

Witch Monastery #Chapter 181: Shadow Demon: Sneak Attack! - Read Witch Monastery Chapter 181: Shadow Demon: Sneak Attack!

Chapter 181: Chapter 181: Shadow Demon: Sneak Attack!

The material world is not perfect. Though the Gods of Order refuse to admit it, the reality remains—this world is full of flaws. Countless streams of chaos energy beyond the world itself seep in through these cracks, spawning all manner of dreadful entities.

The great fissures in reality give birth to the Outer Gods; when these beings awaken from their ancient slumber, the cracks spread infinitely, and the entire cosmos can unravel.

Slightly lesser rifts spawn the Great Old Ones, each capable of destroying a world.

Smaller fissures breed myriad kinds of chaotic horrors—like the Color out of Space, the Hounds of Tindalos, and the Black Goat's offspring...

Hattie and her kin are technically among this last type. They just happened to gain greater intelligence and stable spellcasting abilities, as well as the capacity for humanoid form. Thus, they became known as "witches."

The Chthonian that Willo mentioned earlier, though worm-like in outward shape, is also one such creature. Their bodies are colossal, sheathed in magma-like heat able to bore through solid rock. An adult is capable of causing earthquakes; many ancient cities were destroyed by these monstrous worms!

Legend holds that the most formidable of these, the Great Old One known as Shudde M'ell, could trigger quakes strong enough to sink continents.

Thinking of the devastation wrought by such a worm, Charles's face grew grim. "Matriarch, are you saying this cavern was carved by a Chthonian?"

If that truly was an adult Chthonian...

Yikes.

Given the team's current strength, it wouldn't be impossible to fight one. With Theresa's power, soloing one would be no problem.

Besides, while Chthonians are powerful, they have an obvious weakness—they fear water.

As it happened, the first spell Charles learned in this world was Create Water. Both Hattie and Nidalee could also cast it. If it came to flooding the cavern, they'd have no problem drowning a Chthonian.

Unfortunately, they were still deep inside. If the creature triggered a collapse, no one would make it out alive.

Willo nodded, her expression grave. "Yes, our ancestors recorded among these mountains a slumbering host of Chthonians. Now, it seems they may have been disturbed by demon pollution."

"Even worse, some may have already fallen under the control of demon-worshippers..."

Charles drew in a deep breath, suppressing an urge to turn back at once.

Still, he managed a strained smile. "It's not so bad. Don't worry—Chthonians' weakness is obvious, they fear water, so they aren't difficult to handle."

"As long as the legendary Shudde M'ell doesn't appear, a normal adult Chthonian isn't so hard to beat, hah... hah...?"

He forced a laugh, hoping to ease the tension—only to see Willo's eyes grow even more dire.

A creeping sense of dread overtook him. "Wait—don't tell me..."

He watched as Willo's expression became conflicted and, after a moment, she tried to reassure him: "It's all right. Shudde M'ell sleeps deeply. Ordinary pollution would never be enough to wake it..."

Charles: "..."

Damn. So it really is beneath these mountains!

His scalp tingled. Shudde M'ell is not only a Great Old One—a true endgame boss—but in the early game, there's no way to encounter it: even late in the campaign, it only ever appears as a "foreseen" threat that has awakened and left its nest. Where it shows up is completely randomized!

He never expected the slumbering place of Shudde M'ell to be so close—right beneath the highlands near Liberl Port.

Trouble, indeed...

Now all he could do was hope, desperately, that Willo was right and this cataclysmic Great Old One would not be so easily roused by some demon presence...

With heavy hearts and full wariness toward the Chthonian threat, they pressed on, using their magical light to illuminate the path. Rounding a bend, they soon reached the great cavern lined with stalactites.

But unlike before, the darkness now threatened with unmistakable danger.

Some demons had not left, but rather hid within the shadows, waiting patiently for prey to wander in.

Charles and Willo exchanged looks, the same realization dawning. Willo turned and instructed another satyr, "Shaun, I'll watch the front, you cover the rear—don't let a single blind spot escape."

"Everyone, be vigilant—whatever you do, do not fall to a sneak attack!"

This warning put the entire party on high alert.

Charles called over his shoulder, "Theresa—give us light."

Theresa nodded, raising her hand and incanting: "Daylight!"

Buzz—

A pure white light blossomed near the center of the cavern's ceiling, instantly illuminating the entire cave.

Daylight, a third-level spell—no damaging effect, only the power to utterly dispel the dark.

With this dazzling brilliance, even the deepest shadows were stripped bare.

And in this flood of sunlight, the fiends lurking in darkness were finally exposed!

"Hiss—"

Accompanied by whispers of agony and spite, figures formed of half-translucent black mist, manifesting as upper-bodied humanoid demons, floated out from behind the stone columns. Their long tongues lolled slack; two black, talon-like claws stretched from their forms, their shapes wavering, just on the verge of vanishing from sight.

At one glance, Charles instantly recognized them.

Shadow demons—fiends whose strengths and vulnerabilities are equally obvious. Their bodies can become pure shadow, merging with darkness so completely that even those with darkvision cannot pierce their camouflage.

They can easily pass through solid stone.

But their fatal flaw: intense light—even artificial, not just sunlight—renders them fragile, their power greatly diminished. Radiant damage, especially Divine Smite, deals double harm!

No wonder they'd been hiding in the cave, poised to ambush—they were helpless in the broad, deadly light of the spell.

The Adventurer's Guild rates these creatures at challenge rating four; in dim conditions, even a fifth-level party can be wiped out. But under the protection of a bright, battlefield-wide light, a third-level team could slaughter them wholesale!

Luckily, they had Theresa—the perfect light-bringer. Swamped by the harsh illumination, the shadow demons' patience at last crumbled!

"Watch out—!"

Suddenly, Charles spotted a shadow demon, previously hiding in a column right beside Willo, lunge toward her, eagle-like claws aiming for her head!

He rushed to intervene, spellcasting already begun—but in that split second, he was too late.

"Danger!"

Intent on currying favor with the satyrs, Danche cried out, keeping constant watch on Willo. With a sudden leap, he tackled her out of the way—

"Ah—!"

Thanks to him, Willo evaded the shadow demon by a hair's breadth, but lost her balance and staggered aside—

"Careful!"

Charles darted forward, arms wide, and caught her—

BANG—

Willo crashed into his solid chest; fortunately, with his attributes increased, his slim frame now concealed strength to rival any half-orc present. Even with Willo's full weight in his arms, Charles stood steady as a rock. His left arm locked her in a safe embrace, while his right summoned four bolts of Eldritch Blast—

"Hiss—!"

The force of dissolution tore into the shadow demon's body, making it scream in torment. Face grave, Charles held Willo securely, retreating with her from the front lines while continuing to unleash blasts of Eldritch energy!

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Chapter 182: Chapter 182: The Soft-Boned Matriarch

Lying in his arms, recently snatched from the jaws of death, Willo was still shaken. Her heart pounded rapidly, as if she had just ridden a rollercoaster, but in that moment, she found the man's broad, heated chest radiated such a powerful sense of security that she just wanted to curl up as she had in childhood and never let go.

Reflexively, she slipped her arms beneath his, hugging his chest, her cheek nestled against his torso, savoring that brief tranquility.

Across the cavern, Danche—dusted and a little battered from his leap—rose unsteadily and, upon seeing Willo cradled so trustingly in Charles's embrace, eyes flashed with anger.

You again, man of Sein!

This grudge—I'll remember it as well!

Danche clenched his jaw but forced himself to endure. Now was no time for vengeance—he took up his greataxe anew and turned to face the swarm of shadow demons.

Charles, meanwhile, suddenly became aware of just how soft Willo felt—her body seeming almost boneless, like a bundle of warm, cotton-stuffed clay melting into his arms. And he realized, acutely, that this woman wasn't wearing any undergarment, so the curve of her breasts pressed against his chest, separated only by thin layers of cloth, radiating unmistakable warmth and yielding but resilient pressure.

His blood pressure climbed, and to avoid embarrassment, he quickly let go, shifting so he stood before Willo. "Stay behind me; I'll deal with these demons!"

Even as he spoke, he strode forward, meeting a lunging shadow demon head-on, brushing aside its talons and thrusting his blade through its body: "Purified!"

Buzz—

With Theresa's intense radiance flooding the battle, these shadow demons, blinded by the light, could neither see their foes nor resist incoming attacks. What once seemed a tremendous threat could only flop helplessly, like fish on the butcher's block.

"Aaah—!"

Amid the misty, purified white light, the demon shrieked and was shredded apart, its form vanishing without a trace.

No time to check his gains, Charles darted toward the next foe.

Behind him, Willo, watching his swift, decisive form, blushed as she realized what she'd just done. She quickly composed herself, began to cast a cantrip, and joined the fight against the demons.

Elsewhere, Anno brought her longsword down on a shadow demon; golden light flashed from the blade—

Buzz—

The holy power sliced clean through the demon as if through butter. Its screech of agony was brief, and in the next moment, it dissipated to nothingness!

She had felled it with a single Divine Smite.

Seeing this, Anno looked momentarily awkward. "Uh... sorry, Charles, I didn't hold back on that one... I'll let you have the next!"

Charles flashed a wry smile—of course he did not blame her. "It's fine! I'll handle it myself."

With that, he turned and rejoined the fray.

Theresa's guiding bolts, meanwhile, nearly vaporized her targets one after the other. She had to intentionally restrain her spell's might, leaving the shadow demons half-dead so Charles could reach them and purify the rest.

As for Hattie and Nidalee, lacking effective means against this demonic breed, they shamelessly hung to the sidelines. This lack of team spirit stood in stark contrast to the half-orc warriors, who fought with desperate valor, swinging mundane axes that couldn't really hurt the shadow demons but valiantly refusing to yield.

Still, in the severe brilliance of Theresa's light, these shadow demons were hardly more threatening than Dretch. In the end, the whole group routed their enemies with only minor mishaps.

Unfortunately, because the foes' weakness was so obvious and their fragility so pronounced in the light, Charles only managed to finish off three himself, earning a mere 1500 Purification Points.

This brought his balance near 8000—just a step away from the next level-up.

Now, only one target remained: the stele at the center of the cave, scorched with bloody, abyssal blasphemies.

It was a wellspring of pollution, injecting madness deep into the mountains. Based on Willo Green Vines's deduction, the demon-worshippers had set it here in hopes of polluting, corrupting, and ultimately controlling more Chthonians—since this cave's shape alone made it clear a slumbering Chthonian was near.

The demon-worshippers knew the grave risks here. They left no guardians but only a trap: if attacked, the stele would open a portal to the Infinite Layers of the Abyss, unleashing a torrent of demons to kill any foes.

With that trap already spent, only unease remained as Charles regarded the stele, his mind turning over Willo's recent intelligence.

Willo evidently felt the same. The satyr's hands crossed over her chest, face overwrought with worry. "We don't know if the demon-worshippers prepared other contingencies. If they did, we could be forced to face a Chthonian..."

Charles looked up at the cluster of stalactites and the ceiling; the prospect of fighting a Chthonian in this environment made his blood run cold.

The worst possible scenario... but there was no backing out now.

"We need to prepare some water," he said. "If a Chthonian does burst out, we can drive it off without causing even worse damage."

Willo nodded in agreement. "Shall we fetch water?"

Charles shook his head. "No need, we have an everflowing water bottle. Did you bring any containers? We'll just fill as many as we can for the fight."

At this, Willo's eyes lit up and she sighed with relief. "That's wonderful—having this makes things much easier."

Charles smiled softly, offering no further comment. After all, it was the mountain folk who scorned all things from Liberl Port and 'modern' magical creations—only to praise them when put to use themselves.

He dropped the issue. The group all took out flasks or buckets—whatever they had—and with the everflowing water bottle, he filled each in turn as preparation.

"When the battle starts, stay close to Knight Anno as much as possible," Charles instructed. "Chthonians can dominate minds, but a paladin's Aura of Protection can shield you from such influence."

Willo nodded. "Mr. Charles is right; everyone must follow orders."

Danche looked surly, but he knew nothing of these matters; in the end, he just lowered his head and accepted Willo's word.

Charles tracked everything carefully, considering a plan. Once all the water containers were filled, he went to the half-orc and offered him the everflowing water bottle.

"Mr. Danche," he said, "I'd like you to take this everflowing water bottle for now."

Danche's head jerked up, stunned. "You'd lend it to me?"

"Yes." Charles nodded. "We're all busy spellcasting; it would be wasted in my hands."

"You should take it—just say the command word, and it will shoot a powerful jet of water; perfect for killing a Chthonian."

He fixed Danche with a look of sincere encouragement. "Besides, none of us move as well as you. This weapon's greatest strength will shine in your hands."

"Mr. Danche, our safety is in your hands."

Danche fell silent. Beside him, Willo urged, "Take it, Danche. None of us is a better warrior than you."

That, at last, did it. The half-orc took the bottle. "Fine. I'll return it after the battle."

His tone was as cold as ever, but Willo beamed a radiant smile. The other male satyr smiled as well. Originating from the Feywild, their senses of mood were acute. They all felt, thanks to Charles's gesture, mutual suspicion was finally starting to thaw...

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Chapter 183: Chapter 183: The Mad Chthonian

In short, with all early preparations complete, it was finally time to eradicate the source of pollution here!

Charles took a deep breath, steadied his mind, then walked up to the stele. Placing a hand on its surface, he silently intoned, "Purified!"

Buzz—

A purifying white light flared atop the stele, and the blood-red Abyssal inscriptions dissolved at rapid speed.

He had no idea if this thing would still yield him some Purification Points, but it was worth a try, no matter what.

As the blood inscriptions faded from the stele, the earth beneath his feet began to tremble. At first it was just a faint vibration, but soon the entire cavern started to shake. Stalactites hanging from the ceiling shuddered as if ready to shatter and fall at any moment.

The suspicion was confirmed. There truly was a Chthonian here!

Willo's expression shifted dramatically, and she cried in alarm, "Careful! The Chthonian is coming!"

Charles's face hardened, but at these words he stood his ground, neither fearful nor retreating, channeling the force of purification into the stele—

Buzz—

As the last blood rune disappeared, an even more terrifying quake erupted below. An intense sense of crisis gripped his chest, and almost instinctively, he incanted the Shield spell: "Shield!"

Buzz—

An unseen barrier of magic instantly enveloped him. In the very next instant, a monstrous entity—two meters thick, its surface radiating scorching heat, crowned with countless tentacles—burst from the rock beneath his feet!

Boom—!

Caught off guard, Charles was hurled upward despite the magical Shield, the titanic impact slamming him into the air!

At the same time, the creature's tentacles lashed toward him. Though these physical strikes were stopped by the shield, the intense heat at such close range nearly seared through his clothing, and he was consumed by agony.

He spun through the air amidst flying debris, crashing heavily to the ground and feeling the world spin, barely able to stand back up.

"Charles!"

As the Chthonian revealed itself, Anno, despite the monstrous foe and falling rocks, cried out in panic and darted to his side. She dropped to one knee and pressed her hand to him, "Lay on Hands!"

Golden holy light surged into his body. The battered and dizzy Charles felt relief at once and croaked, "Cough—I'm all right!"

He struggled to his feet; Shield had blocked most of the shock, debris, and fall damage, but the lava-like heat of the Chthonian had badly burned him. Fortunately, the healing light was strong enough, and he hadn't lost the ability to move.

The others rushed over, gathering not precisely around him but around Anno, to benefit from the Aura of Protection.

By then, the gigantic worm, briefly frozen by Armor of Agathys, squirmed its colossal body uneasily instead of launching another assault.

For the first time, Charles had a moment to observe a true Chthonian in the real world. Its body was like an unimaginably enormous worm—over two meters thick and as much as ten, even nearly twenty meters long; its head bristled with squid-like tentacles used for burrowing through the earth and as deadly weapons in battle.

Because it perpetually moved through subterranean stone, its flesh radiated deadly volcanic heat. The heat was at least as fatal as the brute force of the monster.

Confronted by this Chthonian, everyone was shaken. Only Hattie and Theresa retained composure. Hattie drew a deep breath and called out, "Don't panic! Its weakness is obvious—use the water we prepared—"

She didn't finish her sentence before a stabbing headache struck, battered by an urge to lash out wildly at those beside her.

She wasn't alone—everyone nearby was affected. The middle-aged half-orc of Danche's tribe dropped to his knees, roaring in pain with his hands clutching his head.

It was the Chthonian's psychic magic, trying to seize control of them all!

"Hold fast! Don't let it enslave you!"

Suddenly golden radiance burst from Anno, enveloping everyone in light and causing her silver armor to blaze gold.

In that moment, her voice seemed like a blessing from the heavens, instantly driving the stabbing pain and uncontrollable aggression from the minds of all. Seeing Charles wounded, she took command without hesitation: "Follow our plan—douse it with water!"

Beside her, regaining his senses, Danche growled through clenched teeth, "Monster—just die!"

He hoisted the everflowing water bottle and shouted the activation word: "Geyser!"

Whoosh—

A blasting pillar of water shot forth like an unstoppable high-pressure jet, drenching the burrowing worm!

Simultaneously, the middle-aged half-orc hurled a bucket of water; the male satyr and elder half-orc cast cantrips for minor damage; Hattie, Nidalee, and Willo each unleashed a 1st-level Create Water spell, summoning a total of three hundred liters of ice water above the Chthonian from thirty meters away!

The water rained down, catching the spellcasting Chthonian off guard—it clearly hadn't expected them to withstand its psychic assault and respond with such focused water attacks. Sheets of icy water cascaded down, clouds of steam erupting instantly from its body as it writhed in agony—

Rumble—

Its berserk spasms made the cave tremble violently, stalactites smashing down. Charles, readying another spell, was forced to raise another Shield for protection, and the others all ducked to shield themselves from the falling rocks.

The Chthonian, seizing this chance, spun and retreated down the tunnel at high speed.

The shaking subsided and quiet returned to the cave. Charles looked around—the party was battered but alive.

He breathed a sigh of relief and asked, "At least we're safe... Anno, is the demon pollution purified? Can you still feel any lingering madness?"

Willo turned her gaze as well, and Anno immediately nodded, "It's completely purified; we should withdraw!"

Fighting a creature capable of causing earthquakes underground was surely madness. Charles naturally agreed and gestured, "Let's go—everyone outside!"

Without protest, the group hurried to retrace their steps. But after only a few strides, the earth rumbled again, more strongly with every pulse!

Charles's face blanched. "Is this thing insane? It knows we have water—why keep attacking like this?"

Though Chthonians were spawned through cosmic loopholes, they weren't idiots. They never sought death needlessly and would always avoid water underground. Having resisted its psychic power and doused it with water, it should have fled!

And yet it hadn't—perhaps because...

At his side, Willo looked grim. "It's possible—it truly has lost its mind!"

No sooner had she spoken than a brutal tremor shook the ground. Charles's face fell and he bellowed, "Scatter!"

As he did, he lunged forward, tackling Anno—the most encumbered in her plate armor—out of harm's way: "Shield!"

Buzz—

Magic energy enveloped him. The Chthonian burst from the rock once more.

By luck, he wasn't struck head-on—he was barely clipped by a tentacle, tumbling with Anno to the side.

The rest scattered. Hattie and Theresa soared into the air; Nidalee transformed into a leopard and leapt clear. Willo and the remaining satyrs and half-orcs were less fortunate—while they tried to use magic for protection, the Chthonian's strength and searing heat left them badly hurt in an instant!

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Chapter 184: Chapter 184: The Purified Chthonian

"Pfff—"

Rolling across the ground with Anno in her heavy plate armor, Charles felt as if his arm was about to snap and his back was severely burned. Ignoring his own pain, he twisted, gritted his teeth, and began incanting: "Create or Destroy Water!"

Create Water/Destroy Water—a fourth-level spell!

Rage burned in his chest. Since this worm was hellbent on its own destruction, he would go all out and try every means to bring it down!

Whoosh—

Two hundred liters of ice water rained down, but it wasn't from his incantation; Hattie had already finished casting her spell from afar.

She now hovered in midair, her expression cold and resolute, unphased by the trembling earth. She continued her incantations relentlessly, so torrents of ice water drenched the monster's body.

Next came Charles's own turn, conjuring another two hundred liters of freezing water, all pouring down on the Chthonian.

Farther away, Willo ignored her injuries and joined in with the same incantation. Still farther off, Nidalee shifted to her human form—naturally, as a druid, she too could cast this spell. Their spellcasting abilities, though, were more limited and only produced first-level versions, conjuring a hundred liters of ice water each to strike the Chthonian.

Elsewhere, though thrown to the ground, Danche had not been struck by the monster's main attack and was not badly hurt.

When he looked for his kin, however, he saw the middle-aged half-orc warrior's body—half-charred, lying among broken stone and utterly lifeless.

"No! Uncle—!"

Danche felt as though a great hand had clenched around his heart. He was young, inexperienced in death—until now, he'd only witnessed serious wounds, never true loss.

In that moment, to see his own uncle fall tore him apart with fury. Eyes red, he roared at the Chthonian, "May you die in agony!"

Before the words left his lips, he was already charging the beast, reckless, fearless: "Geyser!"

Snatching up the everflowing water bottle Charles had given him, Danche began chanting the activation command, and a heavy torrent of one hundred liters blasted into the beast.

"Geyser!"

"Geyser!!"

"Geyser!!!"

He bellowed, repeating the command over and over. Unlike Charles's Create Water, which required spell slots, the everflowing water bottle needed none—just the command word and a limitless flood poured forth.

He washed the Chthonian from head to tail, dealing it tremendous agony. For that moment, Danche even felt grateful to Charles—if not for receiving the bottle, he could only watch his uncle die and do nothing.

Chthonian, your life is mine.

That thought consumed him as he charged closer, maximizing the water's effect. He was about to activate a fifth time when, with a wild twist, the Chthonian's tentacles lashed out—

BANG—!

Danche, caught utterly off guard at such close range, was struck by a tentacle and sent flying. His animal hide armor was instantly scorched to a crisp and the skin beneath severely burned.

The real terror, though, was the Chthonian's raw strength; Danche spun through the air, crashed into a stone, and blacked out, unconscious.

The everflowing water bottle tumbled from his grasp and temporarily out of play.

"Danche!"

Seeing this, Willo cried out in anguish—every life lost cut her to the core. Charles, meanwhile, silently thanked him for his courage and the precious time he'd bought them.

And the space to attack.

Charles resumed casting, summoning more and more ice water.

Above, Theresa floated untouched by the earthquake. She didn't know Create Water, so she fired guiding bolts at the Chthonian, her damage barely less than anyone else's.

Suddenly, her brow furrowed—she sensed the worm was nearly dead. Using her precognition, she quickly turned and called to Charles, "Master... Priest, you should be able to purify it!"

Charles froze—of course he knew, Chthonians, like witches, were anomalous beings. Since witches could be purified, so could these worms.

But... such a colossal creature with heat like magma...

How many Purification Points would it earn him?

Worth the risk? Or not?

He wavered, torn between greed and fear, and Theresa urged again, "You can do it!"

That settled it—greed won.

Such a rare opportunity! He went for it.

Abandoning spellcasting, Charles summoned his longsword and sprinted forward. "Hattie, draw its attention. I'll purify it!"

At once, Hattie slowed, conjured water before her and shoved it at the Chthonian—demonstrating damage and drawing its wrath.

The giant monster took the bait, writhing toward Hattie. At that moment, Charles ran in, shed his shield, grabbed his sword in both hands, and leapt onto the creature's body, stabbing downward—

Ssst—

Longsword pierced the Chthonian's hide; softer than expected. But the hellish heat surged up at once. Wasting no time, Charles unleashed his core ability: "Purified!"

Buzz—

Milky light flowed into the worm, and its body started to dissolve. At that very moment, with temperatures exceeding a thousand degrees, his body began to burn with unimaginable agony.

"Absorb Elements!"

He quickly called the spell, a magical vortex absorbing most of the energy, but even so, being in contact with the Chthonian's lava flesh was sheer torture. His own skin began to char, the pain tearing through his mind with unspeakable torment.

As something even darker threatened his body and soul, the Chthonian became more desperate, sensing the source of the agony—the tiny human clinging to its back. In a frenzy, it rolled over, intent on crushing Charles.

"Well—!"

That hot, yielding flesh scorched him; he felt his face burn, his hair almost ignite. The monster's weight was crushing, but distributed enough not to break him outright—heat was the true danger.

Scalded all over, his face severely burned—nearly disfigured!

Whoosh—

At last, having survived the last torment, the demon-polluted, maddened Chthonian could no longer endure. Its immense body dissolved into pure white light, fully purified, no trace remaining—forever gone.

"Priest!"

"Charles!"

"Mr. Charles!"

Nidalee, Anno, and Willo each cried out, all three dashing for him.

Nidalee paused halfway and began chanting healing nature spells. The other two rushed to his side, Anno using paladin healing, Willo casting Cure Wounds to pour healing magic into his body.

"Hah—"

As Charles drew near the Chthonian, he'd inhaled a lungful of superheated vapor—his lungs felt scorched alongside his skin.

But under threefold magical healing, his wounds rapidly improved; his burnt face scabbed over, his alveoli regenerated, and he could breathe again, restoring strength to his body.

Gasping deep breaths, he finally found his voice, "I feel much better, really."

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Chapter 185: Chapter 185: The Truth of Distortion

Seeing this, Anno finally breathed a sigh of relief, while Willo's eyes glistened with tears, clutching his hand tightly, unwilling to let go. "Thank goodness you're all right..."

After all, as a race originating from the Feywild, satyrs are highly emotional beings. The smallest thing can keep them happy for a whole day, while even the lightest tragedy can bring them to tears.

For Willo, to witness Charles, in her eyes, throw himself into danger and sacrifice himself to destroy the Chthonian, and yet to merely have tears welling up without bursting into sobs—this was already remarkably self-controlled.

Elsewhere, the middle-aged male satyr who had come with her was quietly wiping his own tears.

Behind them, the old half-orc shaman stepped forward, his face complicated, yet hesitant to speak. His spell slots were already long spent, and in the previous battle, all he'd managed were a few simple cantrips, making little contribution—so now he barely dared say a word.

Seeing Charles unharmed, he at last stepped forward, cautiously asking, "Matriarch Willo, are you all right? Danche is badly wounded—he's still unconscious..."

Willo only now seemed to remember, quickly released Charles's hand, and rose. "Oh, I know. Where is he? I'll go right away."

The priest pointed her in the right direction, and Willo hurried off. Soon after, Nidalee reached Charles's side, knelt down, took his hand, and began healing his burns with nature magic.

"Well done," Charles said softly. Instantly, Anno forgot about disguising her jealousy over Nidalee, stretched out her arms, and pulled his head into a hug.

Charles gave a wry smile. Meeting Nidalee's wounded gaze, he gently squeezed her hand in comfort, then patted Anno on the back and whispered, "I'm okay. I knew what I was doing. It was only because I saw it was nearly dead that I dashed in to purify it."

Anno said nothing—she just held him like that. Charles could only let her remain a while longer as he opened the system to check his rewards.

When he reached the attributes column, his eyebrows shot up.

15000!

Purifying the Chthonian just now had given him a full 7,200 Purification Points!

This adventure had truly been worth it—a tremendous gain in one sweep!

He could barely contain his joy. He remembered that purifying Theresa had only given him 7,500.

Of course, this didn't mean the Chthonian was necessarily stronger than Theresa. After all, Theresa, after being purified, had kept all her strength and now served at Charles's side, whereas the Chthonian was obliterated, erased completely—hence the greater reward.

And today, the Chthonian also held all the advantage of terrain; in the cavern, it could create repeated earthquakes and rockfalls, leaving the party battered. Had they fought it outside, the danger would have been much less.

But regardless, earning so much in a single day made his heart leap with joy.

Still, this cave was not a place to linger. Guessing that Anno's emotions had run their course, he gently freed himself from her arms, braced against the pain of his burns, and struggled to his feet. "We'd better get going. It's not safe here, and even though this Chthonian is gone, who knows what horrors still lie deeper in..."

Hardly had he spoken when Theresa's voice echoed from afar: "There's bad news, everyone."

"The tunnel we used to come in was blocked by the earthquake. It'll take a while to clear it."

...

Outside the cave, the satyrs and half-orcs on watch also felt the intense tremors and then observed a partial collapse inside the cavern. Fearful and uncertain, none of them could tell what was happening or whether their leaders had survived.

Reluctantly, after much indecision, debate, and even argument, they managed to settle on a plan: focusing what little magic strength remained, they would heal a single chimera nearly to full strength, then have its beastmaster ride out as fast as possible to seek Archdruid Ilarode for instruction.

No time was wasted: once the chimera was ready, its master mounted up and rode hard for the Alliance of the Mountain Purifiers' main camp, hoping to find Ilarode there.

But the journey was proving taxing. After all, they were deep in the mountains, and even a lightly wounded chimera tired quickly—especially as the beasts were bred for battle, not long-range travel.

It took a day and two nights before, on the third morning, the rider finally limped back to the Alliance's temporary main base, within the Mountaineer tribe.

Meanwhile, at that very moment, at the main gate of the Mountaineer tribe—

"Tsk, what a hard place to find..."

Two mages—a tall one and a short one—both in black robes, wearing pointed round-brimmed mage hats with the Blackstaff Tower insignia on their chests, appeared amid the mountains.

"Fits the mountain people—all the habits of mice."

The short man grunted, clearly holding little fondness for the mountain folk. The tall one frowned and gently chided, "Don't say that. There should be scouts nearby. If they hear, our negotiations could suffer."

The short mage just snorted and looked away. Both pressed forward, and soon the Mountaineer tribe's encampment came into view.

Two burly minotaurs stood guard. As the pair approached, the guards hefted greataxes and glared warily: "Who are you?"

The tall mage quickly responded, "We're envoys from Blackstaff Tower, seeking to speak with the leaders of the Alliance of the Mountain Purifiers."

At once, the minotaurs' faces hardened: "Blackstaff Tower—enemies! Get—Ugh—"

Reflexes trained since youth readied them to charge, but the short mage was quicker. At the instant they raised their arms, his spell was complete: "Hold Person!"

Buzz—

Instantly, both minotaurs froze, motionless where they stood. The tall mage gave a rueful smile, but said nothing more. He stepped over them and called boldly into the camp: "I am an envoy from Blackstaff Tower! I've come to discuss the Purification of the demon pollution in these mountains with the Alliance of the Mountain Purifiers!"

He amplified his voice with magic, making it roll across the entire camp for several hundred meters. The Mountaineer tribe was thrown into confusion; people poured out, brandishing weapons, wary but not advancing as they saw their minotaur guards frozen in place.

The tall mage smiled, thinking, At least they're not rushing us with sheer numbers alone.

Otherwise, he'd have had to use Wall of Force to teach them what a real spellcaster could do.

He waited patiently, not for long—before long, a figure draped in a robe of colorful bird feathers and leaning on a wooden staff hurried up. It was Ilarode, followed by a minotaur with glossy black fur and a burly, broad-shouldered man—Torun and Luger Stonehide of the Werebear tribe.

At this moment, all three clearly deferred to Ilarode for negotiations.

"I am the Archdruid of the Alliance of the Mountain Purifiers. You may call me Ilarode," he said. "We welcome all friends from Blackstaff Tower, if you've come to help drive out the demons."

The tall mage's face wore a polite smile; the short one looked grumpy, just like Torun and Luger at Ilarode's side, loyally playing their "opposition" roles.

But this wasn't the time for confrontation, so neither Ilarode nor the Blackstaff Tower envoys paid much attention to anyone's expressions. Smiles remained. Ilarode invited them to the tent for tea, and the envoys agreed.

Along the way, the envoys spoke at length about the demonic pollution and its dangers, repeatedly affirming Blackstaff Tower's determination to resolve the threat—a reassurance to Ilarode. The atmosphere was cordial and harmonious. It was as if they were allies already—no longer adversaries, but trusted partners...

Inside the tent, Ilarode and the tall envoy from Blackstaff Tower sat on opposite sides of the round table, sipping tea and chatting, appearing quite pleased with their conversation.

They had already spoken for a long time, exchanging flattery in a way that made them seem like lifelong friends, just short of swearing brotherhood on the spot.

Beside the tall envoy, the shorter envoy wore an openly disgruntled expression. He thought the tall mage was wasting time, but knew that if he himself spoke up, it would surely make things worse. He could only restrain his dissatisfaction, shooting looks of loathing across the table.

Nor was he alone—in the chair next to Ilarode, both Torun and Luger looked equally unhappy.

He especially despised these two envoys after they had just used magic to paralyze his tribesmen—a clear provocation in his eyes.

He also suspected Ilarode of making common cause with their enemies, only seeking new reasons to trick them into temporarily surrendering old grudges, and so on...

Finally, the massive black minotaur could stand it no longer, rising with a deep breath. "I need a walk."

Ilarode regarded him, smiling gently. "Yes, get some air. These stuffy, boring conferences just aren't for young people..."

The Blackstaff envoys offered polite smiles, seemingly unaware that this only disgusted Torun more. He strode from the tent, walking far enough that his mind could finally relax and let go of these matters for a while.

But then, he noticed a loud dispute in the distance: "Let me go! I have urgent business with the Archdruid!"

"No! The Archdruid is in a very important conference. We cannot disturb him!"

...

Torun turned and saw a middle-aged, honest-looking half-orc trying to push past the camp fence, only to be restrained by two minotaur guards gripping his arm, determined not to let him enter.

Behind the half-orc, a chimera bearing visible wounds panted heavily, its three pairs of eyes fixed on one of the minotaurs.

Sensing the situation would soon devolve into violence, Torun hurried over: "What's going on here? Let him go. I'm Torun. If you have urgent business, the Archdruid is meeting now. You can tell me."

The minotaurs released the half-orc, who rushed to Torun, gasping, "Lord Torun, Matriarch Willo and Young Lord Danche have been buried beneath the mountain!"

Torun's face instantly changed. "What happened? Tell me from the beginning."

The half-orc drew breath and recounted it all: "At the time, Matriarch Willo's team went into the cave to purify the wellspring of pollution. We stood guard outside, to prevent interference.

"That's when a group arrived—they looked like people from Liberl Port. Among them was a highlander woman claiming to be the Archdruid's daughter..."

Torun stiffened. "And? Did you believe her?"

The half-orc scratched his head. "Lord Danche wasn't convinced, but Matriarch Willo seemed to trust her eventually. Still, we all felt uneasy about it..."

Torun lowered his head, fighting down a surge of uncontrollable anger. He took several deep breaths, then asked, "Who were the five? What did they look like?"

"Er... well," the half-orc replied after a moment's thought, "The one claiming to be the Archdruid's daughter was a mountain folk. The other four were clearly Liberl Port people. One was a mage in a blue robe, one a young and very handsome man from Sein, one a tall nun, and one fully armored paladin—she later claimed to be from Blackstaff Tower."

Young, handsome, from Sein!

It was him then!

Nigel Charles!

Torun could hardly contain his fury at this rival for Nidalee. With effort, he smothered his emotions and replied nonchalantly, "I see. Now tell me everything that happened next—slowly, and don't leave out a thing."

The half-orc continued, "Next thing, there was a sudden demon shriek from inside the cavern. Our chimera went mad and attacked, then their group began casting spells against us. We fought back..."

He recounted it all, but, as someone who'd spent most of his life learning to train chimeras, his memory for detail was not especially reliable.

Torun's frown only deepened as he pieced it together, calculating how to bend this story for his own purposes.

"Let me ask you," Torun interjected. "Do you recall if it was your chimera that first went berserk, and then spells were cast? Or did they start chanting first, so that their spell was ready the instant your chimera lost control?"

The half-orc hesitated, then scratched his head. "I... I'm not sure..."

"Casting spells like that takes time, especially strong ones capable of killing a powerful chimera," Torun pressed. "How mighty was their magic? And from the moment the chimera went mad, how long did it take before it was hit?"

The half-orc mulled it over, then muttered, "It must have been the latter."

He faintly recalled the spell being very powerful—almost instantly crippling Barbary, the tribe's strongest chimera.

Torun nodded. "So, these Blackstaff Tower folks, who finally dropped their camouflage, originally tried to trick you. When that failed, they attacked you first. Only when the demons came—when their own lives were threatened—did they fight side-by-side with you at Matriarch Willo's plea, correct?"

Gaping, the half-orc could only stammer. In the chaos of battle and consumed by his chimera's madness, he'd hardly noticed the details.

After a long silence, he nodded. "I think... that sounds right."

Torun clapped a huge hand on his shoulder. "Then it's clear. The collapse that followed—all of it—was conspiracy by those Sein outsiders.

"They pretended to come to destroy demons and tricked Matriarch Green Vines into trusting them. Once inside the cavern they betrayed her, killed the tribe, and disguised the murder scene as an earthquake to cover their escape!

"These are their usual tricks. As Highmountain tribes, we've dealt with Sein people many times. Liberl Port's folk cower in their iron boxes, estranged from the wild and weak in body—no match for mountain folk."

As he spoke, a burly man emerged from the tent—unable to stand the mutual flattery inside—none other than Luger Stonehide of the Werebear tribe.

Catching the conversation, Luger strode over. Torun glanced once at him but continued, "To slake their base desires, they rely on such underhanded tricks—trickery, sneak attacks—against us, the great mountain folk!"

"The Highmountain and Stonehide tribes have encountered this time and again. I'd stake my life—the truth is exactly what I've said."

He spoke at length, and as Luger joined them (even though he hadn't caught it all) he nodded. "Exactly right."

The half-orc now listened wide-eyed, persuaded almost entirely. "So that's it..."

"So," Torun finished in satisfaction, "when you meet the Archdruid, you know what to say?"

The half-orc's face grew grim. "Understood. I'll expose the Seine people's wicked plans before the Archdruid!"

Torun almost wanted to laugh aloud. He sent the half-orc off to wait outside while he returned to the tent to prepare Ilarode for what was coming.

He was determined that before winter's end, they would destroy Rockseeker Camp!

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Chapter 186: Chapter 186: The Bathing Problem Inside the Cave

Torun returned to the tent through a side entrance, only to find the atmosphere much colder than before. Previously, Ilarode and the tall envoy from Blackstaff Tower had been laughing, exchanging compliments, and appeared to get along famously. Now, both were grave, staring intently at one another.

Torun didn't rush to call Ilarode aside, instead pausing at the door to listen for a moment. He then realized that Blackstaff Tower had presented a condition the alliance could never accept.

They demanded the Alliance of the Mountain Purifiers provide them with choice cattle and sheep as rations, in exchange for Blackstaff Tower's forces entering the mountains to eradicate the fiends.

At the same time, they stingily rejected the Alliance's perfectly reasonable request to dismantle Rockseeker's Outpost and return the mountains entirely to the Mountain People.

Hearing this, Torun's heart filled with a cold sneer.

Of course—these hypocrites are full of high-minded rhetoric, but the moment they're asked to sacrifice anything, their greedy nature is immediately revealed.

If we hand over all our livestock, what are we supposed to eat?

Hah, negotiations are doomed. Which means, next is only battle.

Thinking this, he discreetly motioned for Ilarode to step out. The latter took the hint, rose to excuse himself, and left the room—leaving the two envoys drinking tea—and came outside to speak with Torun.

At that moment, he also saw the chimera beastmaster from the Chimera tribe.

Upon seeing the Archdruid, the beastmaster immediately began recounting his ordeal—of course, retold according to Torun's version. After hearing all this, Ilarode was visibly shaken. "There was such a thing?!"

"Yes," Torun replied solemnly. "Even at first I couldn't believe it, but clearly they seized the chance, when the Green Vines tribe entered the cave to purify the pollution, to launch a sneak attack—not just to wipe us out, but to claim the credit for purifying the pollution as well!"

"Archdruid, there's no time for hesitation. We cannot trust the people of Liberl Port. We have to secure our own future first, before we deal with outside enemies!"

"What's more, the Mountaineer tribe's reserves this winter are hardly plentiful, are they?"

Even as he spoke, he inadvertently revealed his own tribe's dire predicament. Ilarode's brow furrowed in internal conflict—he weighed his tribe's hardships, Blackstaff Tower's demands, and the crisis faced by the Chimera tribe, torn and struggling...

Suddenly, a tremor shook the earth.

Torun and Ilarode's faces paled, and though the quake quickly subsided, the sudden disturbance became the last straw.

Thinking of the declining state of the Earth Dragon, the Archdruid at last made up his mind.

There's no more time...

Very well—if things will spiral out of control anyway, better to wring out every last bit of value, trading it for the unwavering support of the Highmountain and Stonehide tribes.

Better to gain political capital than lose everything for nothing.

...

Inside the cave.

"Whew..."

Charles unleashed another Eldritch Blast at a slab of rock blocking the passage, reducing the edge to rubble. He stretched his fingertip to rub his temples, exhaling deeply.

Even repeated spellcasting, even as a cantrip, could be exhausting.

Ahead, Nidalee and Willo cast spells, summoned vines, and threaded them through the gap Charles had created to wrap around the boulders. Danche, the shaman, and the male satyr grabbed the vines, low voices barking, "One, two, three—pull!"

Crash—

With magic and muscle combined, a large stone was pried loose, sending debris tumbling to the floor. Instantly a sizable gap opened in the passage, and the men heaved a sigh of relief. "All right, we did it!"

"Let's keep going—sooner or later, we'll clear the way out!"

They encouraged each other. Facing a common crisis, even after the pollution had been purified, both groups had no choice but to cooperate again: mages provided magic, the rest their strength, in hopes of digging a way out.

But in the meantime, they would have to settle into cave life for several days.

Fortunately, the collapsed passage wasn't sealed airtight; a few gaps still allowed air to circulate, so suffocation wasn't a concern.

As for water and food, they had the everflowing water bottle, and Nidalee could create Goodberries, so while there was no flavor, at least they wouldn't starve. It could have been worse.

The only thing lacking was manpower—hauling away the rocks was hard work. Charles, for one, constantly felt the limits of human strength; if only they had an excavator, he thought, it would save so much trouble.

Behind the half-orcs, Willo wiped the sweat from her brow and quietly suggested, "It's getting late—shall we rest for the night?"

Nidalee nodded, "It's night outside. Time to sleep."

Although there was no sunlight here, only Theresa's spells for illumination, the two druids could still communicate with the earth and roughly judge the time, keeping their routines consistent.

"Yes, let's rest," Charles said, glancing at Hattie, Anno, and Theresa, who were already resting, waving them off from any further work.

Throughout the excavation, he'd imperceptibly become de facto leader. As someone from the modern world, he at least understood "efficiency," and wouldn't insist on driving everyone to exhaustion for nothing.

He divided the group into three teams: two worked while one rested, to minimize lactic acid buildup in their muscles and keep efficiency high.

Even so, as he set down to rest, Charles couldn't help but notice how sticky and grimy he felt—deeply uncomfortable.

Spellcasting also brought a toll on his mind.

He craved a shower—but in such a sealed environment, it seemed awkward to even bring up the topic...

Then Danche and the shaman walked past. As the main physical laborers, after a full day's work the two half-orcs reeked of sweat, instantly making Charles's expression twist in discomfort.

No—this can't go on. I have to bathe!

"I've got the everflowing water bottle," he announced. "Why don't we go in groups of three to the far side of the cavern, find a private corner, and take turns bathing?"

"We've been at it all day—going to bed without washing isn't just uncomfortable, it's not sanitary, either."

The moment he suggested this, Anno, Willo, and Nidalee's eyes all lit up. "Good idea!"

Charles let out a sigh of relief. Thank goodness, everyone here appreciated cleanliness. "Ladies first—I'm in no hurry."

Anno promptly stepped over, took the everflowing water bottle from his hand, and asked, "So—who's coming with me?"

She too had worked hard today, and naturally wanted to wash up badly.

Willo, a little embarrassed, glanced at Hattie and Theresa, but the latter turned away with a smile. "We're in no rush, Matriarch, you go ahead."

Everyone's gaze turned to Nidalee. At first, she meant to agree as well, but at the last moment she paused.

Her heart pounded, a bold thought erupting in her mind—one that thrilled her all over, even made her shake.

"I'm good," she said, walking over to Charles and taking his arm. "I'll bathe with Charles later."

Suddenly, the air went still.

Anno's brow furrowed as she glared at Nidalee, not sure what she was up to. Hattie and Theresa, after a moment's surprise, both grinned mischievously, clearly delighted by the drama. Willo covered her mouth in shock—were young people really this brazen nowadays, saying things like this in public? The half-orcs, for their part, looked

completely unfazed; to them, if the pair were engaged, sharing anything was quite normal.

As for Charles, feeling Anno's dangerous glare, he hurriedly pushed Nidalee away. "Cut it out—you go now."

Nidalee giggled, shot Anno a look, and felt a delightful thrill.

Then, feigning dramatic disappointment, she said, "All right, I'll get clean first—and meet you at your tent afterward..."

With that, she took Anno and Willo by the arm, leading the way into the depths of the cavern. Charles rubbed his forehead, noticing Anno's dark look as she left, and felt more and more troubled.

Damn it—Nidalee, that girl, is getting out of control.

I'll have to lay down the law!

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Chapter 187: Chapter 187: The Jealous Ones, Fresh from the Bath

In the end, Nidalee joined Anno and Willo for bathing, while Charles, Hattie, and Theresa pulled out folded tents from the Bag of Holding and distributed them to Danche and the others, setting up camp.

As they hadn't lacked money, they'd been extravagant with their tent selection, purchasing a diverse assortment—varied in size, brand, even a few spares—just for the experience of trying different types. Now, if everyone squeezed into the larger tents, it was enough for all nine of them.

Pitching the tents was quick, or perhaps it was just that the three ladies took their time bathing—likely washing their clothes as well, then using Create Water/Destroy Water to dry them directly.

This spell not only conjures water, but can also make it disappear as if it never existed, thoroughly ignoring the laws of conservation of matter.

But magic—that's its wonder.

At last, just as they finished pitching the tents and had waited a good while, the bathing trio finally returned.

Leading the way was Anno. The confident paladin strode ahead on long legs, taking the lead among the three. She'd removed her heavy magic plate armor, stored it in her Bag of Holding, and now wore only a light gray fitted cloth tunic and trousers that hugged her ample chest and rounded hips, her curves leaving nothing to the imagination.

Her golden hair tumbled freely over her shoulders, already dry, but giving her a serene, maidenly beauty. Her face, still a bit youthful like Charles's, paired with her stunning figure, formed an arresting charisma that made Charles unable to look away.

Behind her, Nidalee was privately gritting her teeth. Her own figure was decent and, being a bit older, she ought to outshine Anno. Yet next to Anno—who had enjoyed excellent nutrition since childhood—she felt she rather fell short.

As she walked, she made a conscious effort to puff out her chest, trying to look fuller, but it made little difference—the moment she compared herself to Anno, she fell behind.

Following them was Matriarch Willo, the satyr. In truth, as a mother, her body lines were the most exaggerated among the three. Despite her petite stature, the curve of her chest rivaled even Theresa's.

Of course, Theresa wore the somber habit of a nun, while Willo's only garment was a robe woven of dry leaves, worn without any undergarments—amplifying her allure even more.

Willo, well aware of her current state, made sure to hunch her shoulders and slouch, trying to diminish her figure and avoid the men's aggressive gazes.

Glancing toward Danche, she saw that the young half-orc prudently kept his eyes down, not sneaking looks at anyone. The other men were equally behaved—the shaman well past such urges, and the male satyr she brought conducted himself with perfect decorum.

With that, Willo relaxed: at least, even the Chimera tribes maintained some manners.

Then she glanced at Charles and found him was focused on Anno, not glancing her way. This made her privately doubt herself: Am I really getting old? Do I have no charisma left?

Can my figure no longer capture the attention of an easily excitable young human?

That shouldn't be.

So she straightened, squared her shoulders, and let her full bosom rise, pushing the limits of her robe—so much so, the mage's robe's collar showed two tiny, raised points through the fabric.

And sure enough, Charles's eyes shifted momentarily toward her before quickly looking away, awkwardly gazing into the distance as if nothing had happened.

Though the glance was brief, Willo caught it. Realizing what a bold gesture it had been, the satyr matriarch blushed, her milky skin flushing pink.

But together with her shyness came relief—she could be sure she hadn't lost her allure after all.

Anno, oblivious to the little contest behind her, walked straight to Hattie, handed her the everflowing water bottle, and sat down quite naturally to Charles's right, initiating conversation.

She looked up to see Nidalee deliberately plop down on Charles's left. Instantly, Anno's face went a little cold, but she carried on chatting as if nothing was amiss.

Nidalee, struggling not to laugh, nonchalantly wrapped herself around Charles's arm, pressing her chest against him and occasionally conjuring Goodberries to feed him—deeply playing the part of an affectionate lover, utterly unconcerned by the murderous look in Anno's eyes.

And sandwiched between them, Charles felt truly tormented. One hand, he pinched Nidalee's backside, signaling her to find an excuse to move away. This only made her all the more gleeful; in fact, she was getting bolder. With his other hand, he gently stroked Anno's hand, trying to soothe her mood—yet it had no effect whatsoever. Charles could literally hear her grinding her teeth.

He finally shot a pleading look toward Hattie and Theresa, only to see them slipping off, arm in arm, toward the cavern to 'bathe'. Of course, witches don't sweat, so they didn't need to wash, but they had to keep up appearances.

All he could do was pray for their quick return, to save him from this Acheron-like torment. But whether they were watching the chaos for fun or out of obliviousness, it took forever before they came back, hair still damp, wearing apologetic smiles. "Sorry, we took so long. Um, Priest, would you like to bathe with us?"

Charles scrambled away from the girls, snatching the everflowing water bottle from Hattie. "Danche, let's go—let's make this quick and go as a group."

The half-orc made no objection, joining Charles, the shaman, and the male satyr. The four of them headed into the deepest part of the cavern and stopped only at the far wall.

Danche faced Charles, lifted his chin, and abruptly stripped off his animal hide armor, revealing dark brown skin and two enormous slab-like pectorals.

He grinned wide, showing short tusks, and stared Charles down as if mocking his slender build.

But when Charles pulled off his own shirt, what showed was not a weak body but sharply cut pecs, an eight-pack, biceps and triceps with clean lines—like a marble sculpture by a great artist.

Danche's cocky expression faltered. Noticing the look, Charles turned, smiled, and asked, "What's wrong, Mr. Danche?"

"You..." Danche stammered, "I didn't expect you to be so well-built, Mr. Charles."

Charles glanced down at his own body and muscle, and felt a little sheepish recalling their true origin. "Yeah, I put in a lot of hard work and training to get this shape."

Danche couldn't help but admire him, and beside them, the shaman removed his garments as well. Though aged, his body still held a remarkable build, showing that he too, in his youth, had been a powerful warrior.

Hearing their exchange, the old man looked up and chuckled. "Danche, don't underestimate Mr. Charles. The day you fell unconscious, it was he who fearlessly leapt on the Chthonian to land the final blow."

"He was severely burned head to toe for it, even losing a good bit of hair and eyebrows. Thanks only to relentless healing from our mages did he survive."

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Chapter 188: Chapter 188: Late at Night, the Druid Begs for Discipline

Hearing this and seeing Charles's body still flawless and unblemished, Danche fell silent. The power of magic was indeed unreasonable—even injuries that should have left massive burns could be completely healed, as long as one survived and there was enough magic for treatment.

He had experienced the same. The day he was struck by those scorching tentacles and knocked unconscious, Willo had poured all her strength into healing him, leaving no scars behind—he was now healthy enough to do hard physical work again.

But because he had been unconscious for so long that day, he hadn't known about Charles's heroic deed. And learning about it now gave him complicated feelings.

After a while, the half-orc finally said with some effort, "I must admit, you are a true warrior."

Charles smiled softly at this. Mountain People really were straightforward. As long as one wasn't stubbornly an enemy, they were easy enough to get along with.

He shook his head and replied, "Not at all, Mr. Danche. It was your courageous actions that distracted the Chthonian and let me notice its weakness, allowing me to land the final blow."

"If you hadn't acted so bravely, I could have never achieved what I did."

He was more than happy to defer credit like this—he'd already claimed the Purification Points anyway. As always, a few words of praise cost him nothing.

Sure enough, hearing this, the half-orc's expression eased noticeably. Charles could sense his hostility and enmity had largely faded—now, he could treat him as a normal friend.

Good. This was a promising start.

Let's hope the coming days pass as smoothly as now!

What followed was ordinary: after bathing, Charles and the others returned to camp to assign tents. Nidalee wanted to sleep in his tent. Sensing Anno's murderous intent, Charles categorically refused and arranged for her to share with Willo—letting the two druids stay together.

Willo had no objection; given the circumstances, she didn't mind. Nidalee, while snickering over Anno's scowl, played the wronged party and squeezed into the same tent as Willo.

Charles slept alone in a small tent; Anno also took a small tent by herself. Hattie and Theresa squeezed together, while Danche and the two others went to the biggest tent. It was late, and the exhausted group quickly drifted off to sleep.

Charles soon slid into a deep dream. Within it, he saw a beautiful woman in a long robe, her face hidden behind a fall of black hair, floating quietly at his side. She spoke no words, but Charles could sense her emotion.

An emotion called "anticipation."

Instantly, even within the dream, Charles's mind grew clear. He realized it was Agatha—she had entered his dream, awaiting something.

He shook his head, fatigue on his face. "Not tonight. I need rest."

He had cast too many spells during the day, his mind still weary. He truly needed to sleep to recover.

At least four hours, he thought.

Hearing her master say this, Agatha pouted, but offered no argument. She faded away into mist, and the dream returned to darkness.

Charles felt no pity, sinking back into real, deep sleep.

Meanwhile, outside, the ring on his left hand glimmered softly with a pink light. By now, everyone in the camp was asleep, so from that red glow, a phantom emerged—a figure cloaked in white, with a cascade of black hair falling straight down from her head.

It was Agatha.

A lonely ghost, denied her master's attention, she drifted aimlessly through the camp. She passed one tent after another until she saw faint light.

Looking over, she found the monastery's most formidable being: Big nun Theresa, peeking out of her tent.

Agatha bowed her head, expressing humility and respect, waiting for orders.

"You seem a bit bored, don't you?" Theresa said softly.

Agatha nodded.

"Then let me give you a task." Theresa pointed. "Do you see that tent? Inside sleeps a female satyr, remarkable in both face and figure."

"Dear Agatha, I need you to slip into her dream and weave her a beautiful springtime fantasy—an erotic dream in which she meets, falls in love, and joins with our mutual Master... just as you once did to Nidalee."

"Do you accept this assignment?"

Agatha nodded gently.

"Then go," Theresa whispered, "I'll be waiting for your results."

The female ghost turned away and glided effortlessly through the tent to where Willo, the matriarch, slept deeply. After all she had experienced, she was fast asleep and sensed nothing of the ghost's arrival.

Agatha was about to work her magic when she suddenly paused, looking toward Nidalee beside her.

She sensed the druid was not asleep. Hesitating a moment, she decided not to care and entered Willo's dream.

Meanwhile, Nidalee opened her eyes. Remembering the ghost she'd just seen, she felt suspicious.

She knew it must be the ghost that resided in Charles's ring, and understood she had the power to control dreams. But...

Why had she come here?

Was it sent by Master?

She'd looked at me... Was I her real target?

But because I'm awake, she couldn't enter, so she went to Willo instead?

Could it be, Master is trying to teach me a lesson?

Because I made trouble for him earlier?

A wave of excitement filled her. After weighing for some moments and making sure Willo was deeply asleep, she slipped out of the covers, crept from the tent, and sneaked over to Charles's tent.

Fortunately, the whole camp was exhausted and no one noticed her.

Charles, midway through his sleep cycle and freshly restored, felt someone enter his tent. Groggily opening his eyes, he saw a beautiful figure kneeling at his side.

It was Nidalee.

She had stripped completely naked, folding every garment—including her undergarments—neatly beside her. Now utterly bare, she knelt with her forehead pressed to the ground, exposing the flawless curve of her back and slender waist.

Feeling him stir, the druid whimpered pleadingly: "Master, please penalize your disobedient kitten, woo..."

Her throat emitted a sound like a female leopard's supplicating whimper, though it carried more provocation than surrender. Charles felt heat surge in his abdomen, memories flooding back—how she'd deliberately sandwiched him between herself and Anno earlier, flaunting their intimacy...

Rage and desire ignited within him. He hissed coldly, "So it was intentional, Nidalee."

"Come here!"

He commanded in a low whisper, wary of waking others. Nidalee remained prostrate, murmuring, "I know what I must do, Master~"

With that, she crawled forward on all fours, lifted his quilt, and revealed his semi-aroused massive cock. Only then did she raise her head, part her small mouth, and extend her tongue to lightly trace the tip with its wet point—

"Hiss—"

Charles sucked in a sharp breath. The slumbering beast beneath her ministrations surged to full erection, jutting angrily toward the tent ceiling. He hadn't anticipated Nidalee's skill—how a single flick of her tongue could electrify him so intensely.

Charles's hand descended sharply on her ass. Crack! The crisp slap made her rounded hips sway—a blend of submission and hungry invitation. Then, she opened her small mouth wider, straining to engulf his entire throbbing length—

"Haah..."

Charles exhaled raggedly. Yet the memory of Anno's icy glare stoked the fire in his chest. This druid needs true discipline to restore my authority as Master!

With that resolve, he retrieved a new toy from his Bag of Holding—one he'd commissioned discreetly: a large, oval metal butt plug, from which trailed a long, leopard-like tail. He'd planned to save it for gentler explorations, but tonight demanded escalation.

Charles gripped Nidalee's hips, twisting her to face away. Even without light-enhancing goggles, he saw her glistening slit—already soaked without foreplay. This woman is aroused by her own defiance.

Undeterred, he spread her cheeks, exposing the tight pink pucker between them. As a druid sustained by nature's energy alone, Nidalee's metabolism had purified her body;

her asshole was as delicate and sensitive as a girl's. Charles slicked the plug's tip with oil, pressed it against her rosebud, and—

"Ngh...!" Nidalee's mouth froze around his cock as the cold intrusion shocked her. Another sharp spank cracked against her flesh. "Suck!" he ordered.

She obeyed, hollowing her cheeks as he rotated the plug, applying steady pressure until it breached her sphincter, stretching her relentlessly until the faux tail nestled flush against her curves.

"Woo... woo..." Nidalee whimpered around his girth, torn between agony and euphoria. When she released his cock, tears beaded beneath her lashes. "Master..."

Spank! His palm branded her ass red. "You brought this on yourself."

Her hips undulated helplessly. Charles then produced more tools: a blindfold, leather cuffs, and a ball-gag. Nidalee submitted, fixing the gag between her teeth so her tongue lolled obscenely, drool slicking her chin. The blindfold plunged her into darkness. Finally, he wrenched her arms behind her back and locked the cuffs. With no support, she collapsed forward, face pressed to the bed, ass lifted in shameless offering.

"Woo..." she mewled like a broken animal.

Ignoring her pleas, Charles retrieved a low-temperature candle. Sssk— The flame hissed to life, casting lewd shadows across her bound form. He tilted it, letting molten wax drip onto her right buttock—

"MMMPPH!"

Nidalee convulsed. The searing pain morphed into pleasure as her clenched muscles ground the plug deeper inside her. Tears soaked the blindfold; her pussy pulsed, slickness gushing down her thighs. Charles smirked, kneading her breasts as he dripped wax on her left cheek. Her back arched, hips churning—was she fleeing the heat or chasing it?

When a third drop splashed her nipple, her body snapped taut. A flood of cum drenched her thighs, painting lewd trails. She'd climaxed untouched.

"Pathetic," Charles chuckled, spanking her again. His own cock throbbed, veins bulging. No more delays. He mounted her, driving his thick cock into her drenched slit—

"WOOOO—!"

Nidalee's gagged scream vibrated around the ball as he impaled her. Overstimulated, she came instantly, vaginal walls milking him. He pistoned relentlessly—a pile driver hammering her cervix. Her slutty hole clenched, squirting anew with each thrust. When

his swollen balls slapped her clit, he buried himself to the hilt, unleashing torrents of cum deep into her womb.

Creampie.

She collapsed, spasming through aftershocks as he withdrew. Charles uncuffed her, removed the plug and gag. Nidalee lay spent, bruises blooming on her hips, her asshole gaping slightly, her pussy dripping semen. He scooped her into his arms, murmuring, "Never defy me again, kitten."

Meanwhile, in another tent...

Willo drowned in a feverish dream:

Alone in a city crowd, her massive breasts aching, she stumbled into a monastery. Before the robed Priest Charles, she bared herself. He suckled her nipples, drawing gasps as her milk flowed. Then his mouth devoured hers, journeyed down her body, and feasted on her hairless pussy—unused for a decade. When his veined cock speared her, she shattered. After three screaming climaxes, he flipped her, oiled her asshole...

"No—!" Willo jolted awake, sweat-slicked. A spring dream? Demonic pollution had frayed her control, and the sight of that handsome young man...

She sighed. Since her husband's death, nature's path had cooled her lust—until the demons came.

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Chapter 189: Chapter 189: The Tormented Matriarch

As a satyr originating from the Feywild, Willo was exquisitely sensitive to the corrupting filth spread by these demons. For months, she'd wake from nightmares drenched in sweat, her mind boiling with violent, murderous urges. Her tribe, the Green Vines, once peaceful for decades, had seen over a hundred brawls erupt in mere weeks. Fortunately, satyrs' gentle nature prevented bloodshed—a small mercy, or she'd have drowned in regret.

To cope, she'd purge the worst of her rage, carrying the residual demonic taint through the mountains, rallying allies to eradicate the corruption. The Alliance of the Mountain

Purifiers was her brainchild, born of painful compromises. But suppressing the pollution came at a cost: dormant for over a decade, her carnal desires now roared back, a relentless inferno scorching her sanity.

I need it... she silently begged, tossing restlessly. Her fingers brushed a cold emptiness beside her—Nidalee was gone. Willo stilled, ears twitching. Faint moans echoed from afar.

That sound...

Memories of Nidalee's shameless plea to share Charles' tent flooded back. The satyr matriarch flushed crimson. Could they be...?

Her pulse hammered. Normally, such things wouldn't ruffle her. But tonight, desire was a live wire. Just one look. No one will know. Trembling, she slipped from the tent and peered toward Charles' shelter.

Her pupils dilated.

A flickering glow painted silhouettes against the canvas—Nidalee on all fours, rounded hips thrust high, Charles pounding into her from behind. His thick cock pistoned relentlessly, stretching her slutty hole with each brutal thrust. Nidalee's full breasts swung wildly, nipples taut as she gasped, "Harder, Master! Breed your bitch!"

Shadow play, Willo reasoned—a trick of the light exaggerating his size. Yet the vision seared her brain: What if it were me? Her throat parched, body ablaze. One hand cupped her massive breasts, fingers pinching a stiff nipple—

"Nngh!" A ragged gasp escaped her. Ten years untouched, the sensation was electric. Enough suffering. Tonight, I end this.

Her hands moved with desperate purpose, kneading her full bosom. She dared not squeeze too hard, fearing the milk swelling within would spill as it had in her dream. Yes, she had milk—a humiliating legacy.

Tribal lore spoke of a heroic male satyr from the Feywild who saved refugees, loved a maiden, and founded the Green Vines. A pretty lie. Their true origin? Livestock.

Generations ago, vile warlocks abducted satyr maidens, selectively breeding them for maximum lactation. They raped the best milkers, culled the weak, and sold the milk for profit. Adventurers eventually freed them, but by then, the satyrs were bound to the material world. They wandered until settling these mountains, burying their shame beneath a noble myth.

Willo inherited that curse: once a mother, her breasts overflowed eternally. Her tribe embraced it—daughters nursed well into adolescence, easing their mothers' ache.

Willo's own fifteen-year-old still suckled at her chest. But trapped underground, relief was impossible. Without her daughter, her breasts throbbed, heavy and desperate.

"Aaah! Yes, fuck my slutty cunt!" Nidalee's cries crescendoed—louder or just clearer to Willo's heightened senses?

As the silhouettes shifted—Charles hauling Nidalee onto his lap, her legs splayed—Willo's fingers plunged beneath her leaf tunic, questing toward her hairless pussy. Finally!

"Ohh..." She arched her swan-like neck. Ten years of neglect vanished in a heartbeat. Bliss threatened tears as her fingertip circled her swollen clit. But clumsy strokes only teased. The ache deepened, a wildfire begging for rain. Give it to me!

She rubbed harder, frantic, the friction stinging more than satisfying. Frenzied, she plunged two fingers into her sopping slit, vaginal walls clamping down. It wasn't enough—not compared to the brutal rhythm hammering Nidalee just yards away.

"Woo—?!" Druidic instincts screamed danger. Willo whirled.

Theresa stood frozen nearby, eyes wide, hands covering her mouth.

Seen! Shame detonated in Willo's chest. She yanked her dripping fingers free, hiding her face. "Don't look..."

The Matriarch trembled, crimson staining her cheeks. If she vanished, would it undo this?

Theresa's shock shifted—part feigned, part genuine amazement. Agatha's dream-weaving worked better than she'd dreamed! Willo's pent-up hunger was a powder keg, and Charles' tent was the spark. Perfect. Time to harvest.

Softening her expression, Theresa glided forward, enfolding Willo in her opulent arms. "I mock you not, dear Matriarch," she murmured. "We women all know this hunger. And you? Forbearing for so long... how you must ache."

As Life Goddess' servant, I implore you: embrace the bliss of your flesh. Only then does life hold meaning."

Guiding Willo into the tent, Theresa sealed them in darkness. Willo remained rigid, unresponsive. With a conspiratorial whisper, Theresa leaned close:

"Truth? Their cries stirred my hunger, too. This sleepless night... Matriarch Willo..."

Her hands drifted down Willo's body. "Shall we heed Life Goddess' design? Two lonely souls, soothing each other's fire?"

Willo stiffened. "You... I..."

Theresa's eyes gleamed—clear, not lust-drunk. She's sacrificing her dignity to help me. Tears welled in Willo. Life Goddess' faithful truly were saints.

"But... my skills are rusty," Willo whispered.

A hidden smile touched Theresa's lips. "No matter. Rusty hands beat empty nights."

Her fingers danced—decades of teasing Charles' nuns perfected her craft. Willo stood no chance.

Caressing satin skin, Theresa nipped Willo's ear. She palmed full breasts, thumbs rolling nipples until they peaked. "So beautiful..." she breathed, one hand sliding down to cradle rounded hips.

Willo gasped as fingers brushed her thighs, then traced her plump labia majora. "Open for me," Theresa urged.

Shuddering, Willo spread her legs. Theresa's fingertip parted fleshy lips, gliding through slick folds to find her clit. "Nngh!" Willo bucked.

"Sensitive little pearl," Theresa purred. She rubbed tight circles, her other hand squeezing a milky breast. Twin sensations—nipple and clit—sent Willo spiraling. Her moans grew jagged. "Please... inside!"

Theresa obliged. Two fingers speared her wet slit, curling to stroke her G-spot. "YES!" Willo's vaginal walls clenched, spasming. Her honey pot gushed.

"Mmm, a fountain," Theresa teased, pumping faster. "Does being watched make your hairless pussy weep?"

Willo cried out, hips pistoning. Theresa captured her lips, tongues tangling as her fingers pistoned. Overwhelmed, Willo shattered—body taut, juices soaking Theresa's hand.

"Again," Theresa commanded. Teeth grazed Willo's neck. Fingers drove deeper, hooking ruthlessly. She pinned the satyr's thigh and sucked a nipple hard—

"I'M CUMMING!" Milk sprayed, dousing Theresa's chin. Willo's scream muffled in the nun's cleavage as her pussy clamped down like a vise.

Panting, Willo slumped—a spent rag doll. Theresa slowly withdrew glistening fingers. "Thank you, Matriarch. I feel... unburdened." She wiped her hands. "Our secret, yes?"

Nodding weakly, Willo watched her vanish into the dark.

The tent flap rustled. Nidalee crept in, radiating Charles' scent—sex and sweat. Willo feigned sleep as her pulse raced.

That smell... Images flashed—Charles gripping Nidalee's hips, slamming into her. Willo bit her lip. Then she saw it: a leopard tail curling from beneath Nidalee's blanket.

Tail?

Willo frowned. Nidalee wasn't a shifter—druidic senses confirmed that. Curiosity burned. She slid downward, lifting the blanket.

Horiz stretched. The tail wasn't fur—it was a metal plug embedded deep in Nidalee's asshole.

Willo froze. That place... used like...?

Nidalee hadn't stirred. Eyes clenched, Willo retreated. City youth... truly shocking.

Unseen, Nidalee smiled. She'd smelt Willo's arousal the moment she entered. Tonight, sleep would evade them both.

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Chapter 190: Chapter 190: Nidalee—Double the Bliss

The next morning.

Anno woke early from her sleep. She'd rested well and hadn't heard a sound all night.

This was a sleep method she'd been trained in from childhood—once asleep, she shut out all external perception, and unless someone shook her hard and shouted her name, nothing could wake her.

Perhaps this was a little lacking in vigilance for wilderness adventures, but as a paladin, her primary duty was to rest deeply and keep her strength for any coming battles—not to keep watch or stand guard.

That was a ranger's, wanderer's, or mage's job—their spells and skills covered those needs. She trusted her teammates to handle what she herself was ill-suited for. So she placed her faith in them every night, dropping into deep sleep to recover fully.

And her teammates never abused that trust. Hattie and Theresa both swore they'd laid early-warning magic so everyone could rest easy.

But in truth, they hadn't used any alarms at all. Their way of keeping the camp safe was simply to stay up together all night—agatha the included—taking shifts to guard the camp and watch the surrounding area to ensure everyone's safety.

Fortunately, that proved enough. At least, no half-orc tried anything foolish, and everyone slept through the night and woke safe the next morning.

In fact, during that night, Theresa had managed to leave "certain traces" on Willo... ahem.

But after this night, something rather remarkable seemed to have happened to some people.

"Nidalee?"

As they washed up together, Anno glanced at the tail now extending from the druid's backside, looking a little confused. "What... is that?"

She pointed at the tail, though politely refrained from touching it.

"Ah..."

Nidalee's cheeks flushed, the stretching fullness from the large plug lodged in her rosebud still leaving her more than a little uncomfortable—even her walk was noticeably off.

But Charles's instructions were unyielding: the truth could not be revealed. So she forced herself to endure, weaving a flimsy lie: "I, um, made a little mistake with wild magic during a shapechange... my tail didn't turn back properly..."

"It doesn't matter. It's not really in the way—just a little awkward to walk right now... It'll probably go away by itself in a few days."

She managed a strained smile, knowing full well that even for a novice, druidic magic never caused such symptoms; any real druid, like Willo, would see right through the excuse.

But Nidalee couldn't do better. This was the only reason she could think up, so inwardly she prayed it would be enough to get by.

Fortunately, although Anno was not without some basic knowledge, she was utterly ignorant of druidic training, and so, without a second thought, accepted Nidalee's

explanation as fact. Pure-hearted as she was, Anno's knowledge of romantic matters—let alone toys for more private pleasures—was nil.

Looking at that odd little tail, Anno's face twisted in sympathy. "So that's it. I hope you recover soon."

Though inwardly, despite knowing it was rather unkind, she couldn't help a little schadenfreude.

Serves you right, she thought, you've been flaunting your intimacy with Charles all week, driving me mad with jealousy!

Anno, whose resentment had built up for days, couldn't help snickering now that Nidalee had hit a little snag.

Meanwhile, as Nidalee washed up, she felt all sorts of odd sensations in her body and the constant suspense of nearly being found out. Her heart pounded all the harder.

So satisfying! Teasing Master in front of Anno during the day, sneaking into his tent at night to be disciplined...

I get to enjoy myself twice every day, day and night...

Ahh, I never want this to stop!

She made up her mind: today she'd provoke Anno and tease Master once again.

The following days thus became the happiest for the druid. Every day, she risked her life at least once or twice, and every night she slipped into Charles's tent for her "discipline," living life to the fullest.

Charles himself could only sigh; even though his discipline grew stricter each night, it only seemed to excite Nidalee more, sending her to new heights of happiness.

As for Anno—it'd be a lie to say she wasn't upset, watching her boyfriend get pulled around by another woman for the sake of keeping up appearances. She even found herself secretly wishing Nidalee's tail would stick around even longer, so the druid would suffer a little more.

She had no idea the tail was actually just one of Charles's discipline toys. Still, every time she saw Nidalee's awkward gait, thanks to the tail, she secretly savored the sight for a long while.

Besides this, Anno's days were spent digging out stones and trading intelligence on demons and demon-worshippers with Willo. The Green Vines tribe had begun

investigating much sooner, so they'd picked up more vital details regarding the demons, which Willo gladly shared with Anno.

On a side note, every night Willo kept having her "spring dreams," waking startled, going to the tent's edge to peep at Charles's shadow, eavesdrop on their noises, and comfort herself.

Theresa wasn't present every night, but fortunately, Willo's "technique" was improving with practice.

And so, three days slipped by. By now, it was the fifth morning they'd been trapped beneath the earth.

Everyone continued working in two groups, alternating rest and labor. At this moment, Charles, Hattie, Anno, Theresa, and Nidalee were on a break, the other four busy with brute force and magic up ahead.

Nidalee sat beside Charles, a long tail reaching from her lower back. She was in equal parts discomfort and delight, anxious and excited; glancing at Anno, her mind spun with plans for how to cozy up to Charles just to stoke Anno's ire.

"Darling," Nidalee suddenly said, "my back's so sore...could you rub it for me?"

With that, she bent down, curling up on his thighs like a little cat, her smooth brown back exposed and waiting for his hands.

Charles froze. He didn't look up, but he could feel an icy, murderous glare burning into his back.

He didn't dare move, but he could also sense that Willo, over by the vine and rocks, was casting spells and sneakily watching their interaction—like some old crone obsessed with romance—

Damn it!

Nidalee, don't force me!

Do you want me to stop playing along?!

He groaned inwardly and finally slapped her on the back with a sharp crack. "You know I'm not gentle—go ask Hattie, she's the professional."

Casting a glance at Hattie for help, he begged for rescue.

There, Hattie and Theresa sat side by side—two girls who'd once competed for the monastery's top nun—now the best of friends, quietly giggling as they watched the drama unfold.

Hearing his plea, Hattie refused, signaling to Theresa, who immediately leaned on her, voice thick with drama: "Oh, my neck and shoulders are so sore~ Hattie, give me a massage, please!"

"All right, my dearest Sister Theresa." Hattie's voice grew just as saccharine. She slipped her hand into Theresa's nun's habit, gently kneading. "I love you so much. I'll rub you anywhere you want!"

Charles: "..."

Damn it, these witches were no help at all, actually stirring up more trouble!

He bit his lip, gave up hope for rescue, and stared down at the druid still lying across his thighs, feeling that this woman was growing bolder every day.

Wait until we're back at the monastery. Here in the cave I can't make any noise, but back home, you'll see how I handle you!

He swore a silent oath—but it did nothing to save him here and now. Sweat beaded on his brow, and just as things seemed hopeless, rescue arrived at last—

Crack—

Suddenly, from up ahead came the rumble of falling stone. A cascade of debris, and then, at last, a narrow way opened up—barely wide enough for one person to pass through!

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