the two witches to the storage room's northern gates, hoping to find something useful.

Inside the storage room, aged barrels lined both eastern and western walls. The first eastern barrel contained salted meat, while the others held slightly rotting grain emitting a faintly sweet scent. The western barrels appeared to contain liquor, though of similarly poor quality.

Charles approached the salted meat barrel, rummaged through it, then sniffed the contents before making a slightly disgusted face: "Well then, I shouldn't have expected anything better from goblins."

Replacing the meat, he casually sat on a nearby barrel. The two witches wordlessly flanked him. His gaze flickered to the door behind them, pausing in thought before turning to Ruth: "Could you kill a grick in a single strike?"

The monster lurked in the dark corridor beyond that door. Even if they tracked its trail, failing to kill it instantly would alert the priest in the temple beyond.

Ruth's expression turned troubled: "A grick... I could kill it, but instantly? That... would be difficult to achieve."

The creature measured three to four meters long with incredibly tough hide. While Ruth possessed the strength to defeat it, demanding a one-strike kill was indeed asking too much.

Charles sighed lightly: "Very well. It seems we can't take the shortcut. We'll have to go through the dining hall then."

After a pause, he added: "Also... keep an eye on Nidalee."

Sephera's expression shifted slightly, seeming puzzled. Ruth raised an eyebrow, her purple-red eyes glinting with murderous intent: "I've had the same feeling. Master's safety comes first. Should we... strike first when the battle ends?"

When dealing with outsiders, she remained the same witch who overflowed with killing intent at the slightest provocation.

Sephera shared similar thoughts, though her bloodlust wasn't as strong, which was why she hadn't voiced her suggestion immediately.

Ironically, at this moment, the most merciful one was Charles: "No need, Sephera. Just keep watch over her. Unless it's an irreconcilable conflict, there's no need for confrontation."

Sephera nodded in understanding. With this consensus reached, the three left the storage room to find the druid.

At that moment, Nidalee was crouched in the clearing outside the northern room, resting while gazing at the night sky. Charles approached directly: "We'll go around through the dining hall. That grick's too troublesome to deal with. To avoid alerting those inside, we shouldn't provoke it."

Her complexion had improved considerably, so she nodded lightly: "Alright."

Rising, she gripped her throwing spear and glanced at the night: "It's getting late. We should act quickly!"

With that, she led the way toward the castle's southeastern dining hall.

Pushing open the door revealed an enormous rectangular room spanning about a hundred square meters. This banquet hall had once hosted the castle master's guests, but now served as the goblins' mess hall.

The room's ceiling reached nearly seven meters high, though the once-suspended chandeliers had all shattered and fallen. Two large wooden tables with benches stood at the center, covered in dirty plates, half-full stew pots, moldy bread, and gnawed bones.

Ignoring the goblins' unsanitary habits, the four proceeded directly to the room's far end. Only after confirming no sounds came from beyond did they slowly push it open.

Beyond lay a north-south corridor. The eastern side had three closed wooden doors and a staircase leading upstairs. The western side held just one door, leading to the hobgoblin priests' quarters.

Ruth and Nidalee tiptoed to listen at the middle eastern door and the western door respectively before returning. Ruth spoke first: "No sounds from the sacrificial chamber. Even priests should be asleep by now, following hobgoblin routines."

"No sounds from the necromancer's workshop either," Nidalee added quietly. "Which should we strike first? Both doors seem locked from inside. You'd think they'd worry about being trapped during a fire..."

She couldn't help complaining - soldier barracks typically maintained unobstructed exits for emergencies. This was precisely how Charles' team had infiltrated several rooms to stab the goblins through their hearts.

But the priests' prayer chamber prized tranquility, and the experimenting necromancer despised interruptions - hence their locked doors.

Charles felt stymied: "Nidalee, can you pick locks?"

Nidalee remained expressionless: "Of course not. I'm no wanderer."

Even most wanderers would find interior-locked doors problematic.

"Don't you know 'Knock'?" the druid countered. Charles shook his head: "No. I don't learn such utility spells."

Ah, this was when he envied proper mages. Had they had an actual mage here with a spellbook containing the lock-opening "Knock" spell, a few incantations could've silently opened the door.

Alas, he wasn't one. As a spellcaster who relied on memory rather than spellbooks, he couldn't waste limited mental capacity on utility spells like Knock.

"Then we'll have to kick it down," he concluded. "But given how thin these walls are, no matter which door we break, the other room—and Zenith upstairs—will hear."

"So we split up and strike both at once?" Ruth murmured. "Cut them all down before they can react?"

Nidalee shot her a startled glance. She hadn't expected this seemingly slight assassin to propose such a reckless plan.

Sephera sighed. "Do you really think that's possible? The rest of us aren't like you—we can't instantly assassinate enemies. We should focus on eliminating one threat first—"

"It's possible," Charles cut in. "In fact, that's exactly what I was about to suggest."

The two girls stared at him in disbelief. Ruth, however, puffed out her modest chest with pride—her thinking aligned perfectly with her Master's at that moment.

"Are you serious?" Nidalee blurted. "You want to divide our forces in this state? We have no idea how strong that priest and his acolytes are, nor how many undead that necromancer has stashed in his laboratory—"

"They won't be that tough," Charles said dismissively. "If they're working under Zenith, how strong could they really be?"

Nidalee looked at him as if he were an idiot. "What are you talking about? This is Zenith—a warlord who's terrorized the Rubble District for over a decade."

"His ambition and influence have only grown. Why else would he dare meddle with necromancy? Mr. Charles, even if we've lucked out killing most of his lackeys, he himself remains a formidable warrior. We cannot afford carelessness. The strongest can still trip in the gutter, no?"

She spoke with forced patience, assuming the young spellcaster had grown arrogant after slaughtering weak goblins.

Turning, she appealed to Sephera: "Surely you agree, Miss Sephera?"

"I follow Mr. Charles' lead," Sephera said without hesitation, switching sides effortlessly. "Hesitation will only give our enemies time to prepare. If they regroup, we'll be at a greater disadvantage."

Nidalee: "..."

She shot the girl a resentful glare. Weren't you just disagreeing a second ago? Now you won't even voice dissent?

Though she'd known this man was the squad's de facto leader, she hadn't expected his authority to be quite so... absolute.

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Chapter 114: Chapter 114: The Stitched Horror

"Very well, it's decided," Charles concluded. "Now let's discuss team assignments. I'll handle the necromancer. What about the rest of you?"

"My toxins are ineffective against undead," Sephera stated. "I'll deal with the priest."

"I can go either way," Ruth began, then caught Charles' meaningful look and amended, "Though a necromancer controlling undead hordes requires immediate decapitation. Given my expertise, I should accompany Mr. Charles."

All three pairs of eyes turned to Nidalee. "And you?"

Nidalee hesitated. "I..."

She realized she had no real choice. Part of her desperately wanted to assault the necromancer's quarters - the Holy Sword Fragment was likely there, being used in some blasphemous necromantic experiment...

But as a druid, she couldn't find justification for this preference. Taking a deep breath, she reluctantly nodded. "Then... I'll join Miss Sephera against the priests."

Teams assigned, they moved without delay. Nidalee shapeshifted into a leopard, charging the western door with Sephera, while Ruth extended a hand, her nails shimmering with magical energy as she slashed at the wooden door—

CRASH—

The door gave way more easily than expected. What greeted them was a wave of putrid stench so thick it was nearly tangible.

"Ugh—!"

Charles grimaced, unable to believe this was a necromancer's workspace.

What the hell? Why this stench?

Properly preserved corpses should be odorless!

Undead made from rotting flesh would have terrible longevity!

Why would...

"UGH—!"

His face twisted further. He deeply regretted lacking a mask. This was his oversight - after all, who remembered environmental details like "overpowering corpse stench" when rushing dungeon instances in games?

No time for complaints. Gritting his teeth, he peered inside.

The room was shrouded in darkness. He cast Light to illuminate the path ahead, and immediately, his eyes fell upon dried black-red trails of blood streaking the ground—a sight so horrifying it chilled the bone.

Following the trails deeper, he saw them: near the basement entrance, several humans, dwarves, and gnomes bound by coarse ropes, their faces blank, as if shattered by unbearable agony into mere husks of their former selves.

In truth, most were already dead. Those still clinging to life had their arms or legs severed—some reduced to limbless torsos, driven to madness by relentless torture!

These were clearly victims captured by the hobgoblins, offered as experiments to the necromancer. Seeing their mutilated forms, Charles felt his heart tremble, then a surge of grief and rage so fierce his vision burned crimson.

Every soul in this castle deserved death.

Gritting his teeth, he knew even the survivors were beyond saving. He and Ruth ignored them, charging down into the basement.

Though no light pierced the room above, oil lamps flickered along the basement walls, casting a dim glow. As they sprinted forward, a wave of putrid decay assaulted their senses—so vile Charles nearly retched.

But soon, nausea was forgotten. For there, in the center of the cramped basement, stood a monstrosity beyond nightmares.

A hulking undead monster, three to four meters tall. Its torso wasn't that of an ogre or other giantkin, but a grotesque patchwork of stitched-together corpses—humans, dwarves, and other creatures fused into a single abomination.

Atop its mass sat a halfling's head, its skull pried open. Several foreign brains connected via repulsive wires to the halfling's own, amplifying its twisted cognition.

Its body bore not just its original arms, but six additional limbs crudely sutured on, each gripping rusted weapons: kitchen knives, blades—all ready for battle.

Its legs, however, remained just two—thick, dwarven stumps reinforced with grafted bones to support its bloated weight.

Staring at this horror, Charles's face darkened.

Abomination.

A nightmarish stitched corpse monster, typically found only in high-level map.

Reality, it seemed, diverged from games. In dungeons, nameless necromancers raised mere zombies and skeletons—but this Dark Elf mage had grander ambitions.

"Ah, what a perfect creation!"

A theatrically smooth voice rang out. Charles looked up to see a Dark Elf male—long, slender ears, obsidian skin—step from behind the abomination.

His face twisted with revolting fervor as he turned to Charles. "You must agree, no? Behold! It combines the finest organs of humans, dwarves, gnomes, and halflings, yet discards their greatest flaw: disloyalty."

"Thus, it becomes the ultimate weapon—obedient, lethal. Well? Don't you think so?"

Charles's answer was a spit. "Ruth—kill him."

For a necromancer this vile, death was the only dialogue.

Beside him, Ruth moved. In a flash, she darted past the hulking guy, blades aimed at the necromancer—

Whoosh.

The elf dissolved into mist, evading her strike, his true form reappearing near a small door in the corner. "Tsk. Must you be so crude? Elegance, please."

"Now, Mimi—dance for our uninvited guests!"

He called out as if summoning a pet. With his command, the massive abomination let out a series of yowls, eerily akin to a cat in heat—"Rrraaagh!"

The creature roared, then pivoted with surprising agility for its bloated body, swinging a rusted cleaver straight at Ruth's head!

The basement was cramped, leaving little room to dodge—but Ruth was undeterred. Unfazed by the filth and blood beneath her, her petite frame rolled toward the wall, baiting the abomination's blade into striking stone—

Clang!

Metal met brick. Seizing the moment of recoil-induced stiffness, Ruth lunged again at the necromancer—

But the Dark Elf was ready. With a flick of his wrist, he completed an incantation: "Vortex Warp!"

Bzzzt—

A surge of magic twisted the space around Ruth. This time, she couldn't evade. A spatial vortex swallowed her, spitting her out directly beneath the abomination's descending weapon!

Vortex Warp—a 2nd-level spell that warps space, relocating a creature within 100 feet to another spot within range.

Like now.

"Rraagh—!"

The abomination let out a grotesque snarl, its rusted cleaver crashing down. With no other choice, Ruth flipped backward, narrowly avoiding the blow.

But the cost was clear—she was back at Charles' side. Every effort to break through had been undone.

Aside from burning two of the necromancer's 2nd-level spell slots (six points in total), the assault had yielded nothing.

Though, apart from a slight dip in cleanliness, Ruth herself had expended nothing.

"Oh-ho, a nimble little mouse," the necromancer mused, lightly clapping in mock admiration. "Then again, I should've guessed. Only someone of exceptional agility could slip in unnoticed and slaughter all my soldiers."

Charles, poised for another strike, froze at the words. His voice was thick with disbelief. "You knew we were coming... yet you sounded no alarm. You let us infiltrate, even kill all those hobgoblins?"

The Dark Elf's smile never wavered—whether in taunt or habit, it was impossible to tell. "Correct. My, what a clever little mouse."

Charles' heart pounded. The sheer audacity of the admission sent his mind racing through a thousand horrifying implications.

He could already piece together the scheme: with the hobgoblins dead, Zenith would lose his forces, leaving this Dark Elf as the strongest power here. And with forty to fifty fresh, robust corpses now at his disposal, he'd only profited from the bloodshed!

Gritting his teeth, Charles felt his pulse hammer. He'd executed over a dozen vile bugbears, the mental toll heavy enough to make his heart quake. And yet this elf...

Truly, this was a Dark Elf—willing to betray allies for personal gain without a second thought.

And truly, this was a Dark Elf—so arrogantly certain that this abomination alone was enough to crush them.

"Ruth, we press on!" he growled. "You keep attacking him—I'll handle this abomination!"

Ruth gave a slight nod. "Understood, Master."

At that moment, with Nidalee no longer by their side, she could finally revert to addressing Charles as she always had.

"Come now, Mimi, my dear little kitten," the necromancer cooed, still smiling despite their aggression. "Catching mice should be your specialty. Devour them, and you'll grow even stronger~"

His voice dripped with saccharine persuasion, as if coaxing a child. Whether the abomination understood his words or simply obeyed a magical command, it let out a guttural snarl before charging at them on stubby legs!

Thud. Thud. THUD—

The stitched-together monstrosity weighed at least a ton, and with every step, the entire castle seemed to tremble.

Ruth paid no mind to Charles' safety—she trusted her Master's judgment. Instead, she leapt again, her booted foot kicking off the wall mid-air to accelerate like a fish darting through weeds. Slipping past the abomination's flailing limbs and desiccated skull, she shot straight toward the necromancer!

"Hey! Over here!"

Charles raised his shield, descending the final step as he taunted the abomination, eager for the fight.

He lacked Ruth's agility, his frame was far from petite, and the basement's cramped space left little room to evade.

But he had his own approach—one most would never choose.

Go head-to-head with it.

Large abominations like this were creatures of glaring strengths and weaknesses. Their advantages? Raw power, multiple weapons, and—being stitched together from corpses—an absurdly massive health pool.

Worse, their rotting flesh often hosted mosquitoes and plagues, forcing enemies to split focus mid-battle to avoid infection, drastically reducing combat effectiveness.

In short: a tanky, high-damage, physically repulsive melee unit.

But their flaws were just as obvious. First, mobility—despite that "surprisingly nimble fat guy" impression earlier, their dwarf-leg bases (reinforced with extra parts for stability) made them slow. Any adventurer under Longstrider could outrun one easily.

Second, as undead, while their bulk resisted brute force, spells and abilities targeting their nature crippled them.

So, plenty of tactics existed: speed buffs, kiting, crowd control—anything but "face-tank it."

...Well, except for paladins. Divine Smite melted fiends and undead alike; two solid hits would vaporize even this thing's health bar.

Ahem.

Though Charles lacked a paladin's invincible Divine Smite, wore no plate armor, and had no divine protections like Shield of Faith—

He possessed purified abilities.

And so, brute-forcing his way through became a viable option.

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Chapter 115: Chapter 115: Holy Sword Fragment

The abomination didn't pursue Ruth. Instead, it lumbered forward, a stitched-together human arm raising a kitchen knife high before slashing straight down at Charles' head.

Charles didn't dodge.

He raised his shield—and blocked.

CLANG—!

A crisp metallic clash rang out. Feeling the slight impact reverberate through the shield—something his current physique could easily withstand—Charles couldn't help but let the corners of his mouth curl into a faint smile.

This was no ordinary shield. It was a magic shield!

That day, after slaying Kendrz, he hadn't just claimed the Storm Warhammer. The magic shield strapped to the corpse's left arm had also found its way into his possession.

Now, at last, the shield proved its worth. Over the past few days, the attacks he'd faced were either too weak—like the goblins' one-handed scimitars, easily deflected by Armor of Agathys—or too strong, like the ogre's massive two-handed club, where even a Shield spell might not hold. In short, the shield had never had its moment.

But now—at this moment—facing an Abomination neither too weak nor too strong, the shield finally had its chance to shine!

Good. Now it's my turn to strike back!

Without hesitation, Charles reached out with his right hand, fighting back revulsion as he pressed it against the creature's rotting, pus-oozing stitched flesh. With a low growl, he uttered:

"Purified!"

Buzz—

A milky light flared, instantly enveloping the Abomination's hulking body!

"Aaargh—AAARGH—!"

A piercing howl tore from the dead Halfling's throat, sharp enough to make Charles' ears throb. The Abomination's massive frame shuddered as dark yellow pus oozed from

its poorly stitched seams, dripping onto his hand—some even seeping under his fingernails.

Instantly, Charles' face twisted in disgust, his stomach churning so violently he nearly yanked his hand back.

Stay calm, Charles. You must stay calm!

This was an inevitable part of battle. In the future, he'd face even more undead and filthy fiends—this kind of repulsive scene would be commonplace. He couldn't afford to falter over something so trivial!

Screaming internally, he forced himself to stand firm, legs locked in place, continuing to channel the purified energy despite the overwhelming nausea.

The Abomination's other blades lashed out like a frenzy, hacking wildly at his body. Too sickened to block, Charles resorted to a spell:

"Shield!"

Buzz—

A sturdy magic shield shimmered into existence, encasing his body. The Abomination's weapons clattered harmlessly against him, leaving him unscathed.

Meanwhile, its own body, after its first frenzied assault, began to shrink rapidly. Wisps of black mist seeped from its form, vanishing into nothingness. Clearly, the purified power was taking effect—this guy was nearly finished!

The Abomination raised its weapons, as if attempting one last desperate strike. But its strength was gone. This time, Charles didn't even bother casting Shield, letting the feeble blows glance off his Mage Armor with nothing more than a faint sting—not even leaving a scratch.

And with that final, pitiful attack, the massive undead could no longer sustain its existence. Even its wails faded entirely. As the purified white light shrank, so too did its body, until at last, it crumbled into a pile of ash upon the ground.

Thus, the tormented souls defiled by the necromancer's blasphemy were finally freed.

Success.

Charles exhaled slightly, the worst of his disgust fading. He realized, at this moment, that the purified ability was considerate—even the filth beneath his nails had been completely purified.

Good. At least I won't lose combat strength from sheer revulsion...

Cough!

With that thought, without bothering to check how many Purification Points his system had just gained, he raised his head and locked eyes with the necromancer ahead, the corners of his mouth curling into a smirk.

"Now... it's your turn."

Across from him, the Dark Elf's elegant smile had frozen solid at this moment.

He couldn't believe his eyes. He had assumed this young, seemingly inexperienced human was weak—after all, the man had infiltrated the castle like a thief. The Abomination should have cleaved him apart in two swings, and then, sandwiched between them, Ruth would have been eliminated as well...

He had even fantasized about cracking open the human's skull, extracting his brain, and grafting it onto the Abomination, granting the undead spellcasting abilities. Never had he imagined the man would possess such a strange power—one capable of obliterating his masterpiece in an instant!

No. This can't be real!

He refused to accept this reality, his heart bleeding in despair. As Ruth's lethal blade once again flashed toward his throat, not a shred of battle will remained within him.

This man came prepared. He must have known about me!

Hell—he might even be an assassin sent by that damned rival of mine!

Run. I have to run!

The moment the thought struck, his body dissolved into mist—the second-level spell Misty Step—letting Ruth's blade slice through empty air as he reappeared beneath an operating table at the edge of the room. Frantic, he snatched up a square box and immediately began another incantation:

"Dimension Door!"

Buzz—

His body transformed into a streak of white light, vanishing from the spot in an instant.

Behind him, the moment Charles saw the Dark Elf take the square box, his pupils contracted sharply.

"Ruth! That square box! After him—now!"

He was certain. Inside that square box lay the very thing he sought—the Holy Sword Fragment!

The Holy Sword—forged during the Sundering, when the believers of the Gods of Order united like never before to protect their weakened deities and repel the fiends seeping into the Material World.

This blade wielded terrifying power. It was the bane of all fiends and undead, and some even claimed it could wound true deities themselves.

The truth behind its shattering remained shrouded in mystery. Some said the restored gods themselves shattered it. Others whispered of a Devil's conspiracy, terrified of its might. A few even argued the sword's materials had simply reached their limit, fracturing under their own strain. Theories abounded—yet the truth remained elusive.

But one thing was certain: the sword had broken. And even its fragments were too potent to handle carelessly. Only special containers could safely hold them without harming the bearer.

That was why Charles was absolutely sure—the square box contained the Holy Sword Fragment he sought!

He immediately ordered the pursuit, unafraid of Ruth failing to catch up. He recognized the spell the elf had cast: Dimension Door, a 4th-level spell allowing instantaneous teleportation up to five hundred meters—a perfect escape tool.

On the Night of the Witches, Regolas had used the same spell to flee. But unlike Teleport, this spell had limits—and with Ruth's speed, catching up was entirely possible!

Without hesitation, Ruth spun and charged out of the basement, leaping through the shattered window into the wilds beyond. His eyes gleamed with magic power, a faint violet glow flickering as he swiftly pinpointed the Dark Elf's escape path—then bolted after him!

Meanwhile, inside the temple.

Sephera and Nidalee burst through the door together, only to find the priests not resting, but instead maintaining a prayerful posture alongside two acolytes, all bowing before a crude idol of the goblin deity placed at the center of an offering-laden altar.

Clad in identical gray, shabby, and filthy robes—seemingly mimicking the garb of human church priests—the only distinction was the priest's robe, adorned with a few extra beast teeth.

Hearing the intrusion, the three guys scrambled to their feet, grabbing their weapons to retaliate.

The central priest raised his holy symbol high, chanting an incantation to guide his deity's power. White motes of light coalesced behind him, reforming into the phantom image of a hobgoblin angel wielding a long knife in one hand and a warhammer in the other.

This was the third-level divine magic—Spirit Guardians! A manifestation of divine power, taking the form of an angel serving their worshipped deity, granting protection to allies while delivering devastating spiritual strikes to foes!

Sephera halted, utterly unfazed. With a raised hand, she unleashed a Ray of Sickness, its emerald streak lancing toward one of the acolytes.

Nidalee, shifting to human form, knew the lethality of Spirit Guardians and wisely kept her distance. Drawing a throwing spear from her back, she hurled it with full force at the other acolyte—

Whoosh—!

"ARGH—!"

The spear struck true—the room was cramped, leaving no room to dodge. It pierced the acolyte's chest in an instant, dropping him lifelessly to the ground with a final scream.

Meanwhile, Sephera's Ray of Sickness found its mark. Though it didn't kill the hobgoblin, his face turned sickly purple, robbing him of all combat strength.

"Bastards!"

The priest snarled in Goblin, wasting no time. White light gathered in his palm, coalescing into a massive radiant projectile before hurtling toward the two women—

The girls rolled aside, but as she dodged, Nidalee's body shifted back into a leopard. Paws skimming the wall, she sprinted in a wide arc—not toward the priest, but straight for the wooden idol on the altar behind him—

CRASH—!

She pounced, sending plates, incense burners, and offerings clattering to the floor in a cacophony of shattering pottery. The wooden statue itself was sent flying by her tail, smashing against the stone floor and splintering into pieces!

"You—! Damn you!"

Witnessing such blasphemy against his deity's idol, the hobgoblin priest flew into a rage. But before he could retaliate, Sephera was already pelting him with another volley of "biubiubiu" Rays of Sickness, forcing him to dodge and counter with spells.

"Nidalee! What the hell are you doing?!"

Seeing the leopard abandon the fight, Sephera's brows twitched in fury. "Kill this priest first, and then find what you want!"

But Nidalee ignored her. After a frantic search confirmed the Holy Sword Fragment wasn't hidden here, her leopardine head snapped toward the doorway, eyes narrowing with human-like tension.

Of course. The Fragment wasn't here for these hobgoblins to worship—it was with the necromancer, undergoing pollution and blasphemy.

And if she didn't act fast, it would fall into their hands...

Gritting her teeth, Nidalee disregarded Sephera's shouts and lunged for the exit—

Just in time to see Ruth, who should've been with Charles, burst out of the room and leap through the window, giving chase outside!

Nidalee froze—then realized.

The necromancer had escaped with magic... and he was carrying something Ruth desperately wanted.

The Holy Sword Fragment.

"ROAR—!"

No time to waste. With a snarl, she sprang through the same window, her predator's senses locking onto the necromancer's trail as she gave chase!

"That damn druid! When I catch her, I'll force her into a sow's form and toss her into a pen of rutting boars!"

Back in the temple, Sephera seethed. At least the battle here was nearly won—she could handle the last priest alone. But if Nidalee's recklessness had left her in real danger, there'd be hell to pay.

Yet her optimism was short-lived.

Heavy footsteps echoed from the staircase leading to the second floor.

Hobgoblin Warlord Zenith, flanked by his two officers, was descending.

...

After Ruth charged out of the basement, Charles—trusting her capabilities—did not follow immediately. Instead, he remained in the room, meticulously searching through the remaining items.

Only after confirming the Holy Sword Fragment was truly gone, taken by that guy, did he clench his jaw and rush out of the basement, intent on reinforcing Sephera.

Yet the moment he reached the room where the prisoners were bound, a towering, broad-shouldered silhouette—standing nearly six and a half feet tall—blocked the doorway, cutting off his path.

It was an aged hobgoblin warrior, his crimson face lined with wrinkles, hair streaked with gray. A crude iron helm sat atop his head, his body clad in battered heavy plate armor. In his right hand, he gripped a longsword, while his left arm bore a shield—fully armed and locked in a fighting stance.

Whether out of habit or sense of crisis, this old guy hadn't bothered to remove his armor even for sleep.

Damn it, he's already here!

At the sight of him, Charles halted mid-step, cursing inwardly. Without delay, he extended his right hand, shadows twisting and coalescing into his trusted longsword.

Shield raised defensively, he backpedaled, lips moving in a rapid incantation. Extended Spell: Blur enveloped his form, rendering his outline hazy and erratic, near-impossible to target.

He recognized this foe.

This was the current master of the abandoned castle—a scourge of the Rubble District for over a decade, feared for both brute strength and razor-sharp cunning. A warlord who pillaged, burned, enslaved, and slaughtered without remorse.

Hobgoblin Warlord Zenith.

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Chapter 116: Chapter 116: The Spectral Bride: Agatha

Even now, with age gnawing at him, Zenith radiated the blood-soaked aura of a seasoned killer. The sheer pressure of his presence made Charles's pulse spike, despite his own tally of battles.

After all, in the game, this castle was a dungeon recommended for a full party of sixth-level adventurers. Zenith himself was a boss meant to challenge players of that caliber—and Charles was only fourth level. Worse, after casting multiple spells, his reserves had dwindled to a mere eight spell slots.

The odds were dire.

As Charles bolstered his defenses, Zenith's hesitation lasted less than a second before he charged. Despite the weight of his armor, the warlord moved with terrifying speed, like a grizzly in full sprint, barreling into the cramped chamber.

Trapped in the confined space, Charles had no room to retreat or unleash Eldritch Blast. He could only brace behind his shield, sword poised to counter.

"Hexblade's Curse!"

Dark energy surged from the Shadowfell, twisting into a cursed sigil upon Zenith's flesh. A signature ability of the Hexblade, it amplified damage—though its hour-long cooldown meant it was a one-time gambit.

Charles didn't delude himself into thinking he could solo the grizzled warlord. His goal was simple: buy time until Sephera finished the priests or Ruth dealt with the Dark Elf. Victory hinged on survival.

Until then, he had to survive Zenith's onslaught—whether through spells, intimidation, or sheer stubbornness.

Before he could strategize further, Zenith was upon him. The curse did nothing to slow the warlord's advance. Towering over Charles by a full eight inches, Zenith thrust his longsword straight for his face—

Charles jerked his shield arm up while slashing low at Zenith's legs. Yet the hobgoblin, clad in heavy plate armor, reversed his momentum instantly. He withdrew his blade and sidestepped, evading the counter before lunging again—this time aiming for Charles's chest!

It was astounding—this grizzled warrior's body still housed such explosive power!

This was a duel of steel, and from the first clash, Charles was outmatched. Zenith's experience was overwhelming; even amidst the haze of magical light, he'd pinpointed Charles's position and struck with lethal precision.

No choice—time for magic.

As Charles began the incantation for Shield, chaos erupted.

"Aaaaaaaagh—!"

A shrill, piercing wail tore from the pale-pink diamond ring on his left hand. Even though Charles wasn't the target, the sound stabbed his eardrums like needles.

Zenith, however, froze mid-charge. His eyes bulged, limbs locked as if gripped by paralyzing terror.

But the scream was merely the prelude.

A female specter—pale, shrouded in tattered white robes, her inky long hair obscuring her face—burst from the ring. She latched onto Zenith's head, bared needle-like fangs, and sank them into his neck.

"Gah—!"

Agony twisted the old warrior's face as his vitality drained. He roared, swinging his sword at the specter's throat—but the phantom flickered and vanished, retreating into Charles's ring.

Now's the chance!

Warmth flooded Charles's weary body as the ring pulsed. Seizing the moment, he lunged, aiming for Zenith's throat—

Shink!

The hobgoblin staggered back, avoiding a fatal blow. The blade only grazed his chest, leaving a deep gash but no mortal wound. Still, the specter's ambush had left Zenith reeling.

Both combatants retreated, gasping. Charles glanced at the diamond ring on his finger, and suddenly—everything clicked.

So that's it. I understand now.

The female ghost who had slaughtered the cave full of goblins—Agatha—had been bound to this ring all along. Sephera, untrained in necromancy, had missed her presence.

And on that first night, when Charles had purified the nightmare, he hadn't just dispelled her malice—he'd claimed her loyalty.

That was why Ruth and Sephera's nightmares had ceased, while Charles enjoyed deep, revitalizing dreams—though he couldn't recall them, their lingering euphoria was undeniable.

And now, Agatha had intervened, shattering Zenith's focus with her scream, feeding on his life force, and channeling it back to Charles.

Hah.

This was like having a free Vampiric Touch—no mana cost, no concentration required. A third-level spell at his fingertips, healing him mid-combat!

In that case...

Charles's gaze locked onto Zenith—the hobgoblin warlord the tales warned was a challenge for a level-six party, best faced with allies.

But now?

Killing him alone... might just be possible.

Ambition blazed in Charles's chest, his eyes burning with newfound fervor as he stared down his foe.

Across the battlefield, Zenith's eyes remained fixed on Charles. He had anticipated many scenarios, but never had he imagined his opponent would be accompanied by a spectral—one that could turn the tide so decisively.

Hss... This complicates things.

Still, if the boy commands a wraith to fight for him, then he must be as ruthless as any necromancer.

In that case...

"So, boy," Zenith rasped, his Common Tongue rough but deliberate, "you're a necromancer after all." He exhaled sharply, his grip tightening on his weapon. "There's no need for conflict between us."

"Listen well. Join me, and I'll grant you corpses, spirits—whatever dark servants you desire. And if it's flesh you crave, we'll take it by force."

Unbeknownst to him, Charles had already marked him for death the moment he infiltrated the warlord's stronghold.

The offer drew a faint smirk from Charles. The audacity of this bastard—thinking I'd ever side with him.

Then, a surge of fury and resentment erupted from the ring on his finger, its wrath directed squarely at Zenith.

Ah. So Agatha has a score to settle with this hobgoblin too.

Perhaps he's the one who ended her life.

Good. Vengeance will be served for all his victims.

"Dream on, old man," Charles sneered. "Time for you to pay the toll."

Zenith didn't grasp the phrase, but the refusal was clear.

With a sigh, the warlord shook his head. "Arrogant whelps like you? I butcher them by the dozen every year." His stance shifted, his movements deceptively fluid for his bulk—like a bear dancing toward prey.

"See those wretches behind you?" He jerked his chin toward the mutilated figures. "Every one of them was a prodigy—far greater than you."

"And yet, here they are. Reduced to that."

His voice dropped to a growl as he lunged. "You're next."

Charles met the charge without flinching. With Agatha's aid, his confidence blazed as fiercely as his sword. "Come on, then!"

The second clash erupted, steel ringing against steel. But this time, despite his bravado, Zenith fought cautiously. No longer the relentless predator, he now wove a defensive dance—testing, probing, waiting for the spectral ambush or the inevitable misstep from his inexperienced foe.

He's stalling. Charles gritted his teeth. He knows my Blur won't last.

Two minutes. That was all the extended spell would buy him. If he couldn't break Zenith's guard by then, even Agatha's presence wouldn't save him from being dismantled.

I need to end this. Now.

Abruptly, he disengaged, dismissing his longsword. In one fluid motion, he drew the Storm Warhammer from his hip, channeled his magic into it, and hurled it forward.

BOOM—!

The detonation rocked the chamber, the enchanted blast reverberating off the walls like thunder. But Zenith—damn him—had raised his shield in time. The metal buckled, fissures spiderwebbing across its surface, yet the warlord held firm, skidding back but unbroken.

He blocked it. Cold dread settled in Charles's gut as the warhammer returned to his hand. What now?

Zenith lowered his shield slowly, his face a mask of grim triumph. The arm beneath trembled, but his voice was steady.

"Last chance, boy." He bared his teeth. "Your spells are spent. Your tricks have failed. You cannot pierce my guard."

"Surrender, and I'll make your end quick. Fight on, and you'll join the broken behind you."

Charles ignored the taunts, his mind racing. Then, like a spark in the dark, a memory surfaced—Anno's training. The way she'd shattered his defense with a shield technique, leveraging precision over power.

That's it.

He replayed the moment in his mind—the angle of her stance, the sequence of muscle and motion.

One last gamble.

This ends now.

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Chapter 117: Chapter 117: Slaying Zenith

"Agatha, the moment I charge—if he doesn't retreat—howl."

He relayed the command mentally to the female ghost within his ring, not waiting for acknowledgment. Charles advanced in quick steps, swinging his blade.

A feint. Zenith recognized it as such, raising his shield slightly while mechanically slashing toward Charles' hip to force him back.

But this time, Charles didn't evade. He surged forward into the blade's path. "Shield!"

Buzz—

A shimmer of magical light deflected the strike. Simultaneously, Agatha emerged from the ring, her long ebony hair veiling her forehead and eyes, revealing only the delicate lower half of her face. Her rosebud lips parted, unleashing a piercing shriek:

"Aaaaaaaah—!"

Here it comes!

Zenith's pupils contracted. His legs tensed as he staggered back, teeth gritted, bracing for the mental assault.

He knew—if he endured this, the young man would have nothing left!

"Guh—!"

Instantly, twin trails of crimson streaked from his ears. Though he clung to clarity, his hearing was ravaged. The scream was but a herald—the deadlier strike followed.

Charles dismissed his longsword, coiling his body before driving forward, his core muscles erupting with force. Every ounce of power channeled into the magical shield on his left arm.

Clang—!

Magic surged through his veins, magnifying the shield bash beyond even Anno's demonstration. Caught off-guard, Zenith barely managed to react. Hobgoblins were never renowned for brute strength, and age had long since stolen the vigor of his youth.

The impact wrenched his balance away.

Now!

Charles didn't press immediately. Zenith's plate armor and helmet made a lethal blow unlikely. The same trick wouldn't work twice. Instead, he drew his warhammer, infused it with magic, and hurled it—

Zenith frantically raised his shield, but his stance was imperfect—

Boom—!

The hammer caved in his helmet. Lightning crackled through the metal, seizing his body in a paralyzing current. For a heartbeat, Zenith stood frozen, mind blank as a zombie's.

Charles recalled his longsword and struck.

SCHLICK—!

The enchanted blade found the gap in the Zenith's gorget, slicing through his throat. Blood fountained. After a decade of pillaging, Zenith the Hobgoblin Warlord was dead.

"Hah—!"

Charles dismissed his sword, gasping. Sweat plastered his brow as he checked his reserves—nearly empty. Even with buffs and gear, he'd burned through everything to barely scrape a victory.

Still so much to learn.

Shaking off the adrenaline, he rose and strode outside.

Meanwhile, in the temple, Sephera had made quick work of the weakened priest and two hobgoblin officers who'd rushed down. Toxins crippled their resistance, and her spells finished them—three against one, yet she wiped them out without a scratch.

With the castle cleared, she briefed Charles on Nidalee's pursuit. Without delay, they followed the trail into the woods.

Deep in the woods, the dark elf necromancer ran for his life. His spell slots were exhausted—no more teleportation magic remained. He couldn't afford to conceal his tracks, relying solely on his own two legs to carry him through the dense undergrowth.

Almost there... Just a little farther...

If he could just reach that place, he might yet survive—

His lungs burned like fire. His legs trembled with exhaustion, yet he dared not stop. Through the hazy moonlight, the distant silhouette of the mountains taunted him, kindling a desperate hope in his chest—

But death followed close behind.

Whoosh—

A shadow blurred past. A primal sense of danger shot down his spine, every hair on his body standing on end. He threw himself into a desperate roll—

Schlick—!

"AAGH—!"

An unseen blade sliced through the air, aimed for his neck. Though he narrowly avoided decapitation, the strike still found his thigh.

A second later, his left leg tumbled away, severed clean. Scalding blood gushed from the wound, painting the grass crimson. Agony lanced through his nerves, and the necromancer collapsed, his grip failing. The square box slipped from his fingers, tumbling across the grass, teetering dangerously close to the slope's edge.

Behind him, a petite silhouette landed—none other than Ruth. Her expression remained icy, her purple-red eyes flickering with a faint violet glow as she swept her gaze across the mountaintop. Soon, she locked onto the square box and strode over to pick it up.

Without hesitation, she slowly opened the square box, revealing a silver-white metal fragment dotted with specks of golden light.

Immediately, Ruth let out a long sigh of relief.

Thank the gods—this was indeed the Holy Sword Fragment they had sought.

Even shattered, the Holy Sword still retained potent sacred energy, capable of purifying corruption and vanquishing demons.

In the past, Ruth, as a witch, would never have dared to open such a box. The residual holy power within could have blinded her with a mere glance.

But after the battle with Sophia that night—especially after passing the paladins' "Divine Sense" scrutiny without detection—she and the other witches had realized their very essence had fundamentally changed. They no longer feared the threat of such sacred relics.

Thus, she opened the box without fear.

Confirming the cargo was intact, Ruth closed the box and turned her cold gaze toward the dark elf necromancer still struggling to crawl away.

Now that the artifact was secured, all that remained was to eliminate this dark elf before returning to reunite with her master...

Just as she prepared to strike, her brow twitched at the sound of rustling grass—something was charging toward her.

Whoosh—

A gust of wind roared as Ruth spun to see Nidalee, in her leopard form, lunging straight for the box in her hands.

"Hmm?!"

Startled, she swiftly clutched the box to her chest, rolling aside to evade the attack.

Ignoring the dirt staining her clothes, she rose to her feet, glaring. "Nidalee, what are you doing?!"

Nidalee landed, shifted back to human form, and met Ruth's guarded stance with flickering eyes before offering an awkward smile. "My apologies, Miss Ruth. I acted rashly."

She hesitated, then added, "The contents of that box are vital to me and my tribe. I should have explained sooner—I know it's unfair to demand now. But if you hand it over, I'll forfeit all other treasures in this castle. What do you say?"

Her plea was earnest, but Ruth shook her head firmly. "I'm sorry, Miss Nidalee. That's impossible. This is just as important to us."

Nidalee's heart sank. Though Ruth was ruthless, they'd fought side by side moments ago—conflict was the last thing she wanted. "Name your price. I have valuables on me, and the Mountaineer tribe owes you a favor. We'll do anything—"

Ruth's tone remained unyielding. "No."

Absurd. This fragment was key to purifying Theresa and securing the monastery's future. Did Nidalee truly think it could be bartered like common loot?

Seeing Ruth's resolve, Nidalee knew peaceful resolution was hopeless.

Holy Sword Fragments were coveted by many: some sought their power for strength, others wielded them against undead and fiends, and some—like the dark elf necromancer—wished to corrupt them for evil.

Nidalee didn't know Ruth's motives, but if words failed, only force remained.

"So be it!"

Remembering how Ruth had slaughtered foes without hesitation, Nidalee shuddered—then gritted her teeth and struck first. "Entangle!"

Buzz—

As Nidalee's incantation surged, nature energy erupted. Vines burst from the earth, coiling around Ruth's legs, thighs, wrists, waist, and throat, immobilizing her instantly.

"You—!" Ruth's eyes blazed with fury before her body trembled. The vines' venomous thorns pierced her skin, toxins seeping in, paralyzing her.

"I'll... never... give... the fragment—Ghk!"

Clutching the box to her chest, Ruth feigned defiance—until a vine slithered into her mouth, gagging her. Only muffled whimpers escaped.

Defenseless, the girl seemed defeated. Yet Nidalee wasn't satisfied. Drawing a throwing spear, she channeled magic into it and hurled it at Ruth's heart—

Thwip—

Slash!

Blades materialized midair, shredding the vines. Freed, Ruth leapt upward, dodging the spear effortlessly. Her purple-red eyes gleamed down at the druid, bitter frustration in her heart.

Was my acting poor, or was she always intent on killing me?

The entire struggle had been a ruse—Ruth had hoped to lure Nidalee close before striking. But the druid had played it safe, attacking from afar.

Sigh. If deception fails, brute force it is.

Thud.

Ruth landed smoothly—only for fresh vines to erupt, lashing at her legs. This time, she didn't pretend weakness. Magic surged through her muscles, energy blazing like mist in the night, propelling her forward at blinding speed.

Her purple-red nails glinted lethally.

Ahead, Nidalee's pupils constricted. Instinct screamed danger. Abandoning the vines, she chanted anew: "Barkskin!"

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