

DEMONS 1121

[Chapter 1121 1121 Cloud Powder And Its 'Minor' Side Effects](#)

Kat and Lily were both very surprised when they walked into the place they were staying. The huts were nice even if Kat understood how why they didn't count as beachfront. They were a good distance from the water, but there WAS a lot of sand around. That sand was the source of Kat's current surprise and confusion. Well, part of it anyway. In the middle of the huts, sat Kress.

Kress had stripped down to just his underwear, though they were at least boxers that covered everything, and was sitting in the sand with a bucket, a shovel, and next to him was a surprisingly good sand castle. Nixilei's eyes narrowed at the sight. Her glare didn't let up even as Kress' head swivelled around to look at the approaching three. His head seemed to sway in an invisible wind for a bit as he looked at them and shrugged, before going back to his sandcastle.

In the background, the sounds of an argument could be heard. It didn't take long to work out that Green and Gareth were still arguing about what they wanted to do in regards to forcing their marriage to go through early. Kat was starting to wonder how the rest of the city couldn't hear them. Her best guess was some sound dampening enchantments. Where they were? Kat didn't know, but it was her best guess.

"What are you doing Kress?" asked Nixilei sternly.

"Sssaandcastle!" answered Kress.

Nixilei sniffed the air and frowned. "Kress... did you smoke a bunch of cloud powder?"

"Yes indeedy, I did do that," answered Kress, seemingly unconcerned with the glare Nixilei was sending him. [n0veLNext.com](#)

Nixilei's glare got worse, but her voice seemed to remain calm as she spoke, "I see. Can I ask how you even acquired cloud powder, or why you thought it was a good idea to smoke it so close to the time we're supposed to compete?"

"Well that be a lot of questions... but uuuhh... ok, so like... the cleaners? They're supposed to... clean things right?" asked Kress, and Nixilei nodded with an exasperated look on their face. "Yeah, see, I thought that too, but obviously they didn't do a great job at it. See, I was checking all the little huts for the best one, cause like, I was gonna either claim that, or one of the ones next to the arguing couple, but like... one of them had a secret compartment!

"Sose, like... I had to check it for secrets. Like... what if it was a magical bomb! Or magical poison! Or... I feel like I had other things I was checking for... but it escapes me man. Anyway, so... like... I was checking it out really well, and I found a really nice pipe, and a whole lotta cloud powder.

"And I thought to myself. I could sell this... so I packed it all up right? Hid it away and then went back to guarding... but well... it's sad you know. I miss gramps, and Greeny and Gareth were yelling and I was sad and you might be a heartless bitch sometimes but you were trying but you weren't here... so I was like...

"Why not? Might as well get something to take my mind off it right? So I thought I'd just have a bit... but like... I dunno if I never got the good shit, or if the shit I tried before was pure and I just tried out some really crazy stuff but now I feel great. Not a care in the world. So I wanted to work on my sandcastle! Isn't it nice!" Kress gestured broadly at his sandcastle, knocking over one of the corners with his hand.

It took Kress an embarrassingly long time for Kress to turn and notice what he'd just done. He studied it for a few moments, as if he couldn't quite understand how the castle had fallen. Kat was getting ready for... well a reaction of some sort, but Kress just shrugged and then started working on the sandcastle again. He got up and headed for the tap to get more water and then started to fix the collapsed wall.

Kat, and Lily on her shoulders, looked over at Nixilei. Nixilei was rubbing her temples slowly, and noticed their gazes. She made a 'get on with it' gesture and Lily asked, "Ok so... what the heck is going on with Kress? I understand he found some cloud powder and then... smoked it, I suppose. But what is cloud powder and why is he like this?"

"I suppose you wouldn't be familiar with it. Cloud Powder is considered by many to be the best drug in existence. Not from an addict's perspective, but from that of the general populous. It is known to drastically improve moods, alleviate the worst symptoms of depression, and the reason it got its name, besides the fact that even in powdered form its fluffy, and a bit like cotton candy..."

Wait these guys, who have medieval level technology in most areas, know what cotton candy is?

"...it also known to produce a sensation a lot like floating. It doesn't really reduce inhibitions in people, so much as it, allegedly, regresses them to a simply mindset that's almost childlike, though not quite. Things just seem... better. Alcohol is still favoured by many because it's ancient, and common amongst all cultures, but cloud powder has spread quite rapidly, and many people find it to be much less harmful than other vices. The good thing about cloud powder is that it's not chemically addictive... but... well...

"For some people the mindset is. While it can really help with depression it doesn't address the underlying problems and many people just... keep smoking cloud powder to prevent themselves from facing the real world. It's easy to get people clean, and the withdrawal symptoms are practically non-existent...

"But for some people, just not feeling the calm happiness of it all is enough for them to... take extreme measures to avoid feeling pain ever again. If you understand what I mean. Still, it is considered quite safe, especially when taken in moderation. Though... I'm unsure what exactly is going on with Kress.

"His reaction is a bit... extreme for cloud powder. I am unsure if Kress himself is just particularly susceptible to the effects... or if there was something else mixed in. The fact that he just... found a random batch of it lying around does leave me worried. The real issue... is that the body doesn't consider cloud powder to be a poison.

"There are healing spells to remove it of course... but they're much harder to cast than what I can do so I can't flush it out of his system. The other issue is that how long it lasts is somewhat variable, and when it runs out, Kress will have about ten minutes of alertness before he'll fall asleep, potentially right in the middle of something if he pushes it."

Kress didn't seem concerned with any of this, he was just nodding along to Nixilei's points while humming and working on his sandcastle. It had been repaired, and now Kress was digging out a

ridiculously oversized moat for his miniature castle. "Yuppers. That sounds about right. I even said I tried some before, and it was nooother like this," said Kress.

Nixilei nodded, "Indeed you did... but your judgement is very compromised at the moment, and I cannot remember you ever trying cloud powder in the past,"

"Ah, see... Torston took us out to try some one day after you went off to do spy things! He was great like that. Green was especially funny after she had some. Instead of doing something reasonable like cloud watching or making sandcastle, Green started to run around in circles like an excited dog. It was very funny," said Kress with a smile as he remembered the event... at the same time as he let his shovel slice through part of his sandcastle.

Kat was getting the feeling that Kress had been working on it a bit longer than it seemed, because it was constantly destroying parts by accident. "Oh," said Nixilei, her voice sounding a little hollow to Kat's ears. "Yes I suppose that makes sense then doesn't it?"

"Right... well... Nixilei what do you think we should do?" asked Kat.

Nixilei chewed her lip as she considered her options, "Part of me wants to take Kress to a healer. Here in this town? This sort of thing would be a common occurrence... but Kress would likely complain, and I don't know how easily we could GET him there... cloud powder also isn't something to worry about... normally... but well...

"The risk of him staying up all night doing random things and amusing himself is a real worry. If he crashes right as the challenges start up tomorrow we're going to be paying for it..."

"Is that likely?" asked Kat.

"No... but... hmm... maybe I should find that cloud powder and examine it, see if I can work out what it was mixed with, if anything," said Nixilei.

"Nopedy nope nope. I smoked it, you can't have it," said Kress.

"Wait you smoked all of it?" asked Nixilei.

"Yup! The whole big box of it!" answered Kress 'proudly'

Nixilei groaned. "That'd be why he's like this then. You only need a pinch to get the best effects... gods,"

[Chapter 1122 1122 Shopping Date](#)

Kat and Lily walked through the streets. Lily was still sitting on Kat's shoulders. The demon suspected that Lily wanted to take the high ground due to her instincts, and Kat wasn't going to complain, it's not like Lily was heavy. Nixilei had sent the pair away so they could go out on a date... and do the shopping for the group. Apparently, the first thing Kress had tried to do after inhaling excessive amounts of cloud powder was try to cook food. TRY being the key word. *noVetnExt.cOm*

Now they had nothing left in any of the cupboards or the fridge, so it was up to Kat and Lily to pick some things up. Nixilei had given them plenty of money, and a rather long list. Though the length of the list

was due to the fact that Kat and Lily didn't recognise all the ingredients. Nixilei had to put her drawing skills to the test and produce small but extremely detailed and well drawn pictures of each item. Nixilei even included brief description, of the item, and what kind of vendor will normally have them.

"Do you mind I'm doing this?" asked Lily as she leant forward. Lily was leaning her arms against Kat's horns and using them to hold herself up. It was a slightly strange sensation for Kat. She could only somewhat feel Lily's arms, and the pressure was nearly non-existent.

"It doesn't bother me," said Kat. "I can barely feel the weight. In fact, I'm probably just feeling your touch instead of your weight,"

Lily stifled a laugh but nodded, "Ok, as long as this doesn't bother you. I might switch to hugging your arm or something later, but this is nice for now,"

Kat shrugged, finding amusement in the fact Lily had to shift her weight to keep steady on top of Kat's shoulders. Lily pouted down at Kat, who could feel the gaze behind her head. *I regret nothing!* Lily just rolled her eyes at the antics and they continued into the town.

Quite a few people stopped to look at them, a bit confused as to why Lily was being carried, but nobody stared long. Apparently it wasn't such a strange sight, just a slightly curious one. It took a bit for the two of them to make it to a market, but once there, Kat could say she wasn't terribly impressed. Kat hadn't noticed the crowds funnelling this way, and was caught off guard by the area being completely packed full of people.

"Lily, stay on my shoulders please. If you can direct me to the right stalls, that would be great," said Kat. [Sure thing]

Kat pushed her way through to the first stall that had a collection of dried fruits. Nixilei had supplied a few bags alongside coin for Kat, so the demon had no need to look for one. Kat looked over the prices, without knowing how acceptable they were. Standing back a bit from the crowd, Kat watched as several people grabbed what they wanted then dumped roughly the correct amount of coin into a box the stall owner had set out.

Kat frowned as she continued to watch this. *I'm not sure what I should do here, I've seen three people underpay, four people overpay, and only two people pay exactly the right amount. There's also the other six that gave slightly incorrect amounts, but they were only off by a few cents. One of the people overpaying gave the stall double what she was asking for! How the heck does this currency system work?*

Before Lily could answer the stall owner's hunchbacked kid snaked out and grabbed the shoulder of a smaller kid that was about to run off. They'd grabbed a bunch of the more expensive fruit and paid a pittance. Apparently the stall owner was paying attention. The stall owner didn't say anything, and the kid just sighed and handed back half of their haul before the stall owner released them, letting the kid dash away into the crowd. Which made some sense... except...

The kid still didn't pay enough! How the fuck does this system work!

[I can't really tell. Nothing seems to stand out amongst the people that seem to be paying more or less for the fruit, and before they caught that kid, I was under the impression that the stall owner was just giving these things away and taking what money they could... but apparently not?]

Should we just pay the amount? Nixilei gave us enough money to buy the whole stand out twice over... so I'm not sure if 'correct amount' is what we should be handing over here. Is this like tipping?

[Look, I don't know. Let's just be safe and hand over exact change. Then we can't get in trouble, and we don't have to feel bad because quite a few people are clearly not paying full price.]

I can accept that.

Kat paid with no issue, then moved off to a few other stalls, repeating the process of watching a bit. Most of the time, they simply paid what was on the signs, but occasionally Kat could see incorrect amounts of money changing hands. Kat just brushed it off, it was possible these people were just family friends or something. Most stalls kept better track of payments than the first, but it was still a bit haphazard.

Kat was nearly done with the shopping, when she felt someone bump into her. That was fine, it didn't even move Kat in the slightest, but when she looked down, Kat saw a kid falling down. Taking no time to think, Kat's tail lashed out, catching the child before they hit the ground. What surprised Kat was that the kid started thrashing. It was hard to tell if they were a girl or not. They were dirty, with short hair that looked like it had been hacked off with a knife.

They were covered in a fair bit of dirt... and they had managed to grab the money pouch Kat had assumed was well hidden amongst her other bags. It still had a good chunk of coin in it, with Nixilei providing well. Kat let out a long sigh. *Welp. This is awkward. I'm going to leave the press of people and figure this out. Ideas?*

Kat started walking to the edge of the market, pushing her way through the crowd. Nobody seemed concerned that Kat had just picked up a random child, and that too was worrying her.

[I don't know what we can do here Kat. If we take the money back... well... this kid might need it, and the money is clearly nothing to Nixilei... but at the same time, we've called so much attention to them, if we let them take it anyway... everyone that's watching will know what we did. Perhaps... we can give away some food? That might be a good medium.]

Kat sighed again. *I really didn't want to run into a presumably homeless child.* Kat made it to a small alleyway but decided to keep going when the smell hit her. Kat hung left towards the ocean and pulled the kid along with her until she reached the docks. Kat looked for an empty pier and headed out away from the crowd. The kid was still struggle, but not as much as before. It was more like they felt obligated to at least try, but they were small and Kat's tail was all muscle. So keeping them aloft was no issue.

Eventually Kat sat the kid down, placing herself between the exit to the pier and the child. Lily hopped off Kat's shoulders and took up watch. "Now, would you like to tell me what you were doing?" asked Kat.

"Nothing," insisted the child. The child still holding the money pouch.

Kat released the child, and went to speak again, but the child took off running to the side leaping off the edge. Kat let them get out over the water before wrapping them in her tail again and dragging them back. Sure it was 'quick' for a human but Kat was far beyond this small child. Though... Kat looked closer at the ears on the child and noticed they were an elf, not human.

"Ok, now you've tried to escape again, and still holding my money pouch, can you tell me what you were doing?" asked Kat.

The elven child looked up at Kat, then at Lily, then down to the pouch and said nothing. Kat let them go once more, and kneeled down to their level to try to be less intimidating. For her efforts. Kat had a bag of money swung into her face. Kat just rolled her eyes and let it hit before grabbing the child's arm and plucking the money bag away and handing it off to Lily. "Right, now, I'm still not mad, but you can't keep doing that. It's rude,"

"I'm not rude! You're rude! You took my money!" insisted the child.

Lily... should we just throw the kid in the ocean? They wouldn't have tried to jump if they couldn't swim right?

[Chapter 1123 1123 Bribery](#)

After three further escape attempts Kat was getting a bit fed up. Trying to reassure the child seemed to have no effect. Sitting down at their level just opened Kat up to be hit, and even if that didn't hurt, it wasn't fun either. Kat was running out of ideas. *I can't see how I'm getting information out of this kid. I suppose I could try scaring them... but I don't want to traumatise any children.*

[What about bribery?]

That could work... it's also a decent way to give them money without feeling bad. "Ok, I get that you're going to keep running away, so how about this? I'll ask you a few questions, you answer them, and then I'll let you go," said Kat.

The child frowned, their entire face scrunched up with concern, annoyance, and thought. Kat just let them take the time they needed to figure out the answer, at least they weren't trying to escape. "Hmm... Big Sis said not to answer any questions if someone asked me though..." said the child eventually.

"Well... don't you want a chance to talk about this Big Sis, of yours?" asked Kat.

This seemed to cause the child to enter another round of intense thought. Kat and Lily just waited patiently, though Lily was now leaning against Kat, keeping her nose buried in Kat's hair. For Lily, it was a very pleasant way to waste time. In fact, it wasn't wasting time at all. The child finally came up with an answer, "No. Big sis would be mad, and I don't want to get in trouble,"

Kat nodded, as if this was understandable, and it sort of was... but if Kat was actually going to cause problems for the elf, it was much too late. "I understand. Though... if I give you one of these coins," Kat pulled out a coin worth the rough equivalent of 50 earth cents, "would you be willing to answer some questions,"

At this point it was no surprise that the kid needed more time to think. This time they sat down, and seemed to be thinking extra hard. Their little ears wiggled up and down as they thought. Kat decided that was adorable, and needed to find out if older elves did that as well. "Two coins!" was the answer the child gave in the end.

Kat nodded, and the little elf looked rather smug, as if they'd just made off with Kat's entire fortune. Kat just continued smiling, trying to reassure the child that this was fine. "Ok, but before we get to the questions, I'm going to need your name," said Kat.

"Isn't that a question?" asked the elf.

"No, it was a statement saying I need your name first," said Kat.

"Hmm... THREE coins!" insisted the elf.

Kat rolled her eyes and pulled three coins out, Kat had at least a hundred of them left so it was no issue. The elf snatched the coins from Kat's hand without asking, and then hid them away. Kat wasn't paying too much attention, and was surprised to note she wasn't entirely sure where the coins went. Note to self. Watch that next time. This time it was Kat's turn to wait patiently. She wasn't going to say anything else until the child gave its name.

"Boot. My name is Boot," said 'Boot'.

Welp. I guess they don't have parents around. Or, their parents hated them I suppose. It also doesn't clue me into the gender of this child... or their age. I really want to know 'why' boot, but I'm not going to waste a question on it.

"I see, well my first question is, why did you try and steal from me?" asked Kat.

Boot made a grabby motion and Kat rolled her eyes, holding out the coins once again. This time though, Kat watched Boot swipe them. Boot swiped the coins and pulled their raggedy coat out with their other hand. The hand with the coins dipped into the coat as if she was putting them in a hidden pocket, but in slow motion it was easy to see Boot dropping them into their other hand, which then fell back to Boot's side before dropping the coins into the kid's oversized boots.

Thematic. "You looked like an easy mark," said Boot.

"That's not much of an answer," said Kat. "You need to explain what you mean by that. I can guess a lot... but I'm paying you g- real money for these answers,"

Boot thought about this for a few seconds before nodding. Kat smiled, glad that she still understood kid-logic. "Ok... I guess you're right. Well, you look like a tourist because I've never seen anyone that looks like you before. Big Sis says that tourists have more money than sense, and don't like running. So I was gonna run off, and you probably had a lot of money in that bag, which you do, and you probably wouldn't chase me for it,"

"What makes me look like a tourist?" asked Kat.

Boot made another grabby motion. Kat rolled her eyes, but decided Boot had been fair with their answer so handed over two more coins, that once again ended up in Boot's boots. "Your dress isn't long enough for you to be a mage, you don't have any armour on and your skin is much too pretty,"

Lily burst out laughing and Kat winced, because Lily had done so right beside her ear. "Are you making fun of me?" asked Boot with a huff.

Kat, knowing how kid-logic worked... made a grabby motion with her hand while Lily was too busy laughing. Boot growled and looked from Kat's face to her hands, then back to her face... before looking down at their own hand. "Fine," grumbled Boot. Apparently, they were only taught how to hide money, not that they shouldn't reveal where it was, because Boot reached back into their boot to get the money without hiding how they were doing it. Kat decided not to comment.

Lily was still laughing, so Kat said, "As my girlfriend is laughing to much, allow me to answer what she finds funny. The first, is that while I might not be a mage she is. Next, I can summon weapons," Kat decided to be a bit showy and summoned her fans with a puff of fire, "and I can regenerate from serious wounds so well they don't even leave scars, so I don't need armour,"

"That's cheating," said Boot with all the certainty of a five year old.

"It might be," said Kat with a nod, "But it's true. Now, my next question, is are you getting enough to eat?"

Boot of course waited for Kat to hand over the money before answering with, "I don't understand the question,"

"I mean do you ever feel hungry?" asked Kat.

Boot still seemed confused, "I don't get it,"

Not sure what that means for their nutrition... but fine whatever. "That's ok, I'll count the question as answered," Boot perked up when Kat said that, "Just this once," Boot's smile fell. "I can't have you answering 'I don't know' for all my questions. Then you're not really answering them. Right... um... hmm... do you manage to keep warm?"

"Of course!" said Boot with a big smile. Then they paused, realising that they'd answered the question without getting paid. Kat smirked, but handed the coins over without issue.

That's one less thing to worry about I suppose. I'm just not sure what to do with that information. So Boot might be going hungry, but doesn't have to worry about freezing to death. I guess I can live with that? What do you think Lily?

[I suppose I can as well. Boot looks small, but if I take a look at their arms, it's not like they're all skin and bones either. I suspect, even if they're not getting a completely healthy amount of food, they are getting enough. This is a big tourist place... and as silly as it might be, tourists with extra money are great targets for pickpockets.]

Kat pursed her lips. She didn't like the idea of just leaving a child on their own, but Boot clearly had at least one person looking after them, possibly more. In addition to that, it wasn't like Kat could take the kid with her. Not only was she not going to just force that onto Callisto and Vivian, Kat wasn't sure she could even take Boot through the portal. That's not even getting into the fact Boot was an elf, and thus, would look very out of place on earth. *I can't save everyone, and Boot seems like they know what they're doing. It leaves a bad taste in my mouth... but I guess we're leaving.*

Kat stood, returning to her full height and said, "Thank you for answering my questions Boot. You're free to go now," Boot nodded, but waited for a few seconds, just in case Kat made a move to take back her coins. Boot watched the pair carefully as they edged around Kat and Lily. As soon as they were out of reach, Boot sprinted back off the docks and into the city.

[Chapter 1124 1124 Farewell, My Loyal Friend](#)

Kat and Lily could smell smoke as they approached the place everyone was staying so Kat picked up speed. She rushed through the streets for a bit before deciding to just fly. Kat hopped into the air and flew as fast as she could... only to quickly realise there was no problem. Or at least, nothing was on fire that shouldn't be. In the middle of the huts where Kress had been making a sandcastle, there was now a pyre with a sad Kress on one side, and Nixilei reading a book next to him.

Kat slowed, gliding down gently and dropping next to Nixilei, "Hello Kat," said Nixilei, remarkably unconcerned. Kat's own concern only increased when she noticed the black eye and tear tracks on Kress... who seemed remarkably ok with everything despite the aforementioned problems.

"Right..." said Kat slowly, "Hello as well... I suppose? I just... what's going on? There's a fire, and I can't hear anymore yelling and Kress has a black eye that... well I know you could heal it, but considering you're also the one with your mind working properly I imagine there's a reason you didn't... just... look I ran over here because I smelt smoke and now I'm just confused frankly,"

Nixilei nodded, putting away her book and shifting so that she could see Kat properly. "Indeed. It is a bit of a story, and Kress has decided to give me the silent treatment over it. It's starts shortly after you left. I decided, wisely, that I didn't want to just stand around or sit on the sand. Even if I don't move much I'm sure it would get everywhere," explained Nixilei.

Kat and Lily nodded. Even though neither went to the beach particularly often it was still something they knew well. Nixilei continued speaking upon seeing their agreement, "Glad you understand. So I went to grab one of the nearby outdoor chairs and sit down near Kress. The problem is that in the few moments I was gone, he seemed to have forgotten I was there. Kress eventually, turned and spotted me...

"Freaking himself out in the process and flail his arms around wildly. Not really sure why he did that, but he did and it resulting in Kress hitting himself with the spade. This started off a tirade where he proclaimed the spade to be a traitor to the cause. I offered to heal him... but Kress insisted that wounds taken when fighting a once trusted companion should be honoured.

"I did think about healing him anyway... but I decided that it wasn't worth the effort. Kress would likely just complain, so I let it be. Some time later, Kress decided that he should give the shovel a send-off after defeating it... which entailed snapping it in half. Then Kress insisted we find a bunch of wood, to burn it as a fitting funeral for his shovel friend.

"So off we went into the nearby area, though I did keep an ear out for Green and Gareth. Eventually we found enough wood... is what I'd like to say but Kress kept insisting we needed more. As to why you can't here Green and Gareth arguing? Well at some point they both came over and asked me to heal them...

"You see, despite being stronger in many ways than the baseline for our races due to our diligent practice it is still entirely possible for us to yell ourselves hoarse. I decided they'd both had enough arguing and refused to heal them. They both thought about it for a while, but Green decided an excuse to sleep instead of argue sounded nice and agreed with me. So they should both be sleeping at the moment, or more likely, Green is sleeping while Gareth lays next to her and plays with her hair,"

"Probably for the best," said Lily with a nod. "If they really managed to yell that much... yeah best not to push things even further,"

Nixilei shrugged, "I agree. Though at least they were not truly angry with each other as they were arguing. I think it goes to show how much they understand each other. It might have become a big shouting match, but they can still cuddle up with each other at the end of the day,"

Lily and Kat took a moment to smile at the thought before Kat asked, "Right... so how did it get to this?" Kat gestured at Kress.

Nixilei sighed, "Right so after Kress finally got enough wood, though that took some convincing from me, he built the pyre, laid down his shovel underneath it and then lit the whole thing up... after which he started crying about the fact that he no longer had a shovel, and that it was all my fault.

"This is of course ignoring the fact that I found two other shovels without really trying, and that Kress was the one who insisted on cremating the one that's now ash. Especially considering we'll have to pay for it to be replaced... but whatever. Anyway, to stop him complaining, I agreed it was all my fault, and now Kress is giving me the silent treatment as punishment... and now here you are.

"Hopefully the list I gave you contained good ingredients for a fireplace cookout. If not, the kitchens will probably suffice," finished Nixilei.

"Will you be healing them in the morning?" asked Kat.

Nixilei nodded, "Yeah. I'm not going to let them go into the tournament still wounded, even if it is just a bit of a sore throat. Communication will be important... probably,"

"Will Kress be ready for that?" asked Lily.

Nixilei shrugged before admitting, "He should be... but if he's not, and I admit I have no idea what I'm doing then I'm hoping that Thyme will fix anything that's still... broken,"

"Is it likely Thyme will help? I mean, he did eliminate that one team... even if it was for very valid reasons," said Kat.

Nixilei shrugged and said, "I think as long as the rest of us are fine, then Thyme should be easy to convince. Sure it wasn't the smartest idea to smoke cloud powder so close to the tournament... but if it was normal cloud powder Kress would be fine. The real mistake was just smoking random powder that was lying around, even if cloud powder does look really distinctive," *nOvelnext.CoM*

Kat nodded. *I suppose Nixilei has a point. It doesn't feel great to rely on Thyme to show us a bit of favouritism and heal Kress. Though, if Kress isn't necessary for the first event maybe we'll still have time for him to recover before it actually matters. It's a bit unclear. If this was the first round Kress would

have most of the day to recover... but the one after that we were all working together on the first task. Still... I guess Kress will have a few hours in the morning either way.*

In the end, Kat had to agree with Nixilei that it was the best course of action. Once that was done they separated the shopping into two separate piles. One to be loaded up until the fridges, and the other would be prepped now. The need for multiple fridges was mostly due to the small size of the ones in the hut, and not an excessive amount of food. Once that was done, Kat and Lily were tasked with packing things away as Nixilei went looking for... something.

That something turned out to be a spit roast setup. They didn't have a great cut of meat for it, but Nixilei explained the plan was to essentially make an oversized kebab that would then be taken off the fire and divided across the plates. With a shrug, Kat got to seasoning the meat while Nixilei set everything up by the fire and Lily cut up the fruit and vegetables.

Once that was done, Lily kept making the salads, with a few instructions from Nixilei to make sure she got the right ingredients, while Kat and Nixilei dealt with the fire. It was a bit slow, adding the things that needed to cook longer first, at least until Kat pointed out she was fireproof. Nixilei cursed under her breath, ashamed of forgetting such a thing while Kat got to work messing with the food.

Kress' mouth could be seen twitching the whole time, like he wanted to say something but apparently his desire to give Nixilei the cold shoulder was stronger than his desire to say whatever it was that kept getting him to twitch. Kat found it amusing, but Nixilei was more annoyed by the behaviour.

Eventually Green and Gareth were drawn for their hut by the smell of food. Or more accurately, Gareth was drawn out and Green was carried over his shoulder like a sack of flour and forced to come along as well. Nixilei directed Kat to grab some extra chairs while the fey herself got a table for everyone. Lily acquired the plates and cutlery, and then everyone sat down for dinner.

[Chapter 1125 1125 Fun For Breakfast](#)

Kat had just finished making breakfast while the rest of the group were setting up the table. Nixilei had grabbed everyone else when she awoke and saw Kat cooking. Well, everyone except Lily who was asleep next to the stovetop, enjoying the heat of it. Kat was a little concerned, but when Lily dipped her tail into the fire and then kept sleeping, Kat relaxed. *Apparently a flame of that power isn't even enough to hurt Lily anymore. Which is weird. I keep thinking of her as a slightly enhanced normal Kat but that was real fire. I would know, I'm cooking with it.*

Regardless of that newfound realisation, Kat didn't plan to treat Lily any differently. As such Kat carefully scooped Lily up and lay her around her neck while carrying the food out to everyone else. Nixilei was smiling at the table, Kress was looking up and the sky, while Gareth and Green sat together on one chair. With Green still dozing and Gareth rubbing his throat.

Kat raised an eyebrow at that. Catching Nixilei's attention, Kat jerked her eyes toward Gareth's neck, asking the silent question. "I decided that Gareth and Green hadn't yet earnt the privilege of my healing just yet. While I understand the need to vent due to grief, I also believe taking it to the point you both NEED to be healed is a sure sign that you took things too far. It takes a lot of effort to wreck the voice of

someone past Rank 1. The fact they both managed it says some unpleasant things about their self control,"

Gareth rubbed his throat a bit more than replied, in a small harsh voice, "We both know that, and maybe we should have stopped but it kept us from moping, didn't it?"

Nixilei rolled her eyes, "As your doctor it is my opinion that you should stop talking in order not to further aggravate your sore throat," Gareth rolled his eyes, "and further, it may have stopped you moping about your grandfather but you immediately came to me to start moping about your sore throat, so it really wasn't much better for me"

Gareth refused to answer, simply placing a series of kisses on Green until she was eventually pulled to the waking world then the two got started on food. Kress was still looking at the sky so Kat asked, "What's with Kress?"

"Well... one of the things I forgot to mention when it comes to cloud powder is that it has minimal, if any effect on your memory of events after the fact. Just one more reason it's better than alcohol. It seems that whatever Kress' batch was mixed with, didn't hurt his memory at all, he now remembers EVERYTHING from yesterday," said Nixilei with a grin.

"Yes, I do. I have rather mixed feelings about the whole day now," grumbled Kress, as he fell forward. Kat noticed that, while mostly gone, Kress still had traces of the black eye from yesterday.

"Why is that?" asked Kat as Lily transformed and took a seat on Kat's lap. Kat had already eaten one of the fruits when she was cooking for everyone else. That alongside a good dinner yesterday meant Kat wasn't hungry at all. So the food in front of the pair was just for Lily.

"It all made so much sense at the time, and if I think about it hard enough I can even follow my train of logic from yesterday. Which is a bit weird... and I'm no longer depressed. The cloud powder helped me move past any feelings of sadness I now have... but I can't figure out if I'm meant to be embarrassed or not," answered Kress.

"Why is it a question?" asked Kat. "Surely you're either embarrassed, or you're not?"

Kress shrugged, as he dug into his food, taking a few bites before answering, "This is pretty good. I'm surprised you handled the ingredients so well," Kat acknowledge the praise. "As for the embarrassment... well I suppose it's partially a mindset thing. Yesterday I wasn't embarrassed at all, and if I think back, immerse myself in the memories of that day, I don't feel any embarrassment at all.

"I feel a sort of... echo of the feelings I did at that time. Now, my memory isn't bad, but it's not normally this good so I think whatever was added to the cloud powder sort of... stamped the day in my memory. When I'm focused on the specifics, I can almost feel myself sliding back towards those happy times...

"But it also means that when I think about it in the abstract I can understand and appreciate how mortifying it should have been. If I try to picture the situation playing out in more normal circumstances, well... I start to wonder if I need to hit myself with that shovel a few more times. Remove the memory completely," explained Kress.

"As your medical advisor, I recommend against such an action," sneered Nixilei.

Kress, with all the maturity of an adult in his twenties... used his fork to launch a berry towards Nixilei in retaliation. Nixilei, watching Kress' attempt, just opened her mouth to catch it. "Was that meant to be hard?" asked Nixilei.

Kress decided to answer that by sticking his tongue out at Nixilei. "Wow... you seem... and I hope this isn't offensive but... you seem remarkably chill at the moment Kress,"

Kress nodded, "Yeah. I'm sure I'll find something else to be mad at eventually... but I'm still feeling pretty great. I'm not even mad Nixilei managed to catch that bit of fruit, I was aiming for her face after all. So it seems despite my slightly weird head, my aim is still good,"

"Right... so you don't think this is permanent?" asked Lily.

Kress snorted and returned with, "Would you rather it was?"

"I mean... hmm..." Lily didn't know how to answer that question.

[I'm really not sure. I mean... I wouldn't want Kress to go back to being an ass... but he really wasn't too bad last time we were here... and this just feels... wrong. Not that Kress should always be angry... but having him stay so chill even after he spent yesterday acting like a clown? It's a bit too much like he's an entirely new person. Which... well I suppose that's something that CAN happen... but Thyme will notice right?] NOVELnext.com

Well I can say it isn't an illusion. Though you do bring up a good point, so I get what you're saying. I'm not sure what I'd want either. Do I want Kress to act more like himself? Or like less of an ass? Perhaps a mix of both? Less of an ass, but more like the person we recognise?

"You know, now that I'm paying attention, it's really easy to see when they discuss with each other isn't it?" asked Kress, directing the question mostly to Nixilei.

"Indeed," agreed Nixilei, "They'd make horrible spies because they both do it. I wonder if the link they share has a hormonal element, or if they really are just that sappy. It's probably just the latter because I can imagine Green and Gareth doing something similar... but they were at last taught how to hold a pokerface for noble politics,"

Kat and Lily looked at each other and grinned. Kat decided to sneak in a kiss as well, turning Lily red. The Memphis just mumbled and turned back to her food so she could pretend to be less embarrassed. Green leaned over and gave Gareth a kiss of his own. Kress rolled his eyes, "Ah yes, the joys of being single. Unless you want to give me a kiss Nixilei?"

"I'd rather kiss the ashes of your 'honourable companion Shovel' " said Nixilei, though she gave a slight smile at the end.

Kress, put a hand over his heart, and reeled back in shock, "So... he was a traitor long before his sneak attack against my illustrious person," Kress kept leaning until he looked like he should be falling off the chair, but he had one leg wrapped around the chair, and the other the table to stabilise him as he 'fell'. "He hath gone behind my back to woo my fair maiden love. Yes. It is good that he is now naught but ashes. Truly, he deserved a harsher fate,"

Kress eventually leaned back far enough for him to let go with his feet, and fall the last few centimetres to the ground. "Now you'll have to deal with having sand in your clothes for the rest of the day," pointed out Nixilei.

Kress shot up to his feet, walking back away from the table and started to shake his clothes out, "Shit. I didn't think of that..." grumbled Kress. Despite his clear annoyance, he didn't sound half as annoyed as he did on a normal day.

"Indeed... ten out of ten for the performance," said Gareth, "but 4 out of ten for preparation and thoughtfulness,"

"Why are you giving him four?" asked Green.

"Well, he at least knew to lower himself with his legs, so he deserves a few points for that," offered Gareth.

[Chapter 1126 1126 Thyme For A Nautical Adventure](#)

The group of five, or six if you counted a sleeping Lily, were sitting on the outskirts of town at a small pier and looking around confused. "This... this is where we're supposed to be right?" asked Kat.

"I'm almost certain..." said Nixilei confused. After a moment of looking around, Nixilei pulled out a thick card that had the town's name on it and then a glowing arrow that was currently spinning around wildly. "I double checked this was the correct place before summoning you and watch..."

Nixilei backed up a few paces and as soon as her feet left the pier the arrow stopped pinning and started to point straight ahead. Nixilei put one foot on the pier and it kept pointing forward. Nixilei finished her forward step and once again the arrow was spinning wildly. "Unless this pier is heavily enchanted by someone surpassing time in power this has to be the right place," said Nixilei firmly.

"I wouldn't worry too much, we still have ten minutes before the deadline. I'm sure Thyme has something up his sleeve. I mean, we've been led to the middle of nowhere twice before. Just because this is inside of a city this time doesn't mean Thyme will be any less weird," said Kress.

Green looked at Kress like he'd just grown a second head. Green hadn't been paying attention to Kress since his... accident... with cloud powder, both the day off and this morning. So she was surprised by the exceptionally calm response. Gareth, seeing that his friend was staying positive, decided it was his turn to be the killjoy, "While that is a lovely sentiment..."

"We can't be late for the round. I don't think we could ever remove the label of cowards if we were disqualified from the tournament if we just didn't show up. Or magic forbid, jokes about sleeping through important events. I already here enough of those because of Green. What I need to know is, are we in the correct spot? Or do we need to move?"

Nixilei frowned and examined the pier a bit more, even going so far as to crouch by the edge and lean over so she could see the underside of the structure. "It looks fine to me. As far as I can tell it's just a normal pier. I'm not sensing much extra magic from it, if any, and there's no obvious enchantment carved into anywhere I can see," explained Nixilei as she stood up. Once she was back on her feet, Nixilei

kicked the pier and listened to the sound it made. "It feels and sounds like normal wood as well. I bet I could destroy the whole pier without much trouble... but that seems like a big risk,"

Gareth frowned as he looked down at the wood. "I don't like it... but perhaps I'm just being overly paranoid now that Kress isn't going to point out everything that could possibly go wrong,"

"Ok, Gareth my man? I might be chill for now but that doesn't mean my memory is broken, or that I'm just going to take that lying down. I was, and possibly still am, a massive ass. I pick fights I really shouldn't and I like to tear people down... but I am not overly paranoid. In fact, considering I'm supposed to be your bodyguard, I'm probably not paranoid enough," stated Kress.

"He's got a point," added Nixilei.

"Whose side are you on?" asked Gareth with a comedically overdone glare.

"I'd love to say Green's... and I suppose that's technically true. Though oftentimes I have to go against her for her own good," said Nixilei proudly.

Kat smiled at the antics between the other four while running her hands through Lily's fur. It kept Kat calm, and hopefully gave Lily good dreams. It all seems so light-hearted now. I hope that even after all the cloud powder works its way through Kress' system he stays somewhat chill. It's nice to see them all like this.

What I want to know... how worried should we be? Personally, I suspect that Thyme has something planned. They wouldn't give a faulty invitation out, and while it could be a counterfeit I trust our spy more than enough to not worry about that part. I suppose it's just a question of when-

Kat's thoughts were cut off when a giant ship just appeared in front of them. The gangplank was already lowering down, and Thyme stepped down the gangplank as it moved. They was dressed as a weird mixture of butler, maid, and pirate. They had a maids frock, a pirate hat, and butler jacket. With a hand 'missing' and converted into a mop but guns on their hips. Kat... really didn't know what to make of the outfit.

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"Huh... guess I should check more carefully for illusions..." mumbled Nixilei.

"Do remember I have True Sight," said Kat after stepping just behind Nixilei.

"Shit... that... that means that cheeky tree teleported the whole ship here... without disturbing the water, or the air. Shit, Thyme's gotten good at teleporting," said Nixilei.

"Indeed. I've kept up my practice after Kat challenged me on my teleportation technique all these months ago. It's been a great challenge to keep my mind busy when I'm not working on other things. So? Does it pass muster?" asked Thyme with a grin.

Kat glared at Thyme and said they only thing should could, "I'd have to be teleported myself to find out. It certainly looks impressive though,"

Thyme smiled and clicked their fingers. Suddenly, in the blink of an eye, Kat was up in the sky. Lily was instantly awake when she felt Kat's momentary panic, and looked around wildly as they fell through the sky. [What's happening?]

Thyme's just showing off. You can go back to sleep if you want... though was it the teleportation that woke you or my moment of panic?

[Um... the panic? I think? I'm not overly sure... I sort of just... woke up. I don't feel too groggy or anything, and I don't remember the teleport... but I don't know how much that matters.]

Eh, I'll handle it. You can sleep.

Lily trusted Kat enough to just nod and curl back up. Kat deposited her girlfriend her backpack, and then took to watching the sky pass by. She was falling pretty fast, likely at or near terminal velocity and the city could be scene below. *Ride won't be long now.* Kat simply let herself fall, closer and closer to the ground until she flared her wings and gently glided down.

Everyone was waiting for her, and to Kat's chagrin despite the wind, and the fact that she'd flared her wings long before the ground, Kat found herself back in the exact spot she had been standing before without any correction on her part. "Ok now that's just showing off," said Kat with a huff.

Thyme grinned back, "I've been working on it for a while so I really wanted to show off. So, how was it?"

Kat sighed and reluctantly admitted, "It was great. I didn't feel the transition at all, it was fast, though that might just be because of how close I was teleported, relatively speaking. The fact you managed to have me land exactly where I left is an almost freaky level of calculation and knowledge. Both of the world, and my own habits. Oh, but you lose points for waking Lily up. Sure, that might've just been my panic, but she still woke up, so I'm taking points for that,"

Thyme shrunk down, taking off their hat in the process and looking up at Kat with oversized eyes that shined slightly, "I'm sowwy,"

"Don't do that," said Kat with a wave, "It looks really weird. Maybe if I hadn't seen you transform down to that it would be kinda cute... but yeah... just no,"

Thyme stepped back and popped to full size. "Yeah, I was mostly trying it out on the fly. Not like the Timmys. Those things were the work of many sessions to get right..."

"Not that this isn't a fascinating look into the psyche of someone so powerful..." said Nixilei carefully, "but where exactly are the other teams, and what's going on?"

Thyme just waved off Nixilei's concern, "Oh don't worry about that. I'm using copies of myself to grab the other teams and we'll be sailing around for a bit before we get to the venue. I won't spoil things too much, but because I'm also the boat you see behind me, I can ensure that each team gets there at the same time,"

"Wait... you're the boat?" asked Green.

Thyme nodded, "Yup. I just had to ensure that the type of wood used in the construction was one of the few that can filter salt water to drink and then I could partially merge with the finished product. I might

be able to make a boat just with magic... but the upkeep would be annoying. Much worse than my usual humanoid forms for some reason,"

Nixilei pursed her lips for a few moments before shaking her head and saying. "Let's just get on the boat,"

[Chapter 1127 1127 Thyme For Dryad Lore](#)

Once the boat goat moving, Thyme caught them all in another teleport. Instead of traveling quickly, instead, Thyme used it to hold them just outside of the world. Instead of fire, there was a large number of vines with blooming flowers of all colours. There was a green ocean below the boat, but looking to the bow or stern that the water didn't extend much past the edges of the ship.

Kat breathed in deeply, instead of the scent of fire and ash, it seemed like Thyme had made their teleportation smell of nature. *Thyme was halfway there already. When we moved the first time I'm pretty sure there was a green flash before it was all over. It seems Thyme has truly refined things.*

"Might I ask when we will be arriving?" asked Gareth as he stared out at the hypnotic mess of flowers.

Thyme just shrugged, "Technically I could drop you all of at the destination straight away, however it seems one of the teams hasn't quite managed to get on the boat just yet. I want everyone to arrive at the same time. Mostly for dramatic effect, but technically because it's in the rules,"

"But that's not how it worked the previous times," said Kat.

Thyme made a 'so-so' gesture. "Technically the rules are the same, but I wasn't overly concerned with that particular one. I assumed that as long as the first round started at the same time then it was all good, but one of the other organisers gave me a chewing out over it. I've had to rework my plans for the grand finale a bit, but this round is basically unchanged,"

"Can you give us any hints?" asked Nixilei with a shrewd smile.

"Funnily enough? No I can't," said Thyme with a smile.

Nixilei shrugged, "I had to ask. If I lost out on information I could've gotten just by asking I'd never live it down,"

"Don't worry to much Nixilei," said Thyme. "Everything will be explained soon... hopefully. As I said, I'm waiting for the last team to get on the boat and they're... having some issues,"

"Can you tell us what those are?" asked Gareth.

Thyme tapped their chin a few times as they considered the rulebook. "I... I'm not totally sure. I'm not supposed to provide an unfair advantage to any of the teams, but if I'm just reporting factual information that's happening in my presence... that might count as an advantage? I don't see how you could make use of this information though... but perhaps? Hmm..."

Thyme eyed Nixilei who was staring back at Thyme with wrapped attention, "You know what? Probably safer I just don't say anything,"

"Well what are we meant to do while we wait?" huffed Nixilei.

Thyme shrugged and said, "I don't know. I'm afraid this is rather outside of my expectations. Technically speaking the team was at the arrival point on time, so I can't classify them as no-shows. I suppose I could force them onto the boat... and maybe I should, but that's not half as funny as what's happening,"

"You can't just say something like that and not give us anymore details," whined Green. "It has to be extra juicy if you're refusing to talk. Is it a jilted lover? An army of garden gnomes? The ghost of their past misdeeds? An army of tax collectors? Oooh, is something on fire? Considering we had to put fire out last time, it could be an excessive amount of fire. Unless... is one of them scared of water? No are they ALL scared of water? What's the word for being scared of water?"

"Thalassophobia, I think," said Nixilei.

"I'm afraid I cannot confirm or deny any of your guesses, that might constitute an unfair advantage. Especially if I am neglecting to tell the other teams that arrived on time any details as well. You can guess all you like but I will not respond," said Thyme.

"I don't know about that. I could just keep guessing and watching your facial expressions?" offered Green.

Thyme rolled their eyes. "Green, I am a dryad. I can freeze my face completely. My face only shows emotions so freely because I have trained myself to do so. The idea of having a 'wooden face' didn't come from nowhere,"

Huh. That's interesting, I can hear a bit of extra context when Thyme said 'wooden face' because it seems like in their language it means a few more things than in ours. It's an odd mix of things... but I guess with the additional context of well... having tree people, the saying is more than just a saying about an inanimate object. I wonder how many races use it like that though?

Nixilei and Green glared at that, but Thyme just made good on their promise. In an instant, all motion stopped in the body. It no longer looked like it was breathing, the eyes didn't blink, there was no little twitches that accompany most lifeforms. Thyme looked much like a dryad's true body. Simply a tree carved to look like a person, and it was only the knowledge that Thyme was a person that kept the idea Thyme was anything but a tree or a carving fixed in Kat's mind.

"Ok... that's a little creepy," said Green.

"I've seen it a few times," said Nixilei. "Thyme isn't the only dryad I've met,"

"So like... that's something you have to learn?" asked Green.

Thyme nodded, "Yes, and I suppose it's something I can tell you about as none of the contestants are dryads. You see, we become aware of the world slightly before creating our first bodies. It is argued amongst my people's scholars at what point a dryad truly becomes alive. Certainly, we are not sentient for many years, but plants are alive, none doubt that.

"So the question is always, 'how much respect need be given to those adolescents' and how much say do we try to give to the plant in question. We have spells to test for sentience in plants of course, and more spells for testing if a plant has potential for sentience... but I find the various dryad collectives to be a bit... militant in their collection of potential dryads.

"It is not unusual for any plant with a glimmer of sentience to be immediately moved to a safe haven and coddled massively until they achieve sentience... or as is often the case. Do not, and die for some reason. Sometimes it takes centuries... but it happens far too regularly,"

Nixilei noticed the subtext, "I'm guessing you were one of the dryads that simply sprouted in the wilds?"

Thyme made a 'so-so' gesture, "It has been proven that all dryads have a dryad ancestor in their history, and most dryads are formed when two other dryads couple... but not all dryads form that way, and not all plants formed in such a coupling even have the chance for sentience,

"Anyway. You are correct, I myself sprouted in the wild, and when the heritage test came through, it appears I was an overlooked seed of my parents. They supported me greatly once that came out, but they have an entire grove of children that never became a true dryad. I am of the opinion, that a dryad's tree knows what it needs. If it sprouted in a particular spot and there's not sign of major damage in the area, I think it is usually best to leave the seedling where it is. Watch over it of course, and help if it becomes sick... but

"Most of the elder dryads simply see moving the sapling as the best course of action. Yet it never seems to have a high success rate. They tout that it is still higher than in the wild... but my own notes contradict that. Perhaps I am biased, arguing for what I know, just as they are... but for a bit more work, I think we would give dryad saplings a better chance at sentience."

Green frowned, "Not to sound callous... but is it really a big deal? I know they're like... baby dryads... but everything I've heard says that nobody knows what causes a dryad to be born,"

Thyme nodded, "I don't take offence to that. Dryads themselves know a little bit more than the other races because we do like to obfuscate the idea... but the real issue is that even if we know a given tree has a chance at sentience... someone has to watch over it for at least a century. Sometimes longer. The oldest tree to ever become a dryad was just over a thousand years old...

"So it's very hard to manage things well. Say you have the time and patience to raise up fifty saplings. That's a century of full time care, for saplings that may never become anything more than large trees. When nothing is born... it's gut wrenching. That's why when dryads find plants with potential they protect them because we hope that this is the one, and usually we only find those trees when they're already putting out a good amount of mana, and are already a number of years old... but still it doesn't always work out,"

"I think I get it," said Green with a nod.

[Chapter 1128 1128 So Blue](#)

The ship ploughed through a large mess of petals, taller and wider than the ship itself. It was an explosion of colour that masked the transition back to real space. Thyme even got to work, twisting and bending that space to show a kaleidoscope of colours as space was bent to Thyme's will. Fix ships exploded from portals, flowers floating down in their wake. Nobody knew where to look, there was action happening on all sides and in front of them...

Was an explosion of fireworks, one of which was a large arrow that pointed downwards to a small island with a medium sized building on it. The fireworks were a bit hard to say during the daytime for Kat, but perhaps they had illusions on them to help everyone else. The building was sturdy and made from, well wood. Out the front was a series of three piers for the five boats to land at, and a small garden of roses lining the path to the building.

Thyme let the anchors fall, causing the boats to rapidly lose speed as they got closer and closer to the piers, slowing down perfectly so line up where they needed to be. The middle pier just had the one boat, while Kat's team's boat pulled up on the right side of the left pier, sharing it with at least one other team.

"How much practice did that take?" wonder Nixlei to the air as they were all directed to the gangplank with a copy of Thyme in the lead. Kat wasn't surprised when she first look over to the other ship, they also had a Thyme in the lead, looking the exact same strange mix of butler, maid and pirate. Then Kat saw the team that was being led down the ramp.

It was the Wild Ones! Nell, the bear beastkin Bonas, and Nabras Margund the two wolf siblings. Their emerald eyes, black hair and similar faces still betraying their similar heritage despite the differing animal appendages. Lily actually felt the desire to bat at the wolf siblings' tails or Nell's ears. Nell still carried her familiar gauntlets, but it looked like the wolf siblings had updated their armour. Where before they had redish, or blueish leather armour, they now had scale armour, possibly made from real scales, and a red and blue sash across their shoulders. Sharing in each other's colours.

Ellenell followed behind, still standing tall in flowing robes that looked like they hadn't changed a bit. Though his long blonde hair was no longer long, nor blonde. Now it looked to be dyed silver, and cut short to sit around the bottom of his chin. His five foot height was currently being offset by the gangplank, making him seem taller then he was, but a close inspection when his robes were shifted by his steps revealed he was now wearing boots with a thick sole to give him a touch of extra height.

Blue was last in line, looking around at the surroundings in amazement. The water of the ocean seemed to crash just a little higher in her presence, as if it was reaching for her. Blue's outfit had transitioned to a padded shirt and pants, with a small skirt over the top made of thick cotton like substance. It wasn't proper armour exactly... but it was closer then most mages would get, and likely the best she could manage from the materials gathered.

Kat's eyes lit up at seeing Blue happy and healthy. After working with her so closely in their 'escape' from the mansion, it had been tough fighting her head on in the next rounds. It had left a bit of a sour taste in her mouth, and also bringing up memories of Grace from the very first tournament. Thoughts of Skye and her team flittered in afterwards, but Kat dismissed those memories for now.

Kat waited until everyone was on the pier then she used her super speed to dash around and grab Blue in a big hug. Nell had reacted first, spinning to punch towards Kat, who was now at Rank 3 and beyond their speed by a considerable margin. Ellenell simply flinched, but the wolf siblings had looked to Thyme, and seeing Thyme keep walking as if nothing was wrong did the same.

Blue let out an "Eeeep" of surprise as Kat twirled the fey around in a hug. Nell watched this and lowered her gauntleted hands, returning to their march.

"Don't crush her spine Kat!" said Nell with a laugh as she continued walking. Kat kept pace with them using her wings so that she could hug Blue properly. *I didn't realise how much I missed Blue. We had a scary adventure together and she was got so injured during out escape... I didn't realise that had bugged me so much. It's extra weird because I've killed people now... and I care more that I didn't get to chat with Blue after she was a little injured. Man are my priorities fucked.*

"Hey Kat, I wasn't expecting such a warm welcome," said Blue with a giggle.

"Well... I wasn't exactly expecting to see you again, and I never properly thanked you last time. You got so hurt because of me," said Kat. ~~nOvEl~~nExt.cOm

"Bah, it's not your fault you have regeneration. I'm pretty sure without that you'd have taken just as much if not more damage then I would've. I know you're more powerful than me, so you probably had better hearing at the time as well. That creepy ass banshee thing would've done us both in if you didn't have it," said Blue as she leaned into the hug.

Lily, deciding she didn't want to be left out popped off Kat's shoulder and transformed, hugging Blue as well. "Nah, Kat is way too prone to getting herself injured. I'm glad you were around to help her,"

"Um... thanks but who are you? I thought you were just a familiar?" said Blue.

"I'm Kat's girlfriend," said Lily with a smile, "Though technically I am also a familiar, according to the rules,"

"Oh, congratulations!" said Blue with a smile, "Wait... you weren't originally like... a cat or something right? Because, while I do respect Kat, I don't respect bestiality, even if you give them sentience,"

Lily rapidly shook her head, "Nonono, I was in love with Kat long before the familiar thing, and I couldn't transform into one either,"

"Hey you three!" shouted Nixilei, "We've got other people to meet,"

Kat let go of Blue and gave a short bow, "Sorry, I guess I got carried away, and Nixilei is correct, we do have a contest... but tell me, was it hard to make it back in?"

Blue nodded, "That's fine, I can understand getting carried away. As for making it back in..." Blue started walking on her own again, skipping a touch to catch up to everyone else. Sure Kat had been keeping up, but Kat had stopped to let Blue down. "Right so... Thyme ended up making the contest this big free-for-all mountain climb. There were ten starting positions, twenty routes, and your team had to start at different ones.

"You didn't have to follow the routes, but Thyme assured us that stepping off of them would make things more difficult for that contestant, but that sneaky bastard didn't explain why that was at the time,"

"I will have you know, that despite growing up in the wilderness my parents were happily married thank you very much," said both of the Thymes.

Blue rolled her eyes, "Right anyway. Teams were split, and we had to decide were we wanted to start. We were given a map, and kept away from the other teams so we couldn't like... team up with a full

other team. Because there were five spots being given away. So like, obviously we all wanted one, but it wouldn't have been a big ask to share two spots of the five, or even three.

"Anyway, with that prevented we needed to work out which routes we wanted. Thyme made it so that all the routes did cross over eventually... at least, according to the maps, but we didn't think it would be so easy. Most of the routes even had paths that took you through the damned mountain. Oh, and it wasn't first to the top, it was first to get all five members to the top,"

"Ah, that does sound like a very Thyme thing to do," said Lily. "Encouraging people to work together... without actually allowing whole teams to work together. I imagine you guys all chose to work together with someone in some way?"

Blue nodded, "Yeah we did. Oh, and we all agreed not to step off the path. We didn't know why at the time, but of course, Thyme is well known for being tricky, but meaning what they say. Good thing we did as well, because it turns out Thyme managed to enchant the entire fucking mountain. Every step you took that was off the path? It increased the gravity by one percent, well no it was actually every metre you travelled off it... which isn't much... but it's every single metre and it adds up fast."

[Chapter 1129 1129 Almost A Mirror](#)

The rest of Blue's story would have to wait for later, for now, it was time to scope out the other competition. Kat looked over to the team that took the middle pier all by themselves and was a bit surprised at what she saw. They were close to being a mirror of her own team.

Firstly the humans, both were women in contrast to Kat's team of two female fae. Despite that, they still mirrored Kat's counterparts well. Without knowing their names, Kat could only label them as Fake Gareth and Fake Kress, or GarethF and KressF. In truth, their names were March and Willow.

March was still built like a tank, in fact, March was actually taller than the real Gareth. With muscles like tree trunks. March was monstrous for a human, towering over the rest of her team, and all of the other contestants with muscles unmatched even by Nell a bear beastkin. The only thing that wasn't large were her breasts. Though even that was admittedly in contention, as her thick plate armour covered them completely. Still, there didn't seem to be any additional room for them, matching Gareth's in style.

Willow took the opposite approaching, shorter, scrappier, and with two long daggers that were more like short swords in her hands. If halflings were a thing in this world, Kat would have some suspicions about Willow's heritage. Perhaps she was at least part dwarven, but her rail thin build made that unlikely. Willow seemed more like someone that would be knocked over by a strong wind than someone that could stand against earthquakes.

Next there were the two fae, where the mirroring was disrupted somewhat. Instead of two men as a true mirror, it was a man and a woman, though based on their appearances, Kat was guessing that the Green stand in was the woman, while Nixilei got a man to represent her counterpart. This guess was fuelled by the man's glasses, and the bow on the woman's back. Kat labelled them GreenF and NixileiF but might have guessed their real names based on fae naming convention.

Chartreuse, the male fae had green hair a noticeably different shade to Green's. It was in fact, Chartreuse, but Kat wasn't interested enough in colours or art to recognise that fact. He had a large heavy book that was reinforced with deadly looking metal corners. Kat's eyes were good enough to see

that the metal edging actually stuck out a bit and had been sharpened to a fine point. It wasn't just a fancy book Chartreuse carried around, but also a real, if unconventional weapon.

He wore a light blue robe with green dots with fading around the edges that blended them into the blue where they appeared. His glasses were thinly framed but glowing slightly, hinting that they were certainly enchanted, and might simply be an additional gadget rather than a medical aid. His boots were notable as well, for their metal tips on the end. It was clear, that even if he was a healer and needed to keep light on the metal, he was making use of as much as he could get away with.

Next up was their archer. Though Kat might never guess the archer's name based on hair colour. They were called Burgandy but they had orange hair. Bright orange hair resembling closely the citrus the colour was named for. They had thin leathers on that covered their chest and legs but left their arms free. Kat questioned that choice, especially considering they had a bow. Said bow was made of a reddish wood with streaks of black. There were cracks in the wood that showed glowing red masses of energy that drew the eye.

Their final member, and one that made Kat somewhat concerned, even as Lily transformed back and started to rub her face against Kat's own... was a demon. He was almost certainly a Succubus, but that was more a guess due to his mostly human appearance. Kat would later learn that he liked to be called Stan, but never his real name. Which happened to be Sanamoth the Destroyer. Yes, his parents added 'the Destroyer' to his birth certificate. Also yes, they were very drunk at the time but were too prideful to change it later.

He a swimmer's body with notable, but not overly prominent muscles. He had his chest completely exposed, not bothering at all with a shirt, instead he had a necklace with a speckled green stone set into a goldish metal that shined with a distinctly red light when hit by the sun. His skin looked tan at first glance but was actually closer to worked copper under more thorough examination. His golden hair was longer than Kat's, flowing all the way down to the small of his back with just a slight curl to it.

The horns on Stan's head were set pointing forward once they left his head, with only the one curve at their base. They extended a touch passed his forehead and meant that anyone looking to headbutt him, except maybe Kat, were going to need to watch their eyes when making the attempt. His tail was much shorter than Kat's, but it was covered in interlocking bony plates that gave it a very unique appearance. He had no wings that Kat could see, and might be a major disadvantage in the contests.

His pants were simple jeans, making Kat wonder if he'd ever been to Earth. He hadn't of course, and the material wasn't actually denim, but it was close enough that the difference would be semantic were the materials properly compared. The main difference was their slightly green colouring instead of blue. It was not a dye, the process for making them simply resulting in that colour coming naturally.

All five walked with confidence in their bearing. It was like all five had total confidence in their ability to win the entire tournament... or they had great acting classes at some point along the line. *Huh. Looks like I'm not the only demon around this time. I wonder what Rank he is? 1? 2? 3? 4? I doubt it would be five. I had expected to get some sort of a sign. Like... I was expecting to feel his demonic energy or... something. I just feel like I should know how strong he is?*

[It's possible that you do have that ability but he's too far away, or suppressing his demonic energy... or he might just be weak. If you have exponentially more demonic energy you might push his away just by virtue of being that much stronger. There's no way to know. Unless demons does?]

D.E.M.O.N.S will not assist User when confronting another User in conflicting Contracts. All information on potential enemy User has been completely restricted. Most other questions have been restricted.

Gonna be honest... not what I was expecting as an answer.

[It's what I expected though. The only way for D.E.M.O.N.S to be fair is to either share everything or share nothing, and I imagine that people would complain a lot more if D.E.M.O.N.S was handing out info on everyone. It's a shame we don't know how easy it is to sense demonic energy, but I guess it's like a pop quiz. If you didn't study it's your fault.]

Yeah well I don't exactly like the feeling that I forgot to study for a test. Especially a test I didn't know I was going to have! Urgh. I wonder if he is a response to my own success or if somebody else just had the idea completely independently. Both are possible, and I don't know what is more likely... it is a bit freaky how closely they mirror us though.

[Eh... A demon, two humans, and two fae but that's basically it. The genders aren't split, it's still two men, two women... though now that I'm thinking that out loud perhaps they are somewhat similar? Still, it was bound to happen, that we'd see similar teams. Though... perhaps not the demon part. I wonder how many demons are in the whole tournament?]

Not many. Remember demon summoning was only recently allowed, so even if people were doing it before this, they wouldn't want to advertise the fact. Though... huh, considering demon summoning used to be illegal, Kress is the only person that had issues with demons.

[Huh... maybe it was just the human lands that changed it?]

Maybe...

[Well, other than that, I think most of the teams were groups before the tournament was announced. They've all been training for a while, and adding some random to that could screw with the dynamic. Our team members were lucky you're so nice. If you only gave the minimal effort then we might never have gotten this far. Not against a team that has coordination.]

Not totally sure I buy that. Even if I just had to try during combat I think I'd still manage to snag a few wins... but I suppose if the demon was trying to be really difficult.

[Chapter 1130 1130 Two Fae And Three Elves Walk Into A Bar. The Bar Loses.](#)

Kat shook her head to clear her mind. No sense dwelling on questions that couldn't be answered just yet. Instead, it would be better to focus on the other new arrivals. It was a little hard to pick out which team was which from this distance, but Kat was 90% sure she'd nailed it down.

The first team was made up of a mix of elves and fae, with two more fae attending and three elves. The leading elf looked so much like the picture of an elven princess, especially at first glance. She had long golden locks with flowers woven into her hair, and a full crown of them sitting atop her head. Which is appropriate, as Kat would later learn her name was Marigold.

Marigold wore a long, flowing dress with more flowers sewn into the garment, a woman after Kat's heart. Except. If one was to look closely, it seemed like the flowers on Marigold's dress were real and potentially still alive. Kat wasn't sure what to make of that part, so she continued to examine Marigold's attire. Marigold wore no shoes, which seemed a bit weird, but not at odds with her 'elven princess' vibe. Perhaps Kat should ask if she was actually royalty? Then again...

The one thing at odd with the peaceful expression on her face, and the flowers everywhere was the massive axe that hung across her back. It was nearly as tall as she was, the leather was stained dark with splotches of what Kat really hoped wasn't blood. The axe head was a brutal thing, not one clean edge but a series of sharp slightly offset teeth designed to rip into the opponent and make them bleed with a proper hook at the base of the handle for catching on things and keeping them there.

And she was happily skipping along at the front of her group. As Kat watched, flowers seemed to bloom on the dead wood that made up the pier, though they died just as quickly. It seemed that her long dress was hiding that particular skill for the most part... but Kat didn't know what to make of Marigold. Or her name, so internally she was 'Axe princess'.

The next elf was just as confusing, though for a different reason. Their name was Vanya which didn't clear things up at all, and Kat couldn't figure out if they were a man or a woman. They had long flowing hair, a thin frame, and a soft face. They even had a leather corset that seemed to be pushing their chest forward... which might make Vanya's breast look better if they had any. Vanya's breasts weren't small. They didn't exist. Vanya had trained, well, and there was a faint outline of muscles but calling them breasts? No way.

Which would be fine, except they had a leather skirt that covered down to the knees and tall boots that left only a small amount of skin showing. What was worse, when Kat heard them laughing later on, they had a deep, bass voice even if they avoided talking most of the time that clashed with Vanya's mostly feminine mannerisms. Kat decided to give them the title of 'they' like Thyme, even if it was possible they identified with one gender or another, it was just too hard to tell, and awkward to ask about.

At least Vanya's weapon was easy to identify. A nice elven longbow without a quiver and a short dagger strapped to Vanya's leg. The quiver was likely substituted by Vanya's magic or an enchantment on the bow itself.

The third elf was the first elf Kat had seen that wasn't simply 'beautiful' or 'handsome' but that was largely due to the burn scar covering their entire face, as well as their neck. Kat wasn't sure how far it extended because they were covered with a cloak from head to toe. They did seem to have hair, so it implied that the top of the head wasn't burnt off. Their weapon of choice seemed to be two sets of knuckledusters. One for less lethal, and one for more. One of the knuckledusters had relatively large spikes on the end, so Kat could guess which option that was.

Their name was Burnice, and Kat really hoped it was just how the translation shook out and much less offensive in their native tongue. Otherwise... it would be an unfortunate coincidence. *I wonder why they haven't got that healed? I mean... it's obviously an old wound but considering high level healing can regrow limbs... healing that should be possible right?*

Lily didn't add a comment of her own, not sure of the answer herself so Kat turned to the next person in the line. They had black hair, which was surprisingly normal for fae. Their name, Midnight, wasn't much

of a surprise either. Midnight was the most clearly male of the team but only because he had an impressive beard that hung down to his neckline. It was well kept, and there was a single flower right in the centre of it. He had a rather stern look on his face... but his face overall was rounded and looked a bit soft. So it was hard to take seriously.

Instead of a staff, he had a small wand. Kat wondered why that was, and if it had any significance, seeing as many magic casters didn't use focuses, and the staffs were common amongst spellcasters more for their lack of metal than as a casting focus. So Kat was curious over the difference.

The final member of their group was the only one that seemed to have real armour. Sure Vanya had leathers protecter them, but that seemed to be more for style than for substance. They had purple hair, and were named Mauve, though their hair was a bit of a darker purple than was appropriate for the name to match. Mauve had heavily padded leather armour that gave a good amount of protection without limiting her movement too much. Her purple hair was pulled back in a bun, with pink flowers making up the band that held it in place.

Mauve also used an axe as her main weapon, but where Marigold's was a massive, overbearing and ominous thing, Mauve's was a small single hand axe that allowed for her to use a buckler in her off-hand. The buckler seemed to be strapped to her arm, and the axe was currently safe in her sheath, leaving both hands free.

I don't know how to feel about Marigold's look. She seems so sweet and attuned with nature at first glance and then you notice the giant fucking axe that looks like it's designed to cause as much pain as possible while taking down the target. I mean... surely that's not an efficient use of metal. It would almost be better if they just made the edge serrated! Plus... I'm a bit scared to confirm the substance that I really hope isn't blood that seeped into the leather on the handle.

[Yeah... I wonder if this is real life gap moe? Then again, I don't find this sight cute at all, and it's not like this is a 'little girl with big sword' moment because sure, the axe might be a bit oversized, but elf in question isn't exactly short.]

What is gap moe?

[Look... I'm sorry but it's just sort of something you know when you see? Moe is like... a cute thing but even that isn't entirely correct. It's a Japanese thing that doesn't translate all that well into English. Look, don't worry too much, it isn't important.]

Right... well... what about the one with all the burns? Why wasn't something like that healed?

[Nixilei might know? My best guess is that it was left too long and it would cost a lot to heal now? My second guess would be that because you'd need to actually peel off the skin and then heal fresh skin afterwards fixing it might be considered too dangerous? Like perhaps for some reason you have to do it all at once? You'd need to skin at all of her face, and perhaps more of her body... and god isn't that a thing to think about.]

Well, I suppose my next question is can you tell if that one walking behind the Axe Princess over there is a girl or not?

[Maybe they're neither? They could very well be intersex, or genderfluid.]

And I'm not discounting that Lily but it would be super awkward to just... walk up to them and ask, and there choice of clothing isn't making it easier. I mean... why even wear a corset like that if you don't have breasts to make more prominent? There's just massive holes in the top of the outfit now!

[Hey, some people wear insanity well. Just look at Thyme.]

They are no Thyme.

[True, but it doesn't look that bad. I kinda like it... except for the corset. That does feel a bit out of place, but only a bit.]

*Agree to disagree.