

## **Witch Monastery #Chapter 171: Anno Bathes—But Are There Demons? - Read Witch Monastery Chapter 171: Anno Bathes—But Are There Demons?**

*Chapter 171: Chapter 171: Anno Bathes—But Are There Demons?*

Time moved steadily onward.

"Whew... It's getting late. Let's make camp here."

Gazing at the windbreak of stone ahead, Charles exhaled deeply and glanced west. The orange sun now hovered just above the horizon and would soon slip away.

There was still some daylight left, and the party's energy remained high. Yet if they pressed on and failed to find another spot like this for camp, they'd be forced to scramble for shelter in the dark—a mistake best avoided.

With late autumn upon them, night fell early and dawn came late. Without a good campsite, the night would be rough.

"Agreed."

Anno checked the sky, inner anxiety mounting. She longed to track down a sign of the demons. After days of questioning and hard travel, they'd spent nearly a week in these mountains already, and her patience was nearly gone.

But she knew they all needed rest. Restraining her urgency, she nodded and helped prepare camp.

After all, they'd all experienced the misery of searching for a campsite at night, fighting the cold mountain winds. None of them wanted a repeat.

So, with ample daylight left, the group halted beneath the stone ledge, withdrew foldable tents from their Bags of Holding, and started setting up camp.

As Anno had noted, clues of demons weren't hard to find. After reaching Rockseeker Camp and questioning returning adventurers and old mountain hunters, they'd gathered a wealth of leads.

Places where trees had sprouted grotesque tumors; sudden bursts of corruption and stench; animals that went berserk, no longer fearing hunters or predators but instead attacking on sight—all these were easy to hear recounted.

After all, the demons had arrived on the material world months ago. No matter how restrained the Abyssal Lord was, its pollution spread recklessly—if they could control it, they wouldn't be demons at all—so such rumors were everywhere.

Veteran hunters, returning to the tavern after a day afield, would swap tales over drink, easily sharing the creepiest events they'd encountered. With only a little time invested, Charles's group compiled and analyzed these stories to find their direction.

Once they had it, they pressed straight into the mountains.

So came three more days of exposure and hardship, roughing it in the wild. The destination was even farther from Rockseeker's Outpost than they'd first worried. With autumn so advanced and daylight short, they traveled by day and camped under the open sky.

There were villages deep in the mountains, but they were home solely to the Mountain Folk. Some would trade at Rockseeker's Outpost, but in general, they fiercely distrusted outsiders. Under no circumstances would they allow Charles or his party to stay, fearing schemes or prying.

Even though the group claimed to be demon slayers, with trust at zero, their words met only with total rejection.

On the first night, hoping for shelter in a village, they were instead turned away and lost precious time. In the end, they had to wander the mountainside in darkness, seeking somewhere to pitch their tents.

Lesson learned, they now avoided villages and picked wind-sheltered spots instead.

Just like tonight.

With camp decided, the group set to their tasks. Nidalee used nature magic to grow a barrier of vines and fences around them, set beast-repelling incense, and deployed magical traps for extra safety.

These wouldn't stop true threats, but they did cut down on harassment from wolves, tigers, and lesser beasts.

Hattie and Theresa joined forces, each summoning Mage Hand to retrieve tents from their Bags of Holding and pitch them.

They put up three tents: one for Charles, one shared by Hattie and Nidalee, and the last for Theresa and Anno—at least, officially. By midnight, who might sneak into Charles's tent was anyone's guess.

Charles and Anno then lit a campfire at the center and set a kettle above it. Anno filled it with clean water using the everflowing water bottle, readying a vegetable stew; Charles withdrew a marinated leg of lamb from his Bag of Holding, planning to grill it once the soup was done.

Goodberry could have nourished them for an entire day, so food wasn't truly needed.

But berries only satisfied the body's nutritional needs, not the longings of one's taste buds—or the need for comfort on a lonely mountain night. Cooking became their way to dispel solitude, and brought everyone closer together.

With each person helping and magic lending a hand, camp took shape. Hattie and the others purposely left time and space for Charles and Anno; only when the lamb was finished did all three join them beside the fire, sharing the meal and idle conversation.

Hattie and Theresa, as always, abstained from food—now able to blame it on Goodberry instead of inventing excuses. Nidalee, for her part, ate heartily; as a mortal, she couldn't resist ingredients freshly prepared in the monastery kitchen.

Naturally, Charles and Anno ate the most. Both needed to meet the demands of melee combat—and both healthy appetites, presumably stoked by the mountain air, tore through a whole leg of lamb easily.

Dinner stretched nearly two hours, as slicing meat from the joint with a small knife was neither quick nor easy.

After the meal, no one rushed to pack up the tableware or cookware. They lounged around the campfire, chatting about everything imaginable. Stories ranged from the free nation founded across the eastern ocean by the gold dragons and Sun Elves, to the far north's tyrannical Red Dragon empire, infamous for its obsession with badges, and even the many bizarre little kingdoms of the Black Lands, endlessly at war.

The moon rose higher, stars dusted the night sky, and the darkness deepened. Charles, feeling the call of nature, rose and strolled into the woods. No sooner had he gone than all light conversation by the fire died, as if the loss of their anchor left no desire for more words.

Anno felt nothing of this sudden hush, too weary for sharp senses. Her long golden lashes drooped as she nodded off, then started and awoke: "Oh... Miss Hattie, I almost forgot—here."

She reached for the everflowing water bottle she'd used while cooking, offering it back to Hattie.

Hattie just kept smiling and didn't take it. Instead, she asked, "Lady Anno, would you like to join me for a bath?"

Hearing this, Anno was suddenly alert: "I..."

She was tempted. Days of mountain hiking had left her filthy, sticky, and unable to find time to clean up. She desperately wanted to, for her hygiene as well as her comfort.

But, after all, this was a wild adventure...

"Wouldn't it be wasteful?" she hesitated. "And what if something dangerous happened...?"

She was a paladin: if she needed to fight, she'd have to don her plate armor first—which, even with practice and help, still took five solid minutes. Far too long in an emergency.

Hattie calmly smiled. "Don't worry. Theresa's here—it'll be fine."

Seeing Anno still hesitant, Hattie added, "I want a bath too, and I'd like someone to help scrub my back. Lady Anno, will you help me with that?"

Theresa nodded gently. "Go on and wash, Lady Anno. Don't worry, we'll keep watch—no one will sneak a peek."

She was hinting at something, and Anno blushed bright red—clearly catching her drift.

"I'm not worried about anyone's character," Anno managed, a little awkwardly. "It's not suspicion—"

"Then let's go; we'll just wipe off quickly."

With that, they rose and slipped behind a rock further off.

Just as they left, Charles returned from the woods, only to see Anno and Hattie disappearing and frowned in confusion: "What happened? Where's she going?"

"They went to bathe," Theresa explained with a smile. "She felt dirty but couldn't bring herself to ask for the everflowing water bottle—Hattie helped her out, so off they went."

"Oh." Charles sat down and started clearing away the tableware. He wasn't particularly interested, but Theresa sidled up, whispering, "Master, aren't you going to take a peek?"

Charles rolled his eyes. "Are you telling me to spy on them?"

"Master, just play with words a bit!" Theresa grinned. "It's not spying—it's just openly watching!"

"Master, trust me—she won't mind. She might even be secretly delighted!"

Charles chuckled, but shook his head, refusing. "No—Anno is a very serious girl. This kind of word game would only annoy her."

"When you deal with serious people, you need to be serious, too—no..."

Before he could finish, a sudden scream pierced the darkness from afar: "Demons!"

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*Chapter 172: Chapter 172: The Too-Short Bath Towel*

At once, Charles's expression grew tense, while Theresa arched an eyebrow, the corners of her mouth curling into a sly smile. "Looks like, Master, you have no choice but to go over there now."

As she spoke, before Charles could give any order, she pressed a hand to her forehead in mock distress. "Oh, I feel so faint all of a sudden... Master, I'm unable to fight. You'd best go save those poor girls yourself!"

Charles could only shake his head helplessly, pinching her arm as he stood, strapping on his night vision goggles and moving off in their direction. "Fine, I'll go. You come along too!"

Only then did Theresa rise, following after Charles in the direction Anno and Hattie had gone. Nidalee, who had been playing the role of silent observer, also got up, deliberately lagging behind before heading that way herself.

Ahead, Charles burst through the deep woods—only to find two pale figures stumbling backward and screaming, hastily trying to cover themselves. It was none other than Hattie and Anno, who had come here to bathe.

Their luck, one could say, was both good and bad: after so long searching, the demons had finally revealed a trace; but fate had conspired for them to show up precisely while the girls were bathing...

Thankfully, there were no outsiders here, and the dusk was deep enough... Well, in truth, no amount of darkness helped at all. With his night vision goggles, Charles could see every detail of the two naked bodies as clearly as at high noon.

Hattie's naked body was a familiar sight, wild forest setting or no, it made no difference. But this was Charles's first time seeing Anno so exposed, her delicate figure seemingly sculpted by a divine hand, without the slightest imperfection. Toned muscle lines shimmered faintly beneath alabaster skin—athletic, yet still tender and soft, radiating a breathtaking charisma.

Even with just a fleeting glance, Charles found it almost impossible to look away. His heart thundered, and it took all his strength to shift his gaze off Anno's bare form and toward the demons surging out of the forest shadows.

Only then did he breathe a small sigh of relief.

So that's all it was—a handful of Dretch.

Dretch, among the lowest-ranked demons of the Infinite Layers of the Abyss—just above the Manes. Averaging less than four feet in height, roughly humanoid but sporting huge, wet nostrils and sickly, pustule-green flesh.

Their arms were thick and long—thicker even than their legs, with massive claws dragging on the earth. Yet, if you thought their claws were the deadliest threat, you'd be gravely mistaken.

Their bodies stored deadly, nauseating gas. It remained hidden until battle, when it would erupt from their nostrils. Ordinary people, upon inhaling even a whiff, would be so overtaken by disgust they could barely stand, much less fight—easy prey for the creatures.

Faced with these revolting demons of the Abyss, Charles's face twisted in disgust—not because they were a real threat, but because they were so sickening.

Quickly, he slipped on his mask, retreating several steps, intending to destroy them from afar with an Eldritch Blast. But just as he lifted his hand, he hesitated.

Disgusting as they were, these Dretch could be purified—possibly granting him more Purification Points.

Considering he had less than a thousand left—and that any monastery upgrade or personal level up would require ten thousand Purification Points—Charles gritted his teeth.

Opportunities like this were rare. Every point counts—forget ranged attacks, time for melee combat and hands-on purification!

Decision made, he muttered an incantation and slapped a 4th-level False Life on himself, then strode forward boldly.

The Dretch at the front waddled toward him. Upon spotting Charles, the demon lifted its chin, its expression of surprise made even sillier by those enormous nostrils.

Then, with a sudden inhale and—poof!

A thick, green cloud of poison gas erupted from its nostrils, filling the air with a foul stench. Charles's face contorted instantly, every sense screaming a warning to vomit.

To hell with this!

He cursed inwardly, held back his nausea, pushed forward with a glowing palm of purified white light. "Purified!"

Buzz—

Milky light surged into the Dretch's body. The beast tried to lift a claw in weak resistance, but the purification took less than two seconds. The demon dissolved into nothingness, not a trace left behind.

But the rank odor remained, and the air was completely still—no wind at all beneath the trees. Before Charles could catch his breath, he saw three more Dretch emerging from three directions, each opening its mouth with a deep inhale.

He had no choice but to hold his breath and lunge at the one directly ahead, the closest to him. The other two circled, spewing toxic mist as their massive claws lashed at his thighs and hips.

Behind him, Hattie and Anno scrambled away, now joined by Theresa. Anno, truly panicked and without her sword, couldn't manage even a single Divine Smite. Even the weakest Dretch would be out of reach for her.

Should she be surrounded by the demons, there was no question: her body would be fully exposed to Charles's view—and she was nowhere near ready for that.

A maiden's modesty sent Anno into a panicked flurry, dragging Hattie as she fled. But Hattie's terror was just an act—her spellcasting alone was more than enough to destroy any Dretch. And as for baring her body—even Charles had explored her inside and out; any shyness was long forgotten.

Theresa pulled two pristine white bath towels from her Bag of Holding, wrapping one around each girl. "No need to panic. It's just a few Dretches. Priest Charles will take care of them."

Only then did Anno regain her composure, glancing anxiously into the forest shadows. "Will Priest be all right? Should we go help—uh..."

She glanced down at herself, face instantly flushing. The towel was extremely short, barely able to cover her most vital spots. Her chest and upper thighs were exposed; to fight in this state would mean an inevitable wardrobe malfunction.

To make matters worse, something about this partial exposure seemed even more tantalizing than complete nudity...

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*Chapter 173: Chapter 173: The Wind Blows, Revealing Pale Golden Down*

Beside Anno, Hattie struggled to shield herself with the skimpy bath towel. Her fuller curves made coverage precarious; even the faint evening breeze rustling through the woods teased glimpses of her forbidden zone.

Yet in that moment, Hattie shed her mask of panic. A serene smile touched her lips as she reassured Anno, "Don't worry. Priest possesses an innate ability to Purify undead, fiends, and their corrupting pollution, wiping them from existence."

"He is the ultimate bane to these fiends. Unless stronger Demons emerge, we can safely wait here for him to handle everything."

Anno's eyes widened, shimmering with awe. "Such a power? It sounds even more potent than a paladin's Divine Smite..."

Divine Smite merely dealt extra damage to Demons—it couldn't Purify the pollution they spread. Eradicating a Demon's taint required holy water for Purification, or even 2nd-level spells like Lesser Restoration. Sometimes, not even paladins could fully Purify the corruption; specialized Pastors were needed, wielding 5th-tier spells like Greater Restoration.

But what struck Anno most wasn't Charles's ability—it was the realization that she knew so little about him. Secrets still lay hidden beneath the surface...

Theresa nodded emphatically, leaping to Charles's defense. "Indeed, some powers defy convention. Against Demons, his gifts eclipse even a paladin's light."

"Even against stronger Demons, we cripple them first and let the Priest finish the Purification. It's far more efficient."



Her words carried a subtle subtext: Priest came to slay Demons, not ogle your naked form! Protecting Charles's dignity while fostering tension demanded all her guile.

Unbeknownst to her, Anno's straightforward mind missed the insinuation. To her, Charles charging to her aid mid-bath during a Demon attack was heroic pragmatism—nothing more. With his safety assured, relief washed over her.

Then, questions flooded her mind: What is the source of his power? Divine blessing? A relic? Or... awakened bloodline energies?

If the latter... Would our children be born paladins?

Her cheeks flushed. Heart pounding, wild fantasies spiraled: For the world's sake, we'd need many children... a great dynasty...

Wait—his lost noble lineage... could that be true?

Anno's gaze flickered toward Nidalee, who lingered nearby. The druid met her eyes, tensing instantly. Anno hastily looked away, scolding herself: It changes nothing. Whether his blood is special or not, he's just helping Nidalee resolve her troubles. That's all...

Nidalee's guilt spiked under that glance. Fear of exposure warred with exhilaration—What if she pieces it all together?

As the girls spoke, Charles finished Purifying the last Dretch. Tossing aside his foul-smelling mask, he retreated from the stench and opened his system panel to tally rewards.

Eleven Dretch roamed here—each yielded a paltry 25 Purification Points.

Trash! Disgusting yet worthless—same as Skeletons!

He grimaced, dreading the hordes of vile Demons awaiting their investigation. Purification Points would be hard-earned.

Closing the panel, he returned to find the four women before him. Hattie and Anno stood nearly nude, clinging to flimsy towels that barely covered their chests and upper thighs. Smooth shoulders, delicate collarbones, and slender legs gleamed under the moonlight, searing his vision.

Freshly bathed, Anno glowed like a water lily, freed from days of grime. Damp golden ringlets cascaded over her bare shoulders. As she adjusted her towel, the clean hollows of her armpits came into full view—radiant with youthful vitality.

Charles's pulse quickened.

Anno's petite frame fared better under the towel than Hattie's lush curves. The latter strained to conceal herself—one arm clamped over her chest to hide deepening cleavage and budding nipples, while she yanked the towel low to veil her thighs. Yet the coverage remained perilous. If she took a step...

Though intimately familiar with Hattie's body, this half-revealed torment tested Charles's control. Suppressing a visceral surge of desire, he forced his eyes away and rasped, "All clear. Resume your bath?"

Anno began to nod, but Hattie wrinkled her nose in complaint. "The stench lingers. How could we bathe here now?"

She was right. Without wind to disperse the foul air beneath the trees, the clearing reeked.

"A breeze would help..." Theresa mused, shooting Nidalee a pointed look.

The druid caught her cue. Gust of Wind was child's play to her. "I'll scatter the stink!"

She raised her hand. "Gust of Wind!"

Charles opened his mouth to protest—Return to camp! I'll wait outside—but Nidalee's spell erupted too fast. A gale tore through the clearing—

"Ah—!"

Hattie shrieked, doubling over as her towel billowed upward. One arm anchored the fabric against her thighs, shielding her forbidden garden—but her full cleavage and rosy buds lay exposed.

Anno froze, slower to react. Wind snatched her towel's hem—

—revealing pale golden down.

Charles jerked his gaze aside, blood roaring. His 15 Constitution amplified primal urges, and this provocation threatened to unravel him.

"Nidalee!" he roared into the wind.

She cut the spell, blinking with feigned innocence. "Liberl Port folk are so fussy!"

Translation: I'm a wild child—your rules mean nothing!

Charles massaged his temples. He glared at Nidalee, then at Theresa—whose smile urged him onward.

Done battling their games, he turned and strode toward camp. "Finish bathing! I'll rest at camp!"

He vanished into the trees. Theresa watched his retreating form, fingertips brushing her lips.

Her smile deepened.

...

The next day, in the afternoon.

Beneath yet another stone crag, some ten satyrs marched in formation, silently chanting incantations as they advanced, following the trail of demon pollution. Behind them, more than twenty half-orcs led five tall, powerful chimera, moving slowly in their wake.

These half-orcs wore crude animal hide armor and wielded heavy iron greataxes. Their faces were painted in varied patterns—by those, one could distinguish shamans, beastmasters, and ordinary warriors among them.

Their numbers seemed small, but with such iron-forged weapons and five chimera at their sides, this party's strength in these mountains ranked them as overlords in their own right.

Chimera were towering three-headed monsters, typically possessing the hind legs of a goat, the forelimbs of a lion, and the wings of a dragon, with all three heads as well.

This combination of bodies made them far larger than your average lion—nearly two meters tall and weighing over a ton, as massive as a buffalo.

Still, with dragon wings upon their backs, these beasts could fly, and depending on the dragon head's breed, unleash various types of Dragon's Breath.

When such massive monsters swooped down, belching fire or acid, even the mountain's bandit gangs could collapse in an instant!

The Adventurer Guild assigned a challenge rating of six to creatures like these, but these five, especially robust chimera, clearly surpassed that. Outfitted with makeshift armor and polished, sharpened claws, it was clear these half-orcs understood how to cultivate the chimeras' battle power and weaponize them for war.

These people, of course, were tribes from the Alliance of the Mountain Purifiers—specifically the Green Vines and Chimera tribes. Through countless experiments, they had discovered a method for keeping chimeras calm for long stretches, even making them obey commands and fight alongside them. With this, even with scant numbers, they could call themselves one of the true powers of the mountains.

Naturally, such methods were not foolproof. These brutal abominations were the original creation of the Demon Prince Demogorgon, forcibly merged from many creatures through terrible magic.

Because of this, they had inherited all the madness and savagery of demons. The three heads always vied with one another; if one—say, the goat head, which craved grass, or the lion, meat, or the dragon, fire and magma—was satisfied, the other two would inevitably be driven to rage and then attack everything around them.

On normal days, such rage could still be soothed, but now, with demon pollution everywhere, the chimeras' inner fury was only magnified, making them even harder to control.

If not for these five chimeras being so exceptionally well-trained, and their bonds with their beastmasters so close—not to mention the tribes had no other options—the Chimera tribe would never have risked bringing them out on an expedition like this.

"This should be the place."

At the head of the column, the satyr matriarch Willo Green Vines, chief of the Green Vines tribe, halted and furrowed her brows, staring at the cave ahead. "A foul aura pours continually from inside—it's likely a major pollution node... perhaps even a portal to the Infinite Layers of the Abyss!"

She turned, worry heavy in her eyes, to the largest, gaudiest-painted half-orc from the Chimera tribe. "Danche, are your chimeras all right?"

That half-orc, the tribe leader's son Danche, was stroking the lion's mane of the chimera at his side, soothing it. "Barbary, good boy, just hold on a little longer and we'll be done..."

At Willo's question, his face darkened and he shook his head. "Not well. Barbary is in agony... I'm sorry, madam, but we cannot move any closer."

"Then don't go any further." Willo nodded softly. "You and your warriors wait out here. We'll go in and perform the purification. If anyone comes to interfere, everyone in the Chimera tribe, please help us hold them off!"

Clearly, the filth in this cave was too corrosive for any ordinary mortal. The demon-worshipers who established such a pollution site would never leave it unguarded, so most likely their foes were lurking nearby, ready to pounce when she started the purification.

"Understood!"

Danche nodded, signaling to the beastmasters to lead the chimeras further away—at least as far as possible from the cave, to prevent the demon taint from further eroding their minds.

The remaining warriors spread out as sentries to guard against being ambushed. Finally away from the cave, Danche could feel his chimeras settling somewhat—the goat head even stuck out its tongue to lick the salt from his bare arm.

At that moment, a sentry suddenly rushed back. "Captain, someone's coming!"

Danche's face hardened.

The demon-worshippers, so soon?

"Prepare for battle!" he growled. "Do not let anyone near this cavern!"

The other warriors instantly snapped into formation. And a hundred meters away, just past a curve in the cliff, five human silhouettes slowly came into view.

Spotting the white-haired figure in the lead, Danche's eyes narrowed sharply.

People from the Empire of Sein?

Wait, could all of this be part of a vast imperial conspiracy?

He had no idea—but he hefted his greataxe regardless. Nearly every tribe in the Alliance of the Mountain Purifiers bore a grudge against Liberl Port; he only wanted to slay the demons because of their effect on the chimeras.

If these were Sein people, he had no qualms about killing them first.

Of course, this group was Charles and company. Last night's encounter had been ambiguous and provocative, but once everything cooled off, there was no question—they had finally tracked down the demons' trail.

After a night's rest, Anno had activated Divine Sense at sunrise to pursue the demons' presence. Even weighed down by heavy plate armor, her pace never faltered; she pressed on tirelessly, determined to reach her quarry before the trail vanished.

They marched through woods overgrown with bloody, tumorous trees, across rivers clouded ink-green by taint and teeming with carnivorous fish, even dispatching frenzied goats whose jaws sprouted countless rows of shark-like teeth, just to track the corruption here.

As a paladin, Anno could sense the demon presence with even greater keenness than the satyrs, and before noon she had located the very origin of the rot, hidden in that distant cave.

But when they arrived, others were already there.

A cluster of unmistakably Mountain People—half-orcs and their chimeras.

Anno halted, her eyes full of wariness. The rest of Charles's party quickly stopped and assumed defensive postures, warily facing the distant opposition.

With the enemy's true strength unknown, neither side wanted to make the first move. At that moment, anxious frustration gnawed at Anno; she could distinctly sense that a wellspring of demon corruption was locked away in that cave, still spewing foul energies without end.

"Our target is inside that cave," she muttered, glancing at her group. "What do we do? Should we just attack?"

As a member of Blackstaff Tower—and fully aware of the Alliance of the Mountain Purifiers' enmity toward the port—Anno's suggestions were utterly uncompromising.

Charles was about to speak, but at the last instant held his tongue, turning instead to Nidalee. "You all probably know best how to talk to them, right?"

He'd realized that his white hair marked him as an outsider and complication. This situation, he knew, was better left to a fellow Mountain Person—like Nidalee.

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*Chapter 174: Chapter 174: Traps and the Shriek*

Nidalee drew a deep breath. "Let me try."

She stepped forward, circling around Charles, and called out loudly to those ahead: "Brothers, I am Nidalee, daughter of Archdruid Ilarode and leader of the Mountaineer Tribe. I am here on my father's orders, bringing demon-fighting experts with me for the purpose of cleansing the demon pollution inside the cave."

"Would you let us pass?"

Danche: "..."

He fell silent. It was fortunate he himself was a higher-up in the Alliance of the Mountain Purifiers; otherwise he might have believed the woman's lie.

Since the decision to eradicate the demons, all the major forces of the Alliance of the Mountain Purifiers had mobilized. The joint action of these two powerful tribes to eliminate demon pollution had been carefully planned with Ilarode. The Archdruid himself was purifying pollution elsewhere, and with his own shortage of hands, there was simply no way he'd send his daughter with a group of strangers to cleanse pollutants here.

This woman had to be an impostor!

Even if by some chance she spoke the truth, just looking at her, the soft-skinned companions behind her were plainly from Liberl Port, maybe even one from Sein. There was no way the Archdruid would work with such outsiders.

So—

"No!" Danche snapped, stiffening his neck. "Our people are already purifying the pollution inside. Please wait here—your assistance is not needed!"

Negotiations failed.

Nidalee's expression turned sour; she felt deeply embarrassed. As she considered what new excuse she might use, Anno's eyes suddenly widened. "The demonic aura in the cave is growing stronger. We must hurry!"

At that, Charles's eyes focused, suspecting at once that these people were up to something they dared not reveal, and that was why they were blocking the way.

He stepped forward, just about to speak, when suddenly from the cave came a shriek like stone grinding on glass: "Aaaaooo—"

A wave of horrifying psychic pollution burst out—even under Anno's aura of divine protection, Charles felt a stabbing pain in his skull. The half-orcs ahead fared far worse.

"Ugh—!"

Danche, moments earlier so adamant, was struck by a splitting pain in his head. Wracked with agony, he clutched his skull, bowing, teeth gritted. He couldn't even soothe his chimera—he was barely holding on himself.

"GRAAAH—!"

Robbed of Danche's calm touch and assaulted by the demon's shriek, the strongest chimera at his side let out a savage snarl, unable to control the blaze and frenzy raging within. Its muscles tensed, and with a beat of its wings, it hurled itself straight at Charles.

Nor was it alone; wherever the beastmasters bowed in agony, their chimeras went mad as well. Two more followed Danche's beast in a frenzied pounce, another began thrashing and drooling in rabid delirium; the last dropped its goat head and charged its own master!

All at once, chaos erupted!

...

Ten minutes earlier.

Willo Green Vines, leading her tribe's spellcasters, advanced along this round cavern tunnel, two meters high. The pitch-dark cavern offered not a speck of natural light—but with fae blood in their veins, all were born spellcasters. Though not as adept as elves, simple spells to improve their environment posed no problem.

Now, each satyr's hand glowed with a Light spell—beams as bright as lanterns, slicing through the blackness.

But the deeper Willo went, the greater her unease.

It didn't feel like a natural cave, nor an animal's nest, nor a mine dug by dwarven miners. If anything, it seemed more like a colossal burrow carved out by some monstrous worm.

The more she observed, the more unsettled she became—could it be, that the demon here had awakened, even gained control of at least one Chthonian?

Was this cavern burrowed by a Chthonian?

Judging by its size, at least a mature Chthonian... And so quickly, too...

Heavens, was this cavern a coincidence, or intentionally made by that demon?

She dared not dwell on the thought—if it was the latter, then the demon's efficiency far surpassed her worst predictions, and the damage would be beyond her fears.

At the bleakest, if the Abyssal Lord succeeded, not just Liberl Port below the mountains, but perhaps a million square kilometers of plateau to the northwest could be shattered—lost forever!



And without the plateau's shield, the monsoons would sweep freely, impacting climate the world over...

No, progress must be hastened!

With rising dread, Willo pressed ahead. Turning another bend, they emerged into an enormous subterranean chamber.

It soared five or six meters high, easily covering ten thousand square meters—a plaza-sized vault. Stone pillars sprang from the floor, capped by draping stalactites, some long, some short, beautiful but ominous.

"Careful—there may be foes lurking here!"

Willo warned her kin, stepping warily ahead. Her fellow satyrs shifted formation, ringed defensively, swinging beams of light into every shadow to prevent ambush.

Deeper in, passing several stone columns, they discovered a crumbling stone stele at the very heart of the chamber. Vile Abyssal curses, scrawled in dripping blood, stained the weathered face; in front, decayed offerings and several pitch-black gems.

The moment Willo beheld the stele, pain lashed at her eyes and skull, hot tears stinging down her cheeks.

She blinked hard, suppressed her discomfort, and declared, "This is it. Everyone, hold watch. I'll remove the stele and purify this place!"

The satyr mages kept their backs to the stele, eyes on the shadows, guarding against any would-be attacker. Alone, Willo approached the stele, casting a protective spell on her eyes as she squinted to read the script.

Anxious, she recalled: this was her first time purifying such a site—no one had summoned demons here in decades.

Circling the stele, she compared every detail to her grandmother's grim textbook; convinced, she formed arcane signs and began her incantation.

Soft white light blossomed from her, flowing into the stele. She felt her strength draining, as though something were drawing her dry. The loss of control unnerved her; anxiety crept in. She clenched her teeth, fighting to control her mana and direct it evenly against the corruption imbued in the stele.

Then, a mighty suction seized her. The stele ripped away its camouflage, becoming a ravenous siphon, madly draining her mana!

Buzz—

The stone shuddered, and the whole underground vault quivered as if riven. Willo's eyes widened: her premonition had come true—the trap had closed on her!

A trap, set by demon-worshippers for this very moment!

"Fall back!" she screamed, throwing caution aside and bolting back.

Too late. The stele uttered a harrowing shriek, the sound of stone scraping upon glass—every satyr in the cavern reeled as agony ripped through their skulls.

A swirling vortex blossomed—a circular portal. Cackling demons surged from its swirling depths!

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*Chapter 175: Chapter 175: The Berserk Chimera*

At that moment, outside the cave.

The instant the shriek echoed forth, Danche felt a sharp stab in his mind, a nameless rage surging from deep within, his thoughts overcome by a maddening urge to kill!

Kill, kill, kill, kill, kill!

Fortunately, he had undergone rigorous training before coming here. He swiftly slapped himself hard, just barely pushing back the rising madness and preventing a total loss of control.

But this delay had already cost him precious seconds. He had no chance to soothe his chimera, forced to watch helplessly as the beast leapt with a roar straight toward the five figures ahead!

"Barbary!"

He cried out, both anxious and relieved. Anxious, because a berserk chimera turning on him could mean death or mortal wounds; relieved, because his chimera clearly loved him deeply—no matter its madness, it would not harm its master and instead chose to attack the enemy ahead!

Well, the foes were from Liberl Port anyway—a fight was inevitable. Let Barbary strike first and claim the advantage.

With such thoughts flashing through his mind, Danche allowed his chimera to attack. Part of him even wondered just how powerful his own training had made the beast.

Up front, when the chimera pounced, Charles's battle instincts surged—he immediately incanted, four washbasin-sized magic arrays spinning above his head: "Eldritch Blast!"

Surrounded by the paladins' Aura of Protection and with his own Eldritch Mind already honed, the mental impact on Charles was minimal. He could instantly react.

Four invisible strands of energy streaked out. The distance was great but Charles's improved attributes meant his aim was precise as ever, and the berserk chimera didn't even attempt to dodge.

All four blasts hit!

"ROAR—!"

All three of the chimera's heads screamed in agony as huge swathes of flesh were blasted to ribbons. The force damage of Eldritch Blast unravels matter at the most basic level; muscle tissue atomized into near nothingness. This torment was far worse than simply tearing out flesh!

"Bastard!"

In back, Danche's eyes bulged, fury surging anew to quash his reason. "Chimera tribe, attack!"

He bellowed, and the remaining half-orc warriors—already roused to a fever pitch by the demon's shriek—roared in feral fury! Axes raised, thick legs pounding the earth, they charged for Charles and his companions!

Meanwhile, Anno shook off the agony of the shriek and, seeing the chimera, her face hardened. "A red dragon head—that chimera can breathe fire! Spread out!"

"Charles, let's keep our distance and take turns tanking its attacks!"

She instantly assessed the subrace and gave orders—she and Charles both wielded shields, so she naturally regarded them as the frontline.

Hold the line so the rear spellcasters would have space to do their work.

It was a logical thought—but she didn't truly know a Hexblade's combat style.

Charles, with a single dash, retreated behind her, ensuring he remained within the Aura of Protection. He barked: "Fall back! Keep your distance! Hattie, restrain that chimera! Nidalee, split the battlefield! Theresa, blind them!"

Even as he shouted, Charles was already incanting—four massive round magic arrays formed behind him again!

Behind him, Hattie, Theresa, and Nidalee all retreated at speed. Though no longer shielded by the paladins' aura, they were well clear of the chimera's breath radius.

Each incanted quickly, readying spells, trusting Charles to deal with the monster and shifting their focus to the other incoming enemies.

Above, the chimera dove at them, dragon head gathering deadly flame. As it flew downward, it dipped low and spat forth—

Whooooosh—

A torrent of fire from the heavens! Fortunately, it wasn't a true red dragon, just a hybridized beast—temperature and area were limited, only covering Charles and Anno—

Buzz—

A golden Aura of Protection flared to life as the flames struck. At the same time, Charles completed the casting: "Absorb Elements!"

Absorb Elements!

Invisible magic power churned overhead, forming a translucent vortex. Most of the flames were swallowed up, the aura's protection dampened them further, and when the remnants struck, they felt more like scalding water than true fire. Between Charles's wards and Anno's plate armor, both shrugged off the flames with ease.

The rest of the fire only scorched the dried grass and leaves, impressive to behold but doing little real harm.

Meanwhile, the four magic arrays above Charles loosed their energies again.

Bang! Bang! Bang! BANG—

The blasts struck the chimera at close range, huge wounds opening, red flesh exposed and blood gushing, a grisly sight.

"ROAR—!"

Again, the chimera bellowed in agony. Eight Eldritch Blasts had nearly killed it, driving the last vestiges of sanity away, bloodlust boiling over. Ducking its goat head, it plummeted headlong, the massive, curling horns driving for Anno—

She raised her shield, dodging, but the goat head twisted nimbly for the perfect strike. The move was flawless—well-trained indeed.

She had to block, which was hardly ideal. The full weight of the chimera barreled down—the mighty horns slammed her shield dead on—

CLANG!

"Hngh!"

The impact numbed Anno's left arm, nearly knocking all sensation from her limb. Armored, she stumbled backward, boots skidding through burning grass, straight into Charles's arms.

"Ugh—"

Charles grunted, the attack disrupting his next spell, so he caught Anno, steadying her.

In front, the chimera's attack continued—relentless as a living siege engine, breathing as it rampaged.

Wings flared, it leapt, razor claws outstretched, the central lion head opening wide to reveal a bloody maw and gleaming tusks—

"Evard's Black Tentacles!"

Whoosh!

Hattie's incantation completed at that moment. Thick black tentacles erupted from the earth, snaring the chimera's limbs and wings, wrenching the beast hard down!

"ROAR—"

The chimera crashed to earth, snarling and snapping, but the tentacles held firm. Behind them, Hattie's face was cold—her spellcaster level might not be high, but the power of her spells still outmatched brute force!

Now it was time for the spellcasters to dominate the battlefield.

"Perfect!"

Charles's eyes brightened at the sight of the bound chimera. He released Anno, right hand sweeping upward as countless fiery threads wove in the air—a longsword, blazing with searing fire, materialized in his grip.

Add to that the previously cast Elemental Weapon, and the energy from Absorb Elements—his blade now burned with searing magical flame.

Advancing on the immobilized beast, Charles slashed down at its body—

Hiss—

Pinned by the black tentacles, the chimera could not dodge. The longsword, white-hot, sliced through the lion's mane and cleanly through its neck!

The searing flame charred flesh in an instant; even for a chimera, with its monstrous vitality, repeated deadly wounds were more than it could bear.

"Rrrgh..."

Even as the black tentacles sucked what was left of its strength through the gaping wound, the lion head groaned out a final death-cry, the massive body shuddered, and at last fell still.

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*Chapter 176: Chapter 176: Bloody Battle*

Danche could hardly believe his eyes.

What did he just witness?

His tribe's strongest, smartest, and most loyal chimera had been slain by the foe in less than a single exchange!

"Barbary—!"

He roared as if his eyes would split.

That was the chimera he had raised from infancy, painstakingly trained. It was robust and intelligent, picking up battle techniques and tactics with ease, even willing to accept armor—arguably the finest chimera in the tribe's history!

He'd dreamed of conquering enemies at its side, sweeping away all foes and bringing honor and power to his clan. Never did he imagine that today, the Barbary he placed all his hopes upon—before achieving a single great deed—would be slain by a stranger from Sein!

"Unforgivable! Burn them all!"

He bellowed, the blaze of rage devouring all sense, then gripped his weapon and charged heedlessly forward, vowing to personally avenge his fallen companion!

Across the field, the other high-level spellcasters had completed their incantations!

"Color Spray."

Theresa finished first—her Color Spray was heightened to fifth level, and her mastery over light focused the dazzling hues squarely on the remaining four chimera!

In an instant, bands of radiant color blinded each of the four chimera, whether they were leaping, vomiting, or rampaging—they all became sightless in a heartbeat!

"Spike Growth!"

Nidalee was the last to finish her incantation, but her spell's area dwarfed all others. Thick brambles erupted across the center of the battlefield. Caught off guard, the half-orcs stumbled through—neither animal-hide boots nor calloused soles could shield them from the magical thorns. Blood and shrieks filled the air as their momentum faltered, the ground beneath them becoming a patchwork of agony and chaos!

"Beautifully done, Nidalee!"

As the half-orcs' assault faltered, their howls echoing, Charles shouted his approval. "Anno, fall back—don't let them surround us!"

But Anno was already standing between him and the enemy, braced to retreat together: "Understood!"

Realizing her role was to shield and provide an opening for her master's ranged spells, Anno readied her shield with purpose.

Her left arm had recovered, paladin bodies long conditioned by sacred rites. Shield forward once again, she stood as the front line against the orcs: "You focus on spellcasting!"

"Right!"

Charles flicked his sword aside; the pact weapon dissolved into a thousand sparks. He raised his hand, forming gestures and reciting the incantation as the eldritch circles glinted again—

Buzz—

Four blasts of energy streaked out. The half-orcs on the brambles tried to dive, but his aim, while not perfect, was deadly—two targets struck. Eldritch Blast's force blew through animal hide, pulverizing one's shoulder and caving in another's chest—one orc slumped, breath barely flickering, life almost gone.

By now, the first half-orc finally staggered past the thorns. Faces twisted in pain, their feet bleeding profusely; every step toward the fray was an ordeal.

Yet still they pressed on, axes raised high, hacking directly for Anno—

Clang!

Anno took half a step back, tilting her shield. The heavy greataxe skidded aside, glancing away.

With the deflection, she spun, steel longsword flashing in a horizontal slash—

Slice—

The keen blade tore through animal hide, cutting a bone-deep wound in the orc's chest. Blood gushed freely!

As a lifelong-trained female knight, Anno's expertise in shield combat was far beyond what Charles imagined. Against varying foes and weapons, she always had a defensive counter, remaining unscathed while striking back with lethal precision.

Against these brute-force half-orcs, she never tried to meet blows head-on, but rather turned their strength against them.

Yet such techniques excelled in one-on-one duels; on a battlefield outnumbered, her real challenge was many against few!

Other half-orcs charged past the brambles, some circling for the flanks. Anno took no pride—retreating nimbly, she called out commands: "Back up! Charles, keep casting—don't let them encircle us!"

Just then, a flutter of fragrance—Hattie, in her deep blue mage's robe, strode boldly past Anno, heading not for safety, but straight into the heart of the orcs' formation!



Anno's eyes widened. She'd thought Hattie was a mage, suited for shelter behind the front—never imagining such audacious courage to charge right in.

Then, from ahead, Hattie intoned an arcane phrase: "Arms of Hadar!"

Arms of Hadar—empowered to fourth level!

Whoosh—

Dark, chilling tentacles burst forth from her aura—each five or six meters long, whipping across the battlefield and seizing charging half-orcs. Their blood ran cold, limbs frozen with dread.

Axes rose and fell in vain—their frozen muscles too weak, fending off not just magical force but invisible shields and layered wards.

There stood Hattie, one woman alone, a wall the half-orcs could not breach!

Anno gaped in shock. It turned out the shield-bearer Charles was truly a ranged specialist with self-protection, while the mage-robed, tentacle-summoning Hattie was the team's true vanguard!

Having realized this, she adapted quickly—no longer retreating, but stepping forward, striking from within the shield of chilling tentacles, launching aggressive attacks on the stunned half-orcs!

The fight was brutal. This force of over twenty half-orcs and five chimera could not bring down a team of five—and was being worn down themselves. If word got out, it would be a lasting disgrace to the Chimera tribe.

Just then, at the rear, the team's sole shaman finally took action.

"Animal Friendship!"

He chanted long and low, the magic guiding the chimera—though blinded, agitated, and rampant, they followed his call, gathering by his side and bowing before his calming touch.

"Lesser Restoration!"

He completed the spell, his hands pressed to each chimera's brow, dissolving their agony.

Eight spells in all nearly drained his mana, but at last, each chimera's blindness and madness was reversed.

Seeing his four newly-calmed chimera, the shaman managed a relieved smile. He was about to command an assault—to turn the tide—when, from inside the cave, a satyr in yellow leaves came running in panic: "It's a trap—retreat now!"

The shaman froze. More satyrs poured out after, utterly routed. Before they could utter a warning, a host of Dretch burst forth behind them, howling, stinking, charging into the chaos!

Instantly, the shaman's face changed: "Children, destroy the demons!"

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*Chapter 177: Chapter 177: Hezrou*

Upon receiving the shaman's command, the four half-orcs—each the dedicated beastmaster of a chimera—each produced a handbell, shaking them with a crisp ringing as they gave harsh, guttural commands for attack!

One beastmaster, his head bloodied from an earlier raid, had no time for his wounds; all he cared for now was destroying these demons as quickly as possible.

"ROAR—!"

The four massive chimera whirled in unison, bellowing as their powerful bodies lunged forward, barreling through the panicked satyrs to engage the Dretch at close quarters. Huge claws lashed down.

Though the Dretch, as demons, had tough, resistant hides that repelled most non-magical weapons, the chimeras' tremendous muscle power and razor lion claws still ripped them open, cleaving deep bone-revealing wounds and gushing putrid green blood.

Simultaneously, their three heads attacked relentlessly—the lion biting, the goat ramming with its curled horns, raw strength cast about recklessly. Wherever their strikes landed, the Dretch were either mauled or killed outright!

With bodies nearly two meters tall and weighing almost a ton, the chimeras easily tore through the diminutive—barely four-foot—demons by brute force alone.

This was their true power, and they hadn't even unleashed their most devastating weapon—the Dragon's Breath. But the chimeras were well-trained: they would not waste their precious breath weapon without their master's command.

"It's time. Breathe—now!"

Watching satyr numbers dwindle, the old shaman confirmed that everyone had successfully escaped the cavern before shouting the order.

At once, the beastmasters howled another sequence of arcane commands. In response, the chimera's Red Dragon heads finally dipped and, after holding back for so long, unleashed great torrents of flame—

WHOOSH—

Four blazing torrents swept over the battlefield, instantly igniting the dry grass and brush. Roaring flames churned the air, sending whirling bursts of hot wind across the cliffside!

"SKREEEE—!"

The ensnared Dretch screamed as they burned. Even demon hide could not withstand the searing fire: they had no chance to spread their pollution, their bodies vaporized by the dragonfire, their souls cast back to the Infinite Layers of the Abyss for renewal!

The half-orc shaman breathed a sigh of relief. Seeing that barely a few Dretch remained, he felt the field was almost secure.

He turned to the battered satyr matriarch, Willo Green Vines. At this moment, her white hair—or rather, her fleece—as well as her face and robe, were filthy with ash, sticky green pus, and dark red blood. Clearly, she hadn't had an easy time escaping the carnage.

The shaman called out with concern, "My lady, how are you? The battle's over, you can relax now."

Willo shook her head hard, her drooping sheep ears quivering. "No, it's not over yet—not even close. There's something even worse in the cavern!"

And as if summoned by her words, towering black silhouettes loomed forth from the cave, flanked by the remaining Dretch.

Four massive, monstrous demons stepped into the fading light—like giant bipedal toads, each nearly three meters tall, their hideous muscles taut beneath thick, warty demon skin.

Along their backs, rows of bulbous, swelling glands pulsed, ready to erupt with deadly venom at any instant.

At their arrival, the shaman's pupils contracted sharply. "More demons! Get the chimeras up there—keep fighting!"

The beastmasters bellowed again, and the chimeras charged the new demons fearlessly. But now, claws that had shredded Dretch with ease left only faint scratch marks across this new breed's ultra-thick skin—totally ineffective!

When the hezrou raised their hands, their claws gleamed razor-sharp like steel knives. With powerful swipes, they easily ripped open the chimera's flesh, sending blood pouring out.

"GRAAAAH—"

The four chimeras howled in anguish. In the rear, the shaman's heart nearly stopped—his face went pale with fear.

Could it be? Were the tribe's finest five chimeras about to die here?

He didn't know—and at the edge of the field, Charles's face darkened as he instantly recognized their foe.

Hezrou!

From the Infinite Layers of the Abyss, these are high-ranking, powerful demons. Their thick skin can resist most flame, cold, and lightning. Non-magical weapons can barely scratch them.

They are surrounded by a nauseating stench and sport claws sharp enough to tear steel. Even heavy plate armor is scant protection against their attacks.

The Adventurer's Guild rates these creatures as challenge rating eight—making them stronger than Hattie and Ruth were before their purification.

But most teams can't afford magical weapons to breach that defense. Even an ordinary level-eight adventuring party would have a hard time dealing with these monsters.

Just as now—even the chimera's claws barely scratch them. Several half-orc warriors swung their iron greataxes, only to feel as if striking stone, chipping mere flakes of demon skin but never reaching the flesh beneath!

But... were they not the demons' enemies as well?

Watching the embattled chimeras and half-orc warriors clash with the hezrou, Charles' mind raced. Suddenly, he stepped to the side, raised his hand, and formed the gesture for Eldritch Blast—

Buzz—

Four beams of energy tore through the air. The charging half-orcs ducked low, but Eldritch Blast wasn't aimed at them. Instead, it raced for a hezrou further back!

That hezrou had battered a chimera nearly to death, raising its claw to deliver a finishing blow to the lion's neck—when four energies slammed into its body!

"SKREEEEEE!"

The energy exploded across its demon hide, blasting four craters in its arm and side. The hezrou staggered, shrieking in pain!

Reeling, it turned toward the attack's source, its muddled gaze brimming with vengeful malice. Eldritch Blast's unique power unraveled matter directly—demon skin could not stop it. In an instant, the hezrou was wounded!

All around, the half-orcs were stunned. Beset on both sides by Charles's party and the demons, they had felt a cloud of despair gathering—but perhaps there was hope?

"Prioritize destroying the demons!" Charles called, backing up a few steps. Four more Eldritch Blast circles spun overhead as he sent crackling energy streaking toward another hezrou pursuing half-orc warriors in the rear.

He paid no heed to the first one. That hezrou might now hate him, but it would have to cross a deadly bramble field and get through over a dozen half-orcs before reaching him—he had no fear.

His immediate goal was to save a handful of half-orcs and show his intentions: fighting the demons.

That second hezrou was even more ferocious, having already slain the chimera it fought and now chasing the surviving half-orc warriors.

But against Charles's sudden barrage of Eldritch Blast, it was utterly unprepared. He didn't even try to dodge—and Charles's marksmanship meant every shot hit!

Energy beams tore straight through its demon hide, shattering the protective covering and bursting one of the inflamed glands!

Yellow-green pus and noxious stench spattered everywhere. The panicked half-orcs looked sick—a few doubled over, vomiting violently.

One of them was badly poisoned, but at least now, he was saved. Abandoning the chase, the hezrou turned and charged for Charles instead!

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