

Witch Monastery #Chapter 141: Was That Milk from Malena...?! - Read Witch Monastery Chapter 141: Was That Milk from Malena...?!

Chapter 141: Chapter 141: Was That Milk from Malena...?!

Behind the battlefield, Ines was close to losing her mind with rage.

She had never imagined that a kidnapping target so poor—living in a simple, shabby stone hut—would actually have such a powerful protector, someone whose strength completely overturned her expectations and even cost her dearly for a single slip.

How could things turn out like this?

She just could not understand, cursing inwardly in frustration. But complaining was pointless now. All she could do was unleash her full strength and simply crush her way through!

Crush all resistance, then swagger right in to snatch both her targets away!

Exposure? So what—she'd deal with the fallout later. But tonight, the first mission she'd received from the Abyssal Lord could not, absolutely could not, end in failure!

She raged inwardly, but tonight, failure was destined to be her only taste.

After all, she was not the only one with a backup plan.

The eight cambions beat their wings, dive-bombing down toward Charles. But at that moment, a torrent of rainbow-colored light swept the sky, and together the cambions unleashed snarls of agony: "Graaah—!"

This spell transformed the entire battlefield sky. Whether it was the airborne cambions, Ines lurking in the shadows, or the Amazon women watching from their homes, all were shocked, their eyes drawn in disbelief to the source of the dazzling cascade.

And there she was—a tall, voluptuous silhouette in a luxurious nun's robe of pure white trimmed with gold, hand raised high, her expression stern.

It was Theresa, who had been hiding and silent all this time. The moment the cambions revealed themselves, she appeared and joined the battle.

From the entrance of the residential quarter, she strode serenely forward, white light glowing beneath her feet—like a descending goddess. And wasting no time, to prevent further complications, she raised her hand and unleashed a level seven spell—Prismatic Spray—crippling several unlucky cambions instantly!

"Damn woman!"

Snarling in pain, the fiends twisted and screamed in Abyssal rage. The chaotic blood of demons made them immediately forget Ines's command as they roared and charged, aiming to kill her first!

But then Hattie emerged at Theresa's back, unleashing writhing tentacles to guard before her, ready to seize any cambion bold enough to land.

On the other side, Sophia began launching Chromatic Orbs one after another—a master of Metamagic Feats, she could spit out first-level spells like a magic machine gun, pouring out explosive fire!

Nidalee, at the rear, knew her strength could do little in a battle of this scale, but as a druid, she had her own gifts: channeling nature magic to grant healing and support to her sisters locked in combat.

Small though her magic's help was compared to the witches' overwhelming power, it was better than nothing.

Hiding in the shadows was Ruth. She didn't rush the field; as an assassin, she hunted patiently, biding her time for a perfect strike—then—

Whoosh—

As the first cambion swooped at Theresa, Ruth sprang from the darkness, her hand morphing into a gleaming blade and slashing across the fiend's throat—

Shhk—!

In an instant, a massive head flew free, scalding blood spraying out. The startled fiend convulsed violently, fell, and his body dissolved into blue smoke.

His body in the material world was dead, but his soul would return to the Infinite Abyss to await resurrection.

In truth, fiends from either the Abyss or the Nine Hells can't be killed for good in the material world—even beheaded, they'll live on elsewhere.

Their forms here are mere projections of their true bodies, which remain safe in their home plane. In the end, slaying them here destroys only an echo.

Only by entering their Old Nest and killing their real body can you truly erase their existence. Such ventures are perilous even for legendary Adventurers—few dare journey into the Infinite Abyss to hunt a target amid endless demons.

That's why sealing demons is usually far more practical and effective than killing them.

Yet even slaying them here is not useless: for fiends, the material world isn't easily accessed. After defeat, they may never return.

With one cambion lost, the numbers shifted from eight against five to seven against five. Since cambions are highly resistant to fire and toxins, Sephera and Ekta still held back.

Andy, the weakest, also didn't join in—her strength of little use. It seemed the cambions still had a numbers advantage.

But in true power, they were outmatched.

According to old Monster Manual records, Hattie's challenge rating before being purified was six, Ruth and Sephera are rated seven, Sophia five (up to ten after memory restoration)—though these ratings are inconsistent (for example, Sephera cannot best any other witch in the monastery), but they serve as a broad benchmark.

After experiencing the Night of the Witches, the monastery's level up, and powers bestowed by the goddess statue, the witches—especially Hattie—had seen a breakthrough in strength. These cambions, now, were no problem.

And with the cambions fighting wildly and with no teamwork, their defeat was only a matter of time!

In the rear, Ines watched the battle with grinding teeth, fury nearly making her jaw crack.

How was this possible?!

Prismatic Spray—that's a seventh-level spell, something only a thirteenth-level Mage should master!

How could that nun wield it?! Isn't this monastery bankrupt and failing?!

Before the invasion, Ines had considered her investigation thorough. All she'd found was a dwindling convent of the Goddess of Life, broke and on the brink.

To pay their debts, they'd even branched into various businesses—groceries, clothes. Ines had even sneered that if things went on, the nuns would soon have to secretly sell their bodies, turning the saintly monastery into a grand brothel...

In a word, she hadn't taken these "useless do-gooder" nuns seriously. In her mind, the Amazons who'd snapped up cheap property were the real threat, and since they made no move, her plan should have gone smoothly.

So why had everything gone so wrong?

Utterly confused, furious, and burning with rage, Ines lifted her head to glare at Charles, who stood guard at Malena's door.

No choice—she would do it herself now!

The cambions could die and resurrect in the Abyss; she could always summon them again.

And as for mortals? Humans are cannon fodder—their deaths mean nothing.

She just needed to crush this man, snatch her targets, and the mission would still be a success. She could resume her plans.

That was that—she would destroy him!

Wings unfurled at her waist, she kicked up a storm and soared into the night sky.

By now, Theresa's Prismatic Spray had ended, the sky above was clear, so Ines looked down upon Charles and let a sly smile curl her lips. "Hey, handsome, mind if I come in?"

Along with Ines's voice, a surge of magic swept forth. Succubi's Charm Person relies not only on their bodily charisma—magic is their true aid.

But Charles didn't budge, his shield up, sword raised, eyes alert.

As if! With Eldritch Mind trained, at sixth-level, his spellcasting ability was maxed—falling for a charm effect now would be unthinkable.

"Fool!"

Ines cursed. Tonight had been one humiliation after another: flawed intel, losing in combat, and now her most prized charm failed...

Fury hardened her expression. She raised a hand and flung a Fire Bolt at him.

This must be a paladin or an eldritch knight—he can't handle ranged attacks! I'll just blast him out of the sky!

Surely, she thought, nothing could go wrong now.

Charles raised his shield: "Absorb Elements!"

Buzz—

Magic shimmered, absorbing most of the incoming fire. But the shield still seared with boiling heat, and Charles could not help gritting his teeth.

That hurt!

This succubus was no amateur spellcaster!

But...

Does she really want a ranged duel?

As he watched her—wings beating, preparing another spell, smile smug—Charles had to laugh inwardly. Little did she know, ranged attacks were now his own forte.

Dropping his longsword, it shimmered away into starlight.

He then gestured, Hexblade's Curse targeting her from afar, and incanted: "Eldritch Blast!"

Four magic arrays blossomed above him, firing four thick, invisible beams into the night at the succubus.

Ines's smile froze. She flapped madly, trying to evade, but the blasts boxed her in. At least two would strike!

Bang—!

"Urk—!"

Two beams ripped her body, the curse taking effect. Groaning in agony, stunned by pain, she barely moved.

Damn, he still had this hidden up his sleeve!

No way—the body can't win this!

She had to flee!

The moment that instinct arose, she tried to fly away. But Charles wouldn't give her the chance—the reach of Eldritch Blast was immense; she'd never escape the spell's range.

Dispelling any notion of mercy, he cast again: four more blasts streaked skyward—

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

"Aaagh—!"

This time, his aim was true. All four struck home, ripping the succubus apart amid a spray of energy, her screams echoing in the black sky.

The battle was over.

Charles let out a relieved sigh—then frowned.

No vitality returned to him?

Hexblade's Curse is supposed to heal the caster when the cursed dies, restoring vitality from the fallen.

Charles was indeed a bit wounded; that Fire Bolt had left him somewhat scorched. He'd planned to heal using the curse's effect—but...

Had the succubus faked death and slipped away?

This thought clenched his heart.

There was no doubt—she had another goal!

He raised his eyes, scanning the darkness. In the distance, Theresa and the others were wrapping up their battle. Though there had been some chaos, their skills made short work of the reckless cambions.

Charles spoke softly to the invisible witches: "The succubus ran. I thought I finished her, but I didn't—she faked her death!"

"Track her, search the area. She can't have gotten far—don't let her make it back to the Abyssal Lord!"

Moments later, the witches replied through the mosquito earring. They'd even captured some cambions and kidnappers, now locked in the dungeon under Sephera's guard, to be interrogated later. Hattie and the other main fighters set off to hunt the missing succubus.

Having assigned these tasks, Charles finally relaxed. He glanced around the bloody, corpse-strewn ground, then toward the Amazon women's houses, smiling faintly.

During previous sales, some Amazons—ignorant of his strength and unsure if the monastery was not to be screwed with—had tried to haggle and bully him.

He hadn't wanted to trouble Porter every time, nor risk conflict with South Harbor District's top gangs, so it remained a headache.

But after tonight...

Well, they'd have a new respect for him now.

The Amazon issue was minor, though. Charles had a bigger worry.

The Abyssal Lord had found his location...

Their targets were Lisa. Now that his home base was compromised, troubles would be relentless.

There's no way to defend against thieves every day. Besides, Nidalee's tribe was suffering under the Abyssal Lord, too. So, moving forward...

Charles pursed his lips, eyes turning northwest. His mind was set.

Blackstaff Tower must have noticed the Abyssal Lord's trace, too. It would be better to go there himself and resolve this before winter—putting an end to the threat.

Letting these thoughts settle, he turned and walked back to Malena's room to check on the two of them.

Fortunately, the mother and daughter had recovered from their fear. As he entered, streaked with blood, Malena swallowed nervously, but quickly took his arm, pulling over a chair for him to sit. "Are you alright? Are you hurt? Let me check you over!"

Charles shook his head. "I'm fine—it's not mine, just blood from others. Are you both ok? Any injuries?"

Malena shook her head. "We checked, no injury. Please sit; you should rest."

Charles wanted to protest, but couldn't resist Malena's concern and his own exhaustion, so he sat and let out a long breath.

"I'll get you something to drink."

Lisa was sensible as ever, darting to the table and scanning it with her eyes.

Spotting a large wooden mug still half-filled with milk, she cheered, lifted the cup in both hands, and carried it to Charles: "Priest, please drink some milk!"

"Thank you," Charles said, accepting without suspicion.

Malena, seeing the mug Lisa was offering, suddenly looked stricken. She realized exactly what was in there, but couldn't explain at the moment. Anxiety prickled in her heart.

Charles raised the mug, about to drink, when he detected a faint, unfamiliar scent.

Odd. What was that flavor?

Was the milk spoiled?

He wondered, yet Lisa's expectant smile made it impossible to refuse. Unwilling to disappoint, Charles forced himself to drink the cool milk down—

Wait... why does it taste a little bit sweet?

Sugar in milk?

No, the mouthfeel isn't right... Goat's milk, maybe?

No, not quite.

Wait a second, could it be...

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Chapter 142: Chapter 142: Andny's Bold Idea

Wait... could it be...?

Suddenly, a bold guess flashed through Charles's mind. The more he thought about it, the more it seemed right!

With this thought, he turned his head in disbelief, secretly glancing to catch Malena's expression—only to see her cheeks burning red, utterly flustered, looking so mortified it was as if she wished she could vanish.

At once, he knew his suspicion was true. His heart began to pound, and he felt his own face flush and heat up uncontrollably.

Inside the cup was truly the milk that Malena herself had expressed!

Realizing this, a wave of panic and confusion swept over him, making it hard to control his expression. As fate would have it, Malena happened to look over too, and their eyes met.

The embarrassment on each other's faces told them everything: both now knew what was in the cup—and both realized the other knew as well. They both knew exactly what was running through the other's mind...

The air went silent, awkwardness thick as a blanket. Only Lisa remained oblivious, since her mother had never expressed milk into a cup before, leading her to believe it really was just leftover cow's milk from last night.

Proud of her mother's milk-warming skills, she looked at Charles with bright, innocent eyes and asked, "Priest, does it taste good?"

Charles, forcing himself, nodded awkwardly. "Mm, it's very tasty."

"If you like it, that's great. Mom's milk always tastes the best." Upon hearing this, Lisa beamed all the more. "You can come here often! Every day, Mom makes plenty of milk for us to drink."

"Mom always says she doesn't know how to repay you for everything you've done for us!"

Malena, now red to the roots of her hair, snapped in shame and anger, "Lisa!"

Lisa blinked, but was utterly unafraid, only giggling into her hands. "Mom's embarrassed!"

Charles wished the ground would swallow him up. Even though the little girl thought it was just milk, he and Malena knew the truth!

Before the embarrassment could escalate further, he stood quickly. "I should go. Tonight's events aren't over yet. There's much left to handle."

He tried to excuse himself, but Lisa wasn't done with him. "Huh? Priest, aren't you going to finish your milk?"

He stiffened, but, bracing himself under Malena's gaze, lifted the cup and forced himself to finish the drink in a single swallow.

...It really did taste rather nice.

Hiding just how awkward he felt, he set down the cup. "Thank you for the treat, Lisa."

Lisa laughed cheerfully. "Don't thank me, Priest. Thank Mom! She's the one who made such delicious milk."

Charles was going numb from embarrassment. He turned to look at Malena, who was now so red and lost that she barely knew what to do with her hands. Struggling for composure, he said, "Thank you for the milk, Malena madam."

Malena covered her face with her hands, so desperate to avoid the situation that she nearly fainted. "No need, Priest... If you come next time, there'll be more..."

Even as she said it, she regretted it immediately.

Dear gods, what am I saying?! Of all the moments for polite small talk...

Charles's thoughts were no less of a mess. Quickly blurting "Next time for sure," he made good his escape from the residential district.

Lisa just stared after him, puzzled by the way the Priest was walking, his posture oddly hurried.

Unable to understand, she simply stopped thinking about it. She turned back to her mother—only to find her cheeks so red she seemed to be glowing.

Concerned, Lisa hurried to her side. "Mom, are you alright? Do you feel sick?"

"Are you cold? I'll get you a glass of warm milk to cheer you up."

At this moment, Malena would have liked nothing more than to give her daughter a thrashing.

My dear girl, you'll be the death of your poor mother from embarrassment!

Leaving Malena's blushing misery aside, Charles returned to the monastery. First, he joined the witches to magically clean away the corpses and bloodstains.

The city hall of South Harbor District was useless and corrupt. True power belonged to the Amazons living in the neighborhood, but certain appearances still needed to be maintained. Thankfully, the body count was low and confined, and word hadn't spread — otherwise, Blackstaff Tower might start paying attention, which would mean real trouble.

Once the traces were cleared, Andny brought him troubling news: that succubus was almost certainly dead. None of the witches had found even the slightest trace left behind.

Not even a scrap.

Charles could only sigh, resigned to the fact that Ines had powerful escape spells, and his own ranged stopping power was still a bit lacking.

His Storm Warhammer's throwing range was limited. In situations like earlier, when enemies flew high above and exchanged spells at long range, it was almost useless. His hammer simply couldn't be thrown far enough, so his ability to stop a retreat was very weak.

With a sigh, Charles glanced down at the plain hammer hanging at his hip. It was just a common model, after all. It could only hold two spell slots—a single first-level spell's worth—which put strict limits on its power and range.

Oh well. It seemed the monastery's secrets were destined to fall into enemy hands.

Fortunately, not all was lost. While the succubus escaped, several cambions and human kidnappers had been captured.

Even though the hour was late, Charles, anxious and sleepless, went with the witches to interrogate the prisoners in the dungeon.

The humans were quick to talk. Hard-bitten criminals they might be, but at least they weren't comfortable consorting with demons. Once they learned their job had been to serve fiends, they confessed everything they knew.

In short, they belonged to a new gang in the slums called the Seayard Gang. After beating a Xanathar's Guild underboss and expanding their turf, they were in rapid growth—but short on funds. Lately they'd take any work at all, and kidnapping a little girl was no problem for them.

As for their leader? He'd already died by Charles's sword during the battle. That man's strength was higher than the other kidnappers, but he made little impression; so much so that Charles couldn't quite remember killing anyone especially stronger than the rest.

In sum, these guys had only been hired by the succubus, disposable cannon fodder with no knowledge of important intel. Once Charles had gotten all he could from them, he gave them a swift end.

The captured cambions, on the other hand, were stubborn. Even as prisoners, they spat curses at him, relying on the fact that fiends resurrect after death and so defiantly had nothing to fear.

Charles had no patience for such games, especially while still angry over Ines's disappearance. He used the cruelest, most sadistic methods of torture he knew, finally extracting some information.

Simply put, all his suspicions were confirmed. They did indeed serve the Abyssal Lord Montport, sent to kidnap a small "offering"—clearly Lisa.

Having the answer, Charles sighed. He didn't kill them—after all, they'd just return to the Infinite Layers of the Abyss anyway. Instead, he built a new dungeon beneath the clinic and locked them away, never to see the sun again.

Only when all this was done did he wash up, then sank exhaustively into sleep.

He knew his days of peaceful growth were over. Now, he had to actively face the threat of the Abyssal Lord.

...

Rubble District, Rockseeker Camp.

Anno gazed at the fully assembled Adventurer Squad beside her, unable to hold back her excitement. This was her first time venturing out as an independent adventurer, joining a band of strangers on a mission in the wild.

She had to admit—the feeling was truly exhilarating.

She had joined a temporary squad of eight, built on a core of four adventurers, then recruiting another four members including herself.

The party's composition was well-balanced: a female brass Dragonborn barbarian, a male dwarf warrior, a tall red-haired human female warrior, and Anno herself as the frontline's four members;

The backline included two male Halflings—one a Wanderer, one a Bard—an Evocation School female Gnome Mage, and a life domain male cleric.

It was a textbook team setup: someone to handle traps, a tank, DPS, AOE, support, and healing. By Anno's own studies on adventurer party composition, getting three spellcasters plus herself—a half-caster—meant the team could solve almost any challenge.

Although, in her view, the rest of the party's level wasn't high—none besides herself had passed the Adventurer Guild's level-five examination—it didn't matter. Their current mission wasn't difficult: they were headed to a dwarven copper mine called The Tide Caverns, to investigate the sudden appearance of undead and monsters, and, if the opportunity arose, eliminate them.

It was a typical commission—almost nothing could go wrong. Besides, even if something unexpected did occur, she could protect her comrades with her divine light, and her Divine Smite was the ultimate bane of the undead.

She found herself looking forward, excited to see what this adventure would bring, and what kind of role she herself might play.

Noticing the excitement on her face, the tall, red-haired female warrior by her side offered a gentle smile. "Looking forward to it? Ready to solve the dwarves' troubles and be hailed as a hero in their eyes?"

This strong and curvaceous female warrior was Bonnie, the captain of the Adventurer Squad and, aside from Anno, its highest-leveled member—a solid level four, enough to command the respect of the others.

But most convincing weren't just her strength, but her leadership and adventure experience. By her looks, her skin, and her sturdy motherly build, it was clear she wasn't young.

In fact, Anno had learned she was already thirty, married, and had a child. She had retired from adventuring, but when her husband was laid off due to his age, she had no choice but to take up her sword again to help support her family.

Fortunately, her strength hadn't faded with time, and her experience was plenty for work in the Rubble District.

"Mhm!" Anno nodded vigorously, full of respect for this sisterly figure who looked out for her. "This is my first time ever adventuring in an underground mine!"

"Heh, real adventures aren't always as pretty as you might think, Anno." Bonnie smiled indulgently, unconcerned by her inexperience.

They'd duelled before—with neither casting a spell—and Anno had managed to win purely by swordplay. As far as Bonnie was concerned, the strong deserved respect, no matter how new. "Especially fighting undead. Skeletons are tolerable, but if you run across zombies, the stench will have you losing your breakfast."

"And that's not the worst. For the sake of clues—and loot—you have to fight through your nausea, rifling through muck and enemy corpses for spoils... What do you think, sound pleasant?"

Anno thought a moment, then made a pained expression. "I... I'll hold it in!"

"Haha, hope you do." Bonnie smiled again, clearly pleased. She couldn't hide her fondness for this cute, courteous, and incredibly strong young paladin—always eager to learn. She wanted to share all her experience with her as quickly as possible. "But if you can overcome all that, I think you'll come to love the feeling of adventure."

With everyone gathered, she looked around, then led the way. "Let's go—time to clear the undead from The Tide Caverns for the dwarves!"

...

Afternoon, scriptorium, first floor.

Andny sat on her bench, flipping through a religious tome of the Goddess of Life, her lips gently parting as she read aloud to the little girl beside her.

Next to her sat little Lisa, perched high on her bench, legs too short to touch the floor, kicking gently in the air.

She stared at Andny's delicate face with her big, beautiful black eyes, listening intently to her reading, completely enraptured.

Lisa loved this petite, similarly slight and purple short hair young nun sister. For so long, she'd been the one to keep Lisa company, learning the teachings of the Goddess of Life from the beginning. When they didn't understand something together, they'd go ask the raven-haired, dark-eyed Sophia.

To Lisa, it didn't feel like she was being force-fed knowledge by some distant figure, but as if she was studying with a friend. She cherished the feeling of equality, making her all the fonder of time with Andny.

But what Lisa didn't know was that, behind the gentle smile on the nun's face, Andny was utterly at her wits' end.

She knew this little girl's value was immense, but none of the witches understood the doctrine of the Goddess of Life—so no one was willing to teach Lisa.

Well, except Sophia—the wise memory witch—but she was needed to assist Charles with his Eldritch Invocation studies, so the task had fallen inevitably to the other witches.

Passed down and down, by order of rank, the least significant, weakest witch—Andny—was stuck with the duty.

No choice, knowing no more herself than anyone else, she had no choice but to grit her teeth and teach Lisa from scratch in the scriptorium.

"...The Goddess says that in this material world, every living being has the right to pursue happiness and affection. To be timid or self-abasing is to willingly give up that right; only the active and confident will attract the greatest favor..."

"...The Goddess says that, under my radiance, all beings of wisdom are equal. So do not be humble, do not be fearful, do not despair. No one is unworthy of anything—when you step forward to pursue happiness, you are already worthy of what you seek..."

"...The Goddess says, if someone stronger oppresses you, do not be terrified, do not despair. They, too, have their own shortcomings and weaknesses. Find them, exploit them, and overcome, to win the joy that your heart desires..."

Andny chanted the holy words; beside her, Lisa listened quietly. This was hardly Andny's first time reading the goddess's teachings, and at first it had been merely mechanical, with inward scorn and disbelief.

But as the days and readings accumulated, as she pondered her situation—and found encouragement in the tomes—her resistance faded, and she began to truly consider their meaning.

Bit by bit, she found herself accepting the message, even moved by it—maybe, she thought, the goddess was right, after all.

Today, the gradual change finally reached a turning point. With each line, each line of divine script entering her mind, confusion crept into Andny's eyes...

Don't be timid or self-abasing—be active, be confident, pursue affection and happiness...

These words echoed in her mind—until they filled her thoughts completely...

Maybe, I can...

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Chapter 143: Chapter 143: The Presumptuous Insect Witch

Dong—

The bell rang to mark the end of class, abruptly pulling the two girls from their grand fantasies. Without delay, knowing her teacher had tasks to attend to after class, Lisa packed her notebook and pencil case into her small satchel, said, "Goodbye, nun my lord," and turned to leave, pushing open the door.

Andny replied with a farewell, but inwardly she was unsettled. Thinking of what she planned to do next, in this very moment, a bold idea emerged in her mind.

"Andny, come over, we're having a meeting."

She heard Charles's voice in her mind; he was speaking to her through a mosquito familiar. Andny did not hesitate, rising quickly to ascend to the second floor.

Here, Charles sat at the head, occupying the only chair at the end of the room. All the monastery's nuns were already seated around, even Nidalee had taken her place, waiting quietly near the end for Andny to fill the last empty chair and begin the conference.

As usual, Andny's seat was at the end, far from Charles, in the least conspicuous spot, beside Ekta, listening quietly to the powerful witches' discussions, waiting to hear the final result.

Even now, with Nidalee joining and having even less status than her, Andny's voice remained mute in matters of decision-making.

But this time, things changed.

Andny's heart pounded, her mind filled with reckless thoughts. Remembering the goddess's encouragement from the scriptures, she full-heartedly picked up her chair and boldly walked to Charles's left hand, setting her chair down right beside him.

His right hand seat had already been taken by Hattie, who, as the first witch to be purified by the Master, held her place with confidence. The left side, however, had remained empty. Daringly, Andny claimed the seat, flanking Charles together with Hattie.

This bold transgression caused all the witches—except Theresa—to react with astonishment. Immediately, Hattie, Ruth, Sephera, and Sophia fixed Andny with stern gazes, pressing her to submit to unspoken pressure and yield her seat, returning to her lower place!

Ekta, at the very back, felt her own heart pounding—she and Andny were closest, and she knew well from experience what it meant to be the focus of so many witches' attention: the sheer mental pressure was immense. She inwardly whispered, "Come back, Andny, don't go challenging the witches' established order!"

Under the unwavering stares of the four witches, Andny nearly fainted.

Yet, she reached out and took Charles's hand, recalling the goddess's teachings she had just studied. Instantly, courage welled up from deep inside her heart!

Though weak, I am worthy to sit here, to draw closer to the Master and proactively seek his affection!

I am no less than they!

With this resolve, she lifted her head, straightened her back, and met the collective pressure of the other witches.

This, in turn, unsettled even Hattie and the other core witches. If, in the past, imposing their will did not deter a weaker witch, they would have used force.

But now, such tactics were impossible. Having been purified by Charles, they could no longer use force against their sisters!

So the situation froze into an awkward standoff. The monastery's former weakest, most invisible witch, had suddenly stepped into a place just one step behind Hattie!

All the way at the back, Ekta stared in disbelief at Andny.

She really... sat there?

How could she be this bold?

Ekta could not make sense of it, but she was deeply shaken.

Beside her, Nidalee also failed to grasp the subtleties, only feeling the atmosphere turn rather delicate. Yet she knew well enough not to speak out of turn, lowering her head with humility and quietly awaiting the conference's opening.

Among all the witches, only Theresa looked on in surprise, then gave a subtle nod, a smile of true approval appearing on her lips toward Andny.

Sadly, in her tension, Andny failed to notice this approving smile.

"Well, since everyone's here."

Charles nodded gently from the head. "Let's begin the conference."

"First, Nidalee, please brief us on the situation in the Rubble District."

At the witches' end, Nidalee cleared her throat and began to speak. In truth, she simply repeated to everyone what she had once told Charles in the prison.

Once she finished, she did not offer any commentary, lowering her head appropriately. Clearly, in her upbringing, social hierarchy was deeply ingrained, and knowing her own status as the newest arrival, she dared not say anything beyond the basics.

After she finished, Charles spoke, "At the moment, it seems the Mountaineer tribe's Earth Dragon problem was caused by the Abyssal Lord, and it's something I can resolve."

"As long as communication is smooth, we can likely establish an allied relationship with this tribe."

In fact, technically speaking, they were already as close as allies could be. After all, strictly counted, Charles was now the son-in-law of the Mountaineer tribe...

Ahem!

"At the same time, though Lady Anno hasn't said as much, her undertaking in the Rubble District likely also involves the Abyssal Lord." Charles continued, "We can take the initiative to contact her, thus joining forces with Blackstaff Tower as well."

"That means, eliminating the Abyssal Lord is almost a certainty. We might not even have to get our hands dirty—this threat could be destroyed through alliances."

"That's my view. Does anyone have further input?"

The witches exchanged looks, and Hattie spoke first: "If we don't plan to confront the Abyssal Lord directly, then after purifying the Earth Dragon, Master shouldn't need to go to the Rubble District himself. We could handle everything from then on, correct?"

"Given so many complicated factions tangled up in this battle, that place is anything but safe."

Charles shook his head with a smile, "That won't do, Hattie—I can't hide away in the monastery forever."

"Besides, we may avoid direct conflict with the Abyssal Lord, but we can eliminate his subordinate threats, can't we? I also want to test whether my purification ability might benefit from purifying fiends."

At this, Hattie sniffed lightly and fell silent.

"I do have a question," Sophia said suddenly, turning to Nidalee, "What is your tribe's attitude toward Blackstaff Tower and Liberl Port?"

Charles frowned slightly, uncertain as well. He had considered this issue, but fighting fiends—especially demons—was a political imperative for the whole material world, so even with differences or grudges, the parties would unite against a greater threat... right?

It was like facing a deadly plague: even the most divided nations set aside disputes to confront an epidemic together.

As he pondered, Nidalee hesitated, then shook her head: "I'm not sure. Actually, the Earth Dragon was summoned originally specifically to fight off the armies of the Empire of Sein, who invaded our mountains. So, our tribe is really one of the main forces resisting Liberl Port."

"But in recent years, my father has started encouraging tribe members to let go of old grudges and focus on life and the future. After all, the reality is complex, and neither the wars nor the killings can entirely be blamed on the Empire of Sein..."

At the head, Charles nodded quietly; Nidalee's father seemed, at least, level-headed.

Indeed, a hundred years ago, when the Empire of Sein first entered the mountains, many tribes among the Mountain People still retained cannibalistic rituals—making drums from human skin, sacrificing blood, and so forth.

Not ogres, but fellow humans, albeit greatly diminished and weakened by hardship—yet with cannibalistic customs, true man-eaters.

Such barbaric Mountain People, barely different from ogres, initially responded to any outsiders—hunters, lumberjacks, miners—from the Empire of Sein with hostility, raiding and even sacrificing or eating captives.

The Empire's army at first fought only these cannibal clans, but the Mountain People had bonds of marriage and mutual respect for such customs, so when attacked, they united in defense.

Thus, striking one tribe meant confronting them all; before long, it was all-out war...

Ironically, those cannibal tribes were wiped out, and the old generation long dead—so the young Mountain People today seldom even know their ancestors' crimes. Men like Nidalee's father are rare indeed.

Still, Nidalee carried on: "He might say that, yet when it comes to foes who hate Liberl Port and Blackstaff Tower and want to destroy the city, he never hesitates to draw their support, even tried to marry me off to an extremely anti-Liberl Port tribal heir..."

She trailed off awkwardly. Charles nodded slightly. "I see. Your father neither hates nor favors the port. He's a clever politician, telling everyone what they want to hear without offending anyone."

After this, he added, "In that case, faced with the greater cause of 'fighting demons,' he should choose to ally with Blackstaff Tower—which is beneficial. Even his anti-port allies couldn't really fault him for it."

Sophia's eyes remained on Nidalee: "So your father would not, in the middle of our battle with the demons, betray us and the alliance, right?"

At this suggestion, Nidalee's heart nearly stopped—she couldn't believe someone would suspect her father of such villainy: "Never. My father is a man of principle!"

Sophia gave a subtle nod: "Alright, then I have no more questions."

Stepping back, she said no more. The other witches also held their peace. After a pause, Charles continued, "Very well. On to the next topic: Who will accompany me to the Rubble District, and who will remain to oversee the monastery's ongoing operations?"

No sooner were the words spoken than almost every witch raised her head at once: "I want to go!"

Charles gave a wry smile, raising a hand, "Hold on, one at a time."

He looked first to Nidalee: "First of all, Nidalee must go—this trip is to her tribe. Who else should accompany us?"

Hattie was about to speak, but now Andny, at his left, took a step forward and interrupted, "Eldest sister and I will accompany Master."

Immediately, all eyes turned to her again. There was shock, fury, some concern, and admiration—the one approving gaze came from the monastery's archwitch, Theresa.

"Give your reasons," Charles asked.

Andny's heart pounded; she had stayed silent in the first round, preparing for this moment.

Now, taking a deep breath, she set out her case: "First, to ensure the monastery runs smoothly and safely, we can't take too many people away, but our strength must be sufficient. I think three people should travel with Master: Miss Nidalee is essential, and the other must naturally be the strongest—eldest sister."

Theresa gave the faintest nod, her gaze alight with approval.

She had always hoped to see her sisters grow strong, a habit from before she herself was purified. Only with enough strength could her sisters watch over her when she was in trouble!

Andny, clever as ever though once timid, now showed sudden backbone—Theresa was genuinely pleased.

"And on that basis," Andny continued, "since eldest sister is so strong, the third person doesn't need to be powerful, but should be able to gather information. Sophia, although very knowledgeable and strong, said herself she's not suited to rapid travel in the field, and is better at home—right?"

Sophia's face turned awkward, but she nodded. "Yes."

"So, for the last companion, I believe I am best suited." Andny straightened her flat chest, heart racing, but kept her voice proud. "I can control mosquitoes, making it easy to gather information along the way. That makes me the most suitable for this move!"

Her words left the witches completely taken aback. No wonder—before today, no one could have imagined the monastery's weakest witch would be so audacious.

"Well said." At the head, Charles nodded, then asked, "But last time, didn't you say you had to stay in one place for a while before you could control the local mosquitoes?"

Andny hesitated, then hurriedly replied, "After Master's blessing, my strength has grown immensely. I don't need as long to prepare now—I can control unfamiliar mosquitoes as well..."

"How long, exactly?" Charles pressed.

"Uh..." Andny faltered, mumbling, "I haven't experimented yet, but... it won't be long! My strength has increased a lot, and in the mountains of the Rubble District, there's no shortage of bugs..."

Charles only looked at her with a smile. At this, Andny was nearly in tears: "Master, please trust me! I promise I won't hold you back..."

She begged, while behind her, Sephera let out a cold snort, barely able to contain her fury.

So weak, and wants to lord it over us? Can't she see her own limits?

She was about to speak, but Charles nodded and said, "Alright, I'll grant your wish this time."

...

Northwest of Rubble District, deep in the mountains, in some cavern.

This had once been a mithril mine carved out by Stone Giants, but after a century of depletion, it was now abandoned.

Now, however, it had become a den of evil.

Ghostly white flames flitted across the air, illuminating the infernal cave. Greatly decayed bodies hung by iron hooks from the ceiling, flesh sliced away like livestock. The stench was overwhelming—from both corrupt corpses and the hulking hezrou standing like immense bipedal toads, their bodies also covered in pustules...

This hellish tableau would drive any ordinary person to madness. Yet in the deepest recesses of the cave, even worse horrors lurked...

In that deepest lair, a vast pool of blood seethed. There, a hulking, dark-purple monster covered in scales lay immersed in its filthy bath.

Its appearance resembled a centaur, but its lower half was huge and hippo-like, over five meters long with a massive tail. Its upper body contrasted by being enormous and troll-like, eyes burning with a sickly green demonic fire, its face adorned with bristling whiskers and two thick tusks, ferocious and terrifying.

Additionally, its back sported bat wings—clearly too small for flight, flapping as mere assistance for running.

This brute, easily weighing five or six tons, would be unstoppable charging across the land!

This creature was none other than the Abyssal Lord Montport—holder of the contract with Theresa!

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Chapter 144: Chapter 144: Insects Witch

At this moment, the Abyssal Lord's massive hand was grasping the long-dead corpse of a Halfling, chewing its flesh and satisfying his near-endless appetite. Outside the blood pool, the purple-skinned succubus Ines stood with her head bowed, hands clasped at her abdomen, silent as she awaited his final judgment.

"So, you believe that the girl was in fact bait, that her location was a carefully laid trap for you all?"

Finally, having swallowed a chunk of raw meat, Montport spoke, his voice resounding like thunder throughout the cavern.

Ines nodded repeatedly. "Yes. The other side had hidden powerful mages—even the strongest among them was capable of casting a 7th-level spell, 'Prismatic Spray.'"

"It was only because of her that my powerful escort of twelve cambions was totally annihilated, and I myself barely escaped..."

Montport offered no comment. "Describe those mages' appearances and dress, especially the strongest one."

Ines hurried to answer: "They were all dressed as nuns. The leader, the strongest among them, stood out—she wore a white nun's habit..."

She described in detail the looks and attire of her adversaries, and midway through, the Abyssal Lord's eyes flared wide with sudden anger: "Theresa, you shameless witch! You betrayed me—!"

"Just wait. Once I have destroyed this place, I'll tear you limb from limb!"

His furious roar reverberated through the cave, shaking its very walls. Ines instinctively hunched, feigning fear, though inwardly she breathed a sigh of relief: Good, good, she thought, the blame has been effectively shifted.

Yet, Montport did not rant further. Instead, he drew back into his blood pool, burying his enormous body in the crimson liquid. "Very well, Ines. Though you failed this time, you did expose a traitor."

"I have decided to entrust you with a new responsibility. Since you are a succubus, I need you to put your unique talents to use and investigate something."

His eyes narrowed coldly. "These greatly weakened ones seem to be forming some kind of alliance. I require you to capture several of their higher-ups and find out what they are plotting!"

"If possible, bring some of them to our side to strengthen our forces as well..."

Ines's face lit up with delight. "Then, my lord, since this new mission involves seducing men, may I summon some of my sisters to join me?"

The Abyssal Lord closed his eyes. "You may act as you wish—I only care for results!"

With that, he withdrew from worldly concerns. Jubilant, Ines bowed out and turned to leave.

Of course, she had no intention of following orders so dutifully. Her true intention in gathering her sisters was to seduce Montport's fellow fiends and extract precious information about the Abyssal Lord's plots and aims...

For example: just what was the purpose of this maddening blood pool he had labored so hard to create? Was he polluting something?

Or was he preparing to awaken something?

...

With three girls in tow, Charles once again entered the Rockseeker's Outpost. The moment they entered, they drew a great many eyes.

It was inevitable: beauty always attracted attention.

Charles, as their leading figure, drew plenty of glances. Prepared for field adventuring, he had shed his black priest's robes in favor of simple brown leather armor, with bracers on his arms—appearing experienced and lean, naturally exuding the charisma expected of the strong.

Of course, these trappings were mere camouflage. His true security lay in the protection of magic.

Following him was Nidalee, this time in her usual attire: a brown fur-lined beast-hide vest, matching short skirt, and leather boots—exposing her shoulders, slim waist, and thighs, utterly unbothered by the cold—not unusually for a druid, whose connection with nature gave resistance to extremes of heat and cold, if not to fire or frost itself.

Behind came Theresa. Her attire had changed little, still the splendid milky white and gold-trimmed nun's robe, hands folded solemnly and face pious.

Standing tallest and most voluptuous among them, even the thick habit did nothing to disguise her curves. It was inevitable that she drew the most lingering male glances—adventurers in particular gazing as if magnetized, unable to look away.

Last came Andny, with by far the greatest transformation. The petite girl had abandoned her somber, heavy, and conservative nun's habit—garments that had hidden all her charm—in favor of an outfit much better suited to her.

Her upper body was now clad in a gothic purple dress, lace trim from chest to shoulders, a small bow tied at the collar. Her delicate legs were sheathed in white thigh-high stockings, little black boots on her feet—lively and charming in her way.

Unfortunately, when placed next to Theresa's voluptuous presence, she simply couldn't compete for attention—her stature and figure, much like Ruth's, went overlooked as all eyes were drawn to the tall, full-bodied, beautiful nun at her side.

Luckily, attention from anyone not named Charles was not her concern. All the while, as they hurried along, Andny was busy establishing telepathic links with the local mosquitoes, recruiting them as her eyes and ears to eavesdrop on as much intelligence as possible.

Thus, as the undeniable focus of the Rockseeker camp, their group drew stares while crossing the streets and entered the dwarven aunt's hostel where Charles had stayed before.

The aunt was as warm-hearted as ever, instantly recognizing Charles as the handsome young man who'd visited a month prior. Noticing that his companions now differed from the previous two lovely girls, the aunt's smile grew a bit unusual but she said nothing, only welcoming them warmly and asking how many rooms they'd need.

Of course, it would be two rooms—four people this time, and with Theresa's imposing presence, one room was out of the question.

Which gave rise to a new dilemma.

Who would share a room with whom?

A detail Charles hadn't originally considered. But at that moment, desire sparking in her heart, Andny asserted herself first: "Tonight, I want to share a room with Master!"

In the corridor on the hostel's second floor, the Insect Witch spoke, taking a deep breath. "Tonight, I plan to send out my swarm to gather information at the Adventurer's Guild. If anything turns up, I must report it to Master first."

"It makes most sense for me to share a room with Master."

The reasoning was thin—she could easily station a bug by Charles's ear and deliver intelligence instantly.

She said it anyway, heart hammering as she risked a glance at Theresa by the corner of her eye.

After all, this woman had been the monastery's supreme leader and strongest archwitch; if Andny hoped to win the right to serve Master first, she'd need the courage to face her head-on...

She is very afraid that the archwitch will deny her, and then Charles will agree to let her sleep first tonight because of her more proud body.

To her surprise, Theresa turned to her and gave a look of sincere approval: "That makes perfect sense. In that case, let's let Andny have tonight."

Andny was stunned—how could it be that, in this contest for Master's favor, Theresa's reaction was... one of support?

Didn't Theresa want to be with Master herself?

Unable to fathom Theresa's thinking, the newly competitive Andny failed to understand her attitude at all.

In truth, Theresa's logic was simple: the more her sisters boldly and actively pursued the power, fortune, and happiness they wanted, the more pleased she felt—just as she had always cherished souls with ambition and resolve, even before being purified.

Since that corrupted compulsion had been lifted, her outlook had grown closest to the Goddess of Life's own teachings.

Beside them, Nidalee pursed her lips but soon fell silent, not contesting the Insect Witch's claim. Charles, with a gentle smile, ruffled Nidalee's hair before saying, "Alright, Andny will share tonight. Tomorrow, Nidalee will take her turn."

He then looked to Theresa: "How does that sound?"

So, the strongest—Theresa—would be the last to keep him company. Yet the archwitch expressed not a hint of jealousy, only smiled and nodded: "I have no objections. Those who bravely pursue joy deserve encouragement and tolerance."

She was signaling her support to Andny—but in her nervousness, Andny couldn't recognize whether it was sarcasm or real approval.

Regardless, the rooms for the night were finally settled. The dwarf aunt's hostel hadn't changed in the month since their last stay: wooden rooms, a large wooden bed with spotless sheets.

He was familiar with the place and the process. As Andny continued to recruit more mosquito contacts, Charles fetched a large barrel of water, closed the door, and washed himself.

Afterward, he didn't go straight to bed, but drew another hot bath for Andny, urging her to wash first before getting to work—not a moment too soon.

Andny didn't refuse. As Charles lay on the bed beneath a blanket, he watched—eyes wide open—as the girl, bashful but dutiful, undressed piece by piece right before him, wiping down every corner of her pale soft body with a wet towel, displaying every inch of her skin under his rapt eye.

In effect, giving him a live bath show.

Once she'd finished, he used magic to vanish the water—Create/Destroy Water spells served just as well for tidying up as for bathing, not much use in battle, but very handy.

When he'd watched her finish her entire bath, Charles lay back down, patting the pillow beside him. "Come, over here."

The Witch of Compliant Insects obediently approached, her wet purple short hair plastered in strands against her temples after the bath. Her fair face glowed with a rosy flush from the steam, looking utterly alluring.

Clad only in a pristine white bath towel that barely concealed her breasts and rounded hips, she resembled delicate Ruth in physique—petite, nimble, and tenderly captivating despite her youth and frailty.

Yet she didn't lie beside Charles immediately. Instead, the girl adeptly positioned herself over his lower body, lifting the woolen blanket to reveal his thick cock, already erect and throbbing with urgency. At the peak of his virility, nourished well these past months, his primal nature surged fiercely, demanding release.

Andny gazed hungrily at the veined weapon promising ecstasy, her lips curving into a triumphant smile: "Tonight, Master belongs solely to me." She parted her cherry lips, straining to engulf the thick girth inch by agonizing inch until the crown kissed her throat. A low groan escaped Charles as her hot mouth constricted around him, tongue swirling along his shaft while saliva slicked her chin. He watched her bobbing head—the obscene slurps, her flushed cheeks hollowing—and finally understood how rarely he favored her compared to other witches.

His fingers threaded through her damp purple strands in a gentle caress: "You've changed greatly these past days, Andny. What sparked this transformation?"

She paused mid-suck, hovering a mosquito near his ear to buzz plaintively: "Does Master dislike this?" Charles chuckled darkly: "Not at all. I merely wonder what ignited such boldness."

Relieved, she resumed swirling her tongue around his swollen head, lapping pre-cum from its slit before answering breathlessly: "The scriptures of the Goddess of Life... I must strive actively for Master's favor. Even if our sisters obstruct me—I'll be fearless!" Her pout returned as she recounted Sephera's sneers and the glares silencing Ekta. Charles sighed, stroking her scalp: "After we return, tell Ekta to speak freely. We're bound by trust as family."

Andny's renewed enthusiasm manifested in fervent licks circling his shaft, her tongue flicking the sensitive ridge beneath his crown. Moans tore from Charles as pleasure seared his spine. "But," he gasped as her suction tightened, "should conflicts arise... defer to Hattie's judgment." He couldn't deny his first purified witch certain privileges.

Andny's eyes gleamed—now only Hattie warranted caution. After minutes straining, she released his slicked cock, knowing her slender throat couldn't conquer his release. Only Sephera's bifurcated tongue had ever claimed that victory. Mounting his hips, she spread her slim thighs. Her small entrance glistened, dwarfed by his thickness. Gripping his shaft, she aligned its bulbous tip against her clenched virgin folds and sank downward—

"Aaahn—!"

Searing pressure stretched her unbearably, but Charles buried himself to the hilt, groaning at her witch-enhanced elasticity. If human, her narrow passage would've ripped; instead, heat clenched him like molten silk. He ripped off her towel, kneading her pert breasts while grinding upward. "Any useful news?" His voice roughened, fingers pinching her nipples.

Her thighs trembled against his abdomen as she rode him, gasping: "Lady Anno... visited—in disguise... joined... an adventurer squad..." Panting escalated as arousal drowned her focus. Seeing her unfocused gaze and flushed skin, Charles gripped her waist—time to reward her loyalty.

Hearing this, Charles frowned.

Anno, join the Adventurer Squad?

What is she going to do?

"Have you noticed what mission she has taken?" he asked, and then he saw that Andny's eyes were blurry, and the skin on her cheeks and chest was a little red-haired, so he knew that this girl was very excited and could hardly work normally.

Then, let's satisfy her first.

Flipping her onto the bed, he reclaimed her depths, spreading her legs into a shameless M-shape. Knees wedged her open, he hammered into her, each thrust smacking wet flesh. Andny's cries crescendoed—"Master! Ah! Deeper!"—as her hips rose frantically to meet his savage rhythm. Bedposts rattled against the wall; down the hall, Theresa and Nidalee would recognize these sinful sounds.

Charles pistoned relentlessly. Sweat slicked their bodies, her inner walls spasming around his girth until her back arched violently—"Coming!" she shrieked, convulsing as ecstasy ripped through her. His control shattered. Seizing her nape, he crushed her mouth against his, tongues tangling as he fucked her through her climax. She sobbed against his lips, tears streaking her cheeks while her cunt milked him.

With a roar, Charles plunged one last time, swelling inside her as torrents of seed flooded her womb. Spent, he collapsed beside her, fingers lazily combing her hair. Andny lay dazed, smile drunkenly forming. "Master..." she slurred.

He traced her nose, grinning. "Satisfied?" His thumb swept semen glistening on her inner thigh while she nuzzled closer. "Utterly," she murmured, eyes drifting shut as he wiped their shared mess from her quivering folds with the discarded towel.

"Then let's look more closely at what kind of task Anno and her group accepted." As he spoke, he drew her head against his chest, gently caressing her silky hair. Though they had just made love, now immediately discussing another woman—a thing that would normally seem strange and improper—in the bonds between witches, this had become entirely ordinary.

"Mm." Andny closed her eyes, softly responding. After a moment's silence, she murmured, "Lady Anno joined with seven strangers to form an Adventurer Squad, and... They set out for a place called The Tide Caverns to investigate the undead incidents there."

Charles frowned faintly, automatically ignoring the earlier details. In his mind, the companions grouped with Anno were surely members sent by Force Grey to accompany her on the mission.

He paid attention only to what followed.

The Tide Caverns...

Hiss...

Wait!

That place...

Could it really be that one?!

He remembered now—The Tide Caverns belonged to the Mountain Dwarf Mining Consortium as one of their copper mines. Copper ore was a resource of considerable importance to the Mountain Dwarves, who needed it to craft Storm Warhammers.

And in the game, there was such a quest—once completed, it improved your prestige with the Mountain Dwarf Mining Consortium. The higher your reputation, the greater the discount for purchasing weapons and armor from them, and you could even buy high-grade Storm Warhammers...

But Charles knew full well—this particular quest was no easy feat!

The BOSS monster lurking in those caverns was no trivial adversary, but a Drider who had recovered free will—a rebel against the Demon Queen of Spiders!

Yes, a monstrous dark elf who had become part giant spider—a terrifying abomination!

Under normal circumstances, Dark Elves who worship the Demon Queen of Spiders, when turned into Driders by this unreasonable fiend, would either become utterly mad or even more fanatical, ruthlessly butchering everything—kin and strangers alike.

But exceptions always exist—there are always a few defiant souls, who, while still regular Dark Elves, cringed before the Demon Queen of Spiders, but upon being transformed into Driders, suddenly awakened. They struck back ruthlessly at their deity, and after their vengeful outburst, fled to the outside world, living as fugitives—constantly on the run, yet finally free.

Of course, most Driders who attempt this rebellion are crushed in the act—suppressed and brainwashed into insane monsters. Only a rare few of exceptional strength succeed in escaping from Menzoberranzan as Driders, leaving behind that hellish realm of the Demon Queen of Spiders, even reaching the surface world to live lives of their own choosing.

And just his luck—the Drider living in The Tide Caverns was exactly such a nearly perfect specimen of the strong.

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Chapter 145: Chapter 145: Drider, Ilthreza

The Drider beneath the earth—her name was Ilthreza. As for her true surname, that had long been lost to time, for she had severed all ties with her bloodline.

Before her transformation into a Drider, this woman had already been a formidable mage, mastering spells up to the fifth circle.

Normally, in any race, when a spellcaster of such strength made a mistake, their deities of faith would expect atonement of some kind—not to be turned directly into a monster.

But, unfortunately, she was an elf; and elves are never in short supply when it comes to high-level spellcasters. Worse still, the deity she worshipped was the Demon Queen of Spiders herself—a fiend as cold, cruel, and mad as any in the Lower Planes, one who openly encouraged infighting among dark elves. It was her nature to waste even the best of her kin, driving them into monstrous insanity.

Thus, for nothing more than dabbling in forbidden lifeform experimentation and offending the Spider Queen, Ilthreza was transformed into a Drider. Yet she did not sink into despair; on the contrary, she exploited her mutated body to the fullest, teaching herself a complete arsenal of dual-wielding swordplay, poison arts, and the art of high-speed movement with spider-silk.

These techniques combined perfectly with her spells, making her all the more deadly. Her challenge rating was estimated as high as twelve—surpassing even Sophia, and almost a match for Theresa before her strengthening!

And that wasn't the end. After hiding in The Tide Caverns, she also studied Spells from the School of Necromancy, knowledge of beast-taming, and biology techniques, and built an army composed of Mutated Giant Spiders and undead, which is extremely difficult to deal with!

Charles did have great faith in Anno's capabilities—after all, she was a noble paladin, hailed as a member of the top-tiered Oath of Vengeance class. But even so, her level wasn't high. Even if she had mastered Aura of Protection, she lacked access to third-level spells; at best, she was at eighth level, and no match for this Drider.

Trouble was brewing...

As Charles considered the real threat lurking in the depths of that supposedly manageable mine, he couldn't help but worry for the girl. A moment later, he sighed quietly, "Let's hope she's got good fortune on her side; if things go wrong, I just hope she'll withdraw before it is too late."

"Andny, any further intel relating to the mountain folk, fiends, or our position?"

He asked, and the witch gently shook her head: "Nothing for now, Master. I'll keep searching; please rest for the night."

Unless there was tremendous expenditure of magic, witches actually didn't need sleep. Most of the time, they lay down to give Charles the illusion of sharing ordinary life—though truth be told, an 'ordinary' life rarely included such a vast harem...

Ahem. In any case, at such a crucial time, it was only natural for Andny to choose to forgo sleep and work through the night.

"Thank you. You're working hard," Charles replied.

He then closed his eyes, willing himself to relax and not let any of this throw off his pace or his plans.

But he couldn't sleep at all. Frowning, he opened his eyes again. "Andny, check once more—when did they leave?"

Andny blinked her large violet eyes, controlled her familiar worms, and peered through the network. "They accepted their commission a week ago. The exact day of departure is unclear, but what's certain: they haven't returned yet..."

At once, Charles drew a sharp breath.

This was bad. That girl—she was likely already caught by the spider fiend!

The thought left his mind in chaos; then, with an inward bite of resolve, he steadied himself.

No—Charles. Even if things have gone sideways, you mustn't lose your composure now!

Tomorrow, start by letting Nidalee contact her father and secure the matter of the purified Earth Dragon. Only then, seek out any further clues from him; if there's hope, assemble allies and mount a rescue for Anno!

So decided.

Having set his course, he stroked Andny's hair and murmured, "Thank you for your efforts." Only then did he again close his eyes, forcing himself to embrace sleep, weighed down with deep worry.

...

After breakfast, Andny reported some fresh intelligence about the mountain folk: in sum, several tribes had been on the move—perhaps a sign of a new alliance forming. Of these, one key tribe was the Mountaineers.

Charles had little insight into this, guessing the Archdruid was simply grasping at any chance to enlist allies against the pollution.

After his morning wash, he related his thoughts, last night's discoveries, and his plans to both Theresa and Nidalee. He also instructed Theresa, if her father proved supportive, to mention The Tide Caverns—the extermination of undead being a matter of maintaining the natural order, one any druidic Ilarode ought to support.

Nidalee, of course, agreed. After breakfast, she set off alone, transformed into a leopard, and slipped into the wild hills outside Rockseeker's Outpost to call for her father.

For caution's sake, Charles and company did not follow, nor did Andny send any mosquito spies. They dared not risk her father misunderstanding the intent.

Out in the wilderness, treading the soft, dry grass, alone beneath the broad mountains, Nidalee shifted to human form and crouched low, eyes closed, chanting arcane incantations.

It was the unique contact ritual of the Mountaineer druids: even at a distance of a hundred miles, her father would perceive her call, and send his envoys in reply.

He did not keep her waiting long. Soon, a mighty stag burst from the trees, tall and well-muscled, its hide glossy, two grand antlers crowning its brow—a true king of the herd.

Seeing it approach, Nidalee rose and adopted a posture of respect. The stag regarded her, and then—her father's voice issued from its mouth: "Nidalee, where have you been? Have you brought back the Holy Sword Fragment?"

This was Nidalee's father, Archdruid Ilarode. He could link his spirit to the mountains, and thus every animal here became his eyes and ears, his apostles, serving as his spies or mouthpieces.

It was a costly power, prone to disruption if disturbed.

Upon being questioned, an involuntary resentment stirred inside Nidalee. She could not help but feel her father viewed her as little more than a tool—a means to an end, with no regard for her feelings, health, or well-being. All that mattered to him was whether she'd brought back something of value.

But then, who among them wasn't used this way?

Tormented by these thoughts, she did not answer directly, but said, "Father, I've found a way to purify the Earth Dragon's demonic corruption."

"This method is far more reliable than the Holy Sword Fragment."

At that, the stag's brows drew together, its expression darkening: "In other words, you didn't bring it back?"

Nidalee felt helpless—Charles's advice was of little use here. "No, Father—it was used up already, for... purifying another powerful fiend."

She pressed the point: "But please believe me, this new remedy is even more reliable."

The stag's frown remained; its face perfectly conveyed Ilarode's current mood. "Explain your plan."

Nidalee took a long breath. "It's this: I'm traveling in the company of Nigel Charles, the Priest."

"At the foot of the mountain, I learned he wields a miraculous energy. He can purify undead, fiends, and any contaminated life—as well as the pollution they produce. If we allow him to approach the Earth Dragon—"

The Archdruid's voice turned instantly icy: "You would allow a man of Sein to lay hands on our Earth Dragon?!"

"Have you considered, Nidalee, what the other tribes would think if they heard about this?!"

Nidalee was momentarily stunned, murmuring quietly, "He isn't of the Empire of Sein. He's a Silver Kin born in Liberl Port..."

"Is that really any different?" retorted the stag. "Are you saying Liberl Port doesn't belong to the Empire of Sein—or that Silver Kin aren't its primary race?"

"When the mountain folk see that hair of white and eyes of blue, who won't immediately associate him with the empire?"

Nidalee had no answer.

Though her father often urged his people not to live in hatred of Liberl Port, the Empire of Sein, or the Silver Kin, most of their allied tribes were hardline hawks. To them, it was crucial to project a fiercely anti-Liberl Port appearance.

Now, at this key alliance moment, if he invited a Silver Kin from Liberl Port into their tribe to treat the Earth Dragon, it would be akin to a major red-bloc nation, during the Cold War, inviting an expert from the blue bloc to tour its armory—how could his allies not react with suspicion?

Even if Ilarode himself trusted his daughter's judgment, inviting that outsider into the tribe, his allies assuredly would not.

For this, Nidalee could only fall silent. She wasn't unskilled in speech, but years of accumulated paternal authority all but stifled her thoughts.

Seeing his daughter appear to submit, the stag dipped its head, clearly satisfied: "In short, consider this mission a failure, Nidalee."

"As for what we agreed before, upon your return, you will marry Torun."

Nidalee jerked her head up, pupils pinning, "No—I won't marry him. I do not like him!"

'Like' was too mild—she nearly hated him. Torun, the minotaur, radiated a mysterious self-confidence, forever flexing his bulging muscles before her, seemingly unaware that this only repelled. Every mention of Liberl Port brought his wild, nearly fanatical hatred to a boil, as he shouted slogans to show his absolute loyalty. It filled Nidalee with utter aversion.

Just imagining a lifetime with this man was torment enough.

"Nidalee!" The Archdruid's voice turned stern once more, "You are the chief's daughter. You have your duty!"

Nidalee's heart leapt into her throat—she opened her mouth, but it was as if a giant's hand gripped her throat, rendering her speechless—

Suddenly, a white silhouette flashed before her mind's eye.

It was Charles's figure.

A new courage surged in her heart, a bolt of lightning through her thoughts, gifting her with a new idea.

"But Father, I've already found someone I love," she said. "And on this trip, I've already given him both my body and soul."

As she spoke, she could not help but smile, arms crossing her chest as if embracing something precious, her eyes shining with happiness.

At that, the stag's eyes went wide: "What did you just say?!"

He had never imagined—the little cabbage he had so carefully raised had gone off and been claimed by a wild boar, just from a single trip down the mountain, before he could ever sell her to his intended buyer!

How could this not fill him with rage?

Nidalee drew a deep breath. Even though her father was plainly furious, his overwhelming aura pressed down on her, yet at this moment—thinking of that white silhouette—she felt boundless courage and strength. There was not a shred of fear: "I said, I have found my one true love in this life. As of now, I have given him my body and soul both."

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Chapter 146: Chapter 146: Our Affair... My Father Knows Everything Now

As she spoke, as if worried her previous words hadn't shocked her father enough, Nidalee raised a hand, gently covering her lower abdomen—the meaning was unmistakable.

Upon hearing this, the Archdruid's voice was almost gnashing with fury: "Who is it?!"

He paused, then suddenly seemed to realize something: "Could it be... him?"

Nidalee nodded. "Exactly. It's just as I told you before—the one who can purify the corruption on our Earth Dragon, Nigel Charles the Priest."

"I've fallen in love with him. And for the sake of this love, he agreed to cleanse the Earth Dragon's corruption for us, with no thought of payment."

"Foolish girl!" the stag roared in rage. "You've been deceived! You actually believe he can really purify the Earth Dragon's corruption? Use your head! If he truly had such an ability, why would he have fought you for the Holy Sword Fragment?"

"He doesn't have such power at all. He's lying to you, hoping to gain the secrets of our tribe—so he can sell them to our enemies and make a fortune!"

Nidalee lifted her chin, meeting her father's eyes without a trace of fear. "No, Priest is not that kind of person! I trust him, Father. Now that the Holy Sword Fragment is consumed, his power is our only hope left."

The stag reared up in fury, hooves pawing the air, as if ready to crush her. Yet, even as Nidalee clashed so boldly with her father, her mind was perfectly clear. The moment he raised his hooves, she sprang aside, instantly morphing into leopard form and fleeing into the distance at breakneck speed.

"Come back here!" the Archdruid thundered, but made no move to pursue. "Return to the tribe at once!"

Nidalee, however, never looked back. Her voice rang out as her footsteps faded away, "I'll only return once you've agreed to my two conditions..."

As she said this, her silhouette vanished deep into the forest, gone without a trace. Behind her, the stag stamped twice in impotent rage. Yet soon enough, its wild glare faded, replaced by the innocence of a true deer. It spun, darting into the depths of the woods.

At that very moment, just outside the Mountaineer tribe's camp—

The Archdruid Ilarode sat cross-legged, eyes closed, attuned to the distant senses of his stag avatar, conversing with his daughter far away.

Beside him stood Torun, the minotaur, face tense with worry and anxiety. He dared not speak, afraid of interrupting a spellcasting so profound.

Suddenly, Ilarode's chest heaved violently, as if something had deeply aggravated him. After a few heavy breaths, his eyes flared open—blazing with wrath.

Seeing this, Torun felt a deep foreboding, but still wasn't brave enough to speak.

The Archdruid soon closed his eyes again, taking a long, deep breath to quell his anger. Only then did he slowly rise, weariness written across his face.

Finally, Torun dared to ask, "Archdruid, my lord, may I ask... how is Nidalee now?"

Ilarode paused, then spoke in a voice as placid as still water, "Ah, she's quite well. Her having lost contact for a few days was nothing but a small mishap."

"But it's created a little extra trouble. She now has a new task to accomplish, and likely won't be returning to the tribe for some time."

His feelings were a mess, and he dared not reveal the truth. Mostly, he didn't know what the minotaur would do if he found out his intended bride had eloped.

After all, the image of Torun's near-fanatical zeal about Nidalee was still fresh in his mind.

With these words, the Archdruid's tone even held a faint apology. "Torun, if you wish to see her, I fear you must wait a while longer."

Upon hearing this, Torun couldn't hide his disappointment, but quickly forced a hearty smile. "So long as she's unharmed, I'm not in a rush, Archdruid. Since you have promised her to me, I will wait as long as I must."

He had been told by his own kin that Ilarode was the most powerful and respected spellcaster in all the mountains. He thus trusted this Archdruid's word implicitly.

Ilarode nodded slightly, Torun's deference much to his liking—yet it only deepened his frustration toward his daughter. "I assure you, once this matter is resolved, she'll return at once and marry you properly."

"Thank you," Torun replied, inclining his head before hefting his massive greataxe. "Well then, I'll set out. Once I take care of the problem at The Tide Caverns, perhaps those Mountain Dwarves will finally join our alliance."

He was ever the optimist, and Ilarode nodded again. "Let's hope that after this, those dwarves abandon neutrality and truly stand with us."

There was, after all, a Mountain Dwarf force in these highlands. They weren't indigenous to the region, but had migrated from some distant dwarven kingdom to mine the mountains.

Their group was called the Mountain Dwarf Mining Company. Though not a massive power, in these mountains their strength was not insignificant. What mattered most—

they possessed advanced ironworking, able to craft quality arms for the otherwise primitive mountainfolk alliance.

As a druid, Ilarode naturally despised metal. He far preferred to create enchanted weapons of oaken wood for his warriors.

Still, practical as he was, he knew his spells could not arm every fighter. Not every warrior could wield a magic wooden axe—while every combatant like Torun needed a reliable weapon to reach their full strength.

Thus, if these expert dwarven smiths could be brought into the alliance, their strength would leap forward by an order of magnitude.

Yet gaining them would not be easy.

Dwarves were traditionally allies to humankind—but that was only on matters of great import. When faced with apocalyptic threats—undead scourges, demonic invasions, rampaging Old Gods—the dwarves would stand firmly with men.

Ilarode had hoped that cleansing the demonic corruption from the mountains would win them over, but the dwarves clearly saw this alliance as aimed against Liberl Port, a mere alliance of self-interest.

For a war of such origin, the ever-neutral dwarves had no interest. Their only concern was business. They wouldn't risk offending any party.

Torun, for his part, wouldn't give up so easily. His excursion to The Tide Caverns was to help the dwarves resolve a crisis, hopefully curry favor, and at last draw them into the alliance.

Ilarode was only too happy to support him. "It's a hard task, but the dwarven might is vital. If we gain their support, our odds for anything ahead will increase by at least twenty percent!"

...

Within the Rockseeker camp.

While Nidalee was busy trying to convince her father, Charles and the other three were also busy. They ran back and forth in the guild-hall of the Adventurer Guild for a whole morning before forming a new team and preparing to conquer The Tide Caverns.

By noon, all formalities settled, they returned to the hostel.

No sooner had Charles entered his room than he saw Nidalee already waiting. Her face was full of guilt.

At once, he had a bad feeling. Sure enough, the girl stepped forward and said, "I'm sorry, Master. I've made a mess of things."

Charles raised an eyebrow. "What happened?"

"My father... He refuses to let you enter the tribe, on the grounds that you're from Sein," Nidalee replied. "He said letting you in would only create misunderstandings among our tribal allies."

Hearing this, Charles was stunned. "Wait—seriously? Even a thing like that matters..."

He looked down at his white hair in disbelief, never expecting his ancestry would cause such trouble.

Nidalee bowed her head, guilt filling her eyes. "I'm sorry, Master. But I'll keep trying to convince him. After all, this truly benefits the whole Mountaineer tribe. Father can't resist forever."

Charles gave a wry laugh. "I agree, no need to rush. After all, it's not our Earth Dragon who's gone mad, nor our territory that's corrupted first."

Seeing her avert her eyes anxiously, his curiosity grew. With a frown, he realized there was something more. "What is it? Is there something else?"

"It's just..." Nidalee's gaze fell. She bit her lip. "Actually... I have a fiancé. The heir of one of our allied tribes. Although I dislike him—it was all my father's arrangement. Recently, my father's been pushing me to marry him as soon as possible..."

"And just now he urged me to hurry home and marry. In a panic, I told him I'd already given everything—body and soul—to you, Master..."

Charles froze. "Wait—what?!"

Such news made his scalp tingle. Remembering every wild thing he'd done to Nidalee, a wave of guilt washed over him, and the thought of facing Ilarode suddenly filled him with dread.

Damn... Her father already knows what I've done!

His expression was a mixture of guilt and distress. Beside him, Andny's eyes widened in curiosity—she didn't fully understand all the complicated relationships, but she was deeply intrigued.

Off to the side, Theresa bit back a grin; her eyes sparkled with mirth at Charles's helpless, flustered state.

"Well, that means, uh..." He scratched his head, finally forcing out an awkward conclusion, "We'll have to wait for the Archdruid to cool off a bit, I suppose..."

He couldn't help but grumble inside: if only things had happened in a different order—if he'd purified the Earth Dragon first and only then revealed their relationship, perhaps her father would have accepted it more easily.

But seeing Nidalee's shame and confusion, he realized he couldn't blame her. He didn't know what pressures she'd faced, how powerless she must have felt with such a domineering father dictating her life. He couldn't find it in himself to reproach her for not achieving some perfect outcome.

Oh well. If the Earth Dragon stays corrupted, the loss is theirs, not ours.

"We'll set the matter aside for now. When your father can no longer keep the Earth Dragon under control, he'll come looking for us sooner or later."

He exhaled deeply, gaze a touch absent. "Until then, we have something more urgent to handle."

After all, he couldn't ignore Anno's safety.

"We're making a trip to The Tide Caverns!"

...

The Tide Caverns lay in the southern part of these mountains. Go much further south, and you'd see the open sea.

Because of the tides, the surf crashed endlessly against the outer rocky cliffs. Rolling thunder echoed through stone, reverberating inside the empty mine tunnels—thus their name, The Tide Caverns.

The copper ore mined here was essential for crafting Mountain Dwarf signature weapons—Storm Warhammers. Copper was cheap and highly conductive.

However, ore distribution inside the mine was scattered and difficult to extract. Annual output remained low, and the yield was not exceptionally high quality. Thus, the Dwarf Mining Consortium never assigned their elite teams here—only a squad of older miners working at a slow, steady pace, extracting copper at low cost and low risk of overmining.

Of course, this also conveniently offered late-middle-aged dwarves new employment—a genuine "silver-haired bonus" to the Mountain Dwarf community.

Ahem.

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Chapter 147: Chapter 147: The Tide Caverns

In short, this was a place important to the Mountain Dwarves, but not so critical that it warranted elite protection. The honest, elderly Mountain Dwarf miners working inside had stumbled upon traces of zombies and skeletons, which terrified them so badly their souls flew from their bodies. Left with no other recourse, they pooled their savings and put the matter up in the Rockseeker camp's guild hall, vowing never to return to work until the adventurers had eradicated these undead and their source.

Whether because the reward was generous, or because Rockseeker camp itself deemed the matter worthy of attention, it wasn't long before a lively and ambitious Adventurer Squad—composed of what looked like energetic youths—arrived, descended the mine, and attempted to investigate.

And then, they never returned.

Actually, they had come back once. On the first and second nights, they managed to vanquish a great many zombies and skeletons, loudly assuring everyone that by the next day, the source of the undead would surely be destroyed and mining would resume.

Yet up until now, the miners were still waiting in vain for that good news.

This left the dwarves worried, believing the dangers below might be far worse than expected. They were just about to collect coins to post a greater reward when, before two more days had passed, yet another party appeared—this time led by a white-haired young man, followed by three stunning women, each more beautiful than the last. Just at a glance, they seemed anything but reliable as they reached the abandoned mines.

"...So, that's the situation."

In the miners' shack, built simply from thatched grass, an aged dwarf with a greying beard and a glistening bald head clutched his wineskin and recounted events in a halting voice.

His cheeks flushed red, evidently drunk, but his words to Charles were clear as he recounted recent events: "In short, there's no way we'd dare go back in. We can only stay here and pray those fine gentlemen and ladies make it out safely."

Charles quickly calculated—the timeline meant Anno and her party could not have been captured by the Drider for more than two days.

There was still time!

With that in mind, he raised his head, set his jaw, and looked out toward the cavern with a solemn expression. "We're moving out. We're going into the cavern now!"

The old dwarf in front of him hiccupped, the flush fading from his cheeks. "You're going in now? Sirs and ladies, even with eight of them, none ever came back—are you four really up for this?"

Charles showed not the slightest concern at the skepticism toward their strength. He only smiled softly: "Our strength is great indeed."

So saying, he cast Light on his shield and strode straight toward the mine. "Let's go!"

With their protective spells already buffed, and ignoring the kindly warnings of the drunken elder, the four of them set off boldly for the cave.

The entrance was a massive natural cavern, its ceiling supported by stalactites and stone columns. The interior sloped gently upward, ending at a pit about ten meters deep.

Thick hemp ropes were tied to nearby rock pillars, creating two makeshift rope ladders, proof that the dwarves, short legs and all, would use them to climb up and down daily for mine work.

For the record, the mine had three levels, but only the first was currently accessible.

The four also grasped the chilly rock, clutching the rough, splintery rope ladders to climb down. Halfway, they simply leaped, landing nimbly at the bottom without incident.

At the pit's base, mine tunnels branched north and west. Charles called Nidalee over. With a druid's keen analysis and investigation, they deduced Anno's party last went west, so the group entered the western tunnel.

Here, all light disappeared, and a faint metallic tang of copper mixed with the stench of rot wormed its way into their nostrils.

Charles hunched his shoulders, moving forward slowly. Although the dwarves had hewn the mine as high as possible, the ceiling still barely reached two meters. While he wouldn't bump his head, Charles stayed cautious, creeping along at a crouch.

At least the width was sufficient—you could still roll side to side in a fight without issue.

Behind him, Andny frowned slightly; the environment put her on edge. What grated more: the knowledge she was here to rescue another woman who would compete with her for Master's affection. Her mood grew subtly sour.

She glanced at Theresa and Nidalee, considering something, then secretly guided a mosquito to Theresa's ear. "Eldest sister, may I ask you something?"

Theresa turned, her smile gentle. "Ask."

"Well, um..." She gestured a little. "What do you think about Lady Anno's situation?"

Theresa looked puzzled. "What do I think?"

"Um... well, aren't you against it?"

"Why would I be against it?"

"But, the other sisters don't seem pleased that Anno's joining our family." Not daring to admit her own jealousy, Andny deflected: it was others who objected.

"Like who?"

"Like Sephera."

"What, her? Why?"

"Uh... I'm not sure. Maybe she fears Anno will threaten her position in Master's heart?"

Andny's explanation wasn't confident; honestly, she felt much the same, though she herself didn't mind Anno's addition—after all, until recently, she was last in line regardless.

Now that she'd begun fighting for her own place, of course she thought more about her ranking in Charles's heart.

Hearing her out, Theresa's expression became rather nuanced. Still, she said nothing for a moment, then asked, "Anyone else?"

"Um... not really..." Andny realized only Sephera had truly shown any overt dislike.

"Hattie—has she objected?"

"I... can't say for sure." Andny thought a moment, then shook her head. "She seems to have feelings about it, but has never openly objected."

"In general, most sisters don't really approve of Master and Lady Anno's romance—but thinking about it, apart from Sephera, no one else has really shown dislike outright."

Theresa frowned slightly. She hadn't thought of this before, nor paid much attention to the others' attitudes.

After a bit, she shook her head. "Sorry, I don't quite understand that mentality. To me..."

Looking over at Charles's silhouette, she continued: "The larger Master's harem, the better, surely. Shouldn't we be happy if he wins the heart of another outstanding woman?"

She turned to Nidalee and smiled: "It's like, um..."

She wanted to say "like watching your own boar root up a prize cabbage," but thought the metaphor too vulgar and swallowed it back.

"In short, I'm happy for every new sister who joins. No matter who—whether Nidalee, Anno, or even Porter, even if her goal is just to bear a better child, it's Master's child, so I'd be sincerely delighted."

Andny fell silent, her heart full of confusion. She answered, "So that's it," and unconsciously slowed, mulling over Theresa's words.

Further back, Nidalee was also silent. She'd overheard the witches easily, and was equally conflicted.

She truly didn't want more women around Charles, but listening to Theresa, she wondered: was this a greater mindset she needed to emulate...?

Should she also believe it was good for him, and therefore encourage him to gather more women?

She wasn't sure, and the confusion was hard to express.

Is sharing a man's love with other women really my destined fate?

But soon, they had no time for confusion. Up ahead, Charles suddenly stopped. "Andny, Nidalee, do either of you have a way to control the vampire bats ahead?"

Vampire bats—a cross between bat and mosquito, bat-sized, but with lengthy, mosquito-like proboscises, feeding on blood.

Once they picked a target, vampire bats would dive beneath clothing, digging mouthparts and claws in and drinking deep before letting go.

Charles had layers of magical protection, but vampire bats didn't hunt alone—where there was one, there'd be a swarm, which was endlessly annoying.

He had no desire to waste energy on such nimble little pests, so he asked if Andny or Nidalee could help.

"Oh, I can try," Andny said, closing her eyes to cast her powers. Soon she sensed the bats ahead and brought them under her control—

Charles waited patiently. After the monastery's blessing, Andny's progress was remarkable. It didn't take long before she opened her eyes: "All done."

As she spoke, the bats soared up, forming a heart in the air.

Nidalee pouted, unimpressed with Andny's flattery. Theresa, smiling, was genuinely pleased by her sisters' growth, while Andny herself seemed frustrated: "Still too slow. These tunnels are so vast—this handful of bats aren't enough..."

Charles smiled, stroking her hair gently. "This is excellent already. Let's continue!"

With bats scouting, their progress sped up. The team charged deeper, racing for the Drider's lair.

While they pressed ahead, the miners' camp outside was quiet—until the old bearded dwarf, half-dozing in the sun, saw several tall, broad silhouettes approaching.

Immediately alert, he squinted and saw a group of seven or eight muscular, jet-black minotaurs coming his way. The leader stood over two meters tall, radiating such a menacing presence that just a glance made the dwarf's hair stand on end.

Before him, they bowed. "Hey, old man, is this the cave where the undead have appeared?"

"Yes," the dwarf replied, eyes darting. "But who are you?"

"We are the new Alliance of the Mountain Purifiers," the leading minotaur boomed, puffing out his massive chest. "As for me, I am a warrior of the Highmountain Tribe—Torun Highmountain!"

"Our alliance was created to purify these mountains of every foul blight! We are the mountains' greatest defenders!"

"So, any undead, fiends, cultists, or invaders—we're here to wipe them out!"

"We represent justice and order, and cannot be defeated!"

With that, he thumped his chest—a gesture of respect, apparently—then turned toward the cavern’s opening and roared, "Warriors, advance!"

The minotaurs thundered into the mine. Watching their backs, the dwarf muttered, "Are these fools for real...?"

All at once, he glimpsed something violet dart past, joining the minotaurs in their charge.

He rubbed his eyes. "What the...? Am I really that drunk?"

He didn't know—in truth, a powerful succubus had just shadowed the minotaurs' trail into the depths of the mine.

That was Ines's demonic silhouette.

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Chapter 148: Chapter 148: The Giant Egg Injection... Egg-Laying...

At this point, Charles and his party had already descended to the second level of the mine.

Following the clues under his feet and the route in his memory, Charles held his shield aloft, the Light spell's brilliance illuminating the way ahead. He compared the path before him to his memories from the game, trying his best to identify the correct route.

However, the actual mine was much more complex than the narrow map in the game. With three total levels and interconnected, overlapping areas, it was enough to make his head spin.

Just like now: the unfamiliar layout left him uncertain which way to go—left or right.

"Andny, send your vampire bats ahead to scout," he finally ordered in resignation. "Dispatch some down each of these two forks, and look for signs of giant spiders or spider webs."

"Understood!" Andny nodded, closed her eyes, and channeled magical power. Just as her vampire bats shot forward, she suddenly screamed, "Master, look out! Something's coming from the right!"

Charles whipped around, peering down the dark right cavern in alarm. A revolting, horrifying monster slowly revealed its silhouette.

Catching sight of the foe, Charles was more excited than frightened, even itching for battle—after all, this was the very first enemy they'd encountered while delving deeper into the mine.

Of course, before they arrived, Anno's party had already passed through, wiping out most of the monsters and undead; the only ones left now were those few lucky stragglers that had escaped Anno's earlier rampage.

He watched intently—and a brand new type of enemy appeared.

It was a classic Ghoul: hairless, moving on all fours, its skin covered in thickened keratin, sporting a gaping, stinking maw of fangs.

These creatures usually lurked in graveyards or wherever corpses piled up, sometimes roaming the wilderness too.

But despite their name, Ghouls didn't actually need to feed, nor did they live on corpses alone. Instead, their insatiable hunger compelled them to gnaw on the dead, and when they couldn't find corpses, they'd hunt the living to make new ones.

Charles had never run into them back on Garbage Island—who'd have guessed he'd find one here?

He silently pulled a mask from his pocket and put it on, handing out masks to the girls as well. Nidalee drew a throwing spear from behind her back, ready to slay the monster from a distance, but Charles called out, "No need—I'll handle it myself."

Theresa, standing beside Nidalee, had no intention of acting. She knew Charles needed to purify these undead to strengthen himself, so she'd planned to sit back and watch from the start.

Charles advanced, shield raised, crouched low. The Ghoul spotted him, sped up, then suddenly lunged off its hind legs like a huge hound pouncing—

But Charles didn't panic. He was no longer a rookie. He twisted sideways, blocked with his shield, causing the Ghoul's attack to miss, then took a step forward, grabbed its arm, and let out a low command: "Purified!"

Buzz——

White purifying light erupted, instantly enveloping the undead's body!

"Aaah—!"

The Ghoul shrieked from its rotting throat, clawing desperately for him. Charles quickly pinned it with his shield, and after a brief struggle, the undead collapsed into ash.

Charles opened his system interface, delighted to see a gain of 200 Purification Points.

That much? Not bad!

Well, it made sense: after all, leveling up the system had taken almost six seconds to purify it—even nearly let it claw him in return.

He wasn't sure if this ghoul was particularly strong, or if all ghouls were like that...

Suppressing his excitement, he asked, "Andny, have your vampire bats investigate—the main nest should be nearby."

Andny nodded, closed her eyes again, then opened them a moment later, her pupils flashing. "Found it, Master! Deep down the left passage, I spotted spider webs!"

Upon hearing this, Charles let out a breath of relief. "Good! That's where the spider nest is. Everyone, pick up the pace—we're almost there!"

Upon hearing this, Charles let out a breath of relief. "Good! That's where the spider nest is. Everyone, pick up the pace—we're almost there!"

Unable to contain his excitement, he dashed ahead.

Meanwhile, deep within The Tide Caverns—

Anno slowly awoke. As soon as she opened her eyes, she was greeted by a hellish scene.

It was a sizable underground cavern, with no light from the outside world, only a white magic stone hanging from the ceiling, emitting a faint glow, barely illuminating the interior.

Pure white, massive spider webs covered nearly every surface—floor and walls—sticky and thick, weaving the entire cave together. Nestled in one corner lay several milky, basketball-sized giant eggs. It was obvious what they contained. Beside each egg rested the corpse of a woman, apparently recently deceased, perhaps either food for the master of this place, or intended as the first meal for the being within those eggs.

At once, this scene awakened old memories in Anno's mind.

After setting out that day, her party had faced a pack of wolves, a group of orc bandits, and an ogre's lair. After sleeping a night at the entrance to this cave, they'd entered here.

The initial fighting went smoothly; with their abilities, slaying the local undead was no problem.

The first two days passed with such ease that they let down their guard slightly, failing to notice the drow's sleeping incense, their senses dulled—they walked right into an ambush.

They'd fallen into the Drider's webbing, bound together, and beset by giant spiders. Anno had fought as hard as she could, but the enemy's strength was overwhelming: eventually, they were all taken captive.

Damn it—expecting only ordinary undead, she'd never imagined such a powerful foe!

That Drider could travel at lightning speed across the cave with spider silk, wielded a deadly blade, strikingly fast—and, most crucially, wielded fearsome magic. Even recalling her made Anno's scalp tingle.

But it was too late for regrets. All she could do now was try to save herself!

Suppressing her frustration, Anno scanned her surroundings and saw her three teammates, all tied up: the female brass Dragonborn barbarian, the female gnome mage, and their red-haired team captain, the married warrior Bonnie.

Perhaps the Drider observed gender separation, or perhaps the other four male party members had already been turned into food—or fed to the giant spiders.

Whatever the case, Anno's three female teammates were now bound tightly by spider silk, slumped against the wall, eyes closed, still heavily unconscious. Anno struggled against her own restraints, only now realizing she too was trussed up in thick webbing.

Worse, her chainmail had been stripped away, leaving her in nothing but a thin, close-fitting cotton undershirt, her curves tightly outlined by the confining silk—ample chest and athletic form on display.

But, in this moment, she truly couldn't care about modesty. Seeing her friends still unconscious, she whispered frantically, "Bonnie! Wake up! Bonnie!"

The red-haired warrior's brows twitched. She slowly opened her eyes in confusion. "Anno?"

Then, realizing their predicament, she looked down at her own ample chest, cinched deeply by the spider-silk, and her frown deepened. "This is just..."

Anno breathed a sigh of relief—her friend was alive. Knowing her own lack of wilderness experience, she quickly whispered, "Any way for us to free ourselves? Did you happen to keep a knife or something to cut the webs?"

Bonnie's brows knitted as she shifted, reaching her hands—bound behind her—toward her rounded hips. She shook her head. "No, the foe was thorough and stripped everything from me."

"Anno, see if you can feel any sharp stones behind you. Try to rub the webbing against the rock."

At that, Anno pressed her back to the wall, felt a sharp protrusion, and brightened. "Yes! I'll start grinding!"

Hope welled up in her. Bonnie too found a sharp stone. The two women began sawing at the webbing, their chests trembling with the effort. But suddenly, a witch-like laugh echoed from outside: "Hehehehe—"

"What adorable mothers you are! Even now, thinking how to win your freedom."

"Too bad, you have none. Just lie still and bear my darling spider eggs!"

Anno and Bonnie twisted in horror. With mocking laughter, a massive silhouette strode from the cave's dark depths.

It was the very Drider who had defeated and captured them!

Her upper body was that of a beautiful female dark elf—black lustrous skin, pure white long hair, lovely face, full chest, slender waist, and a sexy navel. But below her navel, her beauty turned monstrous: her lower body was a spider, the size of a bull, with eight purple, fur-tufted legs stepping soundlessly across the web.

This woman was none other than Ilthreza—the rebellious Drider with restored free will, whose name Charles knew well!

She was a genius, a true polymath, but also mad, always conducting taboo biological experiments. It was precisely because of those dark experiments that the Demon Queen of Spiders had turned her into this form!

And from her words, it seemed she intended to perform yet another wicked experiment upon Anno and her companions.

"You demon!"

Anno spat, glaring in fury, but the Drider ignored her, striding to Bonnie, and, in the latter's terrified gaze, using two forelegs to caress the woman's ample chest and plump hips.

"What a perfect form," she murmured, admiringly. "Ideal for breeding—I almost hate to see you die after just one egg, dear human."

"But whether you live depends on how hard you try."

"Get off me!" Bonnie roared, face hard with wrath, "I'll never let you touch me—"

But Ilthreza had no care for her victim's will. Her two spider forelegs, as dexterous as hands, swiftly stripped Bonnie's last garment, exposing shapely thighs and a profusely hairy lower body.

With her spider limbs, she spread Bonnie's legs wide, and then, from beneath her spider abdomen, she extended a thick, arm-sized, crimson, fleshy appendage, corrugated and knobby, with a pinhole tip.

That thing couldn't possibly be a proper drider organ, but it obeyed Ilthreza's will, extending towards Bonnie's exposed body.

The married, red-haired female warrior's rage vanished, replaced by terror. "No, you can't—you can't do this—Ugh—oh—!"

Ilthreza, cruel and pitiless, ignored her pleas. With a surge from her lower body, the fleshy shaft drove deep inside the woman, its bumps and ridges mercilessly stimulating, drawing uncontrollable moans from Bonnie's throat.

"Ah... now I understand why men are so addicted to this."

Above, Ilthreza hugged her own chest, sighing in delight. Clearly, she'd intentionally remodeled her body—producing this bizarre, nerve-rich appendage.

But, instead of moving it in and out like a man might, she took a deep breath, braced her spider hips—

And the long shaft swelled and contracted with each pulse, forcibly pumping strange liquid deep inside Bonnie's body!

"Oh—not—please—ohhhhh—!"

Bonnie gasped and whimpered. The intense stimulation sent shudders through her, sweat pouring down her back.

Her belly visibly swelled, ballooning to the size of a woman nine months pregnant in less than a minute!

What's she putting inside me?!

Bonnie had no idea. Terror of the unknown filled her heart. She desperately tried to struggle—but she could not even budge against the Drider's strength.

All she could do was curse.

"You damn—monster—!"

Her shout roused the other two slumbering women. The brass Dragonborn barbarian snapped her eyes open, furious at the blasphemous violation. Golden vertical pupils blazing with rage: "Let her go, you bastard demon! If you've got guts, come for me instead!"

Meanwhile, the gnome was so terrified she burst into tears, shrinking away, her eyes fearful as she stared at the grotesque flesh column, unable to imagine what would happen if it were to violate her as well.

"Oh..."

Finally, the injection ended. The Drider sighed, then withdrew her fleshy appendage, setting Bonnie back down.

Pop—

"Ah..."

The moist sound of flesh separating echoed. Bonnie's womanhood closed, but none of the injected liquid leaked out.

Her belly stayed huge, as if nine months pregnant. Bonnie let out a heavy sigh and collapsed, left with no strength, her harsh breathing echoing through the cavern.

"Just wait, my sweet surrogate mothers," the Drider smiled. But her words made the blood run cold: "In less than a week, you'll give birth to my precious spider children, just like the others here."

"Hehe, I hope you survive the egg-laying. Don't die like they did..."

On the wall, Anno's vision burned with hatred. Hearing this, she now understood the truth: those dead women had perished bearing such spider eggs!

"Beast! The gods will judge you!" she spat. "You will face justice!"

The Drider merely glanced her way and smiled. "Don't worry, little girl."

"Your body isn't fit for it yet. And I only inject one a day. Don't worry—by the day after tomorrow at the latest, it will be your turn."

She then turned to the cursing brass Dragonborn, her expression feverish. "Such a strong form, muscles rippling everywhere~"

"Don't fret. Be patient. Tomorrow I'll come for you, and give you my darling baby... hehehe..."

But suddenly, she fell silent.

She turned, looking outside, her brow furrowed. "Someone's coming?"

Anno scowled as well. Even she now sensed the vibrations rippling through the webs!

Someone was coming, deliberately making noise, trying to draw their attention!

Hope surged within her chest.

Could it be... someone coming to save us?

Meanwhile, outside—

Confronted by a massive crossroad, every surface—ground, walls, even ceiling—thickly coated with milky spider silk, Charles stroked his chin, troubled.

It wasn't for lack of knowledge about Ilthreza's location: Andny's vampire bats had already gone inside, seen Anno safe and sound, and witnessed Ilthreza injecting a gelatinous, half-formed spider egg into another red-haired female warrior.

He knew where the boss's chamber and the captives were, and he'd scouted out the remaining passages—each filled with some giant spiders and spider eggs.

However, this sticky webbing made things tricky. The giant spiders skittered across it with ease, but Charles's team would get stuck like boots in mud.

They hadn't brought 500 gold "Spider-walking Boots" to avoid that fate—so if they just charged in, they'd risk ending up stuck themselves.

But suddenly, inspiration struck.

Hiss... is our team perhaps stronger than all the remaining foes in The Tide Caverns combined?

Yes—Anno's group had already cleared out nearly all the cannon fodder; that's why, as they'd come through, the mine had been so eerily quiet—no skeletons or the like.

So these leftover giant spiders, plus Ilthreza—could they even hope to match Theresa?

Realizing his party's crushing superiority, Charles felt his heart pound, then immediately ordered, "Andny, vibrate the webs—draw every spider and foe in the nest out to us!"

Spiders sense prey by reading vibrations through webs. Charles would now reverse the tactic—drawing them all out to open ground, away from the sticky webs, and force a decisive battle!

It was his current plan, and at least in these opening moments, it seemed to work. He could already see the giant black shapes of spiders swarming from the depths, preparing to surround them.

These massive spiders, bull-sized, skittered at high speed on all eight legs, rushing in from every direction, every inch killers on the hunt!

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Chapter 149: Chapter 149: Sneak Attack!

Yet, Charles felt not the slightest panic. He didn't even summon his longsword, but instead lifted his hand and began to buff himself: "Theresa, block the center. Nidalee, take the right. Don't let a single giant spider through!"

As he gave his orders, he had already slapped an extended-duration Blur onto himself, his figure becoming shimmery and indistinct.

Next, four magic arrays for Eldritch Blast materialized above him, launching a beam of potent energy into the depths of the cavern, striking the leading bull-sized giant spider dead-on!

Even without "Hexblade's Curse," a standard Eldritch Blast struck with nearly double the force of a heavy crossbow. These spiders, no matter how monstrous, were only flesh and blood at their core—incapable of withstanding such power. With a dull, explosive thud, the energy beam blasted the spider's body to pieces!

The spider barely managed a last snap of its twin fangs before collapsing into a heap—no scream, no struggle.

But the death of one giant spider was not enough to break the rest; one could hardly call these low-IQ arthropods "terrified."

They charged forward at speed, fangs spread wide—then abruptly stopped. Their bodies trembled, and from each gaping maw, thick ribbons of milky, sticky spider-silk came shooting out!

Charles lifted his shield, reciting the incantation for Shield: "Shield!"

Buzz—

A transparent magical force field shimmered into existence, and when the spider-silk struck, it crumpled and dropped limply to the floor—no longer any threat.

Seeing this, Charles nodded in satisfaction.

It seems my strength is more than enough for mere overgrown animals.

The others handled themselves just as capably. When challenged by spider-silk, each girl revealed her own clever means.

Theresa, ever the brutal one, lobbed a few guiding bolts from a distance—each one smashing into a different giant spider in the central passage. Her targets barely had time to spit silk before being annihilated!

Nidalee, transforming into leopard form, dove forward even as webbing shot at her. With a deft twist, she found a gap in the web, slipped through, and pounced straight onto a nearby spider!

Only Andny fared less gracefully—standing near Nidalee, she was struck full-on by two ropes of webbing and was bound tight in the blink of an eye.

But then she unleashed her magical power, reaching out mentally to the spiders binding her. For all their size, they were still insects—lacking true self-awareness and easily subjugated by Andny's magic!

In mere moments, the first wave of spider attackers was neutralized.

Excellent, this kind of progress makes our odds look very good!

Seeing the overwhelmingly favorable situation, Charles couldn't help but feel optimistic. But the very next instant, a chill ran across his skin—every hair stood on end!

At that precise moment, his Shield spell faded. He didn't even have time to utter a new incantation before deadly danger crept forth in silence!

BANG—

A longsword smeared with virulent green toxin slashed at his neck, breaking through both his third-level Armor of Agathys and third-level False Life protections, striking directly at his throat!

Luckily, the defensive power of those spells was sufficient. The blow's force was already half-spent, and so the very last layer—Mage Armor—barely managed to stop the blade.

If not for that, this sword swing would have sent his head flying!

Crack—

The shattered Armor of Agathys erupted in a burst of bitter cold, freezing the black hand clutching the longsword. But it was hard to say how much harm such cold could do to one this powerful.

Charles whipped his head up. At last, he realized—the nest's final boss, the merciless Drider, had cloaked herself in invisibility and crept directly above his head, both hands gripping poison-coated magical longswords, awaiting the ideal moment for a sudden raid!

It was lucky he had cast Blur beforehand; the assailant hadn't been able to see the exact position of Charles's throat, so her second blade missed its mark. Otherwise, his head would already be off his shoulders!

All at once, he cursed inwardly.

Damn, wasn't this boss supposed to be at the end of the central passage, tormenting the captives?

Why would she raid me here, on the left-hand path?!

He had no answer, but this was not the moment for hesitation or complaining. Staring at the inverted Drider, Charles's mind rapidly summoned up her battle stats.

Ilthreza, originally a ninth-level Transmutation School Mage, transformed into a Drider, and then picked up dual-wielding skills as a warrior. With spider-silk powers, she could perform high-speed movement in tight spaces with negligible cost—a truly difficult foe!

Absolute solo combat was no option—he had to create distance!

Thinking fast, he retreated, raising his shield and attempting to blind her with a powerful Light spell, while his right hand summoned forth a magical longsword ablaze with fire!

The Elemental Weapon spell also lasted an hour. As such, he'd cast it before entering the cavern, and the effect was still active—he could summon the flaming magic sword directly.

But unfortunately, a dark elf's allergic reaction is to sunlight. The light of a simple cantrip like Light—even costing no spell slots—couldn't come near causing agony.

"Heh, paltry tricks!"

Hanging from the cavern ceiling, Ilthreza's pure white long hair cascaded down. Watching Charles's efforts, she issued a scornful taunt, then tensed her muscled, athletic abdomen, and in the next instant, a silk thread shot from her exposed, seductive navel.

Charles jerked his head aside to evade, but realized in the next second that the spider-silk wasn't aimed at him, but rather at the wall behind him!

"Die!"

With a snarl, Ilthreza's eight spider legs thrust with explosive force, using the silken strand to catapult her body at extreme speed down at Charles!

He had no choice but to block with his shield, calling upon the Shield spell a second time that evening: "Shield!"

Buzz—

Midair, Ilthreza twisted her waist, spinning her body, both poison-coated magic longswords twirling toward Charles's head like a deadly windmill!

Crash!

Leaning on that tremendous momentum, Ilthreza's blades easily broke through Shield, slicing through Mage Armor, his garments, and even into his flesh!

"Well—!"

The pain in his shoulder ripped a cry from Charles, his brow knitting tightly. The wound wasn't deep, but he could clearly feel the venom from Ilthreza's sword seeping into his body through the cut!

With the potency of drow poison, just this much would already be fatal!

Wait—am I not immune to toxins?

Ah, that's right. Then there's nothing to worry about.

Without bothering about his bleeding shoulder, Charles planted his feet, turned, and now confronted Ilthreza, who had landed behind him.

At that moment, the Drider was silently frustrated herself. The previous strike had been nearly all her might; if not for Shield's defense, she could have severed Charles's entire arm!

However, she still had more chances. Unlike those mindless giant spiders that could store only a single shot of spider-silk at a time, she—realizing this trick's practical value—had already filled her abdomen with the opaque liquid needed to spin silk. Even after just firing one strand, she remained perfectly capable of launching another fierce, lethal assault!

"Next time, it'll be your death!"

She wasted no time. As soon as she hit the ground, her eight legs propelled her back up to the ceiling, where she shot another silk thread from her navel, aiming straight at the stone wall behind Charles!

Charles swiftly dodged the silk, raising his shield with his left arm, gripping his longsword in his right, ready to counterattack in combination with his shield should she charge—

Whoosh—

Ilthreza didn't hesitate: spinning again as she charged, her shining blades reflecting deadly light. Charles steeled himself, reciting Shield for the third time that evening, and leapt forward, meeting her head-on with two slashes—

Clang—

He and this woman's swords clashed—leaving not a scratch on her. In return, her blade struck yet again, slicing through his Mage Armor and clothing, leaving a fresh gash on his back!

"Ugh!"

Charles grunted, staggering forward a few steps, feeling the burn in his back, jaw clenched.

Good thing I'm immune to toxins, or these tiny wounds would be mortal.

Even so, he realized something else:

I can't beat her.

Gazing at Ilthreza—hanging upside down on a distant wall, face twisted into a mocking smile, eight legs tucked and primed for her third attack—Charles couldn't help but sigh inwardly: As expected, this foe's strength far exceeds mine. With my current equipment and skills, I have no chance of beating her.

If that's the case, then...

"Theresa," he ordered, "eliminate her!"

Behind him, Theresa—who had watched him gain battlefield experience and hadn't acted without his command—finally stepped forward and raised her hand: "Dawn!"

A disk, radiant as the sun, blossomed around her right hand.

Dawn! A fifth-level School of Evocation spell, requiring seven spell slots to cast. Its effect: filling almost the entire cavern with intensely damaging sunlight!

Theresa excelled in all spells tied to light. At this moment, she flooded all the light toward Ilthreza's eyes!

Dark elves excel in many ways—strong, ruthless, cunning, and disciplined. As individuals, they are even stronger than any of their elven cousins. But such power comes with a fatal weakness.

They are mortally afraid of sunlight!

"Aaaaaaah—!"

Blasted by searing daylight, stabbing pain pierced Ilthreza's mind, tearing a shriek from her throat. She clamped her eyes shut, tears streaming down her face. Yet the agony didn't abate—instead, it seared deeper into her mind, nearly forcing her to drop her sword!

"You have chosen your own doom."

Watching the immobilized Ilthreza, Theresa let out a cold, mocking laugh. She had no need to do anything else—by simply maintaining the sunlight of "Dawn," the spell's damage alone was enough to burn Ilthreza alive!

This was the absolute difference in strength. After all, a sun-fearing dark elf facing the most light-attuned witch was like a centipede meeting a rooster—utterly, helplessly countered!

This can't be—I can't defeat her!

If it continues like this, I'll die!

Such thoughts surged in Ilthreza's mind as well, and in her desperation, she realized:

I must escape!

Disrupt the battlefield!

"MoveEarth!"

She chanted a string of arcane syllables. As she finished, the entire mine began to tremble and shake!

Move Earth: a sixth-level School of Transmutation spell—able to unleash violent tremors in an area, even cause local collapses and cave-ins.

Though less devastating than "Earthquake," in a complex, layered mine such as this, its effects can rival those of "Earthquake" in scale!

Just like now—in these stacked mine shafts, Move Earth caused not just fragmenting ceilings, but cave-ins underfoot.

Boom—

"What the—!"

A huge crack ripped open beneath Charles's feet, and in the flickering light, he saw yet another mine level below.

He stumbled, nearly falling straight through. He grabbed for the nearest wall—only for it to begin shaking as well, clumps of dirt and rock raining down and bouncing off his head!

"Damn it!"

He cursed inwardly. Amid the fierce quake, he could no longer keep his balance and fell, tumbling down to the deeper level!

"Master!"

Theresa called, darting forward to try and grab his arm, but she was a heartbeat too slow. She could only watch as he plunged down, rocks and debris blocking the path below!

Boom—

That localized collapse triggered a far larger cave-in: distant rocks crumbled and fell as escape routes were buried!

Yet at the same time, some new passages were opened, the result of the collapse...

"Hahahaha—!"

Ilthreza's laughter echoed wildly. The falling stones now blocked Theresa's spell-light, letting the Drider recover enough vision to open her eyes. She spun around, shot spider-silk from her navel, and used it to swing herself away at speed!

"You wretched fiend!"

Theresa swore. Torn between desire to chase down and destroy Ilthreza and worry for Charles's safety, she hesitated.

Just then, a mosquito hovered by her ear and spoke: "Eldest sister, Master says he's fine—and wants you to hunt down and kill the Drider immediately. She must not be allowed to escape!"

"Master is fine?"

Upon hearing this, Theresa let out a breath of relief. She turned back and found that fallen rocks had also separated her from Andny.

Immediately, her face turned anxious. "Are you alright? Can you still move?"

"I'm fine. I was farther back, just trapped by blocked passages," Andny replied. "But I still control a few giant spiders and a host of vampire bats. As long as I avoid the Drider, I should be safe."

"Is Nidalee with you?" Theresa asked next.

"She fell too, but the gap above isn't blocked—I can reach her."

"Then you go down a level and find Master; I'll pursue the Drider, agreed?"

"I'll check with Master... He says not to worry about his safety, and prefers Nidalee and I focus on finding Anno first."

"Then send a few vampire bats to locate Master, scout a safe passage, and you and Nidalee can go find Anno, alright?"

"Alright... Master agrees."

"Then it's settled!"

Relaxed at last, Theresa drew a deep breath, her gaze locking on the direction of Ilthreza's escape, eyes ablaze with righteous fury.

Unforgivable!

Very well, you'll pay for all of this—with your life!

So thinking, her form, too, blurred and flickered, leaping more than twenty meters per flash, racing after Ilthreza.

Meanwhile, in the third level of the mine below.

"Damn—"

Having some survival experience, Charles managed to roll on landing, tumbling far across the floor. Stones still fell from above, the floor was hard beneath him, but at least he was spared any major wounds—his existing cuts had not worsened.

Once he stopped, he was covered head-to-toe with dirt and dust, resembling a man made of mud.

Once safe, he cursed instinctively.

How has Ilthreza mastered sixth-level spells already?!

Are eleventh-level spellcasters so common these days?

He didn't know. He cursed the unreliable boss info from the game. But, in fact, it was quite logical; game bosses and monsters are always scripted for drama.

Just like the aged Zenith: battle-seasoned yet with a body past its prime, no way a true CR 6 force.

Or this Drider Ilthreza—a magical prodigy among elves, breaking her shackles, mastering 6th-level spells at eleventh level, all perfectly believable.

But there's no use complaining now. All he could do was focus on saving himself.

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Chapter 150: Chapter 150: An Encounter with Torun

From the mosquito at Charles's ear, Andny's concerned message came through. He quickly rolled to his feet, checked his surroundings, and, after confirming there were no foes nearby, breathed a sigh of relief, sent them a report of his safety, and assigned the tasks as previously planned.

Only after this did he end the communication. Ignoring the filth on his body, he took out his Spellbook from his belt pouch and spent one of its charges. With a 1st-level Cure Wounds cast on himself, both his shoulder and back wounds healed completely.

After all, Ilthreza was just an elf—in her early days a mage who didn't enjoy physical training, so her physical stamina wasn't especially great.

Unlike Charles, she couldn't use mana to empower her sword skills. Even relying on the force of her eight spider legs and spider-silk slingshot, all she had done was break through his Shield and Mage Armor protection, only giving him some superficial wounds.

She, who knew her physical weakness, always smeared deadly poison on her blades, so that even minor wounds could prove fatal.

But unfortunately for her, Charles was immune to toxins.

Thus, the injuries from the two slashes were easily healed with a single basic Cure Wounds.

Satisfied with his self-healing, Charles, recalling Ilthreza's fierce onslaught, could not help a lingering worry. He had to admit that this female elf was truly ferocious.

Biting down, he immediately stacked new protections—False Life and Armor of Agathys at third level, instantly burning through ten spell slots. Only then did he feel a measure of security.

Of course, this left him with only fourteen spell slots. If another fierce battle came, that reserve might prove insufficient.

In such a situation, moving alone wasn't safe. He needed to reunite with the witches as quickly as possible!

With that thought, he resummoned his magical longsword ablaze with fire, banished his distractions, and began searching for a way to rejoin the others.

But, in truth, he had little choice. The cave-in had left him at the end of a dead-end tunnel, so there was nowhere to go but forward.

In a way, that was fine—no need to agonize over choices.

With a wry smile at his circumstances, he steeled himself, crouched low, lowered his center of gravity, and advanced carefully.

The cavern was eerily quiet, which made sneak attacks by foes all the more difficult. Charles quickened his steps, and soon heard the deep, masculine roar of some creature ahead: "Die, you worthless undead—damn you!"

The voice was strong, full-bodied—a grown, burly male for certain. Charles's eyes lit up. He dashed toward the voice with renewed speed.

He soon found a great, thick, mighty minotaur pinned beneath a massive boulder. Two ghouls prowled nearby, jaws wide, drool dripping, gluttonous interest all over their faces.

The minotaur, unable to move, could only swing his axe at the ghouls, cursing and raving in helpless fury.

Charles couldn't help but smile.

Perfect—an ideal moment for the hero to save the bull.

With this in mind, he briskly stepped forward and thumped his flaming sword against his shield. "Hey! Over here—over here!"

He shouted at the ghouls, though there was little need. Catching the scent of the living, both instantly turned toward him, charging: "Grrraah—!"

The first ghoul lunged. Rather than attack, Charles dismissed his longsword, twisted aside with his shield to deflect the pounce, and pinned the creature to the ground, his right hand pressing on its wrist: "Purified!"

A brilliant white light shone forth—the ghoul thrashed and struggled even harder. This time, Charles was ready; he kept the ghoul pinned with his weight, not giving it a chance to break free—

"Hiss—!"

The second ghoul leapt on him from behind, its teeth clamping onto Charles's ankle—

Crunch—

The third-level Armor of Agathys triggered. The ghoul's jaws instantly froze over with a shell of ice, but the creature, heedless, kept clawing frantically at Charles's hips and thighs—

Its arms soon froze solid as well, rendering it barely able to move.

Charles kept the first ghoul pinned until it was completely purified, then turned and pressed down the second, half-dead and frozen, and repeated the purification.

A few seconds later, four hundred Purification Points were safely added to his tally.

"Whew..."

Charles exhaled, got up, turned toward the still-pinned minotaur, and flashed his brightest, friendliest smile. "Hello, I'm Nigel Charles. Are you also an adventurer here to slay the undead?"

At the same time, Charles remained cautious—this minotaur's primitive, rugged appearance marked him as one of the Mountain People.

And such folk weren't always friendly.

He observed as the minotaur stared at him with an unreadable expression. Charles felt a pang of foreboding, but then the creature broke into a simple, honest smile: "Thank you, honorable paladin! My name is Torun Highmountain, just a warrior from the Highmountain Tribes. I came to the Tide Caverns at the dwarves' invitation, to help clear out the undead."

Clearly, having seen the white purifying light, Torun (like Nidalee before him) had mistaken Charles for a paladin.

"Unfortunately, as you see, we encountered a quake." Torun's face darkened. "I was separated from my comrades and then got my leg trapped by this stone. If you hadn't arrived, I would've died to those ghouls."

"I truly don't know how I can ever repay your kindness!"

He sighed deeply, but Charles only gave a soft laugh. "It wasn't that big a deal. Those ghouls weren't strong; I think you could have managed them alone."

He paused, then continued, "Let me ask: would you be willing to team up with me—help find your lost allies and take down the mastermind here?"

"Of course!" Torun replied eagerly, "To journey with a paladin from the great Empire of Sein is my honor!"

Charles raised his brows—these mountain folk have quite a positive view of the Empire of Sein?

Well, for now, that was nothing but good news. At least he wouldn't be facing danger alone; if ambushed, he'd have a reliable comrade to fight back-to-back.

"Are you hurt? Let me treat you."

He stepped forward, stretching out his arms to move the boulder off Torun's lower body.

But the stone didn't budge an inch.

Charles couldn't help but look a bit awkward—he could channel magic into weapons, but his raw physical strength was much, much lower than average.

"Allow me, my lord." Torun said, bent himself, wrapped his thick arms around the boulder, clenched his jaw, and, veins bulging in his forehead, heaved—finally managing to roll the stone off his legs and to the side.

Staring at arms thicker than his thighs, Charles glanced down at his own slim wrists, feeling a surge of self-consciousness.

He thought, Once I've amassed enough Purification Points, I need to buff all my attributes a good bit! Put everything at fifteen—make myself a real juggernaut!

He then leaned down to check Torun's injured leg, pulled out his Spellbook, and cast "Cure Wounds."

The broken bone knit together swiftly—within seconds, it had rejoined. Though still somewhat tender and in need of rest, he could now walk and fight without issue.

Torun, delighted at the restoration, exclaimed, "Thank you, revered paladin. I feel truly unworthy next to someone like you!"

He got up, patted the dust from himself, reclaimed his weapon, and flexed with fresh vigor.

Charles chuckled. Even he, after so much praise, couldn't help but feel a little pleased. "Do you often team up with adventurers from the lowlands, like me?"

Torun paused, then nodded. "Yes, many come to the mountains, so it happens often. Especially those from the Empire of Sein—every encounter is enlightening!"

"So, I really cherish this chance, my lord!"

He resumed his praise, but this time Charles felt a bit uncomfortable.

Were the Mountain People always this effusive? Or was it just their way to use such over-the-top flattery?

Charles didn't know, but he decided not to think about Torun's style and went straight to the point: "Come on, Torun, let's find your comrades!"

...

Meanwhile, deeper in the cavern.

"Ugh—"

Anno shook her head, barely regaining consciousness. The recent quake had left her battered and sore—a few rocks hit her, luck keeping any from her head, so she was mostly unharmed.

She forced her eyes open and peered around—by now the magic stone hanging from the ceiling was out, and she could only make out dark, fuzzy shapes.

Somewhere in that darkness, she heard the sound of Bonnie's sobbing.

She quickly called out, "Bonnie? Oda? Dahl? Are you alright?"

Oda was the gnome; Dahl, the Dragonborn barbarian. Neither answered—perhaps they'd fallen unconscious again, or perhaps they were already lost.

Bonnie, meanwhile, kept weeping, unable to accept her condition. "How can I ever face my husband like this..."

Anno looked in the direction of the voice and saw Bonnie sprawled behind a pile of stone, her abdomen still swollen like a watermelon—a woman ten months pregnant, ready to give birth.

Anno's heart raced, her mind in turmoil, and she felt true sympathy for the married female warrior.

Still, there was nothing to be done. Softly, she tried to comfort her: "There will be a way, Bonnie. Don't worry, divine or arcane magic—someone will find a way to help."

Bonnie continued to sob, too lost in grief to be of use.

So, Anno would have to rely only on herself.

She tried to shift position, looking for a sharp stone to slice her bindings. But unfortunately, the quake had rolled her to a new spot—now only smooth pebbles surrounded her.

Damn!

She swore inwardly, took a deep breath, and forced herself to stay calm, analyzing the situation.

First, that tremor—it was over fast, so was clearly magical in origin.

And, given the Drider's earlier panic, it was obvious a new group had arrived in her lair. The dwarves, aiming to reclaim the mine, would never provoke a collapse on purpose.

Further, it had now been ages since the collapse, and the Drider had not returned to check if her eggs survived.

Most likely, the Drider realized she couldn't win and deliberately caused the collapse to create chaos and escape!

That had to be it!

Bolstered by her bold conclusion, Anno sucked in a breath and shouted, "Help! Somebody—help us!"

Her voice carried far. Though one passage had been blocked, other routes must still exist. Only by calling would there be hope of rescue!

For a while, there was no reply in the dark cavern. Heart pounding, Anno shouted again.

This time, at last, she detected movement. She felt vibrations in the spider webs—something massive was speeding closer. Soon, a familiar voice rang out: "Lady Anno, is that you?"

It was Andny's voice!

But... why her?

Wait—had Priest Charles come too?

A surge of hope filled Anno's heart. She called out, "It's me! We are here!"

A bright light shone from the cave's entrance, and the enormous shapes of several giant spiders barreled forward.

Only the spiders could cross so quickly over those sticky webbed floors. But Anno was unafraid—atop the leading two spiders, she spotted two petite figures.

One was the familiar, but not close, nun Andny.

But... she passed by and headed in another direction?

Anno was confused, when she saw that atop another giant spider rode a young woman—wheat-colored skin, long black ponytail, clothed only in a leather vest, shorts, and boots—aiming directly for her.

A Mountain People woman?

The thought flickered as she saw the woman's gaze, full of curiosity. The newcomer jumped down, drew a small knife, and cut away Anno's spider-silk bindings.

"Thank you," Anno greeted her. "I'm Anno Amcastra, a paladin in service to Blackstaff Tower. And you are—?"

"Nidalee." The woman replied without expression. "Recently became a nun of the Goddess of Life, also trained as a druid and part-time hunter."

Her tone was distant, but she took in every detail—Anno's looks, body, bearing, and gaze.

"I've heard Priest Charles mention you, Lady Anno," Nidalee went on as she finished freeing her, "I hope we'll cooperate well in the next battle."

Anno's eyes lit up. "Really? That's wonderful!"

She presumed Charles, a champion of the Goddess's church, would be delighted to have a new nun—even if she was a Mountain People woman. The idea made her genuinely happy for him.

And to think, Charles had spoken of her to the new nun...

Anno's cheeks turned pink. "What... what did Charles say about me?"

This was hardly the time for such a question, but with her heart pounding, Anno couldn't help asking.

Does he, like me, recall our memories? Does he mention me to the others?

If it were possible... she wanted to hide her face and squirm in embarrassment.

But watching Anno's bashful, radiant joy, a complex shade passed through Nidalee's eyes.

So, this is Master's romantic interest?

Hard to imagine, with such an emotional history. A journey I myself can never experience.

Still, such a delicate paladin girl—Master would surely never lay a whip to her, nor blindfold or gag her, nor drip candle wax across her back.

Her romantic experience, then, is incomplete—she has the sweetness of love, but lacks any of its fire or adventure...

With that, Nidalee felt more at ease.

Well, gain some, lose some.

"He only praised you—said you're a righteous and excellent female knight." Nidalee made light of it, then swung herself back atop her spider. "Wait 'til we meet up again—let him tell you himself. For now, saving people is most important!"

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