

## DEMONS 121

### Chapter 121: Freaking out Just a Little

As Kat watched the dagger's trembling stop, the vines on it started to unwind. Once they had uncoiled from the dagger, they launched themselves into the ground effortlessly cracking the ice. A moment later vines surged up from the ground forming a compact dome around where the dagger had just been

"You could have warned me" said Grace

"Well, I didn't exactly know what it would do. But hey look we have shelter now" said Kat leading the grumbling elf to the opening in the front.

Inside, it was even more apparent the dome was made of vines. The dagger sat in the centre, surrounded by the thickest of the lot that arched up and served as a central pole for the dome to sit on. The walls were made of triple layered vines to protect from the elements somewhat but the clear lack of a door allowed the cold to drift in.

"So" said Kat taking the left side of the tent for herself. It would be a little cramped with two but not overly so. "Care to explain why your freaking out so much"

Grace quickly looked her eyes on Kat "What do you mean? I'm fine"

Kat let out a long breath "Grace, I'm using my aura to try and calm you down, but you still seem to be freaking out. Something is very wrong"

"Can we... can we not talk about it" asked Grace hesitantly

"Look Grace, I'm not going to force you to do anything, but now that we've made the contract, we are somewhat stuck together because we can't assist each other if we get separated" said Kat

"Ha the damned contract" said Grace with heavy eyes "If I'm honest, I was just doing that to get your tail off of me. I didn't think... ha, I guess that's right I didn't think"

Kat motioned for Grace to continue and she did after a few seconds to gather herself "For some reason I had it in my head that you had to summon a demon to make a contract with them. I know you guys can't lie, so I'd thought just getting you to accept would protect me for a bit because you couldn't lie about attacking me

"Clearly I was wrong... instead now I'm bound to some crazy demon and we have to win together or else... what? My soul burns forever in hell or something?"

"Well Grace" said Kat as gently as possible "I'm pretty sure you aren't doomed to hell, but in regards to the contract, yes, it is fairly binding. But you were careful with the wording though, we just have to help each other. Surely it isn't so bad"

"I just... the chains Kat... I can still feel them. Binding me, constricting me" said Grace hugging herself.

"Um, I think that's a you problem" said Kat confused

Grace looked up at Kat and tilted her head in similar confusion "What do you mean? Aren't I bound by them"

"Well, I mean, yeah they enforce the contract, but they aren't physically there. You shouldn't be able to feel them at all Grace. You didn't see but the chains affect me as well. I'm just as bound by this as you are" said Kat

Grace looked at Kat with wide eyes. "You mean... that's normal? You have to see that every time you make a contract?"

Kat just stared at Grace "Yes. Yes I do Grace... I'm not sure why your surprised. Besides, they aren't so bad, just um calm down a bit?"

Grace bit her lip and kept her eyes on Kat "I'm pretty sure the only thing preventing me from screaming is that aura of yours. I'm freaking out here"

"You know, I always thought you were the calm collected on of your lot" said Kat

"Well... I mean maybe I am but I feel like things have really escalated compared to the normal stakes. Sure, life and death situations come up often, but why wouldn't I be scared that I just accidentally sold my soul to a demon" said Grace

\*System I don't steal people souls, right?\*

Kat waited for system confirmation but saw nothing. *NovelNext.com*

\*Hey System? No soul stealing right?\*

...

System?

User Kat is correct. Technically speaking taking what is offered isn't theft.

\*System... are you telling me I really own her soul now?\*

Of course not. User Kat is incapable of making a bargain for a soul.

\*Then why are you being so weird about this?\*

Once again Kat received no response.

\*Ok system. Let me be quite clear. Does Grace still fully own her soul?\*

No. Entity Grace's soul belongs to another entity.

\*Oh for crying out loud.\* Though Kat well aware she was speaking in her thoughts. \*Am I responsible for that?\*

User Kat is not. Entity Grace's soul was owned before you came into contact with Entity Grace.

\*Great. Thank you. Was that so hard?\*

Yes.

"Grace, you don't have to worry about me stealing your soul. Not only do I have no idea what I'd do with an extra soul, I'm not sure I could take it even if I wanted" said Kat.

That seemed to calm Grace down a bit "Ooh? So I still own my soul then?"

\*Shit... What the hell do I say to that?\*

"Um, the ownership of your soul hasn't been effected by your meeting with me" said Kat

"Why did you say that so weirdly" said Grace

"Well... I mean, I may or may not have it on good authority, that you likely don't own your soul something else, does but I mean, what's the worry right" said Kat

"Your messing with me right?" asked Grace trying to keep the worry out of her voice.

"Quick Timmy" said Kat from the corner of her mouth behind her hand "Tell her that she owns her soul"

Timmy just gave Kat an exasperated look and gesture to its mouth.

"Well I can't tell her, can I?" whispered Kat

"I can hear you" said Grace furrowing her brows.

"Look, Grace" said Kat "I have no idea why, but apparently something does in fact own your soul. It isn't me, but it is a thing"

"Huh" said Grace as she let herself fall flat against the side of the tent. "So... is that like normal?"

Kat shook her head "I have no idea Grace. Not a clue"

And with that the conversation died. Kat wasn't sure how she'd gone from trying to convince Grace that everything was fine and not to be scared, to telling her that some unknown entity owned her soul.

\*Well, on the bright side she's not shaking anymore. And I mean, she looks good for someone who doesn't own their own soul... right? I mean, perhaps looking identical to four other people isn't the best... and being stuck in a tent while it's hailing outside with a demon you seem terrified of is still an issue... but it's fine right?\*

"So um, Grace" said Kat "You want to talk about the plan for tomorrow?"

"Not really" mumbled Grace

"Um how about we talk about how you found me then?" asked Kat

Grace just gave Kat a look that seemed to ask if she was serious with that question. "What? Why are you looking at me like I'm a fool?"

"So... you aren't aware of how eye-catching the exploding purple fire... or the giant gout of purple fire... or the massive forest covered in purple fire might be to an outside observer in the middle of the night where it's pitch black" said Grace.

"Ah, I have night vision, so I don't really notice" said Kat

Grace groaned upon hearing that "Lynn is right your powers are dumb"

"Look, yeah, that's fair" said Kat "How are you managing to see then?"

"Well, I was exaggerating when I said it was pitch black. A little bit of mana and the light of the moon and it's more than enough to get by" said Grace.

"Huh... well um, what about the forest? How did you manage not to get lost with the enchantment on it" said Kat

Grace burst into laughing. A deep full laugh as she struggled to regain control of her body. After finally calming down the deep shake that wracked her frame Grace looked back up at Kat and lost it once again. Slapping the ground and laughing away Grace had tears in her eyes as she struggled to breath.

"Ooh" said Grace "Ooh I needed that. Thanks"

Grace looked at Kat through tear filled eyes and saw only confusion. "Ah... wait you were serious?"

Kat nodded and Grace continued "We Elves have an innate ability called the Forests Path. Makes it basically impossible to get lost if there are living trees nearby. So, while I did notice the enchantment it was very easy to ignore it and just trust my less useful sense"

"Huh, that's pretty cool. And I'm glad you calmed down. Perhaps you should get some rest. We both need it for now" said Kat

"Yeah... I guess your right" said Grace pulling her cloak tight around her frame as she placed her head in her arms.

Seeing Grace so easily accept the need for sleep Kat decided to follow suite. Leaning back against the dome wall Kat let her wings stretch out a little more, careful not to touch Grace and let herself drift off to sleep.

## **Chapter 122: Wake me up Inside**

Kat heard a rustling and instantly opened her eyes instinctively pushing her demonic energy into her eyes to see whatever it is was making the noise. The intention was to be ready for whatever was causing problems and be able to protect herself if necessary.

Of course, intentions regularly fail to come to pass. Instead Grace, the source of the noise, is now face to face with a demon whose instantly taken a fighting pose and has burning purple eyes trained in her direction.

"Eep" Grace let out a short squeal of fright as Kat relaxed herself and leant against the wall again.

"Sorry Grace, just heard a noise and wanted to be ready" said Kat

Grace nodded at this, but Kat could see the elf was uneasy. Dark bags hang under here eyes, perfectly visible even in the low light. "It's fine Kat, I shouldn't be bothering you" said Grace

Kat reached out to try and comfort the scared form but when Grace recoiled Kat pulled her hand back. "Hey, look Grace, I'm really not that scary. I'm really not sure what's got you so wound up. Would you like me to use my calming aura some more?"

Grace bit the edge of her lip and looked uncomfortable at the thought. "Um, look Kat, um, I'd rather you didn't do anything unnecessary"

Kat sighed. \*How do I comfort a person who's terrified of me? The calming aura has been a huge help, and hugs as well, but Grace doesn't want me to use it, and she's scared of my touching her...\*

"Look, Grace, I'm not sure it is unnecessary. You're clearly quite wound up about this and I need you if not at your pick at least function to be of any help as we travel to the centre. I'm really not that scary. See the Timmy's agree" said Kat motioning to the two small Thyme's in the corner out the tent.

When Kat mentioned their name they both saluted with a smile, though one of them looked slightly angry with Grace.

Grace sighed "Look, um, just, give me a little time to get everything together?? said Grace

"Grace, you look like you've used the time you should have been sleeping for worrying about stupid stuff. I don't want to sound overbearing, but you can't change what's already happened" said Kat

"Easy for you to say. You didn't just find out you don't own your soul. Plus, I was always planning to just run. I knew I couldn't fight you, but instead I'm stuck with you" said Grace

"Well, now you don't have to fight me" said Kat trying to be encouraging "We can work together, and it won't be so bad. If I'm really as strong as you think I am, that means we can beat whoever we come across. Though perhaps we should consider adding a few more people"

"No" said Grace on reflex "I mean... no more contracts... please"

"Grace" said Kat waiting for the elf to meet her eyes. "I am going to project my aura at you. Alright?"  
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"No wait" said Grace but Kat ignored her. \*I'm not going to sit her and listen to you moping for hours Grace. Not just because I have to try and win, but also because this is honestly kind of sad. Grace was really cool in the previous rounds, and it kinda hurts to see her so scared and to know that I'm the cause.\*

Kat pushed her aura over Grace, careful to manage the amount so as not to completely knock Grace out despite the intention. Kat felt her aura smash into Grace and saw her face instantly softening, and the fear bleeding out.

"Now, Grace, do I need to turn it up further, or are you ok now" said Kat

"I... I don't know. I can feel my fear trying to break back into my mind, and I'm trying to ignore it but it's not working... but every time I.... I... think about asking you to increase it the fear only gets worse" said Grace.

\*Ok, I guess I'll slowly ramp it up while she's distracted then.\* "I'll leave it at that level for now then. So Grace, now that you are a bit more focused what's our plan? Head straight for the desert together? Split up a little? Or perhaps you want me to carry you while you get some more sleep?"

"Wait desert?" asked Grace

"Ah right, you can't fly of course. So, the next stage after this icy forest is a desert, but, if we find something strange, we might be able to get more useful items like my tent here. I couldn't really see

much of the desert before, and it's too windy for me to comfortably fly over the ice so I didn't get a good look." Said Kat

"Can you go back to the items?" asked Grace

"Yeah, well, I found that dagger in a tree. Not sure if you noticed but that first forest contained only identical trees, except for the one I found the dagger in. Timmy can you confirm" said Kat, and Timmy nodded

"So, if we could find something out of place in the snow, we might be able to find something as suitably useful" said Kat

"Huh" Grace got a thoughtful expression. "I feel like, I might have seen something actually. While I was following your lightshow, I saw a structure off in the distance, maybe? I really wasn't paying attention and it was pretty far away. And I mean, I could be completely, wrong, it was night, and I wasn't really looking and, and"

"Grace" Kat shouted and the panicking elf turned in her direction "Calm, Grace, calm" as Kat said this she carefully applied just a little extra aura on Grace "Deep breaths, it's fine Grace. We aren't in a rush I don't think. Just breath"

"Sorry I just" started Grace but Kat held up a hand "Don't apologise to me, think of yourself. That sort of stress will damage your pretty face in the future"

Grace grimaced at that and muttered "Anything to differentiate me from the others"

Kat just shook her head. "Right enough moping"

Kat reached out for the dagger in the centre and easily pulled it free of the ground. As the dagger lost contact with the earth the vines surrounding them withered. They simply vanished into dust as if eaten from the inside scattering on the wind. The dagger itself looked much worse for wear. The once vibrant floral motifs and luscious green vines were now dulled to the same steel as the rest of the dagger.

This of course was accompanied by a nasty blast of cold wind. Grace shivered unprepared for the sudden onslaught of hail and Kat while still feeling the effects, try to ignore it the best she could knowing it wasn't real, only a cleverly crafted spell to make you feel cold.

Grace looked at Kat with a spark of anger at the sudden scenery change, but this only brought Kat a sense of calm joy. \*At least she isn't only scared of me now, she can be angry with me as well.\*

"What the heck are you grinning about demon" said Grace "It's freezing, and you could have at least warned me before"

Kat smiled wider "You are actually criticising me for my mistake instead of apologising. I'd say that's a good step forward. As to telling you beforehand, well, I'm sure you would have just complained"

"I would have put up a wind shield thank you very much" said Grace as a sigil on her pants lit up

"Well... don't worry about it" said Kat with a grin "Though, something we might want to worry about is that this dagger looks pretty dull now"

Kat showed the dagger to Green who carefully grabbed and inspected it with keen eyes "This isn't even an issue, we just need to charge it a bit and it'll be good as new" said Grace

"With what?" asked Kat

"Ah? Mana" said Grace as if she was looking at an idiot

"Grace, I have no mana. You" said Kat pointing at Grace "Will have to charge it"

"Wait, but don't you have your fire stuff?" said Grace "And wait you're the teams wizard, what do you mean you have no mana"

"I just don't Grace, we demons use different stuff" said Kat shrugging as she picked up her Timmy... or at least the one that reached out it's hands to be carried

Grace looked back down at the dagger then up at Kat. "I don't think I have the mana to recharge something as powerful as this, and even if I do, I certainly don't while keeping this shield up"

Kat shrugged "It's not so bad, we can just sleep under the stars if this adventure even takes that long."

Grace bit her lip "I dunno Kat, I feel like that could be a bit risky"

Kat shrugged again "In what way? If we can get out of the cold the weather should be manageable with my ice powers. And even if it isn't you were heading to the centre anyway"

"Spouse" mumbled Grace who set off towards the strange object.

### **Chapter 123: The Outside of the Vault**

Kat and Grace headed off, with Grace leading the way, followed by her Timmy that would follow in her wake, and then by Kat who was just admiring the scenery.

After five minutes of trudging Kat decided to speak up "So, not that I mind the pace, but isn't this a bit slow? I mean how did you keep up with me if this is the pace you were traveling at before"

Kat couldn't see it but she was sure Grace was biting her lip as she responded "Well, I was able to use my mana for speed before. Now I have to use it for protection against the weather. I used a bit more to head in your direction, but I don't really want to waste it now"

"Hmmm" said Kat "So is whatever your looking for just in this direction?"

"Ah, yeah roughly?" said Grace *NovelNExt.cOm*

"Nice" said Kat with a smile. Increasing her pace she scooped up the second Timmy and placed it on her head with her own. Then ran into Grace and scooped her up in a princess carry.

"Eep" Grace let out a squeal as she was picked up and felt the tips of her ears turning red "What are you doing"

"Well" said Kat as she pushed her flame into her feet "You see, I'm able to make better time by freezing the ground I walk on. Like so"

Kat quickly picked up the pace rapidly entering a sprint. She still sunk slightly as she ran, but it was nowhere close to the piles of snow Grace was wading through.

"Put me down Kat" said Grace "This is unnecessary"

"Yeah perhaps" said Kat "But I'm pretty strong, and this uses about as much energy as not carrying you, and it's much faster"

Grace looked like she dearly wanted to argue with this point, but seeing the trees fly past and snow stay firm under Kat's strides decided to just try and enjoy the ride.

Grace may have gotten a little to relaxed though, because after a few more minutes of Kat's soft footfalls over the compact snow Grace fell asleep.

\*Naw, she actually looks calm for once. No more nervous shivering or anger attempting to masquerade the fear. Guess I shouldn't wake her then\*

Kat continued forward hoping that she was going at least roughly in the right direction. The wind and hail buffeted her somewhat but with the morning sun it had greatly lessened and so Kat could even dodge most of them that came her way if she was a little bit careful with her footing.

As Kat ran, she admired the landscape. In the soft moonlight it had already looked stunning but the morning sun took it to another level. The trees for one, weren't frozen trees like previously thought but trees made entirely of ice. With the sun on them it shined through the branches and lit them up like city lights.

The snow on the ground glistened with the sun's rays and looked like a collection of diamonds someone had scattered nearby. The wind didn't howl, so much as it was a comforting companion that carried upon it slowly falling gems.

Kat took a deep breath and smelt the crisp morning air. The faint smell of water alongside the hint of something else Kat couldn't identify. Pushing some demonic energy into her nose to try and identify something, Kat was surprised to find that nothing happened.

Pushing even more energy yielded the same result. Confused, Kat pushed some to her ears and could instantly hear the sharp crunch of the snow as she ran. The dripping of the melting snow under the sun, the soothing rhythm of the wind.

\*Ok, so clearly it isn't my energy that's going off. I guess smell is the one thing I can't enhance... And touch maybe? I'm not sure how I'd test that one. Aw well it isn't really a big deal, I mean, eyes and ears are probably the best two. Oh and of course the speed and agility from my limbs... and the flight... Ok I have a lot of cool powers, I don't mind not having a few more.\*

As Kat was reminiscing over her powers, she spotted what Grace had meant... or at least she was pretty sure. Without enhancing her eyes, all Kat could really see was the corner of something... but considering the sharp edges and the fact that whatever it was, while white, didn't have any snow on it caused Kat to take notice.

Kat slowed her run to a like jog, careful not to change pace to abruptly and wake Grace, before angling herself to head straight for the strange object. As Kat got closer, she could make out its squarish shape



and sharp edges. Something seemed to be carved on it but without using her enhanced sight, she couldn't make out the details.

Slowing further Kat took in the sight before her. The squarish shape she had seen appeared to be more akin to a vault than a box, with sharp edges and a massive wheel on the front. The object itself seemed set into the cliff but had more than enough sticking out to show that something was abnormal.

The vault wheel however was the strangest part. It was made up of several interlocking circles increasing in size as they went out. Each disk had a few lines on it that Kat could pretty easily see needed to be lined up in some way

Looking over the lines and how they connect, Kat could already start to make out the answer to the puzzle. It wasn't designed to be that hard, and Kat was sure with a little trial and error she could solve it in no time.

The trial part was the issue though. Kat glanced down at the woman that was taking up her hands. Glancing around there really wasn't a good place to just put Grace down. The container itself was rather tall and there wasn't a great way to place Grace on top of it. Then the surroundings were obviously covered in snow, and while the trees might have been an option last night, seeing them in the morning sun made it clear they were unsuitable for human, er, elves to rest on.

**\*\*This looks like a job for the intrepid Timmy!\*** "Hey, Timmy's can you perhaps turn the wheel for us. I don't need you to solve the puzzle just turn it a bit. I don't want to wake up Grace, so my hands are tied, but you guys can help right?"

Kat felt one of her passengers jump from her head and onto the nearby wheel. The Timmy then proceeded to try and fail to move the wheel at all and then shrug back at Kat.

"Ok, I see your point" said Kat placing her tail, spade end flat to pick up the Timmy and return it to its viewing platform atop her head.

As Kat did this though, another solution readily presented itself. How could I ever forget my trusty tail. Once Timmy was safe and sound on her head again. Kat moved a bit closer. Once in position Kat tried to jam her tail into the gap.

As she did this though, the tip of her tail easily bent, and rather than simply sitting neatly in the line it flattened itself against the wheel instead. **\*Right, ok... not quite what was planned. Then again, I guess my tail is really quite bendy, so this is to be expected.\***

Taking a different approach Kat tried to flatten out her tail against the wheel and try to move it with friction. To her surprised it did, rather smoothly in fact. Despite her tail sliding around, if Kat applied a bit of extra pressure the wheel spun rather freely.

Kat quickly got to work using her tail to correctly line up the individual spokes. There were three sections to the wheel. Each wheel had at least four exits that she needed to line up but the trick once noticed, was that there only needed to be on complete line, for the unmovable centre plate only have one entrance and one exit it on it.

In the end Kat made short work of the puzzle, and as she finished lining everything up heard a loud click... and then nothing. Kat looked around for what it was and managed to notice that the disks within the wheel had slid in place.

Taking her tail and hooking it around one of the large spokes around the edge Kat gave it a heavy pull. The wheel itself spun freely and rapidly around and as it did so the door began to creak. Slowly the seemingly thick door inched forward, leaking what looked like steam as it did so.

Kat stepped well out of whatever range the door might have had and kept a close eye on it as the contents were slowly revealed to her.

## **Chapter 124: The Inside of the Vault**

Behind the clouds of steam and dust hissing from the vault the sight before Kat began to make her question just how highly she had thought of the dagger. Inside the entire thing was filled wall to wall with weapons that just seemed to continue ever deeper into the structure.

The first few rows were made up of identical looking swords on the left and daggers on the right. Just standard steel and leather affairs. It wasn't the quality, but the sheer quantity that impressed Kat.

However as the vault extended further back the weapons became much more varied, not just in style but in type and shape. Whereas the start was almost entirely longswords and daggers, it quickly progressed to ornate longswords, great swords and claymores *NovelNext.com*

Then progressing further, more and more weapons got added in. Spears and halberds, cutlasses and shields, whips and dual blade pairs. Each more intricate than the last.

As Kat was admiring the weapons though, Timmy found a cassette in the corner and placed it into the wall and started it. "Hello? Good this one's on" Thyme was interpreted by a loud crash in the background. Just an endless sound of tumbling down like a landslide of some kind. "Well... I guess that's what I get for stacking them so high. Anyway, ignore me, I'm like 50 tapes deep in these recordings and it's getting to me a little. Um hold on a minute actually" Kat could hear the rustling of paper and the sound of, what she presumed was cassettes being shuffled around

"Ok, so this recording is the one for the big vault? Well ah, good job finding that one, it's one of the better treasures. So how it works, is I've filled this thing with pretty much every spare weapon I have, within the correct power level of course. Wouldn't want to accidentally give you that one knife that can cut a hole in space...

"Anyway, so the further back you go the stronger and more unique the weapons are, and I do heavily emphasise the unique aspect... At the front you can probably see a lot of swords. For some reason, everyone makes increased sharpness, durability and self-repair swords. And I mean, I do understand, it's a great weapon but come on. I have thousands of the things, I'm always tempted too just throw them out

"Anyway, I'm getting side-tracked again. So, you are allowed to take any one weapon from here. If you go all the way to the back, you will find the four best weapons. Well, most powerful... They each have an extra cassette if you want to learn more"

And with that the tape cut-out and Kat thought it was done, but Timmy took out a second one and replaced the first starting another recording. "Hello seems you have entered the vault with three people. That-" The tape cut out as Timmy banged on the wall twice and the tape popped out.

Flipping it around to the other side before putting it back in Timmy gave a sheepish smile to Kat as the second Timmy wacked them on the back of the head. "Hello, Hello, seems like you have entered the vault with two people. That means you have to fight to the death..."

"Sorry, I couldn't resist. How did you both react? Was it suitably fearful, looking each other in the face scared as to who will attack first? Wondering if this is the end of the teamwork and trust you've so carefully built up over the last, well probably few hours at least?"

Kat looked awkwardly at the still peacefully sleeping Grace in her arms before looking over to the Timmy's for an answer who just shrugged together as the tape continued

"Well, enough causing problems. You get one each, but you aren't both allowed to pick one of the back four. Anything else is fine... actually if you want to take some of these damned swords off of my hands go for it. Hell, if you both take a sword take like three extra each or something."

There was a pause and Kat heard a sigh from the tape "You know, I'm kinda annoyed I have to leave all these cassettes around, but the whole 'don't interfere at all with the final round' rule is pretty iron clad, so I had to record all these in advance. Do you know how much effort this has been? I have like five copies of myself all reading out lines.

"Anyway, ignore my minor rant I'm getting distracted. Go claim your prize and travel onwards to... Well I don't actually know where the vault is just yet so... onward?"

And with that the tape cut out. Kat looked towards the Timmy's to see if there were any more tapes, she needed to listen to. The Timmy's shook their heads.

\*Now the question is should I wake up Grace?\* Kat examined the sleeping elf's face. Already the bags had faded quite a lot, and she was breathing steadily. How important is a weapon though?

Kat looked around, at the near infinite choice of weapons of all varieties and sighed. \*I guess I should wake the elf.\*

Placing Grace down carefully in one of the gaps between the weapon racks Kat proceeded to poke her on the cheek trying to get her to wake up. The only thing this accomplished was a pair of amused Timmy's and not much else.

\*Hmm, what next? I don't want to just freeze her with my fire that's rude... oh I know\* Kat then proceeded to flick the ends of Grace's ears. They bounced up and down each time Kat pulled them a little before eventually settling back to their normal state.

\*I guess I could shout? But I don't want to scare her... What about holding her nose? Hmm, that might be worse.\* "Hey Timmy's, how would you recommend waking her up?" asked Kat

The first Timmy slapped the second in the face. After the second recovered from the shock they slapped the first back. This quickly devolved into a slapping fight, and then tumbled away in a pile of slapping and kicking legs.

\*Right...\* Kat gave a sidelong glance at the Timmy's who bounced past the door before realising the obvious solution. Stepping back outside a bit Kat grabbed a large handful of snow.

Careful not to drop any Kat walked over to Grace before looking at the Timmy's. "You guys want to do the honours?"

Their eyes both lit up, and they had smiles on their faces as they instantly abandoned their fight to line up in front of Kat like troops ready for war. Hands out to receive their 'ammo' Kat carefully distributed the snow between the two and kept a little themselves.

Once the Timmy's received their snow, they nodded to each other and split up, one on the left and one on the right. They took a big wind up and pitched the snow like a baseball straight into the small of Grace's neck on either side.

To the three's great surprise Grace only shivered before settling back down to sleep, completely ignoring her now snow-covered shoulders. Kat decided to go for a more direct approach and through her remaining snow right in the middle of Grace's face.

To still relatively minor effects "Rakhor, go away I want to sleep" mumbled Grace.

Kat sighed \*Extreme measures it is then.\* Kat went back outside and gathered as much snow as she could, making use of her tail to scoop up extra snow onto her hands once they were full. Now with a pile of snow blocking her face, Kat slowly and carefully made her way back to Grace.

"Stand back Timmy" said Kat as she dropped all the snow straight onto Grace's head.

Covering the elf from head to toe, in snow this finally got her attention. Grace's eyes shot open and she looked around widely before getting a confused look seeing all the snow around her. After another moment Grace slowly worked her eyes up to meet Kat's

"Um, oops?" said Grace

"It's fine... I needed to wake you up because I found the thing, but I didn't want to scare you... though I had to escalate it to this point" said Kat gesturing at the pile of snow

"Ah, um, sorry about that" said Grace

Kat waved a hand in dismissal "You clearly needed it, and I'm glad you were comfortable enough around me to fall asleep in my arms"

Grace proceeded to bury her head in snow as the tips of her ears went bright red and mumbled something into the ice.

"What was that" said Kat?

Grace popped up just long enough to say "I was tired ok" before returning her face to the snow.

"Grace it's fine, I would have let you sleep except we are surrounded by hundreds of weapons and we get one each, so I thought you'd really like to choose one" said Kat

Grace lifted her head once again and finally noticed all the swords hanging around "Oh... yeah I guess so"

## Chapter 125: The Four 'Best' Weapons

Kat offered Grace a hand, then pulled her to her feet. Grace promptly dusted off the excess snow and then looked suspiciously at the Timmy's who seemed to be snickering, though of course no sound came out.

"So, you missed the tape, but basically, we get one weapon each, and we can pick whichever one we want, but the four best are at the back. If we do pick one of the four though the other person can't grab it... does that make sense?" said Kat *nOVELnext.COM*

"Yeah I think so. Do you know what the big four are?" asked Grace

"Nope, we can go check them out together" said Kat.

Kat lead the way deeper into the weapons vault. Mostly ignoring the increasingly large variety of weapons. After a full minute of walking it became clear this was the right decision, as they'd already walked past hundreds if not thousands in that minute alone.

All in all it took Kat and Grace another 3 minutes to actually reach the back, and by now Kat was debating if the weapons lining the all could even be counted as such. Kat was pretty sure she saw a barstool on one of the weapon racks, opposite a double-bladed butchers cleaver.

Approaching the last four weapons, Kat examined them closely but didn't immediately notice anything that set them apart from one another. On the wall there was a bow, a spear, a shield and a whip. They didn't seem all that strong compared to the rest of the weapons and compared to the strangeness they'd just walked through these seemed pretty tame by comparison.

That was until they read out the names. The bow was called the Great Sword of Azgaren, the spear was called the Lightning Rod, the shield was, the Ancient Bulwark, and finally the whip was the Blood Drinker.

"These are the best weapons Thyme has?" Kat asked confused

"You can't feel the power emanating from these weapons?" asked Grace "I can already tell that each is packed with as many enchantments as their materials could possibly allow, and that isn't because the materials are bad, they seem to be great quality"

"Yeah but why is the bow a greatsword?" asked Kat

"Um..." Grace stumbled at this "I don't know?"

"Are you telling me you don't know or asking me?" said Kat

"Telling, I'm telling you I don't know" said Grace

"Well, in that case" said Kat gesturing to the Timmy's "Have at it"

The Timmy's first went up to the bow and pulled out a cassette from behind the plaque. Moving back over to the wall and inserting it, Thyme's voice rang out "Hello, this is the tape for the Great Sword of Azgaren, if you aren't seeing that weapon around, please choose a different tape.

"Now, I'm sure I know your first question, this is a bow, why is it a great sword? Well, that's because it was made by my old friend and master weaponsmith Azgaren. He has made some of the greatest weapons to ever grace this land

"Of course, all his skill and he still has such shit naming sense, excuse the language. I mean really, why did you call this a sword? Well it's because he enchanted it to cut through anything... and then crazy thing is he got really close

"It can't quite cut through 'anything' but it might as well. This means of course, the main problem with it is also that it can cut through anything, because that includes your hand. See, normally you just enchant the blade with enhanced cutting and call it a day

"But not ol' Azgaren no... he said to me 'what if the whole weapon could cut' and I of course told him 'that's the dumbest thing I've ever heard let's make it' and sure it was fun the first few times you cut your fingers off, but it becomes a pain to regrow them all the time.

"So, ah, yeah, come grab your extra sharp bow, and know that I'm not responsible for any damages you do to yourself"

Kat and Grace shared an awkward look. "I say neither of us pick that" said Grace

"Agreed" said Kat

Grace's eyes flicked towards Kat for just a moment before returning to the weapons. "What?" asked Kat who noticed the movement

"I was, ah, just half expecting those chains again" said Grace

"Well, they seem to know their place really. That wasn't a formal agreement between us, it was acknowledging neither of us want this death trap of a weapon. Imagine if they popped up all the time in casual conversation, that would be horrible" said Kat

"I suppose" said Grace nodding towards Timmy so they'd put in the next tape.

"Hello hello, this next item... um actually what order did I put these in again? Eh doesn't matter. This next item is 'the lightning rod' this was also made by Azgaren, if you've heard of him. A great friend, and a better blacksmith though he couldn't name anything well.

"At least the name is accurate this time. This particular beauty is called the lightning rod for a reason. It summons down a powerful strike of lightning upon it's target... pretty much whenever it wants.

"See, we never could figure out what triggers it to go off. The lightning is powerful, much more so then the materials should allow, but it's propensity to repeatedly strike it's owner has led to it ending up in my care. Azgaren isn't particularly lightning proof and after it broke the roof of his workshop for the third time he gave up on using it personally

"Which is a shame, I used it to roast some horrible people during the battle of Galangalen. I mean sure, I handed the spear out to random troops and I never exactly wielded it myself... and those troops I gave it to were the enemy, but by all accounts it won the battle for us.

"So what do you say? In for a shocking time?" The recording ended and Kat could see Grace clutching her head in mock pain.

"Why? Who is this Azgaren guy and why does he keep making this shit?" asked Grace "Just make a normal weapon. These are all so unbelievably powerful, but you made them useless"

"Well, would Thyme really be handing them out if they were actually good?" asked Kat

Grace nodded and sighed before gesturing for the next tape "Perhaps this one will be better"

"Ladies and Gentlemen... or wait isn't there only one of you? Never mind let's start again. Lady and or Gentleman I present to you the Ancient Bulwark. Now this is actually a legendary item from the first war. I mean, I didn't get it there, found it in an attic I helped a friend clean, but that is beside the point

"This here, is one of the few weapons in existence that can permanently increase the power of it's user over time... that is if you consider turning to titanium a positive. You see, the original owner of the weapon was actually a steel elemental and had the thing created to try and increase its overall strength.

"And the shield itself is very sturdy, can block nearly anything really with only a few limitations like a certain 'sword' a friend of mine made. Nonetheless do be careful, it turns everything to titanium, including your muscles and skin. If you don't have metal manipulation I'd probably skip this one.

"Just roll the last one Timmy" said Kat already not looking forward to the last one.

"Greetings, my name is Thyme and today I'll be introducing my good friend Blood Drinker. Blood Drinker say hello to the fans"

"Well, sure be like that then. This lovely young lady is called Blood Drinker, and now, you might be wondering why I refer to a weapon as a lady... well, it may or may not have an ancient vengeful spirit inside but don't worry about that she's really sweet once you get to know her.

"I mean sure, she requires a couple bodies worth of blood on a good day and a hell of a lot more on a bad one, but focus on the positives, like the fact that you can control the whip with your mind. Cool right?

"Plus I mean, doesn't have to be your blood. It could be anyone's blood. Personally I like to feed her bloodroot sap instead. Now granted, that isn't actually blood, but she's never complained once... though I did scare her terribly that one time I punched a dragon halfway across the continent by reflex... so perhaps she doesn't have the heart to complain."

Kat slapped her palm into her face and slowly dragged it down. "Grace... I think we should look at the other weapons"

The elf nodded enthusiastically along with Kat desiring nothing more then pretend they hadn't just wasted several precious minutes listening to Thyme speak about his most 'powerful' weapons.

## **Chapter 126: Grace is a Massive Fan of Fans**

Kat examined the endless rows of weapons searching for anything that she could potentially use or might be powerful... but to Kat they all just looked like fancy ornaments, and she didn't get the same feeling of power Grace seemed to. \*I guess I just have to defer to the expert.\*

"So Grace, what do you actually recommend?" asked Kat

"Well, um... what do you mean?" asked Grace confused

"I was hoping that the big four would give me a clear indication of what weapon to pick up, but you know how that turned out" said Kat

"Um, I guess hmmm" said Grace "Well look, how do you actually fight? I only saw you dodge around for a bit and then not get hit by Jack, how am I supposed to know what weapons you use"

"Normally I punch people. Often times in the face, but only because it's convenient" said Kat

Grace gave Kat a bit of a strange look asking the silent question of why. "I didn't exactly have a lot of options. Where I'm from weapons aren't so easy to get your hands on and my fists have served me well"

Grace sighed "Oh, your one of those people"

"What? No... I just didn't have a lot to work with, and I didn't want to seriously injure anyone. I don't normally fight monsters" said Kat

"Oh, well, I mean, I guess I know a bit about weapons" said Grace though the way it was said seemed to imply she knew quite a lot in fact.

"How so? Aren't you a scout?" said Kat

"That's exactly why" said Grace throwing her hands up "I need to know as much as I can. What weapons the enemy is holding, how strong they have to be to wield that weapon, how well are they holding it, are their arms shaking implying they should have a lighter weapon. What is the mix in the group? Do they have enough ranged and melee attackers or have they all got swords because that's what a shocking number of people can do

"Then I have to identify the quality of the weapon. A chipped iron sword is a far cry from an enchanted magi-steel alloy with several enchantments. What are those enchantments if they can be seen, can I sense the rough power level of those enchantments or have they been obfuscated by an expert.

"Is the user skilled but unsuited? Is it a big man with a dagger, or has a weak woman picked up a longbow she can't actually draw. See this issue is actually very different to how skilled they are and if they hold the weapon properly. It's actually quite common for bandits to take inappropriate weaponry if it seems nicer

Kat was starting to let the barrage of words spilling out of Grace's mouth was over her. It wasn't that she wasn't listening, more that Kat didn't really understand what Grace was talking about or why it mattered

"Actually, now that I think about it, this extends to so many others, even professional adventurers. So many fools just pick up a sword and think they're done. And I mean sure, swords actually do work for most people but it really isn't an every man's weapon despite what they might claim

"Actually, if you look at the God Crushers, despite their rather strange attire and seemingly degraded weaponry it fits well in their hands. They actually have the body type to maximise the weapons they do have, which is all the more impressive considering how cobbled together they are and how weak they feel.



"In truth, if those guys had more practice I think they'd actually be scarier than Skye's lot. They are professionals sure, but they don't have the teamwork or the natural fit with most of their weapons.

"Actually teamwork is another thing, you can tell how comfortable...

Kat shared a glance with the Timmy's who actually seemed to be enjoying Grace's impassioned speech about the right weapons. Kat looked Grace right in the eyes and while it seemed the elf noticed, she certainly didn't stop

"But truthfully..." Kat stopped Grace before she got any further "Grace, not that I don't enjoy hearing you speak so passionately, but remember we are still in the a death match. Well, I use death loosely... but no I'm also getting side-tracked. Point is, we've already spent a long time down here and we need to pick weapons and get out.

"I'd love to hear you speak more as we travel, but we just don't have the time to waste" said Kat laying a gentle hand on Grace's shoulder

Grace however seemed completely unperturbed "Right so give me details. What are you looking for?"

"Ah... just whatever works? Perhaps something that will pair well with my fire" said Kat

"Right one moment" said Grace appearing instantly beside Kat and grabbing her arm

"Wah-" but before Kat could voice her confusing Grace began feeling every inch of Kat's arm. Poking and prodding, pulling slightly but mostly staring intently every which way.

"Legs please" said Grace fully consumed with her task

"Um-" started Kat "Legs please" finished Grace

\*Huh... well you know what. At least she isn't scared of me anymore. A bit pushy perhaps, but certainly better than scared Grace, and much much better than terrified Grace.\*

Kat started to lift her kimono slightly and Grace quickly transferred to examining Kat's legs instead. Grace felt around for various muscles, and at which stages of development they might be. Poking several key areas and then feeling the entire leg at length, Grace carefully examined both of Kat's before stepping back.

"Well, your muscles are certainly very strange" said Grace "I've never seen anything like it"

"What do you mean?" asked Kat

"Well, normally a person's muscles are good for strength or endurance, and rarely speed... You however are equipped for flexibility, and your strength and speed come from that. Of course I'm pretty sure you have endurance as well... to some extent

"The other thing is it's almost like your muscles were formed yesterday. They don't have any of the scaring typical of a trained adventurer or even a labourer. It makes you very suited to things like rapiers, whips, fans perhaps, and ribbons. Throwing knives could also work, but the rest of your body isn't so suited for it" said Grace as if Kat should already know these things.

"So... what does that leave me with?" asked Kat

"Well... I'd say probably whips, or fans. Ribbons would still be great, but I'm not sure they would survive your fire at all" said Grace

"Ok, keep it simple then with whips and fans... wait why can't I get like gauntlets or something?" asked Kat

"Well, Kat, you punch hard because you are hitting below your weight class. You are strong yes, but not physically strong for how powerful your muscles seem to indicate you should be. You just aren't built for it" said Grace

\*Ha, tell that to Kress and I bet he'd be really mad. Though would it really be worth me picking up a weapon I don't know how to use?\*

"So, fans or a whip? Is it really worth me picking up a weapon when I can just keep using my fists?" asked Kat

Instantly Grace whole aura changed, not even when she was trying to stab Kat with a knife was it so intense. Of course, Kat's own calming aura quickly retaliating shielding Kat from the brunt of it. Even without her own aura's defence, Kat still wouldn't have been affected, but the quick transition was something she'd never expected.

"Kat" said Grace with a new edge to her voice "You wouldn't be thinking of giving up the chance for the perfect weapon just because you want to... punch someone?" *novelnext.Com*

Grace tilted her head smiling and getting closer "I don't care if you keep it sheathed until the tournament is over. There is not a single rule that prevents us taking it out of this arena, and even if it did, I will not allow you to go back to being some shmuck wasting their bodies talent by punching people"

"Look, I'll pick one Grace... your starting to freak out a little maybe calming down would be a goo-" Kat felt the hand on her shoulder tighten. It still didn't hurt, but the increased pressure was enough of a sign to stop.

"Kat. Promise me, that you will learn how to use either the whip or the fan. I don't care which but it must be one of the two. Actually throw ribbons in as well, but only if they can handle your flames. Do you accept?" said Grace staring deep into Kat's eyes.

Kat sighed "Fine I accept"

And as Kat said the final words... that's when the chains arrived. The familiar burning purple, and yet, there was something different about them. Unlike the fight against the blood red chains when she first arrived, there was something else to these... something that felt far more binding.

\*Ah shit...\*

## **Chapter 127: Heartfelt Contract**

\*System!\* Kat practically screamed in her mind as the chains shot towards her... which was on in and of itself, seeing as normally the chains bound both parties evenly.

User Kat what is your question

\*You should damn well know... what is happening? I thought the chains were only for formal agreements and there is something clearly different about them.\*

User Kat seems to have agreed to a Heartfelt Contract.

\*And what pray tell would that be?\* Thought Kat as she was wrapped in chains.

Analysing Contract

Confirming Contract status

Determining Contract nature

Contract True Form analysed

Clearance for Heartfelt Contract in cleared

A Heartfelt Contract, is one made by a secondary party for User Kat primarily with User Kat's best interest in mind. A Heartfelt Contract, must be made honestly, cannot be forced, cannot come from a Summoner, cannot come from an Accomplice, cannot come from an Entity without knowledge of User Kat's true nature as a demon.

\*Right but that still doesn't really tell me anything. What does it actually mean to be a heartfelt contract?\*

A Heartfelt Contract differs from a standard Contract in a few key ways. Primarily in that while User Kat will not receive Currency as compensation User Kat will experience a significant increase in power and ability by completing the Contract.

\*Wait what? Why? And How? \*

D.E.M.O.N.S does not know. Heartfelt Contract have been heavily scrutinised and examined but the triggers for such things elude D.E.M.O.N.S. Numerous attempts to replicate the phenomenon have been attempted but all have failed.

This is the main reason knowledge of Heartfelt Contract's is heavily restricted. Once known it is much harder to obtain one, and yet most demons who manage to obtain a Heartfelt Contract can obtain multiple. It is thus a shame that most demons never obtain even a single Heartfelt Contract.

\*Right, but how does it increase my abilities if I'm not getting anything for it? Is it just because in this case I'd be better with weapons?\*

No. User Kat will receive power as a separate reward. Where it comes from and how it is retained is unknown.

\*Ok... is there anything else I need to know\*

Heartfelt Contract are both loose and strict with the contents. Using User Kat's current Contract as an example. Entity Grace has requested User Kat 'learn' how to use a fan or a whip.

For a standard Contract just having some idea of how to use either would count as a completed Contract, however for a Heartfelt Contract the contents are skewed in the Contractors favour, in this

case Entity Grace. So User Kat will need to be at the very least more proficient in whips, fans, or ribbons, then User Kat is with fists.

However Heartfelt Contract are less strict in other ways. User Kat will receive no punishment for putting off training with the weapons. However a Heartfelt Contract will only lose it's power when either User Kat or Entity Grace perish\*

As such User Kat can take centuries to meet the requirements unlike other Contracts that may punish User Kat for ignoring them.

What's with the Asterix next to perish?

Meaning Perish, as subject to D.E.M.O.N.S reincarnation and resurrection policy previously mentioned to User Kat

\*The uh... like 900,000 hours or whatever?\*

Yes.

"Hey Kat?" asked Grace concerned "You there? Hey, Kat, what just happened?"

Kat shook her head and focused on Grace, who looked rather concerned at what just happened. "What do you mean Grace?"

"I thought you said the contracts were only for formal agreements... I mean not that I'm unhappy you've agreed so strongly... I'm just surprised and um..." Grace trailed off.

"Um... I don't really understand the full scope of it but you made what is called a heartfelt contract" said Kat "I honestly didn't know anything about them before today, and I can't really give specifics"

"Ok...?" said Grace still confused and somewhat subdued compared with before.

Seeing this Kat knew just the thing to turn the mood around "So where should I start? Fans or whips?"

Grace's mood recovered slightly hearing this. She still didn't quite have the same spark in her eyes, but she was already speaking with a cheerful tone "Right... so whips and fans... you said you wanted it to compliment your fire yes? Well whips and fans will go about it in different ways.

"Firstly though how coordinated are you? Fans as the name implies, is using two fans, where as you'd normally only use one whip. Some people do actually use two, but not very well... it's just not worth it when your starting out, and once you get further in normally you've learnt everything wrong so I wouldn't bother"

"I don't really know? How can you tell if your coordinated? I think I'm pretty well off" said Kat thinking back on some of her minor fights she'd been in.

"Right..." said Grace not really believing Kat "Can you do these two things with your hands?"

Grace then proceeded to use one hand to draw a circle and have the other making a cross, then gesture for Kat to repeat the actions.

Kat shrugged and did as Grace asked perfectly replicating her movements... in fact Kat had even managed to copy Grace's minor mistakes which was immediately apparent to Grace's trained eyes.

"Oh, and one more thing can you jab with your tail as well?" asked Grace

"Sure?" said Kat not following why it mattered what she could do with her tail in terms of weapons but complied anyway.

The instant Grace saw this she knew Kat was beyond coordinated at this point. "Right... um well it seems that you are coordinated enough for fans. Most people can't hand duel weapons so the fact that you can means fans is probably the better option

"Of course, whip isn't bad either, just that if you have the talent for duel wielding I think it would be a shame to waste of whips, of course duel wielding whips is an option but I still don't recommend that... then again with your body I suppose it's possible... but no, it just doesn't make sense ~~novel~~*next.Com*

"To fully utilise a whip along with your fire you can't be dual wielding so fans it is. Quick this way" said Grace heading back towards the entrance.

Kat wasn't quite sure where Grace was going but followed anyway. A short jog later and Grace was standing in front of a weapon stand containing a number of gauntlets, more swords and two sets of fans.

"Right, so this is the only shelf with fans, so you'll have to pick one of these two if you're taking them. I can't really feel much of a difference in power, but I'm also unclear about the enchantments... though wait... you use mana right?" asked Grace snapping out of her onslaught of words early.

"Nope" said Kat

"Ah, right in that case it's certainly this one" said Grace picking up a rather plain looking set of fans made out of a dark metal. "These might technically be the weaker of the two, just barely but that I think is due to the lacking enchantments and not the materials"

Kat reached out and grabbed the fans. Holding them in her hands she'd thought that after Grace's impassioned speech she'd feel some innate connection to them, or some more profound understanding of how she might wield them.

Contrary to these expectations the only impression Kat got was that they were shockingly heavy for such small weapons. Examining the weapons in her hand Kat could see the overlapping dark metal sheets that had been pressed together with a thicker dark red metal. The edges appeared sharp, and when Kat lightly ran her finger over them, she found that she'd cut herself, though only slightly.

Kat examined the cut on her hand as a moment later it healed over, with only a line of black blood remaining behind. "Well" said Kat "I guess these are mine now. What about you?"

Grace pulled out a dagger from behind her back "I picked this up on the way. This is the best dagger for me in the entire place. Has a few nice enchantments on it that suit my fighting style"

Kat let her mouth hang open \*When did she pick that up? Actually when did she have time to find the best dagger in the whole place? There were hundreds of the things just in the entrance alone!\*

"Are you sure that's the one you want?" asked Kat

"Well um, of course. I haven't missed any daggers, and while a bow would be nice, mine is custom made, and of high enough quality materials that other than the 'great sword'" Grace was sure to indicate her displeasure at the last two words "Nothing suits my nearly as well. Though of course, that is to be expected really"

Kat nodded towards Grace and gestured back towards the entrance "I guess it's time to head to the desert then. Not sure if it's worth looking around, but I feel we stalled in the snow long enough. We don't want to fall too far behind after all"

## **Chapter 128: Kat becoming a Fan of Fans**

Kat and Grace stepped out of the vault. The moment they did so a rumbling could be heard. Both women whipped their head around to see the Vault shaking as it descended into the earth.  
*novelnext.Com*

Kat just shook her head. "Well Grace, am I carrying you again"

Grace looked away from Kat at this "Well, um, I don't know about that"

"Come on" said Kat "This way you can tell me more about weapons, and your little wind shield will work on both of us"

Grace looked like she wanted to argue the point, but after a quick glance around and the excess snow around she seemed to give up and determine that fighting this point wasn't worth it "Well, fine but-"

Kat interrupted Grace's complaints by scooping her up and taking off in the direction of the desert

"Kat!" said Grace "I didn't want you to carry my like this"

"Well how else could I carry you?" asked Kat "I've got wings, so the backs out. I could maybe carry you over the shoulder, but still, wings. Then there is carrying you from the front, but in my opinion that's even worse. So what would you recommend Grace?"

Grace thought about Kat's point and had to concede, there really is no better way to carry her. Even the other methods would still be embarrassing, if only slightly less so "Well fine then"

"So tell me a bit about these fans Grace, now that I'm committed after all" said Kat

Grace tried rather hard not to look at Kat when she heard that. Grace might not have been able to tell how but she also got a sense of those strange chains that had appeared the second time and could infer a little from that. "Well, it isn't as if I'm an expert in fans, I can't really tell you that much"

Kat gave Grace her best 'sure I believe you' look she could possibly manage. \*If there is one thing I've learnt in the past 30 minutes, it's that you know more than I do about pretty much every weapon in existence. Heck I'd put good money on Grace knowing more about guns and nukes than I do despite never having once seen them.\*

Grace glared at Kat's face defiantly waiting for her to break. Kat of course just kept her face in the perfect position the whole time, not letting a single muscle twitch out of place.

"Well... fine then I guess I know a bit... and since you are carrying me as well then perhaps I should help in some way" said Grace

"Alternatively, the wind shield to block the ice would be nice, or charging the dagger" said Kat jokingly

Grace glared at Kat and continued speaking "So, fans are a tricky weapon. They have rather poor reach, and while sharp the blades can't be used for lunging attacks, making them surprisingly ineffective in a large number of situations that other weapons, even the stranger ones, will never come across

"In exchange, you gain a few things. The first one is the hidden factor. Seeing a young lady walking around with a pair of folding fans is a little strange, and since they are such an uncommon weapon many people don't even look twice unless you're a little crazy about weapons or someone like myself

"The second thing you gain is a surprising amount of versatility that is easily missed on first glance. Slicing attacks are still your leaves and greens but blunt attacks are still a good option by changing the grip slightly.

"And I sort of lied about the jabs as well. The fans are capable of it by closing them and jabbing with the blades shut, but unless you have fans designed for it, and you don't by the way, it really just isn't worth doing

"Now, because you have magic of some kind, I suspect you can make up for the lack of range with 'conducting'. Now, technically it's a rather high-level skill and I don't really know anyone personally who can, though Thyme probably could do it

"So what conducting is, is the ability to channel your element through a weapon and then control it's path afterwards. The fans make for excellent conductors even if you didn't use fire as your main element. From what little I know it takes a bit of finesse but I'm sure you can manage that sooner rather than later."

Kat flew across the ground as Grace spoke. Kat had reached a good top speed and was now making excellent time across the ice. She could feel that using so much energy on her feet was taking a slight toll, but for now she wasn't tired, and the increased speed allowed her to increase her stepping distance with some tricks and use slightly less.

"Right, so those are the advantages of the weapon are they?" said Kat

"Well, that isn't all. The final part come with defending. Fans give you a truly impressive variety of defensive options. The first is just having them open and blocking like a buckler, or-" Grace was interrupted when Kat started speaking

"What is a buckler?" asked Kat

"Uh, well, a buckler is a small shield you strap down on your forearm" said Grace, somewhat off pace. Kat nodded her understanding and the elf continued with her torrent of words

"So, as I was saying, you can use them like a buckler, treating it like a small shield, though this way of using fans should primarily be for catching projectiles you don't have the reaction time or space to dodge, and dire situations and NEVER against heavy weapons like mauls or great hammers

"Following on, you can also close them up and parry with them, the same way you would a sword. I wouldn't recommend this though, because even though a surprising number who take up this weapon fall into that habit it is completely inferior to the third defensive use, and the only one really unique to the weapon

"Well, I say unique but it isn't as though no other can do it, but it's mainly a fan tactic. So what you do is catch blades between both fans and redirected the energy. It takes a lot more practice, but it's unbelievably efficient energy wise, and does the least amount of damage to the fans if that ever becomes an issue

"The name for it is a knifehand block, though that is a martial arts term, and you aren't really using your hands, but if you can't find a fan trainer, which is fair because they are rare, try and find a martial artist who will teach you how to perform them with fans.

"It pains me a little to make that recommendation, because you really should get a dedicated trainer, but I have the feeling you won't be able to find one easily. Then again, nobody really chooses that weapon these days so it's not like I could find one either if I wanted to use them"

When Grace finally finished speaking, she was panting a little. The elf had endeavoured to breathe as little as possible during her speech and had been reaching the limit towards the end of her air supply.

Kat took this chance to shift her focus intending to see if in the distance she could spot the desert transition with her eyes, but she had some second thoughts. \*I mean, I can feel my energy practically bleeding out of me. Running like this is so much worse than flying. Maybe I shouldn't be wasting it trying to see ahead of me.\*

Changing tacts Kat tried to get Grace talking again "So, Grace, tell me why you use a dagger"

Suddenly the Grace that was breathing heavily and in need of oxygen was gone, and in her place was a weapons maniac "Well Kat, I'd love to have a few profound reasons for that but sadly the reason I use the dagger is actually quite basic if practical

"See, the dagger is perhaps the greatest last-ditch weapon. Once you have no choice but to engage in unfamiliar combat the dagger provides you with a great way to just stab people. Now that might sound crude but please let me elaborate

"See, hands are a terribly inefficient weapon without extremely specialised training however a dagger can instantly turn someone from an ineffective element to a dangerous combat just because it has a slightly pointed end

"Many people can tell you about that one lucky knife hit, and I mean well, it just makes sense. A desperate attack with a knife can seriously injure a stronger opponent, or finish off a weakened one

"Why take how we met for example. It wasn't like I was just going to shoot arrows at you for an age. I don't know if your skin is any stronger or your kimono is enchanted or whatever but had it been anyone else the arrows would have taken an age to finish off a downed opponent

"But one slice can be enough to take someone out of the fight, even if they get healed enough for it not to be permanent damage, the blood loss alone...



\*Maybe this was a mistake\*

## **Chapter 129: Plague Woods**

When Grace finished speaking about the various benefits and negatives of using a dagger as a secondary weapon with minimal training the desert came into view for Kat's unenhanced eyes. Grace hadn't noticed yet as she was too focused on explaining the necessities of keeping your dagger sharp.

And it was a good thing too, for Kat could feel the fatigue rapidly approaching her. It was a strange feeling, it wasn't affecting her just yet, and it was more akin to a small voice of warning.

"Hey Grace" said Kat just before Grace could finish taking one of her few breaks for air "The deserts right here"

Grace got a shocked look on her face and turned in the direction of travel to see Kat was right. As they approached the desert the bright red sand stood out even more than usual against the clean white line of snow next to it.

Though the strange part was that the red didn't seem bright at all, almost like it was sucking in the light around it despite its rather vibrant colours. "Oh no" said Grace

\*What seems to be the problem?\* Kat gave Grace a look of confusion who instantly picked up on it and explained "I guess you wouldn't know, but those are the Red Sands"

This only intensified Kat's confusion though. \*Yeah? It's red sand what is so impressive about that?\*

Grace saw Kat's face lacked comprehension and sighed. "Well, ok, the Red Sands are a rather infamous section of the Great Desert. It absorbs sunlight and retains heat extremely well. This means that it's like walking on hot coals night and day with no reprieve"

"Oh... just that?" asked Kat

"What do you mean just that? How are we supposed to get across" asked Grace

"I mean, same way we got across the ice surely? I just carry you" said Kat

Grace thought about it for a moment and recalled the time Kat hugged that orb capable of melting through solid stone and treating it like a hand warmer. "Well... ok then"

However just as Kat reached the edge, the little warning in her mind started to intensify. Kat quickly killed her moment sliding across the snow like a skier until she came to a stop just before the ground transitioned over to sand.

"What?" asked Grace

"I'm feeling my energy use catch up to me. I won't require much to walk but running will still use a bit. Nothing like what I've used up going over the ice, but I think I'd need to rest before we got too far"

Grace nodded in understanding "Well, that gives us time to think of alternatives. I know you said you can run across this, but surely nobody else could. I don't know how long it will take us to cross this section"

Grace took a quick glance at the sun to gauge the time and instantly regretted her decision. Covering her eyes with one hand she continued "It's still morning... approaching lunch probably, so I doubt the answer is to wait till night. The grounds will hardly cool at all with the red sands"

"Hey, speaking of lunch" said Kat "Don't you need to eat? I'm not hungry, and I can go a while without food"

"Well, I'm fine, it hasn't even been 24 hours since we've been stranded here, and I've gone, much longer without food" said Grace

"I sense a story" said Kat as she took a seat in the snow. After realising what she'd done Kat was about to jump up again, but found her kimono wasn't actually letting any snow or water slip through and so settled back down "Care to tell?"

"Well... I guess I can while your resting. So me and the team were investigating a place called the Plague Woods. They aren't actually that deadly, and if you make the appropriate preparations the disease and poison can be resisted" Grace spoke slowly, unlike when speaking of weapons, it was a more human er- elvish pace, and she even breathed between sentences

"It's been really well studied so antidotes aren't that hard to come by. It's most common use is actually training poison resistance for people who really go for that. Never seemed worth it to me but I digress.

"Something had been causing problems in the woods, not the poison or disease, but a monster. It was disrupting the ecosystem in a major way, or so I was told, and we were contracted to find out what it was, and if possible, get rid of it

"Well... we prepared plenty of antidotes, got some updated maps of the area, stocked up on food and headed out. About two days in, we realised that our food was starting to go a little funny

"Well... let's just say we didn't make the brightest decision. We'd heard that your sense of taste could be majorly affected by the antidotes we were taking so thought nothing of it and continued for another two days before realising something was clearly wrong

"So, with no clean food, major stomach problems and in the middle of a forest where basically everything has poison or a disease of some kind, we had to struggle back to civilisation without eating a single thing.

"Well, we all got out and survived, but it was not something I care to repeat" sighed Grace.

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Kat rested up a bit more after Grace finished her story, until she felt completely recovered, though if Kat really focused she could tell that wasn't the case, and she was still missing around one third of her energy. How she could get such a precise amount was also a question, but she dismissed it for the moment in favour of figuring out what to do about the desert.

"So should we get going?" asked Kat

"Well..." said Grace "I think there has to be sand gliders or something to get across. There is no way anyone should be able to just walk across them"

Kat raised an eyebrow at Grace who responded "Yes, ok, I know that you can, and heck Thyme probably could if she wanted to as well, but once you get to that level of power nothing is really an issue"

"So... do we care about these sand gliders? I mean I can walk, but that doesn't mean it would be best" said Kat

"Well... are you faster when you fly?" asked Grace

"Yes, but I can't carry you so that won't work" said Kat

"Are you sure?" asked Grace

Kat went to answer but stopped. \*Am I sure? I haven't tried to carry anyone since Minor, and I think everything of mine improved after I reached rank 1. So it isn't completely out of the question.\* "No I guess not. I'm stronger than I was last time I tried to carry someone so we can give it a go."

Kat stood up and grabbed Grace without warning. The elf didn't even look shocked this time as Kat prepared her wings. Hopping slightly then flapping her wings, Kat ended up straight back on the ground.

Taking a firm stance Kat tried to take off with just her wings. As she stood there beating her wings Kat could feel that if she let more energy into them she might be able to carry Grace. \*I don't think I can waste that much energy though. Carrying Grace is still a question, and even if the answer is yes it seems like it would be too costly.\*

Stopping her wings and lowering Grace down Kat said "I think the answer is no. At least not efficiently. I might be able to throw demonic energy at the problem and hope it gets solved, but even if that works it's simply too much to burn through to cross any sizeable chunk of space"

"Hmm" murmured Grace "Can you perhaps fly up by yourself and see if there is a better way to cross"

Kat nodded and took to the sky. Looking out over the desert Kat found she could see the edge with just a bit of energy in her eyes. Of course 'the end' was a bit misleading because what she could actually see was a massive wall of fog blocking her from seeing further. \*Must be real fog as well, otherwise I'd be able to see through it.\*

Kat was about to take a look around the edge of the desert for something of note when in the corner of her eye she detected movement. Pushing more energy into her eyes to clearly make out the shape, Kat was surprised to find a bird rushing towards her...

Straight towards her, and from the look in its eyes, she wasn't the only one who could see for kilometres. The bird itself was enormous. Kat still couldn't see the fine details, but it was a bright yellow possibly to hide against the sun, with a sharp beak and sharper talons.

Quickly descending back to Grace, Kat shouted a warning "Giant bird incoming"

### **Chapter 130: Giant Bird**

Kat didn't halt her descent and so she could drop as fast as possible. Landing in the snow, Kat's impact threw up plenty of stray snow and obscured her vision. As Kat was trying to identify Grace's figure through the snow her tail whipped out and cleared most of the snow obscuring her vision.

Grace had a serious look on her face and her bow drawn "Details Kat, what can you tell me"

Pulling out her fans Kat moved forward and stood next to Grace and kept her eyes locked on the fast approaching figure "I dunno, it's some massive bird with really sharp beak and talons. Oh and it's yellow"

Grace felt her mouth pull into a frown "That sounds an awful lot like Barbarashi. What colour was it's eyes?"

"No idea" said Kat

Grace sighed "Well Kat, that happens to be very important and relevant information right now. Red would pretty much be a death sentence, green is doable, and black is probably easy for us. Oh and your holding those fans wrong"

Kat glanced at her hands and back up to Grace "Well, I didn't see, and even looking at it now it isn't really close enough to tell. So how am I holding these wrong exactly?"

Grace just shook her head "I don't think we have time to mess with it Kat, just put them back in your sash and use your fists, as much as that might pain me to say"

Kat complied and once again got ready. Staring at the bird Kat brought more demonic energy to bear to try and identify what colour it's eyes might have been, but it was still a bit far out for Kat to tell the details.

"Could we hide or something" said Kat

Grace shook her head "Not really, a green eyed or red eye could see us from that distance and would know where we hid. Then we aren't even scared of a black eye, so truthfully hiding does nothing"

"Oh, well it certainly saw me from even further away, it beelined for me when I was up there" said Kat

Grace cursed under her breath before looking towards the indistinct shape she could see in the distance "Ok, red or green it is then"

"Kat, watch my arrow" said Grace.

Grace knocked an arrow and shut one eye. Breathing in, Grace activated her gauntlets causing sigils to surround the arrow. A second later the bow itself started glowing and another sigil appeared in front of it.

Letting the breath go Grace released the arrow. The moment her fingers left the string there was a massive boom. Air whipped around Grace and Kat as the arrow soared straight towards the bird in the sky.

Kat watched its entire travel, and as it approached the bird it looked about to hit then, the creature banked sharply to avoid letting it clip its wing. "Dodged" said Kat

Grace cursed again "Well of course that would be too easy. Dam"

Grace looked around for cover but found the border area lacking in trees. Sighing Grace knocked another arrow but didn't draw the string back. "Ok Kat, seems like it can dodge. In that case we have one real chance. Barbarashi aren't known for their courage despite their hunting prowess

"If we can land a good hit on it as it dives for us it'll probably run away. The thing is, those feathers might as well be a suit of plate armour and the beak is hardly an option" said Grace

"So where do we strike then?" asked Kat

"Good question. Ideally the eye, but if we actually poked one out it might work up the courage to stay and fight. Trying to crush the wing joints is probably best. We won't deal any serious damage, but it will show we mean business" said Grace

At this point the Barbarashi was fast approaching and preparing for its dive. Kat took a fighting stance as it dropped straight for them. Its eyes locked on Kat, Grace opted to move slightly to the side and poured her mana into her bow.

Kat spared no expense. Circulating as much energy as she could just underneath her skin, priming her muscles to be ready to react as soon as the bird approached. Kat was not ready.

As soon as the Barbarashi started its dive the speed of the thing doubled and was next to Kat in an instant. An arrow shot out distracting the bird for just a second forcing its beak just barely to the side.

Kat took this chance to rely on her instincts and bend herself out of the way. Leaning back and away from the Barbarashi Kat watched the beak sail over her head but then came the talons.

Kat's tail stabbed into the ground correcting her balance and allowing Kat to jump up and over the Barbarashi's wing as it flew past instead of being torn up by the talons as it flew past. As Kat soared over the wings, she tried to bash them with her hands, but she'd jumped just slightly to high.

Choosing instead to rely on her tail Kat empowered it and sent it spearing down towards the wing tip. Her tail made contact with the joint but harmlessly bounced off... or so it seemed.

The spot her tail had made contact burst into flames that slowly spread across the Barbarashi's left wing. The Barbarashi let out a cry of panic and annoyance and tried to angle itself back to the sky.

Of course... its efforts were severely hindered by its now frozen wing. Its left side dragging, instead of flying up its wing clipped the snow on the ground sending it into a freespun. Crashing through the snow and knocking over the trees the Barbarashi cleaved a path of debris through the snow and ice.

Kat went to share a look with Grace but found the elf still focused on the downed foe. "Kat. We might have an issue"

"What?" asked Kat confused *NOVELnext.Com*

"We wanted it to FLY AWAY remember?" asked the now concerned Grace.

\*Oh right\* thought Kat as she watched the bird recover its footing and turn to face the pair. Its emerald eyes burning as it faced Kat down. Rearing its head back the Barbarashi let out a screech.

Kat felt her energy rush to her ears to protect them, while Grace fell to the ground clutching her head. Kat glanced between the Barbarashi and the downed elf, but it seemed to have eyes only for her.

The Barbarashi took one step forward then three sigils appeared around it. As it took it's second step it was already just a few metres away from Kat. The demon launched herself as far as her legs would carry her to the side.

Good thing too, because just as Kat left the area the Barbarashi came charging through not letting up it's speed at all until well past Kat's previous area. As it started to slow the Barbarashi dug one talon into the ground and let it's momentum carry it around to face Kat once again.

"Well at least we know it has green eyes now" said Kat with a furtive glance towards Grace who was slowly regaining her bearings.

The Barbarashi seem to take offence at this because it opened its beak. Kat assuming it was going to scream again placed her hands over her ears only for five sigils to appear in the birds mouth.

\*Ah shit this better not be.\* Kat dropped her hands and lay flat on the ground. Pulling her tail in close and flattening her wings in the snow as much as possible. Just as Kat had fully flattened herself, she felt a massive gust of wind flow over her despite being half buried in snow.

Once it passed Kat raised her head in time to see a beak charging for her. Rolling out of the way Kat saw deep gash where she had just been. But she didn't have any time to rest because she knew the talons weren't far behind.

Keeping the roll up Kat felt something scrape her back and a burning pain. Gritting her teeth and pushing herself further sideways Kat turned to watch the Barbarashi pass her blood now covering its talons.

Kat pushed herself to her feet to get to a standing position. Clearly being flat on the ground was a poor just against such a mobile foe. However as she did this she felt that pain in her back intensify.

Gritting her teeth and standing anyway Kat could feel the blood dripping down her back. Her breath was starting to turn ragged. Checking her energy reserves she felt they still weren't too low. \*Ok, I still have energy to spare but perhaps not quite the blood I'd like... Hey system is it possible for me to die of blood loss?\*

If User Kat tries hard enough it is certainly possible

Kat let a wry grin appear on her face. \*I guess that's good to know\*