

Witch Monastery #Chapter 151: Barbarian Rage - Read

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After speaking, Nidalee turned and called over another giant spider, instructing Anno to climb up as well. "Your weapon and equipment should be nearby. You can ride, right? Anyway, ride this to look for them. I'm going to rescue the others."

Anno, cheeks still flushed and her head full of Charles's praise, finally managed to suppress her tumultuous thoughts, then mounted the giant spider to search for her weapons and equipment...

At that moment, elsewhere, riding a turning giant spider, Andny shone Light throughout the cavern, her wide eyes full of curiosity.

She'd already confirmed Anno's safety, so she wasn't particularly interested in her situation. Instead, it was the basketball-sized giant spider eggs that drew her attention.

She directed the giant spider to stop beside the giant eggs and the dead women, then jumped down, crouched, and began searching through the scattered rubble. Eventually, she found a completely intact giant egg.

She cradled the basketball-sized egg in her arms, then pressed her ear close to its shell, listening attentively and using magical power to perceive what was inside.

A moment later, her pupils suddenly contracted. She glanced around, and when she saw no one paying attention, she discretely slipped the giant egg into her Bag of Holding.

With everything settled, she stood and, her magically enhanced gaze scanning through the darkness, swept over Bonnie's swollen abdomen, her eyes flashing, though she maintained a nonchalant expression as she addressed the others: "Is everyone alright?"

At the far side, Nidalee had just finished cutting the last captive free. Hearing this, she quickly reported: "One female gnome was unfortunately killed in the recent earthquake, but the others are not in mortal danger for the moment."

In truth, even if they were in danger, it was hardly a problem—Nidalee was herself a druid, well-versed in healing spells. As long as someone was not dead, she could likely save them.

Andny nodded. As a witch, the loss of a single life did not move her much. "We can't stay here. Bring the bodies and their equipment; let's hurry to find Pri... Priest Charles!"

...

Torun and Charles advanced slowly through the cavern, one before the other—Torun hunched, head down at the front, Charles taking up the rear.

There was no help for it: Torun was simply too tall, and these mine tunnels were much too low. It seriously restricted Torun's strength, leaving him awkward and frustrated.

As they walked, they exchanged details about their classes and abilities. Torun was a ninth-level Path of the Ancestors barbarian, specializing in brute force, damage resistance, and team protection—a powerful all-around fighter.

Charles didn't correct Torun's mistaken impression that he was a paladin who had self-taught magical ability, skilled at both ranged and melee combat.

So, they continued, Torun leading and Charles following, moving deeper into the cavern.

Although Anno's party had cleared out most of the foes, the cave-in had startled many monsters from deeper within, and the two regularly ran into rushing creatures—sometimes ghouls, sometimes zombies or giant spiders, occasionally even swarms of vampire bats—which they found rather tiresome.

Fortunately, these foes mostly acted alone, so the pressure was low. Charles would fire off four Eldritch Blasts, then Torun would charge in with a few mighty swings of his axe, and they would dispatch the enemies almost unscathed.

During this process, the cooperation between the two grew increasingly seamless. After about half an hour of cautious progress, they finally discovered a rope ladder hanging down, which they climbed to return from the third underground level up to the second.

No sooner had they emerged than they encountered something new.

"Help! Help!"

A faint call echoed from ahead; the voice belonged to a middle-aged man. Fortunately, this cavern was very narrow and, with the tide out, extremely quiet, or else the faint cry for help might not have reached them.

Both men were delighted—they had finally encountered another person. Quickening their pace, they hurried toward the source. Before long, they reached a vast, empty cavern.

Here, Torun could finally stand upright after having been hunched for so long.

In the cavern, the figures of five or six giant spiders stood out. Several had their terrible jaws open as they devoured human corpses. The last spider was attacking a living dwarf.

The dwarven uncle, his face deeply wrinkled, with carrot-colored hair and a thick beard, was beside himself with terror, desperately screaming for help—the very voice Charles and Torun had heard.

On seeing the dwarf, Torun immediately strode forward: "We're coming, don't be afraid!"

With his roar, every hair upon his thick hide stood on end; his body seemed to swell, growing even more massive, fierce, and terrifying.

Clearly, he regarded these giant spiders as serious foes and had immediately activated his most powerful state.

This was the core ability of barbarians: by rousing their primal fury and boiling blood, they entered the battle state called "Rage"!

Hearing his bellow, the giant spiders turned toward him. But, out of silk, instead of spitting webs, they opened their eight legs wide to encircle Torun from all directions.

"Die!"

Torun bellowed again, utterly unafraid even though surrounded by giant spiders, and raised his greataxe for a mighty swing.

Now fully upright in his berserk state, he seemed nearly three meters tall—taller than the giant spiders themselves!

The axe came crashing down, its sharp metal edge instantly severing spider legs. Streams of toxin-laced blood spurted, splattering the minotaur's thick fur and making him appear even more brutal and ferocious.

Such a reckless fighting style, by nature, exposed massive openings. The spiders' fanged jaws clamped down on him from every side.

But in his rage, the barbarian's body was as hard as steel. The spiders' bite force barely tore a few hairs loose—against his flesh, their attacks were superficial at best!

Such was the power of the barbarian—a terrifying, muscle-bound defense in rage that allowed them to ignore most physical attacks. Even magical blades struggled to leave a mark.

And their devastating power could destroy any foe of flesh and blood. In a setting with less magic and where most foes were physical, a barbarian's strength was nearly unmatched—even rivaling paladins!

At higher levels, against cunning, magic-using enemies, they might struggle, but here, on this battlefield, the barbarian was nearly invincible!

Watching Torun whirl amid the spiders, greataxe cleaving, Charles reflected on how mighty barbarians remained in lower-level battlefields.

If he didn't help, Torun might slaughter every foe here by himself.

With that in mind, Charles raised his hand, and at a distance, unleashed four Eldritch Blasts—striking four spiders, inflicting pain and stiffness, easing the pressure on Torun so that he wouldn't suffer too many wounds.

After all, the spiders' mouthparts were filled with venom, and even if they left Torun only small cuts, the toxin would eventually cause him agony.

With Charles's support, the minotaur fought with renewed vigor. His greataxe fell again and again, splitting open spiders' bodies like they were made of butter, taking their lives effortlessly.

Charles unleashed four more Eldritch Blasts, blasting apart another spider's body.

And with that, the battle was over.

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Chapter 152: Chapter 152: Bruno the Dwarf

Torun ended his rage, gazing at the corpses of the massive insects strewn across the ground and the scattered, severed legs of giant spiders, with no thought of cleaning up the battlefield.

The minotaur hurried over to the dwarf who was bound by spider-silk, crouched at his side, and asked with concern, "Sir, are you alright? How do you feel? Anywhere injured?"

As he spoke, he drew a small knife from his leather pouch and began cutting away the spider-silk restraints.

The dwarf was still panting, a bit shaken: "No, no, I'm fine, just a little hungry."

"Ah, do you have any liquor? I need a shot of something strong to calm my nerves..."

Charles strode quickly over and, hearing this, couldn't help but let three dark lines appear on his forehead.

"We don't have any alcohol," Torun replied, just as he finished cutting the dwarf free. The newly liberated dwarf stretched out his arms and legs, then broke into a hearty laugh: "Thank you, young lads!"

"My name is Bruno, a warrior of the Mountain Dwarf Mining Consortium. I came here to clear out the undead, but as you see, quite disgracefully, I ended up being captured by these giant spiders instead."

"Who are you both? Thank you for saving me—I'll be sure to repay you."

"I'm Torun Highmountain, and this is Nigel Charles. We're both adventurers, also here to solve the undead problem," said Torun.

Charles nodded, then pulled out his spellbook and crouched next to Bruno, casting a Cure Wounds on the dwarf.

Hearing this, Bruno looked a bit surprised. "Highmountain tribes? I heard your folks formed some sort of alliance with the other powerful tribes called..."

Torun answered, "The Alliance of the Mountain Purifiers."

As he spoke, he suddenly seemed to think of something, his pupils contracting slightly. He hurried to add, "Just as our alliance name implies, we formed for the purpose of purifying all the evil hiding in the mountains."

"That includes undead, cultists, fiends—anything unclean, we seek to purify and destroy!"

His eyes darted, sneaking a glance at Charles's reaction. "To achieve this, and to ensure the mountains are purified and safe, we'll unite with any possible ally and go to any length to destroy evil!"

Charles kept his head down, apparently focused on Bruno's injuries, masking his gaze and expression from Torun's view.

Bruno burst into another loud laugh at Torun's speech: "Hahaha! So that's how it is—looks like my people really did misunderstand you."

"You know, our leaders thought your real goal was Liberl Port, and that you'd attack anyone from Sein on sight!"

Torun gave a few awkward chuckles, glancing continually at Charles. The latter now looked up with a perfectly normal expression, "Mr. Bruno, can you move? We need to search for other survivors and link up with Torun's comrades, then escape this cavern together."

Bruno stood up and hopped in place a few times. "No problem—the toxin's worn off. You can always trust a dwarf's constitution!"

He then turned and, seeing the partially devoured corpses nearby, could not help his grief and tears flooded down: "All of them were my good companions!"

"They were all excellent people, and now they've died here... Wooo..."

Sobbing messily, Charles could only offer him a handkerchief so he could wipe his face and blow his nose.

Torun had no idea how to comfort someone in this state, so he walked a circle around the area and eventually found a small set of chainmail and a greataxe, then brought them over and waited.

Bruno soon realized this was no time for grief. He wiped his nose on Charles's handkerchief, then looked at the two expectantly: "Let's come back and bury them after we clear out the foes—please?"

Charles nodded quickly. "Of course."

Torun nodded as well, and only then did Bruno smile through his tears: "Thank you, both of you!"

He took the greataxe and chainmail, quickly dressed, then hefted his axe high, full of fighting spirit. "Let me lead the way—dwarves' vision is far superior to yours in the dark!"

...

Deep in the cavern, Ilthreza was fleeing in panic. All her fighting spirit gone, only terror remained.

That woman—how does she keep unleashing spells without pause?

Whether for movement, damage, defense, or scouting, since the battle began, her spellcasting had been nonstop!

And every time—a high-level spell!

Damn it! Does she not know how to conserve mana?

How has her magical energy not been drained dry yet?

Or could it be...

She's not even human, but some magical creature masquerading as one, with an endless well of spell slots?

Ilthreza had no way of knowing, and no courage to test Theresa's true nature. Those searing beams of light were her very bane. So, at that moment, she could only bound frantically through the cavern, yanking herself onward with her spider-silk, her very soul fleeing in terror.

Deeper in the Tide Caverns lay a pit, a thousand meters straight down—leading to the Underdark.

If she could just reach it, she'd be safe again!

If only she could get there—

Suddenly, Ilthreza tensed and halted, turning toward the deep shadows up ahead. Raising her twin swords, her brow knotted as she barked sharply, "Show yourself! Who's there?!"

She didn't have to wait long. Her hiding opponent knew a Drider wouldn't be fooled for long. Ilthreza soon saw a figure emerge—a succubus with faint violet skin, a slender and curvaceous form, and shockingly skimpy clothes, stepping calmly from the darkness.

None other than the succubus agent Ines, who had previously been embedded at the side of Abyssal Lord Montport and now hoped to get close to Torun.

Ines was, at this moment, in a terribly foul mood. She had originally intended to tail the minotaurs deeper into the cave, hoping to determine their true goal.

She planned to appear at a critical moment as a beautiful female adventurer, saving them and then growing close—building a quick romantic relationship and thereby worming her way into their group.

But her luck, it seemed, was abysmal. No sooner had she infiltrated the cavern than a powerful earthquake struck.

Cracks opened in the earth, rocks fell, and she quickly lost track of Torun and his group, left to wander the tunnels at random.

Now, she'd run into a panic-stricken Drider, another powerful presence, one obviously also fleeing from pursuit.

Curious, Ines had lurked in the shadows to observe. But the Drider had detected her, forcing Ines to emerge openly.

With an innocent look, Ines spread her hands at Ilthreza. The Drider, for her part, regarded the succubus warily—recognizing her as a fiend, Ilthreza was startled at first. Still, dark elves often trafficked with demons—after all, their goddess, the Demon Queen of Spiders, was now herself a bona fide fiend.

So, after the initial jolt, she regained her composure, though she still acted fierce and hostile. "Succubus, you'd best explain why you're here—otherwise, I make no promises as to the... condition in which your pretty head will stay attached!"

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Chapter 153: Chapter 153: The Minotaurs of the Highmountain Tribes

Ilthreza leveled her threat, but fortunately, Ines—as a succubus—was no stranger to dealing with dark elves.

She quickly waved her hands and wore a placating smile. "Honored Mage, my lord, I have no intention of being your enemy. A magical accident brought me here by chance, and I unwittingly trespassed into your territory..."

Seeing Ilthreza's expression grow darker by the second, Ines realized flattery and evasions wouldn't be enough to placate this dark elf. She quickly shifted to offer collaboration: "Did you encounter a foe you cannot defeat? Perhaps I could join you and fight by your side? After all, dark elves and succubi ought to be allies—especially when facing certain self-righteous enemies masquerading as the embodiment of justice..."

So saying, she lifted her hands, chanting an incantation. Several fiendish spirits appeared, forming two wide circles around her.

This was the fifth-level version of the 3rd-level spell "Spirit Shroud," greatly boosting her single-target spell power. Ines showed, by this, that she was a potent spellcaster—capable of casting 5th-level spells—and could dramatically enhance Ilthreza's combat strength.

"As you see, I possess fiendish vitality and am also a powerful spellcaster," she said, full of confidence. "With the might of Spirit Shroud, paired with Scorching Ray, I can inflict a devastating blow on any foe instantly!"

"So, shall we cooperate?"

Her former body—and pride—had both been destroyed by Charles. Realizing the material world was even more perilous than she had imagined, she now possessed a new body with even mightier spellcasting abilities, ready for whatever move came next.

Ilthreza stared coldly. "Then, what's your price, succubus?"

She didn't have the luxury to probe whether this succubus might be harboring deeper plans or traps. Desperation was closing in—Theresa was still hunting her, and if not for having no other recourse, she would never have dared returning to the Underdark.

Her kin among the dark elves would never forgive her. On the command of the Demon Queen of Spiders, they continued to hunt her. Returning to the Underdark would mean eternal torment.

"It's simple. Later, I need you to help me put on an act." Ines finally exhaled with relief, then smiled. Her mind worked quickly, a new plan fully formed in an instant. "I need a certain minotaur to believe that I am his truest ally..."

"Deal!"

Ilthreza agreed instantly, then turned away, her skin glowing with arcane power. "Use every spell you have—let's kill her together!"

Ines, elated, let her tiny wings flutter and landed beside Ilthreza. Surrounded by her fiendish spirits, the succubus brimmed with satisfaction. A Drider that had escaped the Demon Queen of Spiders' control and made it to the surface was an extraordinary rarity. Whether she would ask favors, forge an alliance, or seize the Drider for study, it was all of great value.

Whatever happened next, a good start to their relationship could only help!

This expedition was already immensely rewarding. Now all she had to do was wield some powerful spells, make the hunter give up her pursuit, and—

That's what Ines thought, full of optimism. But suddenly, a brilliant light shone ahead in the cavern—and the beautiful silhouette clad in opulent milky white nun's robes, so familiar to her, appeared before the two of them.

Theresa.

The moment Ines saw Theresa's icy, emotionless face, her own smile froze.

An instant later, Theresa lifted her hand and a dazzling multicolored rainbow filled the cavern. Ines and Ilthreza screamed as they spun and ran for their lives, each blaming the other between gasps:

"Aren't you supposed to be able to destroy any foe? Hit her!"

"How was I supposed to know it was her?! Facing that woman, all I can do is run!"

"Useless coward!"

"And just what are you doing, running too?!"

A volley of guiding bolts streaked from behind, slamming into cave walls or into their backs, drawing more agonized shrieks and making the two women run even faster.

...

Torun now felt caught between a rock and a hard place.

When he first glimpsed Charles's white hair, murderous thoughts had already filled his heart. But injured as he was, and seeing his target was a powerful and dangerous paladin, Torun had repressed his urge and instead disguised himself as a Mountain People friendly to Liberl Port, seeking Charles's cooperation.

It had worked well. Charles clearly believed his story and had fought shoulder to shoulder with him, the two becoming a seamless team. Torun congratulated himself on his wit and improvisational skill.

He intended that, upon reuniting with his fellow minotaurs, he would turn on Charles, slay him, and take his head as a trophy—earning him prestige and support among the tribes who hated Liberl Port.

But plans are made to be ruined. What Torun never expected was another third-party adventurer—this time, a Mountain Dwarf—would also be present in the cave.

This Mountain Dwarf wasn't a simple drunkard but had some genuine knowledge of the Alliance of the Mountain Purifiers. Torun's fundamental goal was to win over the dwarves, so he could only grit his teeth and recite the alliance's slogans about "purely

seeking mountain safety and never provoking conflict." Noble words that none of them really believed—after all, if not for expansion, why unite at all?

Still, his second lie worked—Bruno seemed convinced, and eagerly promised to clear the dwarves' prejudices back home.

But as long as Bruno remained present, Torun dared not move against Charles. Were he to do so, the lie would collapse, and not only would his main objective—an alliance with the Mountain Dwarves—fail, their relations would sour for years.

Especially since dwarves were known for their grudge-holding—sometimes for centuries—against those who deceived them.

So, as long as Bruno was here, Torun could not attack Charles.

Which led to a new problem:

When he finally met up with his comrades, the other minotaurs, what would he say?

What story could he spin to keep his rage-filled kin in line, so they would play along with his ruse?

Torun had no answer, but the moment of truth arrived.

After dispatching three ghouls, the trio prepared to advance again. Just then, from ahead—heavy footfalls echoed, and a group of minotaurs emerged from around the bend.

They, too, carried massive weapons—greatswords, greataxes, warhammers, and giant clubs. But, compared to Torun's steel ax, their arms seemed crude—some wielded stone axes and wooden mallets, clearly far less deadly.

Their faces were tense with wariness, but upon seeing Torun, their expressions turned to joy: "We finally found you, Warchief!"

But then they saw Charles behind Torun, and their faces snapped back to suspicion. "Warchief, who's that?"

With those words, these minotaurs gripped their weapons afresh.

Charles's eyes narrowed—he could feel these minotaurs' barely-concealed hostility radiate through the tunnel.

He shifted his gaze toward Torun's figure, subtly stepping back and preparing himself.

"Calm down, Henry!" Torun stepped forward hastily, his voice firm. "This is Mr. Bruno, an important figure in the Mountain Dwarf Mining Consortium—an indispensable ally in our fight against the undead."

"And this, Mr. Charles, is a noble paladin. He saved my life during the quake—a true friend, beyond any doubt."

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Chapter 154: Chapter 154: A Wonderful, Yet Not-So-Wonderful Reunion

Torun's heart was pounding as he watched his wary comrades, terrified they might lose their temper and start a fight.

If that happened, his entire plan would be ruined!

Thinking quickly, he added, "Relax your guard. Every people has bad apples—not every Sein is out to cheat you in business!"

This was his third lie of the day, aimed mainly at Charles and Bruno. He wanted them to believe that his kin's wariness was because they'd been wronged by Seins in trade, not because of some deep-seated historical grudge, nor because the Alliance of the Mountain Purifiers was out for revenge against Liberl Port.

He meant to sell the illusion that, if Charles showed himself trustworthy, Torun's warriors would reciprocate and be friendly as well.

To help, he even stepped in front of Charles, shielding his white hair from his kin, creating a buffer between the two sides.

"But..." The minotaur Torun stopped, named Henry, gritted his teeth, his chest heaving. From childhood, he'd been taught that the Seins—those white-haired beings—were devils who wrought endless disasters for the mountains and their people.

Raised on that belief, he and the other adventurers who entered the mountains had clashed countless times with Seins, showing them no mercy; many of his own relatives had died by their hands.

How could he let go of such bloody vengeance? At the mere sight of this white-haired man, he wanted to raise his weapon and fight to the death.

Torun, however, spoke gravely: "You must see the big picture."

He prided himself on his strategic vision. He knew the main purpose of coming to the Tide Caverns was to win the favor of the Mountain Dwarves, to recruit them as allies, not to go hunting Sein heads.

So at this moment, he had to suppress his tribesmen's hostility before Bruno and maintain the Alliance's noble image. For the greater good, the lesser goal must be sacrificed.

So, Henry fell silent, lowering his head, his rage and hatred kept barely in check. The other minotaurs, not quite sure what their leader was doing, also lowered their weapons, though their eyes still scrutinized Charles with intense suspicion.

Charles frowned slightly, thinking these minotaurs were decidedly odd. After counting their number, he made his decision: better to avoid conflict until they left the cave.

With that, he stepped forward, moving past the shielding Torun, and approached Henry with a bright and friendly smile. "Hello, I'm Nigel Charles, a priest of the Church of the Goddess of Life. I came here to help purge the undead from the Tide Caverns."

"I hope we can cooperate smoothly in the battles ahead and join forces against the enemies of the living. To a happy alliance!"

He offered his hand in greeting. Henry looked down at him with obvious reluctance, but under Torun's glare, he gruffly lifted one rough, callused hand and shook Charles's. "I am Henry Highmountain, a common warrior of the Highmountain tribes. May we cooperate well."

His calluses scraped Charles's skin, but Henry neither squeezed hard nor tried to show any dominance—he simply shook, then let go.

Honest enough.

Charles took in the subtle shifts in the minotaur's face, but gave nothing away. He moved on to the next warrior. "Let's work together, mighty minotaur warrior!"

He shook hands with the rest. They were all reluctant, but the gesture took the edge off their hostility.

At the end, Charles found an old minotaur carrying a banner, his face and chest painted white, clearly elderly—probably a priest, and a spellcaster, though how powerful, Charles couldn't guess.

He was about to offer his hand when the old bull reached out first, greeting him with a kindly smile. "Samit Highmountain. May this be the start of our friendship, Priest Charles."

Charles paused, not having expected a true friend among the minotaurs—let alone an elder, possibly someone who'd actually experienced the wars with the Empire of Sein.

He replied warmly, "May this be the start of our friendship," feeling more hopeful that they would be able to leave the cavern in peace.

After all, his goal here was rescue; he still needed to protect several wounded, so he naturally wasn't looking for a new fight.

If Torun wanted to maintain the peace, Charles was happy to play along.

Torun, too, breathed easier—he now felt the mission was on solid ground. He'd managed to present a friendly exterior and gain major favor with the dwarves; inviting them to join the Alliance of the Mountain Purifiers would be much easier now.

Overjoyed, he declared, "In the face of the greater good, private grudges must be set aside. The undead are our top priority!"

Bruno also let out a relieved laugh. "That's right! Every society has its share of scoundrels, but we cannot let the misdeeds of a few poison our hearts against an entire people!"

Returning from his round of handshakes, Charles grinned and joked, "Of course—except for goblins."

Bruno blinked, then burst out laughing. "Right! Except goblins. Those guys are born thieves and tricksters, every last one!"

He began telling goblin jokes: "How does a goblin mother know she's pregnant?"

"Her tampons go missing," a minotaur answered immediately, "stolen by the little thief growing inside her!"

The rest of the minotaurs exploded with laughter, Charles chuckled too. The prejudiced humor swept away any last bit of hostility, filling the air with camaraderie.

Just then, Charles heard Andny's voice in his ear: "Master, come to the right-hand cave, my familiar spotted you!"

His expression shifted. Waving to the group, he called, "Everyone, my comrades have contacted me—they've rescued others. Let's rendezvous quickly!"

Bruno's eyes widened in alarm. "Rescued others? Was there a red-haired woman, a blond young girl, a gnome, and a brass dragonborn?"

"...Yes!" said Charles, already heading in that direction, "They must be your companions? Anyway, my comrades have freed them, they're just ahead on the right!"

"Everyone, follow me! After we join up, we can go and hunt down that Drider!"

"Excellent!" said Bruno, this time racing ahead on his short legs.

At the rear, Torun frowned in thought. He'd known nothing of a Drider in these mines—he would need these newcomers' intel.

His minotaurs watched, awaiting his instructions. Once Charles and Bruno were out of earshot, Torun turned, face stern, and said, "Clearly, they possess much more intel—like that Drider they mentioned, whom we knew nothing about. We must gather what information we can, so don't turn on them—understand?"

"Everyone, we may encounter more Sein soon, but to win the dwarves' alliance, private emotions must not rule us. Be rational. Think of the bigger picture. Understood?"

He looked to the rear, and added, "Just like Uncle Samit."

The Uncle Samit Torun referred to was the minotaur shaman painted in strange runes. This old man had fought in the war with the Empire of Sein many years ago—both his parents and a son had died at the hands of the Sein.

And yet, just earlier, he'd been the friendliest of all, seeming to have released his old hatred entirely.

To this, the old shaman only offered a gentle smile. "It's all in the past. I've already taken my revenge. One cannot live in hatred forever, can one?"

Torun hesitated for a moment, then quickly nodded and negated his doubt. "Yes, that's the attitude I want! Everyone, for the sake of forging an alliance with the dwarves, we must endure. Stay composed, do not let personal feelings rule your heart!"

"Once the dwarves join our alliance, every one of you will get steel weapons like mine. Then, when we strike against the Sein, won't it feel far better than now?"

As he said this, he pointed at his minotaur brothers' weapons. They glanced at the wooden mallets, stone axes, and rusted greatswords in their hands, instantly swayed, and grew all the more convinced by Torun's words.

"That's all I had to say. Everyone, let's move out!"

With that, Torun himself turned first, striding briskly after Charles.

Up ahead, Charles was walking at speed. A faint tremor ran through the ground, and then—around the corner—came a flicker of light. Several giant spiders crawled slowly toward them, and leading the way was a familiar petite silhouette.

That figure was Andny. Spotting Charles's shape from afar, the Insect Witch's voice was brimming with delight: "M—Priest Charles!"

"I'm here!" Charles waved, showing he was safe and sound. "Andny! Hey, Anno!"

His voice jumped an octave, unable to hide his excitement.

"Charles!" Farther back, atop another giant spider, Anno waved at him with all her might. She was again clad in her chainmail and shield, covering her graceful figure. Her golden hair and delicate face were smudged with dirt, but the beauty was undiminished.

Her face glowed with a smile; her eyes saw no one but him.

Andny's eyes flicked once, and then she controlled the giant spiders to retreat, drawing Nidalee and Bonnie farther back, giving the pair some space and time alone.

Anno's spider approached Charles directly. The girl leapt from its back, landing lightly on the ground.

She gazed up at her beloved, mouth corners lifted in a smile, blue eyes filled with yearning. "Did you come to rescue me?"

Charles' heart thundered in his chest. He didn't answer; only felt his blood surge as he suddenly opened his arms, stepped forward, and swept her into a tight embrace.

"Ah—!"

Anno cried out in surprise; her heart pounded, for with all these people watching, her shyness was not easy to overcome.

Yet, after a second, she summoned her courage, wrapped her arms around his waist in return, and pressed her cheek to his chest.

Thinking of all those eyes behind her, her cheeks flushed fiercely—but she couldn't bear to let go, wanting nothing but to savor his arms for a while longer.

Behind them, Bruno ran over on his short legs. Seeing the scene, he quietly circled around, avoiding the couple.

His gaze swept back, spotting the heavily pregnant Bonnie. His eyes rounded, and he hurried over. "Captain, what happened—why are you like this? What did that Drider do to you?!"

Bonnie covered her face. Her fragile composure broke all over again. "Don't ask, don't look at me..."

At the rear, the female brass Dragonborn barbarian looked glum. "It's a long story...Anyway, don't ask."

Bruno only now realized his blunder. He nodded, apologizing. He scratched his head, scanning the group, uncertain. "Er... is there anything I can help with?"

"For now, no. Just be ready to fight." The female brass Dragonborn spoke impassively. "Though by now, there can't be many foes left in this cavern."

No sooner had she finished than Torun and his warriors approached. The massive black bull walked in front, glancing about and sighing with relief to see no new Sein appeared.

Then, spotting Nidalee atop her spider, his eyes lit up. "Nidalee!"

Behind, Nidalee rode her spider, watching Charles and Anno embrace and pondering how to get along with the paladin. Suddenly, her body shuddered.

She looked up, almost unable to believe it. There before her stood that large, powerfully built, and wild-furred minotaur barbarian.

Torun.

What was he doing here?!

For a moment, Nidalee's expression was frozen, disgust welling up inside so strongly she nearly wanted to spear the guy on the spot.

Unlucky, running into him here!

Yet Torun didn't sense her feelings at all. His face grew eager; he broke away from his group and quickly walked up to her spider. "So you're on a mission here...Why didn't you come with us? I could be protecting you!"

As he spoke, he bent lower, turning his broad back to her and signaling for her to step down.

Nidalee's expression twisted in distaste. "Because I don't want to go on missions with you, Torun."

"I have my own plans and my own life. I am neither interested nor obliged to be on the move with you."

With that, Nidalee urged her spider forward, widening the gap, not so much as glancing at him.

Torun, head bowed, suddenly straightened in shock. "What?"

He moved his lips uncertainly, in disbelief. "But your father gave his word. He promised you to me..."

"That's his business!" Nidalee urged her spider on, distancing herself from the minotaur. "If he wants to make that promise so much, let him marry you himself—don't involve me!"

Torun's bovine eyes bulged, stunned by the unexpected blow. His gaze held only disbelief. "No... Nidalee, it shouldn't be like this!"

He strode forward in pursuit. "We are the perfect pair—even your father, wise as he is, thinks so. If you won't marry me, who could you possibly marry?"

"Nidalee, come down..."

He tried to reason as he reached for her leg, as though he might drag her from the spider by force.

Nearby, Charles—still embracing Anno—looked over in surprise.

Torun was Nidalee's fiancé?

This...

He felt helpless, but when he saw Torun about to lay hands on Nidalee, he immediately released Anno and—ignoring her look of confusion—stepped forward in a flash to block Torun's path.

Torun halted, peering down, brows knit tight. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Sorry, Mr. Torun," Charles looked up, meeting the minotaur's gaze without fear. "Miss Nidalee has sought refuge with the Church of the Goddess of Life and is now one of their nuns."

"She has vowed never to marry. So, while I don't know what promises her father once made to you, it is impossible for her to return to the tribe and wed you."

The air turned instantly still. The warmth of reunion had frozen to ice.

Andny held her breath, hastening to signal her mosquito to summon Theresa back;

Nidalee held her breath too, sitting on her spider, eyes full of concern as she gazed at Charles's figure.

She knew Torun hated Liberl Port and the Sein, and now she worried that, because of her, they would have another foe to face.

Anno's face was full of anxiety. She knew Charles's duty as a priest was to protect the monastery's nuns, but this minotaur clearly wouldn't give up easily.

So, she too drew her weapon—though exhausted as she was, not even a single Divine Smite remained in her.

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Chapter 155: Chapter 155: She's Carrying My Child

Behind them, the minotaurs were all filled with confusion. They had all heard of Torun's engagement before and always thought things were going smoothly. They had no idea that Nidalee was wholly unwilling to marry Torun, and so they didn't know what to do.

And Charles—why was he standing up now? What was he even talking about?

The minotaurs' rather primitive minds couldn't process such a knotty problem; for the moment, they simply froze where they were, spectators to all the drama playing out before them.

Farther back, the priest Samit watched the scene, worry written all over his eyes.

He knew Torun's character. With that strong, proud nature, Torun would never let this go unchallenged.

On the other side, Bruno scratched his head and suddenly muttered, "I heard the Church of the Goddess of Life is the only church that doesn't restrict nuns from marriage... Ugh—"

He realized the brass Dragonborn beside him was staring at him icily. The dwarf only just then realized it was his second time saying the wrong thing: "Ah, sorry—um—I don't really know. My apologies!"

He quickly ducked behind the brass Dragonborn, trying to shrink his presence, not knowing that, at that very instant, the woman's gaze had grown only more disdainful.

Whatever little drama was unfolding there, Torun on the other side fixed his bull's eyes on Charles, his breathing growing ever heavier. "So what?"

His voice was an octave higher, trembling with rage: "I don't give a damn about your Liberl Port's idiotic rules! Mountain People don't bother with such nonsense! Her father already promised her to me—she's my woman, always my woman!"

"You have no right to stand in my way—get out of my sight!"

His last words were nearly a roar, but Charles did not budge. "Sorry. I'm the priest of her church now—I cannot look the other way."

"Mr. Torun, I understand you're feeling disappointed..."

"Understand my ass!" Torun howled with rage. "One last time, Charles, don't make me hurt you—get out of my way!"

Charles held his ground and held Torun's gaze, a bit of his own temper rising. "And if I refuse?"

He'd realized by now things wouldn't end peacefully. They were likely going to have to fight it out, and the only question was...

Who would make the first move?

After all, just a moment ago, in front of the third party—Bruno, the dwarf—they'd both put on that friendly, peaceful face. Whoever struck first would be the one to shatter that mask.

The air seemed utterly still; everyone was waiting for Torun's next action. Nidalee swallowed, her chest full of emotion. She had originally thought this whole expedition would be about Charles pursuing Anno, and she was only going to be a background character.

But then, Torun had shown up as well. Now it was Anno who was the background character, and she herself had become the center of everything—the very focus of the whole affair, with the leaders of two sides fighting over her!

Looking at Charles's slender build, Nidalee felt deeply moved. He was so thin compared to Torun—who was twice his size—yet he stood up and faced that minotaur's pressure, just to protect her...

Nidalee closed her eyes, hands over her heart, as if to calm her racing heart.

And in that moment, everyone but her gripped their weapons, on edge for the moment violence would break out.

But Torun was not quite so impulsive. Though he looked wild with rage, he hadn't forgotten his goal here.

He wanted to make Charles strike first.

So, the minotaur took a deep breath, and suddenly laughed angrily. "What right do you have to decide her marriage, instead of her father?"

He stepped back, wearing a taunting smile, and glanced about for support. "Mr. Bruno, Henry, Uncle Samit—come on, everyone here, say something—who's more qualified to decide her marriage: the father who raised her, or some white-haired human from the outside? Hah! You people are always babbling about religious rules, fake goddesses, as if that gives you the right to make her decisions!"

"Frauds like you—I've seen plenty. Just tell me: do you Liberl Port people not have fathers or mothers? Letting outsiders interfere in your marriages—that's the dumbest thing I've heard all year! Is that all you are—a bunch raised without any real family?"

With every insult and cutting word, Torun tried to claim the moral high ground and incite Charles to strike first.

And there was no denying that the minotaur's words were foul enough. In a few sentences he'd truly stoked Charles's anger.

Blue light flared in Charles's eyes as he realized something: this minotaur truly couldn't understand a word he was saying.

He was a mountain tribesman—he didn't know religion, and so he wouldn't respect any argument rooted in faith.

Charles would have to strike in a language Torun would understand, finish this, and end his stubborn clinging. He had no more time to waste on pointless arguments; there were more important things to do.

With that, a cruel smile curled the corner of Charles's mouth.

"This has nothing to do with outsiders," he said with a smile. "This is our own business."

Torun paused, not understanding, then saw Charles take a step back and call out, "Nidalee, come here!"

Nidalee, bewildered but obedient, hopped down from her giant spider and walked up to his side.

Then, Charles grabbed her shoulders, drawing her into his arms.

In an instant, Anno was stunned, not understanding what was happening.

Nidalee was stunned as well, wondering if this was the right thing to do with Anno right there.

But no one was more stunned than Torun—his fiancée, now in another man's arms...

"In fact, we're already together." Charles's smile grew a little shy, but his words landed like hammers. "And she's already carrying my child."

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