

DEMONS 71

Chapter 71: What's this About a Tournament

"A tournament? I'm not much of a combatant myself, surely you are capable enough?" said Kat

"No, well, yes um... So we need to have five people for the tournament, one for each category they test. We've got a defender, a striker, a healer, and a scout, that's me. We don't have any magical attacks between us. Well, Nixilei has a few, but she's taken the healing role which I'm told demons don't do well in" said Green.

"Right, but I'm not much of a mage either? Why even hire me for something like this?" asked Kat

"Well... we've had... some issues with our fifth member quite a few times" said Green

"Is it something we should go over while Nixilei and the other guy yell there heads off?" asked Kat?

"Oh, don't worry about them they love each other, it's fine" said Green.

"WE DO NOT!" yelled Nixilei and Grumpy together before growling at each other and resuming the argument.

Green gestured at the pair as if that reaction explained everything, which too be fair it did explain quite a lot. "So they're together" whispered Kat

"Oh no never, they'd attack you if they heard that" said Green.

"Right... well tell me about this tournament then. Or wait actually, can we start with why you needed to hire me instead?" asked Kat

"No... I we agreed to only tell you if you asked, but not until after you agreed to help us" said Green.

Kat just turned an unimpressed gaze towards the girl finally turning to face her properly. The girl she'd referred to as Green was more aptly described by that moniker than she'd first thought. Clad from head to two in a mixed green and brown cloak that looked ideal for blending in with forest terrain, a matching leather shirt and pants, the amount of green on her outfit more than warranted the name. Green also seemed to share the strange see through wings that Glasses, now known as Nixilei possessed.

Green shrunk under Kat's gaze and looked like she was ready to tell Kat what she wanted but then glanced over Kat's shoulder at something that strengthened her resolve "No... we promised not to say. I won't say" said Green trying to convince herself more than Kat.

"Right, well how about you tell me about the tournament instead then" asked Kat.*It isn't worth pressing the scared girl for answers when I have three capable fighters at my back. I don't know how strong they are, but it sounds like it would be a pain to attempt to fight them*

"Oh, yes, um the tournament. So it's teams of five, and everyone has to be in the first stage of adulthood for their race or younger, um... The roles, as I mentioned are defender, striker, healer, scout, and mage. The tournament is split up into individual and team events, and we have to go to a bunch of cities for each group... So um, there are 5 teams that compete in each city, and you win if you have the most points.

"Points are gained for doing well at whatever the round needs you to do, but um, some rounds require specific roles to participate. So um, in the past for example there was a course where you had to clear a room full of traps. In some of the first tournaments people sent in the defender, triggered all the traps and claimed the prize, but the organisers said that was a bad thing, so now some of the tasks are role specific.

"Um, ah, so we need you for at least this city, um there might be able to find someone else for the later ones, possibly, but ah, we can talk about that later... only the two best teams from each city even move on in the round. But, um Gareth said that he's confident, um he seemed to think we only needed to summon you to make up the numbers." Said Green

"Right, I'm still hung up on the fact I'm the mage apparently? What sort of thing would I need to do?" asked Kat

"Um, eh, um..." Green mumbled looking for words "I don't really know? Um, there was a flying obstacle course once, I think... but that might have been a scout task. Um, I don't really know..."

Guess that's a dead end. But a mage really? Can I do any magic system?

All Demons can utilise their Demonic Flame to attack. Demonic Flame's have a different effect based on the User, but as the Demonic Flame is a compressed form of higher energy, calling it magic is acceptable for most cultures.

So what I can shoot fire out of my hands?

User Kat can likely shoot fire from wherever User Kat desires. Demons are not limited in this, though most develop a preference to one style such as coating the hands in flames or spitting it from their mouths. Improvements in technique can develop over time.

Right, so I can throw fireballs at people. Anything else?

User Kat's calming aura would count as magic for some cultures, the same as User Kat's ability to strengthen eyesight. Depends on the Dimension in question.

Cool thanks. System, for once you provided a good deal of useful information.

D.E.M.O.N.S always provides the most accurate and relevant information based on the question.

Ignoring the flaming text in front of her Kat glanced back at the arguing group. Platemail had taken to leaning against the wall while Grumpy and Nixilei continued to argue. "So, what's everyone name" asked Kat

"Oh um, am I supposed to tell you that?" asked Green

"Well, you already told my Nixilei's name and Gareth's. I've only got two more to collect before I've got a full set" said Kat

Green seemed to ponder this information for a moment face changing from concern to sadness, to joy and back. *Quite the expressive young lady*

"Uh, well um, I don't think Kress would like me telling you his name, so I guess I just won't mention it" said Green nodding to herself like she'd done the right thing.

"Um, I want you to think about what you just said a second time before looking so pleased with yourself" said Kat.

Green's face just showed confusion for quite some time before morphing into embarrassment as her cheeks lit up looking towards the ground no longer able to meet Kat's gaze. Not that she was before, but at least her head was facing the general direction of Kat's. Feeling sorry for the poor girl Kat patted her on the head. This made Green jump a little but quickly relax and press into Kat's hand for comfort as she let a little of her calming aura flow through her hand.

"Green" mumbled the girl.

"What was that dear?" said Kat channelling her inner Vivian, smiling down at the girl with a big smile. Sadly for Kat, her demonic features helped lend a slightly sinister air to the smile. Luckily for Kat though Green didn't look up.

"My name is Green" said Green as she kept her eyes fixed on the floor.

Wait? The girls name is actually Green? Who names their kid Green? I mean sure, her hair is very green, and I guess the colour scheme matching, but seriously parents?

"What an interesting name" said Kat just to have a response for the poor girl. "So who is who?"

"Um, so Gareth is my fiancé, Nixilei is supposed to look after me, Kress is the meanie and I'm Green"

"So, does that mean you are going to help us?" asked the girl turning her eyes up and looking at Kat with a slight pout.

Sadly for her Kat was unaffected by such a low-level cute stare. *Sylvie's stare is so much more powerful. It seems I've developed a resistance to lower class cute things. Minor had a bit of an advantage because she looks more like an adorable scared animal than a person so her eyes still pack a punch, but Green, sorry you just don't quite cut it. Wait is it rude to think of Minor like an animal?* Kat pictured Minor but could only see Minor with her bushy tail and ears flat pouting up at her. *Nope, if that isn't adorable like a real fox I don't know what is.*

"Not necessarily I still have to hear from the rest of the team. I can't have someone like Kress use my acceptance to bully me if I haven't outlined my own terms" said Kat half as a joke. She wasn't truly afraid of Kress after watching his shouting match against Nixilei. She still remembered that time she recovered from having half her skin ripped off by the floor, so a bit of bullying was nothing.

Kat felt like showing off a little and testing out an idea. Gathering demonic energy in her lungs Kat took in a deep breath and let the rest seep into her eyes just for the glowing effect. "Are you two quite done?" asked Kat

Chapter 72: The Agreement

"Are you two quite done?" asked Kat voice surrounding and encapsulating the room. Whatever the energy had done to Kat's voice, it had changed it and made it clearly heard, yet not any louder than how

she'd normally spoken. Instead it seemed to almost bear down on them as if they were being scolded by a parent.

The whole room seemed to freeze in place. Green seemed to shrink into herself, Gareth took a slight step in front of the arguing pair that now stood staring at Kat, Nixilei with her calculating stare and Kress now with a similar look.

Just as tension started to build between the two parties Gareth spoke up "Well, I'd say that was actually quite deserved. You two should know better. I've never seen you this bad on a job, though I suppose it's a bit different now that we are the client" **NOvelnext.cOm**

Kress seemed suitable placated by Gareth's admonishment but Nixilei seemed completely unconcerned with the issue at all. "Now, it seems Green has told you what we need, but perhaps not the specifics. The Tournament of Fives starts this weekend and we need a fifth member. You will fill in the mage role. Now your actual skill in this is basically irrelevant, the team is more than strong enough to pass this first round. I'd like to see how well it goes then before you are dismissed discuss the terms for any future rounds with participate in" Gareth kept a very professional sounding voice throughout his speech.

And Kat had to admit it seemed like an easy by the sounds of it. *I just have to wonder what the catch is. Probably why their 5th member isn't around but Green already said they wouldn't talk about it until after I accept. Hmmm* "What are the exact terms of our agreement? You've said a few things that you want, but not what you need. This is a binding contract. You have to be clear about what you want"

Kat spoke in the same business-like tone Gareth had conveyed, and yet the remnants of the demonic energy helped this tone carry further and stick in the mind. They weren't facing Kat the inexperienced demon with no idea of what they were doing. The impression Kat gave off was instead one of experience, a depth of understanding that seeped out of her voice.

"Are you trying to thre-" Kress was interrupted by a blow to the back of his head by Gareth. Kat winced a little at the sight. Kress seemed unharmed but she'd heard a loud thump as Kress' head collided with Gareth's steel gauntlets. "What my foolish subordinate meant to say was, we understand so I will lay out the full terms for you.

"We require you to sign up under our team 'the misfortunate four' and participate in the final round of the tournament, the 5 man duel with intent to win. Secondly, you must participate by at least coming forward for any mage only tasks. Effort is not required for these tasks but it is appreciated. Once the tournament has concluded and any awards have been received we will have an hour to calm down then a meeting shall be convened to discuss our continued working relationship. Do you accept"

Kat felt the demonic energy in her flare slightly, and unnoticed to her a wicked smile crept onto her lips causing a shiver to run down Kress' spine. "I accept" and with a loud boom the chains appeared. Different to all previous encounters though the chains had multiplied even further and began to constrict around all five occupants of the room. They were Kat's trademark purple and seemed to blaze with an exceptionally vibrant light as the deal was made.

Kat for her part was used to the sensation, and hardly noticed it at all even with the additional three people in the contract. The others though not so much. Nixilei felt the chains settle heavy on her shoulders. The limits of their reach seemed to intuitively reach into her mind and settle there just out of

reach. Gareth felt them like a firm handshake, the confirmation of a deal struck, and a pact to be upheld. Green felt overwhelmed by a sense of responsibility tempered with companionship. They'd added one to the party, but at what cost?

And finally Kress. Instinctively he fought against the chains trying to resist whatever they had planned for him but to no avail. He felt like he was suffocating as layer upon layer of chains wrapped around him and seemed to press in from all sides both literal and physical. The mental weight of what he'd just accepted falling into place, and the concern of making a deal he could no longer back out of.

This concern of Kress' was only further amplified when the chains started to clear, and he gazed back towards Kat. She now wore a face of extreme calm but the fading remnants of the chains had left her body aflame. Purple seeped out of her horns and the bones along her wings painting an eerie picture of the events that had just unfolded. Her tail coiled and ready to strike out at any time with its pointed end and blazing edges and Kress couldn't help but let out a gulp.

Of course, on Kat's end *Man that was a lot of chains. And that felt a bit different to the other contracts I've made. Even the one before with the summoner didn't feel, oh what's the word? Real I guess? This is a real demonic contract, like all the ones previous were made on flimsy sheets of paper, but this has been carved in stone. It's a strangely entertaining feeling.*

Kat simply thought to herself without reacting much to the inferno going on around her, further unnerving the rest of the group until she broke into a grin and said "So what now guys?"

Shaking himself out of his stupor Gareth said to Kat "We should leave this room, they charge by the hour to use it and while I think we have some time remaining to use I don't want to pay again. We can talk more along the way, because I'm sure you have questions."

Kat nodded and followed the group as they left through the door opposite the one Kat had entered from. Expecting to see the real shopfront now Kat was disappointed to find more plain walls and bright lights. Still no windows or anything? What are we miners?

The group continued their march forward for another 5 minutes straight before they found themselves at a door much like the rest, the only distinguishing feature was that it blocked their path unlike the ones lining the sides. Gareth didn't even pause and just strode towards it and pushed it open to reveal a quaint dining table and chair setup. There was enough for around twelve people but the group besides Kat all instantly grabbed chairs together. Kat following suit and finding a seat next to Nixlei who hardly reacted to their presence.

The group sat there for a while with no one speaking. Kat was about to break the silence when the room shook slightly and started to rise. Kat looked around for something to indicate a trigger or a button, but nothing stood out even when she enhanced her vision to see things more clearly. Shrugging it off she waited for the platform's slow ascent.

After a short journey the lift stopped moving and everyone else made for the door. Kat felt like sharing in the excitement, she was curious as to what a demon summoning shop would look like. Waiting her turn but bouncing slightly on her heels she walked out to find... A rather normal looking café. Turning around she looked at the door behind her and saw a sign labelled 'private booth' on top which was a

little strange, but everything else was just a normal shop. A man manned the counter in a brown uniform as he went from one stage to another making coffee.

In front of him a shimmering surface that didn't quite look like glass kept a number of various sweets Kat had seen before contained. Things like cupcakes and cookies as well as the odd pie or two in the corner for people after a heartier meal.

"Um, why are we in a bakery"?asked Kat more than a little confused.

"Well..." said Green "Demon summoning is a bit weird, it was completely illegal up until around the time I was born, but when the new King took over he allowed it, but with the caveat that everything be kept rather quiet and obtained a permit"

"What she means is the King gave permits to all the scum already summoning demons using hidden entrances and secret lairs and told them to go nuts. Now everyone does it because that's how you get a permit" said Kress with a heaping dose of cynicism .

What have I gotten myself into? And here I thought demon summoning would be a respectable profession.

Chapter 73: The Fifth Member(s)

Kat found herself being led through a town, or perhaps a city? The lines between the two blurred somewhat when you could see the people walking everywhere and there were no cars. The town itself was a strange mix of brick and wooden housing alongside perfectly smooth structures that looked like they were made of this ash grey marble substance. *Why would you ever have such ugly buildings around.* Kat poured some energy into her eyes to get a better look at them and quickly found the answer. Any grey building was layered in countless runes, and while the grey buildings were by far the least common, they all stood out like sore thumbs.

The other thing that stood out to Kat was the surprising number of flowers around the place. They didn't seem to be particularly well kept but every building had at least a flower patch nearby and most had them thrown all over the place. Using the same trick to try and find anything about them all Kat could see was normal flowers. Even ramping the energy up significantly slowing down her perception and seeing the crazy detail she had to be careful with, there wasn't anything to suggest they were anything but normal flowers

"What's with all the flowers around?" asked Kat

"It was discovered that high concentrations of magical energy that gather in places such as cities tend to cause issues given enough time. The solution that was found is to plant excessive plant life, specifically a few varieties of flowers, and replace them every year or two. This prevents a great deal of magical catastrophes" said Nixilei

"Huh, I never knew that" muttered Gareth not intending for the others to hear him, and yet this statement only missed by Kress, though the others chose not to comment.

The group continued making their way through the city and the crowds started to thin out. Kat thought this might be a decent chance to find out what had happened to the previous fifth member of the team. They were still in a public enough place, but at the same time, the team had picked up the name

'unfortunate four' so Kat assumed that whatever had caused their team members to leave, it was fairly common knowledge. "So, about your previous members. What happened exactly? Green said I'd get told once I accepted the deal"

Gareth paled ever so slightly at this, Kat was only able to notice using the remnants of her enhanced vision, as he started to speak with a thinly veiled calm "Well, some strange things happened, none of them were really our fault, actually most of them have nothing to do with the rest of the team at all"

"Aren't you responsible for the arrow though" asked Kress 'innocently'

"I was holding off five other goblins at the time. I'm not a babysitter, I'm the defender" said Gareth with confidence that only came from repeating a line countless time.

Kress and Gareth looked like they were about to side-track so Nixilei stepped in quickly before things spiralled out of control. "As you have heard, we have been assigned the moniker 'unfortunate four', this is due to the number of strange things that have occurred to our fifth members causing them to leave our team for one reason or another.

"We have no reason to believe that any of these individual instances are connected, however a few rival teams started to spread a number of rumours saying that we were responsible for all these problems, or that we were cursed, and even some that say we'd gone through more than twice the true number of applicants.

"To start, please realise that we built the team with the four of us in mind, and the fifth person was always a bit of an unwanted addition. We always understood that we would have to enter the tournament, and that we'd need a fifth, but it wasn't until recently that we'd even bothered to look.

"The first person who joined us was perhaps the best fit for the team we have ever had. He was very quiet but was able to observe the battlefield well like myself, casting spells from afar and never getting in any way's way. Well, he was called to attend his mother's funeral and had to leave the party"

"Oh, I'm sorry for your loss" said Kat

"Don't be, his mother was the most wanted serial killer in the neighbouring five kingdoms. Her death was sought after by many people from other criminals, to bounty hunters, to the church. Hell I even heard of a few innkeepers that figured out who she was when she was staying at their place that tried to poison her" said Kress

"Um, what?" asked Kat confused "Is it rude to ask what killed her in the end?"

"Heart attack" said Kress "Feel sorry for the bastards that found her. They didn't even recognise who they brought into the guard station. They were shocked with they were handed the bounty and a medal of honour"

"Ah, um... right, well what about the others?"

"Oh, there was that guy that got trampled by Tauronoks" said Kress

"Ah yes I remember that, how is he by the way Kress, you knew him better than I did" said Gareth.

"Well, you know about the court hearing, right?" Gareth nodded "Well, turns out that one of the Tauronoks broke their leg stampeding over him, and technically he was trespassing at the time so he's still working off the debt from that" said Kress

Green, not wanting to be fully left out whispered to Kat "There was this one girl who stepped on a teleportation circle in the ruins"

"Indeed, we never did find her again. I initially thought that it had to be a genuine sabotage attempt but after I investigated it seems like that circle was ancient. We did here a loud voice saying something about a demon lord, but only Green and I could hear it, perhaps it was our imagination" said Nixilei. Green pouted at her friend, not truly upset she'd stolen the story from her but a little put off.

"There was also that time our wizard took an arrow to the knee, all Gareth's fault really" said Nixilei

"I already told you, I was holding off half a dozen goblins, I couldn't block an arrow on top of it all" said Gareth.

"Don't you have healing magic? Why didn't he recover?" asked Kat

"Well, I did heal him, but a piece of the arrow was lodged into his kneecap, and I can't heal metal out of a body, I can only fix what's broken" said Nixilei

"There was that other poor sod who got forced into a marriage by his parents so had to join his fiancé's team instead. Poor guy" said Kress wiping away a fake tear.

"Hey, Wiltrud is a nice lady, and a decent combatant. There is nothing wrong with joining her team" said Gareth.

"Right, except for that fact they hate each other's guts and were raised to fight about every little thing in that stupid dick measuring contest their houses were having at the time. I give it 3 years, no 2 tops" said Kress

Gareth looked to refute Kress' point but seemed to realise that he was probably right so thought better of it.

"Um, who else was there" muttered Gareth

"There was Geor-" Gareth immediately cut Nixilei off "We don't speak of him. We do not even utter his name. He doesn't exist, he will cause us no more problems. Correct"

"Ah, yes you're right, actually. What are you talking about Gareth? I can't remember the person in question at all. There only other person who tried to join our team was Una, but she had a house fall on her" said Nixilei.

"Did a house she was in collapse? Did everyone else make it out alright?" asked Kat

"No, Una had her house ripped out of the ground and dropped on her head" said Garreth.

"And she deserved it to" said Green.

"Now now Green, it's rude to speak ill of the dead like that" said Gareth. **NOvelnext.com**

"But she did. She was marrying into one of the strongest earth mage families in the kingdom, apparently her husband really liked her, and instead of spending time with him she spent all his money traveling around sleeping with anyone she could get her grubby little hands on. Disgusting behaviour from a disgusting woman" said Green, and Kat was surprised at the vitriol contained in that statement.

"Um, I'm surprised you seem so, ah, insistent that she deserved it Green" said Kat.

"She tried to take my Gareth away from me. I hated her, she already ruined her own love life, why did she have to try and attack mine too. It's just plain rude. If I was an earth mage I would've dropped the house on her as well" said Green.

Gareth slowed down a bit to pat Green on the head. Green responded with a big grin on her face and pushed into his hand in response. "She was never going to sway me Green, you didn't have to worry"

"I wasn't worried, I trust you. Doesn't mean I wouldn't want to drop a house on her though" said Green with a pout.

Kress just laughed at the two, enjoying the look of a pouting Green getting pampered by Gareth as he whispered under his breath "I'd do the same thing Green" though this time, only Kat caught the whispered message to the winds.

Chapter 74: A Light Spar

As the conversation dwindle to a close the party seemed to arrive with there destination. It was an ash grey building with a complimentary fence around it and yet unlike the others that were made purely of the strange material with some embellishments to make it look more acceptable this building was made of much paler material, though still identifiably the same stuff. It had dark highlights and carvings that didn't appear to be runes at all, just more pleasing structures.

"This is my family's estate in this city. It's an important trade hub so we have a small compound here. If you are ever lost, try and look for this building. It isn't the tallest but the paler colour scheme should make it stand out well enough" said Gareth.

"Yeah, what's with the ash grey everywhere, surely you guys don't think this actually looks good?" asked Kat somewhat sick of the recurring plane grey buildings.

Gareth coughed awkwardly at that with a slight heat rushing to his face, though not enough to be noticeable "Well, um, the material is extremely good for defensive wards, at least twice as good as ordinary materials and it's relatively inexpensive, Green's family actually developed the stuff"

Green shimmered a moment and then stood still. Kat kept looking at Green oblivious to the obscuring ability she'd just use so when Green turned to face her she was shocked to see that Kat hadn't lost track of her at all. Pouting she looked to Gareth for help, but her spell had worked, and he couldn't see her at all. Green's face went bright red as she hid in front of Gareth to hide herself from Kat's view, however this also failed spectacularly due to the parties march forward and so Gareth promptly bumped into his poor fiancé he looked up at him with sad eyes.

Gareth started to sweat and look awkwardly away. He wasn't quite sure what he'd done to earn Green's disapproval, but he wasn't about to stop her acting so adorably. Kress and Kat just shook there heads at

the display for similar reasons. The party stood around awkwardly for a few moments in the entrance to Gareth's estate before he finally decided to do something.

"Well, anyway... Follow me I suppose, I've got a training area out the back" said Gareth heading around to the left of the estate through, moderately well-kept gardens. They were the same mix of over abundant colourful flowers, and while it was clear some effort went into arranging them the sheer volume and variety of them limited the ability of the gardeners to make them anything more than vaguely presentable.

As they rounded a corner, they came upon what looked to be a square concrete box. Kat once again recognised the horrible looking ash grey material. *Really? I mean I get that this stuff is supposed to be good for magic, but this is excessive right? It ruins the garden, hell it ruins everything to have a box just in the middle of your backyard. What were they thinking?*

Gareth approached the stone doors and slowly pulled one of them open. Kat was tempted to help him with it but seeing that the others were standing back unmoving she decided to do the same. Well, Green was awkwardly fidgeting, but Kat had learnt this was a standard state of being for Green and didn't think too much of it.

As the door inched open under Gareth's power it revealed.. More grey material. To Kat's disappointment but not surprise, the inside was simply more grey stone. Nixilei noticed Kat's sighing but didn't comment. "Welcome, to the training arena. It'd be nice to have a quick spar, if you are interested Kat, just to see where you stand" said Gareth.

Is this really necessary? You are all trained fighters. I suppose if you insist. "Sure, who am I fighting?" asked Kat

Gareth went to answer but Kress jumped in with "You'll be fighting me" as he strode towards the other end pulling out his dual swords.

"Take it easy on her Kress" shouted Gareth

"Of course" smiled Kress.

Kat walked to her position roughly opposite Kress on the other half of the arena. "So what are the rules going to be" Kat asked as she started stretching.

"There are none" said Kress grinning.

"What he means" said Gareth in a forceful tone "Is that the arena is enchanted to stop damaging blows. Bumps and bruises won't be stopped but serious injuries and especially death will put a shield around you preventing further damage from being dealt"

Kat nodded in understanding and got ready to fight. She wasn't a professionally trained fighter by any means, but she'd faced off against a few bullies in her time and kept herself quite fit with her trips to and from school. Her main source of confidence was actually her healing ability, the risk of injury didn't scare you as much after having gravel scrape your face off and successfully recover.

Kat and Kress took their stances waiting for the signal to start. Kat wasn't exactly sure if they were waiting for a signal at all, so she just stood ready, wings flared slightly and body positioned into a

fighting stance. While Kat was mostly relaxed, Kress looked like a taut string. Ready to unleash a flurry of blows when Kat showed the slightest opening. Of course, it was difficult to find an opening when your opponent was well outside of your striking zone. *novelNext.cOm*

This didn't seem to deter Kress though as he stood unmoving be ready for the slightest twitch. After staring at each other for a good minute Kress decided that it was time to move forward. Despite Kat's claim she wasn't really a magician, he had been waiting for her to start casting a spell. That was always the best time to charge a wizard, as it took some time to finish chanting, and if you scared them enough it would backfire. Kat taking a fighters stance had thrown him well off his game.

Charging in Kress went straight for a double slash towards Kat's neck. For Kat's part her demonic energy instantly reacted. Her eyes glowed and the world seemed to slow down immensely. Kat was able to watch the oncoming Kress with fascination instead of fear and saw the slash coming from miles away. As the swords came down Kat simply bent her body backwards and let the swords sail over her.

Not to be outdone Kress pivoted on his foot to try and bring the swords back around splitting them up this time to target the space where Kat's head should be and the space where her midsection was. For Kat however the attack was just as easily dodged as the first. Dropping down into a crouch to duck both swords she moved in close and used her moment to land a fist straight into Kress' stomach.

A brown light flashed, and Kat felt like her hand impacted a stone wall. Kat stepped back and dropped her arms thinking that she'd triggered the arena's shield ability. Sadly for her, or perhaps for Kress, this was not the case, Kress had used his mana to harden the leather on his outfit and protect him from the main portion of Kat's strength.

Kress was shocked Kat even had the chance to strike back, and charged once again, doubling the ferocity of his attacks. Coming from the left and right mixing and matching his duel bladed strikes trying to catch Kat off guard and land even a glancing blow.

And yet, to Kat's eyes it was all just so slow. It was only a matter of moving her body just slightly out of the way each time. Even her flowing Kimono went untouched in his mad flurry of blows. The attacks continued like this, left right up down, dodge dodge dodge.

Kat was getting rather bored. The fight wasn't challenging, and Kress had given up using any interesting technique. He was simply trying to swing as much as possible and overwhelm her. *I guess I should just fight back then.* Pouring her demonic energy into her arms Kat was surprised to see her nails glow with purple light.

Changing her idea, instead of going for a punch she slashed downwards with her hand in a sweeping motion towards Kress. Right before it impacted his shoulder a glowing light encapsulated him, and a boom resounded throughout the hall.

Kat blinked, trying to banish the sight from her eyes, and yet it remained. The area around the impact was coated in ice, even with the barrier Kress had icicles forming on the edges of his armour. Kress shivered slightly, though whether it was from fear or cold no one, perhaps not even Kress truly knew.

Kat was shocked, simply taking in the apparent power of her strike. It seemed that pushing energy into her nails provided some shocking effects. She didn't really know how this compared to a normal wizard but the ice coating the arena indicated to her it was powerful enough.

Chapter 75: Lettuce partake in this meal

An odd clanging sound reverberated around the arena. Like the striking of a hammer on an anvil. It took Kat a moment to realise that it was actually Gareth clapping with his gauntlets on. "A fine show indeed"

Nixilei had her analytical face same as ever but Green seemed to be clapping as well, though whether she was simply quiet or overwhelmed by Gareth's clapping was unclear. Kress however had a twisted expression of his face. He looked like he was about to wind up for another attack when Gareth said "It was a good showing, even though you were going easy on Kat it was a spectacle to behold"

Kress' expression got much darker and this statement but Gareth's glare only intensified and Kress could only look away from that gaze in shame. "Nice job Kat, that ice attack at the end was pretty strong, I'm surprised" said Green

"Was it really?" asked Kat

"Yeah, the fact it froze stuff even after the barrier went up is amazing" said Green.

"Actually Green, I believe it to be more of a secondary property of Kat's flame, if it can still be called that considering it freezes things. Demonic fire tends to linger in places. It isn't the same as a normal fireball, so I'm not sure if it is as impressive as the destruction would imply" said Nixilei

"Yeah, well it's bloody cold, which one of you clowns is going to fight her next?" asked Kress as he walked out of the ice field.

The rest of the group shared a look between them that seemed to indicate none of them wanted to fight Kat at all. "I thought we agreed that only one of us needed to fight Kat. You jumped at the opportunity, and you have the best match up against her anyway" said Gareth.

Kress growled a bit at that but quickly quieted down as he seemed to recall that indeed they had agreed beforehand to have only one person test her capabilities. This was to ensure they didn't overly annoy whatever demon they summoned and to keep most of their skills hidden just in case.

Gareth sensing that Kress' mood wasn't improving without something to help it along clapped his hands again "Well, with that wrapped up everyone should prepare for dinner. Kat is there anything I will need to let the staff no about your meals? I'm not sure if demons have any fancy requirements for meals"

Hey system, I think I asked before, but do I have anything I need to eat?

User Kat does not have any specific dietary requirements. This is due to User Kat's succubus heritage that uses Demonic Energy to burn whatever food is placed within the body. User Kat may not require food at all any more but testing would be required.

Huh, is it just succubi that don't need to eat?

A large portion of demons have this ability, though some like succubus have advanced it further than others. More detailed information requires a higher rank.

"Not at all. I'm not very picky, and I can eat pretty much anything. I suppose I could ask you to hold off on the holy crosses, but I could make do" said Kat

"What makes a cross holy?" asked Green in confusion.

Oh, right, I guess that isn't a thing here. "Don't worry about it much Green" said Kat walking over to pat her head. Green instinctively tried to duck away from Kat's hand but she was faster and managed to pat the girl anyway. After a moment Green relaxed.

Gareth coughed lightly into his gauntlet to get everyone's attention and started to head outside. After the others exited the training area he shut the door behind them and lead them back through the path. "Sorry about this, we did have a door at the back of the estate for easier access to the training area but it turned out to be in a critical area for warding sigils so it had to be removed and once they went up it was a bit too much hassle and expense to put in a new door somewhere"

"I did warn your family at the time that the estate was being constructed that the door had the potential to cause issue except none of you took it under advisement. I honestly wonder how your family managed to convince Green's to hand her over" said Nixilei

Gareth blushed slightly at this but made no further comment. He wasn't sure why Nixilei's suggestion had been overlooked at the time but he wasn't going to stand up for whatever poor fool thought they knew better than her.

As the group approached the front doors they swung open to reveal a grand waiting room with two servants standing either side of the door. The pair was a young and old man that shared a few similar facial characteristics. The same square jaw, brown eyes and over abundance of facial hair. Where the old man's was grey the young man had black and was cut short unlike his aging counterpart.

"Greetings young master, dinner has been prepared for you already, please allow me to take you and the guests to the dining room" said the old man

Wait, what? Why bother asking if I can't eat things if the foods already prepared? Thought Kat, but eventually she just shrugged off the strangeness.

"Of course Maxwell, please take the others there first I just need to remove my armour" said Gareth

"I would be happy to assist you young master" said the younger man.

And with that the group split in two with Gareth leading the butler down the right hand hall and the older butler leading the rest of the group down the left. The hallway was a sparsely but well decorated hall. The grey walls had alcoves carved every few metres with various sculptures of animals in each which Kat examined as they continued towards the dining hall.

Each sculpture seemed to have a lot of care put into them, and yet the styles were also wildly inconsistent, as if done by several different sculptors. This was made even more apparent once Kat realised that they were not of different creatures, but different sculptors interpretation of the same strange creature. It looked like a mix between a dog and a stag, with sharp teeth and canine ears, but with the hooves and tail of a deer, though even those details seemed not entirely consistent with each iteration of the sculpture.

"Ah, young Miss, I see you are admiring the Masters' collection. These were part of a competition the lord ran a few years prior to find the best sculpting talent in the region. These are all from the top sculptors of the competition though the winner's piece isn't displayed here but at the main house" said Maxwell.

Kat nodded at the explanation which fit her prior assumption. Shortly after this Maxwell pushed open the door to reveal a well lit room with an extravagant table built to seat at least thirty guests. The room had no windows but the chandelier in the centre lit the room very well by itself. If that wasn't enough though the walls seemed to be lined with the same crystal that lit the underground demon summoning business. The table was laid with a beautifully embroidered cloth that continued until halfway up the table before changing into a plain white sheet for the section that housed the food Kat presumed was for them.

The table consisted of a shocking amount of vegetables and fruits. That isn't to say that there was no meat available at the table, but it was in the minority, and took up only a small portion of what was laid out before them. Arranged before them was a number of salads with different compositions all containing various ingredients organised into appealing shapes and patterns, there was even one made exclusively of different coloured apples.

As Kat was admiring the various salads available to them Kress seemed to teleport to one of the chairs next to the few pieces of meat available to them and started eating with a happy expression. Kat's jaw nearly hit the floor when she saw that the man was actually capable of looking happy for a change.

Recovering from her stunned state Kat was looking for a seat for herself when she noticed that Green had also appeared in one of the spare chairs. Though unlike Kress who had an expression of bliss Green seemed rather indifferent to the spread before her, she hadn't even grabbed at any of the food.

Sighing Kat followed behind Nixilei and took a seat next to her. This Green, Nixilei and Kat on one side of the table with Kress on the other. Nixilei simply grabbed an entire bowl of salad from nearby and started eating without so much as a twitch in expression.

It was at this moment the doors opened to reveal Gareth. The man now sported a very formal looking outfit. It seemed he was wearing robes, though they were not the large flowing garments typically associated with the word. Instead it was as closely cut as possible for the upper half and loose at the bottom. Kat thought it looked a bit like a dress actually, but she wasn't going to be the one to point it out. The 'robe' had some minor embroidery around the midsection and the edges of the sleeves as well as the collar, just some gold thread to contrast with the black of the garment.

"Well, I guess I should have expected you to start without me, let the meal begin I suppose" said Gareth.

Chapter 76: An Early Night

Dinner with the Unfortunate Four was a strange affair. Green consumed a small amount of food from around the table and then stood up and nestled into Gareth's arm and promptly fell asleep on him.

Gareth for his part just patted her on the head a few times before continuing to eat as if he didn't have a sleeping girl on his arm, though he seemed to take a small amount of extra care to ensure no food would drop on Green.

Nixilei wasn't much better, she just finished that first dish that she had acquired and then sat and watched Gareth and Green with that same stare she had before, treating this strange event as an everyday occurrence, though for all Kat new it was.

Kress for his part just kept enjoying the food, grabbing any unattended bits of meat he could find. Gareth took a few of them for himself when Kress wasn't looking but most of them were devoured by Kress. This didn't bother Kat because the guy just looked so at peace with everything as he ate, like nothing could ruin his happiness and Kat wasn't going to try.

In the end Kat sampled a bit of everything and found it to be extraordinarily well prepared, well, she missed out on any of the meat dishes, but it wasn't a major concern anyway. The chefs clearly had a lot of experience preparing salads, but Kat was mainly impressed with variety of taste and texture on offer. Kat intended to say a few words about the meal but seeing everyone else eating in perfect silence she felt it would be wrong to break it for some reason. *NoVELNext.COM*

In the end she finished long before Gareth and Kress and just spent her time awkwardly admiring the rest of the room. It wasn't long before Gareth noticed her discomfort and said "Would you like to retire for the night? We have a room prepared for you if you so desire. I'd show you the way personally but well..." glancing between Kat and Green on his arm.

Kat nodded "I understand, um Maxwell then" glancing over at the butler who had resided in the corner for the whole meal.

Maxwell stepped forward and nodded slightly when his name was called "Of course milady, please if you would follow me"

Maxwell promptly began to make his way for the same door the group had entered. He paused a moment on the threshold to listen and ensure Kat was following him and after hearing her footsteps continued down the corridor.

Noticing this movement Kat had a grand idea, after they passed one of the other doors in the corridor Kat started to use her wings to lighten her steps. Not using them enough to actually hover but more than enough to reduce the sound of her footsteps.

Maxwell didn't falter the slightest in his movements, however Kat noticed that his footsteps had gotten quieter as well to match her own. Not to be outdone, Kat started to hover only barely dropping to the ground occasionally to give Maxwell a hint that she was still following behind him.

To Kat's shock though Maxwell began to mimic Kat's new method of walking. He would seem to float down the hallway for a few steps distance before lightly landing on the ground and continuing on his way, Maxwell for his part never left the ground by more than a few centimetres but it was evident he was floating by the fact he kept his legs in a stationary position until quickly swapping over.

And so the two continued down the corridors, reducing the amount of time spent on the ground until Maxwell stomped his feet and stopped in front of a door that had an ornate mountain carved into it.

"This is your room Milady, please use it at your leisure" said Maxwell as he bowed and then walked back down the corridor the way he came.

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Meanwhile back in the dining room.

"I believe it is time we discuss our impressions of the demon we've summoned" said Gareth eyes roaming the other two but leaving Green out of his gaze.

Kress looked up from his meal heartbroken like someone had just told him his dog had died. "Do we have to get to this now, it's mealtime, and I cannot let the food cool"

"Kress, you're on the last piece of meat, is there any better time?" asked Gareth.

Kress looked around the assorted dishes and saw that Gareth was right and sighed. Quickly finishing the last piece and sighing again he looked towards his leader to begin. Nixilei watched the conversation with an unchanging expression though when it was clear that Kress was ready to begin she cast a concerned glance at Green.

"Do you really want me to wake her up for this Nixilei, I can, but I won't" said Gareth

"I would dare not contradict you in this Gareth, though I believe she has the right to be included in the discussion I also am aware that her contribution would be minor at best due to her nature" said Nixilei.

"Well, I'm glad we have an understanding. I'd like to start with your observations Nixilei" said Gareth

"Well, the most stunning part is perhaps the marshal prowess shown by Kat. Even considering that Kress held back" at this Kress coughed into his sleeve to avoid notice "the level of ability is quite astounding considering we requested a mage type demon.

"That leads us to a further problem which is what magic abilities she truly has. I'm uncertain as to what will be required for this competition, but I worry she will not meet the minimal requirements for it. That being said as a demon she is likely powerful enough to assist as properly in the group staging perhaps rendering this negative moot.

Gareth and Kress nodded, simply deferring to Nixilei's expertise in these matters. They knew even less about demons and mages than she did so they simply took her word for it. "That being said I suppose we need to move onto the real consideration which is her attitude." Said Nixilei.

"Frankly, I cannot get a true handle on it. I cannot understand which faction she would belong to. The temptations we have arrayed for her seem not to have even registered, which should be highly unlikely for such a low-level demon.

"What do you mean?" asked Kress genuinely confused

"What I mean, is that demons tend to embody one of the various sins our people know. Her quick acceptance of the spar and lack of enthusiasm for her own room to retire seems to indicate she doesn't embody sloth, but perhaps that is her strongest connection.

"She certainly doesn't embody wrath, after fighting so calmly and accepting the end of the match immediately. Despite the various wealth we have shown her she seems unmoved, though perhaps her sense of it is skewed, making envy unlikely, and her lack of haggling in the contract price precludes greed as well.

"Pride seems highly unlikely considering she has been nothing but cordial to all of us, and let's not even consider the chance she is a gluttony demon considering the amount of food left on the table.

"The most likely candidate for her should have been lust considering her species but I did not even see her glance twice at the various beauties and handsome men we had planted along our route back. I truly do not know what to make of her"

Gareth let this information sink in. He had been counting on Nixilei to uncover what Kat's vice was to ensure that no potential problems arose. The fact she showed no inclination towards any of them was a confusing and worrying development.

"Is it possible she doesn't belong to any of the vices?" asked Gareth.

Nixilei revealed a pained expression for the first time "From my knowledge it is theoretically possible, however this is only in stronger demons or those that are unhinged in some other clear way. It isn't to say it's impossible for a weaker demon to be cordial, it very much is, but that sort of self-control is not typically associated with demons and I cannot help but feel it doesn't apply to our guest"

Gareth sighed "Kress do you have anything to add?"

"That icefire, that isn't natural whatever it is. Even demon fire burns, hell demon fire burns everything, it leaves nothing unscathed. Not only is this demon's cold, but it doesn't spread rampantly. I don't know if I should thank the gods or curse them for surely she is capable of something much worse"

"We can only hope we haven't missed anything, hopefully the tournament will be no issue" said Gareth

"The only consideration truly is keeping an eye on our demon. We cannot lose her, and if she proves to be capable of resisting all the sins then we need to ensure she participate for the remainder of the tournament. The sort of even headed thinking is rare in demons"

Chapter 77: Sleepy Green

Kat for her part did not hold any complex meetings or overly analyse her new teammates. Instead she found the rather nice bed provided in the centre of the room and fell asleep. Morning came and Kat easily got herself out of bed. Refreshing the summon of her kimono she walked to the door and opened it to find the hallway empty before carefully closing it once again.

Looking out of the window she only just now realised she had been provided it seemed like it was still very early in the morning, though the lack of a clock made it hard to tell for sure just how much time had passed at the very least Kat could see the sun peaking over the horizon.

I guess I can just look around my room or something? I'm supposed to wait for a butler or whatever right? That's how these things are supposed to work I think. And so taking her own advice Kat began to inspect the room.

It was kept well enough, but Kat felt it was lacking a certain something the rest of the house possessed. It was strange, despite the tapestry on the wall and the rune carvings around the place it felt like no one actually lived in the room.

Which, on second thought is probably true. This is just the guest room, one of likely many. That's probably why it feels like one of those fairly new hotels. A bunch of fancy stuff and clean sheets but not like something you'd actually live in.

A short time after Kat had given up admiring the room, she heard a knock at the door. Opening it revealed Maxwell who bowed upon seeing the door open "I had come to inform you of the bathing facilities, but it seems you have already taken care of yourself. In that case would you like to head towards the dining room now?"

You guys had baths and you didn't tell me? Rude. Aw well, it's not like I get dirty anymore, so I suppose I'll just head to the dining room. Down the hall, past the entrance... and down another hall Kat found herself once again in the dining room.

This time, unlike the previous night where the table was filled with a multitude of dishes, Kat instead found that each of the seats they'd occupied the previous night now had a plate with some neatly arranged fruit slices consisting of apples, something that looked like a blue cherry, and something else Kat didn't recognise.

The exception to this was the chair Gareth had sat in which instead had two plates nearby and a slight but noticeably larger chair than had occupied the space at the head of the table last night.

Despite Maxwell offering the use of the baths first, Kat was actually the second to arrive in the dining room. Munching happily on the fruit was Kress who as opposed to the bliss he seemed to be experiencing yesterday now seemed to be absorbed in a calming atmosphere.

His constantly scowling face had levelled out. His eyes remained close as he grasped each fruit with surprising precision for a man not looking at his plate. Kress would move once every thirty seconds, snatching the next article of food before returning to stillness for another thirty seconds.

Taking her seat Kat addressed Kress "Huh, I thought you only enjoyed eating meat"

"It is all about balance in your food. That is the only way to truly appreciate it"

"Then why would you eat only meat last night and only salad this morning"

"I do not mix my meals demon. Morning is for fruits, lunchtime is for vegetables, and evenings are for meat. The occasional snack is acceptable to however it should never come at the expense of one of the three core meals" said Kress with the ghost of a smile and vigour Kat didn't expect from the man.

I guess everyone has things to be happy about, even Grumpy over here. You know what though, good for him. Kat tried her best to imitate Kress' serene calm as he slowly consumed the food on his plate and failed. Sure she could take a bite every thirty seconds but she felt like she was missing something important, just going through the motions and lacking the weight Kress had managed to put behind his own dining experience

I wonder if it's just because I don't enjoy food the way Kress does or if there is something else to it. He looks almost religious this morning, but that certainly wasn't the case yesterday.

Some time during Kat's musing Nixilei managed to sneak into the room unnoticed, though Kress did pause for an extra second when eating, perhaps he detected her presence. Gareth and Green arrived a

short time later walking in and taking a seat at the end. Well, Gareth walked in, Green looked half asleep as she leaned heavily on his arms.

Though, as soon as Green touched the seat her eyes shot open and she casted a spell. Green light enveloped her and pooled at her elbows and hands. Moving at a speed Kat could only follow by using a bit of demonic energy Green quickly ate around two thirds of the food on her plate before stopping and snuggling into Gareth's arm and closing her eyes.

"Milady, what have I told you about using your haste spell to eat breakfast" said Nixilei

No response

"Green, I know you can still hear me"

No response

Nixilei gave a blank look towards Gareth who sighed and nudged the 'sleeping' woman in his arms. Green pouted and only buried her face further into Gareth's arm pretending not to acknowledge her presence.

"Gareth, close your eyes" said Nixilei as a sigil lit up in front of her hands. Rotating a spinning, it grew brighter until a massive flash of light went off, not from Nixilei's hands but in front of Green's face.

A squeak came from Green as she jumped a little in Gareth's arms before glaring angrily at Nixilei.

"I have warned you, many times that it is unhealthy to eat breakfast like this" said Nixilei

"What about the damage to my eyes from that" pouted Green

"I've designed this spell especially for you milady, it causes a flash of light and pain in the eyes, specifically. In fact I've keyed it to just your eyes though the flash is something everyone sees. No damage is being done to you" explained Nixilei

"How can you do that, so mean" said Green

"I have warned you, repeatedly, that using haste almost defeats the point of eating breakfast. With all the extra energy you burn in that state it is so wildly inefficient I should make you eat twice that amount" said Nixilei

"Don't wanna" said Green hiding once again in Gareth's arms.

"You are not a child Green" said Nixilei stressing Green's name "You need to act more like your age, or at the very least not act like a spoiled child"

"I behave myself perfectly well, I know the rules of etiquette, but no one is around, and it's early and I'm tired" said Green, whose claim to know of etiquette was undermined due to the fact she wouldn't remove her face from Gareth's shoulder.

Nixilei looked to Gareth for help but he objected "This is your crusade not mine. I quite enjoy my future wife's morning affection and enjoy having her with me. If she really wishes to abuse the haste spell to spend more time sleeping against me I cannot fault her for that for I enjoy it as much as she must surely"

"What do you plan to do when she complains of hunger in a few hours during the competition then?" asked Nixilei keeping her formal tone.

"I have space for snacks in my storage pouch. She is adorable when munching on various snacks don't you think" said Gareth.

Kat cut in at this "Wait, aren't storage pouches really rare? Those are the things with extra space in them right?"

"Yes, they are, though rare is not something I'd claim them to be. A bit expensive perhaps but not unreasonably so for a wealthy merchant or perhaps an above average adventurer. We find them all the time in ancient ruins. I'm sure they'd be harder to buy if you could keep more than one on you at a time without them potentially exploding" said Gareth

"Wait what? Why do they explode?" asked Kat

Gareth just shrugged.

The conversation dwindled after that. Kress had basically finished but the others still had some food to go. It only took everyone another five minutes to clean their plates.

"Well, is everyone ready to leave for the tournament" asked Gareth as he stood up, taking Green with him into a princess carry. ~~novel~~Next.com

Kat wanted to say yes, but she couldn't help but let her eyes drift to the calmly resting girl in Gareth's arms.

Chapter 78: The Stable, Stablemaster

The Group was gathered outside, now equipped in their adventuring gear. Green was even fully awake and prepared to go. Gareth glanced around and seeing that everyone was prepared to leave headed off towards the city outskirts.

It was still quite early in the morning and the streets were relatively sparse on people. You could always see at least one that wasn't part of your group, but the street wasn't full of people like it was when Kat was first taken to Gareth's house.

As they approached the edge of town their destination became clearer. Gareth had angled the party slightly towards a rather large building that sprawled out even further than his estate in the city. It looked like some sort of cross between warehouse and barn. The building did have walls, but they were closer to support pillars for the roof. Behind the building you could make out a fence, that seemed to stretch endlessly behind it, presumably where animals could be kept when not in the barn itself, but none could be seen at the moment.

When the party had come within 50m of the building Gareth yelled out, his voice booming and presumably amplified by some magic, "Is the stablemaster in!"

"Of course I am brat" another voice returned.

Walking towards them was a figure wrapped in thick leather garments that looked unsuited for combat, but well suited for working with heavy machinery. Their face was covered by cloth wrapping leaving only

a set of eyes peaking out. Their boots came up to around their knees and they had their pants tucked into them. The only strange thing about their attire was that they had no hat. Their hair was very thick and seemed to be tied back tight leaving the impression they were wearing a bandanna.

It wasn't until the figure started getting closer that Kat realised they were actually quite short, extremely so in fact. Whoever this stablemaster was size was not one of the graces that had obtained.

"So brat, I take it you want to head to the tournament grounds?" said a voice, that to Kat's surprise sounded quite feminine. The shouting had obfuscated this at first but chances were the stablemaster was a woman.

"Of course we don't want to be late after all" said Gareth and the lady nodded.

"Hi Granny" said Green in an innocent voice. The figure stumbled a bit like they'd been punched in the stomach.

"Now Greeny, I think I've told you I ain't that old" said Granny(?)

"But, your nice and sweet, and an old lady?" said Green oblivious to the distress she was causing.

Granny(?) searched Green's face for any trace of mockery and found none. This information though came with mixed feelings, should she be happy Green wasn't trying to be rude? Or sad that she genuinely believed what she was saying.

Sighing Granny(?) sent out a series of complicated whistles that only Green and Kat seemed to be able to hear. After a brief silence five horses came trotting out of the building towards the group. These five all looked identical, with sleek brown coats and steady gaits. Each horse walked past, nodded slightly to Granny(?) and took its place beside one of the group members.

Everyone immediately jumped up into the saddle with perfect riding posture and got ready to leave... except Kat, who had never even seen a real horse before let alone knew how to ride them. Glancing around nervously Kat said "You know, I can just fly behind you guys, I don't need a horse" *It's more like I can't ride a horse but what's the difference really.*

"Are you fast enough to keep pace?" asked Nixilei

"Of course she wouldn't be, I bet she just can't ride" sneered Kress

System? Can I keep up?

How could D.E.M.O.N.S know. User Kat has not bothered to test User Kat's abilities. D.E.M.O.N.S does not possess the ability to see the future. User Kat should refrain from asking these questions in the future, as User Kat has in the past. D.E.M.O.N.S does not hold the answer.

Ok fair point, but do you know what the average flight speed for a demon is?

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Look, ok, fair point.

"I should be fine Kress, thank you for your concern" said Kat as she started flapping her wings and hovering beside the party. Though Kat could have sworn the horse assigned to her was mocking her as she did so.

"Well, if that's what you have decided. Stablemaster we'll be off" said Gareth as he set off waving behind him.

"Yeah, bye Granny" snickered Kress. As he did so a look passed between Granny(?) and the horse Kress was riding on. This movement was noticed by the girls, but they didn't say anything, whatever punishment was about to befall Kress was his to bear alone.

And so the group set off at a decent pace, the horses cantering along the rode heading out deeper into the fields. Kat was pleased to find that her bluff of flying along actually payed off. It was a little taxing to keep pace with the horses, but as long as they weren't riding for days Kat felt like she could keep up with them.

Of course, keeping up with Kress was even easier. His horse had decided that a light trot was more its pace and kept firmly to the back of the pack.

This is actually really comfortable. Thought Kat as she beat her wings to keep up with the group. *I enjoy a nice jog but there is something so much more satisfying about flying instead. I really need to properly test my abilities. I feel so free like this, even though it isn't exactly a breakneck speed, and I could probably keep up if I was running, if only barely, this just feels right.*

Kat spent most of her time hovering around Green and Nixilei, it was interesting to watch their various methods of observing the surroundings. Green let her gaze wonder, from point of interest to point of interest, taking in the scenery at her own pace, and yet as Kat observed longer she noticed that slight sounds would cause Green to focus on that direction with shocking speed and accuracy, and yet it still seemed as if her gaze was wandering.

Nixilei on the other hand looked like a scanner. She was taking in absolutely everything in the environment, additional noises or noteworthy plants were just more things to observe to her. Her eyes shifted across the scenery evenly, in an almost repeating pattern, with it being mixed up just enough to not become routine.

After around half an hour at their pace Kress had finally had enough

"Stupid dam horse, what the hell are you even trained for. Keep up with the rest" said Kress.

His horse however clearly wasn't listening, as it didn't so much as twitch at Kress' complaints.

"Whatever do you mean Kress, your horse is traveling at exactly the same speed" said Nixilei raising her voice so that Kress could hear her speak from 100m away.

"It's not the same and you damned well know it. Why else would I be so far away from you all" said Kress

"Perhaps you're smelly" offered Green. Gareth bit his mouth shut but air puffed through the openings. Luckily for him though the sound of hooves covered for him.

Kress scowled and went to kick his horse in the side however just as he was about to bring his heel down the horse whipped its head around and took a bite out of his hand.

"By the Great Earth Mother's tits that hurts" screamed Kress "I should have you whipped for this, or perhaps hunted by a pack of grey wolves. Damned beast"

"Now now Kress, violence is unbecoming of you" said Nixilei

"Oh like you're one to talk. Why don't you do something useful for a change and heal me?" said Kress

"Oh, but I wouldn't want you to use that hand to attack a poor defenceless animal. The weight on my conscience would be too much to bear" said Nixilei deadpan.

"You are a healer. You heal things, I need to be in top shape to compete you know" tried Kress

"Ah, but we only needed four competent members to pass this round, and we have Kat now. Sure we can't sub you out, but if you loose all the contest you participate in then that would be just as expected" said Nixilei

"Now listen here you" started Kress "Enough" finished Gareth. "I know you think this is funny Nixilei, and Kress, you are being ridiculous attacking a horse like that. But he is correct, heal him"

Nixilei just shrugged and lit up a spell circle shooting of a beam of green light towards Kress' hand. The red marks that covered it slowly disappeared, though the little bit of blood remained.

"See was that so hard?" asked Kress

"I said enough" finished Gareth.

Chapter 79: Introducing the Concept of Thyme

The journey continued in silence. The group returned to their previous methods of observing the world, and Kress remained angry at everything they past. Kat just sort of hovered around the group, finding it rather easy to flit around everyone now that she had wings, and was thoroughly enjoying the mobility they provided her.

"We are approaching the tournament barrier get ready" Kat's relaxation was interrupted by Gareth.

Just moments after Gareth had spoken up Kat felt something wash over her and looked around to see what was going on. "Do not be alarmed Kat, what you have experienced is the passing through of a potent magical barrier. It's strength made its presence known but do not worry about it harming you"

"Right... what's it for then" asked Kat

"To hide the tournament grounds and keep out the public" said Nixilei

Kat looked around searching for the tournament grounds that Nixilei had mentioned but only saw the same flat planes that had accompanied the rest of their journey. Sensing Kat's confusion Green asked "What's wrong Kat? I don't see what there is to be confused about"

"I mean, where is everything? Didn't you say this was the tournament grounds?" asked Kat

"Well, yeah? What did you expect a coliseum?" asked Green

Kat didn't say a word letting the silence carry on until Kress shattered it with all the social grace of a jackhammer on Sunday morning "Hahaha, you thought it'd be a coliseum. What an idiot. Why would there ever be a coliseum here"

Nixilei not missing the opening said "Considering the coliseum in the city we just left it as not an unreasonable assumption. Plus in the richer areas there will likely be a coliseum for the tournament to take place in"

Kress clicked his tongue in annoyance "What a waste of money. You either make them too small and they get trashed or you make them too big and no one can see shit"

"That's because the big guys like to waste money and make people think they're cool" said Green

Gareth paled a bit at that and seemed to look around for something but seemed to not find what he was searching for. Casting a worried look at Green he bit his lips and held his mouth shut.

"Ha, wasting money is right, though I suppose if they are gonna waste it on anything at least it's shit everyone can enjoy and not them getting fat on taxes" said Kress.

"Actually, once you start talking about particular prestigious coliseum projects, especially the oldest of the lot, they are actually used as training grounds for apprentice enchanters, utilising the exceptional amount of space to layer enchantments over each other and across the whole thing in a quantity over quality approach that wouldn't work anywhere else. *novelNext.cOm*

"They are actually a rather fascinating piece of history and have rumoured to have had some unforeseen consequences in upper continent where they have more powerful apprentices willing to use their time coating a 12-acre surface. That isn't even accounting for the higher-level enchantments made to facilitate interesting and unique challenges

"Oooh, fascinating history lesson there"

The group whipped around to face this new voice they didn't recognise. It was a strangely echoey androgynous voice that seemed to be right behind them, but somewhere else at the same time. Searching around they couldn't catch sight of anyone other than each other. Kat was particularly surprised at this because her true sight hadn't failed her yet. *Does this mean whatever it is, is too strong for me? Or are they just hiding some other way that I don't understand?*

"Did you know you guys are the third group to arrive? Decent I suppose, but compared to the other guys who have been here for an hour you are quite late"

Kat pushed herself into the air, hovering with her feet around the same height as Gareth while he was on his horse and pooled her energy into her ears to try and hear something.

"Then again, I guess you are still an hour early anyway, so perhaps it isn't my place to complain here"

Kat found that the voice wasn't coming from just one place. It was coming from several, all just behind the various party members excluding herself. Kat readied herself for the next line the being spoke and was quickly rewarded

"And it seems you have a fifth teammate, how strange for the unfortunate four, though I suppose they do make that a requirement, so I shouldn't be too surprised"

Kat homed in on the nearest copy of the voice to her and noticed something strange. It wasn't coming from behind everyone, but instead it was coming from the grass near everyone's feet. Kat stared intently at the blade that was making noise near Green and kept watch on it.

"Oooh, looks like someone figured it out. Quite the surprise too, especially considering it wasn't the scout. Then again, flying around is cheating, you can figure it out so much easier that way"

The spot Kat was staring at suddenly had a surge in the grass growing upward into the sky past Kat seemingly endlessly. As the grass was shooting up parts of it were brushed aside by a slender arm wrapped in countless vines of varying shades of green. This was followed by the rest of the persons(?) body that left the group slightly confused.

In front of them was a figure clad in vines and flowers, spiralling around and weaving in and out to provide the semblance of clothes and decency. This was disturbed however by the slight pulsing and shifting that each of the vines went through instead of the figure breathing with their chests as you might expect.

It was hard to say if that figure was male or female. Calling them a plant would be more accurate than either of those terms. It had a humanoid body but nothing seemed quite right, the chest area was too small, the arms and legs too long and the head was missing a nose. The eyes looked more like they were carved into the figure's head than things that could function and yet even that expectation was betrayed as they moved to examine the party one by one.

Quickly manufacturing a fake hat out of leaves the figure then tipped it towards the group and bowed. "Congratulations on figuring me out, let me introduce myself properly to you, my name is Thyme, much like the spice, and the unit measuring the passing of the moment. Sadly I didn't get any time magic to further continue the gimmick, but I suppose there isn't anything you can do about that"

Gareth placed his right hand over his heart in a sort of salute and inclined his body forward as much as was reasonable on a horse "I take it you are the overseer for this current tournament location. I greet you as Gareth, leader of the unfortunate four, thank you for taking charge of this event"

Green and Nixilei for their parts hopped off their horses first but repeated the gesture, Kress saluted but did not bow, and Kat, well she actually missed the actions of the group as she was too busy examining the strange plant man to pay attention to the proper etiquette of the situation

Thyme made an attempt at what Kat could only guess was a laugh, but instead sounding more like the crushing of bark. "Indeed I am, and I'm glad you like the name. Some of my finest work in my opinion, which is a shame because they don't let me host these things too often.

"A real shame actually. I mean what's a dryad to do in between those few hundred years of mating cycles other than host tournaments really. Sure some fools train but our bodies are just weak constructs, anyway, hardly makes a difference to train them I say.

"Though I suppose none of you would really know what I mean. Well perhaps the flying one might have an understanding one day, your energy source is a very strange shape"

"Wait you can see my Demonic Flame?" asked Kat

"If that's what you want to call it sure. Got myself these special eyes here" said Thyme as it pulled out their left eye and held it up as an example. "Did some mighty fine work on this one if I do so say myself. Gives me that bit of extra information, and everyone thinks your nuts. It's the perfect combination"

Finishing it's sentence Thyme crushed the eye in front of the others eliciting a gasp from Kat and Green but then proceeded to immediately regrow the lost eye as if nothing had ever happened, not even so much as flinching from the rapid restoration. "Welp, enough fun for just the moment"

Waving its' hands Thyme started to force the grass surrounding the party to encircle them "I suppose I should take you to the rest of the competitors"

Chapter 80: The God Crushers

Kat felt herself being tugged into an adjacent space. Lifted off her feet she found herself in an area that felt somewhat reminiscent of a summoning. Except things weren't quite right, the lights faded in and out instead of a constant warming presence calming her down. Instead of the beautiful array of colours, the darkness seemed to press in and the few sparks of light she could see all felt wrong, like meeting an old friend who has changed so much you can't even recognise them.

And yet before the weight of the wrongness could fully impact Kat she felt herself being deposited onto soft grass. *Yuck, what was that. It leaves such a horrid taste in the mouth. Why would anyone travel like that.*

Though Kat's complaints seemed minor in the face of what the rest of the party was experiencing. Everyone else was vomiting profusely except Green who seemed to be holding everything but only barely.

Thyme looked over the faces of the group judging their reactions "Seems you aren't a fan, shame that. It is one of the grandest ways to travel"

Something in Kat's mind threatened to boil over at that. Never had she felt so personally attacked by a statement. Not the bullies, not the flippant comments about losing her parents, not that time Lily tried to accuse Gramps of something horrible. Kat let her aura flare, calming herself down and helping the others recover their stomachs.

And yet the burning seemed to remain, it was a colder anger now. One that needed to be expressed, understood. "How can such a perversion of a beautiful process be considered a grand way to travel"

"Hmmm" grumbled Thyme as it flipped it's head to gaze at Kat "How curious, you cannot lie and yet you dodge the subject slightly by asking a question. All the same though I see it in your eyes, you truly feel affronted by this. So strange, to cover such great distances in an instant is a wondrous thing no?"

Thyme let its head drift toward Kat extending past the neck and effortlessly brushing aside the aura Kat had been letting out, reinforcing that Thyme was much stronger than he appeared. And yet one thing stuck out to Kat, that the travel was instantaneous, sure it was fast, but that seemed off to her "Do you see nothing during the journey Thyme?"

"Why no? Of course not, the travel itself takes no time at all. What is there to see?" asked Thyme.

Kat bit back a laugh so as to keep at least some civility "I suppose you do not see what I do. That transportation process is corrupted, it is wrong. I see more than nothing during the journey, and what I saw, I did not like"

This actually seemed to shake the strange plant man who had thus far not actually shown much expression at all. Still didn't in fact, but the vibrant colours and lush green vibes it had dimmed quite a few shades and the tips of the few flowers present on its body seemed to wilt slightly. Thyme quickly gazed around and noticed the rest of the party had recovered and said "Well, swiftly moving on, I guess I'll introduce you to the other competitors"

Kat felt a rather significant portion of her anger cool as she saw how unnerved Thyme was, she wasn't one for such reactions anyway and to see the obvious affect on him helped douse whatever remained after her outburst.

Pulling down the grass screen Thyme revealed two other groups of five that were talking amongst themselves. They kept to there respective teams, or what Kat assumed was their respective teams considering each group had five members.

"And so, ladies and gentleman, I'll be introducing you all, so get ready" said Thyme who had now changed their voice into a booming announcer voice that echoed across the fields. "First in arriving, and perhaps first in the competition, are the God Crushers! These guys are ruthlessly efficient and have completed the highest number of contracts out of all the competitors. They are famous for never once turning down a job that has been offered to them, and the messier it is the happier they are afterwards. Give them a hand"

Contrary to Thyme's introduction though, the group he had pointed out looked more like well equipped farmers than adventurers. They all wore the same leather overalls and thick cotton shirts. Their weapons and hats were really the only thing to separate them... if you could call their farming equipment weapons.

The man standing in front held what looked to be a wagon wheel with boards nailed into it in place of a shield with a sturdy iron cap. To his left was a man holding a sharpened pitchfork with the two outer ends chopped down to make it look more like a trident, wearing a leather cap with a spike on top. The man to the right had a sling on his hips and wore no hat at all, and finally the last pair that stood behind the first three looked to be twins, or at least they had similar enough appearances. They held no visible weapon, and instead of a hat they just seemed to have more dirt caked onto them. Perhaps they weren't twins, but with the amount of dirt covering their facial features it was basically impossible to tell.

Kat gave a confused look to Gareth hoping he would explain, he just shrugged in return but luckily Nixilei had the answer "That team, the "God Crushers" are the local handyman group. A bunch of nice kids really, that just go around doing odd jobs like cleaning basements and clearing out rat infestations. There mage and healer just have decent potential and can throw it at things but it isn't that effective to just shove mana at the problem. Technically everything Thyme said about them was true by the way, just, context."

"Why are they even in this tournament then?" Asked Kat

"Well, ah actually I don't know" answered Nixilei

"Because Jim's mother promised us raspberry and honey pie if we entered" shouted the God Crusher with a wagon wheel for a shield. "And I'll be damned if I miss out on some raspberry honey pie uh, no offence demon miss, I think"

"None taken?" asked Kat somewhat confused as to what she should be offended by. Seemingly satisfied with this Wheel stepped back into his group and nodded.

Thyme cleared his throat noisily, which sounded more like crushing bark than a clearing of the throat "Are you quite done my guests? Yes? Good. And now, the next group, the Totally Not Related at All, group. Now yes, I stand by that, despite there appearance they are not related in any way shape or form, though perhaps in form... and I guess that makes them related in a way too... And wait, now that I think about it, shape and form are basically the same thing..."

Thyme trailed off trying to analyse the hole he'd dug himself into. And what a hole it was because the second group he was referring to did look similar indeed. Though even that didn't quite cut it. Despite the groups obvious attempts to differentiate their appearance with accessories and hairstyles they couldn't escape the fact that they all clearly looked the same.

They all shared the pointed ears, marking them as elves, long white hair that extended down to just past the shoulder blades. Matching faces with blue eyes and a small nose. Each member exactly the same height and build. Honestly it was a little creepy. Outside of their weapons which were a more standard affair matching Kat's group they each distinguished themselves with a unique hairstyle and a different take on the outfit.

The first kept the hair hanging free and straight down, and utilised the fact she was wearing plate mail to limit the need for an extra way to tell her apart. The one with dual swords had twin tails with basic strings to keep them separated. The one holding the bow, well, had a bow. Sitting atop her head was a bow that easily stretched thirty centimetres in height, giving her the slightest illusion she was taller than the others. The two casters were harder to distinguish. They had their hair bound in a ponytail on either the left or right side of their head, and held a plain looking wood staff. Which one was the healer and which was the wizard, Kat had no idea.

"Nixilei explanation please" Seriously, there has to be a good reason for this one, even twins don't look quite so similar. If someone told me they'd made clones these guys would be the first suspects.

"I have no idea. I've never heard of these guys" said Nixilei

"What's this? Something the great Nixilei doesn't know! The worlds going to end!" said Kress as he pretended to search for some world ending threat. Of course, it had to be at that moment the ground started to shake.