

DEMONS 161

Chapter 161: A Ghastly Hand

As Green and Nixilei's fight started to drag on Kat started to relax. She was never particularly worried, but an intense fight is only as interesting as it's novelty, and Kat was not proficient enough to notice the technique on display, yet strong enough to watch everything in perfect clarity if she wanted.

In the end, Kat decided that relaxing against the wall and just generally watching would suffice, letting her mind drift around while her ears listened to the ringing of steel and clashing of blades.

That was, until those same ears picked up a creaking sound. Putting a bit of energy towards them Kat could clearly hear someone climbing the stairs. Each slow, heavy step didn't make that much noise in itself but Kat could hear them clearly.

Glancing out of the corner of her eye she saw that Estelle had closed her eyes but Grace looked alert. *Problem is, I can't tell if Grace heard that sound as well or if she's just enjoying the fight. I'm not sure where her love of fighting begins once her love of weapons ends.*

Glancing over at the trapdoor Kat decided it would be best to wait. *I'm capable of dealing with whoever comes through if necessary. Even if Grace hasn't noticed yet, I doubt they can attack quickly enough. Besides I'm in the way of any attacks if the worst truly comes to pass.*

Seconds passed as Kat stared intently at the trapdoor waiting for movement. Kat eyed it, waiting for the slight shift in the wooden platform that would indicate a new arrival shortly.

Instead however, the trapdoor was flung open. Kat tensed, as a hand shot up out from below, slamming into the stone floor. It was a pale, ghastly hand that was white as a sheet. A second hand slammed down next to the first.

Then, gripping the stone in anyway possible the strange being pulled itself up. Heaving with a seemingly great effort, the full figure came into view...

It was Ryo covered in flour. *Ok, what?* Kat looked over at Grace who was now trying not to laugh, and Estelle who still had her eyes closed. Ryo turned to face Kat whose eyes then went wide. Struggling to go for her weapon, instead she slipped and collapsed onto the floor.

Grace burst out laughing and Estelle cracked open an eye, noticing the fallen figure before closing it again. "Ahahah, Ryo what the hell happened to you!" said Grace

Kat managed to stop herself from laughing like Grace, but felt her lips rising into a smile. Ryo certainly did look ridiculous. She was now completely coated in flour. Her once light blonde hair was now pure white with blonde spots the flour hadn't quite covered.

Her once standard looking attire, was also completely coated in the stuff, and after collapsing the flour around her had gained a thin layer of white powder. Ryo glared at the laughing scout and growled "Well, what the hell are you doing sitting around huh? Isn't that more important?"

Grace dismissed Ryo with a wave "Nope"

Ryo's eye twitched as she glared at the smug form of Grace who was immensely enjoying herself. She looked towards Estelle seeking help but sighed upon seeing that Estelle wasn't even paying attention.

Sighing Ryo's gaze travelled towards Kat. *What are you looking at me for? How am I supposed to help you?* Seeing that Kat also wasn't going to help she let her gaze go towards the two fighters.

Ryo froze in surprise at seeing two of the Unfortunate Four before turning back to Grace even more confused. "Don't worry about it, tell us what happened to you" said Grace

Ryo looked rather annoyed but bit down her words, realising that Grace wasn't going to let up now. "Fell into a trap" whispered Ryo

Kat only barely heard the words using the remnants of her empowered ears. She tilted her head to the side in confusion, but it was Grace who spoke up. "Hmmm? What happened?"

"I said" growled Ryo "I fell into a trap"

Grace nodded as if this was to be expected "So why didn't you clean yourself off?"

Ryo glared at the scout. "Because, for some reason, this shit doesn't come off. Watch"

Ryo sat up and held her twin tails in both hands, before turning to the side to give Grace a good view. Bunching them together, she then flicked them outwards together like you would shake out a dusty rug.

Flour exploded out of Ryo's hair coating the nearby environment. Kat's eyes went wide as she saw it all falling over the trapdoor. *What the hell? That's like a whole packets worth of flour where did it all come from.*

Once the flour settled Ryo looked Grace dead in the eyes and then performed the same action again. To both Kat and Grace's surprise more flour poured out, in almost identical quantities. Once the flour had settled for a second time Ryo looked at them, smug.

She then stretched out her hand, still covered in flour, and brushed her hand along it. The sweeping motion threw off another large helping of flour, coating the ground next to Ryo in a fine powder.

Once the dust in the air settled Kat stared at Ryo's arm that was STILL coated in flour. "Oh" was all Grace managed to say.

"Oh indeed Grace" said Ryo a bit annoyed "Seems I've collected just a bit of flour. Hell I'm sure I've got enough to bake everyone a damned cake if I felt like it. You just can't get rid of it"

Grace took a deep breath, before raising her hand in a placating gesture. "Ok, fair enough. I understand your concern. How exactly did you end up covered in it though"

Ryo sighed, and looked a little embarrassed at this. "I mighmhmmam"

"What?" said Grace raising an eyebrow and looking down at Ryo, which was impressive considering they were exactly the same height and both sitting down. *nOvelNext.Com*

Ryo shrunk down. "Ok, I might, might, have been a little tiny insignificant bit overconfident" said Ryo

Grace gestured with her hands for Ryo to continue. After a long sigh Ryo obliged. "Ok, so, I was walking down one of the corridors by myself. I'd split up from Gareth-

"Wait hold on" said Grace "Why did you split up?"

Ryo looked grateful for the diversion "So, we teamed up just for the sand skipper, because that needs two people at least, but we went our separate ways once we left the rest area. It seemed like a good idea at the time?"

Grace sighed "Ok, fine, now continue please"

Ryo winced a little as if hoping Grace had already forgotten. "Ok, fine. So I was walking down this corridor and I heard the sound of a string snapping. When I turned to find out what it was, I saw this massive white boulder flying towards me"

Grace glared at Ryo. "You tried to cut it in half didn't you"

"Am I allowed to say no?" asked Ryo

"Did you, cut, it, in, half" said Grace slowly

"Yes" said Ryo, ears drooping and looking down.

"Well, why did you think that would have worked out?" asked Grace

"I... I've been practicing you know, and it was coming right at me, and I had my sword out... and that's about it?" said Ryo

"Why didn't you just dodge out of the way like a normal person?" asked Grace

"Well, I mean, the corridor was pretty thin, and it was behind me and I didn't have enough time?" said Ryo unsure.

"Is that a statement or a question?" asked Grace

"Statement?" said Ryo even more unsure

Grace sighed "You know what, it's fine. This is totally fine. Do you know how long it's going to last, and is there any other side effect?"

"Um... no?" said Ryo

"There are side effects aren't there" said Grace resuming her glaring

Ryo started to mumble again so Kat enhanced her ears to hear properly "might not have any mana at the moment"

"What?" said Grace

"She said she doesn't have any mana" replied Kat

Ryo glared at Kat like she'd stolen the last cookie from her before bowing her head in shame "She's right" said Ryo

Grace let out another big sigh "You know what Ryo. It's fine. I'm glad you made it this far, you did a good job"

Ryo's eyes lit up like a Christmas tree and leapt forward to give Grace a hug. Flour rained down from the girl as she completed her arc. Just as she was about to touch Grace however, the scout lit up a sigil on her outfit blowing Ryo backwards onto Kat.

"Oops" said Grace "Sorry Kat"

Ryo pouted and looked at Grace "Why did you do that?"

"You'd spread the flour, then I wouldn't have mana either" said Grace

Ryo looked shocked as if she had not considered this, then looked over at Kat in terror realising what she had just done.

Chapter 162: On the Other Hand

Kat grinned wide showing teeth, as Ryo scrambled backwards "I'm very very sorry"

Kat just laughed in response and lit up a little bit of fire on the end of her finger. Purple flames leapt into existence and gave the immediate area around Kat a strange glow in the white light of the room.

Ryo tilted her head in confusion before bringing her hands together and staring intently at them. Nothing happened. "Wait why can you still do magic?" asked Ryo

Kat glanced at Grace the with a silent question. Grace shrugged. "As a demon I don't use mana, I use something else, so this doesn't actually affect me"

Ryo slumped down as the tension drained out of her. "Oh, thank the forests. I thought you were going to kill me for that"

Kat and Grace burst into laughing at this, and Estelle let slip a small chuckle "Well, I doubt that. Kat's a rather hesitant fighter despite taking out pretty much all of Boring herself"

Ryo's eyes went wide. "What? What the heck are you talking about"

Grace shrugged "Well, it went something like this...

Grace proceeded to describe (in shockingly good detail for someone distracted with her own fights) the entire process to Ryo, and how Kat managed to take multiple fatal wounds as minor inconveniences.

At this point Ryo was slumped against the other side of the trapdoor so as not to spread even more flour onto the others. Stumbling over her words for a bit, she finally managed to ask Grace. "So, um, what are we doing then? Why are we just waiting for those two to fight? Are they forced to do that or something and are we waiting to all take on Kat" said Ryo

Turning to face Kat they continued "Um, no offence? I think?"

Kat shrugged "None taken. Also as far as we can tell those two are fighting entirely voluntarily"

"I didn't volunteer for this" said Green in between two somewhat slow slashes of Nixilei's sword.

Grace nodded "Well, she didn't but Nixilei signed her up for it anyway, and she doesn't seem to have much of a choice"

Ryo got a rather confused look on her face. "Are we supposed to help her then?"

Kat shook her head. "I somehow feel that if we were to do that it would be worse for Green in the long run" said Kat, who could have sworn she saw Nixilei's smile tick up just a slight amount.

So it was of course, at the exact moment everyone was once again focused on the fight, that a thump resounded from the trapdoor. After Ryo had come up in, it had been left open, and now a hand covered in dark red clawed its way up.

Everyone except Green and Nixilei stopped and stared, waiting for the rest of the arm. This one was covered in steel and made surprisingly little noise for what Kat had to assume was a suit of armour.

Seriously, how did I not hear this coming.

With a grunt, and a pull, a figure started to arise, dripping blood from head to toe, a thick metal armour surrounded them while the excess blood dripped onto the floor spraying the area around the thing.

As it rose to its full height Green screamed, "GARETH"

Everyone else paused and looked between Green who was now back to fighting, and the figure coated in blood. Kat narrowed her eyes and enhanced them, looking closely at the 'blood' and realised it looked a little strange, it was clumping together and it wasn't actually in liquid form.

Wait a minute. Kat sniffed the air and the overpowering scent of hot jelly hit her like a freight train.

Ugh, ok, yup not blood. Kat felt like she should need to gag, but the feeling never arose. Instead, opting to cover her mouth and nose with her sleeve was a reluctant compromise.

"Um, hi Green? What the heck is going on here?" asked Gareth(?)

At this point, Ryo was slowly backing away from the opening, leaving a trail of flour in her wake as she carefully shimmied along the floor.

Kat decided to speak up. "Not much really, just waiting for these two to finish"

"Gareth help, those mean guys won't stop Nix" said Green

Gareth, looked between the elves and Kat, and Green before looking at Nixilei "Are you sure you want me to help you? It'll only be worse later when she catches you next time"

Green's face fell, where she had previously gained a large smile from his presence, now it was only a pout. Despite this, she still expertly dodged Nixilei's attacks without fail but she wasn't attacking for a few moments.

Ha, called it. "So what happened to you Gareth?" asked Kat

Gareth first stopped and looked around at the scared Ryo then spoke. "Hey, um do you mind if I take a spot on the other side of you? I can see you're scared, but I don't want to spread out too much while Nixilei and Green are fighting"

Ryo looked up at the now, less scary figure whose face had lost most of its "blood" and seeing as nobody else was reacting, reluctantly crawled back over to the edge of the trapdoor leaving plenty of room for Gareth, but an easy escape if needed.

Gareth nodded and took his seat just past the flour trail Ryo had left. "Right, well, I assume you know I split up with Ryo?" Gareth, got a series of nods "Well, after that I was really close to the end of the maze when I heard a click, *NOVELNext.COM*

"Couldn't discern where it was from, I checked my footing for a loose tile, but everything seemed in order, checked that I hadn't activated a tripwire, and found no evidence of such a thing. Heck I even waited in place for a few moments shield ready for whatever was about to come my way.

"Sadly, it wasn't exactly coming my way as I was coming for it. So I took a big step forwarded, intending it for stepping over any tripwire I might have missed initially and as I put my foot down the floor gave way.

"I fell head first into this massive pool of jelly, which sounds great, except it was all hot, and rather gross. Luckily it was only about half a man deep. Unluckily, I was head first and panicking a bit so I activated my stone wall sigil

"However, clearly the jelly does something strange to magic, because instead of a stone wall appearing below and pushing up, I felt one slam on me from behind and push me deeper into the stuff.

"So there I was, pinned under a stone wall, still face first, but at least I knew where the bottom was now. I managed to patiently hold my breath just long enough for the wall to start cracking.

"As soon as it did, I flipped myself over and slammed my knee into it to finish the job before I brushed it off and stood up. Finally, head above the damned stuff I took in a deep breath, only for, you guessed it, jelly to come in instead.

"So, I spent a while coughing, clearing out my mouth, getting some air into me and then I stepped inside. I mean, the tower was pretty much right there at this point so I wasn't going to rest just yet"

Estelle nodded and spoke up for the first time in several minutes "I see, so we have flour that removes access to mana and jelly that changes the effects of a given spell. Truly I am surprised that we have not encountered a third or fourth type of effect. It is strange that the first two groups are unaffected"

Hmm, you know, I have a sneaking suspicion that maybe it isn't. "Is it possible the traps only arm themselves after say, two groups, or perhaps just four people, make it to the orb? That seems like something Thyme would do" said Kat

Estelle met Kat's gaze and nodded thoughtfully "Yes, I do suppose that's possible. Especially when you consider that the traps were both found close to the tower, it is possible they were designed to punish people who were rushing once the orb was found"

"Hmm, still then, that makes me wonder why Kat and I didn't find anything" said Grace

"Perhaps it is because you already fought and disabled a team's worth of people, or what I find more likely considering the timing, is how quickly you arrived following the activation of the orb. Thyme may have set it so teams already near to the tower wouldn't find trouble.

"Of course actually, now that I say that out loud, I think it might instead be to stagger contenders. The first two to start the fight over the orb, and then a series of traps to prevent the next set of teams from approaching until the fight is in full swing"

Chapter 163: So... What now?

Everyone started nodding along to this. The contestants could easily believe that Thyme had set up traps specifically in order to increase the chances that the next group to arrive would come while the fight was already in full swing.

"So what now" asked Ryo

"Well, I guess we should discuss who we want to send to the next round. We are only allowed the one from each team after all" said Grace

Gareth nodded "I suppose in that case we should probably discount myself and Ryo then"

Ryo glared at Gareth and tried not to pout "Hey, that's not fair, why can't I go to the finals"

Grace sighed. "It's because there is a good chance that the traps you triggered won't be cleaned off. Sure it's about as likely as Thyme fully restoring you, but we can't count on that"

"Oh" said Ryo *nOvElNext.com*

"So that leaves us with, Estelle, and Grace on your side, and Kat, Nixilei and Green on our" said Gareth

"I pass" said Green rolling under a strike from Nixilei "I want to skip this, I don't want to fight anymore"

Gareth raised an eyebrow and tried to make contact with Nixilei for confirmation that she'd let Green skip, but she was too busy with her attacks. Sighing Gareth continued "Perhaps we should work it out between Estelle and Grace then"

"Grace is likely the better choice then," said Estelle "She is more combat capable, and familiar with her body"

Grace bit her lip "Well, that's true, but I don't think it matters much. We're getting second in the end I reckon, especially if Kat is the one, I have to fight. Plus, if we are trying to take current condition into consideration, I don't really have many arrows left, and all of them have been used at least once"

Gareth raised an eyebrow and looked in Kat's direction "Why is Grace so scared of you in particular"

Kat snickered "Grace isn't scared of me, does that look like the face of someone who is scared" Kat gestured towards the completely calm and slightly smiling elf beside her.

"You took out a full team by yourself Kat. No single person here could take you, especially because I bet you've got all your energy back now" said Grace

Kat checked her energy levels. *Eh, she's close, it's more like three quarters but much of a muchness I suppose.* "I didn't take on all of them, you were there to help"

"Ah yes" Grace nodded sagely "I managed to get peppered by arrows until Clive got taken out and then fight a healer with no mana. I sure did my share of the work. That's not even mentioning that you took out Kress, and ate a spell from Dusk's entire mana pool"

Gareth furrowed his brows at this "What is this about Kress"

Grace glanced at Kat, a little worried she'd somehow thrown her under the buss. Kat just shrugged and looked towards Gareth and said "He attacked alongside the rest of Boring. Well, I say alongside, but it was actually after Eva lead me towards his hiding spot and he literally stabbed me in the back. With both swords too"

Gareth put his head in his hands "Yup, that sounds about right"

Nixilei cackled and threw away her dagger "Ok, that's the funniest thing I've heard all day. Green I'll let you skip out on your training this time

"Tell me Kat, what did his face look like when that failed to take you down" Nixilei slid over and took a seat in front of Kat.

"Um, well, he was certainly going an interesting shade of red" said Kat "See, after he stabbed me, I spread my demonic fire all around. Turned to him, pulled out the swords and then thanked him for the gift"

Nixilei snickered "Oh yes that's perfect. Oh how I wish I could have seen his face. Wait-"

Nixilei scanned the room for something. That something was revealed when a veritable army of Timmy's walked out from behind the podium. Kat stared at the set of seven Timmy's as they made their way out.

"You guys were recording that right?" asked Nixilei. Two of the Timmy's nodded and Nixilei's smile got wider

"Brilliant" said Nixilei

Gareth coughed lightly into his hand "I do believe that we still need to discuss who is moving onto the next round. We don't want any more people showing up and confusing things"

Nixilei let her face return to its resting position and nodded "Of course Gareth, matters of great enjoyment can be enjoyed at later times. I will not let this great treat distract me from the matter at hand"

Gareth nodded and gestured towards Estelle and Grace "So, getting back on track, who would you like to send through. It's worth noting that Thyme has an extra prize for the person who does get sent through... though it's unclear if it's a team based one or an individual one"

Green jumped in to say "I don't care, it's not worth it. I wanna sleep..."

Kat looked over to see that Green was already well on her way. She'd stopped near Gareth and had curled up next to him, just barely far enough so that any bits of jelly that fall off while he's talking will miss her prone form.

Nixilei sighed in exasperation as she looked over at the already half asleep Green but chose not to comment. Ryo for her part had eyes that were now lit up and was doing her best impression of an adorable kitten.

I suppose she has some practice. A shame then that it's still not as strong as Sylvie. Kat stole a glance at Grace and Estelle. *And it seems to not work on those two either.*

Grace and Estelle shared a look before Grace spoke up "I, suspect it won't be majorly important, or if it is, it will be something for the whole team. Even taking that into account, anything for one of us is something we can all use

"It isn't like we can split up after the tournament or a shiny new piece of armour wouldn't fit the others. I suppose if it's a new weapon it might be an issue but we all have decent enough weapons so it's no big deal"

"Hmm" Gareth seemed to chew on this information then looked towards Nixilei "That is something I hadn't considered. Do we want to send through someone just in case it's an individual reward?"

Nixilei got a slight glint in her eye as she answered "I doubt it should factor too heavily into our considerations. Please remember that there is also likely a prize for the winner of the second round anyway and that will likely be a bigger factor

"Thus, ensuring the win should take precedent, and as much as I'd like to see Green get additional combat experience, especially utilising the chance for it to be impossible to permanently maim or kill her I suspect that is not our best option"

Gareth took a loving glance over at Green who was murmuring slightly in her sleep and miming reaching out to something but keeping herself curled up. It was a rather strange sight if Kat was honest.

"Indeed, so by that count we shouldn't send me either. Miss Grace seems proficient and without access to my magic I do not have faith that I could defeat either her or Miss Estelle"

Grace chuckled "Ha, Miss Grace, well, perhaps you're right Gareth, but no need to be so formal"

Nixilei's eyes found Kat's "Indeed, if that is the case then it is best we send Kat onto the next stage for us. She practically cements the win" said Nixilei

"Hey, wait a minute, aren't these prizes kind of important" said Kat "Shouldn't you take it Nixilei? Just in case it's something you need"

Nixilei's mouth rose just barely at the corners before she flicked her hands. As she did so a full set of fourteen daggers appeared between her fingers. "I do not lack for armaments, and I would not lose to anyone even twice my age in magical knowledge. Whatever prize Thyme might offer I do not believe it worth the risk I may lose"

Kat stared awkwardly at the large number of daggers Nixilei had 'magiced' into existence. *I'm really not sure the chances are actually higher if I go out. I mean, I certainly don't own fourteen daggers that I can pull from nowhere, and even if I did, I have no clue how to use them.*

Kat looked to Grace for understanding but she found the scout nodding along with Nixilei as if that made perfect sense. Estelle spoke up "In that case, we should send Grace along. I certainly have no way to even begin to compete against Kat if half of what has been said is true"

Kat sighed. *Am I some big final boss now or something?*

Chapter 164: Kat VS...

"Ok" said Grace, "If you all have no objections then Kat and I will trigger the device together, assuming that is allowed, and use the two spots for our teams"

Every except for Ryo nodded at this, who instead decided to pout "Can't I go? If you don't need to win can't I show off a bit?"

Grace sighed "Well Ryo, are you in any condition at all to fight? As far as I can see you are tired, unnerved and without the ability to use mana"

"I mean, I don't use mana that much I'll be fine" said Ryo in protest

"Ryo, you know that is just further evidence Grace should go. You need better control over your mana. Maybe fighting against whatever effects the flour has will be good practice for you going forward" said Estelle

Ryo let her shoulders slump "Ok, I understand. This is important, even if the chances are low"

Nodding, Grace stood up and walked over to the pedestal and Kat followed. The pair shared a glance before the slowly reached out towards the orb. As soon as their hands brushed the glassy surface, bright light exploded from the orb.

Kat's eyes summoned demonic energy to shield them from the light and quickly adjusted. The light was still blinding, but she could somehow see the figure of Grace on the other side. The elf in question had her eyes sealed shut with a grimace on her face but she didn't let go of the orb.

Soon the light dimmed, and Kat looked around to find herself... still in the tower room. Raising an eyebrow at Grace, Kat saw the elf hadn't yet reopened her eyes. Instead looking over questioningly at Estelle Kat hoped for an answer

"What?" said the elf in question

"Do you mind explaining why we are both still here?" asked Kat

"Oooh, right, well that's because you have to keep hold of the orb for at least five minutes before you get sent off" said Estelle "I think it's so that you have to fight over the orb for a bit first. Give the others some time to catch up you know" said Estelle *nOvElNext.com*

"Huh" said Kat turning to Grace "You can open your eyes now, the flash of light is gone"

Grace slowly let one eye open just barely and found Kat was correct. Opening both to look around she sighed but had heard Estelle's explanation so at least wasn't confused.

"So we just awkwardly stand around for five minutes?" asked Kat

Gareth shrugged "Hey, you never know could be some others around. We've still got Lynn and the God Crushers somewhere"

"Well, we have you all to protect us so it is really no worry" said Grace

You know, as on brand as this sort of thing is for Thyme it is also strange that he wouldn't have a system to tell if it's been decided who to send. I wonder if it's because we are missing Lynn, or if having Lynn and Kress would make a difference

And what about the God Crushers? Are they still around at all? What even happened to them, we've seen pretty much everyone else and it's a little strange that nobody has even seen them.

Kat pondered this and other questions as the minutes ticked down. Her demonic constitution finding it easy to simply zone out and hold onto the orb without trouble. She was able to sit almost entirely motionless if it wasn't for the slow rise and fall of her breathing.

On Grace's end the wait was a little less convenient but no real bother. Having been trained to sit in place without unnecessary movements to scout targets watching over a motionless orb was nothing.

The others also seemed content to just sit around... except Ryo, but nobody else was paying attention. Green was asleep, Gareth was watching over her, Estelle looked to be asleep but would occasionally open an eye to scan the others and Ryo just sat with her knees up pouting.

Final, the five minutes passed, and with minimal warning Kat and Grace vanished from the spot.

Kat felt herself getting pulled through Thyme's teleportation system once again. This time she tried closing her eyes to prevent the feeling of general disgust from permeating her body, but even with her eyes shut, the feeling prevailed. A strange sickness that seemed to cling to the soul

Luckily it was over before too long and Kat found herself seated in a small empty room with wooden walls. In fact, the room was so small that Kat had to fully fold her wings to fit, being barely wide enough for her even sitting down in the provided chair. Her tail flicked in annoyance as a Timmy appeared.

The Timmy bowed before inserting one more cassette into the ground. "The end. The final section, the grand finale, piece de resistance, the I'moutofwordssol'mmovingon. So how has it been? Enjoy the ride? Pick up some bonuses along the way? Personally I'd love to congratulate you for making it this far but I have no idea who you are.

"If you never heard me explaining, which, I really should have done in the rest stop cassette, this whole set-up has been pre-recorded. I hope the little ones have done their job, and you understand what's going on.

"At the moment you are in the holding room. Once this explanation is over I will freeze your perception of time, and then the next time you are conscious it will be the final battle. The rules are simple. Last man standing wins.

"You can do anything you want. Ask people to surrender, attacking them with toothpicks, seduce them with Avant Garde poetry you name it. I of course will be preventing permeant damage but don't let that stop you, go nuts.

"We won't be having any of this 'friendship prevails' nonsense though. There will be one winner. Just for making it this far you've already earned a boon for you or your team.

"I'd wish you luck, but it would ring hollow, both because of the recorded nature of the message, and the fact that everyone is hearing this. I did want this final match to have a live audience with the other contenders but, that too is against the rules for the finale.

"So, once again. Small room. However many contestants. One person walks away. Brace yourself and may the smartest contender get the glory"

Kat only had a moment to process the message before her perception of time was frozen. From Kat's perspective, as soon as the message ended, she was suddenly somewhere else.

Kat quickly got into a combat stance and looked around. She was in a larger box this time, but not by much. This one was a hexagon, with Grace on the opposite side looking similarly disorientated.

"How do we want to do this" asked Kat

Grace drew her bow and faced Kat with a look of determination. "I want you to take your best shot. I wish to see what power you can bring to bear so that I know how my team is lacking"

"Not sure if I'm the right judge of relative power Grace, the rules seem to be different for demons" said Kat

Grace didn't answer, only loaded her bow and fired. Kat dodged left and ran forward to the centre of the arena. *If this is what you really want Grace, I will oblige.*

"Sorry the arena is a bit small!" Kat yelled.

From the centre of the arena Kat let all of her energy escape at once. Before she had always been trying to manage it to at least some extent, but this time, she knew that she could more than fill the room with her fire.

A purple blaze erupted from Kat. Her skin gaining cracks of light as fire poured from Kat's body. The flames exploded up and out with rapidly increasing speed. Reaching the ceiling in moments, before continuing to expand quickly along the roof just as it spread along the ground.

Grace watched in awed horror as a wall of purple flames came straight towards her. Steeling her resolve for one final attack of her own she rapidly pulled back her bow and pushed as much mana as she could into it.

Her arrow and bow glowed with an eerie green light as she took aim for where Kat's figure had once been before the fire had erupted. Grace smiled a faint smile and loosed the arrow.

An explosion of wind blew back the elf's hair as the arrow shot towards its target wreathed in fire. Just as the arrow left Grace's hand the fire caught up with her. The moment it touched her hand she disappeared.

The arrow continued its journey for only a few paces before it was completely coated by Kat's fire as it froze in place and fell to the ground shattering.

Kat felt the last of her energy leave her as she heard the arrow clatter to the ground. *Is this really what you wanted?* Thought Kat as she fell down, exhausted.

Chapter 165: Tied to a Chair

As Kat hit the floor, she felt the disgusting feeling of Thyme's teleportation wrap her up and carry her away. As she travelled though, something strange happened the feeling of wrongness was worse this time, but as she travelled the sickly green distorted.

Kat only had another moment to ponder the strange distortion before she was thrown out somewhere and hit the ground face down.

"Ah, hmmm, well" said Thyme from somewhere "Can't have our winner face down in the dirt can we. Just one moment"

Kat felt something light touch her back, but no improvement in her condition. "Hmm, ooh" Thyme clicked their tongue. "Well, that certainly wasn't what I was hoping"

Thyme clicked their fingers and Kat felt something wrap around her. Vines wrapped around her pulling her up into a sitting position, and then secured her head to the back of the chair. As this was happening more vines positioned her legs, so they were crossed.

From a distance it looked more like Kat was a regal Queen sitting on a throne of brambles and vines rather than the half-conscious demon she was in reality. "That will have to do I'm afraid. I can't do much better" said Thyme

Kat wanted to nod in appreciation but that was beyond her at the moment. She could however see Thyme, and behind him the rest of the contestants except Grace. They were all in matching sets of chairs based on team.

The God Crushers had interactively carved stone chairs and while they were all smiling and in good condition as if they'd had a nice relaxing vacation instead of just coming from a death game.

The team of elves had chairs made out of leaves as if they were little fairies sitting on the edge of a tree. Each of their chairs did actually seem to come out of one of several branches that grew from the ground but there was no tree in sight.

Ryo had been cleaned up and there was no flour left on her... if Kat was in fact correct. Thyme seemed to have change their hairstyles and now they all had the same long free flowing hair that their defender had originally supported.

Well, at least we know Thyme isn't above messing with us. Despite the clean clothes though, they all seemed to be rather tired. Compared to the God Crushers who seemed perfectly rested, the elves all seemed to be happy, if slightly worn out.

Next was Boring, which had the widest variety of expressions if not in chairs. They all sat in chairs looking like cracked trophies where the front had been chipped and broken for them to sit and the back served as a backboard the lean against. The handles had been bent to provide armrest.

Skye herself looked rather accepting, if a bit demure. She could accept her loss gracefully but had wished for something else. Eva and Kutruoph though looked ecstatic. Well, Eva had a large grin that she

kept trying to lower and was failing, while Kuttruph had a large shit eating grin on his face. Finally, Clive was fairly impassive, as if the results were to be expected.

Finally, was The Unfortunate Four and it seems that Thyme wanted to have a little bit of fun with them. Green was wrapped up in a bedroll and suspended from nothing. Kat was actually somewhat surprised she could sleep like that.

Gareth was seated on the hand of a large set of armour. Only the top half was visible but the hand itself was bent in an unnatural way to seat someone comfortably with the hand completely backwards and the fingers up as a backboard. *nOvElNext.com*

Nixilei's was a strange one. Her seat was a book propped up by a number of daggers. The book was half open, and it had large, if unreadable text across its surface. The sides that were supported by a number of daggers were supported by a truly staggering number, all bent and interlaced together to form a solid support.

And Kress... well Kress had an old rickety chair slightly too small for his frame. The back-left leg was a little too short, so the chair rocked if Kress tried to lean backwards. Which would have been fine, except that he was balanced on top of a podium that would sway dangerously even as Kress fidgeted slightly. Kat didn't want to know what would happen if he leaned back.

Kat herself couldn't turn herself, but her field of view was just barely enough to catch the edge of Grace beside her. She couldn't make out any details, but the elf seemed fine, and was standing under her own power unlike Kat.

As Kat completed this, Thyme started to move. First, Thyme violently flicked out their hand and a large set of stands appeared behind the contestants. Secondly Thyme then started to move their hands slowly starting from the edges.

Every millimetre Thyme's hands travelled, a new copy of them was created. In every shape and size, even a few that were squares. Young and old, male and female... one of them was even a bear. Thyme filled the stands and as it did so they all began to cheer.

Quickly the contestants picked up on this and clapped along with the brand new crowd. "What a show everyone" boomed a voice. Kat looked behind the grandstand and saw a giant version of Thyme. Easily twice the size of the stands. With a desk and some papers.

There were actually two giant versions of Thyme. The first had something approximating a lavish coat. It was black and embroidered with frills lining the centre seam and buttons held together with ropes as wide as Kat's full wingspan.

Sitting to the first giant's left was a much more feminine version of Thyme. This one had long flowing vines as hair and wore what seemed to be a dress to compliment the first's coat, but it was hard to tell as the desk obscured the lower half of the figure.

"Indeed darlings. The end is upon us. We have our final winner. Kat. And what a show it has been" said Dress Thyme

"Quite, so. The finale was short but powerful if I do say so myself. Why, I even went to the trouble of removing Grace before that fire could interact with her. Nasty stuff that was. I'd likely have needed to remove the limbs it attacked and heal them up" said Coat Thyme

"Though darling, before we talk about the winners, we should cover the losers" said Dress Thyme

"Of course my dear" said Coat Thyme "Let us start with the God Crushers. All except John, got lost in the forest"

"Darling, perhaps you need a bit more of an explanation then that" said Dress Thyme

"Ah, of course. So, the first obstacle our teams encountered was the forest of misconception. The whole thing was designed to lead people slightly astray. This effect disappeared once the sun rose though so we had expected people would exit shortly after that" said Coat Thyme

"But sadly for the God Crushers, they weren't quite well equipped for the terrain. After struggling for two days and failing to progress, they forfeited at various points... which in hindsight might be our bad as we provided no monsters and no food within the forests. Sorry darlings" said Dress Thyme

The God Crushers mostly shrugged at this as if it wasn't a major concern. Coat Thyme coughed "Anyway, moving on from that we have Lynn. She managed to find one of our weapons caches just into the frozen tundra"

"Yes, but the poor girl managed to end her run there" said Dress Thyme

"STOP" yelled Lynn "Don't say it please"

The giant Thymes just raised an unconcerned eyebrow before Dress Thyme continued "This one was filled with a few single use weapons. Once Lynn dear cast her fire spell to see better she set the place alight and it exploded taking her out of the running"

Lynn hung her head and placed it in her hands. It was clear she had recovered mostly from the experience but was extremely embarrassed about it still.

"Next elimination was John, last of the God Crushers" said Coat Thyme "He was unable to find a partner to travel across the desert with... this may have something to do with the exceptionally large number of other God Crushers that ended up nearby and that nobody was actually around to partner with him"

"Indeed dears, that wasn't quite what we had intended. It was completely random who ended up with who, and we tried to shape the terrain in such a way that people would congregate around the sand skippers" said Dress Thyme

"Sadly this meant John could go no further alone, and he lacked the ability to cross the desert" said Coat Thyme

"After that though" said Dress Thyme with a smile "Everyone managed to make it to the resting area. This was a great equaliser because some teams made it much faster than others. In fact, the combined team of Green, Estelle and Nixilei were first by quite a large margin"

Chapter 166: Grace's Reward

"Before we move on though" said Coat Thyme "I'd first like to say that we were quite surprised that the desert didn't actually take anyone out. We'd thought that was the most deadly challenge we'd set up"

"True dear" said Dress Thyme "The main crux was that we only had two of the furnace worms released. We'd assumed that people would drive them off and they'd move around terrorising multiple groups"

Coat Thyme nodded "In the end though Kat kept one busy for an extremely long time, and the second one just, didn't really do anything. Not too sure how that one worked out actually. Perhaps we should check on it later but we digress"

"Yes dears, the forest was just supposed to be a bit of a stalling tactic, give the people who fell behind less of a chance to rest once they made it out, maybe get them low on sleep" said Dress Thyme

"Truly though, all the individuals who managed to make it out were able to counteract the effect in some way. Sure it wasn't meant to be that hard to work around, but we really hoped it would be a speed bump at most" said Coat Thyme.

The pair shrugged at each other before Coat Thyme continued "None the less, the next major showdown was Kat and Grace vs Boring and Kress. It was a rather well set up ambush by Skye which involved pitting her whole team against Kat and Grace. Even we were shocked when they both made it out"

"Indeed, would you like to comment at all Skye dear?" said Dress Thyme.

Skye nodded and looked to Kat. "I may have already apologised, but I'll do it again. I'm sorry for the ambush. I don't regret my actions though. While I may wish it didn't need to be done, for us to have any hope of winning we needed to make sure you didn't get to the next round.

"Sure, if I could see the future I would know that my best course of action was to instead simply work with you to get to the final round, but as you wonderfully demonstrated with that fire nova, we had no chance of winning that way.

"Grace, for you, well, I still find you a bit annoying, but I imagine you could tell something was funny, and perhaps that played some role in our downfall. I am sorry you got caught up in a battle meant to take out Kat but we did offer you the choice to team up instead"

Dress Thyme nodded thoughtfully "Indeed, Grace do you have any comments, or perhaps Kat if you can move at all?"

Kat tried to give some indication she was fine but found she still couldn't move at all. *I guess I'm not that fine then.* Grace glanced at Kat and upon seeing that she didn't make any moves decided to speak up. "If I'm honest Skye, I can't take much credit

"Even my loyalty to Kat is in large part, her own making. I got somewhat tricked, though mostly I was just being an idiot at the time. I found Kat when she was practically out of energy, as I said as much to you, and I still couldn't beat her.

"Her tail wrapped itself around my arm and held me in place. So I offered her a deal that we'd both help each other to the best of our abilities." There was a collected gasp from the audience at this. Most of the

Thyme's in the stands specifically, along with Grace's own team, the God Crushers, and everyone in Boring except Skye. The Unfortunate Four just nodded as if that made sense

"Anyway, as I was saying, because of that I was basically forced into helping her. I didn't think that the contract would work because I didn't summon her, but I'll admit it certainly worked out in my favour

"Because, no offence to Skye of course, even if I'd played turn coat, there is no guarantee I'd have made it to the end let alone win. It was nice being able to trust someone completely for the game and it really gave us both an edge. I think"

Huh, I guess that makes sense. Though I'm glad Grace was thankful for it in the end, I was a bit put-off over all the crying. Shame I can't embarrass her with that just yet.

"A question if I may" asked Nixilei. Grace and the Thymes nodded "How is it that Kat was able to make a conflicting contract to help you win, when she had promised us the same?"

Grace checked to see if Kat was going to answer, and after seeing her frozen state explained. "So, I'm not sure on the exact details, but Kat said it was because her contract was for KAT specifically to try and win the final round. She was under no obligation to help you as a team to win the final round"

Nixilei nodded "I see, we didn't think to specify otherwise because the last round has always been a team game. As such, if Kat thought it best to gain a permanent ally up until you both used the orb, she was well within the bounds of her existing contract with us... intriguing"

Grace nodded along "Yes, that seems to be the case, though you'd have to ask her for the full details. Honestly I was quite shocked that it worked at all"

Nixilei nodded. "Oh yes, and Thyme is there a reason Kat isn't able to answer these questions herself?"

The giant Thymes answered in sync "While normally we would hesitate to reveal a contestant's secrets, Kat has been forthcoming with this information, and it's general knowledge applicable to almost all demons.

"Kat is likely out of energy, and as such is in a half-suspended animation state until such a time she recovers. We are capable of healing Kat, but as we possess no demonic energy, we can't replenish that"

Nixilei nodded and gestured for the announcements to continue.

"Honestly that about wraps everything up" said Coat Thyme "You were all able to watch or be present for the discussion in the tower, and were able to see the thrilling conclusion to the final round

"And so with that. The team that places" "Is" said Dress Thyme ""The Unfortunate Four"" said Dress and Coat Thyme together

"Really, perhaps we should change your team name to Lone Member" said Coat Thyme

"Now dear, that's unfair, Green did a large amount of work herself. Perhaps the Dynamic Duo would be better" said Dress Thyme

The crowd of Thyme's laughed at this joke, though no one else really found it funny.

"Gee tough crowd" said Coat Thyme "Nonetheless. The final score is, The Unfortunate Four is first place, followed by a tie for second between Boring, and Not Related at All, with the last place going to the God Crushers"

"Now, it is time to hand out the prizes" said Dress Thyme. As they said this, a third and fourth Thyme appeared. One was dressed in a long red dress that sparkled in the sunlight, with a slit on either side with a feminine form. This Thyme had long hair that went down longer than even Kat's own. They also seemed to have little flowers spread out amongst the hair which was a similar green to Green's.

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Next to them was a masculine time dressed in petticoat and trousers. This Thyme had slicked back hair in the same colour as its counterpart. The butler looking Thyme stepped forward and pulled a box seemingly from nowhere and walked over to Grace. "This, is the prize Grace has won by reaching the final deathmatch" said Coat Thyme.

It was an elaborately carved box with a note on top. The box itself had vines and trees carved into the surface, with a green emerald set into the front of the box where the key hole would normally be.

"Please refrain from opening the box and the letter until tomorrow" said Dress Thyme "It will make more sense that way"

Grace nodded gratefully and accepted the box from the butler Thyme slowly and held it towards her chest. A faintly hopeful smile started to rise up onto her face before Grace squashed it.

Huh, I wonder what that's about. A bit strange that there is a time limit on this sort of thing, but I'm not really sure.

"Now, for the rewards to be distributed to Kat for her wonderful performance that allowed her to win the tournament for her team. Well, they did already have a bunch of points before, but Kat contributed to that total as well" said Coat Thyme

This time the Thyme in a sequin dress slinked forward and stepped in front of Kat. Kat tried to move slightly and found that she could move, if just barely. Kat slowly tried to move her hands. Adjusting her seating slightly and looked towards the Thyme in front of her.

Chapter 167: The Final Prize

The Thyme reached down into their dress. Their hand continued to sink into the top of the dress. Kat watched in confusion as Thyme's hand bent and the whole arm sunk into the opening in the front.

Ok, how does that even make any sense. There was a snap, and suddenly the sparkly Thyme pulled out a small red gem. To Kat's untrained eyes it looked like a ruby, or something of the sort.

The gem itself was strange though, despite its red hue it was dark and slightly cloudy. Even as the light tried to catch the edges it only seemed to make the gemstone darken slightly. Their insides seemed to be shifting slightly, as if it contained a black fog.

"This" boomed Coat Thyme "Is called a tarnished ruby. They are both exceptionally rare, and exceptionally useless"

Um? What?

Kat stared at the gemstone with a raised eyebrow in confusion.

"However," Coat Thymes voice shook the ground. "I suspect this might not be the case for you Kat. If my test fails, then please feel free to return it to me and I will give you a more suitable reward for your efforts.

"The reason, many believe this ruby to be useless, or 'tarnished' in this case, is because unlike other similar gemstones and even other rubies, it doesn't conduct mana at all. Trying to force the issue will only cause the gem to crack or explode if sufficient mana is applied.

"On top of this, despite its rather unimpressive looks, a number of individuals took to wearing this as jewellery in various ways. This turned out to be a horrible mistake"

Dress Thyme took over "What these people found is that if it was anywhere near other pieces of jewellery charged with mana, that mana would be forced out over time. Quite thoroughly defeating the purpose of having such mana stored for extended periods of time like gems are normally used for.

"On top of this, if left touching, or in contact with metal that was in contact with skin, and there was no other jewellery present, it seemed to corrupt the skin, for lack of a better word.

"Oh the horror that it was. It would slowly blacken the skin around the area, until it was as dark as pitch and then the area in question would start to flake off. One poor fool who wanted to push the limits of the effect had all of his finger wilt away until it hit bone, which was starting to show similar effects before, they stopped the experiment"

Um...? Why the hell would I want a demon gem? Oh wait... is that actually the answer? Is it that simple?

"Ah I see, you may have picked up on our train of thought" said Coat Thyme "If it is as we believe, this gemstone can store demonic energy. Likely an extremely large amount, though obviously we can't test as such. If you are comfortable with it, please, take this gift"

Kat went to reach out but stopped instantly. *I should ask the system first. Just in case something absolutely horrible would happen.*

User Kat made the correct call to contact D.E.M.O.N.S. Entity Thyme is correct in most assumptions. The gem in question seems to contain old Demonic Energy. However User Kat should not touch the item in question until User Kat has regenerated at least half of User Kat energy reserves.

Um, can I ask what happens if I do touch it?

User Kat requires a higher Rank for that information. Gem in question is a class 4 Restricted item.

What the hell does that even mean?

But Kat got no further response. Looking up at the Thyme's she spoke "Yes, I somewhat know what this is. It's very valuable to a demon like me but at the moment I can't touch it. I need to regenerate properly before I do so"

The sparkly Thyme nodded in understanding and reached back into its cleavage. Somehow moving the arm around, after a few seconds they pulled out a plain wooden box with a lid. Carefully they placed the Tainted Ruby in the box and closed the lid.

"Is that sufficient protection dear? We aren't really sure what else you might need. It's just a normal wooden box" asked Dress Thyme

Kat pretended to be thinking on it as she through the question to D.E.M.O.N.S

Entity Thyme has provided sufficient protection. It is not just a wooden box. Entity Thyme has provided a Cursed Elden Oak Tree box. It is sufficient to prevent contact with the gem.

Do I want to know what a Cursed Elden Oak Tree is?

User Kat required a higher Rank to obtain that information.

Why would I expect anything less?

"That box should be fine" said Kat

The sparkly Thyme gently handed over the box and Kat received it with cautious hands before placing it on her lap. The sparkly Thyme nodded and stepped back.

I wonder what exactly this is going to do. The system declined to answer me the first time, but is that because it won't tell me while I have no energy or because it won't tell me at all.

While Kat was pondering this, the sparkly Thyme and the butler Thyme both bowed to the audience and started to sink into the ground. Grace's team let out some small claps. Nixilei and Skye gave Kat a nod, and Green... well she was still asleep.

The God Crushers seemed to still be in good cheer, as Dress Thyme spoke up. "Now that you have your more interesting winnings it's time to distribute the boring prizes. I know, I know, it's what you were competing for, but I quite frankly find it inordinately boring"

With a clap of the giants hands a sealed envelope appeared in the hands of Kat and the rest of the Unfortunate Four. "Contained within those envelopes is your prize money as well as the location of the next leg of the journey. I do wish I could give you something more worthwhile then just a promissory note for the bank, but rules are rules, even if I do stretch them as much as possible" said Coat Thyme.

Kat examined the plain envelope in her hand. It was a basic soft green and lacking in embellishments. Looking around she saw that everyone had one in their hands, even Green, who'd hers slipped into her hands while she slept.

Coat Thyme clapped his hands together twice. Both of the giant Thymes stood up at this queue. This was followed by all of the Thyme's in the stands. Once they were standing, they all bowed forward at a perfect 90-degree angle as they started to sink into the ground.

Kat watched with some sadness as the numerous Thymes vanished into the dirt signalling the end of the competition. Once the Thymes had vanished the strange and crazy seating that everyone had started to change into basic wooden chairs, and Green was lowered down to the ground safely.

Kat took a long look around at everyone who was now standing up and stretching, as she watched her own strange chair start to change into a basic wooden construction. Even Kress' disrepaired chair on an unstable platform was fixed, and the platform lowered.

Huh, I guess this is really it. Kat looked down at the envelope in her hands and the box on her knees. Despite only being a few days of effort, it also felt like a rather large time had passed, like she'd spent three months hanging out with Thyme and the other contestants.

"A bittersweet sight isn't it" whispered Thyme beside her. Flinching a little but turning she saw Thyme in its more basic form leaning against a fake tree they'd sprouted for the purpose. "I've had my fun, and I enjoyed setting this up for you all. Congratulations on winning, and I hope to see more of you all"
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And with one final bow, that Thyme too disappeared. At the same time all of the contestants were covered in the tell-tale green light and transported. Kat was even able to ignore the standard feeling of disgust as she let everything sink in.

After a short hop they were released back to the original clearing they'd met Thyme in. Looking around, the other teams were still there, and Kat was now standing next to the rest of The Unfortunate Four.

"Well, I guess that's about it then" said Kat

The other groups all started to bunch together and started talking. Kat deliberately tuned them out as she turned to face the others. Green stood up groggily and fell onto Gareth who nodded to Kat. "It does seem so. We still have some things to discuss, if you'd like to come back to the manor with us, we can work them out there"

Kat was about to nod in acceptance with Gareth's suggestions when behind her Kress spoke up. "Oh yeah? Well, I've got a few things, to discuss and I'd like to do them here"

Chapter 168: Running from Your Problems

Everyone turned to face Kress. His previous shout not having been hidden at all, every other contestant was more than able to hear him.

Gareth sighed and stood over near Kress whispering "Look, is it really important this gets done right now?"

As Gareth finished his sentence Green opened just one eye, filled with mana and glowing with an eery light staring straight at Kress. Before quickly closing it again as if nothing had happened.

Kress gulped and stated back "Yes, it is important I say this here and now"

Nixilei looked at him slight disappointment in her eyes "You wouldn't happen to be about to criticise Kat would you?"

Kress flinched at this and said "I don't see how that's relevant to my point"

Um... seems pretty relevant Kress. And also, why? What the heck did I do to you?

Nixilei took a step to stand beside Kat "I see, well if it isn't relevant, I can head back to the manor with Kat while you make whatever grand speech it is you want"

Kress clicked his tongue but nodded "Yeah, go ahead"

Nixilei nodded and started pulling Kat away. "Quick come with me and don't say anything" Nixilei managed to say so quietly Kat was almost sure she hadn't heard anything. *What the hell is going on?*

Kat could practically here Kress grinding his teeth behind her. "What's going on Nixilei?" asked Kat

"I have a suspicion he wants to criticise you and perhaps challenge you to another duel while he knows your low on energy. That's why it has to be right now, but now that I've called him out on it, he'll just say something meaningless then trudge after us" Nixilei responded

Kat and Nixilei started to pick up the pace towards town, slowly increasing the length of their strides, and Kat was rather impressed that Nixilei could even keep up with her unaided. "Why though? I don't understand what his problem could possibly be. We won didn't we? And while you guys did let me touch the orb, I managed to beat Grace in the final fight"

Nixilei strode unhurried beside Kat, making her passage appear effortless despite the fact the surroundings were starting to blur. "He is a prideful fool with a few issues with the other races. It is not my place to say where his dislike comes from, but if he truly wishes to push the issue, I might have to share it anyway.

"I suspect the fool wants to challenge you to a duel over something or perhaps dispute your final prize you received from Thyme" said Nixilei

Kat shook her head. "Why didn't we just confront him there?"

Nixilei let out a small snicker at that one "Well, I'd be more than happy for him to make a fool of himself. I suspect you could beat him despite the deck already so heavily stacked against you. My main concern is dealing him permanent damage.

"That would cause us a number of issues legally speaking. Sure he started the fight, but the laws that allow us to summon demons are rather stringent and because of how it's worded if you were to hurt Kress seriously, he could get the law to come down on you and the summoning business we used like a tonne of bricks"

"Ok... what is the main hang up really?" asked Kat

"Well" said Nixilei "The main point of contention is that technically he is classed as a summoner of you, even if he did no summoning, and if we'd 'allowed'" Nixilei said allowed with as much sarcasm as possible "You to 'attack' him even the bystanders, we'd all get in a rather large amount of legal trouble"

Um... right... "How does getting back to the manor help us though? Would you like me to just weather Kress' insults?" asked Kat

Nixilei shook her head "No, of course not. It is likely he will strike first, and perhaps in rather deadly ways especially because he knows you can regenerate but suspects you can't without energy. He can just claim that you attacked him first, or that no permanent harm was being done to you"

"I'm sensing a but" said Kat

"That is correct actually Kat. You see, one of the old laws that have been left over from more extreme times is that crimes committed involving only servants when in a nobles primary or secondary estate can be persecuted using only that noble's discretion.

"Most people have forgotten about this law, but in this instance, as you are both technically in Gareth's employ, he can just dictate the outcome and ensure a trial never happens" Nixilei sighed "Honestly a trial would likely be the worst

"They will abuse truth potions to try and get the story they want out of us. And while Green and I will be fine because we have training for dealing with that kind of thing, the rest of the contestants likely don't. If you lost, I'm not sure what they'd do. Likely blacklist you from being summoned again, but I'm not sure about any other punishment"

Huh. "Well, that doesn't sound so bad. I could have just let Kress wail on me a bit then leave once he was satisfied so we never escalated it to that point" said Kat

Nixilei furiously shook her head. "No, I, and almost certainly Green as well, would like you to kick the shit out of him. I'll then be able to refuse him healing, and he can suffer in the infirmary while he recovers from his own stupidity.

"Gareth the poor fool has a soft spot for Kress even if he tries to be fair. But he will not force me to heal the fool if he attacks you with malice" said Nixilei.

Kat nodded. *Honestly this is all getting a bit weird. I don't really want to cause issues for Nixilei and Green, but would it really be such a big deal?* "So what is the plan then? Get back to the manor and beat Kress up?"

"Essentially" said Nixilei as large number of horses stampeded past.

Kat watched as the large herd stuck almost perfectly to the side of the rode, making sure not to get too close to Nixilei and herself. "Um, what the heck was that?" asked Kat *nOVeInext.com*

"Those are horses being called to the contestant grounds to pick everyone else up" said Nixilei

"Huh, actually now that I think about it how are you so fast? I mean I know I'm no better, but it seemed like I was the exception in many ways" said Kat.

"Ah, that is because I am a member of the fey. I doubt you'd be able to tell, and I suppose I should have mentioned it before." said Nixilei "This grants me certain extras even before I fully activate my mystic form. I can burn mana instead of food as energy in a much more direct way than humans and elves"

"Huh, so a bit like me then. And yeah, I noticed the wings you and Green have" said Kat

Nixilei practically froze in mid-air at that. Kat flared her wings to stop herself as well and turned back to face Nixilei tilting her head in confusion.

"My apologies" said Nixilei "You mean to say you can see an adolescent fey's wings?"

"Yeah?" said Kat now very confused.

Nixilei started running again and gestured for Kat to follow. "A fey's wings are a measure of how close they are to awakening a mystic form. Large expensive rituals are normally needed to see how any given fey is progressing on their path... but you say you can just see them? With naked eyes?"

Kat nodded "Yup, they sort of phase through stuff in a weird way and only you and Green have them"

Nixilei was once again floored "I'm surprised. But knowing that even Green is a fey member as well does lend credence to your claim. Tell me, how do they appear to you"

"Ah... hmm" said Kat "Well, I wasn't really paying attention to be honest" Kat cycled back through her memories trying to remember when she first saw Green's wings but couldn't quite place it.

"Hmm, well I believe Green's wings are a bit strange actually" said Kat with a wave towards Nixilei's back "Yours are sort of half there. They don't exactly have a colour but it's more like the idea that you have wings rather than seeing seeing them... if that makes sense"

Nixilei nodded and gestured for Kat to continue "Green though, well hers seem to almost be trying to hide. And they are a lot more, wispy? Perhaps. Like yours are proper clearly defined wings, but Green's are closer to something say... a bunch of wind flowing from her back perhaps? Less noticeable if you aren't aware of it, but very noticeable once you do"

Nixilei nodded at this with affirmation. Kat looked at her and could have sworn that she paled slightly but Nixilei spoke firmly, the same as always and her face betrayed no worry. "I see, thank you for that information. I'll need to have a proper discussion with Gareth and Green at some point in the future"

Chapter 169: Designing a Mark

Nixilei and Kat wasted no time as they headed straight for the mana. Once they arrived Kat felt mostly fine but could tell that her energy reserves weren't quite doing so well. They'd recovered a small amount during the awards ceremony, and then held mostly steady for the run. But that still left her relatively lacking in energy if she knew a fight was going to happen.

Nixilei lead Kat inside proudly and dismissed the servants that came to the door as she led Kat down a series of hallways to a new room, on the left side of the house. "Please, come in. This is my own quarters. Though please be aware they get minimal use"

Nixilei opened the door carefully to reveal what to Kat looked more like the own guest room she'd previously inhabited than a personal abode. There were a few extra bookshelves, and the table had some neatly stacked notes, but otherwise it was a rather bare room with a large bed off to the side and large windows that let in a soft breeze from the inner courtyard.

"Why don't you use this room much?" asked Kat as she took a seat in one of the chairs. It was a little inconvenient as it was one of those chairs that circled the user but had a high back, so Kat had to sit up and drape her wings behind the chair.

"I use the servants' quarters adjacent to the room Green sleeps in normally. I am apparently too good for such a room, and as such have my own here, but I've made my point rather strongly and they no longer press the issue" said Nixilei

Kat nodded and tried to get comfortable and regenerate some of her demonic energy properly. Nixilei seemed content to go over her stack of papers as Kat relaxed.

Huh... why did this suddenly get so complicated. I thought the job was done. I thought that maybe, I'd just have a bit more time here to sort out getting summoned again... Well actually, System can I even make a beacon for these guys?

User Kat is capable. As Entity Nixilei has stated, for a number of contractual reasons Entity Nixilei, Entity Green, and Entity Gareth are considered Summoner in a number of ways

Wait? Shouldn't there be one more person on that list?

No. Entity Kress is not considered to have Summoner privileges. These were waved when Entity Kress broke his agreement on the initial day of User Kat summoning.

Um... I thought that wasn't an official contract or anything.

Correct. However, As Entity Kress is not the True Summoner Entity Kress can be easily removed from additional privileges.

Well, the more you know.

Kat was about to mention this fact to Nixilei when she realised she wasn't supposed to talk about the system to summoners. *Should I inform Nixilei about this fact?*

It is unlikely for this information to be relevant to Entity Nixilei. User Kat's word alone would not have an effect on how the local legal system viewed Entity Kress.

Ok... not sure I understand but ok. Kat tried to relax and lean further back into the chair but found it rather difficult. Ignoring this she continued to think. *Hey, System, do I still need to design a beacon of my own?*

Correct. User Kat will need to choose a permanent form for User Kat's beacon.

Any suggestions?

No.

Well aren't you helpful. Kat thought of the many things she could potentially have for a beacon, but nothing inspiring really came to the forefront. *Do you have any examples perhaps?*

This is possible.

And suddenly the text from D.E.M.O.N.S transformed. It rapidly condensed towards a centre point in front of Kat before it started to spread out again and take shape. It formed into a pair of eyes with bull horns floating nearby.

Behind that was a large axe that was upside down. The bottom curve of the handle roughly following the shape of the horns in question. The edges of the axe seemed to be lined with minor engravings, but the details weren't very clear.

Next to this, a smaller hand sized version of the symbol in question was summoned. A lot of the detail was lost, and the horns became more of an outline on the axe then their own individual things, same with the eyes.

Ok, so just using stuff like that is fine. Can I just use a spade shape like my tail?

A substantially similar beacon is already in use. User Kat will not be able to claim that shape.

I guess that is fair. I hadn't exactly expected it to be free but you never know and I did have to try.

Kat thought about what additions she could make to her spade design that would give it a bit of originality. She briefly considered adding a small version of herself representing her demonic fire but quickly dismissed the idea.

It's not really something I want to advertise to people now that I know how strange that is. Plus it seems to be a pretty hidden thing... then again I can also imagine that whoever made the axe one probably uses an axe, and even more likely has an axe shape for their fire.

Then again, perhaps if an axe is such an important part of your fighting style, and you are a demon who defines themselves by their battle prowess then maybe it's really appropriate and I'm the one being silly.

Kat mulled over the idea of adding a fan to her backing. Something like the spade sitting in the centre of the fan at the cross point where all of the metal sheets came together. *It's not actually that bad looking when I picture it. The issue is, didn't I just criticise this sort of design choice.*

Hmm, but what about a flower instead. Kat looked down at the flowers on her own outfit, specifically focusing on the bunch at the end of her kimono. Hmm, I mean these do look really nice. Actually wait what about.

Kat tried to picture a flower, in the style of those on her outfit but with spade ends instead but ended up cringing away. *Nope, nope, that looks pretty bad actually. Hmm but what about a spade with the flower inside instead? *

Kat picture the design in question. A large spade with a smaller flower in the centre, but it didn't feel quite right. Instead she tried picturing three flowers. One at the top and two on the sides.

Hmm, that isn't too bad but I'm still not that happy with it. Kat imagined it surrounded by fire just for laughs and wasn't overly impressed. Kat's thoughts drifted back towards her three-flower design. It still wasn't ideal, but it was the best she'd come up with so far.

Hey system? What exactly do the beacons look like once they are out in the real world? Surely they aren't just 2D pictures or slightly 3D fire.

Beacons look to be made of some form of crystal in the shape you desire. Normally they are around the same thickness as User Kat's hand but that can be increased or decreased as desired. *novelExt.com*

Hmm, ok in that case what about. Kat tried to imagine her current design more in 3D with a flame contained within the spade. Whereas the flowers would look to be added to the surface, the flame itself could rest underneath in the centre.

Hmm, that actually isn't too bad. Maybe not the best, but I'm not sure I can think of anything better. Kat mulled over some more designs in her head. Trying a few radical things like just a picture of her face, or her own set of horns and a fan.

She even tried imagining her kimono itself as the beacon, but nothing really seemed to grab her like the one she'd made combining her flowers, spade and demonic fire.

Ok system how do I confirm this look for my beacon?

The system transformed into an identical copy of the image in her head. Giving it some dimension and smoothing out the spots that were a little rough in her mind. This design seemed to curve in with a bubble at the centre, making it look like more like someone had made her beacon with glass blowing techniques.

Kat nodded in appreciation at the design as text appeared.

Do you wish to confirm this as User Kat's beacon. This can NEVER be changed.

You know what? Yeah I think I do.

D.E.M.O.N.S requires secondary confirmation. Do you fully accept that this will be User Kat's beacon design until such a time that User Kat ceases to exist?

Yes. I do.

At Kat's acceptance the picture seemed to swirl and warp, in some strange way she couldn't actually see. The form itself seemed unchanging yet the sense that some great shift was occurring couldn't be ignored.

After several moments of strangeness. There was a light pop, and then Kat felt the design settle into her mind, before dismissing itself.

Chapter 170: Nixilei the not quite Spy

After dismissing the beacon, Kat tried to bring it up again. *I want to see if this is anything like with contracts.* And, Kat was unsurprised to find that guess was correct. As soon as her thoughts brushed the idea, she felt her beacon leap to the front of her mind.

Kat found she could manipulate it in a shocking number of ways. Scaling it up, spinning it around, and even squashing or stretching it to some extent, but that part was limited. The background was also somewhat easily swapped around, which was a little strange but Kat didn't question it.

Dismissing the mental projection Kat glanced over at Nixilei and found her writing still. *Hmm, should I strike up conversation? It's a great way to past the time but...* Kat looked at the fey with a pondering thought. *Not really sure that's the sort of thing Nixilei would like. She seems like she'd either be like Grace and love explaining things, or not interested in speaking to anyone ever... Then again, maybe it's different for fey. She might look human, but she isn't.*

Kat was content enough to sit in the quiet. She allowed her gaze to wonder around the sparse room before quickly turning her attention to the central courtyard. It was a nice area, with a simple fountain in the middle of a glass domed room. There were a few flowers around the edges. *I wonder if it's functionally a greenhouse or if the glass roof is just to keep out the rain.*

After spending a few more minutes trying to determine the answer to her previous question Kat let her gaze return to the room and Nixilei who was still scratching away at a sheet of paper. Kat tried to relax, but her wings were making it hard. Eventually, deciding to at least attempt some conversation Kat spoke up. "What are you writing?"

Nixilei paused with her pen raised above the paper and slowly turned towards Kat. "I am currently detailing my preliminary report of the tournament. Normally such things could wait but considering the

strange circumstances and the extra time that Thyme added to this round in particular requires me to send this off"

"Oh, I won't interrupt you then" said Kat

Nixilei gave a wave of dismissal at Kat "Give a minor amount of additional time and I'll have finished my report"

Nixilei fixed her glasses and started to increase the rate of her writing. Not significantly, but with Kat's demonic eyes and hearing it was quite the noticeable increase. After only another minute Nixilei folded up the paper in question and took one of the envelopes from a drawer that was filled with them.

As soon as the paper was secured in the envelope Nixilei slammed her hand onto the back of the envelope. A soft glow was emitted by the envelope, before it vanished before Kat's eyes. *Woah. I'd think it sleight of hand or an illusion if I wasn't immune to both of those things... wait does that mean I can never enjoy magic shows ever again now my eyes are too good to miss the tricks?*

While Kat was reeling from her devastating revelation, Nixilei quickly tidied up her stationary and tidied her paper stack slightly before turning to Kat. "What did you wish to converse with me about Kat?"

Is I didn't think I'd get this far an acceptable option? "If you don't mind telling me, what was that report for?"

Nixilei nodded "I can answer your questions if you promise not to divulge that information in any way"

Kat nodded.

"I Nixilei, so do declare, that any information shared with the demon Kat, shall be considered confidential and not to be spread by Kat until such a time as I give permission. This agreement ends once I acknowledge that it has, or when any sentient entity crosses the threshold of the room in question" said Nixilei

Woah, that was a rather in-depth contract you came up with so quickly Nix. "I agree" said Kat

A single chain shot between the two of them before vanishing. Kat raised a confused eyebrow at Nixilei.

"You would know more than I would about the lacking number of chains we experienced" said Nixilei.

System?

User Kat and Entity Nixilei consider this contract to be of low importance.

Um... ok? Surely there are other limitations, right?

User Kat is correct. It is simply the most applicable in this situation.

Kat nodded, as that was enough for now. She wasn't just about to stare off into space with her mind empowered while Nixilei was waiting to talk to her.

"Right, so you were saying Nixilei?" asked Kat

"I was sending off my daily reports to Green's family. It isn't a particularly grand secret, and most of the staff are privy to it, though I did have to ensure that at least some precautions were taking when revealing that to someone of your persuasion" said Nixilei

Kat tilted her head to the side "What do you mean by that exactly?"

"Simply that you are likely to at some point, be summoned by others, and when such a time that comes, I'd like some additional assurance you won't tell anyone about these details" said Nixilei

Kat rubbed her eyes while thinking on what Nixilei had said. *Well that hardly makes any sense. I mean sure, it isn't like it makes no sense at all, but if that truly was the case why didn't you place such clauses in the original contract. *

"I doubt that can be all Nixilei. If it was, you'd have it in the original as well" said Kat

Nixilei nodded, and her lips twitched upwards just slightly. Kat couldn't be entirely certain she'd seen it if her memory didn't allow her to go and check. "This is true. I have some other things I'd like for you to consider while my teammates are away and I'd prefer this didn't get back to them" said Nixilei

Kat nodded and gestured for the fey to continue. "Having observed your recent behaviour, and competent performance in battle I'd like to extend an additional offer towards you. I'm sure that Gareth will offer to resummon you for the next round. I'd like for you to also consider Green's safety to be of the highest priority" *nOVeInext.com*

Kat brought her body backwards realising she was leaning forward. Tapping her nails on the side of her horns Kat mulled over Nixilei's words. "Why would you like me to do that? Gareth seems more than competent as a defender, even if I never really saw him in action"

"And that is certainly true. I also shall be considering Green's safety to be one of my top priorities. The main reason I also request this of you is that I may only sacrifice my life for Green's once, whereas you will simply be banished. In addition, you are much more physically adept than I am at this point in time." said Nixilei

Kat let her tail free itself from where it was wedged behind her back and let it rest underneath her chin. *Truthfully I'm quite fine with this. She makes a more than valid point about everything. Not sure I exactly like her asking me to sacrifice my life for Green... *

*But at the same time, she is quite adorable. Nixilei is willing to do the same as well, and she isn't really asking for my death, because from everything the system has told me I can't die while on these outings. Honestly it's all very reasonable when I think about it, and I have no doubt that I'd be willing to at least make an attempt even if Nixilei hadn't said anything... just feels weird that she'd ask. *

Seeing Kat mull over her words Nixilei continued "Once we have finished with the tournament, I am willing to provide you with an additional reward for this service. Obviously, I cannot offer you a reward on a per defence basis lest you decide it be profitable to lead Green into danger, but I doubt you'd be so crass"

"I accept" said Kat...

And nothing. There was no chains. *Um...*

"No chains?" asked Kat

Nixilei shook her head "I do not yet know what I will be providing you as payment only that you shall have one. The contract cannot bind us unless all terms are clear. I could make a contract detailing you defend Green for nothing, then pay you afterwards, but I believe that having no contract binding us at all would be better here"

"Ok, I understand" *But not really* "If that's how you prefer we go about this arrangement I have no major complaints" *I might have one or two minor ones* "Is there any more details you wish to provide me?" said Kat

Nixilei shook her head. "Not as of right now. We have yet to even be informed of the next venues, so it is entirely possible they will be sufficiently protected in sufficiently defended areas. It is equally as likely that later matches lead us into dangerous territory, so we will have to see"