

Witch Monastery #Chapter 191: Breaking Free - Read

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Danche was momentarily startled, then his face broke into delighted surprise. "It's open! We've broken through, the front is passable now!"

He called out, and Charles, relieved, shot him a grateful look—thankful to be liberated from this dreadful Acheron at last.

He patted Nidalee on the small of her back, commanding her to get up, then called everyone else to join them. They cautiously stepped across the new passage, making their way over the rubble with care.

Fortunately, although the Chthonian had triggered a minor earthquake, the outer layers of the tunnel had held strong; the collapsing rocks had scarcely blocked the way onward. There were still some stones, but not enough to slow their progress now.

So they headed outward, following the path until they reached another major cave-in at the exit. A wall of rock blocked their way, and a wave of disappointment washed over the group—until, from outside the cavern, came the sound of distant clanging!

Hope flared anew. Danche gestured for caution behind him, then crept to the end of the collapse and called out in Orcish: "What do chimeras eat in autumn?"

There was a pause, then a tremendous cheer from beyond the stones: "Roast lamb! It's the young lord's voice—they're alive!"

"Thank the gods, they're unharmed, they're inside!"

"Hurry, notify the captain! Whatever it takes, dig the young lord out today!"

...

Cheers echoed through the stone, easily heard despite the barrier. Danche breathed out in relief and signaled back that there was no danger; their rescuers were friendly.

From there, the rest was simple. Spellcasters inside and out worked together for half a day, clearing away the last stones. It proved that indeed, many hands make light work—what would have taken the trapped group five or six days was achieved in mere hours by the united Mountain People.

Sunset's light slipped in from outside, evening's chill air brushed their faces, and although dusk had already fallen, the delight of freedom set every heart alight with excitement.

"We're out!"

Willo, overjoyed, nearly leapt for joy, and another satyr wiped his eyes in relief. The others heaved grateful sighs; whatever else, they'd clawed their way from darkness and won back their freedom.

Charles did the same—he'd endured not just claustrophobia and hardship below ground, but the torment of Acheron. Now, with it all behind him, he was finally free.

Ah, the breath of freedom—how sweet it is.

With a smile, he followed Willo and the others from the cave. Outside, the Mountain People—black-furred minotaurs, brown-skinned half-orcs and humans, snow-white satyrs, and even some humans with fair skin—waited, faces alight with emotion.

No sooner had Charles spotted them than the cave's atmosphere changed abruptly.

Those who had been celebrating suddenly drew silent, watching them warily, palms drifting to weapons, shifting cautiously into battle formations. The air was charged, ready to ignite.

Charles halted at once, stepping halfway backward, expression tense. Behind him, Anno instantly sensed the hostility, growing anxious: for the sake of digging out the cave-in, she wore no plate armor, and her combat power was much reduced—not the time for an armor-donning ceremony. All she could do was grip her sword and brace herself.

Behind, Nidalee's face turned grim, while Hattie and Theresa remained relaxed—one silently counting their opponents, the other confident she could lay them out with one spell.

Willo, always the most sensitive to moods and danger, first noticed the change. Realizing open conflict might break out at any moment, she rushed forward, calling, "Everyone, please, don't do this! Mr. Charles is our friend—we purified the demons' pollution together!"

She looked pleadingly at Danche: "Danche, say something!"

Danche hesitated, the memory of his companion Barbary dying a hard thing to set aside, and revenge an ever-present temptation. But in the end, he took a deep breath and addressed the wary Mountain People. "You don't need to be so anxious. Mr. Charles is a true comrade in arms."

"We cleansed the demons, the polluted wellspring, and vanquished a Chthonian together. They can be trusted."

His gaze swept across the watching crowd. Faces still showed confusion, uncertainty clouding their eyes as they tried to make sense of the tangled situation.

The shaman in back frowned and called to a half-orc, "Rog, explain! If the Matriarch and Danche say things are fine, why are you still holding weapons?"

The half-orc turned to the beastmaster who'd gone for help. "You say it."

The beastmaster stammered, "Didn't they attack us first while Willo was purifying fiends, casting spells at us?"

Other Mountain People looked just as lost—they didn't know the details, only that Danche and Willo had been betrayed, and their mission was a rescue.

"But Mr. Charles later insisted on joining forces, fighting the demons together!" Willo gasped, "There may be misunderstandings—but we all shared the same goal!"

At the mention of the battle, Danche felt another surge of anger. But having chosen peace, he gritted his teeth and snapped, "It was our chimera that went berserk first—even attacking us! What nonsense are you spouting?"

"When you got back, what lies did you tell the archdruid?"

He was nearly shouting, even letting out a burst of Orcish curses. The Mountain People all turned on the half-orc Beast Master, fixing him with hard stares.

The fellow stammered, "I... I said they sneak-attacked us, then tricked us with Matriarch Willo's kindness..."

Suddenly he collapsed on the ground, stunned. "Ancestors above, what have I said..."

Danche nearly marched over to hit him, but instead exhaled deeply. "There's been a great misunderstanding. We have to get back now, or the archdruid could make a rash, disastrous decision based on bad information!"

He dreaded the thought of the Highmountain and Stonehide tribes pushing for a full assault. No—demons must be purified first. No untimely war!

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Chapter 192: Chapter 192: Ines—Mission Accomplished!

Willo turned, bent at the waist, and bowed to Charles, her white bosom plainly visible. "I am truly sorry, Mr. Charles. When I return, I will do my best to clear up these misunderstandings and prevent any needless conflict."

Charles breathed a sigh of relief. Since it wouldn't come to a fight, that was all that mattered. Ever since he'd found that eliminating undead, fiends, and loophole creatures earned Purification Points, he preferred battling those foes; fighting other material world beings held little appeal. "It's all right, this isn't your fault. I trust your sincerity, and I believe you and Mr. Danche can bring peace to these mountains."

He glanced upward at the sky. "We should go soon. We've been missing for days—Blackstaff Tower will need our report on the demons."

Willo nodded. "Safe travels. And please, when you report to your superiors, take care to clarify any misunderstandings. Let's all try for restraint, and avoid causing further trouble."

Charles smiled, replied, "Of course," and called for Anno and the nuns to join him. As they left, Danche suddenly called out, "Nidalee, aren't you coming with us?"

Nidalee hesitated. Returning to her tribe meant marriage pressure, not to mention the minotaur Torun, who was surely still furious after recent events. Shaking her head quickly, she called back, "No, I have a more urgent mission... Go on, just tell my father I'm safe!"

She hurried to catch up to Charles. Willo's eyes wandered to the tail still trailing behind Nidalee, growing suspicious that the true reason she was avoiding home was that she wanted to keep playing her games...

Thinking of how Theresa had been developing Willo's own appetites the past few days, Willo blushed, shook her head, and tried to drive those surging thoughts away, turning instead to the rest of the Mountain People. "Let's get going too, before anything else happens."

...

So the Mountain People departed as well. Many of them were still upset, unwilling to forgive Charles as an outsider, but under joint urging from Willo and Danche, they grudgingly held back their murderous intent and abandoned any thoughts of starting a fight.

Meanwhile, a short way off, once safely out of sight, Charles quickly moved away from Nidalee and jogged to Anno's side, grabbing her hand.

As the familiar warmth flowed into his palm, Anno's eyes filled with tears. All her recent grievances rushed to the surface, and unable to restrain herself any longer, she pinched his palm sharply.

Charles winced but didn't complain, knowing she was angry. He took a deep breath, braced himself for the pain, then pulled her into a hug.

Anno struggled symbolically, then realized Charles really was stronger now and simply let herself rest in his arms. Seeing that she let herself be held, Charles let out a breath of relief and kept his arm around her as they continued forward in silence.

Hattie kept sneaking glances at them, feeling conflicted, while Theresa pretended to look forward innocently—though she used magic to bend the light and sneak peeks at the couple, her heart racing as she watched.

Only Nidalee felt a sense of loss—her twice-daily bliss had suddenly come to an end, and she hadn't even had time to remove her tail.

Damn, it looked like the coming days would be rough...

The group walked on in silence, each lost in their own thoughts, the atmosphere somewhat subdued.

At last, they left the ravine and climbed a hillside. The sun was already near the horizon. Charles didn't call for camp, instead suddenly turning and calling out, "Theresa!"

Theresa, who'd been sneaking peeks at the others and quietly enjoying the scene, jumped as though caught reading a novel in class. "Yes?"

"Can you use your magic to check whether Willo's intelligence about those places is accurate?" Charles asked. "Once we're sure, we can report everything properly."

Anno returned to her senses, a look of expectation in her eyes. "Is that possible?"

Earlier in the cave, Anno and Willo had shared a deep conversation. The Satyr Matriarch had honestly marked every demon pollution point, cultist stronghold, and the possible Abyssal Lord's lair on their map.

While Anno badly wanted to trust Willo's sincerity and her intent to purify the pollution and bring peace, there was too much uncertainty in the details. She needed to check before reporting back to Blackstaff Tower.

"Ah... Yeah, I can do it!" Theresa nodded, relieved. "But probably not until tomorrow. It's too dark now— even I can't see much."

Charles nodded. "That's fine, we can wait until tomorrow. Let's focus on making camp for now."

...

At the Mountaineer Tribe—Alliance Headquarters

Succubus Ines was in a foul mood lately—she felt she'd messed up. For over a month she'd been undercover as a female minotaur among the Highmountain tribes. Thanks to her scheming, everyone expected her to be Torun's future wife.

Even Torun himself seemed resigned to that destiny.

But... why wouldn't Torun even touch her?

She hadn't even gotten the chance to sweet-talk him or fish for secrets!

It was infuriating!

Not that she doubted her own charisma; in truth, plenty of elderly and even adolescent minotaurs had slept with her, and she'd seduced a number of female minotaurs too.

But for some reason, she simply couldn't win over Torun—as if the tribe's strongest young bull had zero sexual desire whatsoever!

It drove her nuts, but what could she do? If seduction couldn't get her into the Alliance of the Mountain Purifiers's upper echelons to access top-secret intel, she'd have to take risks and try other ways to unearth useful information.

Today was just the opportunity: all the tribal leaders had gathered for a rare conference. Risking exposure, Ines cloaked herself and slipped past the guards to eavesdrop outside the main round tent:

"My son may be dead! How do you expect me to stay calm?" From the sound, this had to be the true leader of the Chimera tribes.

"We can't wait. We have to strike at Rockseeker's Outpost—now!" The familiar voice belonged to Luger Stonehide, the werebear always at Torun's side.

"...Since that's your decision, I'm going out for some air." This was a somewhat childish, impatient girl's voice.

"Let her go." That was Ilarode, sounding weary and tired.

Outside, Ines quickly ducked away, dissolved her invisibility, and saw a young, rather small female satyr emerge from the main tent, even her fur tinged with pale pink. Her face looked almost like a human girl of fourteen or fifteen—youthful, cheeks still plump with the last traces of baby fat, cute and full of innocent charm.

At that moment, the girl looked pretty disgruntled as she walked to the camp's edge, leaned against a fence, and sighed deeply toward the leafless forest.

Ines's heart raced: she might look young, but anyone sitting in on the conference and released personally by Ilarode had to have real power.

Feigning simple concern, Ines strolled over and smiled. "Whose child are you, looking so upset? Oh, I'm Ines Highmountain, Torun Highmountain's fiancée."

She made her introduction confidently, all the while deciding how best to probe for information.

"Adele Green Vines," the satyr replied, and she clearly wanted someone to talk to. "My mother sent me to represent her at that conference, so I could convey the real threat we're facing. But they just won't listen, and there's nothing I can do."

Threat?

Ines's heart skipped a beat. With wide, innocent eyes she asked, "The real threat? What's that? Could you tell me?"

"Sometimes you just need to talk, you know."

"Oh, it's the Chthonian." Adele answered offhandedly. "Mother's long been sure Shudde M'ell lies dreaming here, and those demons—they're trying to wake her up so she can destroy everything."

"But for some reason, no one wants to listen." She pouted. "Maybe it'd be better just to let those demons succeed! Let them see for themselves when it's too late!"

Ines's pupils contracted in shock.

She never dreamed that after lurking here so long, unable to fulfill Montport's orders, she'd accidentally stumble onto Montport's true objective!

Her real mission—suddenly, just like that, was complete!

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Chapter 193: Chapter 193: The Eve of Destruction

Over on Charles's side—

There isn't much need to dwell on the details: after finding a suitable place to make camp, they waited for daylight, then asked Theresa to cast magic—distorting light—to search the locations Willo had provided.

As it turned out, Willo's intel was highly accurate. Even if they couldn't pinpoint the exact sites, the obvious pollution, warped landscape, and signs of madness visible in the surrounding environment left little doubt that these were regions plagued by rampant demons.

This only confirmed that Willo hadn't deceived them—the intelligence she'd shared was detailed and reliable, and this Matriarch truly sought peace with all her heart.

With this wealth of clues in hand, they felt well rewarded. Next, they returned to Rockseeker Camp to report these findings to Blackstaff Tower.

It took them another five or six days to travel, slowed by rainy weather—but at last, they arrived back at Rockseeker Camp.

In the end, their delay hadn't caused too much trouble. Anno took charge of writing up her report, while Charles had a bit of personal business to attend to.

Rockseeker Camp, in a small room off the Adventurers' Guild's main hall.

Charles sat alone here, having already instructed a waiter to bring out strong spirits and platters of fragrant roast meats. There were racks of peppered lamb ribs, thick slices of leg of lamb, and a variety of beef and pork—all presented with mouth-watering aromas.

At his hip, inside a small pouch, rested his Storm Warhammer.

After the recent battles, he'd found the power of the hammerhead somewhat lacking. This warhammer, after all, could only hold two spell slots at most—barely enough to match the output of a single lower-circle spell.

In his increasingly demanding battlegrounds, its power—whether for damage or control—had begun to lag.

So, he'd been wondering if he could find an excellent dwarven runesmith to adjust the rune-work and power it up.

He wasn't particularly lacking in mana, so boosting its consumption wasn't an issue.

But as good as that idea sounded, the dwarves' famous caution and insularity made it very difficult to find one willing to tinker with a magical item for an outsider.

Legend said that it took at least a hundred years to earn a dwarf's trust, unless you'd shared some truly special experience. That might be a bit of an exaggeration, but it underscored just how hard it was to get through to them.

Without trust, how could anyone expect their help?

Especially with something as prized as a Mountain Dwarf's masterpiece like the Storm Warhammer.

Fortunately, fate leaves no one helpless. Charles did have one friend among the dwarves.

Today, he'd invited him here in hope of getting help leveling up his weapon.

That friend, of course, was—

Creak—

"Wow, what smells so good? Roasts, finest wine, I can smell it all from the door!"

The room's door opened, and Charles quickly got up to welcome his guest, not even needing to see the burly figure to recognize that booming voice.

It was none other than Bruno, the dwarven warrior Charles had saved at the Tide Caverns.

The short, stout, bearded silhouette shuffled into the room. Charles smiled and ushered him in, shutting the door. "I'm glad you like it. This little banquet took me some work to put together."

By focusing on the effort rather than cost, he hoped to build goodwill.

Bruno hopped onto a stool and, seeing the giant mug of aromatic ale already poured, wasted no time lifting it in his thick fingers and downing it all at one go.

"Ahh..." He drained the glass and sighed with contentment. "Woo... Not bad. All right, out with it—what do you want?"

Dwarves, true to character, were direct and got to the point with no beating around the bush. Charles wasn't surprised, and answered straightaway: "I'd like your help finding a runesmith to modify my warhammer."

He drew the silver hammerhead from his side pouch and placed it on the table. "Is it possible?"

Bruno had already started on his second mug but paused mid-drink at Charles's words. Charles watched him, hopeful; he'd ordered the finest ale just for this.

He noticed a look of difficulty cross the dwarf's face. Bruno considered for a moment, then slowly shook his head. "I'm afraid not, Mr. Charles. When it comes to a Storm Warhammer, we have very strict controls."

"There are indeed runesmiths I know back at the clan, but using their skills means fulfilling harsh conditions—and there's a lot of red tape."

His face filled with guilt. "Even if I wanted to help, you just don't meet the conditions yet."

Charles couldn't hide his disappointment. "So that's it... I understand."

Bruno looked at the feast before him, then at his ale. "So...can I still enjoy the meal?"

At that, Charles couldn't help but laugh. "Eat, eat! Even if it didn't work out, we're still friends, aren't we?"

Reassured, Bruno dug in with gusto, soon covering his chin in grease. Charles watched him eat but had little appetite himself. After a while, he asked, "So, tell me—what needs to be done to meet those conditions and get a runesmith to upgrade my Storm Warhammer?"

"Mm, that I can tell you."

Bruno replied around a mouthful of meat—a full mouth never stopped a dwarf from talking. "Best way to win over a runesmith is to become 'an old friend of the Mountain Dwarves'..."

...

Half the afternoon slipped by. Even though he hadn't solved the problem, Charles learned a lot.

Just goes to show—this isn't like a game. In games, a couple of trivial tasks would skyrocket your reputation with the dwarves, then you could do whatever you liked.

Reality: dwarves set a different, tougher bar every time. Without truly investing yourself, you'd never get what you want.

All Charles could do was sigh and return to the hostel, feeling a bit gloomy. He didn't go to his own room, but opened Anno's door instead.

Anno, busy writing her report, paused and looked back. Seeing him, she offered a warm smile. "So? How did it go? Did Bruno agree?"

Charles sighed and shook his head. "No, just as you predicted—the dwarves might export iron goods, but magical items are strictly controlled..."

He walked over and hugged her from behind, face full of frustration, clearly seeking consolation.

"It's not a problem," Anno reassured him. "After this mission, I'll submit a request to Blackstaff Tower in the guild's name—they should be able to find you a runesmith."

"Force Grey might not be close with the dwarves, but Blackstaff Tower has connections. With the right backing, your hammerhead could easily be upgraded to the highest level on the market."

She promised confidently, and Charles felt deeply moved. He bent to nuzzle her cheek. "You're the best—let me thank you with a kiss..."

"Stop that, go away..."

They bickered playfully for a while, then Charles sat down to help her draw the maps for her report.

No one knew that the destruction of Rockseeker Camp had already begun its deadly countdown.

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Chapter 194: Chapter 194: The Assault Begins

That night, outside Rockseeker Camp—

Dark shadows gathered in the moonlit gloom: the soldiers of the Alliance of the Mountain Purifiers. They came from every tribe—human, half-orc, minotaur, even hobgoblins and goblins...

Yet regardless of race, all of them now gripped their weapons tightly, brimming with murderous intent and ambition. They knew a feast of killing and plunder was about to begin, waiting for them to enjoy.

At the front of the assembled ranks, Ilarode, Torun, and Luger stood together—vanguard and high commanders of this battle. The Chimera Chief, aged and lame, was absent; the Green Vines' young lamb, too small for war, was also not present.

Still, their tribes would not be left out of this conflict.

As the moon climbed to its zenith, their assassins must have already dealt with the Rockseeker Camp's sentries. The time for the attack was nearly upon them. Ilarode's face was severe, Luger Stonehide's eyes burned with a hunger for violence, and only Torun wore a look of unease.

"Archdruid, aren't we acting a little too hastily?"

The minotaur finally voiced his anxiety. Though he was the war's main advocate, barely seven days had passed since the decision to attack was made.

They'd received news of Willo and Danche's rescue, but had not waited for their return. Now, watching Ilarode push for an advance tonight, he could not shake his nervousness.

Surely a military operation of this scale needed a much more thorough and careful plan:

Early-stage scouting, drafting strategies, gathering supplies, organizing, preparing backups, feints...

If not for the setting, Torun would truly have told Ilarode, "You are rushing things."

Ilarode's response carried an air of resignation. He couldn't exactly admit that their tribe was hiding an enormous subterranean Elemental Creature about to slip out of their control.

This beast is about to rampage; if we don't act, our tribe could be destroyed by it!

That could never be said aloud. Instead, Ilarode forced a smile. "Weren't you the one shouting all over camp that we should start fighting? How is it you're timid now?"

He feigned composure, but inwardly heaved a sigh.

He understood all too well the crisis Willo and her daughter Adele spoke of. He was no ignoramus when it came to magic—he was a powerful druid himself, so naturally he knew the moment Shudde M'ell awoke, the entire mountain range would be doomed.

Yet if they didn't let the Earth Dragon loose, the Mountaineer Tribe would be destroyed by dawn. Continuing to struggle with it was a losing proposition; freeing it into the deep mountains would only deliver it into the hands of the demons, and sending it back to the Elemental World meant abandoning the sacrifices made through the years...

Only by attacking Rockseeker Camp could he salvage anything from the disaster.

Such calculations could never be shared. Torun was left awkward, unable to protest. "Of course not—um..."

Still uneasy, he finally blurted, "I just feel that some tribes aren't quite prepared..."

Ilarode favored him with a light smile. "Our Mountaineer Tribe is always ready for war. At a moment's notice, we can muster all resources."

"What, are you saying the Highmountains or the Stonehide haven't prepared for war after all?"

In a few deft words, he put them on the defensive.

Torun's face turned sour. Nearby, the towering Luger Stonehide held his head high—either supremely confident or just prideful—as he declared, "The Stonehide Tribe has always been ready for this war. We've been prepared to fight to the death at any moment!"

He stood in human form, nearly two meters tall, round-headed, muscle-bound, bald—a burly hulk that looked as if he could swallow a child whole.

Different from the dark-skinned Mountaineer humans or the Chimera's orcs, this man's pale complexion resembled Liberl Port's nobility—though his bear form looked nothing like this.

With both sides posturing, Torun's frown deepened. Though Highmountain and Stonehide tribes shared goals and had acted together lately, their relationship was far from friendly.

Both, plus the Chimera, needed copious meat—making them constant rivals, with much history of conflict. Those old grudges were only suppressed for now by the even greater feud with Liberl Port.

Unwilling to lose face, Torun spoke up stiffly. "The Highmountain Tribe has also been ready, and will ensure tonight's victory without fail."

Ilarode simply smiled, letting the tension ease. "To be honest, I have my own worries. Matriarch Willo is expected back soon, and with her influence, if we convened again there might not be any war at all."

This was also true. Torun could only accept it. At that moment, a pigeon-calling whistle echoed from the front lines—a special, urgent signal well-known to all.

"The assassins have succeeded. It's time to attack," Ilarode announced, gaze alight with fire. "Let's take this town!"

He began to chant an incantation. As the earth trembled, a colossal Elemental Creature burst from the depths, charging straight for the town.

The Earth Dragon had begun its assault!

...

Woo—————

A piercing alarm shattered the stillness. Charles, sleeping soundly in Theresa's warm embrace, bolted awake. His first act was to shout at Theresa, "Hurry, teleport to your room!"

Theresa's body vanished in a flash of light, heading back to her own room. Charles exhaled in relief—at least now, even if Anno burst in, she wouldn't find anything amiss.

He threw on some clothes and rushed to the corridor, flinging the door open. "What's going on?"

He found that all the adventurers—men in nothing but trousers, women still frantic, everyone half-dressed and panicked—were pouring into the corridor asking the same question. "What's going on?"

"What happened?"

...

Shrieks from women and dwarves' booming shouts mixed in the halls as heads of every hue bobbed about, but no one had any answers.

Charles frowned—and then the ground shuddered violently, as if a thousand wild bulls were stampeding beneath the building.

"An earthquake?"

"Get to the open ground, quickly!"

"Didn't expect earthquakes in these mountains..."

...

The adventurers shouted and argued, using their own judgment as they surged toward the ground floor. Charles, recognizing the signs, paled—he'd seen the Chthonian before, and instantly made the connection.

Is this the Abyssal Lord's move?

Have the Chthonians arrived to destroy the camp?

Damn, too late!

He gritted his teeth, and rather than follow the crowd, he sprinted for Anno's room and began battering on the door. "Anno! Wake up, Anno!"

No response. A sense of dread rose in his heart—he ignored decorum, fired off four Eldritch Blasts at the lock, reducing it to twisted slag!

He kicked the door open and rushed inside in a panic—only to see Anno, in pajamas under a blanket, peacefully asleep in her soft, broad bed. The alarms and tremors hadn't disturbed her at all.

Charles was momentarily speechless. He shook her shoulders hard. "Wake up, Anno! There's an earthquake—the building's about to come down!"

Her pajamas were a bit loose, and her curves full—so with Charles shaking her, there was a fleeting glimpse of skin. Anno slowly woke from her dreams, barely about to speak, when another low wail of warning sounded from the window. "Woo—!"

Her confusion vanished, replaced by a look of fierce focus. "That's an assault alarm—someone is attacking the camp!"

Charles nodded. "Right—the Chthonians have come, the ground's been shaking! You're just now waking up—the alarm's gone off twice already!"

"No time for talk, get dressed—prepare for battle!"

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Chapter 195: Chapter 195: The Earth Dragon Appears

At Charles's shout, Anno leapt out of bed, scrambling to dress herself. She was completely caught off guard by the sudden danger—after all, Rockseeker's Outpost had existed for more than a century, and aside from wild beasts, had hardly ever been attacked. Who would expect such a crisis to erupt overnight?

But there was no use complaining. All that mattered now was to get up, grab her weapon, and respond.

She reached for her bedside chair, then suddenly remembered she had nothing on underneath, flushing bright red. "Get out, quick."

Charles sighed and backed out of the room. Thankfully, the hostel was Dwarf-built, and say what you will about dwarves being as stubborn as stone—no one could deny the superb quality of their construction.

Despite all the shaking, there was no sign the building would collapse. It was, undeniably, sturdy and reliable.

He stepped into the corridor, just as Hattie, Theresa, and Nidalee exited their rooms, too. Unlike the panicked adventurers, the spellcasters were calm—brows furrowed, quietly observing everything around them.

Charles wasted no time, gesturing to Hattie, "Hattie, go to Anno's room and help her into her plate armor. Nidalee, Theresa, with me—let's get downstairs and see what's happening."

Plate armor, to guarantee its defensive capabilities, is mostly a single interlocking piece. Donning it alone, even for the practiced, takes over ten minutes. With someone's help, the job is far easier.

Hattie nodded, turned, and entered Anno's now-broken door, entering to the flustered but relieved greeting from inside. Charles led the other two girls swiftly down the stairs; by now, the hostel's first floor was deserted—even the Dwarven proprietress had taken refuge outside.

But was it really safer out there?

"ROAR—!"

A bestial roar echoed from outside. A huge shadow swept across the sky, diving down. Fire rained from above, igniting buildings, woodpiles, stables, and fences—the night exploded with flames, the whole town lit up in a searing orange glow!

The crackle of burning wood, bursts of new fires, and distant shouts from would-be defenders blended together in the chaos as pandemonium seized the small town.

Charles's expression darkened as he rushed outside—only to find flying overhead, breathing fire on the buildings, a flock of three-headed Chimera!

And not just one—a whole group!

Chimeras were not a social species, yet these ones operated in flawless coordination, targeting inhabited houses and spewing jets of flame!

Fwoosh—

Just then, a Chimera swooped over their hostel's roof, dropping a massive fireball that set the very building ablaze!

Charles hastily chanted, casting Create Water/Destroy Water, summoning torrents of icy water on the roof, extinguishing the flames. The Chimera's goat head fixed him with an evil glare—holding its temper, it turned and flew off, showing none of a typical Chimera's infamous rage.

These Chimeras are well-trained—clearly organized!

He felt a cold foreboding, a premonition that was soon confirmed as a new cry rang out from the distance: "It's the Mountain People! The Mountain People are attacking!"

"Defend the camp, damn it! Drive those dog-born Mountain People back!"

"Hey, watch your mouth, I'm one of those damn Mountain People!"

"I didn't mean you! Hurry up and get over here!"

...

Mountain People!

Charles's heart clenched, Danche's brown face immediately coming to mind. With Chimeras so well-trained, they had to be Chimera tribe war-beasts—this was surely a premeditated assault by the Alliance of the Mountain Purifiers!

Damn it, Willo and Danche ought to have returned to the alliance by now—why is the battle starting anyway?

Is Willo really not to be trusted?

His expression was grim. At that moment, he heard rapid footsteps behind him—Anno and Hattie, the former now fully armored, arrived at his side.

Seeing the fire-breathing Chimeras, Anno came to the same conclusion: "The Alliance of the Mountain Purifiers started an assault?"

She shot a glance at Nidalee, whose heart seemed to leap into her throat. "That... shouldn't be. My father, he wouldn't start an assault so rashly..."

Her voice faltered—she didn't sound confident: "Unless..."

She cast an anxious glance at Anno, wondering if the paladin might—out of resentment that Nidalee was the enemy leader's daughter and had been flirting with her boyfriend—decide to kill her on the spot.

Fortunately, even if she didn't like her, Anno wasn't so shortsighted. "We save people first!"

She didn't care what Nidalee's "unless" meant—at this moment, she still viewed this Mountain People druid as an ally.

Charles's expression grew even darker. He already knew what Nidalee's unfinished "unless" meant.

Unless the Earth Dragon had completely gone out of control, forcing Ilarode to squeeze out its last value—unleashing it on Rockseeker Camp in exchange for radical support within the alliance.

As he thought this, the ground began to shake anew. The party staggered out of the hostel, struggling to stay upright. Anno gritted her teeth, "Is it Chthonian? Are they working together?"

"No," Hattie said, her eyes sharp. "This isn't a Chthonian—it's an Earth elemental causing this!"

Chthonians emit intense heat—they love dry places. If burrowing, their burning hides parch the earth above. But now, the ground didn't feel dry—only teeming with intense elemental power, reforming in the distance.

"It's the Earth Dragon!"

Nidalee screamed. As the Mountaineer tribe's heir, she recognized her people's elemental beast: "Keep away from the open ground where the tremors are strongest!"

It was obvious, even without her warning, to any experienced adventurer that something terrible was about to happen in the central town square—the usual place for the market. They cried out and fled for safer ground—

BOOM—!

The next instant, a colossal beast burst out from underground, shaking the earth and spewing clouds of dust and stone. Adventurers caught too close were thrown off their feet or struck by flying debris—many were badly injured.

At their distance, Charles and the others experienced only the outer edges of the shockwave. He steadied himself and squinted through the airborne dust.

That... is that the Earth Dragon?

Through the haze, he could just make out the massive creature behind it. It was less like a dragon than a monstrously enlarged primeval crocodile—with massive horns crowning its head.

Even lying flat on the ground, it stood more than five meters tall—almost as high as their hostel itself—and its full length exceeded twenty meters. Its hide was covered in earthy yellow scales, and there were no wings on its back: clearly, it could not fly.

Trailing behind was a tail as long as its body, thick with blunt protrusions—a deadly weapon in its own right.

It opened its jaws wide, emitting a terrifying ululating roar from the depths of its throat. Its eyes glowed blood-red. Earth elementals were typically steady and gentle—unwilling to fight. This Earth Dragon, however, was in a frenzy—its urge to kill burning out of control!

There was no question—its mind was clouded by demonic pollution. Now, in its madness, it had only one goal: to unleash destruction!

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Chapter 196: Chapter 196: Hunt Behemoth

"Danger!"

An adventurer, barely struggling to his feet, cried out in alarm before immediately dropping to the ground again, desperately trying to avoid the Earth Dragon's coming attack.

But all such efforts were in vain. The Earth Dragon's tail was infused with the power of earth itself—enough to sweep away everything before it!

BOOM—!

That massive, log-thick tail swept across the battlefield. Downed, upright, or even those attempting to shield themselves—all were struck by the brute force of the tail. Amidst flying dirt and stone, they tumbled through the air like broken kites—flung in all directions!

"Shield!"

Charles raised his shield, quickly chanting the incantation for Shield. He was far enough away that even as scattered debris struck him, the damage was minimal.

The other girls scrambled to evade as best they could. Hattie, Theresa, and Anno had magical options or heavy plate armor to protect them, but Nidalee was forced to shift into leopard form and flee at top speed. Even then, a glancing blow or two left her yowling in pain.

At last, the dust settled. Yet the Earth Dragon's rampage was far from over. With a single sweep having cleared away the bothersome little ants, the raging Behemoth turned its attention to the nearby houses.

Given its massive size, armored scales, and raw strength, it would only be a matter of time before all the buildings in the small town were reduced to rubble. When that happened, a settlement with more than a century of history—Rockseeker's Outpost—would be nothing but memory!

"Stop it! Archers, fire! Use magic!"

"Any spellcasters here? We need support!"

"Bring up the catapults—pelt it with stones, grab its attention!"

"Ah—my house—!"

CRASH—

Some poor soul let out a wail, presumably a luckless dwarf. As the earth dragon's huge paw smashed down, a brick house collapsed in an instant!

Dust burst skyward, and behind the demolished house stood rows of tiny residences. If the destruction continued unchecked, the losses would be catastrophic!

Charles gritted his teeth and pinched his thigh, forcing himself to calm as his mind worked rapidly to find a solution against such a massive enemy.

A direct kill seemed unlikely; though it lacked the formidable spellcasting might of someone like Theresa, as a colossal earth elemental, this Behemoth was both tough and powerful—a quick victory was out of the question.

Meanwhile, its destructive potential was immense. If it dragged on, it could tear apart the entire town before it died, claiming countless lives.

However, since the Behemoth's madness was triggered by demonic pollution, the solution became obvious—

"Theresa!" he shouted. "Hold its attention, lead it away from populated and built-up areas! Buy us time—limit the damage!"

"Hattie, Nidalee! Head to the woods and set a trap with vines and tentacles! Make sure it's a trap it can't escape from—give me the chance to purify its mind!"

He barked these orders directly in front of the Earth Dragon, caring nothing if the creature heard—the creature was so frenzied, it had probably lost all ability to understand.

"Understood!"

Theresa responded instantly, casting Fly on herself and drifting up into the air, leveling her gaze at the colossal dragon.

She lifted her hand and invoked a blinding Dawn, targeting its eyes, followed by a barrage of 1st-level guiding bolts, raining magical force upon it like there was no tomorrow!

The Earth Dragon was too powerful and resistant—even a 5th-level Color Spray couldn't blind it. Theresa opted for pure violence to grab its attention.

Somewhat battered, Nidalee shifted back to human form, waving an arm at Hattie. "I know a perfect spot for the trap—follow me!"

As a druid native to the Circle of the Land in these mountains, she knew the terrain by heart. Switching back to leopard form, she darted off at full speed, Hattie casting Fly on herself as well and streaking after her like the wind.

Their job was to prepare a vine-and-tentacle snare—a trap that would bind the Earth Dragon fast, just long enough for Charles to step in and purify its mind!

"Anno, let's move together!"

Charles called out and began layering himself with magical buffs: Mage Armor, Extended Longstrider, Extended Elemental Weapon, False Life, Armor of Agathys, and Extended Blur.

As he finished, Anno—now fully armored—joined him. Shoulder to shoulder, the two raced toward the front lines.

As the Earth Dragon rampaged, the Mountain People launched their assault. The hastily formed lines of guards and adventurers barely held the line, in danger of total collapse.

Fortunately, Charles and Anno's arrival bought the defenders a gasp of precious time.

The first to charge weren't the elite of the Alliance of the Mountain Purifiers, but rather the lesser tribes—hundreds strong, able to field a mere fifty warriors at a time.

These were mostly goblins, kobolds, gnolls, and bugbears—chaotic, evil-leaning races, their equipment crude, and discipline non-existent. They fought viciously against the weak, but shrank away from any real resistance.

Now, as Charles and Anno strode onto the battlefield, they stood as boulders in a rising tide, blades mercilessly reaping the lives of their foes.

Charles shielded himself, focusing on defense and counterattacks. Though his Eldritch Blast was deadlier, without a strong front line, fighting at range would only give his enemies the chance to break through.

So he stood firm, buying precious time for the defenders and any adventurers dedicated to saving the town. Soon, more townsfolk and adventurers converged on the line.

Once the defenders re-formed their battle lines, Charles would be able to fall back—to become a merciless Eldritch Blast machine once more.

He watched as more and more townspeople donned armor and joined the defense: human adventurers, dwarves from the Mining Consortium, even half-orcs from the Stonefist tribe unrelated to the attackers.

Though somewhat ragtag, the attackers too were poorly trained. The two sides ground against each other in an awkward stalemate.

At the rear of the attackers, watching the steady rebuilding of the defenders' line, Ilarode clicked his tongue. "It seems our so-called allies are not so reliable after all."

"They were always rabble," Luger Stonehide snorted, his bald head held high. "If we're to break this town's defenses, we'll need true elites!"

Beside him, a half-orc from the Chimera tribe frowned, then shook his head. "It's not that—the Stonefist tribe's warriors joined the defense, and that's what stopped us."

This was the Chimera tribe's Warchief—a formidable commander now acting in place of the feeble, crippled chief.

The Stonefist tribe, another half-orc group from the mountains, had long since allied themselves with Liberl Port. Some even joined the port's mercenary companies, working as bodyguards.

They had gained much from these ties—so much so it drove the Chimera tribe wild with jealousy and hatred. "Those traitors must be crushed with overwhelming force!"

Jealousy, after all, was a core cause of this conflict: those who missed out on the spoils could always invoke "ancient blood feuds" to justify plundering their former kin.

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Chapter 197: Chapter 197: Stonehide the Giant Bear

At those words, Torun's expression shifted. "Then, shall I lead the charge?"

The minotaurs of their tribe were ready, just waiting for Ilarode's order so he could lead them in a deadly charge against their foes.

"No need, I'll handle this myself!"

The one who spoke was Luger Stonehide. The werebear grinned, baring his teeth in a ferocious smile.

He was confident of tonight's victory, and now was eager to claim the glory for himself.

"Everyone, just stand back and watch," he declared. "When it comes to these people, only absolute strength will suffice—crush everything in your path!"

As he spoke, Luger rolled his shoulders and then suddenly let out a savage snarl. "Shamans, give me strength!"

With that, his body began to transform: his skull enlarged, his bones shifted, thick brown fur erupted across his skin, and claws sprouted at his fingertips.

Leaning forward, his hands hit the ground, now vast, bear-like paws. In moments, he became a fearsome massive entity—a gigantic brown bear, nearly two meters tall at the shoulder and weighing close to a ton!

"ROAR—!"

A bestial roar thundered from his throat. Behind him, three druids stepped forward to cast spells, empowering him with buffs: one cast the 1st-level spell Longstrider, greatly increasing his mobility; another used the 2nd-level Enlarge/Reduce spell, causing his already-massive frame to swell even larger—nearly three meters tall and weighing more than three tons;

And the last druid, a rare 4th-level spellcaster among their tribes, silently chanted as he cast Stoneskin, transforming Luger's hide into granite—ordinary metal weapons could no longer hope to harm him.

This was the most critical spell: with it, almost no one in Rockseeker's Outpost could do him any real injury.

"ROAR—!"

Mauling the air, Luger Stonehide felt all his magical buffs settle into place and unleashed his rage. He, too, was a barbarian—though his path differed from Torun's, he shared the same power of "Rage": destructive strength!

A phantom nearly five meters tall—the totemic spirit of his tribe's bear—appeared behind him, a symbol of his lineage. The totem granted him further resistances and strengths, making him now nearly invincible.

No weapon, magical or otherwise, nor any sort of elemental damage, would prove lethal now!

Sensing the raw power flooding his state, Luger Stonehide was certain of victory. Advancing, the massive bear—almost three meters at the shoulder—charged forward, whipping up gales with every stride, unstoppable.

Behind, Ilarode watched him with admiration. His own tribe lacked such formidable, wild warriors; this alliance was exactly what he desired.

Torun, meanwhile, was utterly shaken.

Though he firmly believed that in a one-on-one duel he might best Luger, seeing the gigantic bear packed with magical effects, he doubted even ten of himself would suffice to make a dent!

He doubted his fine steel axes would even pierce the beast's skin.

Magic...

If he wanted to grow stronger, he needed to harness more magic, too!

With these thoughts, he cast a sidelong glance at Ilarode. Their own tribe had few who could cast spells, while Ilarode was the most powerful spellcaster he knew. He wondered whether he could somehow trick Ilarode into granting him the power of wild magic...

As for taking the glory, he wasn't anxious. As a minotaur, he was patient: he knew Rockseeker's Outpost would not fall so easily, and his warriors would have their chance before the end.

At that moment, at the front lines, a gigantic brown bear—nearly three meters tall and five meters long—was laying waste to the adventurers of Rockseeker Camp.

Yet this was less a battle than a massacre!

"What's that monster?!"

"I don't know—my arrows can't even pierce its skin!"

"Damn it, its hide is harder than stone!"

...

A group of adventurers fought and retreated. One Wanderer pulled out his light crossbow, loaded and fired, but the once-reliable steel-tipped bolt bounced harmlessly off the enormous bear as if it were a child's toy!

To their despair, the bear was even faster than them. The gap closed with terrifying speed!

"Screw it—let's fight! Brothers, charge him!"

The leader—a dwarven warrior in chainmail, middle-aged—gritted his teeth, stepped forward, and brought his huge cleaver down on the bear—

BANG—

The blade struck Luger's body with a clang, as if hitting granite; not only did it fail to injure, but the blade cracked and snapped off!

The bear's paw casually swung sideways. The brave warrior's body flew through the air, breastbone collapsed, blood streaming from mouth and nose—dead or dying!

"Aim for the huge bear, loose arrows!"

Within the small town, a squad of twelve crossbowmen saw the carnage and realized the bear's destructive power surpassed a hundred ordinary Mountain People warriors. Their commander shouted orders.

But as the arrow rain fell—most finding their marks—all were helplessly deflected by Luger's stone-hard flesh. Worse, the barrage caught the bear's attention. Luger Stonehide spun and thundered toward them, his charge promising still more bloodshed!

BOOM—!

Suddenly, a fireball hurtled in from the distance, detonating against the massive bear. The explosion and shockwave spread debris and smoke fifty feet in every direction. The flare set corpses ablaze, adding another inferno to the smoke-choked battlefield.

The adventurers caught by the bear's rampage fell back, glancing behind to see a half-elven mage: pointed purple hat, brown hair, petite and flat-chested, clutching her thick spellbook, eyes wide at her handiwork.

"Don't fear! Reform the formation—I'll deal with it!" she called out, trying to rally the others. Though a novice herself, she knew that as a spellcaster, she had to take the lead in times like this!

The remaining adventurers, emboldened, regrouped with trembling hands and formed a new battle line before the mage, weapons raised.

Meanwhile, they all watched the haze, straining to see if the bear had suffered any harm from the fireball.

The blaze still raged, and through the curtain of smoke, the silhouette of the bear emerged. It was Luger's body—some fur singed, but otherwise entirely unharmed!

The young mage blanched, then gritted her teeth and flipped frantically through her spellbook for something better.

Ahead, the great bear let out a savage snarl and thundered forward, charging straight at her!

"Block it!"

"Protect the mage! She's our only hope!"

Several adventurers and town guards charged forward, spears and shields raised, trying to buy the mage time to cast—but their bodies and weapons were as nothing before the berserk bear, who, buffed by magic and rage, tore through them like a true heavy tank, trampling mere mortals beneath his fury!

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Chapter 198: Chapter 198: Bear Barbarian? He Will Not Return Alive!

Mundane blades and spears rang harmlessly across the Giant Bear's hide, unable to inflict any damage; in contrast, every swipe of Luger Stonehide's paw—or even a simple charge—sent anyone struck flying, either left for dead or grievously wounded!

He rampaged straight toward the mage. She, clearly lacking real battle experience, was still rummaging through her disordered spellbook, hesitating over which spell could possibly work against the maddened Giant Bear. It was only when the monster loomed over her that she hastily spoke a new incantation: "Shield!"

BANG—

A bear paw struck her, and in an instant her delicate body was sent sailing like a severed kite. She crashed to the ground, her innards churning with pain. Even with the protection of Shield, she couldn't hold back a gut-wrenching cry, vomiting a mouthful of fresh blood.

She was already injured internally.

Hatred flickered in the Giant Bear's eyes as he stepped forward, intent on eliminating this sole threat. His near-invincible defenses were only thanks to his magical buffs—but those spells, like all magic, had their weaknesses!

First, they could all be wiped away in an instant by a single 3rd-level spell, Dispel Magic. Second, these spells and the Giant Bear totem only protected his body, not his mind—he was still vulnerable to the mages' control spells!

And even aside from that, elemental damage conjured by mages could still bypass protections to wound him, just as that earlier fireball had done.

The damage was minor but not irrelevant. So however little he cared for ordinary people, these spellcasters must all die at once!

With this thought, he moved in to deliver a killing blow to the mage.

But right at that moment, a flash of argent light suddenly tore through the air and slammed into the giant bear's skull!

BOOM—!

A deafening detonation erupted as Luger's mind went completely blank. His huge body seized up, nerves shocked into numbness, and he toppled to the ground, unable to move.

As he barely regained consciousness, a sudden wave of chilling cold washed over him as if he'd been cursed—and four lances of violent energy struck him almost simultaneously!

"ROAR—!"

He distinctly felt his flesh and organs being torn apart in agony. Stoneskin was utterly useless now, and his ancestors' protection felt powerless, leaving him no choice but to unleash a cry of pure agony!

Another mage!

He hated mages!

He was certain this was a spellcaster's trick—nobody else could break through his defenses.

Rising in abominable rage, the bear turned its ferocious gaze toward the origin of those energy blasts—a white-haired figure, standing at a distance, quietly reciting an incantation, four basin-sized arcane circles spinning above.

And a human, no less!

All the better. Your death is certain.

Luger's pain and wrath surged at being flayed alive, and as the red-haired mage now lay collapsed and no longer a threat, he barreled toward the white-haired man in a mad charge!

The one who had intervened, of course, was Charles. The fireball's explosion had drawn everyone's attention, and glancing over, he discovered—with shock and horror—that the rampaging figure was a giant-buffed bear barbarian.

Bear barbarians, generally, referred to those who followed the path of the totemic warrior, venerating the Giant Bear. On its own, that granted solidly improved defenses, but this particular foe could truly transform into an actual bear!

Now, with the vital force of a true bear, stacking the Giant Bear totem's defenses, this fellow was nearly invincible on a chaotic battlefield—ordinary weapons were little threat.

And he was currently boosted by an enlarge spell, his strength even greater. If he was left unchecked to slaughter his way through the defenders, the night's casualties would be beyond count!

He had to be stopped.

And those who could stop him were... himself, Hattie, or Theresa!

But with Hattie and Nidalee busy setting the earth dragon trap, and Theresa still engaged with the elemental beast, only Charles was left to cover the field.

Steeling himself with this responsibility, Charles had just hurled his Storm Warhammer. Now, after drawing the giant's fury to himself, he let his lips curl up ever so slightly.

Good.

If you're focused on me, your end is at hand.

Buoyed by confidence, he unleashed a second round of Eldritch Blast, four lances of energy smashing into the great bear. While backpedaling to buy time, he drew his pact longsword in his right hand, reciting as he cast his sole 4th-level spell: "Staggering Smite!"

Staggering Smite!

Brilliant magical energies wreathed his longsword. To Charles's eyes, this bear warrior was already as good as dead.

Barbarians devoted to the Giant Bear totem had resistance to almost all damage—they took half from almost anything. Except one thing: psychic damage.

And Staggering Smite delivered a direct strike to the soul. By rending an enemy's spirit, it inflicted devastating psychic trauma and terror.

An absolute bane!

The Giant Bear loomed, its right paw raised for a crushing blow. Charles at last stopped backpedaling, lifted his shield to block, and let the ring on his left middle finger blaze with crimson light: "Awo—!"

A woman's shriek, cold and fierce, ripped through the battlefield; many of the embattled warriors flinched, ears ringing, glancing over.

They saw a ghastly, black-haired specter, pallid and wild, hovering midair—howling and reaching with both arms to seize the giant bear's head!

Luger, facing the scream head-on, endured the full brunt of the mental assault. His eardrums seemingly ruptured, his mind split with agony, and his downward swipe weakened considerably!

Charles, his blade wreathed in the Staggering Smite spell, struck down hard even as he recited another: "Shield!"

BANG—!

Both blows landed at once. Charles was hammered sideways by the force, but the giant bear, though unmoved by the hit, found a thin coating of ice now glazing its claw.

That frost was nothing—but in his soul, an unbearable wave of terror and anguish erupted!

Head... splitting... apart...

Soul... torn asunder... organs... withering...

That female ghost will drain away my life—I'm dying, I'm dying!

"AH—!"

Utterly defenseless against psychic harm, the bear barbarian let out a guttural roar, his primal terror overwhelming every trace of reason. Oblivious to the fact that within the totem's protection, the female ghost hadn't actually drained much of his vitality, he simply bolted, barreling straight back the way he'd come!

He fled the field!

"Khh!"

Behind him, Charles struggled upright, hacking up blood. The force of that single blow was terrifying—were it not for his pre-cast False Life, Armor of Agathys, and Shield, it might have truly been fatal.

But since he was all right, that meant he could keep pouring on the pressure!

Watching the giant bear's looming frame recede, Charles quickly refreshed his False Life, then sprinted after him, incanting furiously, unleashing repeated Eldritch Blasts!

You're finished, bear barbarian!

Four more basin-sized magic circles whirled above him as searing blasts of energy tore across the battlefield, smashing into the fleeing giant bear's back. Even under his ancestors' protection, flesh and muscle were instantly flayed away—these strikes cut deep, sending steaming blood gushing forth!

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Chapter 199: Chapter 199: Arrival of the Minotaur Ancestors

"Awoo—"

Another howl of agony erupted from Luger Stonehide's throat, the sharp pain gradually pulling his will back to the surface. The torment in his soul was replaced by the pain searing through his flesh and internal organs. The terror gripping his heart was mostly dispelled, and his frantic escape finally faltered. His gaze now shimmered with confusion.

Wait... Wasn't I supposed to be here to battle, to kill that man?

His heart hammered in his chest, but just as this thought surfaced, another four streams of energy lashed against his body!

Once more, he couldn't help but let out a tortured howl. The Hexblade's Curse tore at his internal organs, fresh blood now dribbling from the corners of his mouth. He turned and glared furiously at the source of the assault—far in the distance, the white-haired human still chanting incantations, a circular magic array appearing for the fifth time, suspended in midair.

Charles's expression was grim as steel, like a remorseless Eldritch Blast machine. His battle plan from here on out was simple: keep firing Eldritch Blast to draw back the Bear Barbarian's hatred, and whenever they closed in, land a staggering smite and drive him away!

The goal: force this foe to waste his time running back and forth, so Charles could pour out massive damage with Eldritch Blast from a safe distance—until the enemy finally dropped dead!

After all, with the power of the Illusionist's Bracers, as a warlock he could output nearly twice as much as any ordinary warlock. Even with the Bear Barbarian's hulking endurance, he wouldn't withstand many more rounds like this—he'd be reduced to bloody scraps!

It all seemed perfect—except as Charles finished chanting his fifth Eldritch Blast, and the fierce energies tore forth, the Giant Bear suddenly rolled sideways—

Despite his bulky frame, he rolled with surprising agility, dodging three of the blasts; only one struck its mark.

Without breaking stride, he regained his posture, then spun and kept running further into the distance!

Charles was dumbstruck.

What the hell...?

Aren't you supposed to be a barbarian?

You're stacked with buffs, shouldering the hopes of your tribe, here to sweep aside the camp like a force of nature—

Where's your honor? Your pride? The courage expected from the toughest of all classes?!

Aren't you afraid your tribe will mock you on your return?!

Charles swore he'd never seen a self-initiated escape like this from a barbarian—in any game, let alone real life—leaving his mind momentarily blank.

He quickly gave chase, letting off a few more Eldritch Blasts. One connected, but a determined, fleeing Giant Bear was terrifyingly fast. Within seconds, the brute vanished from sight.

Left with no choice, Charles finally had to halt and set aside his pursuit of this honorless barbarian—he turned his gaze instead on the wider battle.

At that moment, the front line that he and Anno had barely stabilized now held steady, thanks to reinforcements from the others. With the front momentarily secure, Charles didn't rush back into combat. Instead, he pulled out his spellbook and started to rescue as many of the wounded as possible.

Only now, surveying the scene, did he see just how grim things really were. Luger Stonehide's brief rampage through the ranks had caused massive casualties. At least

twenty had perished under his terrifying might; most survivors were grievously wounded, some crippled for life.

Charles hurried from one mangled fighter to the next, casting Cure Wounds and hauling them back from death's door. In the process, he noticed that aside from the mage who'd shielded herself, nearly all surviving wounded were dwarves.

He couldn't help but marvel at the dwarves' tenacious vitality, but didn't linger. After dragging the handful of survivors back from the edge, he turned and threw himself once more into the front-line battle.

The Mountain People's rear lines.

Watching Luger Stonehide's panicked retreat, Torun let out a silent sigh of relief. Even after becoming a Giant Bear and being stacked with magic buffs—so what? He still couldn't best that man.

That was what he thought, though his face remained solemn. "This is quite a hidden nest of dragons—if even the mighty Luger, a barbarian among barbarians, is forced to flee."

"It seems only by entering the fray myself can these foes be defeated."

As he spoke, Ilarode couldn't help but give him a sidelong glance. This boy always manages to come up with something new, he thought, even managing to boast at a time like this.

But he didn't mock. His eyes turned to Charles, and a bold idea flickered in his mind: Could this man be the one Nidalee favors?

Given what he'd just seen, from any angle, this warrior was peerlessly impressive—he'd brought down a barbarian, empowered by three druid spells and transformed into a Giant Bear, as if it were nothing.

A man such as this, superior even to Torun, winning my daughter's heart—perhaps that isn't so unacceptable...

He mulled this inwardly, wavering but saying nothing. His expression grew grave as he nodded. "Torun, I'll go deal with that mage who's holding back the Earth Dragon—for this front line, I leave it to you and your warriors!"

Torun nodded, then hefted his axes high, unleashing a thunderous battle cry: "Highmountain tribe—charge!"

"Slay them—!"

Roaring, he entered his rage. Immense spectral minotaur heads of different hues materialized behind him—iconic ancestors from the tribe's long history—now bowing their heads, smiling down on their descendants.

Torun led the charge. Behind him, over two hundred minotaur warriors—each hefting stone axes, greatclubs, and other massive weapons—bellowed as they stormed ahead.

Above, the shining phantom minotaur heads shed motes of many-colored radiance that melded into a silvery hue, making the minotaurs' fur gleam brilliantly.

This was Torun's gift, path of the ancestor-guarding barbarian: when raging, he could call upon the spirits of the ancestors to grant protection to kinsmen of the same bloodline.

Perhaps alone, Torun couldn't defeat Luger, who stacked three archdruid spells—but leading his minotaurs, he commanded a truly unstoppable army!

Among these mountains, they would be invincible!

"Slay them——!"

The minotaurs stormed the battlefield, on the verge of tearing Rockseeker's Outpost's lines apart in moments. These were no goblins or kobolds—over two hundred nearly two-meter-tall, musclebound minotaurs wielding heavy weapons, pressing forward with a force nothing smaller could match!

The fires kept raging, black smoke billowing high. The scales instantly tipped—ordinary human guards and adventurers couldn't withstand the onslaught and broke almost instantly; halflings worked their light crossbows, gnomes attempted to cast spells, but all this had little effect on the minotaurs. The ancestors' blessing shielded them from tremendous harm—unless overwhelming firepower was brought to bear, the minotaurs simply ignored these meager blows!

Only the mountain dwarves, relying on brute strength, could stand toe-to-toe with the minotaurs—and even that wouldn't last long. Defeat was just a matter of time.

From the instant the minotaurs hit the field, the outcome seemed sealed. At the back of the crowd, Charles discharged Eldritch Blast after Eldritch Blast, trying to drive back the invading horde, racking his brain for any method to turn back this disaster...

Suddenly, a bolt of lightning—thick and blinding—arced across the battlefield—

Zzzzt—

"Ahhh——!"

With a blaze of electric light and the crackle of energy, the lightning bolt ripped through several minotaurs in a line. Their bodies convulsed, paralyzed on the spot, their fur even bursting into flame, crackling and popping in the magical current!

The scent of roast meat, tinged with acrid smoke, wafted through the chaos.

A high-level spellcaster—?!

Charles stared in shock, head whipping around—aided by the battlefield blaze, he first caught sight not of the newly arrived reinforcements, but a huge, wind-whipped banner flying overhead!

That was...

At once, his pupils contracted, his heartbeat quickened.

That's the blue dragon bank's symbol—it's the banner of the adventuring company sponsored by the blue dragons!

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Chapter 200: Chapter 200: The Blue Dragon Ion Beam Emitter

Damn it, I knew it—as the true masters of Liberl Port, how could these major conglomerates not have stationed their own soldiers in Rockseeker Camp!

That thought had barely crossed Charles's mind when he saw the group rushing toward the battle. Though this was the adventuring company sponsored by the blue dragons, only the leader was an actual blue dragonborn. The other members were ordinary adventurers: humans, dwarves, half-elves, even a few gnomes, numbering just over twenty in all.

But compared to typical adventurers, half of them each carried a square box, roughly the size of two basketballs, fitted with blue gems as the central focus.

As they neared melee range, one of them muttered an incantation, and in the next instant, a thick Lightning Bolt shot out from the top of the box!

"Aaah—!"

That lightning bolt tore straight through several minotaurs as well as a few other advancing Mountain People. Amid anguished screams, their bodies were charred and scorched, then fell limply to the ground!

The attackers were thrown into panic, each of them wary and tense, terrified another Lightning Bolt could come their way at any moment. The assault's momentum sputtered, while the adventurers' squad whooped with wild laughter:

"Hahaha! This thing is fantastic!"

"Prince Blue Dragon's got money to burn! C'mon, let these Mountain People bastards see what real magic power looks like!"

"Ready—prepare—volley fire!"

Zzzzt—!

This time, three fired at once. The intertwining Lightning Bolts formed an electrified net across the battlefield. Those Mountain People who knew the horror of these weapons immediately dove flat to the ground, evading frantically. The attackers' advance was completely broken—and their spirits crushed under the barrage!

Amid this, the sole blue dragonborn in the squad strode forward, stepping away from his comrades, who were still shouting and whooping with excitement. He cast a voice-amplifying spell on himself, and in flawless Common, barked out briskly:

"Ion Beam Emitter—the latest high-powered, self-charging magical weapon independently designed by Blue Dragon Electric Company! Convenient to use, even for non-spellcasters—"

"Incredible power, results plain for all to see..."

"Original price: 4,800 gold pieces—a special today, only 2,999 gold pieces..."

He sounded like a professional announcer, hawking wares in the middle of the battlefield. Charles stood dumbfounded. There was no such thing in the game, that was for sure.

He could only marvel—when it comes to ingenuity, sentient beings in the real world really are limitless.

As he pondered this, the enemies ahead were pinned down by the Lightning Bolts, unable to even lift their heads. So for once, Anno found a bit of respite. She fell back a few paces, exhaled, and returned to Charles's side. Hearing the blue dragonborn's pitch, her expression grew complicated: "So equipping these adventurers with so many weapons—must have cost at least forty thousand gold?"

Charles did some calculations, then nodded slightly. "Knowing the blue dragons, the cost price for these weapons can't be much less than the sale price. If they're at all honest, the total build cost for these weapons could even go over 5000 gold apiece..."

Hearing that, Anno couldn't help but sigh, "They really are rich..."

Charles gave her magic plate armor a slow look up and down, thinking: you really have no right to talk—your armor alone must be worth upwards of 10000 gold, right?

But then he glanced at the Illusionist's Bracers on his left forearm.

Honestly, my own gear? Ten thousand gold wouldn't cut it, either...

Never mind, everyone here is pay-to-win.

He chuckled to himself at that thought. At this moment, off in the distance, a leopard raced up and came to a halt at his side, then shifted into human form:

"Priest, the traps are ready!"

Charles's eyes lit up. Without another glance at the battlefield, he quickly said to Anno, "Be careful!" and broke into a run, shouting as he went:

"Theresa, move! Lure it to where we set the traps!"

But even as the words left his lips, a blinding light erupted in the sky. He squeezed his eyes shut, turned his head, then reached out to cover Anno's eyes as well, both of them backing away from the violent radiance.

When it finally faded, he cautiously opened his eyes, turning with tightly knit brows and utter shock on his face.

That level of light—Theresa herself couldn't possibly cast something so powerful...

A truly high-circle spellcaster had shown up!

As if on cue, Theresa's distant shout followed: "I can't break away! Priest, use your Eldritch Blast to draw it over—I'll pin down this one, and that spellcaster too!"

...

Jump back ten minutes in time. Theresa hovered midair, face cold and severe, pouring all her spellcasting prowess into holding back the Earth Dragon's rampage.

Ever since being purified by Charles, she'd rarely fought at full force. Usually, the foes she faced were too weak, either dying before she could go all-out or trying to flee instead of standing there to be struck.

Secondly, she wanted to save room for Charles, so he could purify their enemies with his unique abilities and reap those special rewards.

If she did unleash her full firepower and burned down their foes in three strokes, wouldn't Charles come away empty-handed?

So she'd always held back, never really fighting with all her strength.

Tonight, though, with a challenge rating possibly higher than her own, and an enemy so tough but unable to take flight or threaten her at altitude, she could finally unleash her power!

At the start of the battle, she had cast the 5th-level spell "Dawn," manifesting a miniature sun above her head, burning the Earth Dragon below at a slow roast while flinging 1st-level guiding bolts down upon it, one after another!

To maximize efficiency, she used unaugmented guiding bolts, so as not to waste stronger spell slots on single hits. But stack enough spells with Dawn's ongoing burn, and even the Earth Dragon began to feel pain.

It snarled and roared but, standing barely five meters tall, it could do nothing to Theresa hovering twenty meters above it!

Helpless, it bellowed and slogged on through her attacks, trying to command the surrounding earth elementals: pulling them from the ground and reforming them, sending them floating up, hoping to force Theresa down.

Vague clouds of dust and debris hung in the air.

A sandstorm?

Theresa's brows arched, then relaxed again. She didn't see it as a significant threat.

Please. If this were a desert—with sand everywhere to raise and shape into giant hands reaching for the sky—then, yes, she'd have to pay closer attention.

But here? They were on a mountain, surrounded by forest!

How much sand could the Earth Dragon even use?

She paid the threat no mind, darting skillfully through the sky, keeping just ahead of the Earth Dragon's attacks. And as she'd guessed, with so little sand available, it was impossible for the beast to raise a hand enough to snatch her from the air.

All the dust did was provide slight obscuration—nothing that could harm her!

In the rear, Archdruid Ilarode chatted with Torun while taking it all in. Seeing the Earth Dragon's predicament, even he couldn't help but sigh.

Truly, it is battle cunning that matters most for any living creature in combat.

The Earth Dragon of old, finding itself stymied by a foe like this, would surely have burrowed deep, triggering earthquakes and devastation in hopes of bringing the foe down to fight it on the ground—never flailing at unreachable enemies like this!

Demonic pollution might have made the Earth Dragon more savage, but also more reckless, more vulnerable in a battle of equals.

That being the case, I have no choice but to act myself—to pull that mage from the sky.

With that cold thought, Ilarode's expression hardened. Raising a hand, he began a complex series of gestures, chanting an ancient and mighty incantation: "Sunburst!"

8th-level spell—Sunburst!

A supremely powerful spell with an immense radius, it's the magical equivalent of a solar storm. In an instant, a blazing tide of white light flooded the sky. To avoid catching the Earth Dragon in the blast, Ilarode aimed the spell at the upper air!

Terrifying rays swallowed Theresa whole and lit the battlefield, the entire small town, as if a nuclear weapon had detonated overhead. The light was so brilliant, no one could keep their eyes open!

That's the force of an 8th-level spell. Land that on the ground, and the whole town would be wiped out in an instant!

A smile curled at Ilarode's lips. In truth, the spell Sunburst sacrifices some range for raw killing power. Spells designed purely for area, like Earthquake or Tsunami, can level a town in a moment, though with less concentrated force.

Such spells would be overkill here. He needed only this—a single move to kill the mage aloft.

When the radiant Sunburst faded, Theresa floated there, utterly unharmed.

Ilarode's smile froze, disbelief flooding his face.

What the...?

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