

## **Witch Monastery #Chapter 161: She Needs a Father, So... - Read Witch Monastery Chapter 161: She Needs a Father, So...**

*Chapter 161: Chapter 161: She Needs a Father, So...*

Time passed slowly. After returning, Charles's life seemed to return to its usual rhythm. Under Sophia's guidance, he began studying 3rd-level spells while waiting for news from Anno.

The demons had to be eliminated. His original plan was to ally with the Mountain People and Blackstaff Tower to resolve the matter steadily. However, the Alliance of the Mountain Purifiers had shown intense enmity, leaving him no choice but to side entirely with Blackstaff Tower, relying on their strength to solve the problem.

Until Anno brought back new information, he could only study, train, adapt to his enhanced physique, and wait patiently.

Morning, Scriptorium, First Floor.

The nun tutoring Lisa had temporarily switched from Andny to Hattie. The former was now focused on caring for Bonnie and the spider eggs she had acquired, while the latter had little to do and volunteered for the task.

As the bell rang, signaling the end of class, Lisa hopped down from her tall chair and began packing her stationery. Her lips were pursed, clearly unhappy.

Hattie noticed her mood and leaned down gently. "Lisa, what's wrong? Is something bothering you?"

Lisa nodded without hesitation. "Yes!"

Pouting, she looked up at Hattie with a wronged expression. "Teacher, does Priest Charles... not like me?"

Hattie blinked in surprise. "Of course not! Why would you think that?"

"Because he's back, but he hasn't visited my home." Lisa lowered her head, her voice tinged with disappointment. "Mom and I prepared treats to share with him, but he never came..."

Hattie was struck by how sensitive the little girl was—such a small thing had upset her so deeply.

Without delay, Hattie softened her voice. "That's not true at all. Priest Charles has been incredibly busy these past few days, barely able to catch his breath. That's why he hasn't visited."

"I promise, once he has time, he'll come to see you. Okay?"

Hearing this, Lisa's eyes brightened. "Really? Okay!"

A child's mood shifts quickly. Lisa's gloom vanished, and after stuffing her backpack, she chirped a goodbye and skipped out of the scriptorium.

Hattie watched her leave with a smile, waiting until the girl disappeared around the monastery's corner before her expression sobered. She hurried out, heading straight for the kitchen.

The two buildings weren't far apart. In just a few steps, she reached the doorway, pushed open the kitchen door, and found Charles already eating lunch.

Since enhancing his Constitution with the system, his training intensity had skyrocketed. Running five kilometers in under twenty minutes now felt effortless.

His appetite had also grown dramatically. Even after a hearty breakfast, he often found himself ravenous before mealtime, forcing him to cut short his training or lessons to devour whatever was available.

Like now. A massive steak—weighing at least a kilogram—sat on the kitchen table, accompanied by crisp vegetables and a glass of milk.

No longer strapped for funds, he could afford to treat such steaks as a staple, just like people from his previous life. Without finishing this, he wouldn't last the afternoon.

Hearing the door creak, Charles paused mid-bite and glanced over. "What's up? Something wrong?"

He speared a tender piece of beef with his fork and popped it into his mouth.

During the day, the witches were all occupied with their duties. The monastery was still in rapid development, so—aside from evening baths—he insisted they minimize interactions with him, especially Hattie.

Otherwise, a single lapse could cost him two hours, and that was simply too disruptive.

"Nothing urgent, really." Hattie closed the door and took a seat beside him. "Lisa's been missing you."

Charles paused his knife. "Missing me? But she hasn't come to see me..."

His mindset was passive. With so much on his plate, he rarely initiated contact with the girls, waiting instead for them to seek him out.

Hell, he hadn't even considered visiting Anno proactively.

"It's about the invitation to her home," Hattie clarified. "She's upset you haven't gone yet and wonders if you dislike her."

She blinked. "Master, could you spare some time to visit her?"

Hattie held no particular affection for Lisa, but she recognized the girl's value. She also sensed her Master had a soft spot for the child.

Charles's expression turned odd. "Huh... I had no idea..."

He hadn't grasped Lisa's anxious little heart. He assumed if she missed him, she'd boldly seek him out like Anno or, like Porter, set up an elaborate orgy trap to drag him into bed.

Ahem!

"Alright."

He forked another bite of steak, chewing as he mumbled, "I'll visit her this afternoon, spend some time with her."

Decision made, he said no more, methodically polishing off the steak, greens, tomatoes, and finally downing a tall glass of milk. Only then did his stomach feel satisfied.

Hattie waited quietly, her gentle gaze fixed on him, as if his profile alone brought her joy.

Once he finished, she produced a napkin and dabbed away the traces of sauce around his lips. Charles let her tend to him without protest, rising only after she was done. "Tell Ruth to postpone this afternoon's training. I'll be back later."

Hattie nodded, and Charles strode out, heading straight for the neighboring courtyard.

At this hour, Lisa was likely not at home but at the tailor's shop. Malena usually left work a bit early to prepare lunch so her daughter could return to a hot meal.

After eating, she'd take Lisa to the shop, letting the girl nap on a folding cot while Malena caught up on her morning backlog.

Thus, heading straight to the tailor's shop was the right move. Even if he missed them, he could wait there for their arrival.

His reasoning was sound—though perhaps he'd taken too long eating. By the time he pushed open the shop's door, Malena was already at her sewing machine, tackling the afternoon's workload.

Late autumn had brought a biting chill, but the monastery's walls insulated against both cold and noise, leaving the shop comfortably warm.

Inside, Malena had shed her brown leather coat, hanging it on the wall. She wore only a gray, round-neck sweater, its stretchy fabric clinging to her mature, voluptuous frame. The neckline accentuated her slender, pale neck, while her long, wavy black hair cascaded freely down her back.

The sight of her full chest and the allure unique to a young mother made it hard for Charles to look away the moment he stepped in.

Hearing the door, Malena glanced up, her lovely face lighting with surprise. "Priest?"

Then, lowering her voice—though her tone still brimmed with delight—she asked, "What brings you here?"

Charles averted his gaze, reminding himself he'd come for Lisa, not to flirt with Malena.

Losing composure in front of her would be bad enough, but worse, it might tarnish her view of the Church of the Goddess of Life and cast doubt on his priesthood.

Ahem!

"I promised Lisa I'd visit, and since I had some free time now, I came to see her," he said, keeping his voice low. "Is she asleep?"

"Yes," Malena nodded, glancing toward the back. Charles leaned over to look and saw a small folding bed behind her workstation. Lisa had removed her coat, pants, and shoes, wearing only a pink sweater as she curled up under a wheat-gold woolen blanket, sound asleep.

Her fair cheeks, tinged with a healthy flush, radiated tranquility. The delicate rise and fall of her little nose with each steady breath stirred a wave of tenderness in Charles's heart.

He longed to pinch her soft skin but feared disturbing her slumber. Instead, he admired her golden lashes from afar and murmured, "I came at a bad time—she's already asleep."

Hearing this, Malena couldn't help but smile. "Not at all. Lisa has been talking about you nonstop these past few days. She adores you. If she wakes up and finds you here, she'll be overjoyed."

Charles chuckled at that. "Then I'll wait a little while. It'll be a nice surprise for her when she wakes up."

As he spoke, he glanced around for another stool to sit on while waiting for Lisa to stir.

Behind him, Malena watched his silver-white hair and handsome profile, her heart pounding uncontrollably.

She took a deep breath. The excess nourishment and energy that had restored her beauty also stoked an unrelenting hunger for pleasure within her youthful body.

Normally, she could suppress or temper these urges—but today, faced with this man who had twice rescued her and her daughter, so handsome and powerful, the fire inside her roared to life.

She licked her slightly parched lips, feeling a sudden dryness in her throat.

"Priest... the shop doesn't have extra stools. You can sit here if you'd like," she said, pushing forward the high-legged square stool she'd been using. "I can stand while I work. It's no trouble."

Charles immediately waved her off. "No, you need to work. I'll stand—it won't be long."

He offered a light smile, but Malena swallowed hard and stared at the wooden stool. "This seat isn't too narrow... maybe we could... share it?"

Charles froze for a moment.

What... is she doing?

A bold suspicion flickered in his mind, but he didn't dare confirm it.

He turned to look at her, but Malena had already bowed her head, her long, wavy black hair obscuring her face. "Here, Priest... sit first."

Charles gulped, his pulse quickening. The more Malena regained her health, the more he became aware of the intoxicating allure radiating from her—the kind only a mature woman could possess.

Now, sitting pressed against her, he feared losing control.

No, Charles. Stay composed. You came here for Lisa. And they're outsiders—you must maintain a proper image. Don't give her any reason to doubt or resent you...

"Alright," he said. "We'll share."

He sat on one half of the stool, stealing a glance at Malena's face through the curtain of her hair. Even in the dim light, he could see the enticing blush on her cheeks, betraying the immense tension she was under.

Yet she sat down firmly beside him, their bodies pressed together.

Even through the thick knit of her sweater, Charles could feel the heat of Malena's voluptuous frame. The faint fragrance of her hair teased his senses, each whiff stirring his desires further.

Malena's face burned. She tried to focus on her work, but soon realized that with this man—the one she longed for—sitting so close, she could think of nothing else.

Abandoning her task, she finally spoke. "Lisa really does adore you, Priest."

Nervous, Charles replied distractedly, "Is that so? Maybe she's just curious. This might be her first exposure to religious teachings?"

"That's part of it," Malena murmured, her voice tinged with melancholy. "But another reason is... her father passed away so young."

"She's grown up without a father's love. Our home was so poor, and her health so frail... she hardly had any friends."

"If not for everyone at the monastery... I can't imagine what kind of childhood she would've had. Or if she'd even have lived to grow up..."

Her words trailed into sorrow. Charles sighed. "There's no helping it. The world is full of such tragedies."

"We followers of the Goddess of Life can only do what we can to save as many as possible."

Malena lifted her gaze, her eyes shimmering with emotion. "You're truly a kind-hearted man."

After a pause, she turned away, hiding her expression. "So... could I ask you to look after Lisa more often? I can't give her a real father, but you... perhaps you could fill that void for her."

Charles's heart skipped a beat.

Is she... hinting at something?

Hiss... Should I play it cool? Or—

"Of course," he said. "I'm fond of her too. It's the least I can do."

Malena studied his face, listening to his voice, feeling as though her heart were ablaze. She yearned to throw herself at him—but feared her desperate, fervent longing would scare this man, so much younger than her...

As she wrestled with her torment, a rustling came from the little bed behind them. Both turned to see Lisa stirring, her drowsy eyes fluttering open.

A second later, the wall clock began to chime. Clearly, the girl's internal clock was perfectly synchronized with the world.

Charles quickly stood, and when Lisa recognized him, her face lit up with delight. "Priest!"

She stretched her arms out from under the blanket, demanding, "Hug!"

Smiling, Charles stepped forward, lifted the blanket, and scooped her up. She felt like a warm little furnace in his arms, radiating energy from her cozy nest.

Lisa wrapped her arms around his neck, nuzzling her face against his, inhaling his scent. "You smell nice, hehe..."

Her tiny hands tousled his hair playfully. Behind them, Malena watched the affectionate pair, her lips curving into a smile.

How wonderful...

Pushing aside her wandering thoughts, she picked up Lisa's little white coat and held it up. "Lisa, get dressed. It's time for school."

"Huh?" Lisa pouted, turning to her mother with pleading eyes. "But Priest is finally here..."

Charles gently stroked her soft golden hair. "It's alright, Lisa. I'll come back tomorrow."

"Go on now—attend your lessons. Don't let me keep you from your studies!"

As he spoke, he pinched the tender skin on her back through her sweater, making her giggle. Reassured by his promise, her mood brightened, and she obediently slipped into her coat, then slid down to put on her shoes. "Okay, Priest! I'm off to school!"

Malena handed her the roughcloth bookbag. Lisa slung it over her shoulder, waved goodbye, and dashed out the door.

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### *Chapter 162: Chapter 162: Malena's Longing (Part 1)*

Watching Lisa's figure disappear into the distance, Charles couldn't help but sigh softly. "What a lively child."

After saying this, he glanced at the sky and prepared to leave. He had no intention of delaying his afternoon training. With the battle against the Abyssal Lord looming, mastering a new feat beforehand would undoubtedly give him an advantage.

"Ah, Priest..." Malena suddenly called out. "Are you... busy this afternoon?"

Charles paused mid-step. Was it his imagination, or did Malena's voice carry a note of intense reluctance to let him go?

Given her earlier behavior, it probably wasn't just his imagination...

The thought flashed through his mind, and suddenly, his feet felt as though they were glued to the ground by magnets, unable to move another inch.

"Uh... I..." His heart pounded so hard he nearly stumbled over his words. "Not terribly busy. Did you need something?"

Malena lowered her gaze, the faint blush on her cheeks deepening. "It's nothing major, just..."

"I heard you have some unique insights into clothing design. Coincidentally, I've been experimenting with some new ideas lately, so..."

She swallowed lightly. "Would you like to stay a little longer? We could... exchange thoughts?"

Charles's heart raced. He thought of the afternoon lessons Sophia had prepared for him, the training sessions, the exercises necessary to adapt to his enhanced attributes...

No, Charles. You have too many responsibilities. You can't afford to waste time on trivial matters like this.

Burdened by these thoughts, he nodded with great difficulty. "Sure. I don't have much planned this afternoon anyway. We can chat for a bit."

Malena's breathing grew uneven, her nerves evident. She kept her head bowed as she sat back down on the stool, leaving just enough space beside her. "Then, Priest... please, have a seat."

Charles didn't hesitate, squeezing onto the stool beside her. Though the stool was sizable, accommodating two adults was still a tight fit—especially with Malena's voluptuous hips, which seemed naturally generous, perhaps due to childbirth, giving her an unmistakably "fertile" silhouette.

The awkward seating arrangement left her shifting uncomfortably, instinctively leaning closer, pressing against him.

Fortunately, she wore thick, conservative brown trousers that fully concealed her skin, and Charles's clothing was equally sturdy. Otherwise, the contact might have ignited flames neither could control.

"Ahem, Madam, shall we begin?" he ventured, trying to steer the conversation toward safer waters.

Malena nodded faintly. "Yes. Priest, I've been considering how to design these stockings—the colors and patterns that would appeal most."

As she spoke, she retrieved a stack of sample stockings from a box beside her sewing machine. They varied in length, fit, and color—some black, others white. These were prototypes Charles had requested after upgrading the monastery to level two and establishing the tailor's shop. Though he'd proposed the idea long ago, today marked the first time the garments had been produced.

He'd waited eagerly for these, not just for the potential profits but also to unlock new character art for the witches: nuns in habits paired with black or white stockings, alluring swimsuits, even breathtaking bridal gowns...

In a way, this game was quite generous—no need to pay for skins; you could unlock everything through sheer effort.

Ahem!

But at this moment, Charles's mind wasn't on the stockings. A delicate fragrance wafted into his nostrils, and though he tried to focus on the garments, his gaze kept drifting toward her full bosom.

His face burned as he forced out a response. "Ah, well... From what I've read, vertical stripes tend to create a slimming effect, while horizontal ones can make legs appear fuller."

"Similarly, white emphasizes volume, while black has a slimming effect. So, for slender or delicate stockings, white with horizontal stripes might work best. For designs tailored to mature, curvaceous, or sturdier figures, black with vertical stripes would be more flattering..."

"Of course, this is just theory. The exact proportions and stripe styles would require practical experimentation and... a touch of genius."

Malena's cheeks flushed deeper. "So, the only way to know for sure is to try them on?"

Charles's heart skipped a beat, his imagination running wild. "Yes, ideally with models of different body types wearing them..."

Malena's head dipped even lower, her voice barely above a whisper as she leaned in. "Then... would you like me to model them for you?"

Charles fought to keep his expression neutral, swallowing hard before nodding. "Sure, then—"

"Master!"

A mosquito perched on his ear suddenly buzzed urgently. "Sephera is heading this way! Leave now, or you'll be caught red-handed!"

The warning snapped him back to reality. Flustered, he stood abruptly, clearing his throat. "Ah, apologies, Madam Malena. I must go."

"I have training sessions this afternoon, and Miss Sophia is expecting me. I can't keep her waiting."

"So, perhaps we can discuss the clothing another time."

Sweat beaded on his forehead as he turned to leave. Malena's visible disappointment tugged at his heart. She managed a polite smile. "Of course, Priest. Don't let me keep you."

The palpable sadness in her eyes was heartbreaking. Charles bit his lip, struck by a noble resolve.

I can't let her efforts and hopes go to waste. And I can't have her, like Lisa, suspecting I dislike or resent her!

With that in mind, he added, "Madam, are you free tomorrow? Perhaps I could visit then..."

The words left his mouth before he realized it was Friday—tomorrow being Saturday, her day off. His question sounded like he was asking her to work overtime.

Malena's head snapped up, her gloom instantly replaced by radiant joy. "Yes! I'm free, um..."

The same realization dawned on her, and her heart raced. But the thrill of knowing Charles didn't dislike her emboldened her desires, pushing her to ask for more. "Would you... come to my home tomorrow? I could model them for you there."

By the time she finished speaking, her face was crimson. She kept her eyes downcast, not daring to meet his gaze.

Charles blinked, but Andny's urgent whisper returned. Guilt gnawing at him, he dared not linger. "Alright. Tomorrow, then!"

With that, he hurried away. Malena finally looked up, watching his retreating figure with a dazed expression.

He agreed...

I can't believe it... He's coming tomorrow. To my home...

I need to prepare everything perfectly... What would he like...?

Charles's silhouette vanished into the distance. Malena reflexively stepped forward, gripping the doorframe, staring until he was completely out of sight.

Just then, a sharp voice cut through her reverie. "What are you staring at? Shouldn't you be working instead of slacking off?"

Malena turned to see a tall, elegant figure draped in a nun's habit, her slender waist swaying like a willow in the wind—or a serpent slithering closer.

"Are the clothes I asked for ready? Or can I inspect them now?"

Malena quickly bowed her head. Among the monastery's nuns, Sephera was the most formidable. Her stern demeanor intimidated the others, leaving no room for error.

"Not yet," Malena admitted honestly. "Priest Charles just visited, so I showed him the stocking samples."

Sephera's eyebrow arched.

Among the witches, the Toxic Witch was the most possessive of Charles. Naturally jealous and sharp-tongued, she could instantly detect any woman's longing for him, and it never failed to ignite her fury.

Like now. A cold smirk curled her lips. "The Priest was here? What did he do?"

Malena kept her head low, her heart pounding like a chastened child's. She didn't dare evade the question. "He... just checked on Lisa. Then we discussed stocking designs. Here, these..."

She turned, presenting the stack of samples Charles had just examined. "He said the proportions need testing, so he plans to visit my home tomorrow..."

Sephera's eyes narrowed. She glanced at the sheer black stockings on the table, then at Malena's voluptuous, childbearing hips. The mental image of her modeling those stockings tomorrow—in her own home—sent her rage skyrocketing.

Were it not for her nun's facade, she might have exploded.

Instead, she sneered. "How very noble of you. It hasn't even been a week, and you've already devised such a clever strategy."

She picked up a black stocking, her tone dripping with sarcasm. "Look at this. So charismatic. No man could resist, could they?"

"Madam Malena, you've outdone yourself~"

Malena frowned at the mockery—no, the outright malice.

Is she... insulting me?

For a moment, she questioned her sanity.

How?

Sephera had scolded her before, but always professionally, pointing out flaws in her work. Never like this—personal and venomous.

No, impossible. The nuns here are angels of compassion. They wouldn't berate me just for... admiring the Priest...

There must be another meaning. Maybe...

Her gaze fell on the sheer black stockings, and suddenly, she recalled Charles's earlier words. She glanced down at her own figure.

Eureka!

Her thighs and hips weren't the slender type. Black would accentuate their curves, making them even more alluring. Sephera was holding the black stockings as a hint—telling her to wear these tomorrow!

Sephera, I understand now!

"Thank you!" Malena beamed. "Miss Sephera, I appreciate the advice. I know exactly what to do now!"

Sephera eyed her suspiciously, baffled by her sudden cheer. "I hope so," she said coldly. "Then you'll behave accordingly?"

Malena nodded eagerly. "Yes! I know what to do next!"

Sephera, unaware of Malena's misinterpretation, assumed she'd remembered her noble dignity, chastity, and honor. Satisfied, she nodded. "Good. Then I'll take my leave. I trust you'll manage things properly."

With that, she strode away. Having only interacted with South Harbor District officials and never mingled deeply with true nobility, Sephera had no idea that among aristocrats, extramarital affairs were commonplace. Malena had no such taboos.

Her mind was already ablaze with plans for tomorrow—how to dress, how to arrange everything, how to please the man she desired...

Oh, and one crucial detail. Lisa has no classes tomorrow. Where should I send her...?

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*Chapter 163: Chapter 163: Malena's Longing (Part 2)*

The next morning, Charles arrived at Malena's doorstep as promised. He wore formal attire once more, expression stern, internally commanding himself: Today is strictly professional. No repeat of yesterday's intimacy.

And Lisa is home—no classes today. Be warm and paternal, not some outsider lusting after her mother's beauty!

Malena surely feels the same. She'll act dignified in front of her daughter...

After this mental drill, he knocked softly. "Madam Malena? Are you home?"

Footsteps approached, followed by Malena's delighted voice: "I'm here! Priest, is that you?"

"It is," Charles replied. The door opened, revealing Malena, face radiant as spring sunlight.

Today, she wore the same gray knitted sweater, clinging to her body, outlining her magnificently full breasts. One glance was enough to root Charles in place.

But looking lower only inflamed him further. Instead of conservative trousers, she now wore sheer black stockings.

The dark silk hugged her plump thighs and rounded hips, hinting at the milky skin beneath—a sight that made him ache to tear them away and savor the mature woman's forbidden depths.

Charles forced himself to look aside, striving for gentlemanly composure. Yet the image burned in his mind, refusing to fade. Does she dress like this at home? Isn't she worried about corrupting her daughter?

He thought he'd masked his reaction swiftly, but Malena caught his fleeting look of awe and ragged breath. Instantly, shyness warred with triumph within her.

Miss Sephera's advice was perfect...

"Come in," she urged, stepping aside. Charles entered, scanning the room. "Where's Lisa? Shouldn't she be home today?"

"Ah." Malena glanced away. "Her magic studies are weak, so I asked Sister Sophia to give her extra lessons this morning."

"Don't worry—it's just the two of us here today. No one else will interrupt..."

Her voice was feather-soft. Charles's heart skipped a beat.

Damn. The only deterrent is gone...

His thoughts scattered as Malena closed the door, then lifted the kettle from the table. "Priest, please sit."

She poured water into a cup as Charles took a stool opposite her. Her sheer stockings stretched taut over her thighs, nearly transparent against her skin.

Noticing his gaze, Malena's pulse quickened. Boldly, she kicked off her shoes, crossed her legs, and arched one foot—stretching the fabric until it revealed the flushed sole beneath.

"Priest..." Her voice trembled. "I wore this today... just for you."

She lifted her gaze, vulnerable yet determined. "Do I... look beautiful?"

Charles swallowed hard, offering sincere praise: "Exquisite. Truly."

"Madam Malena, this suits you perfectly."

Malena flushed. "Thank you, Priest."

Good. He likes it.

Step one complete. Now for step two.

"Priest," she murmured, "My back itches... but I can't reach it."

She bowed her head, dark hair veiling her face. "My hands won't stretch far enough. Could you... scratch it for me?"

"Of course." Charles stood reflexively, circling behind her. He placed a hand on her sweater. "Here?"

"No..." Malena shook her head. "Higher. And..."

She hesitated, then whispered, "Slide your hand under my sweater. Please."

Charles froze.

So this is the game...

Licking dry lips, he lifted the hem of her sweater, revealing skin like warm jade—flawless and luminous.

He drew a sharp breath, sliding his hand beneath the fabric. When skin met skin, he felt Malena tense—equally nervous.

"Is this the spot?" he asked.

"Higher," she breathed.

His fingers journeyed upward. Through the wool, the outline of his touch was visible—a slow ascent toward forbidden territory.

Higher still, his fingertips brushed a clasp. He recognized it—a bra fastener, one he could undo single-handed...

"Here?" His voice roughened.

Malena's reply was barely audible. "Unfasten it. The itch... is beneath."

Charles's fingers stilled. This was surrender.

But...

An old warning echoed: Never bed a widow. Disaster follows!

So...

Click—

He meant to stop. But his fingers disobeyed. One deft pinch, and the clasp released. Straps slithered down her back.

The bra fell away. Though hidden, he knew—the gates to her secrets now lay open.

He scratched gently. "Here?"

"Mmm..." A soft moan escaped her. "No. Right... a little right."

He obeyed, skirting the edge of her back. Then her command shifted: "Forward now. Just... a little."

His hand crept toward the precipice. Through the thick knit, the path of his touch was unmistakable...

"Madam," he rasped. "Further?"

A whisper sealed his fate: "Yes."

One word—lightning, laying her bare.

Come. Claim me.

Her longing tore at him, igniting a fierce protectiveness.

She's a widow. Must she endure this loneliness?

His right hand pushed past the half-cup bra, palm engulfing the swell of her right breast.

"Ah—!" Malena gasped. Though once a wife, nearly six years of solitude had left her unprepared. A man's touch on her flesh made her body spasm—nipples hardening against his palm.

"Here, Madam?" Charles's voice was gravel.

"Y-yes..." She trembled, voice fraying. "Thank you... Priest."

Silence hung heavy. Charles abandoned pretense. No longer scratching, he kneaded—fingers mastering curves no witch or Amazon could match.

Her fullness overflowed his grasp. The weight alone was intoxicating—a sensation born of motherhood, of milk waiting beneath skin. He dared not press too hard, fearing precious drops might spill...

"Mmm..." Pleasure clouded Malena's mind. She fought a moan, inhaled sharply, and pressed on. "But... not just there."

"The other side... aches too."

"Please... help me..."

Charles couldn't speak—throat parched, mind ablaze. But his left hand moved, slipping under her sweater, parting fabric, claiming her left breast.

"Nngh—" Her breath hitched, ragged now. She felt his rhythm—both hands working in tandem, thumbs circling stiff peaks, drawing sensations she'd never dreamed possible.

A bead of moisture welled, dampening his fingertip—sweet, milky scent blooming in the air.

Aware of her body's betrayal, Malena kept her head down, panting. Shame warred with purpose.

Time for step three.

Make him... go further.

"Priest..." Her voice shook. "A selfish request..."

Charles bent close, lips near her ear. "Name it."

"When Lisa was little... she was so frail." The excuse felt thin, desperate. "When ill, she refused wet nurses... only I could feed her."

"So..." Malena's cheek burned beneath her hair. "She nursed until last month. And I... never stopped producing milk."

Charles imagined her blush—scorching, unbearable. "Even weaned... my body won't stop. It swells... aches..."

"Remember that night? The milk Lisa gave you?"

Charles nodded silently, his temple brushing her hair.

"That... was mine." Her confession trembled. "I squeezed it myself. The pressure... it's agony."

"Priest... please. Relieve this torment. Take what pains me..."

Charles straightened. "Understood."

Decision made. Time to taste what he'd craved—only ever sampled in dreams.

He withdrew his hands, circled her, and knelt before Malena. She couldn't meet his eyes, but he didn't force her. Gently, he lifted the hem of her thick sweater...

Beneath the lifted sweater, Charles first saw Malena's soft, flat stomach. The edge of her sheer stockings skimmed her hip bones yet left her navel bare, exposing milky skin to his gaze.

Her rounded navel held no trace of impurity—this woman cherished cleanliness, tending meticulously to every hidden curve.

Charles tugged the fabric higher. Soon, the swell of her breasts came into view—fuller even than Theresa's, despite Malena's shorter stature.

Perhaps the milk, he thought, swelling her chest beyond measure, leaving even his broad hands unable to master their grandeur.

As the sweater rose, her pink half-cup bra slipped free, pooling atop the sheer stockings hugging her thighs. Charles ignored it. His eyes locked onto Malena's chest, captivated beyond retreat.

What magnificent shape and volume! Though heavy with milk, they bore only the faintest curve of surrender. Their peaks stood defiantly taut—pink nipples ringed by flushed areolae—challenging his nerves and will.

He could wait no longer. Mouth open, he took her right nipple between his lips—

"Ah—!"

Malena shut her eyes, too shy to watch. Sightless, her senses sharpened. She felt Charles's searing lips envelop her breast, his mouth tightening not to suck, but to milk her—

His tongue flicked against the sensitive tip...

"Oh... Priest..."

Panting, she reflexively cradled his head against her chest, holding him like a nursing child.

She felt the milk surge from her ducts, jetting pure white streams into his mouth. She pictured her nipple painting his throat with ribbons of cream—

The aching pressure vanished, replaced by indescribable bliss—

"Ah...!"

She threw her head back, black waves tumbling down her spine. Arching forward, she thrust her breasts deeper into his mouth, craving the scrape of his teeth, the heat of his throat—

Charles drank greedily, savoring the velvety warmth flooding his tongue. This milk—fresh, warm, unchilled—held none of yesterday's stale tang. Only sweetness remained.

Perfection.

His hands roamed free now. He pushed Malena's sweater above her breasts, pinning it beneath their weight as he gripped her waist, sliding lower to peel back her stockings—

"Ahn... Priest—!"

His palms cupped her full hips. Malena offered no resistance, shifting her posture to grant him more. Rising from the stool, she stood as he nursed, letting him knead her thighs while his fingers inched toward the soaked silk between her legs—

Just as he'd guessed: drenched fabric clung there.

"Priest... not here..."

His touch brushed her cleft. Malena tensed—but not in protest. Lust sang in her veins. Still, a sliver of reason returned as she glanced toward the parlor door.

Someone might hear!

"To... the bedroom."

Arm in arm, they staggered toward the room. Charles suckled harder, finding her right breast drained. Reluctantly, he released it and seized the left—

"Nngh—!"

Malena's legs buckled. She caught his shoulders, stumbling backward until they tumbled onto the bed.

Now Charles lay across her sheets, rumpling pristine linen, mouth fixed on her nipple. Malena bent over him, surrendering to his suckling. Her freed hand slipped lower, undoing his trousers—

His swollen cock sprang free, crimson and imposing. She gasped. Six years had erased all memory of such size; her husband had never matched this.

Flushing, Malena recalled the manuals she'd studied. Her left hand circled the shaft, palm cupping the glans, fingers tightening as she twisted gently.

She'd read this pleased men. Watching Charles's face soften with pleasure confirmed it—

A smile touched her lips.

Worth every hour of preparation...

At last, the nursing posture concluded. The milk in Malena's left breast had also been sucked dry.

Though not fully satisfied, Charles reluctantly released her nipple. His hands traveled deeper beneath her stockings, caressing her rounded hips and probing toward the center.

"Nngh..."

As he ceased suckling, Malena turned, adopting an off-center posture. She bent forward, thrusting her ample hips upward toward his torso while her face hovered above his imposing length below.

Breathing in the potent musk, Malena was utterly lost. Recalling her manuals, she parted her lips and engulfed him—

"Ooh——!"

Enveloped by her mouth, Charles's legs stiffened as a low groan escaped him. Still electrified from nursing, this new sensation nearly overwhelmed him instantly.

To distract himself, he fixed his gaze on Malena's sumptuous hips. The black stockings hugged curves where a thong vanished into the cleft—visible only if he pried her cheeks apart.

His hands grasped the stockings' lace-edged borders, sliding them down her hips' contours. Exposing skin like glistening snow, the stockings bunched at her thighs.

He left them there—Malena still wore slippers, standing bedside. Exposing her thigh roots sufficed. His fingertip brushed aside the thong's central strip, revealing moist pink petals beneath...

He marveled silently—racial heritage truly mattered, especially lineages blessed with divine blood.

Even after bearing a child...

His thoughts trailed as his middle finger slipped inside.

"Ah——!"

Malena's body convulsed violently. Unbreached for six years, her senses screamed at the intrusion. Instinctively, her core clenched—back arching, hips lifting, thighs locking—sucking his finger deeper when he tried to withdraw.

Undeterred, Charles expertly sought her sensitive spot. Fingertip stroking, teasing—

Malena trembled uncontrollably. Her mouth abandoned his length, overwhelmed. Charles persisted, and soon a hot rush drenched his palm.

Fifteen Agility combined with technique pushed her over the edge in seconds.

Malena released him, panting. Flushed and dazed, she collapsed onto his abdomen: "Priest... thank you..."

Charles gently stroked her hair. "My duty, Madam."

He rose, circling behind her. Hands gripping her bare, soft hips, he embraced her exposed curves.

They stood near equal height. Though stockings and cotton thong still clung to her thighs—forcing her legs together—alignment was effortless. Gripping himself, he positioned against her entrance: "Madam... may I enter?"

Malena leaned over the bed, legs spread wide. Eyes shut—this was her deepest longing. "Yes, Priest..."

The broad tip parted delicate folds. He eased inside, then inhaled sharply and thrust—

"Ooh——!"

Years without intimacy yielded to ecstasy as her beloved filled the emptiness. A melodious cry tore from Malena's throat.

Charles exhaled deeply. A mother's body held less tautness than a witch's, less visceral power than an Amazon's core-clenching mastery.

Yet far from lax. Her hips and thighs, plump and supple, instinctively tightened around him—squeezing, milking—rivaling any enchantress's embrace.

He withdrew slowly, met by fierce suction begging him to stay. Reentry required force to part her hungry flesh. Both movements delivered sublime rapture.

Thankfully, her earlier arousal eased the way. Initial friction gave way to fluid rhythm.

Strength and Constitution heightened to fifteen, Charles felt an engine roar in his core. Power surged into his hips—driving him wilder, fiercer—

"Ah... ah—Priest—Priest——"

Charles's hips slammed her curves. Flesh met flesh in sharp reports echoing through the room. Malena chanted his name mindlessly. Her body undulated with his thrusts; full breasts swayed freely, nipples tracing frantic arcs against her knees—now pinned to her chest as her legs folded impossibly high.

Flexibility honed by dance training allowed the demanding pose.

"Ah... Madam..."

Charles gripped her calves, pinning them to her shoulders. Her lower body spread wide—utterly defenseless against his assault!

Hip met hip. Her inner flesh bloomed with each thrust. Heat gushed freely. Bliss blurred Charles's vision—Malena's dazed eyes, gasping red lips—propelled him downward. He captured her mouth!

"Mmph——"

A muffled cry escaped Malena as their tongues entwined fiercely.

She saw nothing. Heard nothing. Only the climb to ecstasy mattered.

"Mmph..."

At last, Charles tore his lips away. A thread of saliva hung between them. Hazy, burning, he neared release—

"Madam... I..."

He didn't finish. She understood. Lost in rapture, consequences faded. Gazing at his handsome face, words spilled unbidden: "It's... alright... Priest... ah... Oh——"

With a final plunge, he buried himself deep. Tremors shook him; muscles convulsed—pouring scalding streams into her core.

"Ah..."

Malena closed her eyes. Two tears of pure bliss traced her cheeks.

"Hah..." Panting, release washed over Charles—followed by instant regret.

This shouldn't have happened...

Malena wasn't a witch, immune to conception. Not an Amazon, seeking pregnancy. Not Nidalee, commanding nature's magic to prevent it.

She was a magicless widow. Unprotected. A pregnancy...

"Forgive me." Charles's voice was heavy with remorse. "I shouldn't have..."

Malena met his eyes, offering a gentle smile. "It's fine, Priest. I won't regret this."

How many years since she'd known such joy? Base needs denied too long breed madness. She'd been starving. Now sated—body and spirit healed—she feared nothing.

Charles opened his mouth—

Thump-thump-thump!

Happy footsteps pattered outside. A familiar voice called: "Mommy! I'm home!"

It was Lisa!

Both whirled toward the bedroom clock. Morning classes had ended!

Disaster!

They couldn't let Lisa see this! What trauma would it inflict?

Charles scrambled for his trousers. Malena yanked her sweater down, barely covering her torso. Her bra was lost. Stockings and thong were impossible now. She stuffed them under the quilt, tugged the sweater's hem over her hips, and sat rigidly on the bed.

Bang——

The door flew open. Lisa burst in.

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*Chapter 164: Chapter 164: Lisa, the Bloodhound*

The little girl was just about to set down her schoolbag when she paused, her delicate nose twitching as she picked up a strange scent. Her face showed confusion: "That's odd... What's that smell?"

Following the scent, her gaze landed on the bedroom—where she saw Malena sitting on the bed, hair disheveled, covering her pale thighs with the hem of her sweater.

At once, Lisa sensed that something was amiss.

What's wrong with Mom?

Why does it look like she isn't wearing pants?

Her imagination began to run wild, but before she could dwell on it, her thoughts were interrupted. Out of her line of sight, Charles stepped from behind the door. Instantly, the girl's eyes lit up: "Priest!"

She set off at a run, legs pumping. Still too young to grasp adult matters, Lisa drew no odd conclusions—even with her mother seemingly pantsless and a priest emerging from the bedroom.

Charles hurried out, closing the door behind him to cut off Lisa's view of Malena, his face wearing an awkward smile to buy Malena time to change: "Lisa, isn't it early for your lessons to be finished?"

"Yes!" the little girl chirped, clutching his leg and setting her schoolbag on the chair. "Today's lesson was easy, so Sister Andny let me out early!"

Andny? Wasn't Sophia covering lessons today?

Wait—Andny?

Realizing Andny's familiar probably knew exactly what he'd been up to, and still sent Lisa home early, Charles cursed silently.

You troublemaker!

Determined to give the Insect Witch a serious scolding later, Charles kept up his smile: "That's good—sounds like everything went well."

Lisa, still hugging his thigh, was easily scooped into his arms, helping ensure she wouldn't bolt into the bedroom.

She had no resistance, but her wide eyes roamed the room, finally settling on the now-shut bedroom door: "Priest, what were you and Mama doing in there just now?"

Realizing she'd likely seen far too much already, Charles broke out in a cold sweat. He was just about to concoct a story when the little girl suddenly turned, leaned in close, and sniffed at his mouth: "That's Mama's scent?"

Charles felt his face burning with embarrassment, quickly setting her down. He coughed. "We were just discussing new clothing designs—she's changing now, she'll be out soon."

Lisa, now on the floor, looked around—and spotted something. Her eyes widened and she shrieked, "Mama's clothes!"

She hurried to the coffee table and picked up Malena's bra off the floor. "Oh, Mama, you're so careless! Dropping your clothes on the floor—aren't you worried about them getting dirty?"

Charles massaged his forehead, wishing the earth would swallow him up. Even if Lisa didn't seem to have made sense of anything uncanny, he still felt his cheeks burning with shame. "Ahem... Maybe there were just too many clothes and something got dropped by accident..."

But Lisa hardly seemed interested in his answer. Instead, her expression grew even more confused as she pressed the bra to her nose and sniffed before turning to Charles: "It smells just like you?"

Now Charles was drenched in cold sweat.

Lisa, are you a divine soul warlock or a bloodhound?!

How could you even tell?!

His mind blanked, he couldn't think of a single excuse to evade the relentless, sharp-nosed little girl.

Just then, inside the bedroom, Malena reemerged, now dressed in conservative gray homespun trousers. The blush had faded from her face, and her voice was flat and even, as though nothing at all untoward had happened.

If not for a slight awkwardness in her gait, Charles might have believed she'd fully recovered her composure.

"Oh."

Lisa obediently handed the bra to Malena. Malena, without a trace of embarrassment—even with Charles present—folded it neatly and put it in her pocket. She then turned, her bright eyes fixed on him. "Thank you, Priest. Your suggestions were a great help, I feel inspired with so many new ideas."

"I hope we'll have many more opportunities to exchange inspiration and ideas in the future."

Her tone was all business, and if it weren't for the clear implication in her words inviting a repeat of today's intimacy, Charles would almost have thought she was simply being polite.

He nodded lightly, a slight smile at his lips: "Yes, I look forward to the next time we can have such thorough and deep collaboration."

It was clear that Malena's cheeks colored again at this.

Clinging to her mother's thigh, Lisa scrunched up her little nose, sniffing up along her mother's hip, then glanced over at Charles.

He didn't dare give this little bloodhound another chance to sniff him over, so he quickly turned and made for the door. "Then I'll be off for now—I've got things to attend to this afternoon. Madam Malena, Miss Lisa, until we meet again!"

"Yes, goodbye!"

Lisa had wanted to invite Charles for lunch, but with her mother acting so strangely, she could only wave farewell politely.

Once he had gone, the oppressive atmosphere eased. Lisa hopped up with a cheer. "Yay!"

Malena bent down, scooping her daughter up, peering at her curiously. "What is it? What's got you so happy?"

"Of course it's because of Priest Charles!" Lisa wrapped her arms around Malena's neck, giggling. "Mama's getting healthier every day, and Priest comes over all the time to play. Two wonderful things—together they make me so happy!"

She planted a kiss on Malena's cheek. "And I could smell it—Priest carries Mama's scent, and Mama has Priest's. That means you two get along so well..."

Malena's heart pounded wildly—how could her daughter be this sharp-nosed, able to sniff out even that?

Although Lisa didn't understand any of it, Malena certainly didn't want anyone else to find out about what had happened. She straightened her face and scolded her daughter, "Don't talk nonsense, do you hear me?"

Lisa paused for a second but then broke into a mischievous grin, utterly unfazed by her mother's sternness: "Mama's embarrassed again, hehe!"

She teased unabashedly, and faced with such a clever, impish daughter, Malena could only press a hand to her forehead, full of helplessness.

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*Chapter 165: Chapter 165: Promotion and Egg-Laying*

Mountaineer Tribe.

At the edge of a cliff, Archdruid Ilarode still wore his rainbow-plumed feathered robe, standing all alone with eyes closed, chanting incantations in an attempt to use nature magic to soothe the massive entity below.

Beneath the cliff, terrifying roars echoed again and again, causing the entire mountain to shudder.

Yet these were not simply the brute force of the behemoth below, but rather the work of the earth elemental it controlled. If the earth dragon beneath truly went out of control and unleashed all the might of its master in wild frenzy, it could very well overturn the entire mountain!

The Archdruid continued his incantations, the weight upon him immense. One bead of sweat traced down his brow, lips pale.

At last, thanks to his tireless efforts, those fearsome roars gradually faded, the trembling of the cliff vanishing.

Slowly, Ilarode opened his eyes, and his dim gaze revealed exhaustion impossible to conceal.

The earth dragon's condition had only grown worse...

The demon lord must be eliminated soon, to sever the source of the pollution. Otherwise, once the earth dragon lost all control, it could mean utter annihilation for the tribe!

Sigh, Nidalee that brat—never there to share her father's burdens...

He let out a faint sigh before turning away, almost gliding across the grass, swiftly returning to the tribe.

There was much left for him to do. For instance, tonight he still had to preside over a conference among all the different tribes. Normally, any public appearances he would delegate to his designated son-in-law Torun, but since the minotaur had gone to rub shoulders with the dwarves and not yet returned, he had no choice but to take on the task personally.

This made his already-dwindling time and energy even more precious—soothing the restless earth dragon had drained nearly all his strength.

Yet today, just as he finally re-entered the tribe, he saw a group of tall minotaurs with dark manes entering the fenced village from another direction.

He brightened immediately and looked in their direction. Sure enough, in the midst of the group was a particularly large and well-built figure with a greataxe slung over his back, moving slowly—

It was Torun.

In an instant, Ilarode's spirits soared—happier even than seeing his own daughter. He hurried forward and called out, "Torun!"

Perfect. Now he could finally assign all those public-facing tasks to him.

Such were the Archdruid's thoughts, while Torun, in the middle of the group, lifted his head to glance at him, responding with a simple, "Hmm."

Then he dropped his gaze again, saying nothing more.

Torun was extremely withdrawn now, unwilling to speak to anyone—not only toward Ilarode, but even toward the other minotaurs of his tribe.

The other minotaur warriors had noticed this change in him upon finding him, but only assumed it was heartbreak after a failed romance. They tried to convince him it wasn't worth brooding, pointing out that at least he'd met Ines—a purebred, beautiful, and remarkably figure minotaur woman...

The minotaurs cared greatly for the purity of their lineage. Many had long viewed Torun's previous match with Nidalee with distaste—and so felt her departure was for the best.

In their matchmaking and ribbing, it was now an unspoken agreement among all the Highmountain minotaurs who'd gone to the Tide Caverns that Ines would become Torun's bride and next Matriarch of the Highmountain tribe.

Everyone, that is, except Torun.

He felt no desire for Ines, and was lost in his gloom.

Sensing his mood, Ilarode became uneasy.

"Torun?" he called softly, drawing him aside and using magic to whip up a breeze so they were soon outside the fence, in a quiet, deserted spot. "You seem troubled—did something go wrong?"

Torun looked at him, and a sudden, nameless rage flared in his heart.

That old bastard—still pretending!

Through druidic magic, Ilarode had already contacted Nidalee and must know she's carrying the Sein's child, yet he continued to deceive Torun with stories of her being on a solo mission, insisting she'd return to marry him.

Fool me like a child, will you?

Unforgivable!

Fury raged within him, but Torun knew he could not best the legendary Archdruid.

So he lowered his lashes, shrouding his rage, and feigned simple disappointment: "I failed at the Tide Caverns mission."

"The enemy was far stronger than we imagined. She triggered the earthquake—I even injured my leg and had to stay home to recover for days. And the alliance with the dwarves fell through..."

Hearing this, Ilarode sighed, "This isn't your fault. None of us ever guessed there'd be such a powerful mage—one who could cast 8th-level spells—behind those undead."

He paused, then continued, "Never mind. We'll find other chances with the dwarves. For now, you just need to heal and recover, so you'll be ready when Nidalee returns—she won't want to see you listless and dispirited, will she?"

He had no idea Nidalee was the very reason Torun was spiraling—still hoping to cheer him up.

Torun gritted his teeth, barely containing his anger. In the end, he lifted his head and forced a dazzling smile: "Of course. I'm still waiting for our wedding, to secure our alliance once and for all."

Blackstaff Tower.

This was a towering mage tower reaching more than 700 meters, said to contain over a hundred levels. Even in a modern metropolis, it would be a world-famous skyscraper.

The mage tower was both majestic outside and massive within. The tower's powerful spellcasters had created countless demi-planes inside—folded spaces to store their private instruments, equipment, familiars, and secret weapons.

It was rumored that with these extra spaces combined, the internal area of Blackstaff Tower was even greater than that of Liberl Port.

This was, clearly, the city's headquarters for its defenders—home base of the organization code-named "Blackstaff Tower." They guarded and monitored the city, yet would allow sins to run unchecked—so long as the city's core safety was never truly threatened, they would not intervene.

Outwardly, they claimed only 500 mages could cast spells above third circle, but none knew the true number of mages, or just how many could cast even higher-circle spells, or how many rare and powerful magical items were truly stockpiled here. Only the tower's master, "Blackstaff Madam," and the Open Lord of Liberl Port, Laeral Silverhand, could know.

After all, in this tower, there were already over a hundred mages with private floors serving as their office, living quarters, and laboratory.

Still, despite the number of floors, most members could only access the bottom few.

At this moment—Blackstaff Tower's first floor, in a secluded side conference room.

The place usually hosted only minor meetings—for small squads or units to debrief, or plan investigations and actions. It was often spartan, even half-empty.

Today, however, it had been lavishly decorated and packed to capacity, making the room feel cramped.

At the podium in front stood a tall, straight-backed, silver-haired old man—hair meticulously combed, wrinkles deep but his spirit undimmed. One look and it was clear he had been a powerful warrior in his youth.

On his chest gleamed a silver badge—proof he belonged to the supreme leadership of Force Grey, a true "Defender of Order."

"Senior Greyhand, Anno Amcastra—please come to the stage."

His voice, though aged, rang like a bell. Anno, sitting in the first row, stood up and mounted the stage. Dressed today in a black suit and tie, she cut a figure of heroic poise—if Charles had seen her, he might have imagined returning to modern city life once more.

"For her outstanding performance in the recent Rubble District investigation, and for her acquisition of vital intelligence regarding the demon lord, Senior Greyhand Anno Amcastra is hereby recognized for her exceptional contribution to city security," the Defender of Order proclaimed. "On behalf of Blackstaff Madam, I award her the title of 'Grey Squad New Blood.'"

She held real power.

Anno took the badge with both hands, solemn-faced, and declared in a clear voice: "I will not disappoint Blackstaff Madam's trust. I will defend this city's safety with my very life!"

A rousing round of applause echoed through the hall, and with that, the simple ceremony ended. The attendees filed out of the room, and today's protagonist Anno departed as well.

Declining invitations from colleagues to share lunch, she rushed out of Blackstaff Tower, new badge gleaming, hailed a carriage, and headed straight for South Harbor District.

She was eager to share these wonderful tidings with the true hero of this incident—the one who had become her beloved.

...

Monastery.

"Ugh—ah—"

From the clinic came the painful cries of a woman—Bonnie was laboring with Sophia and Andny's help to deliver the fully developed giant egg in her abdomen. Despite their best efforts to hurry her back, the journey had taken four days.

This meant Bonnie had missed the optimal window. The sticky white fluid that the ilthreza injected into her body had already solidified into a tough giant egg. Destroying it now could be life-threatening.

So, at Sophia's suggestion, they had no choice but to allow Bonnie to lay the egg naturally, and then restore her health.

"Ugh—oh—ugh—"

Bonnie's moans echoed continuously—it was, evidently, not an easy task for a human, even one who had previously borne children.

At the clinic doorway, Charles stood with arms crossed, brow furrowed, palms slick with sweat as he listened to her cries from within.

He waited for a signal; if Bonnie couldn't endure any longer inside, he would have to rush in and use the clinic's resources to mend her body.

Fortunately, with Sophia handling the procedure, it passed without mishap.

Gradually, the cries subsided. Charles waited a moment until the clinic doors were pushed open and Andny came out, holding a slimy, wet white giant egg in her arms.

Her face shone with delight. Upon seeing Charles, she rushed up and grabbed him eagerly, showing off the egg: "Master, look—it's perfect!"

"I just examined it, and I can guarantee—what hatches from this egg will combine the best traits of giant spider, dark elf, and human!"

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*Chapter 166: Chapter 166: You Again for the Investigation?*

Charles smiled, reaching out to pat her on the head before asking softly, "How is Bonnie doing now? Are there any lasting aftereffects?"

Anno had entrusted this woman to him, so he had to take responsibility for looking after her.

Andny gently shook her head. "She's doing well, no lingering aftereffects. Uh, if I had to bring up anything, if her husband isn't... big enough, their marital life might not be too harmonious in the future..."

Her voice got quieter as she spoke, her eyes darting—clearly embarrassed by this topic. Charles couldn't help but chuckle, then played along: "That's not really our business, is it?"

Andny smiled, but then her expression shifted slightly. "Master, Lady Anno is here!"

Charles' smile faded, and he watched as Andny, still cradling the egg, hurried toward his room. "Go on, Master, don't keep a lady waiting!"

"I'll take the egg—once she's gone, we'll study it!"

With that, she turned and scurried off, her short legs carrying her away. Charles watched her leave, absentmindedly touching his nose. He was still not used to the feeling of having his own witches cheerfully encourage him to pursue another woman...

But he didn't dwell on it, quickly pushing those thoughts aside as he strode to the monastery's main doorway and opened the gates—

Creak—

With a heavy creak, the door opened onto the street. Not far away, Anno—just having disembarked from a carriage and fingered her coin purse to pay the driver—turned back and blinked in surprise: "Charles? Are you heading out?"

"Ah, of course not," Charles replied with a smile. "I just had a feeling—a special guest was about to arrive."

At this, Anno broke into a soft laugh. "What are you talking about?"

She pulled out a gold coin, handed it to the coachman. The man thanked her profusely before driving off. The South Harbor District was remote, and its inhabitants quite poor—there was little business to be had here, and he'd likely have to return empty. If not for Anno's generous fare, he would never have come here.

Charles strode forward to her side. This time, she didn't hesitate—instead, she opened her arms wide for an embrace. "Come, Charles! Let's celebrate—I've been promoted to Grey Squad New Blood!"

Charles's eyes lit up, and he unhesitatingly opened his arms, hugging her shoulders. "Congratulations, darling!"

Anno pressed into his arms, just a bit shorter than him—her arms slipping about his waist, her head nestled against his chest.

Feeling the solid muscles beneath his shirt, Anno couldn't help but open her eyes in surprise. She withdrew one hand, running it over his chest. "Have you been exercising? You've gotten... a lot stronger!"

Charles held her close, the fragrance of her hair and skin filling his senses. "Well, I have to prepare for the future."

Anno's lips curled as she tucked her hand back around his waist, her cheek pressing against his chest, rubbing gently, greedily drinking in the scent of clean cloth and sturdy muscle until it made her head swim.

Still, embracing like this in the open wasn't quite proper. Charles soon took her hand and led her inside the monastery, closing the gates behind them.

Only then did Anno seem to remember her usual reserve, asking, "How is Madame Bonnie now?"

"She's doing well." Charles nodded. "The spider eggs were removed, and she's safe. As long as she rests for two days, she'll be able to go home."

"She's recuperating in the clinic—shall we visit her?"

Anno agreed, stepping forward—then halted, suddenly awkward. "Ah, I should have brought something for her..."

Charles stopped as well, then chuckled. "No worries. Come, let's stop by the kitchen and prepare a little something."

He led her to the kitchen, filling a basket with oranges and fruit for Anno to carry; then added several large jugs of milk to her small bag. Thus equipped, he brought her to the clinic.

Bonnie, less than an hour after giving birth to the egg, was still weak—but delighted by Anno's visit. Anno sat by the bed, holding her hand and offering comfort, assuring her that she'd recover soon and could return to normal life. Bonnie, in turn, asked about

Anno's future adventures. The two women talked for a while before Anno reluctantly took Charles's arm and left the clinic.

Out in the hall, she couldn't help but sigh. "Honestly, if not for this adventure, I'd never have learned there was something as wicked as a drider in the world."

Charles, arm in arm with her, led the way to the kitchen. It was nearing noon, and he intended to cook while chatting. "Yes, there are horrors hidden in those mountains none of us could ever imagine."

"So—do you have a plan? How are you going to deal with the Alliance of the Mountain Purifiers, and the demon lord?"

They entered the kitchen, Charles had Anno sit on a stool while he began to crack eggs and stoke the fire.

Though in truth the kitchen cooked itself, he could stand by the stove, pose as if making a lavish meal with his own hands.

"Blackstaff Tower plans to deal with the Alliance of the Mountain Purifiers and the demon lord at the same time," Anno said. Seeing him cooking, she tried to help, but blundered about clumsily.

Charles smiled and reassured her, asking her to sit back down—only because he didn't want her to see that the cookware was actually moving on its own.

Anno assumed he didn't like her being awkward in the kitchen, and resolved inwardly to learn how to cook when she got home. She sat back, continuing, "For the Alliance, our superiors are planning to send people with diplomatic skills to negotiate, hoping for a peaceful resolution."

"As for the demon lord, since we still know so little about its abilities, location, strength, or even whether it still exists in those mountains, the organization thinks someone skilled in investigation should keep digging."

While pretending to beat eggs, Charles glanced back: "So... wait, are you the investigator again?"

Anno blinked, then nodded. "Yes. After all, I'm the one who discovered the demon plot, even if you provided the evidence. By the way, that's why I was promoted to Grey Squad New Blood."

The so-called evidence consisted of items stripped from those cambions in the monastery dungeon—Charles had confiscated every possession for use as proof, which made Blackstaff Tower take the threat seriously.

But on hearing she'd be investigating again, Charles couldn't help but laugh. He thought back to her two previous assignments—the first, investigating Sophia's cult, she was captured; the second, investigating the Tide Caverns, she was captured again...

He couldn't hold it in—he burst out laughing.

Anno, seeing him laugh, immediately knew what he was thinking. Mortified and indignant, she pinched him about the waist. "Don't laugh at me! Both those times were just bad luck, alright? I didn't expect the foes to be so powerful—there was no way to retreat!"

Charles dodged her attacks, trying to stifle his laughter. But Anno's voice went a little soft, almost hurt: "I know I've only escaped by relying on your rescue both times, but I really want to pull off a successful investigation—just once—to prove I'm not as fragile as a glass vase..."

At that, Charles's laughter vanished. He paused the kitchen's automatic cooking, came over, and wrapped her in his arms, comforting her. "Of course you're not. The last two times you were just unlucky, darling."

Or, in truth, it was the world's malice—beautiful lady knights are destined to fall into the hands of their foes...

Ahem!

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*Chapter 167: Chapter 167: Ekta's Wish*

Charles gently patted Anno's back. Once she had pulled herself together, he released her and returned to the cutting board, giving a silent order for the kitchen to resume. While pretending to chop onions, he asked, "Have you decided on the team members for this investigation?"

Anno shook her head. "Not yet; I came to find you as soon as my promotion ritual was over."

As she said this, her big blue eyes sparkled, and her voice took on a hopeful tone. "Charles, why don't we..."

Charles gave a slight nod, having already understood her meaning. "Yes, I was thinking the same. We'll form a team and head into the mountains together; that way, everything will be covered."

He understood Force Grey's methods—they rarely moved in large groups. After all, being too conspicuous could easily alert their targets.

That was why their members often went undercover and made use of outside forces to achieve their goals.

Just like last time, when Anno disguised herself as an ordinary adventurer and teamed up with Bonnie's group. This time, she could submit a report, give a suitable reason, and move with Charles.

As long as the investigation produced reliable results, Force Grey was flexible about such details.

Anno's eyes glimmered with gentle affection. "Alright, I'll go back and write a longer report... Oh, if only you'd officially join Force Grey, that would be wonderful..."

She murmured this quietly, but Charles only smiled and said nothing. Anno understood his thoughts and didn't press the issue.

They chatted about other matters while Charles continued making lunch. He prepared a pot of lamb stewed with carrots, some eggs sautéed with onions, and a dish of duck breast.

Though these were common dishes, thanks to the kitchen's enchantments, the results were extraordinary. Anno, never having tasted such flavors, ate with delight—her lips oily, her belly round and full—finally stopping only when she truly couldn't eat another bite.

That afternoon, they talked in the scriptorium, then played together at the training grounds. Charles's collection of steel-crafted gym equipment dazzled Anno, and she had a wonderful time, not realizing how late it had gotten.

By then, it was late autumn, and the sun set early. Though she hated to leave, Anno had to catch the last carriage. Charles walked her to the stop, waiting until the carriage disappeared before returning to the monastery to inform all the nuns to prepare for the coming mission.

...

In Andny's room now.

It was a second-level dormitory, but no longer the den of crawling bugs it had once been—instead, it looked much like Charles's room.

After all, there was always the chance Charles might drop by for a visit. If she disgusted her master, that would be her loss.

So she had given up most of her old habits. The purple spider plush on her bedside table, and stickers of caterpillars and butterflies on the walls, were all that remained of the Insect Witch's old quirks.

Now, the girl sat on the bed, her big purple eyes gazing at the two basketball-sized, snow-white giant eggs on the nightstand, her heart full of anticipation for the future.

According to Sophia's estimate, the first egg would hatch in about a week.

She could not wait to see what would emerge.

Would it be a drider—a cute spider-girl—or a human-faced spider, or something else entirely?

Andny was filled with hope for this new life. Just then, a knock sounded at the door behind her.

She jumped down and ran to open it. Expecting Charles, she was surprised to see Ekta.

The nun with fiery red, wavy hair and crimson pupils—normally so bold and passionate—stood in the doorway, looking rather shy and awkward, as if she were now lower in rank than Andny herself.

"Ekta?" Andny raised her eyebrows, then grabbed Ekta's hand and pulled her inside. "What's going on?"

Ekta's figure was similar to Sophia's, but even a bit taller. She didn't have Hattie or Theresa's exaggerated curves, but in summer her silhouette was still quite eye-catching.

Compared to Sophia's noble, cool grace, Ekta's cheerful mood exuded a bright, infectious warmth—like a little sun—apt for someone who used to turn bones into beads for fun.

But now, both her hair and figure were hidden under the bulky nun's habit, and her lack of confidence made her charisma utterly invisible.

Inside Andny's room, Ekta sat with her on the bed. The Flame Witch hesitated for a long moment before whispering, "Andny, at the last conference, how were you so bold?"

"I saw that, except for Theresa, all the sisters were glaring at you, but you stood your ground... It was amazing!"

Ekta spoke in wonder. Andny tilted her head, then answered with a bright smile, "Because I knew Master would indulge me. It's not a serious offense—Master loves us! If you want something, just ask!"

She looked at Ekta, blinking her big eyes: "Are you thinking of asking Master to let you into the expedition this time?"

Ekta nodded. "Yes—since you're staying here to look after the spider eggs, I thought I'd ask you for advice on how to bring it up to Master."

"Just bring it up at the conference," Andny said. Then she remembered how, at the meeting before last, Charles was mobbed by the Amazons, and how Ekta had tried to speak but was silenced by the other sisters' glares.

Sensing Ekta might have some trauma, Andny encouraged her, "Don't worry, as long as Master's there, the sisters can't do anything to you. If you're still nervous, I suggest reading a few more scriptures of the Goddess of Life."

"That's what gave me the courage to speak up at the conference!"

She cheered Ekta along, but Ekta's expression remained troubled. "There's not much time. The conference is about to start soon..."

She bit her lip. "Alright, I'll give it a try at the meeting..."

Andny nodded with satisfaction, then her eyes brightened. "Master's already back at the monastery—come, let's hurry to the scriptorium's second floor and grab seats before the others arrive!"

She seized Ekta's hand and ran out of the room, with Ekta hurriedly stumbling after her. They hurried through the corridor, up the stairs to the scriptorium's second floor.

Here, a circle of chairs stood ready. The chief seat was Charles's, the rest for the witches as they chose. No one else had arrived yet.

Not interested in fighting for attention, Andny chose a spot at the very end, urging Ekta, "Go on, sit at the very front, right next to Master's seat!"

Ekta hesitated, but Andny grew impatient. "Be brave, Ekta! If you keep this up, you'll never get Master's favor!"

That was the last straw for Ekta. She strode up and plopped herself into the seat beside the master's chair.

"That's more like it," Andny said with a smile, giving her a thumbs up.

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### *Chapter 168: Chapter 168: Hattie's Preparation*

Footsteps echoed from the stairs as Charles arrived on the second floor of the scriptorium. Seeing Ekta sitting at his left hand, he was a bit surprised but said nothing, taking his seat and waiting patiently.

Ekta's heart pounded—this was her first time sitting so close to Charles at such a conference. She was so nervous she couldn't control herself, glancing his way every second, only to find each time that Charles wasn't looking at her at all. Her mind spun with worry and wild speculation.

There was no time for her to overthink, as the other nuns soon made their way upstairs. Each reacted differently to seeing Ekta so boldly seated at Charles's side.

Hattie registered mild surprise in her eyes, but her smile remained steady as she confidently took her place on Charles's right, as if assured of victory today.

Ruth frowned slightly, sensing a looming crisis—a certain longing growing more urgent.

Sephera arched an eyebrow, her golden eyes flashing a sharp warning at Ekta, still trying to intimidate her.

Sophia wore a faintly disdainful smile at the corner of her mouth, as if mocking Ekta's futile attempt.

Nidalee looked rather lost, taking a seat in the back near Andny, still feeling she hadn't quite blended into the group.

Only Theresa's gaze brimmed with delight; she offered Ekta an encouraging look. Unfortunately, Ekta was too tense to notice this one shred of kindness.

When all the witches were seated, Charles declared, "Everyone is here, so our conference will begin. The first thing to discuss is who will travel to the Rubble District."

"Theresa and Nidalee are definite. Andny is too busy to go, so who will take her place and accompany me to the Rubble District?"

He left the floor open for opinions. As soon as he finished, Ruth was the first to raise her head. "Let me go. Since this time our foes are demons, my combat style is best equipped for such situations."

She wasn't one for making speeches, simply stating her view. Beside her, Sephera bit her lip, feeling a bit deflated—fiends are mostly immune to toxins, leaving her nearly useless against them.

To outcompete Ruth, she had to shine beyond raw combat power. Thankfully, she'd already made up her mind: "With Eldest Sister present, we're never lacking strength. What we need is someone more well-rounded. Ruth, do you really think you're versatile?"

Ruth opened her mouth but couldn't find a rebuttal. "More muscle is always good... I suppose."

Sephera smiled, continuing serenely: "Yes, but it's hardly vital. In my opinion, the best candidate should have strong comprehensive abilities—whether negotiation, deception, interrogation, or other means, like the use of poisons..."

She pitched herself, while at the row's end Andny frantically signaled Ekta to speak up. Ekta took a deep breath and was just about to open her mouth, when from Charles's right—Master's spot—Hattie had already spoken up first: "Actually, once I learned Andny would be staying behind, I began preparing for this expedition."

All eyes immediately turned to her. Unhurried, Hattie took out her Bag of Holding. "A few days ago, I made a special trip to the central district. With some luck, I gathered quite a few very useful magical items at excellent prices..."

With that, she pulled out a palm-sized, oval glass bottle filled with red liquid: "Healing potion, able to heal wounds instantly. Usually fifty gold per bottle, but with help from some Amazons, I got several at a twenty percent discount."

Next, she produced a tiny vial filled with translucent blue-green liquid: "Potion of Mental Clarity. After meditation, it restores the mana equivalent to a 3rd-level spell. It also normally costs fifty gold per bottle, but I found a secret channel at Strixhaven University and bought several at just sixty percent of the usual price."

Further along the table, Theresa lowered her head, a modest smile on her face. She was the one who had given Hattie that channel: the person who made those potions had once been her selected food. Back then, Theresa forged an ancient text so a poor Strixhaven student could make these potions at lower cost, to escape poverty and for her own benefit—only, Charles purified her before she could orchestrate a tragedy.

Now, with her old ways behind her, there was no reason to waste a good connection. So, when Hattie came for help, she taught her how to use this hidden channel and buy the potions at a low price.

As Theresa reminisced, Hattie continued pulling items from her bag: "Mana Restoration Pearl—usable once per day, instantly restores the mana of a 3rd-level spell."

She played with the large blue pearl before placing it in Charles's arms. Then she continued, one after another: "Sentinel Shield, a perfect substitute for Master's magic shield. Its protection is just as reliable, but it also gives early warning if foes are lurking close by."

"A revealing lantern to expose invisible enemies. Climbing rope... night vision goggles... everflowing water bottle... philter of love, um—"

Noticing she'd let something dangerous slip out, Hattie quickly stuffed the pink, heart-bubbling potion back into her bag, pretending nothing happened. "After all, this time we're facing demons head-on. It could easily become a prolonged battle, so we need to be fully prepared."

"I've read countless adventure manuals and bought all these supplies in hopes they'll prove helpful for this battle."

Once she knew Andny was staying behind to care for the spider eggs, Hattie guessed the Insect Witch wouldn't be going to the Rubble District, so Charles would need a new companion. She thus started her preparations almost a week ahead—saving money, borrowing money, researching, buying magical items, and stockpiling them like a hamster, all to ensure she'd win decisively at this conference.

Beyond that, her aqua-blue eyes shimmered with longing as she even played the emotion card, worried she still hadn't done enough: "It's been ages since we went on an expedition together..."

Objectively speaking, that was a stretch—after all, they'd just gone to Garbage Island. But seeing her heartfelt gaze, and all she'd prepared, Charles's heart tightened. He simply couldn't reject her.

On his left, Ekta, now anxious, sat up straight and blurted, "Master, I think I also—"

Alas, it was only a burst of emotion. She opened her mouth, but her mind went blank. Against Hattie, she was utterly outmatched in strength, preparation, and appeal. She didn't even know what reason to give that could possibly sway Charles.

Luckily, she didn't need to say more. Charles gently touched her lips with a fingertip, offering her an apologetic look.

From the far end, Andny rubbed her forehead, sighing inwardly.

Ah, I forgot to warn her: Hattie always holds the highest place in Master's heart. Compete with her? Don't bother!

"Sorry, Ruth, Ekta," Charles concluded. "This time, Hattie will come with me."

At once, Hattie's expression bloomed like spring. "Understood, Master!"

She shot a grateful look backward, toward Sophia, who received it with a silent smile.

Sophia was Hattie's other pillar of support: she'd lent her money, offered suggestions, even told her where to buy the right gear.

Sophia knew she wasn't suited for field adventure, so she might as well do a favor—ensuring the monastery's top witch owed her one.

At the far end, Ruth bowed her head, sincerely impressed by Hattie's thorough preparation, and made a private vow that next time, she too would prepare this well.

As for Ekta, her face became deeply aggrieved, then she turned, wronged and helpless, to Andny.

Andny only shrugged, thinking: Your luck's just too bad—you ran into Hattie when she'd set her mind to this, and with so much prep, no one could have taken this chance from her.

Ah, just accept it!

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*Chapter 169: Chapter 169: Methods of Investigating Demons*

Several days later.

Charles received news from Anno: she had already completed her report at Blackstaff Tower. The Force Grey squad's higher-ups were still quite efficient—after all, their organization was still in its formative stage, without much bureaucracy or layers of formality.

Her application had been approved, so she arranged to meet Charles at the market in the Rubble District. Charles and his group had long been ready; after a morning spent switching from one carriage to the next, they arrived smoothly at noon.

By now the season was late autumn, edging towards winter. After a busy fall, both mountain hunters and treasure seekers had enjoyed a fruitful harvest. This gave the market an extremely lively atmosphere: vendors worked hard to peddle their wares—many of dubious origin—while buyers haggled and bargained, the noise rising into a constant din.

Of course, quite a few lost their lives in conflicts with the Mountain Folk or other treasure hunters, but this chaotic territory was simply that way—if you came here, you relied on your own strengths, and could blame no one else.

Charles's group had already changed into new clothes: he wore a chainmail shirt, the standard garb of adventurers; beside him, Hattie wore a dark blue mage's robe and a broad, pointed hat, the very image of a spellcaster; Nidalee, for once, donned a brown fur-lined jacket—after all, winter was near, and even a druid couldn't go about with her midriff bared forever.

Only Theresa looked the same as always—she had only her nun's habit, which barely managed to conceal her exaggerated figure. The habit did little to disguise her curves; as she walked through the market, countless fiery stares landed on her, refusing to let go.

Then again, with a party this charismatic, any one of them would be a focal point in any crowd. Even most of the local businessmen managed to show restraint, knowing their lives in this place hung by a thread, and thus unwilling to invite trouble for the sake of beauty—content simply to look from afar, never daring to approach.

But the women of the market had no such reservations. Bolder by the minute, they came right up and took Charles's arm, asking his name and stroking his hand. Charles was left extremely awkward, forced to dodge repeatedly and make excuses about urgent business, sending them away one by one.

In the end, Hattie and Theresa were obliged to flank him left and right, shielding him from the wolfish female adventurers. Nidalee followed behind, so the whole scene looked a bit like they were escorting a criminal.

Fortunately, this awkward ordeal didn't last long. Soon, at the spot where last they parted ways, a figure clad in full plate armor, helm on head, suddenly raised a hand, waving with vigor. Charles looked on in confusion for a few seconds before recognizing Anno.

It was truly the first time he'd seen her like this—for until now, every meeting had been in plain clothes, or else after her armor was stripped away while a captive.

Seeing her now in plate armor, fully armed, was a little unfamiliar. Still, he waved in response, called her name aloud, and jogged over to her side.

Anno flipped open her visor; excitement lit her delicate face. She embraced him lightly, but her first words were a complaint: "You took so long! I've been waiting forever."

She was telling the truth: she had arrived by carriage in the morning, the road also being shorter, so she'd been here nearly an hour already. She'd even arranged the next leg of the trip into the mountains and found time to do some shopping—in fact, she'd purchased quite a few things—by the time Charles and friends finally arrived.

Hearing this, Charles couldn't help but look awkward. "Nothing for it—there are just too few carriages from the South Harbor District. We had to switch between lines at every stop to get here."

He sighed: "If only South Harbor District had just two more public carriages, we wouldn't have had to take such a roundabout route."

Little did he know that these casual complaints would, in the future, bring major changes to public transport in South Harbor.

Anno nodded, letting the matter drop. Then, out of courtesy, she greeted the three nuns: "Sister Hattie, Sister Theresa, Sister Nidalee—good afternoon to you all."

Hattie smiled in return, though her eyes showed a trace of resignation. Like Sephera, she instinctively resisted having yet another new girl join the monastery.

But ever since she realized Charles's true feelings, she'd been forced to hide her own, and make herself accept Anno as one of them.

Theresa, from the start, was sincerely delighted. At that moment, her smile was radiant and genuine.

As for Nidalee, her feelings were somewhat more complex as she gazed at the paladin before her.

Strictly speaking, they were rivals in love. In truth, Anno was the one Charles truly recognized and was pursuing; she herself was just his prisoner.

On the other hand, she understood perfectly well that, for this journey into the mountains, to keep shielding her identity, Charles would continue pretending to be "Nidalee's fiancé"—even in front of Anno.

And the latter would also need to play along. Which meant, right in front of this paladin, she could hug Charles as much as she liked—cling to him, kiss him, show affection as brazenly as she wished...

This thought made Nidalee so excited she trembled all over, unable to contain herself.

Oh, Lady Anno. I wonder what it will feel like to watch another woman lie in the arms of the man you love dearly, yet still have to force a smile?

Nidalee didn't know. But just imagining it sent a thrill through her.

She realized her mindset was becoming a little warped, but couldn't keep herself from fantasizing. Every time Anno's likely reactions flashed through her mind, she could barely suppress a laugh.

At the moment, Anno thought Nidalee's smile was the strangest of all and felt a touch worried. Still, she didn't dwell on it; after being polite, she moved to business: "It's getting late—should we have lunch first, or ride to Rockseeker Camp and then eat?"

Behind her, the halfling uncle who handled her carriage arrangements was already impatient, scratching the thick yellow hair on his own shins.

Hattie and Theresa shook their heads, saying they didn't need lunch. Nidalee explained, "No need, I prepared some goodberries this morning. That's enough to keep me going. Let's get on the road, and eat once we reach Rockseeker Camp."

Goodberry—a 1st-level spell that creates ten berries charged with primal magic; eat one, and it will sustain you for a full day. Exceptionally convenient.

Anno nodded in realization. "So that's it! I forgot Miss Nidalee is a druid. Well then, shall we depart?"

The group had no objections and quickly boarded the carriage. The halfling driver, crouched beside the cart, let out a long sigh, lit his pipe, and took up his whip. With a flick to the plump rumps of his mules, both animals neighed in pleasure and started walking, all four legs moving in a steady rhythm.

Inside, Anno asked Nidalee for a goodberry, ate one as her lunch, and then began outlining their mission.

"For this, Blackstaff Tower dispatched three squads," she said. "One will negotiate with the Alliance of the Mountain Purifiers. Another will investigate the movements of the Dark Elves. The last—my squad, with you—will be investigating any traces of demons."

She sighed, adding, "Actually, compared to the hostile Mountain Folk and the Dark Elves of the Underdark, demons are the easiest to find."

"The mountain range is the Mountain People's homeland, full of their lookouts and watchers; the Dark Elves have most likely returned to the Underdark—so if you don't go very far in, you'll get nothing."

"But demons, with their own uncontrollable, chaotic, and frenzied power, always leave some pollution or signs of spawning around their hiding places."

"The most typical case: rampant plant growth forming tumors, animals going berserk and attacking others, residents plagued by endless nightmares, falling ill, sometimes even losing their sanity..."

Anno explained all this, her conclusions clear. "So once we reach Rockseeker Camp, as long as we follow areas where plants suddenly rot and die, or animals lose control, our investigation will easily catch the demons' trail. They may try to hide, but this is the kind of thing that simply can't be concealed."

Charles and the others listened closely—he himself already had some experience here, having at least cleared the pure love route in the past.

But of course, knowing it in theory isn't quite the same as applying it in real life. Like some men who have watched all the movies and know the techniques and sequence, but in actual practice, still...

Ahem!

And so, as the carriage rumbled over the hillside, with the box rattling and shaking, Anno patiently shared all the knowledge she'd gathered.

The sun drifted southward, but the autumn wind in the mountains remained crisp and cool. Sleepy and swaying with the ride, the group continued on toward Rockseeker Camp.

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