

Witch Monastery #Chapter 156: The True Face of the Alliance of the Mountain Purifiers - Read Witch Monastery Chapter 156: The True Face of the Alliance of the Mountain Purifiers

Chapter 156: Chapter 156: The True Face of the Alliance of the Mountain Purifiers

The instant those words were spoken, shock rippled through the group like a bolt of lightning.

Andny stared at Charles in utter disbelief, unable to understand why he would say something like that.

Anno was standing right next to them—didn't he care at all about his paladin girlfriend?!

Nidalee's own beautiful eyes went wide. She had always thought Charles would never reveal their relationship for the sake of pursuing Anno, but never expected this... Was he doing it to protect her?

A surge of happiness so overwhelming rushed in that she almost fainted.

But compared to her, at that moment, the Anno behind her was struck as if by thunder. She stared at the scene in disbelief.

The man she liked—he was actually already another woman's lover, with a child on the way?!

No, it couldn't be true. This couldn't be happening!

A wave of despair swept through her, her spirit collapsing, as if her entire world had been drained of color.

Behind, all the minotaurs stood dumbfounded, their minds going blank, unable to process a single thought.

What did they just hear?!

Torun's fiancée... pregnant by another man?!

What a disgrace!

But for something this momentous, what would the far-sighted Torun do?

They didn't know. Right now, all those minotaurs were filled with confusion.

The old priest sighed, relinquishing his last hope, and pulled a small banner from his back, ready to spellcast for battle.

Just as they'd feared, the taunt and self-satisfaction vanished from Torun's face, replaced only by astonishment.

"No..." he mumbled, much the same as Anno's state now, as if his very soul had been sucked from him, "You're lying... There's no way..."

He turned to look at Nidalee, his voice almost pleading: "Nidalee, you two are just... companions, right? All this was just to reject me—some lie. You can't possibly like such a pale, frail, monkey-like man..."

Nidalee's mind was blank, reeling in tension and unexpected joy, until Torun's words finally brought her back to herself.

Her lips trembled, but she couldn't get a word out: "I..."

Charles tightened his hold around her shoulders. "It's true, Torun. Nidalee deserves a better life. She should be with me, living in a grand castle in the central district of Liberl Port, bathing in milk and rose petals, feasting on wine and steak for breakfast, not living with you, scraping by up here among the mountains, suffering through such a primitive and poor existence."

As he finished, behind him, Anno slowly returned to herself, brow creasing in suspicion. Wasn't Charles just a penniless priest from the South Harbor District? Since when did he have a central-district castle and live the high society life of a king?

Andny's gaze flickered; she thought, Master really can tell a whopper! She glanced around, reading everyone's faces, and when her gaze landed on Anno, a sudden idea struck. Controlling her mosquito hovering by Nidalee's ear, she quickly prompted, "Go along with Master—say you love his money!"

Snapping back into focus, Nidalee grabbed Charles's arm and declared, "Torun, just give up. I admit, your Highmountain tribes are strong, but compared to the power of Duke Charles's family, it's not even close."

"I really am carrying the Charles family's bloodline, so you'd best let this go."

Silence again fell over the clearing, only this time the atmosphere was undeniably subtle.

Bruno scratched his head, about to say, "There's no such Duke Charles in Liberl Port," but as he glanced to his side, the brass Dragonborn woman shot him a look of pure murder, and the big-mouthed dwarf instantly clamped up, not daring to utter another word.

Anno, being a noble, knew perfectly well there was no such noble house as Charles in Liberl Port, let alone any tacky so-called 'high society' living like that.

She understood: it was all lies, all made up by Charles to protect Nidalee, the Mountain People nun.

So the pregnancy was fake too?

At this thought, she felt at ease, and slowly the color returned to her world. But then, a wave of annoyance swept over her.

Why use such a reason? The religious rationale was more than enough...

Her mood restored, but there was one among them whose feelings could not be so easily mended.

That was Torun.

Even though Nidalee's reason was full of holes—anyone with a bit of knowledge about Liberl Port's noble lines could see through it—just like Nidalee, Torun knew none of this.

He had no idea there was no noble family named Charles, and now he fully believed Nidalee had been seduced away by these so-called 'civilized' folk.

And so, at that moment, his heart plunged into an icy abyss, nearly ceasing to beat. Staring blankly at the girl before him, memories raced by of days gone by: her every smile, her swift silhouette leaping through the woods, the elegant way she shifted between beast and humanoid forms—each image, so perfect...

He had dreamed a thousand times of their wedding, with the chieftains of every tribe gathered to celebrate their union. He would escort her, arm in arm, to the peak of mountain authority, possessing the greatest power, the greatest strength, and the most beautiful wife, an object of envy to all...

And now, all that was ruined. This white-haired boy, who'd come out of nowhere, had robbed him of his destined bride. Now he was nothing but a fool in everyone's eyes.

In the next instant, all that remained was pure, blazing rage!

"Bastard!"

He gripped his greataxe until his knuckles whitened, muscle bulging, veins throbbing in his forehead, even the fur on his body standing on end: "Unforgivable, you damned white-haired human! Arrrrgh————!!!"

With both hands wrapped around his steel greataxe, he plunged into a berserk state and, stomping forward, brought it crashing down on Charles!

"Watch out!"

Charles's nerves were stretched taut. Ever since revealing their relationship, he had remained acutely wary of Torun's every move. So, the instant Torun gripped his axe, Charles seized Nidalee and rolled to the side—

BANG—

Torun's greataxe slammed into the ground, shattering the stone and sending shards flying. Raising his head, black bull hair wild, his eyes flushed red like a maddened demon, Torun let out a furious howl: "Die—Die, you bastard—!"

"Warriors, with me! Kill! Kill this Sein! Make them pay for every sin with blood! Make them pay for what they have done!"

Rage all but incinerated his mind; now every inch of his body snarled for battle, every drop of hot blood boiled. There was no room left for other thoughts: only the overwhelming urge to kill Charles!

Clutching Nidalee, Charles tumbled to the wall before coming to a halt. Against such a crazed warrior, he dared not hesitate; he sprang to his feet, shield raised, eyes cold as steel. "Finally dropping the act, are you, Torun? So at last you tear off that fake mask of friendship and reveal your true enmity?"

He taunted all the harder, knowing each word would only fan Torun's rage!

"Die, you worthless dung heap from Liberl Port, and your bastard Charles bloodline!" Torun roared, striding forward, hacking down with tremendous force. "The Alliance of the Mountain Purifiers was formed for one purpose: to destroy your filth-ridden city of white rats, to skin you all one by one and nail your wretched hides to the rafters of our halls!"

"You'll be my first trophy—die, Nigel Charles! Your scalp is mine!"

With those words, he came on with another thundering stride.

Behind him, Anno had raised her shield and sword, intending to move up in support, but upon hearing this declaration, she froze, her expression utterly shocked.

Alliance of the Mountain Purifiers!

This was her very target—what she had come to investigate!

Never would she have thought the trail would end so abruptly, without any need for subterfuge: the enemy named themselves right out in the open!

Sure enough, this new alliance of the Mountain People was a dire threat to Liberl Port's safety, and must be eliminated as soon as possible!

She wasn't alone; beside her, Bruno had thought about stepping in, trying to play peacemaker with lines like "Our true enemies are the undead." But now, at Torun's shouting, Bruno stood rooted in disbelief. "What?!"

He was stunned—had the minotaur deceived them the whole time? The Alliance of the Mountain Purifiers was nothing but a terror group, not a force for protecting the mountains?

He didn't know what to think, and for a moment just stood paralyzed. In the end, it was the brass Dragonborn woman who yanked his shoulder backward: "Get back! Are you trying to get yourself killed?"

She snatched at Bruno, pulling him away while grabbing Bonnie from her seat atop the giant spiders, dragging both back, doing her utmost to get them out of the danger zone, to look after themselves.

None of them had fully recovered from their captivity—after a day and night with no food or water, their strength was almost spent. In this condition, they had no business in this brawl; best stay safe and wait out the fight.

Meanwhile, to the rear of the battlefield, the minotaurs looked about, bewildered. Just minutes ago Torun had preached—do not be ruled by personal emotion, keep the big picture, win the dwarves' favor...

Yet barely ten minutes later, everything was changed, and chaos reigned.

They stood, unsure what to do; then the priest Samit sighed and said, "Why are you hesitating? Will you disobey a command?"

"Fight, then! What's done is done—there's no turning back!"

With those words, burdened by frustration and fear, the minotaurs tightened their grip on warhammers or greatclubs and charged straight toward Charles.

Meanwhile, Andny desperately directed the giant spiders forward, intercepting the minotaurs' movements, shrieking with terror for Theresa: "Eldest Sister, get over here—these minotaurs are insane, they're attacking us!"

She screamed while the spiders and the minotaurs clashed in a chaotic melee. But this thin line of defense trembled at the first impact—already at the brink of collapse!

Anno drew her blade and raised her shield, intending to support Charles, but he barked, "Anno, Nidalee—go help Andny! Whatever you do, don't let the minotaurs break through!"

"As for Torun—I'll handle him myself!"

His eyes blazed, and summoning his longsword, flames leaped forth along the blade, shield primed—he was ready to face Torun alone.

Taking on a barbarian single-handedly might look reckless, but against a Path of the Ancestors barbarian, it was by far the wisest course.

That path's barbarians could summon the spirits of their ancestors in rage, shielding all kin sharing the same bloodline!

So if the fighting tangled into a mass melee, their side would have no edge, while Torun's power would shield every minotaur, raising their combat strength substantially.

Thus, a duel was the best choice.

"Then...take care of yourself!"

Anno gritted her teeth but did not protest. She knew her limits—she could barely muster the strength for swing, let alone Divine Smite. The best she could do was stand her ground with sword and shield against an ordinary minotaur; anything more was beyond hope.

Nidalee too wanted to remain and protect Charles, but with spellcasters among the minotaurs, she had no choice; she leapt to the side, shifted into leopard form, and raced into the fray.

On the battlefield, only Charles and Torun now faced each other.

"Your head will be my trophy!"

Torun bellowed, lifting arms thicker than Charles's thighs, swinging his greataxe with no finesse, only raw, reckless force as he brought it down in a savage arc!

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Chapter 157: Chapter 157: Staggering Smite

The barbarian's combat style had always been like this—scorning tactics and techniques, their minds filled with only one thing: attack, attack, and attack again!

Reckless to the extreme, with slashing arcs and wild swings, they were riddled with openings from head to toe. But in their berserk state, boiling blood and bulging muscle allowed them to simply tank nearly all physical damage, making it nearly impossible to put them down!

They were like living, ironclad tanks—engines roaring—crushing every foe with unstoppable brute force.

With Torun's direct assault, Charles had no way to evade. He began to chant, placing Hexblade's Curse upon Torun while raising his shield to brace for the clash: "Shield!"

Buzz——

A flicker of magic power light appeared. Charles spun his body, sweeping out his right arm, slashing sideways diagonally at Torun—

A longsword, used one-handed, actually had a bit more reach than a heavy weapon like a greataxe, which required both hands. Plus, Charles's summoned sword was already on the long side of the spectrum, so he managed to land his blow first.

Hiss—

His longsword struck the raging warrior's body, hard as steel, barely leaving a mark. But the flames on the blade caught his coarse fur, and the curse began ravaging the minotaur's innards instantly!

The raging warrior grunted, but such pain was nothing to a barbarian caught in the storm of fury. His greataxe fell, as if to cleave Charles in two.

Charles raised his shield, but the barbarian, deep in rage, was an irresistible force. Even without magic, with nothing but brute strength, Torun's greataxe shredded the shield's magical protection and crashed down on the shield!

Clang——

A deafening crash. Charles felt a monstrous force screaming through his arm—he staggered backward several steps, left arm numb and almost useless.

He gritted his teeth.

Damn—so that's the raw power of a ninth-level minotaur barbarian?

And this on top of a magic shield, Armor of Agathys, and False Life!

What if this guy was wielding a magical weapon? Wouldn't he be able to tear my shield to pieces on the spot?

I can't let this become a melee slugfest—I need to leverage my spellcaster's edge and outplay him!

With that thought, he feinted a retreat, widening the gap. But Torun was faster, showing no sign of faltering or slowing down.

His muscular legs thundered forward, arms still encased in reforming ice from previous attacks, and again he raised the greataxe to bring it crashing down: "Die—!"

With no choice, Charles raised his left hand: "Agatha!"

At once, the diamond ring on his left index finger flashed with dazzling red light—a wild-haired, white-robed female ghost burst forth, mouth open in a piercing shriek: "Aaaaaah—!"

The scream struck Torun's very soul, making his body freeze in place as his greataxe whistled harmlessly down and slammed into the ground!

And Agatha lunged, her hands gripping Torun's broad shoulders, mouth gaping to reveal monstrous fangs, and bit down viciously into the minotaur's throat!

"AAHH—!"

Torun felt a sudden chill as the agony of his life-force being drained battered his mind, a guttural roar tearing from his throat.

He tried to counterattack with his greataxe—but just then, Charles took advantage of the opening. From his belt he drew the Storm Warhammer, charged it with magic power, and hurled it forward with all his strength—

BOOM——

Forced to defend, Torun raised his greataxe, blocking the spinning warhammer. The steel ax and the flying hammer met with a shriek of tortured metal, and a bolt of electricity surged through Torun's body, leaving him paralyzed and helpless!

In midair, Agatha clamped to his neck, gorged herself on the minotaur's vitality.

"Whew..."

Charles felt a warm rush of energy from the life he gained, the numbness and pain in his left arm fading away. However, seeing his spell slots drop to just six, his expression grew grim.

That's not enough to keep fighting...

No help for it—he'd have to do this now...

Taking a deep breath, he opened his attribute panel. Looking at his balance—over fourteen thousand Purification Points—his heart twinged.

It cost nine thousand Purification Points to raise from level six to seven. He'd saved up enough a while ago.

He hadn't planned to level up yet, for a simple reason: upgrading the monastery to level three required ten thousand Purification Points, and he'd wanted to save them for that...

It was level three that would unlock the true game. Once his monastery was expanded to a hundred thousand square meters and leveled up, he'd be able to construct all kinds of real training facilities, turn new recruits into pastors, and rapidly expand his influence.

Level three training grounds would also allow him to learn new feats, so he wouldn't need to grind levels—strength could soar independently.

Those powerful combat feats and metamagic feats, or advanced specializations that required many prerequisites, would take too long if he only leveled up.

So he'd been hoarding Purification Points, just waiting for his monastery to reach that threshold and hit level three.

But this fight was harder than expected.

Sighing, he resolved to just hunt down more undead later and grind Purification Points gradually.

Exhaling, he pressed his fingertip lightly on the "Level Up" option.

Buzz——

A milky light surged up—new magical power and purified energy flooding into his body, granting him new strength. His spell slots instantly restored by six, the cap increased to thirty-eight.

Not only that, but new knowledge also surfaced in his mind—he had mastered a new 4th-level spell.

Staggering Smite!

A 4th-level spell required the consumption of six spell slots, and the effect of Staggering Smite was to pour the destructive force of those six slots into a single strike: instantly tearing open an opponent's soul and shattering their will!

As Charles slowly savored this new spell in his mind, his lips curled slightly.

Heh. Torun, in a moment, you're going to be very sorry.

"Get out of my way!"

On the other side, Torun, paralyzed from the electric shock, finally regained control over his body. Growling, he swung his greataxe, and Agatha was forced to let go and retreat.

Supported by Hexblade's sixth-level feature, "Accursed Specter," she had a certain physical presence, allowing her to persist in the world and battle foes—but it also meant she could be harmed by ordinary weapons. Although such damage was minor, it remained a real threat to Agatha in her current weakened state.

After driving the female ghost away, the enraged Torun didn't hesitate. He brandished his greataxe and charged forward again, his heavy footsteps making the cavern rumble as if the entire earth itself were shaking!

Charles quickly stepped back, once again drawing the Storm Warhammer from his hip, infusing it with magic power, and hurling it forward—

But this time, Torun was ready. His greataxe swept out horizontally—

Clang!

Another screech of metal rang out as the flying hammer was batted aside. A burst of electricity surged through Torun's arms, but it only locked his muscles for less than a second.

Of course, Charles hadn't hoped a single hammer would settle things. He chanted anew, channeling magic, and flaming energy began to reform on his longsword: "Staggering Smite!"

This was the effect of "Staggering Smite." Spell completed, he surged forward at Torun.

Torun marched forward as well, greataxe poised for a wide horizontal slash. Charles didn't dodge this time—instead, he braced himself and charged through, shield raised: "Shield!"

The greataxe came crashing down!

Clang—!

Once more, his greataxe slammed into the shield, and Charles staggered from the impact but forced himself upright, then brought his longsword down in a vertical arc—

Hiss—

The sharp blade left only a shallow wound on the minotaur's hide, but the flames ignited his fur and the curse stabbed again at his heart. Yet none of this compared to the agony flooding Torun's mind in that instant!

"Ugh—"

Invisible magic surged into his mind, transforming into a formless blade that nearly split his soul. Torun's crimson eyes constricted—he suddenly saw Charles's body looming larger than the mountains themselves, wielding a longsword broad as a mountain, coming down on him!

It was as though a bucket of ice water had been dumped over him. The fury in his chest vanished instantly, replaced only by cold terror and the sensation of suffocating!

"No..."

All his rage was simply gone, and now overwhelming agony, shame, and fear seized his heart as if a giant iron hand had clamped around it. His voice began to tremble. The once-fearless warrior now sounded like a child: "This isn't real, this isn't real—!"

A moment ago, he had been in a berserk state—now, suddenly, the barbarian let out a scream, dropped his weapon, clutched his head in both hands, and turned to flee, howling: "This isn't real—Aaaahhh—!"

Clang—

The steel greataxe crashed to the ground. In this iron-scarce mountain tribe, to treat a steel weapon so carelessly would be bitterly condemned.

But now, Torun could ignore tradition, taboos, or principle. All he wanted was to escape—no matter how far, just away!

"Aaaaaah—!"

Blinded by panic, he tore pell-mell through the dark tunnels and in an instant vanished into the depths.

"Whew..."

Charles exhaled in relief as he looked after Torun, considering whether to give chase.

But that barbarian was much faster than him, and Charles had only two spell slots left—practically powerless for combat.

Chasing now would be suicide. Better to retreat while the effects of Staggering Smite lingered.

Behind him, minotaurs and Anno's group were locked in desperate battle. Stone weapons and metal shields clashed, blessings and curses glimmered, and tangles of vine wove everywhere—testament to both sides' spellcasters.

At that very moment, even Andny's vampire bats swarmed forth, biting at the minotaurs, adding what little extra damage they could.

But overall, the minotaurs still had the edge in numbers and physical strength. Their assault was about to break the tenuous defensive line—when suddenly they saw their chief's son, the best young warrior, Torun, shrieking in terror and fleeing as fast as he could.

Instantly, they were devastated. They couldn't imagine what the white-haired stranger had done to make their battle-crazed champion run in such terror.

At the rear, Priest Samit drew back his banner, worry etched on his face as he peered in the direction Torun had disappeared. After a moment's thought, he said gravely, "We retreat! We must find Torun and bring him back!"

Success or failure, the most important thing: their chief's son, the future heir of the Highmountain tribes, Torun, could suffer no harm.

So, at Samit's shout, the minotaurs—who had been pressing hard against the spiders and Anno's group—gave up their advantage, fell back, and then broke for the depths after Torun.

At last, this disastrous battle was truly over.

"Whew... Everyone, is everyone alright?"

Charles caught up from behind, glancing around and seeing, though three giant spiders lay dead, vampire bats littered the ground, and blood pooled everywhere, at least everyone only had minor wounds and nothing fatal.

"We're fine. Priest, are you alright?"

Nidalee answered instantly—she had already shifted back to human form, since as a leopard she couldn't cast spells, and of her group, she alone was a spellcaster, capable of dueling the enemy priest.

So she had transformed back.

"I'm fine as well," Charles replied, glancing at the wounded, and at Bruno, the female brass Dragonborn, and the swollen-bellied Bonnie hiding nearby, and frowned.

All right... best to retreat, quickly!

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Chapter 158: Chapter 158: Anno: I'm Not Angry

"Those minotaurs could catch up to us at any moment. We should leave this place immediately," Charles suggested, his gaze shifting toward Anno.

The latter lowered her eyes, seemingly unwilling to meet his gaze. "I have no objections."

Charles felt a mix of emotions, but this was no time for sentimentality. He turned to Bruno and asked, "Sir, what do you think? Will you join us, or will you side with those minotaurs?"

Though he knew these people were weak and injured, their earlier indifference still left a bitter taste in his mouth.

At that moment, Bruno and the female brass Dragonborn, each supporting Bonnie on either side, looked awkward upon hearing his words. "Of course, we'll leave with you. Those minotaurs are despicable! They deceived a dwarf!"

As he spoke, Bruno stomped his foot, his expression a mix of anger and indignation.

Too exhausted to join in condemning Torun's deceit, Charles sighed and said, "Alright, let's go. Andny, contact Theresa and ask where she is. Did she eliminate that drider?"

Andny shook his head. "No, she's on her way here. But she didn't kill the drider because she encountered new foes."

Charles's expression shifted. "Who?"

"That fiend—the succubus we met earlier," Andny replied. "Your hunch was right. The succubus survived your attack, and she's grown stronger. She can even cast 5th-level spells now!"

Behind them, Anno's head snapped up, her eyes wide with shock. Charles tensed as well. "Then Theresa's in danger?"

Andny shook his head again. "No, Eldest Sister is still chasing both of them. But... they're covering for each other, so she hasn't managed to take either down."

Anno lowered her eyes once more, and Charles exhaled in relief. "Never mind. Killing her isn't crucial. She won't dare return to this mine."

"Let's hurry. Tell Theresa to meet us at the exit, and we'll leave this mine together!"

Andny gave a quiet acknowledgment, relaying the message to Theresa through his familiar. Unfortunately, most of the giant spiders he controlled had perished in the earlier battle, leaving them no mounts to ride. They had no choice but to proceed on foot.

Charles didn't feel like speaking; exhaustion weighed heavily on his mind. As he trudged forward, Anno watched his weary figure, her emotions in turmoil.

She didn't want to engage with him now, but her duty as a paladin and a member of Force Grey compelled her to address what she'd just heard.

Finally, steeling herself, she stepped closer to Charles and asked, "Priest, earlier you mentioned fiends?"

Charles perked up at her voice, but the formal address sent a chill through his heart.

He knew she was upset, and the realization made his scalp prickle. But he also knew patience was key. Gritting his teeth, he decided not to hide anything and briefly recounted his experiences. "Yes, the monastery was attacked by fiends. We followed clues linking it to events in the Rubble District, so under Miss Nidalee's guidance, we came here to investigate."

His expression turned rueful. "I never expected things to turn out like this."

Hearing this, Anno's face darkened. The name "Nidalee" reignited emotions she'd barely suppressed.

Biting her lower lip, she pushed her feelings aside and focused on the mission. "What exactly happened? To be honest, I came to the Rubble District to investigate some anomalies as well."

Charles, however, noticed the shift in her expression. He knew exactly what had caused it.

Taking a deep breath, he leaned in slightly and whispered, "Are you angry?"

Instantly, Anno's resentment surged. Her eyes reddened, and she turned her head away so he couldn't see them. "No, I have no reason to be angry."

Charles's heart raced. The only thing he could be sure of was that this girl still held affection for him. Summoning his courage, he suddenly wrapped his arms around her.

Anno stiffened, reflexively trying to pull away. But then she realized how weak his grip was—if she truly struggled, she could break free easily.

So she only feigned resistance for a moment before letting him hold her. Keeping pace with him, she muttered angrily, "What are you doing? Let go of me!"

Meanwhile, Bruno and the female brass Dragonborn tactfully supported Bonnie, sticking to the opposite side of the tunnel and pretending not to notice.

"I'm sorry, Anno," Charles murmured. "I'm such a fool. My words were reckless, and seeing your face earlier felt like a knife to my heart..."

As he spoke, Anno's cheeks burned. Glancing around, she noticed the others stealing glances and flushed even deeper. "Let go! I told you I'm not angry... If you don't let go, I really will be!"

"Then forgive me?" Charles pressed. "If you don't, I'll slap myself—"

He raised a hand as if to strike his own face.

"I'm not blaming you! Stop!" Anno hissed, horrified at the thought of drawing more attention. "I know you lied to protect Miss Nidalee. It's normal—I've done the same. How could I blame you?"

"You think I'm that petty? Now let go!"

Charles finally released his embrace but kept her arm linked with his as they continued walking side by side.

Anno let out a sigh of relief, her cheeks still burning. She glanced around and noticed their companions pretending to be serious, though they were all stealing glances and eavesdropping with sidelong looks.

For a moment, she was so embarrassed she couldn't stand it. Suddenly, she stopped and stomped hard on Charles's foot, making him grimace in pain.

But that was the extent of her emotional outburst. Remembering the responsibility on her shoulders, she quickly steered the conversation back: "Charles, about the fiends—how much have you investigated so far?"

Charles shook his head slightly. "Not much, really. Just that the main foe is an Abyssal Lord named Montport, and his corruption has driven one of Miss Nidalee's tribe's Elemental Creatures into madness."

"We came here to investigate more about him and help restore the Elemental Creature's sanity." He shrugged. "But as you saw, because Nidalee wasn't happy with her father's arranged marriage, we haven't gone to her tribe yet. Instead, we started our investigation here."

"I just didn't expect an extra twist—there's a drider here, and she's also colluding with our foes."

He was genuinely confused, thrown off by this development since the game had never included such a plot.

Of course, the game also didn't have the Alliance of the Mountain Purifiers or Abyssal Lord Montport. The real world was different—bosses didn't just sit around waiting to be challenged. They had their own goals and lives, so they moved on their own...

Anno nodded softly. "I see. But... since Miss Nidalee's father betrothed her to that minotaur, it's possible her tribe has joined this so-called 'Alliance of the Mountain Purifiers.'"

"You heard their true goal—to destroy all of Liberl Port. Do you still plan to go there and purify their Elemental Creature?"

Charles paused mid-step, then sighed quietly. "That... we'll see. Miss Nidalee keeps telling me her father is a flexible moderate, but... well, even ignoring the risk of aiding the enemy, I have to wonder if her father would just kill me on sight after what happened."

He looked utterly troubled, and Anno's lips curled slightly, her mood lifting. "Serves you right! Who told you to say those things? If her father finds out, killing you would be the least of your worries!"

As she spoke, as if still unsatisfied, her small hand pinched Charles's side and gave a sharp twist—

Charles's face twisted in pain. "Ow—easy, Anno, I'm sorry, ah—!"

Anno released him, huffing lightly, then rested her head against his shoulder like a true couple. Charles didn't say more, simply keeping her arm linked with his as they walked slowly.

The cave began echoing with the roar of waves—high tide had arrived. The southern coast's surf crashed against the mountain cliffs, the vibrations resonating through the rock, filling the cavern with a perfect backdrop of sound, a farewell to their departure.

As the excitement faded, exhaustion set in. The group walked in silence, following Andny's lead through the collapsed cave, searching for a way forward.

Fortunately, though Move Earth was a 6th-level spell, the collapse was limited. In less than an hour, they navigated the low mine tunnels and returned to the first level's exit—the massive pit.

Only then did Charles and Anno separate, climbing the rope ladder one by one. Bonnie, despite her altered physique, retained her basic athleticism as a warrior, needing only slight assistance to ascend.

Once everyone was up, Charles removed the ladder, ensuring the minotaurs couldn't climb up anytime soon.

With that done, they left the cavern behind. The sky outside had grown dim—deep autumn meant earlier nights. Theresa hadn't returned yet; she'd chased the drider too far. To wait for her, the group settled in the miners' rest area, sitting on stone benches to rest while reporting their safety to the dwarves on watch.

Bruno, meanwhile, helped himself to the old miner's liquor and loudly lamented how the minotaurs had deceived him and attacked Charles and the others. In doing so, he exposed the true face of the Alliance of the Mountain Purifiers to the dwarves.

After another half-hour of waiting, as darkness fully descended, a flash of white light flickered at the mine entrance. Then, a tall, curvaceous figure in opulent nun's robes sprinted toward them: "Priest! Andny!"

Charles, seated on the stone bench, quickly stood and took two steps forward, waving his arm in response. "Theresa, we're over here!"

Theresa moved swiftly, reaching the group in moments. Seeing Charles covered in dust and grime, her heart ached unbearably. Without caring for his filth, she stepped forward and pulled him into a tight embrace!

"Huh?"

Caught off guard, Charles—shorter than Theresa by a head—found his face pressed against her chest. His expression was stunned, unprepared for Theresa's emotional outburst and this very public display.

With Anno watching, he didn't dare wrap his arms around her waist. Instead, he stood there like a helpless child, held tightly by his elder sister...

The already tipsy Bruno perked up, eager to share the gossip with the old dwarf on watch. But the female brass Dragonborn's icy glare silenced him instantly, and he shrank back, not daring to say another word.

Behind them, Anno stood up, then pouted and sat back down, pretending she didn't mind.

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