

DEMONS 201

Chapter 201: Spot the Difference

Kat glanced at the surroundings hoping for a clue but nothing immediately jumped out at her. Focusing again, Kat tried to move her limbs but found them responding slowly.

Dammit, seems that I'm not as fast as I think I am. Or perhaps it's the other way around, I'm thinking faster than I am. Either way, it looks like I won't be able to poke around too much if I want to solve this in time.

Kat tried searching the nurses for any other indications that they could possibly be fake but found them to be matching in almost every way and the differences only served to help ensure they looked more realistic. For example, the way the lights fell over them were subtly different.

Of course, that was only to be expected because they weren't standing in the same position as each other. So Kat switched gears, the light from her flame was proof that one had to be fake. The issue was that the room was more than bright enough to prevent it having an effect on any other part of the nurses' uniforms.

Shit what else. Kat focused on her peripheral vision with Shizuka and Chiharu in it, but found that about as useful. Chiharu wasn't watching the nurses at all, she was looking down at Shizuka, so her eyes were out of sight.

Shizuka was even worse. Because she was just the ice stand in her whole body should be reflecting light, or casting some shadows, but it was as if she wasn't in the scene at all. It didn't even react to the lights from the blue crystal lamps, let alone Kat's own fire.

Dammit. Why the heck are you making this so hard on me. Kat looked over at Minor hoping she might have some way of helping. This was crushed however when Kat focused on Minor just barely in her vision with her eyes closed.

Seriously! Could you not have done this to me world! Seriously what the hell. How is this even fair. The only people looking at me are the two nurses, everyone else has their eyes hidden. The room has no mirrors... where the hell am I supposed to get a clue from.

Kat scanned the room one last time looking for some hint about her fire when her eyes landing on the ice cube that was currently blocking Shizuka's training area. Kat then proceeded to curse as she realised a second issue.

Dammit, why! When Kat had moved to intercept the nurses, she had ended up in such a position that her eyeline was blocked by Shizuka's tails. Oh sure she could see over them, but any reflection from her fire would be absorbed harmlessly by Chiharu's tails.

Guess I need to move a bit then. Kat beat her wings while her mind was slowed, and felt her energy roil in protest. Splitting it between her head, her flame and her wings was rather hard. *Dammit, I'm stretching myself to thin.*

Biting her lips Kat did the only thing she could and stopped providing her mind with the slowing effect. *I'll need to act as soon as possible.* Kat lifted off of the ground and the nurses continued, she was careful to move her legs slightly to not bother them as she looked over at the ice.

And there was no reflection. Not even a slight glimmer of light to show it being reflected. *Gotcha.*

Kat wheeled on the nurse she now knew to be fake, bringing her flaming hand down on the Nightmare. A moment before Kat would make contact with the fake it reached out, trying to tear away the vitarus fruit from the other nurse's hands.

Kat's tail speared out, blocking the path of the arm, as Kat set it on fire, hoping it would prevent some of the twisting. The nurse however was actually waiting for this trick. Grabbing Kat's tail, she pulled hard.

Kat found herself ripped out of the air, with the nurse stepping back and trying to fling Kat into the second nurse that was still walking forward without a care in the world. *Shit.* Kat went to start reeling herself in by her tail but realised that wouldn't quite cut it.

Kat folded herself completely flat as she brought herself in, curling into a ball as she slammed into the Nightmare nurse, just barely missing the real thing. The nightmare stumbled back slightly and dropped Kat's tail, which was actually to Kat's detriment.

Kat fell to the floor, but quickly tried to jump to her feet finding her wings uncooperative. Nonetheless, her tail was ready, and pushed her the rest of the way to her feet. Kat and the nurse eyed each other warily as Kat tried to plan.

Ok, I can still feel my wings, and my tail is in perfect condition. Can I waste my demonic energy fixing those wings right now? Or do I just leave them out for the fight. I need them to balance, but if my tail is on the ball perhaps I can make due

At the very least I know that keeping demonic fire active over any given limb, while expensive, does prevent that part of me being twisted, and it is still much cheaper than repairing it afterward.

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Kat looked over her surprisingly full reserves and made the decision. Flaring her reserves she pushed as much as she could into her back feeling her wings slowly return to her. Once that was done Kat lit up her hands and charged.

The nurse hissed, but let herself take it, by rolling towards the bed. Kat wasn't willing to risk the Nightmare knocking the bed and messing things up though, and a tail coated in fire wrapped around the Nightmare's legs. Kat halted her charge in midair using her now functioning wings and pulled back tripping the Nightmare.

It screeched in pain, as Kat watched the area around her flaming tail start to dissolve. Kat's face broke into a faint smile *So I can fight you scumbags.* Kat let her fire burn, slowly coating the rest of her body as she lunged once again for the Nightmare.

It had other plans though. Losing its nurse-like shape and morphing into a black tar-like substance reaching out towards Kat in turn. They collided in midair with a thud, but the Nightmare was forced back.

Kat let her instincts take over, slashing and clawing away, punctuated by lunges from her tail. Kat watched as the Nightmare was slowing getting eaten away. She was winning... but not fast enough.

Examining her energy reserves she found herself quickly approaching halfway. *Dammit, I might have to risk the Grace special.* Kat let herself focus her eyes on the attacks, watching to see why she was burning so much energy and quickly found the answer.

The nightmare now in its tar form was dodging around her strikes, morphing out of the way. She still got decent chunks, but they were not as much as they could be, and her constant flaming upkeep to keep her body safe was doing her no favours.

"Minor" shouted Kat in her flurry of claws "You'll have to keep me safe for a bit"

Kat let her flames, burn. Exploded off her body. The instant she did so the Nightmare was covered in flames, seeping into its body and started to freeze it from the inside out. The two figures separated, as Kat fell backwards, her energy leaving her.

The Nightmare though was still standing. Looming over Kat with a menacing air. Minor took in a scared gasp, until the scene settled further. The nightmare was only standing because it was frozen in place.

Its once shiny and liquid form now solidified and dull. Minor looked over with worry at Kat, while Kat simply watched the Nightmare waiting for any movement. *How much have I got left?* Checking her reserves, Kat was surprised to still have a bit more than an eight left.

Trying to flex her muscles slightly, Kat found them responsive. *Ok, so I'm still good if it's not quite finished.* Kat held her breath as she watched the figure looming over her. Ready to use the last of her energy if the situation called for it.

A loud cracking sound rang out. Kat kept herself limp, not reacting in the slightest. Hoping that it would let its guard down when it broke free. Slowly, a thick line appeared, going from the top left of the blob down to the bottom right.

The cracks started to spiderweb, as they grew and encapsulated the whole form. Slowly snaking their way with light cracking sounds. Before finally the figure shattered...

And fell to the floor. Small crystals of ice drifting down to the ground and Kat let herself relax mentally as well. *Ok. So they can be beaten. But probably only one at a time.* Kat let out a deep breath she didn't know she was holding and closed her eyes for just a moment for a bit of rest.

Chapter 202: A Calm-ish Break

"Kat" said Minor with a shaky voice.

Well, I suppose I shouldn't rest just yet, Minor would worry too much. Using her tail as leverage Kat threw herself to her feet. "I'm fine. A bit low on demonic energy... and that could be a problem in the future"

"How big of an issue" asked Minor

Kat shrugged "Well, I can function, but it seems I need my flames to attack nightmares, so... depends. I could fully recover with that relatively calm memory, so if we get another one of those it will be no trouble"

Minor pursed her lips "I'm sorry, I can't really stop this. I mean... we could wait maybe? It might cause issues though"

"That's fine" said Kat "I'm fully mobile, so I can just run away, the issue will be stopping whatever interference the Nightmares try to run"

Minor bit her lips as the scene started to fade to blackness "I can maybe hold us in the scene change for a few minutes"

"Hmmm" mumbled Kat. *That might not be a bad idea. If I was a bit better with my energy management, I could probably take those guys out with a lot less. Like maybe, crazy idea Kat, just throw fire on them instead of running in yourself*

It works well against real opponents, and you certainly have been a bit hesitant. But abusing your demonic regeneration isn't a good idea when you need to coat yourself with fire, and any damage you take is a right pain to heal.

Ok. Now with the internal criticism out of the way. "How hard is it to keep us in transition"

Minor bit her lip and tilted her head to the side "It... isn't so bad. It's somewhat hard to explain. I guess... it's sort of like holding your arm outstretched. It doesn't seem so bad, and the first thirty seconds are super easy.

"But the thirty fifth second is a killer and it only gets worse. For me, I can maybe do... two minutes? Maybe three if I really push it" said Minor

"Two minutes should be plenty" said Kat *I won't be full. Maybe like... halfway? Bit less? Depends on the regen rate here in the dream I guess, but that plus even a bit of time in the memory should be enough.*

"Ok" said Minor with a nod.

Kat let ten seconds past "How distracted can you be for this?" she asked

Minor shrugged "It's really not hard, so... a bunch?"

Kat nodded "Ok, well, in that case I was wondering. How come we've only ever seen one Nightmare at a time" *novElnext.cOm*

Minor tilted her head to the side "Actually... that's a good question. I'm not sure. I've only ever seen one at a time, but I have seen them in separate memories. And they don't normally look the same, so I've always just called them the Nightmares... but now that you mention it"

Minor got a thoughtful expression as she considered the possibilities "Honestly, I wouldn't be surprised if they aren't Nightmares, but instead THE Nightmare. I don't think it changes much... except you did just flash freeze one... hmm.

"Does that mean it's gone? Is there one less nightmare in the world or did you just slow it down a bit? Or is there no longer a Nightmare at all" said Minor

"Hmm, I'm going to say it, or they will be back" said Kat

"Why?" asked Minor

"Well, it fought me, but it was more concerned with messing with the memory. Something that is easy to damage, or only exists as a few beings would probably care more about staying alive. It didn't seem surprised I could damage it... unless turning into a mess of ink counts as surprise" said Kat

Minor pouted "That isn't what I wanted to hear but sadly you seem to be right. I was always the one running so -ugh"

"You alright" asked Kat

"This is just... a little harder than I thought" said Minor with gritted teeth. Kat could see her whole form vibrating as if it was about to come apart.

"Hey, it's ok" said Kat, checking her reserves and finding them to be at around a third "I've got plenty back don't hurt yourself"

"No... no I got this" said Minor, but Kat could see the edges of Minor's figure started to blur.

Kat walked over to her and wrapped her in a hug, before spinning her around. Breaking Minor's concentration and advancing the scene. When Kat let her go, she was pouting but Kat payed it no mind. *I'm not about to let her hurt herself, or perhaps cause serious damage if she was underplaying it. Not for just a little bit more demonic energy.*

As the scene coalesced, Shizuka was noticeably older. Not that she hadn't been aging before, but now it was a clear jump. Whereas the first few memories were from baby, to toddler, to child to... well still a child, but one of perhaps 10 years instead of five.

It was a familiar scene to Kat, Shizuka was practicing with a series of icicles surrounding her. It was only the two, but they orbited her perfectly. Sometimes Shizuka would change the patterns slightly, bobbing them up and down, or in circles as they rotated.

The environment though was slightly different. It was still clearly a training area of sorts, but Shizuka was now likely in the palace gardens. She was sitting on a small platform, probably meant for balancing on one foot but was large enough for her to sit.

She was in the centre of a pond, and the water beneath the pole seemed to be circling it as well, perhaps part of Shizuka's training, or a side effect she was trying to eliminate, Kat didn't know.

Kat herself was floating over the water... which was strange because she wasn't flying, it seemed to almost be a solid surface, but only towards the outer edges. Looking around Kat saw the rest of the gardens.

She was surrounded by various trees and shrubs, none above head height except for a few notable exceptions well off into the distance. The garden itself seemed to be divided into four sections, one for

each season, summer autumn winter spring, with Shizuka in the middle with the pond connecting them all.

Each corner had at least one tree in the centre. The spring and winter had multiple, but autumn and summer had just the single tree as a centrepiece. The summer tree was a strange golden tree full of leaves, that shifted in an invisible wind.

The grass in the area looked somewhat like small wheat stalks, giving off a very vibrant gold whenever Kat so much as glanced towards it. The winter section was more subdued, with a line of trees heading towards the centre.

They seemed to be pine trees of some kind, looking a bit like Christmas trees. Each one increasing in height the further you got from the centre. The corner of the winter area seemed to be taking up by a number of small bushes with various coloured berries, mostly blue.

The spring area was full of sakura trees in full bloom. There was practically nothing else, but considering how spectacular the sight looked to Kat's eyes, she wasn't going to complain. There were benches scattered throughout as well, and while the trees didn't seem to be in full bloom, there was a few pink spots on each tree.

The final section, autumn, was closer to a forest than anything else. There were flowers everywhere, and trees in any available space. It was just spread out enough not to look dreary and the bright flowers went a long way to help that.

Kat wasn't actually sure what made the autumn section autumn, and would have discounted the whole seasons thing entirely if it wasn't for the massive signpost that labelled them as such.

Well, whatever, it isn't exactly like I can critique their decorative choices.

That was when Kat saw Minor tense up. "Nightmare?" asked Kat

Minor nodded, as a golden haired fox walked around the corner and into view. "Oh no" said Minor

"What?" asked Kat

"Well..." said Minor "We have a problem. I remember this. I was awake enough for it to be part of my memories as well and... that guys has to be the nightmare but he was actually in the scene"

"Shit" said Kat. *We are going to have to let this play out then huh. How will I know when to interrupt if the Nightmare is around for the whole thing and playing a key role.*

Kat took a deep breath as she watched the clearly smug fox walk towards a training Shizuka "Hey, did he always look like a sleezy scumbag?" asked Kat. *I swear he has enough grease on him to keep a car running smoothly a decade*

"Yeah" said Minor sadly "That's exactly how he looked.

"Well... I guess they weren't going to keep it easy" said Kat

Chapter 203: Information on the Fool

"So, what can you tell me Minor, considering you actually remember this one" asked Kat

"Well..." said Minor as the blond fool kept walking towards Shizuka with not a care in the world. "He's about to test the first in a long line of challenges for Shizuka's hand in marriage"

"Wait what?" asked Kat "Is that even a thing?"

Minor cringed "No... we moved past the idea quite a long time ago. Now it's mostly about bribery and blackmail, but Shizuka decided to bring it back into fashion" said Minor wearily

"Why would she do that?" asked Kat

"Well... this particular sleezeball, he's called Reverendi by the way, happens to have some particularly powerful legacy runes that his family keeps under lock and key" said Minor

"Can't you just... watch them use the runes?" asked Kat

Minor nodded "Yes, if they ever actually used the things. See his family, the Merintorps, have lost almost all of their magical abilities because they are lazy pieces of shit"

"Woah" said Kat "I'm sensing a bit of anger there"

Minor nodded "Yes, they are useless fops, but mum can't get rid of them because there is another family, the Mederin's, that are the estate managers of the Merintorps. They do all the actual work, and because of their efforts the Merintorp domain is one of the most financially powerful in the kingdom... though their military has suffered"

"Why not just put the Mederin's in charge then?" asked Kat "Seems like they are doing all the work anyway."

Minor sighed "Mother has offered many many times actually, but the Mederin family just keeps saying that they faithfully serve the Merintorps and cannot hope to ever replace them. Politely ignore the fact that they replaced them three generations ago.

"Which I suppose isn't actually that long. Because the Merintorps are useless they have a rather average lifespan compared to mages like myself and the Mederin's. So, really, it's more like the two Mederin's and the like... five Merintorps I think. Anyway,

"Because they are so well off, they haven't needed to sell anything of worth from the houses glory days and Shizuka would really like some of their runes and well... just watch" said Minor

"Lady Shizuka, I am here for your hand in marriage" said Reverendi

Kat's mouth fell open. "He didn't just do that"

Minor nodded sadly "He did"

Shizuka opened a single eye but continued the rotation of her ice cubes. "On whose authority do you seek my hand"

What sort of an answer is that for a ten-year-old? "I am here under the authority of my house" said Reverendi looking smug.

Shizuka's icy body completely shifted at this. The ice stopped mid-air, Shizuka's position went from relaxed to intrigued and she started glaring down at Reverendi. "I see, in that case what is it you have to offer me"

Reverendi frowned "Is not my illustrious personage enough to sway your mind. I am the eldest and most proficient of my siblings, from the most powerful house in the empire other than your own"

"Is that true" whispered Kat

"Not really" said Minor "They just have the most money, but a lot of that is from owning businesses and leveraging connections"

"I see, well, if you are proficient in the combat arts are you requesting a duel for my hand" said Shizuka with a grin on her face.

Reverendi seemed to bloom upon hearing this idea "Yes, I challenge you to single combat for your hand in marriage" said Reverendi with a confidence only fools have.

Shizuka's grin morphed into a wicked smile, like the cat who'd caught the canary. "Excellent, in that case, what do you offer as collateral. Mine is obviously my hand in marriage and only something suitably valuable can be proffered on your end of course"

Oh... ten-year-old Shizuka is already terrifying "He's already been trapped hasn't he?? whispered Kat

"Yes. The only thing he can offer is his family's scrolls more or less. Anything else would be crippling to the family or insulting. Sadly he isn't quite so intelligent" said Minor

"I know not, what my family could offer to compensate for such an illustrious opportunity" said Reverendi

Shizuka's eye twitched slightly but her grin didn't fade "Perhaps your ancient family's magic?"

Reverendi laughed "Those old things? They are practically useless. I know not why father keeps them around. Still, if you are willing to give such generous terms, I can do naught but accept"

Shizuka's eye twitched violently at that but she nodded with false calm. "We shall meet in the training arena in one hour. I will provide the contracts"

Reverendi paled a bit hearing those last words but nodded "O-of course lady Shizuka"

Before he promptly exited the scene. "Why does Major look so angry at the moment?" asked Kat

"Well... she just realised she probably overpaid for those scrolls. Oh don't get me wrong, they truly are the most valuable thing he owns, and he is being gouged horribly in a duel he could never hope to win... but if she could have asked for more she would have" said Minor

"Huh... Major is more cunning than I thought" said Kat

Minor shrugged as the scene started to twist "We are kitsune after all, we picked up at least some of that heritage. This is just Major's way of expressing it"

When the scene returned, Shizuka was in a dressing room, with Chiharu. "What in the name of the great fox were you thinking" said Chiharu.

"I mean, of all the things, why would you bet your hand in marriage. Why is my twelve-year-old daughter betting her life on something so stupid" said Chiharu

She's twelve! "Mother, it is perhaps the easiest gamble. Either I win and get the scrolls, or I lose, marry into the family, and then get the scrolls" said Shizuka

Chiharu frowned "Why did it have to be them of all people. And you can't simply be ok with losing something so precious like your hand in marriage" said Chiharu

Shizuka shrugged "His territory can be much better managed without his family leaching off of it. Alternatively, assassination is an option before the wedding, and after. That isn't even taking into account I am without a doubt the greater fighter. I only believe I will lose if they cheat unreasonably"

Chiharu sighed "You shouldn't talk about assassinating your husband to avoid marrying him. Just don't accept the duel in the first place dear"

Shizuka shrugged "It was my idea. Why wouldn't I want it"

Chiharu groaned "Where did I go wrong? Was it letting her learn magic so early? Was it that maths teacher that corrupted her? My own Mother? This does seem like something she'd do..." Chiharu mumbled under her breath.

Though clearly not quiet enough "I have been greatly inspired by grandmother, but most of it was a simple calculation. And besides, as horrible of a personality as he might have, at least he is somewhat good looking" said Shizuka

Chiharu blanched and looked at her daughter like she had suddenly grown two heads "You really think that thing, of all people is attractive?" *nOvElnext.cOm*

Shizuka tilted her head but nodded slowly

"Clearly I have failed more thoroughly than I imagined" said Chiharu with a sigh.

Shizuka shrugged as she put the last of her outfit on. It was a strange sight for Kat. As each piece was placed on Shizuka, it blended into the memory ice form she always was. She had a close-cut robe, with a leather plate on top covering her midsection. The sleeves were cut short above the elbows, and the robe flowed freely over her legs giving her plenty of are to move with.

"Look Mother, I'll be fine. I already have the magical contracts ready and on hand anyway" said Shizuka pulling a stack of papers from a drawer hidden in the wall of the room.

"Wait... those are real magical contracts!" said Chiharu with surprise "When in everfrost's name did you get those done"

Shizuka shrugged "I've been thinking something like this was going to happen sooner or later so I actually have a few made. I wrote them myself and had grandmother help me enchant them properly. This one is the one for ancient family artefact against hand in marriage

"I also have ones for, considerable sums of wealth, one for tracts of land, and one for rare goods, both of the singular items, and in bulk. I was thinking of a few more but enchanting this is apparently difficult and I didn't want too many to go unused" said Shizuka

Chiharu cursed internally at the confirmation that her mother had indeed been responsible for at least some of this madness. "Well dear, I suppose you had best go out and fight then. But so help me, if you lose I'll be sorely tempted to disown you"

Shizuka shrugged like she'd heard it all before "I'll be fine"

"Will she be fine" asked Kat

"Well..." said Minor "The issue is her opponent is now the Nightmare, and not the pompous ass he actually was."

Chapter 204: A Contract Signed in Blood

"Speaking of the Nightmare" said Kat "Is it still around? It doesn't actually seem to be in the memory, I can't see it anywhere in this room"

Minor shook her head "The Nightmare is certainly still around. It isn't that it was banished, this is an extension of the other memory. It has simply moved to a more appropriate venue"

Kat nodded as a gong rang out over the area "What the heck was that" asked Kat

"It is the call to battle" said Minor "It is used for all official duels, though, the last official duel was many many years ago"

At this, Chiharu froze and Shizuka turned to face the door to exit the small room. Chiharu bit her lips as she said "I suppose it is time then. Not even I can stop this now"

Shizuka nodded "I know what I am doing, and I won't lose"

Shizuka stepped out, and Kat was dragged along as well. The room vanished as it was replaced by a large circular ring in the open air. The platform was suspended on a large circle, and as Shizuka took her steps forwards towards the centre, the small room they were in was lowered to the ground.

"Why are we so high up" said Kat

"It is tradition. Our duels are supposed to be free from interference. There is actually a hidden referee's box if you look to our left. The eyes of the referee can just barely see the field" said Minor while pointing to the left

Kat enhanced her eyes slightly and looked at the direction in question and saw a thin line and box, just barely above floor level. *Huh, so there is.*

Across from Shizuka was her opponent. While Shizuka's outfit was clearly a basic training set, Reverendi's had been specially customised. It was tight around his figure emphasising the few muscles he possessed. There was also a golden design, that consisted of a series of lines across his robe, that pulled your eyes towards his two tails.

The pair walked to the centre where Shizuka presented the papers she had behind her back "These are the relevant forms. The first is a magical contract signifying you are acting on behalf of your house to be signed by you alone.

"And the one underneath that is for both of us stipulating that you are offering up your family's ancient scroll collection for my hand in marriage. Would you like to look over them before we begin?" said Shizuka sweetly.

Reverendi tried to look unswayed but his demeanour did pale slightly at the news "Of course not. I trust your honour as the princess of this nation"

Shizuka nodded, summoning a sigil. Reverendi flinched instantly and reached for the sword on his back but stopped when a table of ice appeared in front of Shizuka, who was giving Reverendi a confused look.

Shizuka didn't say anything as she laid out the two considerably sized stacks of paper. She then moved over the left stack pulling out a quill deliberately stabbing it into her finger before signing the contract in front of her.

In Reverendi's well practice false bravado couldn't withstand the psychological beating?Shizuka was engaging in. "Is there a problem? You do know that magical contracts need to be signed in blood?"

"They do?" said Reverendi and Kat at the same time.

Shizuka smiled lightly and handed him the pen, while Minor spoke up "They don't actually. You just need to put a bit of your mana into the pen and it will work, but technically blood can as well. My sister is just terrorising the boy at this point" *novElnext.cOm*

Kat nodded. *Major is a lot more vicious than I gave her credit, she gave me a nice place to sleep, was instrumental in my summoning on an easy job according to the system, and she was nothing but polite.*

It seems though, she has a cunning streak a mile wide. It makes me wonder if Minor has something up her sleeve. She seems so much sweeter but she had to live in Major's head for quite a long time... surely she picked something up?

Reverendi shakily took the offered pen and proceeded to stab his finger as Shizuka had done. It was of course, not as well practiced and his hand was shaking. This meant that instead of a light cut, he simply rammed the pen into his finger without drawing blood.

Shizuka made a point of not even reacting to the failed attempt. Reverendi glanced at her for a second, but grit his teeth when he saw the impassive stare Shizuka was giving him. Slamming the pen down again, he failed to draw blood and stifle the grunt of pain.

"Do you need assistance Lord Merintorps" said Shizuka icily

Reverendi shuddered at the cold voice, and near venom dripping from Shizuka's mouth. He shook his head quickly and reached back to grab his sword. As he touched it, the weapon shrunk, becoming nothing larger than a toothpick.

He slid the weapon along the middle of his finger causing it to bleed, before using the blood in question to sign his name beside Shizuka's and on his own contract. Shizuka nodded as he did this and gathered the papers, before walking over the referee's box.

When she reached it, Shizuka handed them into the box, where they were snatched up by an indistinct figure inside. "Thank you" said Shizuka as she walked back to the centre.

Once she was in position the sound of Chiharu's voice rang out across the platform. "A duel of contract has been initiated. The competitors have agreed to the terms, and now as per tradition the rules shall be outlined and then the fight shall commence

"One item other than training gear may be used, wherein sets of armour, or duel weapons count as single items. The winner is decided when one side yields or when one side is unable to continue fighting, either through being knocked from the arena or being physically incapable.

"The arena has been enchanted to prevent death. Any attempt to circumvent this enchantment will result in the immediate execution of the perpetrator and the forfeiture of the duel.

"All, bear witness to this sacred right, and by the sound of the gong, and the power I wield let the duel commence' said Chiharu.

Shizuka and Reverendi separated slightly, standing at the halfway point between the centre and the edge of the platform, one across from each other. Once they were in position a deep gong sounded out across the arena.

Kat tensed, and further reinforced her eyes to see what was about to happen. Both fighters jumped into action instantly. Reverendi enlarged his sword to its original size, and charged towards Shizuka.

Shizuka for her part started to summon a number of two ringed sigils around her. From their centre, chunks of sharpened icicles emerged, but held steady. Just before Reverendi entered striking range, Shizuka summoned a single circle sigil, and all the icicles exploded into motion.

Reverendi reacted with fear, drastically enlarging his weapon, and using it as a shield, cowering behind it. When he expanded it, the sword managed to dig slightly into the ground halting his momentum.

Icicles slammed against the sword, ringing out as each successive impact made contact. As Reverendi hid, Shizuka kept up her work. Summoning other sigils off to the left and right, she waited till her initial barrage was finished, before sending them all forth again.

Reverendi seeing himself surrounded, poured mana into his chest piece which started to glow, before the sigil in its centre lit up and a bubble appeared around him. The icicles seemed to be absorbed by the shield. Kat looked closely with her enhanced vision, and noticed that as the icicles made contact, they turned wispy and then got sucked into the shield

"I see it" said Kat "His shield is absorbing the ice, that must be what the Nightmare has changed"

Minor shook her head "Sadly, he actually cheated like this originally. Shizuka has a plan for it, but it is disheartening. Technically she should have called the duel her win then and there... but well. My sister likes to show off more than is healthy"

Kat noticed that Minor was right. As the second barrage of icicles started to dwindle Shizuka was making her way behind the cowering figure of Reverendi. He had recovered some of his poise with his shield, but still remained wary

"What exactly is that shield anyway" asked Kat

"A spell specialised in blocking ice and water magic. They are similar enough it works with both, a great detriment to Shizuka" said Minor

"So what is the weakness then? Surely no spell is just better" said Kat

Minor nodded and pointed to Shizuka who had made her way behind the shield without being noticed. Taking a fighting stance, Shizuka bounced on her feet twice, before charging in, and bringing an open palm down on the shield currently protecting Reverendi. It popped like a soap bubble, leaving nothing but air between Shizuka and her victory

Chapter 205: a Minor miscalculation

Shizuka's hand was going straight for the back of Reverendi's neck, with nothing to stop it. That was until the metal in his sword flowed backwards blocking the strike. When Shizuka made contact with metal a dull ringing sound rang out as she stayed half suspended in the air from the force.

Kat heard Minor gasp, and Kat turned her attention to her companion "What?"

Minor paled slightly as she said "We were wrong. The Nightmare isn't Reverendi, it's his sword!"

Kat returned her focus to see Shizuka pushing herself back, a lightly bleeding wound on her right hand. Kat's eyes narrowed as she prepared to jump in and attack Reverendi but Minor stopped her "Wait"

Kat returned to a slightly more neutral stance but was still ready to jump into action, with her wings spread and ready to fly forward at any time "What is the issue? I have to help her. If the Nightmare is changing things we need to make sure it doesn't go too far off course and break the memory right"

Minor nodded "Yes but this is different. In the memory Shizuka beat Reverendi by himself. Major knew he was cheating and this is merely an extension of that. I can tell the memory is still running its course and hasn't started to need correcting"

Kat frowned as she looked at Shizuka, now wary and holding an ice sword in her left uncut hand. She still looked calm, but no longer held the same confidence she did before her failed attack.

"So... what makes this different" asked Kat

"Well, the Nightmare was always something not in the scene. Before, even when it was copying the nurse, it still wasn't the nurse, because she was there. In this one the Nightmare IS the sword, and we never learned all of its tricks

"Sure, it probably can't move so freely like we just saw in reality, but it doesn't matter. It hasn't even damaged the memory so Shizuka will keep fighting. To keep the integrity up she has to win herself" said Minor

Kat bit her lip "So where does that leave us? Can the Shizuka memory even beat it by herself? The Nightmares can disrupt memories, we know this, so why hasn't it?"

Minor frowned... "My best guess is that it's trying to break it properly. Something we can't just fix. So in this instance Shizuka is fighting by herself, but if they manage to make her lose we can't even stop them, and the memory will just end"

Shizuka resummoned a bunch of icicles around her with sigils once again but didn't fire them. Reverendi for his part, finally started to look around. He peaked out from behind his sword to find Shizuka missing. Rapidly shaking his head around looking for her, he just barely caught sight of the icicles Shizuka had summoned and yelped.

Quickly ducking to the other side of his sword Reverendi peaked at Shizuka with fear. *Wow. He has a Nightmare for a weapon, he's cheated by bringing in better gear, his sword alone might be able to defend him from whatever Shizuka throws at him and his is still a coward.*

Kat narrowed her eyes. *So how does the Nightmare think it can win. Even with a few extra abilities there doesn't seem like there is much Reverendi can actually do.* Shizuka narrowed her eyes when she saw Reverendi hide behind his sword once again.

She was starting to realise that something wasn't right, by the look on her face, but her inaction meant she hadn't figured the trick out. "What's the plan Minor" said Kat

Minor looked slightly panicked, but Kat hit her with some calming aura to assist her in regaining some semblance of calm. "I... I'm not sure. I mean... it's strange for the Nightmare to keep within the memory while trying to break it. I know I said it must want to really break it, but it just doesn't seem to have enough power"

Kat tilted her head at this "What do you mean"

"Well..." said Minor "Even if it is the sword, Shizuka completely outclassed Reverendi. Like it wasn't even close even though he cheated the first time. That strike to the back of the neck should have taken him out.

"Now sure, he has a better sword now, but that's it. Reverendi is still hopeless. I don't see how the sword can take memory Shizuka out"

Kat bit her lip at that, and focused on Shizuka, specifically on the cut that was made. It appeared to be bleeding the same light purple that she always was in the memories, so nothing seemed wrong. *Is the cut important?*

Did the sword cut her because it could? Is there poison or something in the wound? It looks fine maybe? But I don't know what dream figures are supposed to look like when they are bleeding. Hell I'm not sure I've even bled since I've been here so what does my blood look like?

Would it be red, perhaps the way Major might expect? But Minor saw that I have black blood, so would it be black instead? Kat shook her head, she was getting distracted. *Focus, what could the Nightmare attacking Shizuka have to... Oh oh of course.*

"Minor, could the Nightmare be twisting Shizuka with each attack?" asked Kat

Minor paled at that, and got a look of concentration on her face. A few moments passed, as Reverendi and Shizuka calmly stared at each other, both waiting for the other to make the first move. Shizuka had dismissed her extra icicles, but the sword in her hand remained.

A look of confusion came over Minor just before she spoke "Um... it doesn't make any sense to me either but... it seems like Shizuka isn't twisted at all"

"Wait what?" asked Kat

"Yeah" said Minor "That was my reaction as well. And now that I'm looking, even Reverendi is fine despite holding the sword in the first place. I'm not sure if it has forfeited the ability in exchange for becoming a more complete part of the scene...

"Or if it's because it's an inanimate object, or if it just isn't trying for some reason. I really have no way to tell... but I can say that for now, everything is about as good as it could be"

Kat frowned. *As nice as that is to hear, it doesn't bring us any closer to figuring out what the plan actually is.* As Kat was thinking Shizuka made the first move. Reverendi, flinched as she launched herself at him. *nOVelnext.cOm*

He positioned his sword as a shield, but shrunk its size, perhaps to move it easier. Shizuka took a slash at his side, and the sword enlarged slightly to knock it off course. Reverendi then shrunk the sword rapidly, before stepping to the side and bringing it down.

Shizuka however, was not caught unaware, summoning a block of ice, right on top of the sword and trapping it within. The sword was dragged to the ground because of the extra weight with Reverendi straining against it. Just as Shizuka was about to make a counter attack, the sword creaked, and spikes grew out of it shatter the ice.

Shizuka jumped back instead, taking the chance to eye the sword even more warily than before. Kat tsked at the sight and Minor sighed. "I'm not sure what she can do. Despite not being a shield, it seems this Nightmare has some major defence. Once Reverendi works up the courage to just go at Shizuka he might be able to win" said Minor

Kat frowned at this news "What can we do then? It's not like I can shoot fireballs at them without interfering"

At this Minor got a thoughtful look on her face "Actually... that might not be quite true"

Kat tilted her head "What do you mean. You were quite clear that we can't interfere"

Minor nodded, "Well, let's just say I have an idea. Kat, your fire is actually really cold right?"

Kat nodded

"So... how much control over it do you have?" asked Minor

Kat winced at that "Not quite as much as I'd like. I can hover it around me, perhaps a centimetre away but I find it very hard if it's much further away"

Minor frowned but nodded "Right well, that is a bit of a shame but I can work with that. Kat how much energy do you have to summon fire?"

Kat checked her reserves and found them nearly full. Minor's short break, plus the duration of the memory seemed to be enough for her to recover. "More than enough for a bit of fire" said Kat with a grin.

Minor nodded "If you are confident then I think I have a plan. The best way to interfere, is to just make sure that nobody, not even Shizuka knows we are interfering"

Well, at least this is sure to be interesting. Let's see what Minor has in mind.

Chapter 206: a Minor victory

Once Kat had heard Minor's plan, she was rather impressed. *This could actually work. As long as Minor can pull her part of the plan off we should be alright. I can do my end easily enough, but I was unaware Minor had so much influence over Major's dreams.*

Kat shrugged and prepared the fire, keeping it burning just above her palm. Once it was steady, and she was able to keep it going by feeding it a consistent stream of energy and compressing it down to keep that energy ready to move at any time. Kat nodded to Minor.

Minor nodded in turn, as their gazes moved back to the fight. During their planning not much had happened. Shizuka had gone in for a few more failed attacks, but they amounted to basically nothing.

Reverendi was starting to realise that something was up with his sword, or perhaps, he thought it was growing alongside him. Either way, with each failed attack, his grin got wider and wider, before finally. He made his first real move.

Reverendi shrunk his sword and charged, whirling it around between his two hands and around his back, trying to make it as hard to follow as possible. This of course, was simply wasted effort, as Shizuka's eyes were more than good enough to keep up.

Never the less, it did still put Shizuka on the back foot. Now that Reverendi was attacking she was concerned about his sword's strange abilities, and summoned two sigils on either side of her with two rings to block his attack.

This is where the first part of Minor's plan came in. With a twist of Minor's hand the sigils flickered for a second, before reappearing with three rings instead. Shizuka didn't seem to notice the change and neither did Reverendi.

The same could not be said for the sword. Kat was using her full power of her vision to look at it closely. When the sigils flickered for a moment, the sword seemed to shudder for just a moment, but it made no other movements.

Just before Reverendi approached Shizuka, he forced energy into his boots. They lit up with a red glow, and he blasted off into the air. At the peak of his jump, he rapidly enlarged the sword to three times its natural size, before bringing it down

The force of the jump as well as the weight of the sword brought him crashing towards the ground, with Shizuka in the direct path. Without a hint of hesitation two pillars of ice exploded from the floor beneath her sigils

They reached up and collided with the sword, but there was a loud crack on impact as the ice wobbled. Reverendi activated his boots once again, to force his way through and the ice shattered. But that was not the end.

As the ice shattered Minor put her hand next to Kat's flame and caused it to vanish. It reappeared next to the broken ice, exploding once it had left Kat's direct control

Purple fire washed over Reverendi and the sword, which reacted faster than its master. Wrapping them both in a metallic ball, they dropped straight to the ground, covered in ice. The air was still, as Shizuka let out a large breath of cold air.

The sword, and its user were completely encased. Kat let out a sigh of relief, when a loud boom echoed from within. Everyone tensed hearing the sound and Kat trained her eyes on the cube.

Loud thuds, reverberated on after another. Shizuka was unsure what was the best course of action, and so raised a block of ice in front of her to act as a shield while she started to meditate behind it to recover her mana.

Kat frowned as she saw the cracks with her enhanced vision. She didn't have time to see Minor paling with each successive hit. *Dammit. I wish Shizuka had some big finishing move or something. She's just sitting there! I mean she is probably meditating but even still. If she had a way to finish them off now...*

With a final thud and a great crack the block of ice split in two revealing a cold and shaking Reverendi as well as his trusty sword seemingly no worse for wear. Kat narrowed her eyes, but noticed that the metal that had frozen to the ice was no longer attached to the sword. *Could it be? Is there less metal in it now?*

Are we making progress? Reverendi struggled to stand, planting his sword into the ground to keep himself moving. Shizuka had opened a single eye when she heard the last crack. Seeing his failure to stand, she shouted "You should give up. You are in no state to fight"

Reverendi nodded and went to speak, but the metal from the sword snaking up his arm and around his mouth. Reverendi's eyes widened in horror upon seeing this, while Shizuka frowned.

Kat and Minor looked uneasy "What is going on" asked Kat

"I don't know" said Minor "I can only guess the sword is preventing his forfeiture... but what reason could it have? He's exhausted, and Shizuka is rapidly rebuilding her mana supply. If the fight was close before, it would just be a slaughter now so why..."

Minor's eyes widened in horror "Wait. He can't breathe!"

"What?" Kat shouted narrowing her eyes and noticing that the mask did not just cover the mouth but the nose as well. "What does this mean?"

"I think... the Nightmare might be trying to kill him. Get Shizuka to lose because she broke that rule. I don't think this would actually work in the real world because it is clearly Reverendi's sword but... in this dream it might just be enough"

Kat frowned, and tried to think of solutions, but Shizuka was already moving. Seeing her opponent struggling to breathe she dashed forward striking at the metal with her ice blade. It clanged on contact but did not even cut the material. *novelnext.com*

"Kat" said Minor "Can you make it so your fire doesn't hurt things?"

Kat frowned "I mean... maybe I don't know? I haven't really tried... and I mean... ah" said Kat starting to panic slightly. *I haven't done something like this... I mean it sounds like I should be able to... but my fire is somewhat unwieldy... should I even try this?*

But when am I ever going to get a better shot. "I can try" said Kat finally with confidence she didn't feel.

Minor nodded "Do it"

Shizuka was frowning, as she summoned another sigil to attack the mask now covering Reverendi. Once again, Minor tweaked it to look like a third tier sigil as Kat summoned her fire. *Don't hurt a person. Don't hurt Reverendi. Just the Nightmare. Please Just the Nightmare.*

Kat focused her will on her fire. Trying to impress upon it the idea that it should only go after the Nightmare. She was still a bit worried. So when Minor reached over, and instead of placing her hand near Kat's fire, she placed it inside of it, Kat's heart leapt to her throat.

Her control over her fire slipped, and it reared up, blazing at twice the size. Kat started to worry, but glancing at Minor revealed a sight she would never forget. Minor had her arm coated in purple fire, but it was not icing even in the slightest.

Minor had a huge grin on her face as she looked at Kat "It feels warm like your calming aura" before turning to face the battlefield once again.

Shizuka shot off an icicle, straight at the gag still choking Reverendi. And Minor gripped her hand into a fist. Kat's fire looked like it was sucked inside, before it disappeared from Minor's view.

Kat's eyes however were locked on the fight, and she saw the moment her flame entered the icicle going for Reverendi's face. As it travelled the short distance it needed to reach the metal it exploded.

Purple fire went everywhere. Completely engulfing Reverendi. His sword screeched and let out an ear piercing sound as purple cracks started to run up its length. The cracks pulsed with purple light as they overtook the sword piece by piece, until it was more cracks than sword... before finally it shattered.

The moment it did so Reverendi fell over backwards. Collapsing onto the stadium. Kat felt her heart stop. *No! Was it not enough?*

But the next words assured her fears. "Victory to Princess Shizuka. Victory through Knockout"

Before the sound of the gong rang out once more and the scene faded to black.

Kat let out a long breath she didn't know she was holding and looked over at Minor. "Well, looks like we make a good team"

Minor smiled and nodded "It would seem so"

Chapter 207: a Major problem

"Shall I try and hold back the next memory again?" asked Minor

Kat checked her internal reserves and found that she actually had only used around a third of her total energy pool. *Why is it that Minor is better at using my powers than I am!* Kat sighed. *I guess it makes sense with living in a magical prodigy's head but... I feel more defeated than perhaps I should.*

"I'm fine, I have pretty much all my energy still. Unless a Nightmare is going to jump in straight away. Even then I'll still probably be fine" said Kat

Minor examined Kat closely but didn't make a move to hold the scene in darkness. Perhaps only because she knew Kat couldn't lie.

As the scene formed around them, it was very familiar to Kat. Shizuka was running through a basic stone tunnel with some rather poor lighting conditions. *Looks like she's in the secret passages in the castle.*

In this scene, Shizuka had grown up substantially and look about the same as when Kat had met her in person. There was just one significant difference. She was missing the third tail. *Strange.* Kat compared the ice silhouette to her memories own memories of Shizuka and found they matched almost perfectly except for the tail. *Huh... perhaps this is a bit further back then I thought.*

"Hey Minor remember this?" asked Kat

Minor nodded "This is about... six months? A bit more? Before we summoned you. A lot happens shortly after but things are about to kick off. Major is running to Mother's document's room"

Kat nodded, about to ask more but holding her tongue when she saw Shizuka approaching the wall in question. She knocked in what was clearly a code. Two taps, followed by a five second break, and then another three taps, followed by a ten second break, and one final knock. *novel*Next.com

After this Shizuka stood back and waited. A few moments later the wall rumbled and swung inward, revealing the scroll wall that it appeared to be on the other side. Shizuka stepped through and it was a strange thing.

What she'd entered was clearly Chiharu's office, but the perspective was so strange. She could see Chiharu writing something, through the gaps in her tails. Kat could clearly see the entrance of the room as well. A thick set of double doors, with a bar off to the side and metal clamps to hold it in place should it be necessary

In the corner of her eyes she saw alternating book and scroll shelves. *I can't help but wonder why they don't pick one or the other and stick with it.* And while most of the desk was obscured, it clearly had a number of drawers available. Beyond that was two chairs, on the left and right.

And finally of course was Chiharu. She sat in a small chair with no back, likely to allow for her tails to fan out freely behind her. *Something I can understand given my wings. A bit weird for royalty to not have something better made though.* "Please, take a seat Shizuka" said Chiharu when she heard Shizuka's footfalls.

Nodding, Shizuka moved around and the perspective shifted with her. Now where as before, Chiharu's office seemed to be a standard, if well decorated room, with small carvings on the shelves and nice chairs, with a brightly lit area.

As we turned to face Chiharu that light mood seemed to drastically shift. Here sat a queen with a wealth of knowledge flanking her sides. A solid wooden desk that Chekov could admire, and a perfectly straight ruler somehow oozing authority even when scribbling on sheets of paper laid out before her.

"Why did you wish to speak to me Mother" asked Shizuka

"That..." said Chiharu "Is an excellent question. By all rights we should not be having this conversation because I have been sworn to secrecy of course. But, if somehow, someone was in the room at the same time as I opened the missive well... I suppose they'd be bound by it the same as I"

What the heck is she on about. Kat shot a questioning look towards Minor.

"Mother has a specially enchantment made by Grandfather that can see the contents of messages. The main use is that many of said messages have confidentiality spells that you must accept when opening them. Looking at them beforehand is not of course opening them" said Minor.

Still a bit weird if you ask me. Why go through all the trouble of finding everything out and then opening and restricting yourself anyway... "Surely that is rife for abuse right? Like forcing people to hide secrets or something?" asked Kat

Minor shook her head "Of course not. You can't make something that strong permanent unless you're well... a demon... so I guess your question was fairer than I first thought. Most messages are just for a month at most, though very rare stuff like that one is actually four. I think the most I've ever heard of is a five month one. It gets exponentially more expensive with time"

Kat wanted to ask more, but the scene was continuing regardless of her desires. Shizuka had already walked up the desk and was now standing beside her mother. Chiharu looked at her daughter once more before nodding and lifting the envelope open.

A spell sigil with six rings slowly rose out of it. And the letter covered itself in a thick fog. Shizuka and Chiharu placed their hands on the sigil in question and the smoke disappeared. *I guess that means they accept the terms or something.*

Inside was a letter. Kat was about to walk over to read it herself, when she found that the words had started coming from nowhere in Shizuka's voice, as if she was speaking them aloud, though based on her firmly pursed lips this was evidently not the case.

"Greeting Queen Chiharu Maemari, first of her name, and current ruling monarch of

Blah blah blah

Opening paragraph blah

Slight attack at heritage disguised as compliment

Your daughter

Blah blah

Impressive feats

Blah

Hand in marriage

Blah blah.... WAIT!"

Shizuka let out a startled "eep"

"Is that what I think it says?" asked Shizuka

Chiharu nodded "It seems that the Beast King, is interested in joining our houses, and your recent antics with challenging everyone to duels is the cause. It seems he plans to allow for his children to challenge you, and based on this letter, he means to be rather forceful about the attempts"

Shizuka frowned "But... he can't really pressure us that much right? We might be the smaller kingdom but overall, our fighting strength is basically on par with theirs correct?"

Chiharu nodded "Yes but... with how you have conducted these duels, a good number of noble houses are unhappy with you... and it is unlikely that I can shield you from this. They will campaign hard to allow the duel to happen

"And this letter seems to suggest the Beast King will try very hard as well... and as much as it pains me to admit it... I don't know if you can win" said Chiharu sadly

Shizuka growled "His kids are like ten years older than me. How the hell am I supposed to win against those muscle heads... They train almost as much as I do"

Chiharu nodded "Yes, that is the crux of the issue. I am ashamed I did not see the potential for this to occur"

Shizuka shook her head "It's not your fault Mother. Perhaps I should have tempered my recklessness a bit... but what is done is done I suppose. How do we plan to fix this"

"Oh?" said Chiharu raising an eyebrow "What makes you think I have a solution already? I've only just now read this message the same as you"

Shizuka let out a dry chuckle "You got all of the cunning Grandmother lacks, so I doubt that very much"

"Well... it isn't a plan per se, but perhaps running away?" said Chiharu

"Surely you can do better than that Mother. Why not go all the way with a kidnapping?? said Shizuka

"I could never put you in that sort... of..." Chiharu's words fell off towards then end. "That might actually work. But it can't be anyone we know. I'll likely need to lie under a truth spell, so we need some plausible deniability with some word tricks"

Shizuka thought for a second "What about a demon? Even if you don't trust them can't you be specific enough with the contract? And that way they wouldn't belong to the kingdom."

Chiharu nodded "You might be right. This has given me much to think about. Please return through the secret passage to your room for now. We have almost a year before the Beast King forces our hand. So I have some time at least"

"Of course, Mother" said Shizuka bowing and walking back into the passageway. She sounded fine, but Kat's eyes were more than good enough to see Shizuka shivering as she walked away from the room

Chapter 208: a Major memory

As Kat and Minor were pulled into the corridor it faded quickly to black. "I suppose this next memory will be the time when we met and Major sort of cracked" said Kat

"Actually" said Minor "We should have one more before that. I think it is perhaps Major's most important memory aside from the whole 'losing' your sister bit"

Kat tilted her head "Third tail?"

Minor grimaced but nodded "It's more than that I think... it's not really my place to say, because I can't be sure even though I can hear Major's thoughts and I don't want to put words in her mouth but... I do know it is important" *novelnext.com*

"I see" said Kat running her hands along her tail.

"Oh, did you need some time?" asked Minor

Kat checked her reserves and found them to be completely full "Nope I'm good to go"

Minor nodded but the scenery stayed blank. "Um Minor?" asked Kat

Minor shrugged "Sometimes these take longer than others, I'm not extending it but... actually"

Minor turned to face Kat fully with a determined look on her face "Kat, how long can you hold your flame?"

Um... what? "Well... I guess that depends on how much?" said Kat "I'm not quite so good at being conservative with it, I tend to waste a lot of my energy, but if it's just a bit of fire like last time, I'd say a good while... why?"

"Well... I just... I have a feeling that protecting this memory we are about to see might be important. There are too many ways for a Nightmare to interfere, and I was thinking that rather than trying to deal with the Nightmare before it enters, we deal with it before?" said Minor

"I'm listening" said Kat. *If this can actually work, this could be a big step forward. We might even be able to protect the final memory when things went pear shaped. I'm not sure how important this memory could realistically be, but... I hope this works.*

"Ok... so, I'm hoping I can sort of??? manipulate it so that your fire covers the whole memory. Just a thin layer of course... and I'll probably be stretching the rules of the dream world, but I think I can do it" said Minor

Kat bit her lip as she thought. *Do I have the energy for that... I mean... I guess it depends how small the memory is exactly* "How much fire do you need" asked Kat

"Almost none" said Minor "I hope... see we can sort of just... use the idea that it's shielded right? Or at least that is what I'm thinking. Because the Nightmares are largely conceptual, then maybe conceptually blocking them off will work"

Kat nodded. *Well, she is the expert on various dream world stuff...* "Alright I'm ok with that. Just know that if the memory is too long I might have to stop, and then I'll be down on energy"

Minor bit her lip as a slightly panicked expression came over her face before she calmed herself "It should be fine. If needed I can make use of the trick we pulled off in the Reverendi memory, and use a bit of your flame to attack instead"

Kat nodded "Well, if you're sure. When should I warn you?"

Minor took her tail in her hand and run her fingers through the fur. "Um... hm.... Can you give me a halfway, warning, and then maybe like... a quarter? And whatever else after that if worse comes to worst"

Kat nodded "Should be fine"

Minor nodded "Sounds good"

Minor and Kat stood facing each other for a moment. This stretched further into thirty seconds as the scene continued to remain black. "Are we waiting on something?" asked Kat

Minor looked around confused "No... I don't think so? I mean I'm not stopping the transition"

"Huh" said Kat

"Chair?" asked Minor summoning one for herself and falling into it.

"Sure..." said Kat. *This is starting to be a little weird... why is it taking so long.* Kat looked behind her and saw that Minor had her strange chair she'd designed with Kat in mind. Lowering herself down into the chair, as soon as Kat touched the surface, the scene started shifting.

That would be right wouldn't it!?!

The scene shifted to an overcast day. Shizuka was once again in the garden with its four season sections. She was now balanced on the same pole as last time, but now she had a ball of ice, and a secondary platform balanced on that to sit on.

This meant that Shizuka was incredibly still as her shards of ice orbited. Now numbering five in total, with three in one orbit and two in another. As Kat gazed at Shizuka, something seemed to flicker behind her, though Kat dismissed it and got to work on her fire.

Holding out her tail as a place to start, Kat summoned a tiny flame at the very tip, and then fed it a trickle of energy to keep it existing. Minor nodded when she saw it and got to work instantly. She reached out with her hand placing it over Kat's flame.

Kat nearly panicked at the sight, but noticed that when Minor touched it, nothing happened. Calming down, Kat scaled back slightly on the energy because in her panic she'd doubled the amount she was sending.

Minor started to make strange hand gestures, like she was pulling and kneading dough or something similar. After a few moments of this Kat shivered, and started to feel strange. She could still feel her ember at the end of her tail, but it was suddenly everywhere.

What the... It took a moment of thought to identify the sensation before realising why she felt her fire everywhere. *Duh, of course, that was Minor's entire idea. Feels really weird though...* Kat looked down at the ember Minor was messing with.

It seemed to be the same size, despite her mind telling her it certainly wasn't. It was made weirder because her eyes felt like they were swimming. *What is going on with me? Is it because my eyes think the ember is an illusion or something?*

Kat wobbled slightly but steadied herself. Keeping a tight rein over her energy was about all she could do. Checking her reserves, she saw it was shrinking, but only by a trickle. If Minor's trick didn't use up any more than it currently was, she felt they were safe for an hour or so.

Kat stretched out her wings, letting them flap lightly. Due to her dream state she was already above the ground, but her mind was having a harder and harder time keeping track of everything.

Is it safe to disconnect from the fire? I can't just remove my senses from it because it is more connected to me than it should be despite being everywhere... I certainly don't like this.

Kat tried again to focus on Shizuka, hoping it would distract her but it only made things worse. She could still see that flicker behind Shizuka every few seconds. She wanted to enhance her eyes to see what it was, but could hardly keep her demonic energy under control, and didn't want to risk anything.

Finally, Minor seemed to finish whatever it was, and things stabilised. *Ugh... I never want to go through that again. I almost think it would be easier to just fight the Nightmares.*

Kat used her wings to steady herself as the feeling over being everywhere slowly receded. She still felt like she was touching everything with her fire somehow, but it was less disorientating, and just uncomfortable now, and the wings helped.

Kat heard the crunching of stones and the clanking of metal coming from behind her as someone walked the garden path, but Kat couldn't bring herself to move enough to turn around. Luckily her patience was rewarded.

What... the heck. The person who walked into Kat's vision was perhaps the strangest looking individual she'd seen since meeting the other demons in the accounting department.

The person in question was clearly a rabbit beastkin. Kat could see their large ears and fluffy tail quite clearly. The person that had these features though, was tall. Even discounting the impressive size of her ears, she stood at least a head taller than Kat.

As for her outfit, it looked more like a loose collection of junk than armour. She had huge pauldrons nearly the same size as her head. Despite this, her midsection was only covered by a light wrapping around her breasts and nothing else. Her pants were leather with a layer of light chain over them.

Her boots though, looked to be heavy steel traps, that if Kat had the ability to improve her eyes, right now, would see them grinding down the gravel they stepped over. In her arms she held her weapons, a small buckler in her left, and a trident in her right. The details were obscured from Kat's vision... mostly by the pauldrons.

"Yo Shizuka, what's up" shouted the strange rabbit.

Shizuka startled. The ice around her shattering and causing her to fall backwards into the pool with a splash.

Chapter 209: a Major ally

Shizuka spluttered, as she swam back to the surface and glared at the bunny smirking across from her. Kat's perspective had shifted, and now stood to the side of the two speakers. "What did you do that for Amelie!" shouted Shizuka

Amelie, the bun in question, was laughing loudly to herself and struggling with her words "I didn't... ha.... Ha. And you just... hehehehe.... It was.... Hahaha, give me a moment"

"Just you wait till I come over there!" growled Shizuka, summoning a single ring sigil to freeze the water around her before climbing up and marching towards Amelie

"Ok, Minor... what is with those pauldrons. I don't know how they stay up, and why they are so large. Especially considering she's hardly wearing anything else. Like, there must be enough metal in one of those things to make me a full chest piece"

"Ah" said Minor "Well... there are a few reasons actually. You're right, there is enough metal for a chest piece... well almost. It has to do with enchantment. I don't really understand it but for the ones on her pauldrons, you need a certain amount of material to store the mana for them

"As to why she's lacking in armour in other areas... well, her combat style is like nothing I've ever seen. She makes full use of her flexibility and armour would only restrict that. The reason she can be a frontline fighter though is she has a rare mana type

"Very very rare. It's known as regeneration, but it's more accurately a defect in healing affinity. If a person is unable to project their mana outside of their body, but awaken to healing affinity it becomes more potent but can only work on the person in question, even if they later gain the ability to use mana outside of themselves"

"Right..." said Kat unsure "What about the boots then"

"She likes stomping people" said Minor

Kat nodded. *I guess rabbits enjoy hopping.*

Kat returned her attention to the pair in question just as Shizuka was about to reach her, Amelie easily hopped out of the way. Her long toned legs flexing with power, but moved just a few centimetres to the side just enough to get away from Shizuka's admittedly half-hearted lunge.

"You disappoint my little fox, I'd thought you better than that" said Amelie

"That's because I am stupid hare" said Shizuka as three two ringed sigils appeared around Amelie. Shizuka clicked her fingers and a cube of ice grew to encapsulate Amelie in full.

"Oooh I-cey you've been working on some tricks. Though still I'd expected bwetter from you" said Amelie as she tensed her muscles shattering the prison completely.

Amelie, then took a sprinter's pose, before pushing off and shooting towards Shizuka catching her in a big hug, scooping the fox up and rubbing her face into her tails "Mwhaha I win" said Amelie.

"Get off me I'm not a little kid anymore" said Shizuka

"Little Kid" laughed Amelie "I'm like a year and a half older than you, you're just short"

Shizuka of course, wasn't short when compared to most women. She was of a very average height. It was only when people like Kat and Amelie came into play that she looked small at all.

Shizuka struggled to get out of Amelie's iron like grip but failed. "What is this? The fox trying to run from the hare? What would your ancestors say?"

"I'm a kitsune not a fox you inbred rabbit" responded Shizuka

"Oh... I can't let such an insult stand" said Amelie who proceeded to tickle Shizuka.

"Is this... really how they act?" asked Kat looking over at Minor

"Amelie is perhaps the only thing close to a friend Major has. I'm very grateful she is around at all" said Minor "There are a few questionable things about her, but I know she cares a lot about Major. I'm a little surprised this is the first we've seen of her actually"

"What do you mean?" asked Kat

"Well, we've known Amelie for... at least five years? Seven maybe? It's been a few. I'm not sure why she just showed up now" said Minor

"Maybe this is the most important memory with her in it. You said yourself this was a memory you wanted to protect" said Kat aware that her energy was still draining. Down almost a third.

Minor got a thoughtful look on her face "You might be right. I think it might have more to do with not having a stand out event other than this, but perhaps you are closer to the truth"

Eventually, Shizuka was finally free from Amelie's torture and managed to ask "What... what are you here for" between catching her breath

"Why, I'm here to duel for your hand in marriage of course" said Amelie

Shizuka froze. Her icy appearance to Kat and Minor only further reinforcing this appearance. When she started to move again Kat could almost hearing the cracking of ice. "Why" was all Shizuka managed to say.

"Well, I can't let anyone else take away my sweet little Shizuka. I shall protect your honour with my own" declared Amelie.

Kat frowned as she watched this. *Does Amelie know? Just... the way she said that like it was a forgone conclusion that Shizuka would lose in the near future.* "Does she know?" whispered Kat to Minor.

Minor jumped and looked between Kat and Amelie a few times "I... I don't know... I hadn't even considered... Does she?" mumbled Minor.

"You'd know better than me right?" asked Kat

"Yes but I don't see how she'd get that information" said Minor

"I can protect myself" said Shizuka, she looked slightly angry but, her voice held no heat.

"Right, of course you can. You totally didn't get captured by me" said Amelie and mimed tickling Shizuka again.

"You know that doesn't count. You're stronger than me by a long way" said Shizuka

Amelie frowned "Then why can't you see that the next challenger might be the same" asked Amelie.

"I mean... I can pick my battles carefully?" said Shizuka unsure of herself

"Look, why not just have a friendly duel of honour with me. I'll bet my weapons if you want" said Amelie

"No!" shouted Shizuka "You can't do that. They've been with you for so long"

Amelie shrugged "They aren't worth nearly as much as your hand and I can get new ones. I'd bet my own hand in marriage but that would defeat the point wouldn't it"

Shizuka grit her teeth, pained expression on her face "I don't want to fight you Amelie"

Amelie shrugged "We spar all the time when I come to visit. How is this any different?"

"You know why" said Shizuka

"Nope not at all" said Amelie with a grin "You win, and you get some cool weapons. I win and I get your hand. That sounds like a win-win to me" *novelnext.com*

Shizuka grit her teeth "Be serious about this please"

"I'm dead serious" said Amelie, who first put Shizuka down, then turned around, bent over and answered through her legs.

Shizuka clenched her fists together, trying to contain her rage. Thinking Amelie was making a mockery of her "Fine then. But it will be a kitsune duel, you won't have your amour"

Amelie stood up straight and grinned wide "Perfect my little fox. Fight hard"

And with that Amelie bowed to Shizuka before skipping off out of the scene.

"What the heck was that" asked Kat

"Something that has never been done before" said Minor

Kat raised an eyebrow "What do you mean"

"Well, nobody without a noble house backing them would ever challenge the princess just in case they cheat. I mean, we would never, but some in other kingdoms have. This is the first major challenge from an unknown party"

"Wait isn't Shizuka super important? How did some random rabbit sneak into the castle" asked Kat.

"She literally just walked in. We didn't find out till much later but she just marched straight through the front gate and nobody stopped her" said Minor "She was just a child but she didn't seem scared at all so the guards let her pass

"So, she visited for a while until Mother find out and she was furious. See Amelie had been showing up fairly regularly, making small talk with the guards, and for some reason nobody thought to question it till Mum realised there was a problem

"Anyway, when confronted Amelie said she'd rather die than cause problems for Shizuka. Grandma was around at the time, and decided to put her to the test, not thinking she'd accept. She was asked to sign a binding lifetime contract, that she'd die before allowing serious harm to come to Shizuka.

"Jokes on them I suppose. She sliced her hand open and signed it in blood. Now, granted, the contract didn't actually do anything. We don't possess that ability, but all the flashes and appropriate sigils looked to be in place

"Mum and Grandma were so shocked, they stood their mouths agape and Amelie just walked out and went back to playing with Shizuka. Oh, and she's a hare, but she doesn't really care if you make that mistake"

Chapter 210: The start of a Major battle

"What exactly is even the difference?" asked Kat "I mean, aren't hares and rabbits basically the same thing?"

Minor shrugged "I never really looked into it, but according to Amelie, hare beast people are much rarer than rabbits and normally more combat adept and a few other things. I honestly have no idea"

Kat was tempted to continue this line of questioning when the scene changed to Shizuka in the prep room for the duelling area again. Chiharu was sitting on an ice chair with her face in her hands sighing.

"How did it come to this" said Chiharu

"Um... my apologies Mother" said Shizuka "I didn't really"

Chiharu waved her daughters concerns away "No, you didn't really mean for this to happen. I'm sure Amelie pushed you into this. I know how bad you are at refusing her"

Shizuka pouted while trying to look serious "I do not have an issue with refusing her"

Chiharu raised her head and looked her daughter in the eyes "Then why are you having an honour duel with Amelie right this moment? We both know that if you win, you'll give her weapons straight back to her

"And I cannot even begin to imagine what she is going to try if she wins. I know she has some hare-brained scheme like usual, but I doubt you'll end up worse off considering we have the Beast King already onto you...

"Then again I have to wonder if she knows. Sure we have a number of refugees but I wouldn't be surprised if Amelie is somehow high up in the Beast King's chain of command. The only question is if she knows about the arrangement or not and if this is a response"

Shizuka gained a shocked look on her face "There is no way she'd work for the beast king. Isn't he a horrible person?"

Chiharu let out a long sigh and lightly chopped her daughter on the head "Firstly you can't just say that Shizuka. Even if it was true, which I don't fully believe, you shouldn't say that about another country's ruler unless you are actively at war.

"And secondly, the beast kingdom has an obsession with strength. Their King needs to reflect that, and while it breeds arrogance, unlike other kingdoms like the humans and some dwarven clans, it is not unfounded either.

"They've been taught to settle problems with violence, and if that doesn't work, adding more violence can only help the situation" said Chiharu

"But that... that's so inconsiderate" said Shizuka

Chiharu nodded "Yes, and that is why many beast people move to our kingdom, but it is also why despite this we have a good deal of friction with them because we almost seem to be directly competing"

"I understand" said Shizuka

"No Shizuka, I honestly don't think you do" said Chiharu. Shizuka went to retort, but Chiharu raised her hand "No, this is no fault of your own. Unlike my own mother I don't seek to retire any time soon, and I have allowed you to get away mostly with etiquette training and combat. I don't regret it, but please realise you simply aren't equipped to deal with the highest levels of politics just yet"

"I understand" said Shizuka with puffed up cheeks.

"Now, where were we. Yes, Amelie's possible relation to the beast king. I don't see it mattering, but I do think you need to consider it, and what it would mean should you lose" said Chiharu

"Um... what would it mean" asked Shizuka

"I don't know. That is the issue" said Chiharu

"Oh" said Shizuka, tails sinking.

Chiharu sighed "Look, do you truly wish to go through with this?"

Shizuka shook her head "No of course not. This isn't even about winning or losing, it's about fighting Amelie seriously. I just... I don't know if I can"

Chiharu patted Shizuka on the head. "Sadly, you've come this far, even if the documents haven't been signed. It would be hard to back out. Besides, Amelie wouldn't hurt you, and it's almost impossible for you to hurt her permanently

"Even discounting the field around the arena, her regeneration should keep her safe" said Chiharu with a soft smile.

"Ok" said Shizuka nodding and stepping out. Chiharu sighed as she left, but Kat wasn't able to watch her any longer as she was pulled out into the arena. Amelie was leaning on her trident at the centre.

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She had stabbed it into one the floor, and was using it as a wall to lean against. Her small shield firmly attached to her hand as she pretended to look over her mostly non-existent nails. Instead of her old armour, she what she was now wearing might be even more revealing.

Around her chest she had what looked to be a ripped training outfit wrapped around. On top of this, she had similar wrappings around her palms, likely from the sleeves. Below that, around her waist she had a close-fitting pair of underwear, and nothing else.

"What took you so long? Making sure you were pretty for me?" asked Amelie

Shizuka ignored her question in favour of her own "Are we really doing this Amelie? Can't we just not"

Amelie pouted, and moved her ears into a heart shaped "Don't you like me? Won't you let me fight for your hand"

"You know it isn't about that" growled Shizuka

"Ooh, getting aggressive already. If you want to come at me, I'm willing to let you" said Amelie

"Argh..." Shizuka grit her teeth "Do we have to fight. Be serious"

Amelie nodded "Yes. We do" Amelie ripped her trident from the ground and placed herself in position to lunge out with her trident as soon as the call to start began.

Shizuka sighed, but readied a few sigils behind her, and waited for the announcement. It was the same one as last time, when Shizuka fought Reverendi. As soon as the announcement finished, Shizuka launched a wave of spikes at Amelie.

Who tried to dodge out of the way, narrowly dodging every single one of them twisting and bending herself out of the way surprising even Kat with her flexibility. The few icicles she couldn't dodge with acrobatics were blocked by her shield.

That was until one managed to strike Amelie's side, slicing open a large wound where it scraped past. Amelie stood shocked, before a second icicle directly impaled her heart. That hare beastman was knocked backwards falling to the ground and dropping her weapons.

As Shizuka saw this she panicked and rushed forward shouting "Amelie!" at the top of her lungs. When she arrived next to the fallen figure of Amelie, she slid into a kneel and pressed her hand against Amelie's throat checking for breath.

"Boo" said Amelie as soon as Shizuka made contact. Wrapping Shizuka up in her arms she proceeded to spin around and throw her across the arena. As Shizuka left her arms the wound on her side closed up. After which she then pulled the ice out of her chest and closed that wound as well, it didn't even bleed.

"I'm disappointed in you" said Amelie "You should know better than to get distracted in a fight. And, as much as I appreciate you trying to take my heart, I'd rather it was in one piece when you do thanks"

Shizuka just groaned as she struggled to stand at the edge of the platform. As she did so Amelie calmly picked up her weapon as if she was plucking flowers from the side of the road. "Ah feels nice having my polearm back in my hands" said Amelie

"Why would you do that?" growled Shizuka once she recovered.

"Well, I did want to show off a little, but I do wish that icicle had actually cleared my ribcage properly. Then I could say you stole my heart" said Amelie

Shizuka had enough of Amelie's poor jokes. She also wasn't crying. She was just melting ice near her eyes. Summoning a large two ringed sigil, a massive icicle shot out towards Amelie.

Amalie just stepped forward, placing her small shield in between the tip of the iceberg flying towards her. To Kat's surprise Amelie took the whole thing on the centre of the shield without faltering. The ground beneath Amelie's feet cracked, but she remained steadfast. Instead the ice dropped to the floor.

"Now, I do so hate to return a loved one's gift" said Amelie as she dug her hands into the side of the iceberg "But, it just isn't my style you know? I'm sure it will suit you better"

With a quiet grunt Amelie lifted the iceberg partially onto her shoulder before launching it back towards Shizuka at twice the speed. Shizuka's eyes went wide, as she frantically scrambled to create a sigil.

She wasn't having much success however in her panicked state, her three attempts all fizzled as she failed to visualise the ruins properly. She was just about to be hit by the ice when she realised, she was still powering the first sigil. Dismissing it, the icicle disappeared as if it had never been and glared at Amelie.