

DEMONS 1221

[Chapter 1221 1221 Abdication? Not On The Cards](#)

The group took a break from discussion after Odir finished explaining the situation with the beastkin. This was mostly because they all recognised that Odir wasn't really getting a chance to eat. Kat and Burnice made some minor small talk about the sand castle contest but it was mostly to fill the empty air.

March had a pensive look on her face, she'd clearly taken the silence as a chance to properly think on what Odir said earlier. It wasn't something she was willing to ignore, not coming from the dwarven queen. Of course, while she didn't want to ignore it, she didn't exactly understand it either. March had been under the impression that you were either strong, or you weren't. Perhaps you could be strong relative to someone else, but she'd never considered 'types' of strength. She didn't know if this was advice that she'd ignored in the past, or if it'd never come up.

Marigold was practically bouncing in her seat. She clearly wanted to say something but she was holding back for now, as, like everyone else Marigold recognised that Odir did deserve a chance to have her meal. Though it was a bit in question in regards to how much Odir did need to eat. Marigold knew that her family had a big dinner every single day, but that was mostly for socialisation. She also knew that quite a few of her family didn't actually EAT at those events.

When she was little, she'd just thought they were shy, or being silly. Now she recognised that food intake became really, really weird as people grew in strength. Some craved it constantly, burning through food to fuel their efforts... while others could go a week without noticing they hadn't had so much as a bit of fruit.

Eventually it was Burgandy that broke the silence, "So to ask an easy question then. What exactly do you do for fun? You said you had hobbies during that rant you went on about free time earlier,"

"Huh..." mumbled Odir. "I thought I also mentioned during that rant that I like to tinker?" The rest of the table shook their heads. She had in fact, not mentioned anything of the sort. "Odd... well I suppose that's fine. I can mention it now. It's still partially work in some ways... but I find it quite relaxing and I'm usually not investigating things particularly seriously.

"I'm certain that I mentioned I was trying to push for more innovation amongst my people? Well part of that push is simply because I enjoy the process of messing with things. Currently one of my more public projects is finding out a way to power machines with mana directly. We... sort of can at the moment but it requires a lot of work.

"We have to either enchant the whole object, which is a massive pain and terribly mana inefficient usually... or what we can do is enchant a water wheel to spin and then use that to move the machines... but I feel like I'm missing something. That there has to be a way to convert mana more directly into variable force. I mean, I'm almost certain I've heard legends of a 'Force Mage' before, but alas, I haven't been able to figure it out so far,"

I feel like we know the answer to that question.

[Yes but if you haven't forgotten we ALSO aren't supposed to advance the technology of a world too much. I feel like giving Oditr the answer, even if she's quite close to one already would be a bit too much interference. It would be setting off the dwarven industrial revolution. Sure it seems obvious to us, but they've clearly been focused on magic for a long time. They're missing some basic principles. Which seem basic to us... but were mighty hard to work out the first time.]

Yeah... I guess you're right. It just feels wrong not to help. It wouldn't really cost US anything. Well, we'd get in trouble, but it would be easy to say, in theory. Hey System...

User Kat would indeed be punished for revealing basic principles of industrialisation or electricity to Oditr.

[Well at least we KNOW we'll get into trouble?] Kat sighed, but in end, didn't say anything. She convinced herself that it would be wrong to rob Oditr of the accomplishment she was probably going to achieve anyway. It was more of a bandage then a real fix for the problem, but it was enough for her to get through the rest of the meal. Probably.

"Do you do anything else?" asked March. "That seems like more work to me. Though perhaps I'm not one that should be criticising. I spend most of my time training, doing jobs, or working out how to train more efficiently," I think you should take a look at pαηdαsnovel.com

Oditr shrugged and said, "I used to have other hobbies but it turns out running a country is a full time job when you want to do it correctly. Which is really annoying. If I just didn't care I could hand off basically all my power to someone else and only check back every now and again... but for obvious political reasons that would weaken my kingdom's position immensely. How Titania gets away with half the shit she does, I'll never know,"

"What do you mean?" asked Burnice.

"Ah... well... not to talk bad about Titania but she has... a few known vices and isn't terribly afraid of letting her people know she indulges in them. I suppose I seem like a massive prude in comparison to her. Anyway, she manages to wrangle a lot of free time from her people. Perhaps it's because she's been in charge a lot longer then I have, or perhaps it's because she's more powerful.

"I actually did try to lessen the load on myself once. Ended up having to execute my prime minster. Which was REALLY annoying. Especially because his mother was my parents' prime minister. The woman is my GODMOTHER for crying out loud. I was so certain I could trust him... and then I accidentally found out he was plotting to marry me and then have my killed. Which... really put a damper on things.

"I'm not even sure why! He had almost all the power I could give him at the time. He just didn't have the title. Oh, I know the reasons he gave me, both in prison and on the execution stand, but they all just rang hollow to me. All this 'you aren't fit to be queen' and 'I've been doing your job for five years, I might as well go for the crown' which weren't inaccurate statements...

"But it's not like I hid this from him. I was very upfront with why I wanted to hand over control but not give up the crown. I don't want the damned thing. It's heavy, gives you neck pain if you wear it too long. The lining on the inside is worn so it rubs on your temples and we can't get it fixed because the whole thing is enchanted as much as possible, so fixing the lining would mean redoing all of those as well in the

process, and we don't even know what all of the enchantments on the damned thing DO anymore. The first king of the dwarves didn't right it down because he assumed he'd just tell his heir everything...

"Which would be great, except for the fact he was killed in battle, so he never had the chance," Oditr shook her head to clear it a bit. "Sorry, that's still a bit of a sore spot for me. I don't really know how to talk to my godmother properly after that. The worst part, I think, is that she doesn't hold it against me. She was furious with her son when it came to light and...

"If anything that was worse? Because like, sure this woman helped raise me and she and her husband were basically a second set of parents for me... but it feels like I did something bad, and then watched my brother get punished for it? Or well, I assume that's what this feels like, not having siblings obviously."

παΠδαςNovel.com "Yes..." mumbled Burnice. "His court case was rather famous wasn't it. I'd mostly forgotten it now, but I actually had to do a report on it for one of my dwarven history classes. I'm not sure I did the report well... I can't remember it much, but yes, I remember the event you were talking about. So... no attempts to hand off power after that?"

Oditr nodded and said, "Yes. I wish I could justify it. I mean, Auctifer and Titania manage. Ulf... well he just said 'here wife this is your problem now' and she happened to love the job... but hmm... maybe I need to find someone who wants to be in charge of the country AND understands what that means, marry them, and then go hide in my workshop. Hmm... it seems I need to think about marriage once again,"

Ok. I feel like I have questions about that line of reasoning, but I don't know if it's polite to ask them.

[DO IT!] Lily decided to egg on Kat. She was curious what these questions actually were.

[Chapter 1222 1222 Marriage Plan Failed](#)

"That has to have come up before, right?" asked Kat. "I mean... you're older than us and have had this marriage thing as an active part of your life for at least a decade so it's a bit hard to imagine you're only now considering the idea properly. What turned things around so fast?"

"Oh that's quite simple," said Oditr, "I hadn't considered from the perspective of just handing everything over. At first, it was more about not having anyone that I love. My grandparents married for love, Thyme constantly marries for love. Really the only person I'm close to that hasn't is Titania, and possibly my parents? I've never actually asked them. What I didn't think about was Ulf. He didn't marry for love, he married first and love came later.

"Still, I realised that wasn't necessarily in the cards for me quite some time ago so I started to consider it more from the angle of 'if I had to marry someone who could I trust' but I realise now that I don't actually need to trust them all that much. I just need to find someone that wants the best for the kingdom, and likes politics. Marry them, and then say 'well have a go'. As long as they don't completely screw up, it could work..."

"I feel like you'd start to creep back into their business as soon as they did something you thought wasn't good for the kingdom," said Marigold. When Oditr turned a raised eyebrow to Marigold, the elf

continued. "Look, not to say that you don't want to retire, or don't wish you could do something other than rule, because obviously you'd like a break... but at least for now it seems like you're going strong.

"The real problem, is the weight of responsibility. You've been carrying it for a long time. At this point, even if you intend to give it all over to someone else... I imagine you'll still feel responsible for it all. It might take you years or even decades to get to the point where you can just accept that you don't have to keep the whole kingdom together anymore,"

"Surely it wouldn't be that bad," said Oditr. "I'm usually bored in meetings, I don't always pay attention when ambassadors come and visit, and I've been trying to find more ways to get free time for years at this point. In fact, I probably spend too much of my free time looking for more and not enough of my free time enjoying it, but that's beside the point. Why would I want to go back to working if I can avoid it?"

"Right..." said Marigold clearly not believing Oditr. Marigold let the word hang in the air for a few moments as she tried to think of the best example for Oditr to understand. It took a minute, but she had a lightbulb moment. "Ok, I've got it. Oditr would you say you're perfect?"

"No, of course not, what kind of silly question is that?" asked Oditr.

"Look, just humour me for a bit, ok?" asked Marigold. When Oditr nodded she continued. "So you agree you're not perfect, so anyone you try to find to replace you won't be either. Correct?"

"Yeah... where are you going with this?" asked Oditr.

"I AM getting there trust me. So you're not perfect. Your replacement isn't perfect. We've established that. Now... how well did you do when you first started ruling?" asked Marigold.

Oditr sighed, still not seeing where Marigold was going. She decided to just humour the elf until she finally got to the fucking point. "It wasn't easy, but I had my parents there to help me a lot. The cabinet was mostly old guard as well. I didn't exactly go about replacing them all, but quite a lot of them wanted to retire with my parents so it happened. They did stick around for a while though, so it wasn't too bad. I only caused a few diplomatic incidents. Nothing major,"

Marigold smiled and said, "Of course. It's nothing to worry about... except... what happens when your replacement starts making mistakes? Do you just... let them go about it?"

Oditr shook her head, "No of course I don't. I had my parents to help me so I'd help them out at least a bit at the start. Why?" **novelnext.com**

Marigold made a 'slow-down' motion with her hands. "So you'd stick around as an advisor for at least a little while... how many hours do you think an advisor works?"

"Depends on the subject... but I guess around the same amount of time as me? They do need to double check all my work after all, at least for a bit," said Oditr. I think you should take a look at pandasnovel.com

"Right, so you'd have stepped down from ruling, handed it over to someone you only sort of trust with the understanding you'd quickly stop ruling and allow them to take over. That way there's no betrayal or

anything. Then you stick on as an advisor until they're comfortable... but how long is that? And when would they start to think you're reneging on the deal?" asked Marigold.

"What do you mean?" asked Oditr, even though she was starting to work it out. The confirmation would still be useful though.

"Well if they were brought on as your husband or wife to avoid political issues... but you promise them you don't want to run the country anymore... then you advise them for decades... they might start to think either that you just wanted someone to do all the paperwork, or make the public appearances or heck, maybe just act as assassin fodder. It'd probably get messy," said Marigold.

Oditr let her head rest on the edge of the table so her hair wouldn't end up in her food. Once situated she let out a pained groan before sitting back up and saying, "Yeah... should've known there was going to be a problem with that. You're right I would totally do that. I don't like to think of myself as super controlling... but my kingdom is important to me. It's basically like my child in a way.

"Which... is weird as all heck to say out loud let alone acknowledge. Now that you've laid it out for me, I've got no idea how I'd ever be able to just hand it over. I've probably had this realisation before, but it's certainly sinking in this time. How the hell did my parents do that? Just... up and hand everything over to their daughter?"

Marigold shrugged, "How should I know? I only know so much about how hard it is to step down from things because like half of my family is constantly complaining about how hard it is to retire. I think it's more of an in-joke then a serious complaint at this point, but I still hear it all the time. As far as I can tell Dad isn't planning to retire anytime soon and I don't think he's grooming anyone to take over yet... I mean, we've still been given some lessons. Mostly as a 'just in case' type deal you know? If something happened... well... you know. Actually do you? What's your plan for if you end up in a coma or... something,"

"I'm... not entirely sure I should answer that one Marigold," said Oditr after a moment of thought.

"That's really close to 'military secrets' type of deal. I mean, we have a plan, obviously, but I probably shouldn't share it,"

Marigold shrugged and said, "That's fine. I'm not sure if I should've told you what our plan is, but it's not exactly a major secret. All the kids are trained at least somewhat in our mother's jobs should the worst happen, then we're also trained a bit about being king, but like, not too much. Though maybe that's just because I'm so young. Perhaps my older siblings got the training,"

"I can't say," said Oditr.

Marigold raised an eyebrow, "Wait a second... do you already KNOW?"

Oditr grinned back, "Of course I do Marigold. Remember, little sister of the group. I know all sorts of things I really shouldn't. Heck, I know more about Auctifer and Titania then they know about each other. They both try to keep things a bit more professional with each other. Though in the case of Ulf... urgh,"

Oditr winced. "It's probably something that should've come up back when we were going over him, and it sort of did... but there was no plan for if something happened to him. I'd guess there might've been

one millennia ago right back at the start of his reign... but they never made a new one later on. It's probably another of the many reasons that the kingdom is doing so poorly without him,"

Marigold winced and said, "Yeah that does sound like something that would happen to Ulf. He wouldn't have wanted to make that sort of plan, and I know his wife wouldn't either... so I guess it never got done, or if it did, the guy who did it died, and the plan fell apart as well,"

Oditr nodded, "Ulf became a constant, and nobody knew what to do when he left,"

[Chapter 1223 1223 Hard March](#)

Another short break to eat went around. Mostly for Oditr again. Kat and Lily had both long since finished their own portions at this point though. Oditr was still eating, but Kat was getting annoyed by the silence. It was a meal with everyone, it wasn't meant to be so quiet at the dinner table, especially not where everyone was sharing a meal like this. Despite Kat's desire for some conversation, Oditr obviously deserved the chance to enjoy her meal before all the good stuff was gone, so instead Kat asked a question of someone else. "Hey March, I hope this isn't a weird question, but... well really it's two questions.

"The first is how did you manage to get so many muscles? Most people that raise their level of strength don't seem to bother with normal muscles. I mean, look at me, I can barely see the muscles I apparently have but I'm exceptionally strong physically. The second question is, why go to all the effort? Not to say it isn't worth it, or that you shouldn't strive for it, just that once again, nobody else seems to bother so it can't be something easy,"

March finished off the slice of meat she had in front of her, Kat had lost track of exactly what number it was. Once that was done, March took a quick drink then started to explain. "I would imagine that at least some of my success can be attributed to my parents. Both mother and father were exceptionally large individuals compared to the human norm, and if their stories are to be believed, this has continued in both of their families for quite a number of generations.

"Even still, I am an obvious outlier that has gone above and beyond my own parents in terms of muscle mass, and possibly overall strength. It has been some time since I competed with my Ma and Pa, so I can't rightly say who remains stronger. They managed to peak at the top of Rank 2 when they were out adventuring, but found they could not push higher.

"My father blamed it on his lack of talent for magic, as even if you don't use mana for spells it is still quite important for reinforcing yourself internally. All the strongest individuals are, arguably, mages of some kind even if they can be more physically inclined than the robe wearing stereotype that image presents.

"My mother on the other hand... lost her leg to a particularly nasty curse in an old tomb. The cost to heal it was exorbitant. Allegedly, not outside of my parents' budget at the time, but certainly more than they were willing to pay so instead they retired and had me. Father now works as a logger, abusing the fact that he can carry the logs single handedly to make extra money, while my mother took a break to raise me, and now works at the sawmill moving things around. She uses a sturdy wooden replacement for now.

"Of course, that may sound like a physically demanding job, and it is, but both of my parents insist that their strength has dwindled over the years. It was still greater than mine last time we compared, at least in the arms... but it has been over a year since our last gathering. Perhaps I should visit them soon..."

March trailed off, having gotten rather distracted from the actual question Kat had asked about her muscles to talk about family. Kat wasn't particularly surprised, nor annoyed. It seemed family was a popular subject at this table for some reason. It kept coming back to that when Odir was speaking, and what little other conversation there had been tended to revolve around it as well. Marigold being the main example of this.

Burnice, used the break to ask, "Do you plan to heal your mother's leg if you win the contest?"

March shook her head somewhat sadly, "No I'm afraid not. She'd never accept it. I know this, because I saved up my money judiciously to get hire a healer for her... but I was shot down rather harshly. A lot of talk about how I was just starting out, and I could use that money for equipment. That her time in the field was done, and she didn't regret leaving it to start a family... as well as a few jokes about making the family a bit larger now I'm out of the house. nOvelnext.coM

"Which of course, only made it worse when I found out a short time later I didn't even have enough money. I still get teased about that whenever I speak to my mother or receive letters from her. So I can just imagine the sort of tongue lashing I'd get if I ever tried to use my favour for winning this whole thing to get her healed. Heck, I wouldn't be surprised if Ma chopped her leg off again afterwards, just because she's stubborn like that."

Marigold, Lily and Burgandy winced at the mental image. While Kat was mostly unphased. Apparently her sense of pain and consideration for maiming had been twisted. Woops. On the other hand, Burnice just nodded, "I can understand that perspective on things. I do not feel the need to heal my own wounds after so much time. Perhaps one day, when I am looking to finish up my adventures I will heal everything. Perhaps not. I think you should take a look at

"For now they serve as a good reminder, as well as a great test of who is worth spending time with or not. So many see my burns and pity me, or recoil in horror. I do not waste time with such fools,"

"Well... I do still have some hope," said March. "I plan to become so strong and successful that I can use the excuse that healing her is pocket change. Which... is a big ask, and while I'm confident I can get there one day... one day might not exactly be fast enough. My parents aren't that old, and with Rank 2 under their belts it's not like they're going to die of old age quickly... but growing in power and gaining that sort of wealth isn't a quick thing either,"

Let's not mention the fact I got to Rank 3 with no effort in less than a year. Woops.

[Yeah. Let's.]

"So... this is all fascinating," said Marigold, "And I love that we've got a bunch of interesting backstories between us all," Burgandy went to speak up, "Yes we'll be going over yours later Burgandy, I'm sure you've got at least one interesting thing in your past. That being said, I am also curious as to how you managed to get muscles like that. I train constantly, but the nature of my regeneration means that it's more likely to compact my muscles. When they fix themselves, they're also being constantly bathed in mana, so it's not exactly a surprise, but I still wonder how you manage... well that,"

March nodded and said, "Yes, I have indeed strayed from Kat's question, though that was not my intention,"

"It's fine I liked hearing about your parents," cut in Kat.

"Be that as it may," continued March. "Part of the answer, is as I said, my parents. So I was already predisposed to gaining muscle like this. The other, is that I always idolised my parents as a kid, much more than normal. I wanted to be big and strong like they were. Even after they'd insisted that they weren't the strongest around, that wasn't entirely my goal, even as a kid.

"So I started to work out, and I didn't see the gains in muscle I was hoping for. My parents assured me this was because I was five at the time. I really should've listened, but I kept trying. Eventually I found out that I have steam affinity... and that I'm perfectly capable of using that affinity to expand my muscles.

"It hurt quite a lot at the start. My body wasn't used to it, and honestly? I was probably doing the technique wrong. Assuming there was a right way to do it at all of course. Anyway, practising that technique alongside my regular workouts seems to encourage thicker and more numerous muscle fibre growth. On top of that, it helped stretch my skin around the correct areas so that it wasn't putting as much pressure on my muscles. I assume it also had the secondary effect of making sure my body didn't decide my muscles NEEDED to be compressed while I gained strength.

"Of course, now I'm at Rank 2, I'm quite sure they've been compressed a good deal, but I still have my large size. It does come with upsides and downsides of course, like everything does. The main downside is my lacking agility. Not to say I'm slow, or that I lack agility, just that my muscles do not compress and bend like the muscles of others. Though... I can offset that little detriment by pumping steam aspected mana through my body, increasing my power and speed so in real fights it isn't an issue,"

[Chapter 1224 1224 Lily Starts An Argument](#)

"I can't help but feel that really isn't how things are supposed to work," said Lily. "I mean, our bodies just aren't designed to work that way. Sure mana can make things go a bit wonky... but I just find it really hard to believe. Not to say you're lying. I'm quite new to mana myself, so I'm probably wrong... but just from the outside looking in, it doesn't seem like it should work that way,"

March shrugged and said, "I didn't exactly intend for things to turn out the way they did. Even if I was looking for bigger muscles, I had no idea my steam affinity would be such a big boost. In fact, it is partially a guess that it's my steam causing it... but I see no other obvious reason, and it makes sense to me,"

Marigold jumped in with, "More powerful people tend to be more... striking as well. Not necessarily more beautiful, but mana does seem to enhance their features in mostly subtle ways. Though of course, the person in question tends to like the changes, and a lot of people think that's part of the reason,"

Oditr cut in with, "But there's a fair bit of proof things don't work that way consistently. There is also the theory that as one gets more aligned with their element, they take on physical properties in line with it, and while that does happen sometimes, it's far from common,"

Marigold counter with, "But it does tend to happen in the most powerful. Ulf, doesn't have a single wrinkle on his face despite his old age, likely because of his regeneration affinity. I mean, look at all the fae running around. Their hair colour normally gives away their affinity. Even if it can sometimes be wrong, it's usually not. That proves mana, and your affinity has to have at least some affect on the body,"

"Fae might just be naturally susceptible to that sort of mana meddling," added Oditr.

Oh dear. You seem to have really kicked off something here Lily.

[Well it's not like I'm turning into paper or something. So I felt the question was warranted.] noVelnext.cOm

Lily, you're nearly as pale as I am and your hair looks like it's starting to absorb light. Let's not even get into the fact that your shadow seems darker than everyone else's. Your appearance is already being affected by your affinities. Sure I might be exaggerating a bit... but not by much.

[Oh. Um... oops?]

Oops indeed. Are you going to step in to slow this argument down?

[No? That would require me getting involved and while I might have magical powers now, dealing with social stuff can still be a bit nerve wracking and I'd really rather just... not get in the middle of all that.]

Kat took a drink to hide the fact she was rolling her eyes but didn't say anything to counter Lily. People at the table were already saying enough. "Hmm... it's an interesting idea certainly," said Burnice, "I wonder if my scars have gotten more shocking over time? It's not something I've ever consider. Furthermore, would my wind affinity make them less or more obvious over time?"

"That's not how it's supposed to work," said Oditr.

"I don't see why not," retorted Marigold. "I did say 'more striking' not 'more beautiful' no offence Burnice. I love you, platonically of course..."

"Of course," said Burnice with a roll of her eyes, not unaware that Marigold would drag her off to the bedroom if she gave so much as a hint she was interested.

"... but you do have noticeable burn scars. Though... yeah I can't really say if they've gotten any more or less noticeable over time. I wonder how it changes things? I mean... those burns aren't really your skin? Or not your natural skin? Would that have any effect on how much the mana changes them?"

"I'm telling you, things aren't so simple. It only happens in rare cases," insisted Oditr.

"And I'm saying that those 'rare cases' are almost always powerful people, or people who become powerful. I'm pretty sure it starts to get more noticeable once we hit Rank 3. March might actually be quite close to Rank 3," returned Marigold.

Does that mean you're getting close to Rank 3 Lily?

[I have no idea. I didn't really notice going up to Rank 2. Or well, I mean. I didn't know I was close until it happened. I don't know that I could tell how close I was even if I knew what I was looking for, and I certainly don't know what I'm looking for.]

Hmm... might be something to keep in mind. Perhaps you're closer than you think.

[I haven't properly mastered the spells at my current level, I really don't need more things to lean just yet, and I can leave the stuff that really needs power to you.]

"Well, it's not I've changed all that much in appearance," said Odir. I think you should take a look at

"Could be because you have multiple affinities?" offered Marigold. "Actually... I don't even know what your affinities ARE, so it's hard to say if that matters. Hmmm..."

"It's not that big of a secret, but my affinities are ice and metal," explained Odir.

"Huh, I would've expected fire or something," said Marigold.

Odir nodded and explained, "Yeah nobody is quite sure where I got the ice affinity from. I'm the only person in my family with it. Well, unless you count that one husband of a cousin of mine. Still, he's not related to me, he just married into the family. It's also not like he's particularly strong either. Oh, and I'm older than him. So really he can't have anything to do with it. Metal is somewhat common, even if earth is more so,"

"How would ice or metal even change your looks though?" asked Kat.

"What do you mean?" asked Marigold.

"Is it possible that it's at least partially mental? Even if the mana helps, if you don't KNOW what someone with ice, or metal, or whatever affinity it is SHOULD look like nothing changes? Could part of the reason March's technique works, and has such an influence on her body and looks just be because she thinks it's appropriate?"

Marigold and Odir both thought about Kat's suggestion. Odir was the first one to speak, "How would you even go about confirming or testing such a thing?"

Kat shrugged and said, "I'm not a scientist, I hit things. I just thought the idea might be worth thinking about. I have no idea how the heck you'd test something like that,"

Lily jumped in, because she DID have an idea, "Well I think it would be quite easy. Simply start using pictures of powerful mages with specific affinities and see if over time more and more people start to look like they do. If everyone has the same thing in mind when they think 'wind mage' or whatever, it should be self-reinforcing.

"Because the wind mages, assuming it's correct, would start to look similar. See that they look similar, and then start looking even more similar, or obviously similar at least. Assuming of course, that Kat's guess is correct,"

"Is that something we should be doing though?" asked Burgandy. "Seems a bit like fucking with peoples minds,"

Lily shrugged, "We're not telling them they have to look a certain way, or that they SHOULD look a certain way... just subtly saying that they can I guess? I doubt it would work on anyone who didn't want to pick up those traits anyway,"

"Still not something I think we should be doing," insisted Burgandy.

Marigold shrugged and said, "Honestly I could probably talk dad into testing it without much trouble. He'd probably be interested in the results... but it wouldn't really work with elves. We breed too slowly, so even if it did work, it'd probably only work on a few individuals and be forgotten quickly,"

"So humans then?" offered Burnice.

"Urgh, we won't be able to convince them to do anything like that. They'll think we're trying to undermine them somehow," said Oditr.

"To be fair, making all of their mages look the same so they were easily identifiable IS undermining them," offered Marigold.

I feel as though this topic has gotten out of hand somewhat.

[Yeah... somehow we want from, why I thought, was a perfectly innocent question to potentially manipulating the human population as an experiment to determine how much affinities shape a persons appearance. Is it weird I don't think it's a bad idea?]

I'm... not sure. I don't think it's a bad idea either... the results would be really interesting to know and I'm sure the information could be used for something. Maybe it's because we don't care about the humans as a kingdom just as people? I mean, I probably care more about the dwarven kingdom because I know Oditr cares.

[Yeah that could be it. I'm not sure how we'd test something like that, but you very much could be right.]

[Chapter 1225 1225 Burgandy's Backstory](#)

"So, now that we've finished that little debate," said Marigold, ignoring Oditr's rolling eyes, "I'm curious about your backstory Burgandy. I'm sure it's interesting,"

"I'm not sure I agree with you," said Burgandy with a wave of her mug-filled hand. "It's a touch complicate without knowing all the facts so just keep listening, I promise I WILL get to explaining everything.

"The first thing you should know about me is that I planned to stay a solo adventurer," Marigold, Burnice and Oditr looked shocked at this, while March obviously knew, while Kat and Lily didn't have the context to know why that was supposed to be shocking, "Sure it's dangerous, but I felt the increase in pay, and the extra danger was actually worth it.

"I'm sure you've all noticed I'm not exactly a people person. I've known a whole lot of fae growing up that never believed I had an earth affinity. I was constantly angry as a child, and I still am to some extent. I'm not even sure why, I just WAS. Fighting was how I blew off steam.

"My parents tried desperately to find something else for me to occupy my time. I've tried painting, a whole slew of instruments various sports and I even know how to sew. My parents threw me at just about every potential hobby they could think of... and it just didn't work. I loved to take my anger at... well everything? The world? Whatever you want to call it, I would throw that energy at anything, or anyone that seemed to be looking for a fight.

"Did you know I won a fight with a giant hawk when I was seven? My parents were horrified, I nearly died in the attempt, but it was the happiest I'd ever felt in my life. Though admittedly I'm quite lucky my great-grandmother is both alive and a healer. She patched me up for free... the first time. Every time after that she'd force me to do chores if I came to see her for injuries.

"Which of course, as a younger woman just made me angrier but I still DID it. The one time I really complained grandma whooped my ass so quickly I didn't even realise I was beaten until I was tied up on a chair facing the wall. Of course, she couldn't just beat me into the ground as punishment, I'd have probably risked angering her for a chance to fight... even if I was going to lose.

"No the punishment was to sit there, tied to a chair and stare at the wall... for hours. It felt like weeks for me at the time, and grandma never told me exactly how long the punishment was for. Just gave me a long straw attached to a cup and told me to sit there and not move. Then she silenced the chair, so she couldn't hear me complaining,"

Marigold looked like she really wanted to ask a question, but recognised Burgandy had asked not to be interrupted. Marigold was debating asking anyway when Burgandy answered, what was apparently her question, "Yes, indeed I did... soil myself more than once on that chair. I was board and drank all the water... which kept getting filled up. So I drank it again, anything to stave off the boredom. It was mortifying later... but next time I was on the chair? Well... I was really that bored."

That's... kinda gross. And I 'say this' as someone who had to clean up all sorts of things at an orphanage filled with children.

[I'm not saying I disagree... but I've read about studies where people left alone in a room where there's just a button that shocks you. People eventually start pushing the button, even though all it does is cause pain because being in pain is less... I was going to say 'painful' but that's obviously not the right word. I suppose it is less against the human condition to be in pain, then to be bored.]

Burgandy isn't human though, she's a fae.

[Yes well clearly it implies to all sentient creatures.]

Mint has said before, dryads literally can't get bored.

[Ok, so maybe it's a bit more nuanced than I was laying it out, but you get the point.] I think you should take a look at

Kat just smiled as she turned back to Burgandy, distracted enough to put that previous bit of information out of her mind. "So yeah, I can't say I was particularly normal child, or a normal teenager. Some days, I think the only reason I managed to pass school was because if they failed me they'd have to put up with me for another year. I'd get into fights all the time,

"Now, I want to be clear, I wasn't bullying any kids. That shit is boring. I tried it once after I saw some older dude bullying this little boy my age, but it was just... boring. I mean, they didn't even try to fight back after I punched them once. So I picked bigger targets... until they graduated.

"Then I tried fighting with the teachers. Man I loved the athletics instructor. That woman was the best. She'd fight me any time of day, no matter when I jumped her, and beat me into the ground. Enough to hurt, but not enough to need healing. Truly, it is what made that school bearable. I should really send her a letter. She deserves that much... maybe some gold.

"Anyway, for me, things turned around when my cousin, who's really more like my brother, got married to Willow's older sister. Hmm... what to explain first. Right, so for my cousin. His parents died, and he's only a touch older than me so my parents decided to take him in instead of having another kid themselves.

"So we're more like siblings, but we're technically cousin. Anyway, he's a lot calmer than me, and my parents are merchants. So we've got a decent amount of money, mostly built off the back of my grandparent's who took the starting capital great-grandma's healing provided them and really got our company off the ground.

"We're the biggest supplier of medical herbs in the entire fae kingdom. We also do good business in some of the beast, and human kingdoms but not really the elvish or dwarven. Anyway, enough bragging. So, thing is, Willow's family are semi-important nobles from the human kingdom but they aren't exactly doing so well financially... they also only had daughters in a traditionally patriarchal house. So they were looking for a husband that would do decently amongst the nobility and could give them an injection of money.

"Well, it just so happens that while my cousin, his name is Midori, by the way, well he was with one of our caravans while traveling through their lands. He was acting as the manager, because god knows I'm not taking after my parents and running the business. When Willow's family saw him? Well they tried to snatch him straight up. They really needed the help apparently.

"Midori turned them down though. Said he was only interested in marrying for love. You see, he'd just met this lovely human woman while he was in the previous town and despite only seeing her a few times things were already pretty serious. So the parents are arguing with him about this, and then suddenly, Willow's sister, Aspen, is literally thrown into the room by the head maid... you'll never guess who it was though?"

"I feel like we very much can," bit out Odir.

Burgandy nodded, "Yeah I mean, it wouldn't be such a crazy story otherwise? Needless to say, my bro was no longer complaining about the marriage. So that was all fine and good. I was off adventuring by myself, when I get this letter from my parents that they need to discuss something with me back at home. I wasn't too far away, just a few towns over. So of course I come see what's up.

"Well, it turns out that Willow was looking to become part of an adventuring team, but they only had four members. I wasn't interested at all... but my parents more or less tricked me into it. Looking back, it really wasn't hard for them to do it. I fell for the bait hook line and sinker. It was probably in my best interest. *noVēlnext.com*

"March has really helped me out with my anger problems. She's normally down for a fight... but if I ever got too angry? She'd just sit on me while lifting weights so I couldn't get up. It has surprisingly helped me calm down quite a lot. I'm still not the most stable person, and Thyme's nonsense about 'having a relaxing tournament round' has been really grinding my gears. I'd much rather fight but... well... you don't say that to someone like Thyme, not when they're in charge. So... I'm trying my best to relax. It's going... alright,"

Fascinating. I wonder how long she's been with the team? I mean, she can't be that old. So I wonder how long she was off fighting things by herself? And when she decided to join up with everyone else on her team?

[Chapter 1226 1226 Marching By Their Side](#)

Something odd clicked in Lily's mind once Burgandy was finished. "Hey March... if Burgandy's got a healer in the family why didn't your Mum go and see her?"

March waved Lily off, "I did see her. That's why I was under the 'mistaken' impression I'd gathered enough money. I suppose it was clear to the old woman I wasn't going to just accept a handout, because apparently I'm a bit too much like my mother... so they quoted me what I thought was a ridiculously high price.

"When I eventually made all that money... well I found out that it wasn't enough. Sure the old lady probably still would've done it, she was the one to give me the quote after all... but my mother still wasn't willing to accept it. Which is stupid, in my opinion... but I wasn't sure Burgandy would want me mentioning it, and I was... somewhat embarrassed myself because it took me a bit of time to even think about asking her to heal my mother,"

"Why wouldn't Burgandy want to talk about it?" asked Lily.

Marigold looked ready to jump in, but so did Burnice and Odir. Apparently this was something that was really obvious for everyone else. They girls all looked at each other with Burnice shrugging first and waving her chance away. Odir and Marigold stared at each other for a bit before Odir scoffed and went back to her food. "Awesome, I just won a staring contest with the dwarf queen!" said Marigold happily. Everyone else rolled their eyes.

"Right, so now that I'm secure in my victory I can explain. The basic reason is that healers are... kinda weak. Your friend Nixilei? She's really weird for being that strong. Healers are already rare, but healers that can defend themselves? Even more so. For some reason, a lot of healers don't ever learn to fight, though if they do dedicate themselves to healing they tend to get to higher ranks earlier than other affinities. *nOvelNext.coM*

"The problem of course, is that it doesn't matter what rank you are if you've never been in a fight. Plus, healing yourself is always a bit wonky for some reason. You need regeneration affinity for that. So with those two facts combined it's sort of seen as a taboo to announce you've got a healer in the family. It's basically like shouting to the world that you've got an undefended chest full of gold just sitting under your floorboards.

"Now, it's not always that bad. Healers also usually manage to get a few favours from powerful people. So it's not like they're completely helpless... but it's really not something you spread around you know?"

That makes sense. I can follow the logic there. Though I would've thought that being Rank 3 would make her pretty safe.

[I think it's a bit like telling people you have a gun but not actually knowing how to use it. Anyone who decides to attack you ANYWAY is coming in expecting a close fight so they'll shoot to kill you straight away instead of going into a stand-off because they've got the weapon.]

Ok... I can sort of see it? I guess my perspective is too skewed. With my regeneration and power... honestly I'm not sure a normal bullet would hurt me anymore, even without my regeneration. Actually... how tough IS my skin these days?

[Don't you dare.]

Fine.

"Thank you for that," said Lily. "Though... now I have another question. If Burgandy didn't join till later, how did you end up on their team March?" I think you should take a look at

March sighed and said, "It's a bit of a sad story, nobody died luckily, but it is the story of how a young couple had their dreams destroyed. I believe I mentioned that my father and mother worked for the sawmill, yes?" March received a round of nods, "Good. The town in question is just called 'Loggermill' because we have a deal with a dryad to come around and replenish the forests every time we cut down all the trees in exchange for a share of the profits.

"While that's nice, it's not enough for a town to form by itself. That being said, there was a lot of open space nearby and so farmers moved in. This was all long before I was born so I don't know the specifics. Still, it's a small town that doesn't actually have too many families that live there. A lot of the lumberjacks come out for a few months, then head back to nearby cities and towns where their family live.

"It's considered a decent source of income for the off-season of the harvest. A lot of the lumberjacks are sons of farmers you see? It's also probably why we've got a few farms around town. Anyway, my father knew about my goal of gaining strength and heard from his colleagues that two teenagers were starting up an adventuring party, and that I might like to join them.

"I had no problem with this, so I did. I was... thirteen at the time? No wait... I might have just turned fourteen? It's not important. Anyway, I met up with them and talked. They had such big dreams. They wanted to form a big mercenary company, lead by two main teams. One lead by the guy, one by the girl. They were also dating at the time, and for some reason thought it would be romantic.

"For some reason, I didn't think there would be any problems joining a party consisting of just myself and a couple, but it wasn't actually that bad. It could've been, but that was never the problem. The issue was that there was only three of us, and the town was small. So first, we started to do 'adventurer jobs' around town. Which was really just whatever we could get paid for.

"You know, basic stuff. Taking wagons of food across town. Helping move the harvest into storage, fixing up various problems around town. Honestly, I was more of a carpenter and labourer than an adventurer

for the first year. Eventually we saved up enough money to rent a room in the inn at a nearby town. The idea was, from there we could do proper jobs.

"Which... eh? I guess so. The teens, they were called Alex and Alice by the way, were just farmers with big dreams. They kept wanting to push forward. To actually 'do something' but I was pretty content with the jobs we had. I was getting stronger and earning money. That was all I needed. I was even managing to perfect my 'Steam Engine' technique but they wanted to leave so I went with them,"

"Job quality didn't really improve. I struck an intimidating figure, and I could take out a lot of low level problems with a good kick... but those kids..." March sighed. "Alice and Alex had big dreams... but no training, and a drive for all the wrong things. They were rarely training with their weapons, instead focusing on trying to guess magical sigils so they could be sword mages," March shook her head.

"I doubt you'd know Lily, but we're tested for that sort of thing. If you can actually become a mage? Some lord is willing to finance your education for a few years of service. They were never going to get it... but they had a dream yes? A powerful thing for the foolish," March slowly licked her dry lips as she tried, and failed, to prevent herself from sighing once again.

"One day... one day one of the older adventurers said to Alex, 'hey kids, you want a real mission?' and poor Alex missed the sadistic gleam in his eyes. I saw it, and asked 'Why are you handing it over?' and he explained 'One of my team members got sick so we can't... but if you can? Then our record will stay clean' which... heck might've even be true, but it was just an excuse.

"I tried to warn Alex but... well... he said that him and Alice had a dream. That they were going on this mission with or without me, and I had to make the choice," March sighed again. "Gotta stop sighing. Anyway, for some reason those two thought I was older then they were. Probably the muscles and the height. Now... despite my younger age... it's not like I could just let the two of them go and get themselves killed now could I?"

"The mission was allegedly simple. A pack of wild wolves had been causing problems for the merchants along on of the roads out of town. Someone else had been paid to scout out their lair already. So we just had to follow the map. Find the wolves... and then take them out? Alice and Alex were convinced it would be simple. That half the work was done for us. That it would be easy...

"Those fools never stopped to ask two important questions. Why is it, that merchants with GUARDS needed someone else to deal with the wolves? The other question they forgot? Was to ask how many wolves we were likely to be dealing with..."

[Chapter 1227 1227 Packed To The Brim](#)

"I can finish the story if you want March, you've told me before," offered Burgandy.

March shook her head and said, "No. It's my story and I will end it. I am not so much hurt by it... as I am sad about what it means. I didn't exactly go into the details, but Alex and Alice were my friends. Sometimes I would feel like a third wheel of course, or their mother... but they were good people. Still are probably, I once again, I don't mean to imply their dead or anything...

"But sometimes I wonder if that would almost be better. I'll get to that part later I suppose. It's... perhaps it's really rude of me to think it would be better. They just ended up so resigned after the mission. Anyway, my point was that... they mean a lot to me those two. I never cared for the adventuring profession all that much. It just seemed like the most convenient way to become strong.

"I still don't know if staying an adventurer for the rest of my life is what I want, but I at least feel as though I'm doing good work. It doesn't exactly take much to keep me content but I no longer feel just 'content' with my duties these days. So there is that. Alas, I'm letting my thoughts wander. Perhaps I can convince you what I truly mean as I go... perhaps not. I have never been the best with words."

She seems fine with words to me? Is the translation magic helping her out or something?

[No idea? Perhaps she's just being overly humble?]

Kat shrugged mentally as March continued with her story. "The cave they were operating out of was about three and a half days out by horse. Not something we had, so it was going to be quite a journey. We loaded up our camping gear as usual and set out. I carried all of my own provisions, plus a few extras, while Alex and Alice split the rest evenly. Not the fairest system perhaps but well... strength training," March said with a shrug. "So that was no problem.

"Then we set off. I could've probably made it in less than three days if I was pushing myself... but we needed to stay fresh in case of wolf attacks, and we were all still Rank 1. So we got to walking. It took us five days to reach the spot in question, but didn't encounter any problems on the road. Which was lucky, because this really was one of the first missions we were all taking out in anything approaching the wilds. We didn't even set up a watch schedule.

"A mistake, but not one we paid for, or even realised we'd made. Sure I had some advice from my parents... but I hadn't paid as much attention to the extra stuff honestly. Not sure if it would've helped here. I really did try to talk them out of it. Anyway, we made it to the marker on the road we'd been looking for. It was a rather obvious painted red line on a tree. Then we just had to follow the arrows for a bit.

"Took us... about two hours I want to say? From there we were downwind, luckily, of the cave and up on a bit of a hill a good distance away. Didn't see any wolves around, so we weren't too worried. That was probably a mistake as well. Anyway, after a bit of debate, it was decided that we'd sneak into the cave while the sun was in the sky,"

March sighed once again. "So before we get into that, let me go over our equipment. For a weapon I had a decent hammer. Not perfectly balanced, not the sturdiest... but damn heavy and good at it's job. Especially for Rank 1. As for armour? I had horribly bulky steel armour that hindered my movement massively. It was poor quality, but it did protect me well. Much harder to fight in... but I wanted to use it, in part, for strength training. It was a shit suit of armour, probably not worth the price I paid for it if I'm being honest...

"But it is certainly the reason everyone lived through the encounter. I likely would've survived myself. I could've run at any time, and perhaps, if circumstances were different I would've. I like to imagine I'm not such a coward, that I wouldn't run, that I'd fight to the end... but I was younger back then. Much less disciplined, and in the face of true death? Who can say what I'd have done.

"Alex, and Alice on the other hand, both had swords. Alex had this bastard sword, one and half hands, and much too big for the guy. Insisted on it though, and I didn't know enough about weapons to know just how poorly suited to it he was. Another mistake added to the pile I guess. Alice on the other hand, she had a rapier. Not because she favoured the weapon, but because the others were too heavy for her. I think you should take a look at

"Now, I don't begrudge her that. Training for speed instead of strength isn't my path, but it is one I know to be valid... but not if you refuse to train up your strength at all and your weapon is low quality. Damn thing snapped like a twig in the fight. We'll get to that... but needless to say I was disappointed with it, and the smith we bought it from might've had a freak accident where a nearby tree fell on his house. Odd that.

March shook her head, "Getting sidetracked again. Armour... right as for armour they barely had any. It was just some leather stuff that looked nice. I'm still not sure how bad it truly was, but the same blacksmith who sold us the sword sold us the armour, and he was no leatherworker. So I wonder why he had it at all. Once again, tree on house. Weird that all the branches were missing..."

"So we entered, one at a time with myself in the lead. Probably should've had a shield. Doubt it would've helped us. As we shuffled deeper into the cave we did spot some sleeping wolves, down in the back of the cavern all curled up together. I don't know what we were thinking when we imagined being able to sneak up on them, but that was the plan.

"A damn beast ambushed us from behind. We didn't notice it, but the cave mouth had a little outcropping at the top and there was a wolf up there waiting for us. It jumped down on Alex and I wasn't fast enough to stop it. If that wolf was smarter, or a human Alex would've died right then and there. Powerful jaws went down on Alex's shoulder crushing it to bits, moments before I obliterated the things head.

"Now, I don't blame Alex for this next part... but he screamed, like the hells themselves were spewing forth demons set to punish him. Err... no offence Kat,"

Kat shrugged, "None taken,"

"Right, so he was screaming, which obviously woke up the other wolves. Alice was frozen with fear and coated with wolf blood, and brains. Not in the right mind to find a pack of wolves, not even half asleep ones still getting up. I was a bit better. I charged straight into the fray, slamming my hammer down on the one closest to me. I tore through those wolves the best I could, but not all of them went after me. There was six of them, and four came for me. I took them out quickly only taking minimal damage in the process, mostly just scrapes on my armour.

"Then I had to go help Alice. She was panicking, wildly waving her sword back and forth but it was keeping the two at bay for the moment. I charged them from behind. Got the first one as it was turning around, and grabbed the second one by the throat as it was going for my own. I slammed that bastard into the ground.

"At some point during the battle, I'd started to use my Steam Engine technique. Steam was pouring out of my armour, my face was red and my blood was burning. I almost felt ready for anything, when I

heard a whimper coming from Alex. We needed to get him to the healers, or at least someone to bandage the wound. Lest he lose the arm,"

"Perhaps it was lucky we'd left out packs behind before we entered, perhaps it would've been better to have some rope to strap him down. Didn't matter, the poor guy passed out from the pain or blood loss not long after. Alice ripped up her undershirt and wrapped it around the wound as best she could... stopped the bleeding for the moment.

"I was getting ready to pick him up... when I heard howling. It was coming from all around us. I sprinted to the cave entrance, and my fears were confirmed. We only got a few wolves that had been back at their base sleeping. Now we had to face the rest of the pack," March bit out, eyes darkly shining.

[Chapter 1228 1228 A Whole Pack Of Problems](#)

The atmosphere around the table was tense. Even knowing that somehow, Alex didn't die, things weren't exactly looking good for the group. March was using this break to carefully sip her water, but everyone else was holding their breath. Crunch.

Everyone's head whipped over to Oditr who looked back at them awkwardly, half of a cracker in her mouth. Oditr finished it in another bite, the sound still quite loud, completely destroying the silence.

"Look, sorry, I get that this is still pretty tense for you guys but it's a bit routine for me. Not that your storytelling isn't excellent, I'm just a bit older than you all. It almost reminds me of one of the adventures I had in my youth. Still... sorry about the noise. Didn't think it would be that loud,"

Marigold just laughed, destroying the lingering tension and the awkwardness that remained. Burgandy and Burnice joined in soon after, followed by Kat. Lily just looked around the table, mood lifted somewhat by Kat's, but not entirely comfortable with the laughter. She was much more worried about how the story would end and didn't relax completely.

She swallowed heavily and asked, hoping to stop the laughter, "So what happened next?" Lily was right the laughter did stop, rather quickly at that.

March blew out a long breath at the question, even going so far as to add a bit of steam to it for added effect. "Well, there was that same silence much like we had. I believe I was talking about how hyped up I felt? That my steam was coursing through my body, buoying my abilities and given my just that much POWER beneath my skin? I still wonder when I turned it on. When it became so automatic. Perhaps I needed a push, perhaps not.

"Still, once I recognised Alex needed help I'd been reducing my steam back down. Slowly letting it seep out so the pressure on me was dropping... only to see a pack of wolves surrounding us. We were penned in on all sides... and there was a big bastard out in front growling at me.

"Unlike the other wolves which were closer in size to big dogs, this one was the size of a carriage. It was easily the same height that I am now, perhaps a bit bigger, and obviously much longer than I am. I could see now why the bloody caravans were having problems with a beast like that. I also knew for certain why that man had looked so sadistic offering us that mission. He'd known. *nOvelnExt.com*

"The bastard had only given us a map and a few extra details. In that moment, I'd realised that he'd kept the fucking mission slip. The one with all the real details about the missions. The one that would've had details like the number of wolves on it. Details like caravan size wolves leading the pack. I swore, in that moment, that if I lived through this? I'd kill the man. The vendetta against the blacksmith came later," added March for levity. Hoping to raise the mood a bit. Didn't really work.

March shrugged and got back to the story, "Alice was shaking in her boots. Pretty sure she was crying too, but all I could hear at that point was the rush of steam. I didn't know if I could live. If I could make it out. I just knew that I needed to kill the bastards first. I might be fast, had I been in top condition I could've outrun a pack of normal wolves any day of the week," March's smile turned hard. "Pretty sure even in top condition I couldn't outrun the something of that size. And we'd just slain a decent chunk of their pack. We weren't getting away.

"So I pushed steam into my limbs. Into my muscles. Into my blood. I let the steam fill me in ways I don't think I'd ever done before that day. It was hellish on my small mana pool but I didn't particularly care. I was fighting for my life, and I wasn't going to run away. I charged at the bastard, and apparently that was enough to set them all off.

"The big guy charged in first, followed by a bunch of the smaller ones as well. Don't even know how many there were. My first swing took out two, almost as an accident while trying to slam the big guy. He dodged of course but I didn't let up. I kept trying to pound away at him, taking out a few more little ones in the process.

"Of course, as they were doing that... a few managed to get passed. Not sure I could've done anything about it, but I could hardly see for the steam coming out of my chest, half blinding me fog. Not sure why, but I can just... see through it now. Wasn't at that point yet, and honestly? I was pretty far into the fight so I'm not sure it really mattered. I think you should take a look at

"I heard Alice scream... and I couldn't turn around. No time. I know from asking her later that she'd blocked a bit from the wolf by shoving her gloved hand in its mouth. Remember those special gloves? Yeah? Turns out they were enchanted and they probably saved her hand. Didn't help when a second wolf came for her. She shoved her sword straight through the things eye... and snapped it in the process.

"Anyway, I didn't know any of that. I'm just pushing myself. My steam, my body. My mind. My everything. It's all locked on this wolf in front of me. Eventually, I fuck up. My boot crunches through a smallish rock I hadn't seen. It was just enough of a distraction for the thing to go for my neck. It bit deep into my armour, and my skin, but that was a mistake. I slammed my hammer into the damn things legs, shattering the bone in one of its front paws and forcing it to let me go.

"It backed up at that point and the little ones dogpiled me. Heh, pun not intended. Lost my hammer at some point, as they just kept coming at me. I was crushing their skulls in between my hands. Breaking their bones with my boots. Slamming my elbow into necks and just taking wolf lives wherever I could.

"Now, I don't know what triggered it. Perhaps I felt the great beast through my steam. Perhaps I smelt its hot breath. Perhaps I heard its approach over my pounding heart and steaming ears. I don't know. The big guy had leapt right at me coming to finish me off... and somehow I MOVED.

"In a burst of steam I jumped not away from the beast... but forward. I went right for the dam things rib cage and tried to rip out the things heart. I urr... went for the entirely wrong side of the body but I DID get a lung, and that was more than enough to bring the big guy down. I then turned to find Alice still struggling with that one wolf she'd caught with her glove.

"She was bashing it on the head with her hand, it was scraping up her legs with its claws. I didn't let it live longer. Not sure if I got all the wolves... some probably ran... but the clearing was empty for now. Alice was still hitting the wolf, even after I killed it. She collapsed down to her knees, crying as she just kept... hitting over and over and over.

"I collapsed at that point, which was enough of a jolt for her to stop. Not sure what she saw when she looked at me in that moment. My armour was horribly bent and cracked. There was a huge hole in it around my neck where the big one took out a chunk... along with some of me shoulder. Still, it was enough. Alice got to work getting me out of my armour, which was nice, and then... she just collapsed.

"I was so shocked at the time... but obviously it was blood less. Her leather pants barely stopped the wolf's claws. Seeing them both collapsed... something changed. I don't know how I managed to stand, but I did. I picked them both up, pulling them up under my arms, despite the pain in my shoulder... and I ran.

"Part of me wanted to pick up the supplies, and maybe that would've been better. I couldn't stop though. Didn't know if I had time... barely remembered where we'd left anything. Plus, even if I did go for the packs... I'm damn near certain I couldn't carry three of them in the condition I was in. Heck, I don't know how I carried the couple as it was.

"So... I ran. I ran back to the road, faced the direction of town... and then kept going. Not sure when it started to happen, but steam started pouring out of me again. Might have helped me... might not have, I... don't really remember the next few hours. Well, I say few hours, but apparently I ran for over a day before someone found me. I don't remember collapsing, but really, that part isn't a surprise,"

[Chapter 1229 1229 Nesting Swallows](#)

Silence reigned, this time nobody was going to break it. Especially after a few glances towards Oditr showed that she was carefully sipping on her fourth or fifth glass of fruit juice just to keep the silence. Then it kept going... and going... and Kat noticed the corner of March's mouth twitching ever so slightly. Deciding to just be the one to go for it, Kat asked, "So what happened next,"

March's mouth stretched into a smile, "I'm glad you asked Kat. Now, keep in mind this is all second hand, told by the people who picked us up. I'm not sure if it's true, but it makes enough sense for me to believe it. Plus, it makes for a good story, which is at least entertaining. Still, keep in mind it might not have happened exactly like this.

"As I said before, I don't remember even reaching these guys, but it was a party of four adventurers. Mostly older types that aren't pushing forward anymore. I can't say what Rank they are. At least two, possibly three... but three seems unlikely. They're more like... the towns main crew. They handle most of the nasty jobs that aren't really for beginners, but not the really bad stuff you'd need to call in outside adventurers for.

"I know this at least, because I asked a few people about the group afterwards. What were they called?" March paused as she flexed her muscles a bit. Kat was assuming it helped March think. Must've worked because after a few seconds the name came to her, "Ah, yes they were called the Nesting Swallows. Apparently they had another name back when they moved around more, but I don't know what it is. Asking about it got me at least three different answers.

"Of the ones I can remember, 'Ranging Swallows' seems the most likely, and 'The Crimson Dragons' seems the least. Especially because I know a semi-famous company called the 'The Ruby Dragons' but maybe they're related to someone in the original team so I can't be certain. Anyway, here's how the story went from their perspective, as according to Evan, their healer.

"So, apparently four days after we left, the guy who sent us off on that mission was bragging to his friends about what he managed and they were all having a good laugh. Steph, the ranger of the Swallows, a half-elf with great hearing and Sound Affinity overheard them and started to really listen to their conversation.

"One of the man's companions pointed out that we were only Rank 1 so we probably hadn't even made it to the wolves yet because we were so weak, and didn't have any horses. They went back and forth for a bit, and Steph managed to get most of the details, at least enough to go to the adventurers guild and ask for more information... which had to wait till morning.

"So morning of the 5th day dawns, and the Swallows go to the guild and start asking for information about the mission... which the guild refuses to give them. Apparently it's against the rules to hand out details of another team's mission. Even when they explain why they want it the guild receptionist won't budge. Ruth, the teams defacto leader and tank apparently reached over and pulled the receptionist off her feet and said 'We've protected this town since before you moved here, probably before you were born. If you can't trust us to help, then why do we keep getting missions?'

"Anyway... apparently that still wasn't enough. Now, according to Evan the Swallows would later learn that the receptionist they were trying to shake down was good friends with Shady Sadist, so it wasn't that they were just following protocol but that they were hoping to protect their friend as well.

"Even informed me that normally the Swallows would go straight to the Guild Master at that point... but he was out of town visiting some of the smaller villages just to check up on things and make sure that everything was running smoothly. So then it became a bit of a bigger deal. The Swallows had to ambush the Shady Guys team, and then dragged them off to the constables office to explain what they'd done, and why they needed help getting the information.

"Unlike the receptionist, the constable was happy to help, and so an hour later, they had the information they needed. It was getting late, and there was a bit of a debate amongst the group about if they should leave right away or not. There was also talk of getting horses, but that would be another complication that might not even save them time.

"Luckily for me and my unconscious companions, they chose to head out immediately. They just ran along the road until they found me. It's hard to tell how long I was running, they didn't really know either but at least twelve hours, probably longer. As soon as I saw them, I collapsed, or so I was told. I'm not entirely sure I believe that part. It seems much more in character for me to have kept running until I

DID collapse and they just picked me up afterwards, but I may have been just that tired that at the first hint of safety I dropped," I think you should take a look at

"Well what happened after that?" asked Marigold.

March sighed at the question, "The aftermath isn't such a happy story... see what the bastard did, sending us on a quest too high level for us? Isn't illegal. Especially because they didn't actually SAY how hard the quest was. Never once did they mislead us about the difficulty... we just didn't ask.

"Which is still enough for them to pay a fine, and because of the Swallow's connection to the guild master get them kicked out of the town's guild, and a black mark put on their record. Not that they'd want to stay in town afterwards, the Swallows are quite well loved, and many business were ready to stop serving them to help force them out of town.

"Still... the fact they basically got away with it does leave a bad taste in my mouth. It's also worth mentioning that the guild should've put a black mark against me and my team because of the incident. Accepting quests, the way we did is also against the rules you see. It didn't happen because Alice and Alex both vouched for me, saying I tried to talk them out of it but was forced along by them.

"This combined with the fact that they both wanted to retire afterwards... well... they took the black mark, not that it mattered with the team dissolving. Then they went back to the farm. Content to get married and take over one of their parents' farms. It was... a rather sad moment.

"They spent most of our recovery time crying, or apologising to me for just about everything. It got to the point I had to ask Evan if there was a way to stop them, but he said it was best to just... let them go. Which, was a bit harder on me but if it helped them... well I wasn't going to complain where they could hear me.

"It seems... that while my close brush with death just confirmed that I needed to be stronger... they both decided it meant they weren't meant to be adventurers. No matter how much I pointed out that they could train now. That they could learn to properly use their weapons. That they could take easier missions until they were ready...

"The pair were adamant that they'd only been dragging me down. Which, admittedly, isn't something I could deny because it was very true and they knew it. Never before had the difference in combat ability been so apparent to them. Normally we'd take on easy stuff you know? The fact I was much better wasn't notice because I'd finish quickly, then watch them, and they just assumed they only took a bit longer, or that my weapon was particularly suitable.

"In the end though... that was how their dream died. It was super embarrassing when, as they were getting ready to leave town, Alice tried to hand off her gloves to me because I could make better use of them. I tried to more politely talk around the issue 'you spent a lot of money on them' or 'they can still be useful on the farm' or 'they are nice gloves but not my style' well she kept insisting and well..."*nOVELNext.cOm*

March pulled up Marigolds hand and lay her own on top of it completely engulfing Marigolds much smaller hand. "As hopefully you can all work out the gloves were MUCH too small for me, but it felt rude to point out the obvious when Alice was trying to hard to find an excuse to hand them off to me, perhaps out of guilt or obligation,"

Kat winced. That really was an awkward situation. March continued though, with, "She actually still handed off the gloves even when I finally pointed that out. I ended up leaving them with my parents. For the memories mostly, but I did let Alice know where I was keeping them. In a nice glass case in the drawer to my old room. Just in case she ever wanted them back,"

[Chapter 1230 1230 A Humble March](#)

"So... this has been a great story and all, but it still doesn't explain how you all met up to form an adventurer group," said Marigold.

"Eh, the rest of the story really isn't that interesting," said March with a shrug. "The Guild Master asked if I was serious about still adventuring, and when I said yes, he offered me the chance to work with Willow. Willow wanted her adventuring team to be... more organically grown, but her parents put their foot down about that particular part.

"The Guild Master had heard about their search, I think it had only been going on for about a week or so... anyway, the Guild Master knew a guy who was good friends with that family, so he thought I'd be a good fit. I imagine the 'good fit' part is mostly down to the fact I survived, and carried my teammates out of a wolf den led by a Rank 2 wolf,"

"You do realise that's impressive right?" said Burgandy. "Most monsters tend to be stronger than their Rank would suggest, even if they can be defeated through use of cunning and smarts. Which you DIDN'T DO! No, instead you beat a Rank 2 wolf in direct combat without any tricks, and the rest of its pack just for good measure."

March tried to deflect the praise, "I'd been practicing for years at that point and it was probably just a recently ascended Rank 2 wolf. Might be that it got to Rank 2, and then started causing issues, which had been going on for a week at most when we got the quest. So the wolf had, at maximum, a month to get used to its strength, and I'm sure it wasn't doing intense training in that time,"

While this was happening, Oditr tapped the table once and leaned over to Kat and Lily. "For your benefit I'll explain. March is downplaying a truly massive achievement in terms of combat capability. I'm sure, for a demon such as yourself, killing a monster a Rank above you is not even that strange or dangerous. What you have to understand is that even with this one accomplishment, many will assume March is guaranteed at least Rank 4.

"Killing up a rank, when the monster is fresh and unwounded? It's a very rare occurrence. Especially in direct combat like March's was. If more people knew of her combat prowess, she'd be hounded by plenty of people trying to curry her favour. Luckily for her, she never boasted, nor did she say the wolf was Rank 2 for quite some time. Though that might just be that it needed to be pointed out to her..."

"Is it really so impressive?" asked Lily. "I mean, the story itself certainly was... but you're talking about this like it's something else..."

"March may just be a once in a generation talent," said Oditr with a sigh. "Now, granted, humans tend to have a lot more of those just by virtue of having so many people, and much shorter lifespans. That being said... this is the sort of thing you'd expect from people like myself. People like Titania... people

like Ulf. Perhaps you can't understand because your perspective is so different, but if March can replicate that feat once or twice more? She would be on track to become the new strongest human on the continent. Heck, she's already closer to it than everyone except for Ulf's daughter, but once again, she doesn't count because she married Auctifer."

Kat felt rather stunned at that. "That... that's... I can hardly believe it. Does that mean we lucked out as a team that this round has no combat in it?"

Oditr shrugged and said, "I suppose so, but I imagine March isn't exactly phased by the lack of combat either. A natural fighter she may be, but March seems perfectly content to train in the mountains for decades if she felt that would give her the strength she desires. As any true seeker of strength knows, breaks can be just as important as the training itself,"

Kat looked over at March who didn't seem all that angry at... well anything really. *Which is sort of weird for someone that can literally have steam come out of her ears, but I suppose life can't be a cartoon.*

[Says the magical demon girl with an animal familiar.]

That's not really how our relationship works, but I'm not going to deny your point either.

"Hey, I've got another question, if you don't mind, March, Burgandy, either is fine," said Lily. I think you should take a look at

"Sure, I'll take this one, assuming it's not about March," said Burgandy.

"What exactly happened to your last member? I mean, Stan has only been helping you guys for this round right? So there had to have been another person working with you... correct?" asked Lily.

Burgandy nodded, "Yeah you're right. We had another guy on our team, he is an elf called Arbor. He fit in decently with the group... but not perfectly. The reason he left though, is only somewhat due to the group itself. Um... let me see if I can explain. So... Arbor joined up with us... basically because of teenage rebellion.

"Now, he thought we'd offered him a place just because he was competent... but really it's because his parents knew Willow's parents and when their son ran away from home, they asked if we could snag him up for our team so that he wasn't just adventuring alone, or with people his family couldn't trust.

"Or well, I wasn't in the team just yet, timeline wise, so technically it wasn't 'our' team at the time, but you get what I mean. Anyway, that's how he joined the team. He was... fine? As a team member there wasn't much to complain about. He was a surprisingly good team player, and we did well on jobs...

"But he just wasn't gaining strength like we were. Not sure if it's talent, or if being an elf held him back. Heck, maybe he was skimping on training or meditation or whatever it was he did in his free time. What it amounted to... was everyone in the team getting to Rank 2 and he... well he just didn't.

"Now, this was fine at the start... but then we nearly lost. It was a close run thing last round, and he definitely dropped the ball. Which is fine, he was only Rank 1 and it was a lot of pressure... but if Thyme wasn't around he would've died. This is made worse by the fact that... well while he was still reeling from that and not properly handling his emotions, he got a letter from home to find out that his aunt was dead.

"Now, I'm not sure exactly how close he was with his aunt. If she was a big part of his life... of if nearly dying just two days before getting the letter helped shattered what little control he had over his emotions when the letter finally did arrive. Regardless, Arbor decided that, at least for now, he had to return home.

"He'd been getting letters from them the entire time we'd been a team, but he never actually read them. The only reason he read that particular one was apparently it was marked with something special denoting it as an especially important message. It looked like a normal letter to me, so I've got no idea how it was marked, just that it was. Arbor nearly didn't open it actually.

"Spent the evening debating it with us. Or, more accurately debating with himself while we sat around the table with him giving the occasional words of encouragement or denial based on what he was saying. Still not sure if he should've opened the letter at because next thing we know? He's packed up and ready to leave. *novelnext.com*

"Perhaps we could've talked him out of it but well..." Burgandy let the words trail off.

March was happy to say them though, "We didn't feel it was right to stop a man grieving his family from returning home. Even if the win for the tournament would be nice, none of us truly need it like some other contestants. If his departure is what causes us to lose? Then that's fine. We can still hold our heads high knowing we've tried our best,"

Just as March finished speaking, a loud clap went over the area. Kat turned to look at the sound and saw a larger than normal Thyme standing up and waiting for everyone to stop talking. When they were all silent, Thyme spoke, "So, I'm glad you have all been having fun this evening. I have to inform you all, that it's actually quite close to midnight. Now, I'm not going to be quite as strict with the timing for starting tomorrow, but I do want to start early, around nine.

"So I'm just letting everyone know, that I suggest you all finish up with your talks and head to bed soon. I'm not going to force anything. I know quite a few of you want to speak with the various judges, but I'm only going to be so lenient come tomorrow morning if you're one of the people that stayed up too late. Think on that. I myself, will be shifting into the background to check on some projects instead of sleep. I'll bid you all, goodbye, and goodnight." Then Thyme vanished.