

Witch Monastery #Chapter 211: Birth, Eighth Level, Quickened Spell - Read Witch Monastery Chapter 211: Birth, Eighth Level, Quickened Spell

Chapter 211: Chapter 211: Birth, Eighth Level, Quickened Spell

As Charles finished speaking, the series of small lines ending with "failure" on the system interface began to disappear, replaced by the system's solution: perform surgery simultaneously on the heart, liver, kidneys, and other necessary organs—a total of eleven procedures—to ensure the infant's survival.

At the same time, to guarantee successful surgery, "Cure Wounds" would be needed at both the start and the end to sustain the vital force of each organ; otherwise, given the newborn's fragile vitality, she would not survive until the operation's conclusion.

At the very bottom of the plan, the total treatment cost was displayed: 2215.

That's expensive...

Charles sighed, but he did not give up. Then he turned and glanced at the other witches behind him, "Does anyone know Cure Wounds?"

Sophia, Theresa, and Nidalee all raised their hands at once. "I do."

One had broad knowledge, one had worked hard to infiltrate the Church of the Goddess of Life, and one was a druid by nature—for them, Cure Wounds was second nature.

As for the other girls, they couldn't contribute much.

Charles nodded slightly, "All right. When the surgery begins, I'll direct things. Sophia and Theresa, take turns using Cure Wounds to sustain the infant's life."

The three nodded, while the other nuns stepped back. Charles and those three surrounded the baby. Without further delay, he took a deep breath and said, "Begin, system!"

At his command, a milky purified light appeared, covering the infant's body. Then, several scalpels, hemostats, and other instruments floated into the air, each going to its assigned spot on the infant and beginning to cut and remodel.

Sophia and Theresa, as Charles requested, took turns spellcasting to sustain the infant's life. Nidalee, whose mana reserves were too low, was kept as backup, only to step in for emergencies.

Everything seemed to be proceeding smoothly. Charles was tense, waiting in silence.

Time passed, second by second; the system's efficiency remained impressive. After about half an hour, the system interface suddenly popped up with a line of text:

Attention: The surgery is entering its final stage. Please, when the countdown reaches zero, within eight seconds, cast Cure Wounds simultaneously on all eleven surgical wounds.

On the system interface, eleven red dots were marked on the baby's body. Then, a one-minute countdown appeared, tick-tocking down second by second.

Charles froze.

Eight seconds, eleven wounds... meaning eleven spells?

Are you kidding me?

Cure Wounds isn't like Shield or Absorb Elements, which can be fired off instantly with just a single incantation and gesture. Like Burning Hands or Fireball, it requires a full incantation and somatic component to manifest as an empowered spell.

So, to complete one such spell, even the most skilled spellcaster would need at least five seconds.

But here at the scene—it couldn't have been more unfortunate—even counting himself with a spellbook, only four people could cast Cure Wounds.

Eight seconds would barely let each of them cast two spells, totaling a maximum of eight. That meant at least three organs would go unrepaired.

Charles faltered for a moment. For an instant, he wanted to tell Andny, Maybe we can't save her—maybe I just can't do it.

But seeing the Insects Witch, jaw clenched and her face drawn with worry, he could not say such a thing.

I cannot let my girl endure such agony.

So...

He would once again have to rely on his cheat.

He glanced at his system balance—thirteen thousand and some. Not a huge sum, but just enough to level up.

"System," he called silently in his mind. "Level up!"

"Select Feat: Quickened Spell!"

Level eight—another chance to choose a Feat. It was fortunate that a Feat existed to solve this precise crisis.

Quickened Spell.

This was Metamagic—its effect was to spend an extra two spell slots to compress most of the incantation and components, thereby significantly shortening the time to cast spells.

In essence, spells with a casting time of ten seconds or less could be compressed to two seconds, even a single second!

Buzz—

A milky purified white light flashed, twelve thousand Purification Points were spent, and his flush of recent wealth disappeared in an instant.

But at that moment, he felt no regrets.

"Sophia, Theresa, Nidalee, listen," he continued. "When I give the word, cast Cure Wounds at the fastest possible speed, aiming at the locations I specify. Cast two each."

"Sophia, you target the heart and the lungs; Theresa, the heart and the stomach; Nidalee, both kidneys."

He drew a deep breath. "Everyone remember?"

All three girls nodded, their expressions unusually serious. The scalpel still danced in the air. They didn't understand the process or its principles, but all could sense that the true challenge was about to begin.

"All right, then—"

Eyes fixed on the system's countdown, when only four seconds remained, he suddenly cried, "Begin!"

Instantly, all three girls began incantations, and Charles grabbed his spellbook, chanting as well.

Four seconds flew by; one second after the system prompt to cast Cure Wounds within eight seconds, all four Cure Wounds spells were completed and landed directly on the infant's body!

A warm white glow emerged. The incised organs swiftly healed, the system-implanted remodels perfectly integrating.

Then, Sophia, Theresa, and Nidalee each incanted a second round, continuing treatment. Charles's eyes blazed. In less than two seconds, he had finished a new incantation: "C W!"

Buzz—

His incantation was reduced to just two letters, his gesture to a simple flick. Massive magic power surged through him, and beam after beam of white light flashing out, sealing the surgical wounds.

Behind them, Andny looked up in shock. Her limited knowledge could not fathom why her Master was suddenly able to cast so rapidly!

But confusion quickly faded, replaced by awestruck worship on her face.

Master is omnipotent!

That idea took root the moment it sprouted, and she accepted it without question.

At the same time, the eight seconds elapsed. Theresa and the others finished their second round right on time, healing every one of the girl's wounds.

On the system interface—visible only to Charles—four golden words appeared: Perfect Success.

"Whew..."

He let out a long sigh, sweat glistening on his brow. The mental strain he'd just endured was considerable.

A single 1st-level spell slot for Cure Wounds cost two points; Quickened Spell cost an additional two. One normal and four quickened casts—within those eight seconds, he had spent a total of eighteen spell slots.

Note: It takes thirteen spell slots for a 9th-level spell that takes eight seconds to cast.

And he had just burned through eighteen points—as an 8th-level spellcaster. The burden of such magical output on his mind and being was almost unimaginable.

That's why he'd never wanted to spend a precious 8th-level Feat slot on "Quickened Spell" before; while it could massively boost his output, the strain and side effects were obvious.

This Feat was not suited for a war of attrition.

Still, for Andny's happiness, it was all worth it.

He turned and smiled. "The surgery was a complete success."

At these words, Sophia, Theresa, and Nidalee all exhaled in relief.

Fortunately, their efforts had not been wasted.

"Hooray!"

With a cry of delight, Andny threw herself into Charles's arms, weeping with joy. He wore a satisfied smile, gently returning the embrace of her slender, fragile frame—feeling that every struggle had been worthwhile.

Beside them, Hattie pulled out a handkerchief and softly wiped away the sweat from Charles's brow, her voice warm: "Thank you for all your hard work."

Charles gently caressed Andny's hair, then looked over to the spiderborn infant. "It was worth it."

Andny let go of his arm, stepped to the side, and took out the silk blanket she'd prepared, carefully wrapping up the still-unconscious spiderborn.

Her movements were gentle, like a truly loving mother. Then she looked up at Charles, eyes full of hope: "Master, would you please name her?"

Everyone's attention instantly focused on him.

"Hmm..." Charles pondered. Truth was, he was terrible at names—especially having to give a Western-style name to a little girl was no easy feat.

After a long pause, he finally dredged one from his throat, the name of a spider queen: "Let's call her Elise."

"Elise Charles. From today, that will be her name."

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Chapter 212: Chapter 212: Andny: She Can't Suckle...

Charles originally thought the issue with the spiderborn infant was settled, that matters had finally come to a close and he could return to his normal study and training.

But unexpectedly, in the afternoon as he was alone in the scriptorium, studying spells, Andny's familiar once again landed by his ear, voice full of urgent worry: "Master, please come quickly—Elise has a new symptom!"

After all that happened that morning, this girl had clearly already come to see Charles as someone all-powerful. Whatever happened, her first reaction was always to call on him for help.

Of course, Charles wasn't about to refuse. "Are you in your room? Wait for me, I'll be right there."

After replying, he closed his book, turned and left, and hurried to the doorway of Andny's room, pushing open the door to see the Insects Witch as always in her black nun's habit, but now cradling the infant swaddled in white in her arms, like a true Madonna full of compassion.

Although the baby's condition clearly looked worrying.

She was vomiting up milk.

Warm, white milk, coming out in small streams from her mouth, filling the air with a peculiar scent. The area around her mouth was stained white, and Andny, holding a handkerchief, was anxiously wiping her clean.

As she heard the creak of the door behind her, Andny turned back, looking at him with pitiful eyes. "Master..."

Charles instantly understood the problem. He quickly walked over and frowned. "She can't keep anything down?"

"No." Andny shook her head. "No matter what I feed her, she throws it up—cow's milk, goat's milk, all of it, as soon as she takes it. Her constitution is just too poor. I really don't know what she can possibly eat..."

As she spoke, the baby in her arms had already spat up nearly all of the milk she'd just drank, then wrinkled her brow, opened her mouth, and let out an ear-piercing wail.

Andny looked at Charles in desperation. He frowned as well, forcing himself to endure the crying, and suddenly said, "Maybe human milk would work."

Andny blinked. "Eh? But... where would we find..."

Charles reached over, gently caressing Elise's head through the swaddle, trying to soothe her, but the little one just cried even louder.

He scowled, then abruptly suggested, "Why not try letting her nurse from you?"

Andny immediately looked confused. "Me... but I have nothing..."

She looked down at her own flat chest, a wave of deep inferiority overwhelming her.

Was there any way to make her figure a bit fuller?

She recalled noticing Sephera drinking cow's milk lately—maybe that's helpful?

Her mind wandered in confusion, while Charles, listening to Elise's continuous cries, grew more irritable. "Just give it a try—at least put something in her mouth so she'll stop this racket!"

As a human, some instincts were embedded in his very bones: for example, hearing a baby crying made him nervous, driving him to try anything to calm the child.

Andny clearly didn't have this instinct. Only after Charles pointed it out did she finally realize how grating such crying really was.

She agreed softly, then, cradling the little girl in one arm, used her other hand to deftly unfasten her nun's habit, revealing her modest, petite chest. She pressed the baby to one side—

And as if guided by instinct, the instant Elise's lips brushed Andny's pink nipple, she opened her mouth and latched on.

"Ah—!" Andny couldn't help but gasp, feeling a tremendous sucking force, an indescribable sensation shooting through her mind, making her reflexively clamp her legs together as the other nipple tingled with blood.

Charles observed Elise's movements. Infant bodies are completely designed for nursing; every structure made for sucking milk. You could see clearly—fists clenched, legs tucked in, mouth locked around Andny's nipple, she worked with all her strength, desperately trying to nurse at the Insects Witch's chest.

There was no doubt she was truly hungry. Unfortunately, no matter how much effort Elise put in, nothing would come out. She simply could not extract a single drop of milk.

"Master..."

Andny looked up at him, tears in her eyes, caught between deep wronged anguish and a shuddering pleasure. "She's stopped crying... but what now? I just don't have... I can't feed her."

Charles finally let out a sigh of relief and said, "Human milk should work—you just keep holding her like this. I'll go find someone who actually has milk to help you!"

With that, he turned and hurried out. Andny, eyes brimming with tears, called after him in a faint, coquettish voice, "Hurry, Master, she's already started licking..."

Charles waved behind him, signaling that he'd heard, and picked up his pace, heading straight to the tailor's shop.

Naturally, he was looking for Malena.

It just so happened to be a work day. When Charles pushed open the door he saw Malena, behind the sewing machine, working quietly alone.

She was wearing a gray knit sweater over her ample chest, soft black fleece-lined stockings, and flats—nice and warm.

At that moment, she'd slipped her feet from her shoes to rest them, and a thought struck Charles: perhaps if the tailor's shop produced more high-heeled shoes, it could open up another profitable line?

Maybe not a fortune, but at least a bit of extra income.

As this thought drifted through his mind, Malena, noticing his gaze lingering on her legs wrapped in black stockings, gave a subtle smile, shifted her posture, and crossed her shapely calves so the soles and arches of her bare feet were nicely exposed for his appreciation.

At the same time, she spoke, her tone perfectly proper: "Is there something you need from me, Priest?"

He hadn't visited Malena since his return, so seeing him now, there was an unmistakable heat building inside her.

Charles quickly pulled his gaze back, took a deep breath, reminding himself of his urgent purpose for coming, and tamped down the flames in his heart.

"Oh, yes... I do need your help with something." He scratched his head a bit sheepishly. "Uh... our monastery recently took in an infant girl, but her body is far too weak..."

"She can't tolerate milk—cow or goat, both come right back up. We thought maybe only human milk would help..."

He forced himself past the awkwardness, fixing Malena with as sincere a look as he could manage: "So, could you do us this favor?"

Malena smiled at once. "Of course, dear Priest. But I haven't finished work yet..."

"Work can wait," Charles said—after all, as the greatest benefactor of the monastery, he had the power to excuse her. "The baby's really in trouble—it'd be a big help if you could come now."

Malena didn't refuse. "All right."

She slipped on her shoes, pulled her brown coat from a peg on the wall, draped it over her shoulders, and followed Charles out.

Together they hurried back to Andny's room, where the girl still sat with her nun's habit half-undone, holding Elise to her chest, frowning in concentration, sweat beading on her brow, silently bearing the desire aroused by that strange sensation.

Charles paused, then turned away—deliberately keeping a respectful distance. "Please go ahead, Madam Malena. I'll excuse myself."

When alone with Andny or Malena individually, he could act naturally enough. But with both present, a certain line still couldn't be crossed.

There was, after all, still one last layer of the window yet unbroken—and he was in no rush to shatter it.

Malena glanced curiously between him and Andny, but said nothing, responding gently and stepping in, closing the door behind her.

Charles waited outside. In a short while, Malena emerged again, her cheeks flushed, a thin sheen of sweat on her brow—clearly, this had been a test for her as well.

She couldn't help shooting him a glare—the kind that can ignite desire with a single glance from a beautiful woman.

Charles tamped down the urge, stepped forward, and asked, "Did it work?"

"Yes. The little girl fell asleep, and didn't spit up this time." Malena said, "For a baby this small, only mother's milk will do."

Charles let out a long breath. "Thank you so much... We may have to rely on you for a while..."

His expression was a bit apologetic. But Malena just smiled softly. "Of course, it's the least I can do."

2 gold a day, 60 gold a month—by any measure, a textile worker shouldn't earn that much.

That was the wages of senior blacksmiths and shipwrights—Malena was well aware, and deeply grateful. She would do anything for him.

Though, looking at Charles's fair face, her heart pounded even harder.

"But, I do have a request." She went on. "Next time you need milk, why not bring her to my home?"

"It's... not so easy in front of the other nuns—I'd feel too self-conscious."

It was a feeble excuse. Charles thought—so in front of the other women you're shy, but alone with me you're fine?

Malena, you could easily just express some milk for Andny to take, no need for me to bring the baby in person...

Still, he understood her motives, and wasn't about to expose them. Nodding seriously, he replied, "Of course. I'll bring her over, then."

The corners of Malena's mouth curled up in a most enchanting smile.

...

That evening.

Cradling the still-sleeping Elise, Charles knocked gently at Malena's door. As hurried footsteps approached, the door opened to reveal Lisa, in pajamas, her blonde hair still damp. Without a word, she raced over and hugged his thigh. "Priest!"

Her voice was pure joy. Charles smiled, reaching down to pat her head, softly reminding her, "Lisa, next time you hear someone knocking, always ask who it is first. Don't open the door to just anyone—it's not safe."

"I know!" the little girl nodded vigorously. "But I recognized your footsteps, Priest, so I ran right over!"

With that, she buried her face against his waist, rubbing wildly.

A moment later, Malena also came from the back, dressed in a purple pajama that left her full figure almost bare, her hair still wet from a recent bath. With nights dark and entertainment scarce, people usually bathed and slept early.

Seeing it was Charles, Malena's smile bloomed like spring. "Priest? Come in, please! Let me take the baby—Lisa, let go so Priest can come in."

She stretched out her arms, taking Elise from Charles. Lisa reluctantly let go, but at once grabbed his hand—acting just like a little sister.

At that moment, she finally realized what Charles had been holding. She cocked her head, eyes full of curiosity. "Is she... Priest, is she your daughter?"

Charles shook his head as he walked inside. "No, she's an abandoned baby we found. Her name is Elise, and after studying things over, the nuns decided she should have my surname—Charles."

After stepping into the living room, he sat down on a chair without hesitation. Lisa closed the door and, even more unreservedly, climbed onto his lap, hugging his waist and gazing up at him. "So... she came for Mama's milk?"

Charles fought through the awkwardness. "There's no other way—she's only just been born, and really can't take animal milk..."

Lisa's eyes sparkled as she stared at Elise's round face. Suddenly she piped up, "Priest, are you a noble too? 'Charles'—that sounds so dignified!"

Over on another chair, Malena had lifted her pajamas to nurse the child. At the mention, she frowned. "Lisa!"

Lisa burrowed her head into Charles's belly, curling up in his lap. Charles gently squeezed her soft back through the fabric, smiling. "It's nothing."

He gave her a playful pinch through the pajamas. "I'm not. My father was a regular soldier from Sein, my mother too. Charles is a very common name in Sein."

Then he suddenly thought of something, and laughed. "Still, the Empire of Sein is so old—if you traced back a few thousand years, maybe 'Charles' was once a noble family!"

The Empire of Sein traced its founding to the Green Emperor (a legendary aasimar) and the Silver Emperor (an ancient silver dragon), but for thousands of years afterward, the throne rotated among many families—no one family held power for long.

So in fact, any surname, traced back for a few centuries or millennia, would likely find distinguished ancestors, or at least some romantic brush with the extraordinary.

In other words—anyone could become a warlock.

Charles didn't know of anyone notable with his surname in the game, but if he checked far enough, he was sure some supernatural ancestor could be found.

Anyway, he didn't make any bold claims.

But Lisa's imagination filled in the blanks at once. "So that's it—Priest Charles, is your family just like ours? Once noble, but ruined by slander?"

Charles smiled, hugging her and tapping her dainty nose with his fingertip. "Maybe so. Who knows?"

Lisa adjusted herself so he could tap her nose whenever he wished, and went on, "Those nobles slandered us just to steal our inheritance. It's so evil!"

"I'll study hard and train hard and get strong like you, Priest, and beat them all!"

The young Divine Soul Warlock balled her fist in a solemn oath, her eyes shining with hope—or perhaps a silent birthday wish.

Charles, thinking of his own powers' mysterious origin, could only nod very guiltily. "Yes. With hard work, you too can become strong like me!"

Meanwhile, Malena, breasts bared as she nursed Elise, spoke up with a frown, "Lisa, don't talk like that."

Then her expression softened and she turned to Charles. "Honestly... it's all in the past. There's no need to take any more risks for it."

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Chapter 213: Chapter 213 (R18)

Lisa pouted, wanting to argue her point, but Charles suddenly said, "Well, since I have some free time tonight, Lisa, let me tell you a story."

Lisa's eyes lit up, her earlier complaints forgotten. "Okay!"

Charles hugged her, gently patting her back, and began, "In a very distant world, there was a Great Emperor who, to bring happiness back to the suffering empire, stole the Evil God's power and created twenty strong sons..."

He slowly narrated the story, adapting it from his past life into a tale a child could understand. Lisa's eyes sparkled, even Malena, despite her reserve, couldn't help but listen intently.

"...and so, the Regent and his elf wife held a grand wedding in the Second Empire, living happily ever after."

As the story concluded, he lightly caressed Lisa's head. "There, the story's done."

But Lisa wasn't satisfied. "Did they do shameless things in the end?"

Malena, who had just finished nursing Elise, interrupted, "Lisa, you have school tomorrow. It's time for bed."

Lisa pouted but eventually relented. Charles soothed her, "I'll come back and tell you more stories, okay?"

The little girl's face lit up. "Okay!"

She hopped down from his lap, put on her brown bear slippers, and waddled to her room. Charles watched her leave, noting her small frame.

"Does she not sleep with you?" he asked.

Malena smiled faintly. "Lisa has become more independent since awakening to her bloodline. She insisted on sleeping alone last week."

Charles nodded understandingly. "It's common for children to seek independence as they grow."

Malena stood, her voice dripping with anticipation. "Well, Priest, shall we begin?"

Charles turned, and Malena immediately grabbed his hand, pulling him toward her room. "Let's go."

They entered the bedroom, and Malena closed the door behind them. "Priest, we can start now that Lisa is asleep."

Charles hesitated for a moment. "Let's wait until she's truly asleep."

Malena leaned in, her breath hot against his ear. "It won't be a problem. She sleeps quickly."

"Let's begin," Charles agreed, and they moved to the bed.

Earlier, while telling a story to Lisa, Malena had already been burning with desire. But with her daughter present, she had no choice but to maintain a dignified and solemn facade. Now that Lisa was gone, she could no longer hold back. She tore away the veil of restraint, revealing her true, ravenous nature.

Charles tilted his head slightly, and Malena immediately pressed her lips to his. His hands slid beneath her clothes, first exploring her soft waist before descending to knead her plump yet firm hips. He rose from the chair, and since Malena was slightly shorter, their kiss became a dance of him bending down while she arched up.

Malena wrapped her arms around his waist, pushing him backward. Charles offered no resistance, allowing her to guide him into the bedroom.

"Whew..."

Their lips parted, both panting heavily before collapsing onto the bed. Charles kicked off his shoes, his hands continuing their exploration beneath her pajamas. Since she had just bathed, Malena wore nothing underneath, saving him the trouble of undressing her further. He could indulge freely.

His hands climbed to her full, heaving breasts, kneading gently until he felt droplets of moisture seep from her nipples.

His voice was laced with surprise. "You're still producing milk?"

Malena's cheeks flushed. "Of course. A newborn infant girl can't drink much."

Charles chuckled. "Then leave it to me."

With that, he pulled his hands free and unbuttoned her pajamas, exposing her ample breasts. He lowered his head and took one nipple into his mouth.

"Oh..."

A soft moan escaped Malena's throat as her hands tangled in Charles's hair, cradling him like a nursing infant. Earlier, while feeding Elise, she had felt the little girl's tongue flicking against her nipples, stoking her desire to unbearable heights. But with Lisa nearby, she had forced herself to endure. Now, with her daughter asleep, she could finally surrender.

She closed her eyes, shutting out the world, focusing solely on the exquisite sensations radiating from her breasts. Her lower body was already drenched.

After savoring this pleasure for a while, Charles switched to her other breast. Realizing she had left him waiting, Malena reached down and unfastened his clothing, freeing his thick, erect cock.

Though she had seen, tasted, and experienced it before, as a noblewoman raised with strict decorum, the sight of his veined dick still made her heart race and her cheeks burn.

But hesitation was fleeting. Her delicate hands wrapped around the throbbing shaft, her palm covering the glans as she began to stroke and knead. The more she caressed him, the hotter her desire grew, her throat parched with thirst. When Charles finished draining her other breast, she couldn't wait any longer. She lowered her head and took the massive length into her mouth.

"Woo..."

Charles exhaled sharply, looking down to see Malena's eyes shut tight as she worked her lips and tongue along his shaft. No matter how hard she tried, she could only take half of him—her body lacked the supernatural flexibility of a witch. Charles cupped her breasts, kneading gently, but unlike with Nidalee, he didn't force her tongue deeper into her throat. Instead, he enjoyed the rhythm of her small mouth sucking and her tongue lapping.

Soon, Malena could bear it no longer. She released his cock and stood up. Charles expected her to climb onto the bed and present her rounded hips, but instead, she took a half-step back and said, "Today, let's try a new position."

With that, she pressed her back against the wall, lifted one leg effortlessly into a full split—her dancer's flexibility still impeccable even now. The thin pajamas she wore (and nothing beneath) did little to hide her arousal; her hairless pussy glistened, the fleshy lips already swollen and parted.

"Now, Priest," she gasped, cheeks flushed crimson. The boldness of her own actions sent heat pooling between her thighs. "I can't... hold this much longer."

Charles blinked, then grinned. He closed the distance, hands gripping her waist as his veined dick aligned with her dripping slit. With a slow, deliberate thrust, he sheathed himself fully into her clutching warmth, her vaginal walls fluttering around him like a vice.

"Oh—"

A shared moan tore from their throats. The pleasure was instant, overwhelming—a white-hot current that drowned out all else. Malena's head fell back, her beautiful legs trembling as she locked them around his hips. Her arms, pale as moonlight, wound around his neck, pulling him into a searing kiss.

Charles groaned into her mouth. The pressure was unreal; her honey pot squeezed him with every trained muscle, a sensation only a dancer's body could provide. "God, Malena," he rasped, hips snapping forward. "You're incredible."

She met each thrust with a roll of her hips, her clit rubbing against his pelvis. "Faster," she begged, nails scoring his shoulders. "I'm—ah!—close already..."

He obliged, pounding into her with the force of a pile driver. The wall creaked behind them as their bodies slapped together, her breasts bouncing with every movement. When her orgasm hit, her vaginal walls clenched like a fist, milking his cock until his release followed—a flood of cum filling her cervix as she shuddered through aftershocks.

They collapsed to the floor, then the bed, never parting. By the time Charles spilled into her a second time—bareback creampie painting her inner thighs—Malena was a boneless heap, her slit slick and swollen.

Exhausted, she lay sprawled across his chest, her breath warm against his skin. Charles traced idle circles on her back, but his mind drifted to darker things. "Your family," he murmured. "They were framed?"

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Chapter 214: Chapter 214: The Destruction of the Mountaineer Tribe

Charles held her delicate body in his arms, but there was still something he needed to ask: "Your family—were they were framed?"

Just now, Lisa had mentioned that their family suffered under false charges; clearly, this was something Malena had told her previously.

There was, in all likelihood, a deeper story behind it.

And if it were true, Charles wouldn't mind lending mother and daughter a hand, helping them reclaim their family's lost honor.

After all, Malena and Lisa were trustworthy—perhaps this was the stepping stone he needed to glimpse the deeper noble games of Waterdeep.

At his words, Malena sobered up a little. After some thought, she shook her head firmly. "I no longer concern myself with those things. The dangers and filth of those in power—the struggles and conspiracies—I don't want Lisa to ever be involved."

"All I want is for her to grow up safe and sound."

As she spoke, it truly seemed she had let go of her family's vendetta. Charles understood her meaning, and gently patted her back, dismissing the thought.

If she was content to be a normal mother, keeping her distance from those unseen storms of blood and intrigue—well, that was no mistake.

As long as her past would not come back to haunt her...

...

Winter had arrived.

The mountains welcomed the first snowfall of the year. Although it was not heavy, it was enough to bring joy to the children.

And on such a day, the five great tribes of the Alliance of the Mountain Purifiers once more gathered at the Mountaineer tribe's seat, to negotiate the allocation of spoils, and determine the next steps for the alliance.

In theory, this sort of conference was supposed to include all the tribes in open discussion, to ensure strategies were as fair as possible. In reality, however, once these five met among themselves, the broad strokes were already decided.

It was just as it had been last time, when they debated whether to assault Rockseeker Camp first, or deal with the demon pollution.

At the head of the table, Ilarode sat draped in a feathered robe, smiling, utterly self-assured. With the passage of time, he felt more and more that his status in the alliance was unshakable—this place was close to becoming his personal fief.

The four major tribes, and dozens of minor ones, now all followed his lead. He had a premonition that soon, he would be the uncrowned king of these mountains.

Excellent. He had surpassed all his ancestors, and the position of the Mountaineer tribe reached new heights among the mountains.

Even if the tribes all had different interests and internal conflicts, he was confident that by his own wit and craft, he could balance their factions, turning them all to his ends.

There was nothing he could not do.

These thoughts in mind, he glanced at the leaders of the other tribes seated around the table. Torun Highmountain and Luger Stonehide were both visibly delighted, while Willo of the Green Vines appeared rather displeased.

As for Danche of Chimera, his expression was the most complicated: emotionally, he intensely disliked situations in which his father would suddenly make decisions on his behalf, or the other allies would launch military actions without waiting for him; yet, speaking rationally, his tribe had indeed profited this time, and the losses were arguably the smallest...

Thus, his face was a mess of contradiction. He wished to side with the Green Vines tribe, but feared that, having benefited, voicing complaints now would only draw the ire of the other three.

In the end, he lowered his head and remained silent. And in that unseen gap, his tribe's voice in the alliance continued to fade.

"Ahem!"

Ilarode cleared his throat and spoke: "Let's begin, regarding the distribution of spoils from this campaign."

"Though Matriarch Willo has declined, my previous promise still stands. The Green Vines tribe gave much and deserves first choice of the spoils."

"The snow came early this year, and the weather is bitter cold. I hope this harvest will at least allow the Green Vines tribe a good winter."

As he spoke, Willo Green Vines immediately raised her head and intoned: "Since Archdruid, you are so lofty and generous, I propose we make use of these supplies immediately, mobilize all forces, and at any cost, swiftly eradicate the demons' pollution."

"If the demonic blight is not cleansed, no one should expect a peaceful new year. Better to mend the pen before disaster—friends, we have already wasted too much time; we cannot let these demons run rampant any longer!"

Her meaning was clear: not only was she declining her share, she was urging the others to do the same. Wealth gained should not even warm their hands before being spent—put every ounce into the next mission.

Naturally, not everyone agreed.

"Uh... there's no need to panic so much, is there?" said Luger Stonehide. "It's only just snowed, it's freezing out—sending warriors to battle demons in a blizzard hardly seems wise."

"Indeed," added Torun. "And we still have the wounded to recover. If we hurry our young warriors out now, many of them may end up crippled for life!"

These two tribes were least affected by the demons' pollution—naturally, their enthusiasm was limited.

Willo Green Vines was anxious: "But, according to our previous estimates, the demonic blight has already spread deep into the mountains, and the Chthonian is about to awaken."

"You all claim the mantle of protectors of the mountains—are we to stand by and watch these peaks ravaged and defiled by demons, their depths gouged by the Chthonians?"

Luger and Torun fell silent. Willo's argument was pure political correctness within the alliance—the shared faith that led the Mountain People to join in the first place.

But, as with so many grand slogans, it was more a pretext for war than any true sense of duty.

Both men felt resentment, but lacked the nerve to oppose such high-sounding ideals openly, so had no choice but to keep quiet.

At the head of the table, the Archdruid smiled: "But Matriarch Willo, did we not already organize an action, rooting out many of the pollution sites?"

"I trust that our previous efforts have severely slowed the spread of the demons' corruption."

He had already abandoned the Earth Dragon; from this point, the Mountaineer tribe no longer needed to be the ones to purify the demons.

"But..." Willo started to protest, but Ilarode cut her off: "Even the Chthonians have weaknesses, do they not?"

"First of all—they fear water, isn't that so?"

"This snowstorm may keep our warriors at home, but it is also our best defense. Even if those fiends awaken, they won't come our way."

"What we need to do is simply outlast the winter; I think everyone feels the same, yes?" Ilarode surveyed the table, noted the approval on Torun and Luger's faces, then fixed his gaze seriously on Willo. "Of course, I promise you, as soon as the snow melts, I will stop at nothing to eradicate the demons!"

Torun and Luger both nodded vigorously: "Yes, when the time comes, we will mobilize our entire strength—never again will the demons defile these mountains!"

Willo was left speechless, and finally could only sigh. "Well... so be it."

Danche frowned, but when he considered his own tribe's situation, he bowed his head and fell silent.

Ilarode nodded: "Good. Now, let's discuss how we divide the spoils."

"The tally has been made. If anyone has urgent needs, or a particular desire for something, now is the time to raise it."

He finished speaking, leaned back in his chair, and savored his own performance, immensely satisfied.

Especially after seeing Willo compromise and accept his arrangements, Ilarode wanted to laugh out loud.

Yes, just like this—he could balance all the competing factions' interests and have everyone recognize him as their undisputed leader...

Smugly, he could already envision the Alliance of the Mountain Purifiers expanding ever further, himself standing atop the mountains.

Buzz—

Suddenly, the ground quivered gently. Ilarode returned to himself, frowning, and looked down. "Was that an earthquake?"

Willo Green Vines' expression changed drastically. "It's the Chthonians!"

"They've gone mad; they're actually braving the snow to come here!"

No sooner had she spoken than everyone present felt the ground beneath their feet tremble—at first, subtly, then stronger and stronger, as if a thousand warhorses were thundering below their tents!

Boom—

The earth split open. Countless rocks, snow, tents, lodges, and residents of the encampment all plunged into yawning fissures with terrified screams.

The cries of fear and pleas for help, mixed with the rumble of breaking ground, rose from all directions—a merciless mockery by the demons of Ilarode's arrogance!

"Save the people first!"

Willo leapt to her feet and began chanting, running across the shaking earth as if it were solid stone, dashing into the chaos outside the command tent. Danche raced after, while Ilarode's face was stormy.

He had miscalculated. Never had he expected the demons to launch their assault at this very moment!

Teeth grinding, he realized the disaster had already come—nothing could be changed now.

At that moment, in the depths of the mountains, inside a blood-soaked cavern, the massive form of Montport finally stepped from his filthy pool of blood.

His massive hand reached for a twin-bladed polearm that leaned against the wall. Then he strode forward on four elephantine legs, his fat bulk surrounded by hordes of demons as he left the cave and faced the snow-clad mountains beyond. He burst into mad laughter: "Hahahahaha—!"

"Let the blood and souls of these mortals sharpen my twin blades—by Montport's hand!"

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Chapter 215: Chapter 215: Supernatural Gift

Inside the monastery.

Charles embraced Ekta, one hand caressing her red long hair. As soon as he closed his eyes, his vision turned to a swirling, sand-colored landscape.

He was instantly on guard, frowning, wanting to move, only to discover his consciousness seemed severed from his body, slipping into a deep Dream.

"My child, do not resist. Otherwise, I will not be able to maintain this connection with you."

A warm yet slightly unfamiliar woman's voice echoed. Charles was momentarily confused, then recalled whose voice it was. "Galleon?"

At once, there was a trace of joy in that voice. "I'm glad you still remember my name."

As she spoke, a vast curtain of yellow sand appeared before him. Quickly, the sand gathered into the form of a colossal crocodile, nearly five meters tall and over twenty meters long.

Upon its head grew a pair of thick, curved dragon horns—exactly as Charles had seen Galleon's body at Rockseeker Camp.

Only, that day, he had faced her in a state of madness, and she had seemed terrifying and overwhelming. But now, having recovered her mind, she gazed calmly and kindly at him, her voice gentle and beautiful...

For some reason, Charles suddenly found the giant crocodile's features possessed a strange grace—a certain maternal gentleness.

Ahem. Composure, Charles! He couldn't let himself get carried away!

He pinched himself in secret, fiercely warning his heart: Your sense of beauty is normal—human women are beautiful, you cannot let this wretched fantasy world skew you until you're falling for dragons!

He cautioned himself thus, and ahead, the enormous Earth Dragon Galleon spoke again: "I have come this time to thank you for the help you gave me previously."

As she spoke, she lifted a massive claw. Countless grains of yellow sand swirled up, reforming beneath her claw into an earth-colored glass bead the size of a fist.

"This is my gift of gratitude. Hm... using the terms of your material world, you could call it a 'Supernatural Gift.'" Galleon continued. "As thanks for pulling me back from madness, I hope you will accept it."

As she spoke, the glass bead floated toward him. Charles did not resist, reaching out to touch it—yet in the next instant, the bead melted into a streak of yellow light, which flashed along his fingertip and vanished into his body.

Seeing this, a hint of a smile appeared in Galleon's eyes. "Fortunately, your affinity with it is quite good. In that case, I haven't given you the wrong thing."

Charles clenched his fist; he could vaguely feel an unseen layer of protection around his body. From now on, his resistance to ordinary physical attacks would be greatly increased.

Thinking of this, he looked up and said sincerely to Galleon, "Thank you."

He paused, then continued, "Actually, I have some questions I hoped you could answer for me."

"About the Chthonians beneath the mountains—how much do you know? What is their current state? How should I prepare myself?"

He poured out all his concerns in one breath. Upon hearing this, Galleon's expression grew grave, all gentle smile vanished.

"The Chthonians are mired in deep madness," she said. "Shudde M'ell has already awakened, and is rampaging through the mountains. Your homeland, even the entire material world, is facing destruction."

"I am no longer in the material world, so the only warning I can give you is to mind the earthquakes."

"The time should be in the next few days."

Charles tried to speak, realizing the worst was arriving so soon. He couldn't help but sigh, then pulled himself together and spoke to Galleon from his heart: "Thank you. I'll be careful."

He said the words, but honestly, when facing a rampaging Great Old One, what could a mere mortal do, no matter how careful?

He could only hide within the city and hope the Lady of Blackstaff and Laeral Silverhand herself would work wonders.

"Mhm." Galleon's massive head nodded gently, then her body began to fade. "My strength is already stretched to the limit, child. I hope we meet again in the future."

As she spoke, her form turned nearly fully transparent. The world around began to lose color, and soon, Charles too lost consciousness, sinking into deep Dream.

The next morning.

Charles woke early. As he gazed at the sleeping girl beside him, fragments of last night's Dream slowly returned to his mind.

He hurriedly opened his system, flipped to the attributes page, and saw, sure enough—

Supernatural Gift

You have received the magical blessing of the Earth Elemental Genie named Galleon, gaining the following benefits:

Your Constitution score increases by 1, up to a maximum of 20.

You have learned the spell Hunter's Mark and may cast it freely.

You take reduced damage from nonmagical piercing, slashing, and bludgeoning attacks—damage reduction scaling with your Charisma score.

Seeing this, Charles was thrilled.

Stronger than expected!

A boost to Constitution needs no explanation. Freely casting Hunter's Mark means he would almost never fear magical traps again; as for the last effect, the damage reduction only applies to nonmagical weapons, but magical weapons aren't exactly commonplace anyway!

What's more, the strength scales with Charisma—a stat in which he excelled. With this, Charles would no longer need to fear wild beasts, or even the claws of a hezrou!

Nice!

Delighted, he woke Ekta, then got up to wash and have breakfast.

Yet as he sat in the kitchen, eating slowly, the earth beneath him began to tremble faintly.

The tremor was not severe, but it was enough to make Charles nervous. After all, just last night Galleon had warned him to beware earthquakes.

Fortunately, the shaking soon subsided, lasting less than a minute. Forcing himself to stay calm, Charles finished eating, then stepped outside to see what was happening.

He quickly found that in Liberl Port, news traveled faster than the wind. After just a few steps along the nearby streets, gossip flooded his ears from every direction:

"Did you hear those districts up north had an earthquake? Was this just an aftershock reaching us?"

"Good! Why didn't it shake Mithral District to bits and send those nobles sky-high?"

"Karma—this is all karma! The heavens have eyes—may they crush those rotten bureaucrats and old lords!"

"Sigh, will the aftershocks get worse—destroy our houses, too?"

"I don't care, I don't own a house."

"Hahaha, those who took out loans for their homes are doomed. Looks like there's no future for anyone now!"

...

The residents' conversations were full of biting resentment—a sign that, in this era, all that talk of nobles being "chosen by the gods," of "noble bloodline" coursing through their veins, had basically been worn away.

Listening to the heated debates of those around him, Charles felt a shadow sweep over his heart.

Others might not know the truth, but he'd long understood—the source of this earthquake was the Chthonians!

Shudde M'ell had awakened, its power enough to topple the world. Time had already run out for Blackstaff Tower—and for Laeral Silverhand...

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Chapter 216: Chapter 216: Lady Blackstaff, Vajra

Blackstaff Tower, top floor.

The current holder of the Blackstaff, Vajra Safahr, stood before the massive floor-to-ceiling window. She was clad in a pitch-black magical leather robe and high leather boots, clutching in her hand the legendary artifact known as the "Blackstaff"—the symbol of protection over Liberl Port. Her gaze was grave, fixed on the mountains to the northwest.

She was the most legendary Blackstaff in history—not because she was a woman, nor because she had become a legendary spellcaster before reaching thirty and was exalted above all others, but because she was a tiefling.

A being whose veins ran with devil's blood—spawn of an evil race.

Though generations of mixed blood had left her outward appearance little different from an ordinary human—her light brown skin was hardly uncommon, her white hair simply a trait of the Sain in her bloodline, and even her crimson pupils could be disguised as a rare eye condition—there were two features she could never hide: the elegant honey-colored horns atop her head and the slender tail trailing behind her, forever marking her as a devil-cursed outcast.

Even in Liberl Port, that melting pot of races, Vajra was always looked down upon because of her heritage.

But born amidst garbage and squalor, she had never despaired. Instead, she had quickly proved her remarkable talent and indomitable will, rising up against the odds. While still young, she advanced to become a legendary mage, won the trust of the previous Open Lord, and was appointed as the youngest Blackstaff ever.

Many said that the prior Open Lord—removed for corruption and forced into exile—had chosen her for her youth and malleability.

But those mages who had once vied for the title of Blackstaff knew the truth. In the end, regardless of politics, the final—and most crucial—step, "acceptance by the Blackstaff itself," was a matter for the artifact alone. No one could interfere.

If the heirs failed to gain the staff's recognition, it would rather lie dormant and masterless than settle for an unworthy owner.

Thus, Vajra possessed exactly the strength and caliber befitting such a weapon.

Yet as a young woman in high office, Vajra had her own concerns. Ever since the former Open Lord's exile, and after Laeral Silverhand was installed as lord of the city by the unified petition of many powerful interests, Vajra had felt increasingly awkward in the post her predecessor had given her.

Rumors and doubts continued to swirl. While these whispers could not shake her authority, Vajra suspected that Laeral Silverhand was waiting for a single misstep—and that, the moment she failed, her position would be stripped away and another would be chosen as Blackstaff.

She had to be perfect.

Now, she knew that the Great Old One—Shudde M'ell, a flaw in the very order of things—had awakened. Its menace threatened not only the mountains and Liberl Port, but the very safety of the material world.

As the Blackstaff's bearer, she must resolve this crisis flawlessly, and prove to the world that she deserved every honor and every ounce of respect she had earned.

In the far distance, beneath clear skies, the mountain range began to quiver. Vajra's grip on the Blackstaff tightened. She understood: for a tremor visible from so far away, stretching across the leagues that separated her from the peaks, this disturbance could only mean one thing.

The terrifying Great Old One, Shudde M'ell, had appeared.

So be it. She would end its reign—here and now.

Drawing a deep breath, she swiftly incanted, layering upon herself the ninth-level spell "Foresight," granting her a fleeting glimpse into the future.

Next, she shielded herself with the archmage's exclusive ninth-level spell, "Invulnerability"—rendering herself, for a short time, immune to all harm.

Once those preparations were complete, she immediately cast the seventh-level spell "Teleport." A surge of light—and she was instantly transported a hundred miles away, soaring over the place in the mountains where the tremors were at their peak.

She summoned no allies—against a Great Old One, only she could stand.

There she hovered, high above, letting the winds whip her magical leather robe. Compared to the towering mountains below, she seemed a tiny speck—yet the power she could unleash rivaled that of a cataclysm.

She did not attack at once, but instead chose to add fuel to the fire. Stretching wide her arms as if to embrace the world, a flood of arcane energy surged from her body, and her lips unleashed a rapid-fire series of arcane words: "Earthquake—tremblement de terre—Erdbeben involviert sind!"

Eighth-level spell: Earthquake!

Boom—

A deeper, more terrifying tremor ripped through the land. In a heartbeat, the earth split wide; the thunderclap of shattering stone echoed far and wide—so loud that even distant Liberl Port could hear it clearly.

A cataclysmic surge of power ripped and tore at the ground, sending fissures winding across several kilometers of fractured mountainside. The broken crust revealed, for the first time, the cause of all this devastation.

It was a colossal, night-black Chthonian, magnified a hundredfold. Its body spanned nearly a kilometer in length, its head crowned with monstrous tentacles. Near the base of these tentacles, its skin peeled back, exposing eight huge disc-like eyes.

Its appearance was utterly grotesque—any creature lacking immense mental resilience would lose their mind at a single glance, their soul torn apart, dooming them to irredeemable madness.

That monstrous body writhed and rolled, transmitting seismic energy enough to level mountains. If it unleashed its full force, the entire material world might tremble.

Yet Vajra stood, cold and resolute, mind utterly unshaken. Instead, she was calmly forging her battle plan.

Despite the vast disparity in size—the tiny mage suspended in the air above, the behemoth squirming below—she did not falter. Raising her staff, she chanted again, loosing another eighth-level spell: "Tsunami!"

Tsunami!

A tidal mass of water appeared, conjured instantly from the nearby sea—Liberl Port's own coast providing ample source. In the sky above the mountains, millions of tons of icy seawater condensed into a massive column, plunging down to crash upon the earth!

Crash—!

In an instant, Shudde M'ell was submerged in cold salt water. Agony wracked its form, and its soul gave a silent shriek.

Even as a Great Old One, progenitor of the Chthonians, the incurable flaw at the heart of the material world, its hatred of water was a fatal weakness it could never escape.

But Vajra was not finished. After all, no true tsunami ends with a single wave.

Still cold and unwavering, the Blackstaff above continued to channel the spell. Again and again, millions of tons of water rained down, burying Shudde M'ell beneath roiling surf.

The water struck the Great Old One's body, whose temperature soared to thousands of degrees; instantly, the ice turned to steam, swirling upward as dense fog.

And when the vapor returned to the upper air, it swiftly reformed as thunderheads. Where once the mountains had basked in sunlight, now the skies blackened with storm.

Layer upon layer of clouds ground against each other, thunder rolling across the sky. Finally, as Vajra unleashed her sixth wave of the tsunami, ceaseless rain began to fall. The mountain range was deluged by torrents of water.

The rain lashed Shudde M'ell, sizzling to vapor—dense mist billowed upward, cloaking the battlefield. None could see what transpired beneath.

Yet still the aftershocks continued. The mountains splintered, the earth gaped, and with the unrelenting rain, a colossal mudslide thundered out to engulf the valleys.

Thunder, pouring rain, earthquake, and flood—together they brought the mountain range to the very edge of the world's end.

This was the aftermath of a battle between a legendary mage, artifact in hand, and a Great Old One. If not for her decision to choose a desolate, uninhabited field of war, thousands might have perished in the devastation.

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Chapter 217: Chapter 217: Tenth-Level Spell

At that moment, Lady Blackstaff Vajra still hovered high in the sky, her expression grave as she gazed down upon the earth below—where, amidst mud and torrential rain, Shudde M'ell rolled relentlessly, attempting to provoke another earthquake.

As the bearer of the Blackstaff, she naturally understood the essence of these Great Old Ones, as well as their greatest advantage: they were the living embodiment of loopholes in the order of the material world. If the Gods of Order did not intervene to repair them, they could never truly die—"death" would only be a temporary state, and in the not-so-distant future, they would return in another, perhaps even more troublesome form.

Therefore, Vajra had no intention to kill it outright. Her plan was to beat it into a weakened state, reduce its resistance to magic as low as possible, and then either seal it away, or at the very least, banish it into the endless Astral Sea. That would be enough.

Clearly, the time for that had not yet come.

Because at that very moment, she could distinctly feel wave after wave of powerful psychic assaults hammering her very soul. Were it not for the protection of "Invulnerability," her soul would have been shredded by Shudde M'ell by now, leaving her an utter imbecile!

It was nowhere near heavily injured or weakened—a greater effort was needed!

That was her strategy and protection, but "Invulnerability" could only guard against harm. It did not shield her from all possible magical effects.

Such as certain psychic assaults that could interfere with her mind without causing harm directly.

Noting that its psychic attacks could not injure the tiny worm in the sky who relentlessly rained suffering upon it, Shudde M'ell immediately changed strategy: it attempted to beguile her, to cloud her mind—turning her into a puppet!

This was an ability common to every Chthonian; they used such mental magic to enslave certain beings, compelling them to reveal the locations of veins of rare minerals...then slaughtering them.

Shudde M'ell, of course, wielded this ability with vastly greater potency than lesser kin.

A fresh onslaught of psychic energy swept through the sky like a swarm of invisible tentacles, wrapping Vajra's body, burrowing through her ears into her mind, caressing her soul while severing her ties to the outside world.

With the aid of "Foresight," Vajra was instantly aware of this new attack—the way it adroitly slipped past the protective radius of "Invulnerability," gradually depriving her of control over her own body.

This mode of psychic assault...was something she had never experienced, and required a wholly new structure of spiritual defense.

She thought thus; even as she struggled to maintain her spells, sending ever more torrents of icy water crashing down upon Shudde M'ell, she multitasked, chanting in parallel, seeking to break the temporal wave of psychic assault.

Yet even wielding the artifact and standing a legendary mage, her spirit was still only that of a human: it could never contend with the boundless mind of Shudde M'ell—an intellect on par with a true god. Very quickly, she was lost in an ocean of alien psychic power!

She closed her eyes. Though she still grasped the Blackstaff, she had lost all control over body and magic. Her body began to drift earthward, as light as a feather, quickly sinking down.

In effect, she had fallen into Shudde M'ell's embrace. From now on she would be at the mercy of this nightmarish, tentacled crawling monstrosity.

Yet, she felt no fear. "Invulnerability" protected her flesh; and in the world of spirit, aided by "Foresight"—the powerful ninth-level spell that allowed glimpses of the future—she worked urgently to solve Shudde M'ell's psychic confusion and to reestablish her bond to body and magic alike.

A minute later, having constructed a new protective shield for her consciousness, Vajra's eyes reopened.

Yet the sight before her was not one of being bound, ravaged, or even defiled by massive tentacles.

Rather, she lay in mud, rain thundering down, while lightning cracked overhead—and Shudde M'ell was nowhere to be seen.

No—it was not missing. The earth still trembled; even among the mire, she could sense the shuddering. The deep rumble of the earthquake, despite the interference of rain and thunder, still reached her ears, clear as ever.

Shudde M'ell was close by!

She sprang up into the sky, eyes radiating sapphire light, her vision cleaving the curtain of rain, fixed on the source of the quake.

In the next instant, her expression changed dramatically.

The colossal Chthonian did not see her as a threat; after momentarily subduing her, it continued along its former path—rushing headlong toward distant Liberl Port!

It sought to unleash an even greater earthquake, to destroy the port and the very mountains in one cataclysm!

"No, that cannot happen!"

Vajra's heart seized. She immediately invoked a seventh-level "Teleport," her body turning to a streak of blazing light and, in a heartbeat, closing the distance, once more emerging high above Shudde M'ell, intent on cutting it off.

Yet, to stop such a vast creature, able to burrow, whose speed exceeded five hundred kilometers an hour—even if she could pursue and defeat it, halting its advance was quite another matter!

True, she had sealing methods, but Shudde M'ell was not yet truly weakened—she could not guarantee her sealing spell would succeed.

She had no choice but to try!

"Time Stop!"

The chant was lengthy, but completed in a heartbeat. She cast her third ninth-level spell of the day: Time Stop.

Her target: Shudde M'ell!

Buzz——

Vast magical power surged forth; ninth-level spells were a leap beyond even the eighth in power. Magic circled the Great Old One, attempting to overwrite its very rules, to halt its time forever, so that it could never again trouble the material world!

But the enormous Chthonian gave but the slightest twitch—and shattered the fragile temporal stasis utterly!

Even after enduring billions of tons of rushing seawater, its vitality was barely diminished—it easily snapped through a Time Stop spell enhanced by the artifact itself!

Vajra's face turned pale. Watching from above as the Great Old One pressed ever closer to the port, a sense of despair welled up in her heart.

She could go on pounding it with tsunamis, yes—but if Liberl Port fell, what did any of it matter?

Utter despair claimed her—and just then, change arrived again.

Time itself—stopped.

Buzz——

Torrential rain, the roaring earth, howling winds, and the exertions of Shudde M'ell—all of it, at that very moment, froze as one. Silence enveloped everything. Vajra felt herself as if suspended in the Astral Sea—alone, yet utterly free.

Who had done this?

The question rose in her mind; the next instant, a voice sounded there—strange but impossibly gentle, and unmistakably feminine: "Vajra, quickly—use the Blackstaff now, and banish it!"

Vajra hesitated, then in a flash understood who had cast this Time Stop spell and reached out in voice.

Liberl Port's Open Lord, trueborn daughter of the Goddess of Magic—Laeral Silverhand!

None but the daughter of a true god could wield the mana required to paralyze a Great Old One!

She had intervened!

A profound sense of dejection swept Vajra—this was proof her own strength had still fallen short of solving the crisis. But there was no time for regret; time was brief; she must act now!

Drawing a deep breath, Vajra once again raised the Blackstaff high, and chanted a long, solemn spell: "Nailed to the Sky!"

Tenth-level spell—Nailed to the Sky!

The spell's effect: the target is lifted beyond the upper sky and sent spinning at immense speed around the world—thus, Shudde M'ell would become a satellite of the material world, unable ever to descend without outside interference!

This was her contingency; her plan was, if she could not bring Shudde M'ell to a weakened state and seal it, then she would simply banish it to the edge of the sky now.

So be it—though that left the possibility that, one day by accident or design, it might fall again. But anything was better than what was coming now.

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Chapter 218: Chapter 218: Winter Rainstorm

Buzz——

Very soon, the effect of "Time Stop" faded. The terrifying Shudde M'ell still intended to unleash another earthquake, but now, after a full minute of chanting and channeling magical power, Vajra's tenth-level spell was complete!

A surge of dreadful energy enveloped its body. In the next moment, Shudde M'ell's body was wrenched away from the ground, beginning to rise, and accelerating ever faster—soaring into the sky like a rocket!

Buzz——

The Great Old One let out a silent shriek of the soul. Yet now, in its weakened condition and wholly unprepared for this spell, it could muster no effective resistance!

Its body scraped violently against the atmosphere, swiftly turning red, as if truly molten. It writhed and struggled desperately, but apart from stirring currents of air and producing deep or piercing vibrations, it could do nothing.

Eventually, it vanished beyond the distant edge of the sky, never to be seen again.

Vajra opened her eyes once more, her expression indescribably exhausted.

She could feel that her strength had suffered a permanent loss—she would need a long time of seclusion and training to recover from this depletion.

This was the price of casting a tenth-level spell. Legendary mages merely possessed the qualification to cast such spells—it did not mean they did not have to pay the price.

Simultaneously, this was yet more proof of the recent changes to the Goddess of Magic: in the past, previous bearers of the Blackstaff, when casting tenth-level spells, could let the staff—ultimately the Goddess of Magic herself—pay the cost. Their own bodies would suffer nothing.

But things were different now. The Goddess of Magic could no longer help her bear this cost. Every deficit had to be borne by Vajra herself.

Vajra closed her eyes again and cast the seventh-level spell "Teleport," returning to the top floor of Blackstaff Tower.

The very moment she arrived, her legs gave way and she collapsed on the thick white carpet, gasping for breath.

Listening to herself, she knew that for some time, it would be impossible for her to go deal with the so-called "Montport" Demon Lord.

Biting back her enormous fatigue and weariness, she cast one final spell for her subordinates.

Sending.

"Notify all Blackstaff Tower mages," she ordered, "Mobilize at once. At any cost, eradicate the last remaining demons and Chthonians in the mountains!"

With these words, she could no longer hold back the overwhelming weariness. Even before her subordinates could reply, she fell fast asleep.

She rested, but at that moment, the true trial for Blackstaff Tower and all of Liberl Port was only beginning.

To defeat Shudde M'ell, she had stirred too much water vapor. This vapor, boiled out of Shudde M'ell's superheated skin, rose into the sky, reformed into massive storm clouds, rapidly cooled—then fell as torrential rain upon the city—

Boom——!

Above the city, thunderclouds saturated with moisture clashed in the heights, unleashing a deafening peal of thunder across the skies!

"Whew..."

South Harbor District, monastery, scriptorium, second floor. Here, Charles was reading, studying spells. He looked up, frowning out the window.

He could well imagine what was happening among the mountains to the northwest, why what was a bright day had suddenly unleashed a deluge.

Though the South Harbor District was a hundred miles from the battlefield, the aftershocks of that earth-rending quake still carried through—he had already felt four or five strong tremors. Thankfully, the monastery's construction was solid enough that he needed not flee outdoors.

And after the quake, the rain: a winter storm far more terrible than any typhoon. Great fists of rain pummeled the earth, forming a barrier that utterly cut off any view outside.

Staring out, Charles could see nothing of the world beyond—he felt totally isolated, his room the only place left in existence.

Luckily, the monastery was sturdy; even if the tremors had been worse, it wouldn't collapse.

He set aside his studies, grateful for this shelter. But then, another worry struck him, and his heart tightened.

He was safe. But what of the residents of the slums?

That place was filled with crumbling hazards, houses that could collapse at a kick. With such an earthquake now followed by relentless rain, how many were brought down?

After a house falls, where do those who have nowhere to hide go? How will ordinary residents survive such a storm?

Especially now, in winter. Soaked by this rain...

His heart squeezed—he could hardly imagine what devastation now reigned in the slums.

How many would freeze to death in the storm, how many be swept away, how many drown—how many lives would this night claim?

He cast a glance toward another direction, then shook off any hope.

There could be no expecting help from the South Harbor District's city hall. The Amazons would do nothing; they were as cold and indifferent as ever.

No one would help—unless...

For a moment, Charles could not help wishing he could be more oblivious, duller by nature.

If he hadn't such keen thoughts and vivid imagination—if he could not envision how those in the slums now suffered, how many perished tonight—then he would not have to bear this wrenching anguish and guilt. He could close his ears to the world and simply keep on practicing magic.

He was on the verge of learning an important new spell—"Hex," a first-level spell that greatly increased his damage. With it, he'd be able to inflict even more harm on bosses.

And yet...

Taking a deep breath, Charles pulled a gold coin from his Bag of Holding. This was a coin minted by the Goddess of Trade and Wealth—one side marked with its value, the other bearing her profile.

Merchants in Liberl Port traded globally, but only trusted their own currency and the Goddess's credit. Thus, this gold was always in demand.

Charles placed the coin in his palm, brought hands together, and bowed his head in silent prayer. "O Goddess of Life, I know the people of the slums suffer. My strength is too small to turn back this disaster. If, as I go out to save them, you will guide and protect me, let the coin's numbered side face up."

He opened his eyes, flipped the coin, and caught it, trapping it between his palms at its apex.

Without looking at the result, he put the coin back and stood up. Going downstairs, he called out, "Andny, summon all the nuns, and give them my command: go out and save people!"

By then, he had already reached the first floor. Here, Sophia sat in a chair, with Lisa snuggled in her lap, peering with a mix of curiosity and fear at the rain pounding outside.

Not even typhoons in summer ever brought such rain, let alone in winter. Lisa was terrified, afraid the rain would soon become hail and batter the house.

Though hail would not break the monastery, the little girl's heart trembled with fear.

Upon hearing Charles come down, Sophia and Lisa both turned. The former, having already received Andny's telepathic message, quietly asked, "Priest, you want to save people? Do you have a plan?"

Charles nodded. "I still have some resources—I can build several more dormitories. Then we head out, look for the poor swept up by the floods, and bring them here—house as many as we can."

"Though the slums are vast and our manpower is limited—"

He sighed. "But if we can save even one, that's enough."

Hardly had his voice faded when the door opened, and several nuns filed in. Andny held Elise in her arms, looking the very image of a young mother.

Charles took a long breath, then began assigning tasks: "Hattie, Ruth, Sephera, Theresa, Nidalee—you five go to the slums. Find those whose houses have collapsed, who are now homeless or swept away. Save every person you can."

"Andny, stay with Lisa, and use your worms to keep us all in contact at all times."

"Sophia, you also stay here. First, one task—go fetch Malena. She's likely still alone at the tailor's shop, which isn't safe."

"Ekta, come with me; we'll build more shelters. Once that's done, I'll go save people—you light fires in each shelter, build stoves."

He arranged everything thus, according to each witch's traits.

Ekta, of course, could not go out in the rain—being a fire witch, these stormy nights were more dangerous for her than any Chthonian, perhaps even mortal.

Andny also could not go—though she had begun learning her craft, her powers were still too weak to handle such conditions, much less to rescue anyone.

As for Sophia...

She was truly unsuited for high-speed movement. Sending her out would be useless; better that she stay at the monastery, where she might later be of greater use.

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Chapter 219: Chapter 219: The Shelter

After making arrangements for everyone, Charles continued, "Any other questions?"

Sephera immediately raised her hand. "Priest, are you going out to save people as well?"

Charles nodded. "Of course. Once the new shelters are built, I'm heading out."

At once, Sephera's brows knitted in concern. "The rain is so heavy out there, and the water is rushing fast. It's far too dangerous. Let us go instead—please, stay here."

Next to her, Ruth immediately agreed. "Yes, I think so too."

On the other side, Hattie and Theresa nodded repeatedly, clearly unwilling to let him take such a risk. But Charles's attitude was firm: "I'll be fine. I'm at least a fourth-circle spellcaster now."

"And the more of us there are, the more efficiently we can work, hmm..."

As he said this, his gaze landed on Theresa, and suddenly, inspiration struck.

"Theresa," he called, "can you use your powers to directly monitor the whole slums, and see clearly where there are collapsed houses or people swept away by the flood?"

Theresa frowned, then turned to gaze out the window at the endless wall of rain.

"No," she shook her head. "There's too much vapor in the air, the light is far too distorted. Even if I managed to spot someone in the water, I'd most likely see the wrong position."

Well, it seemed search and rescue would have to be done in person.

"Let's move," he said. "Ekta, come with me!"

With that, he strode out, pushed open the study door, and stepped outside.

The instant he left, the rain—a noise muffled by thick walls—instantly roared in his ears, pelting everything in a relentless torrent, so loud he could hardly hear anything else.

Even with a near-perfect drainage system, turbid rainwater had flooded the monastery's grounds nearly half a meter deep, coming up to Charles's calves.

Looking from afar, the storm was a surging sea: torrential rain smashing down in endless splashes, accompanied by howling wind and rolling waves.

Yet none of the nuns panicked in the slightest. Hattie in particular was unbothered—she was, after all, a witch from the deep sea. The wetter things were, the more at home she felt, her power only rising, flourishing beyond measure.

If not for worry that her true form was too warped and terrifying—enough to drive mortals mad at a glance—she'd have preferred to revert to it outright and swim through the flooded monastery and, perhaps, the slums themselves.

Even without returning to her true form, her abilities were greatly enhanced in such conditions.

She strode into the rain, feet plunging into the water, not bothering with any cover, letting the heavy drops batter her. Yet her nun's habit showed no sign of dampness at all; it was as if she'd become one with the storm, indistinguishable from the rain.

Swiftly, she headed beyond the monastery to finish the mission Charles had given her. After her, Ruth and Sephera shielded themselves with magic, then followed her out at speed.

Nidalee, using wild magic, transformed into a small fish, flicking her tail as she swam out; and the most impressive of all, Theresa, turned her whole body into a stream of light and flew right out from above the monastery.

Watching their figures vanish into the storm, Charles silently prayed for them, hoping for their safety. Then he took a large black raincloak and a pair of tall black boots from his Bag of Holding and put them on.

All set, he turned to Ekta. "We need to build the shelter on the other side of the monastery. Can you withstand this kind of rain?"

Gazing at the unending downpour and sea-like floodwaters outside, Ekta's face was grim. After a moment, she shook her head furiously. "I can't, Master. With rain this heavy, I'll either drown or be washed away..."

As she spoke, her voice was tinged with guilt. This was the first time Charles truly needed her, yet because of her true nature, she couldn't help at all.

Charles sighed, then spread his raincloak open and scooped her lovingly into his arms. "I'll carry you. Let's go!"

As he spoke, his arm slid under her knees, and with a princess carry, he swept her up. "Wrap up tight under the cloak, don't get wet—I'll handle the rest."

Saying this, he strode into the deep water of the courtyard. Giant raindrops drummed on his raincloak, and icy-cold flood rolled against his boots. Yet his stance was as steady as a mountain, each step parting the water as he made rapid progress.

Resting against Charles's chest, Ekta's heart raced wildly. Listening to the hammering of the rain on the cloak, watching the churning, near-deadly water just inches below, terror gnawed at her soul. She clung more tightly to her Master than ever.

Compared to the cold and fear that surrounded her, Charles's embrace was warm—a harbor of safety.

Pressed close to his chest, with the rain and chill shut away, she let herself drift. She barely heard any sound; her soul felt cut off from the world. It was as if only she and her Master existed—and in that moment, the sense of being alone together was so overwhelming she nearly melted, wishing she could become part of him forever.

It was strange—though she'd been physically close to Charles countless times, this was her first time feeling like this:

To be held by him alone, to belong entirely to his embrace—such bliss...

She whispered these thoughts inwardly. But Charles, for his part, noticed nothing of her mood.

He simply felt he was fulfilling his duty as a Master, holding her, shielding her, wading through floodwater to the empty land at the monastery's edge.

By now, thanks to the nuns' tireless efforts, the monastery's area had expanded to seventy thousand square meters.

Still, there were too few nuns—he'd been busy dealing with demonic threats, and hadn't recruited more. Most of the grounds were thus wide and empty, only a few actual buildings scattered about.

Nothing could be done; even if new buildings had been constructed, without nuns to staff them, they'd serve no purpose. Charles, naturally, didn't want to waste more Purification Points for nothing.

Sigh. Once Montport was defeated, he hoped at last for a period of genuine peace—time to properly develop and grow his monastery.

Lost in such thoughts, he passed through part of the inner wall and reached an open outer area. It, too, was under water, but Charles wasn't fazed. He opened his system, chose a patch of ground in front of him, and selected "dormitory" for construction—

Buzz——

A milky purified light rose. The flooded ground lifted and became a platform above the water. Through the white glow, a single-story house of just under a hundred square meters took shape: a standard level-one dormitory.

He planned to use it as a temporary shelter for those whose houses had collapsed or been washed away in the flood. Officially, a level-one dorm could only house two people, but this was reality, not a game. With a little squeezing, thirty or fifty people could make do inside.

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