

DEMONS 81

Chapter 81: Boring

Rising up out of the ground was a wall of grass that bloomed to the side a small distance away from the current groups. When the wall dropped to reveal the next team, they all seemed fine, but the piles of vomit being quickly dispersed by vines contradicted that initial assessment. The odd thing was though that talking to them was another copy of Thyme.

"Perfect this means we are all here, and I can continue the introductions proper"

""Wait a minute isn't this the tournament of five though"" said Totally Not Related at All in perfect sync.

Well that isn't creepy at all. "Can you guys perhaps not be creepy little shits?" asked Kress

""No, we have been cursed. Nothing can be done about this"" spoke Totally Not Related at All.

"Well could you kindly sh-" Kress was interrupted by Gareth slamming Kress' head into the floor "Ignore him"

The two Thymes examined Kress on the ground and shrugged "Technically there should be no combat allowed before I read out the rules but well, I'm going to say this is fine"

As Thyme spoke though it mixed in a strange way, the original, or at least the one that had escorted Kat kept the announcer voice, but the one speaking near the newcomers still had its original slightly feminine voice and clashed it an awkward way, like when two notes are one step from harmonising and it sounds even more out of tune.

"Can you refrain for utilising both bodies to speak at the same time if you are going to be discoursing with us. The sound is quite appalling" Kat turned to see that Nixilei actually had her hands covering her ears and seemed to be in slight pain as she said this. Kat then turned to find Green who at first glance looked fine, but with a second glance and a little demonic energy, Kat could see Green had pooled wind around her ears to prevent sound from entering.

Both Thymes crumbled at that. Literally, they disappeared into motes of dust. A moment of shock past between the crowds before bursting forth from the centre of the groups was Thyme, though this time it had doubled in size and the proportions looked slightly more correct. "Of course my friends. I had forgotten the sensitivity of certain species ears, why if I had known better, I'd never have been so careless"

"Nevermind that, let me introduce the final team in this bout" TNRA tried to interrupt by Thyme quickly kept speaking "The fifth team will not be joining us due to circumstances I'll explain after? Happy?"

Thyme paused for a moment to study the faces of everyone present by twisting his whole head around keeping his body still

"So, the final team, they are Boring" said Thyme.

A silence pervaded the area. No one spoke up waiting for Thyme to continue his announcement, perhaps some of their achievements, or relevant information but nothing was forthcoming. Eventually seeing that no one else was going to ask Kat volunteered herself "That's it? Just boring?"

"Yup" said Thyme.

"I suppose I should explain, because it seems Thyme won't" stepping forward the human girl who appeared to be the healer said. Her robes were distinct and seemed to have more in common with Kat's kimono than Nixilei's robes. This girl had a thick sash layered multiple times around her waist with runes so numerous that Kat didn't even need her demonic energy to see the telltale signs of magic running across it. Comparatively the rest of the outfit seemed to be practically barren with a symbol over her heart that depicted two crossed swords and some sort of flower Kat didn't recognise, it looked a bit like a cross between a maple leaf that had been turned into a flower and a rose.

Her hair was cut short and was a bright blonde that actually seemed to be emitting a little light as she moved. Her robe was more of a grey colour and Kat could see thick brown boots poking out of the bottom. "Our team are simply qualified adventurers. As much as it pains me to admit, we got in because nobody else in our town applied and someone nominated us behind our back"

"I suppose if Thyme isn't going to introduce us properly I might as well continue, my name is Skye Moore, I'm the groups assigned healer, I practice faith based healing which has fallen out of favour in recent years, next is Evangeline Day, who like to refer to herself as Eva, and is the parties physical attacker" Skye said pointing to the only other woman in the party. Eva was nearly as tall as Gareth with a greatsword that was even larger than that, clearly designed for two handed use. She wore leather armour with thin strips of plate that covered essential areas without limiting her movement too much. Eva had a scar on her left hand that continued into her sleeve. Her arms and legs were quite thick, comparable to Green's waist in size and even under the armour seemed ready to burst into action at any time.

Eva just grunted in response "Then we have my good friend Kutruoph of Grershic, our defender and old family friend of mine" continued Skye pointing out a dragonkin, he had horns that started at around his temples and curved backwards and up. The horns were black with a slight red tint to it, with a rougher looking style that made them seem like they'd grown in stages over time slowly expanding. Kutruoph had red scales covering his hands and didn't wear gauntlets despite wearing platemail everywhere else. His face was free from these scales but Kat thought she could see them poking out of the top of the armour.

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"Then we have our um, I don't really have a good descriptor for Dusk, as he likes to be called, at least I think it's a he, the creepy guy just hides behind that mask of his" said Skye somewhat awkwardly. Though dusk, and creepy were fair descriptors of their mage. He wore a black robe that covered his whole body, from head to toe with a frowning opera mask where the head needed to be. Underneath the mask seemed to be black cloth to hide his features further or perhaps a darkness enchantment. Either way it was hard to know anything about his true appearance.

"Well, ignoring him we also have my husband Clive, our scout" said Skye finally introducing the last member. Clive seemed to match with Skye well. He was a little on the short side making him about her height and wore a collection of leather armour across his body. He had a bow on his back that was made of a pale white wood, and had runes aplenty just like his wife's sash. His undershirt seemed to have been patched in quite a few places, from wear or attacks it was hard to say, but it had clearly seen better days. He had a cloak with his hood up but he didn't hide his face like Dusk.

"You know Skye, pretty sure we didn't need an individual introduction. When Thyme gave us the rundown of our competitors he didn't give us names" said Clive.

Skye didn't even have the good graces to be embarrassed "Nonsense dear when introducing yourself you do it properly"

"Your husband is right, introduce yourself but leave the rest of us out" said a gravely voice that sounded slightly distorted coming from Dusks' mask.

"Well aren't you just rude then?" asked Skye

"Now, now, ladies and gentleman" said Thyme "But I don't want you to get too far off topic here. As free as I am I do have some schedule to keep, mostly the one imposed on me, but I digress.

"Things are going to be a little different this leg, for my tournament I thought I'd have a little fun with it" Thyme started to grow upwards and spreading out from his chest planks of wood quickly assembled themselves into a stage. Stretching up to give the illusion of walking over the stage Thyme placed its hands on the wood and let a wheel break its way free. On the wheel were ten dials, with five symbols each repeated twice. The symbols were, two crossed swords, a shield, a bow and arrow, a wand, and the last one was a glowing hand, likely representing each of the classes

"For your entertainment and mine, each event will be decided based on a spin of my lovely wheel here. Whichever triangle the wheel lands on will decide the class competing in the next event.

"Oh and before I forget, the final contestants won't be joining us because they insulted a bear, that was actually a druid that turned out to be the tournament organisers wife's third sister's cousin and so he took offence to that. Now they are out in the forest picking herbs as punishment to give them time to think about what they've done. Sadly I don't actually know what that is, but I bet it was funny"

Chapter 82: A Green Perspective

"Well now, let's forget about them, everyone important is here" said Thyme with a big smile pulling hard on the wheel he set up it started spinning wildly "Round and round the wheel it goes, where it stops... is honestly really easy to figure out. It's traveling at a constant speed and..." Thyme started to trail off as everyone stared at him blankly.

"Well, I guess if your not quite as strong it's quite hard to work out..." said Thyme "I guess we can just awkwardly stare at this wheel as it winds down then"

And that is exactly what the groups did. The wheel kept spinning, it was clearly a well made construction, minimal friction and could spin with only the slightest touch. So Thyme's forceful approach meant it didn't look like it was stopping anytime soon.

"Well" said the god crusher holding the wheel "My mamma always used to say that it ain't awkward unless you point it out. We could have happily watched the wheel turn with bated breath, but now you've gone and made it awkward for everyone by pointing it out"

"Right, thank you Jeff" said Thyme as he subtly took out one of his eyes and placed it in his hands to watch the wheel.

Kat noticed this, focusing on Thyme's eye Kat found that there didn't seem to be any magic around it, but what caused even more confusion was when he opened his eyes again. With both of them securely in his skull. *Ok that's just cheating. I might have insane regeneration but I'm pretty sure it isn't that good.*

Finally the wheel started to slow. The tension had completely vanished from the groups and when it finally ended on the scout symbol no one even battered an eye.

"And... We have a winner, the scout class is first" shouted Thyme "Come on up here"

##

The following section is from Green's perspective.

Green walked forward projected a confidence she didn't really feel. *Don't use phase, don't use phase, don't use phase.* Chanted Green trying to avoid pushing her mana into the phase rune contained within her cloak. We trained for this. You are the best scout here. We know this, we are one of the youngest groups to reach D rank.

To further distract herself Green started examining her competition. The first person her eyes fell on was the God Crusher with a sling. *John, well known for his handyman jobs. His reaction speed is probably the worst out of the scouts here but his eye for detail probably rivals mine, I think... Um a sling is a good weapon for short to medium range, better than my bow if we are in close combat.* Green's nervous gaze flicked around the groups and was put off by the fact she hadn't even walked halfway to the platform.

Ok, um what else do I know. Um he has a slight favouring on his right foot but this seems to be natural rather than injury related, um... Looking for other people to examine Green let her eyes drift past the cursed team member, she didn't know enough about why they all looked the same to make proper observations just yet. Switching instead to Clive Green tried to figure out what she could. *Ok, um, winterwood bow, or perhaps petrified vallen oak, either is great for holding enchantments. Um, gives off the impression that he's kind of old but that can't be right because of the tournament rules. He looks human same as his wife but he doesn't walk like one. Could be a beastkin but I don't see any indents from his ears um... Oh we are here.* Green stopped and turned in place so that she was facing the groups now pretending that she had noticed she was in place already abusing her fast reactions.

"Excellent" clapped Thyme "Now, let's get one of you to pull a sheet of paper out of this box" Thyme pulled a plain looking box from behind his back.

Please don't ask me please don't ask me "I'll have to ask" Thyme's eyes wandered across the contests as he glided back and forth choosing to morph into the stage around him instead of walking "Greeee" holding the box towards Green with a smile on his face "Grace, she was the first up so Grace" turning back to face the elf with a bow and a bow.

Grace reached into the box nonchalantly before jerking her hand back out. Attached to it was a squirrel wearing a messenger sash. Thyme laughed as he grabbed the squirrel and healed Grace's hand "Ah that never gets old"

Opening up the tube on the squirrel who immediately calmed itself upon entering Thyme's hand Thyme unfurled the message and read it out "The first event shall be, the obstacle course"

Thyme's voice boomed and the ground seemed to shake at his command. First the grass shifted the teams still standing in place moving them too the front of the platform. Behind the platform grander changes were being made.

Trees and vines sprouted from the ground, pits were dug and walls of hedges sprouted all in short response. Green forced as much mana into her eyes as she could comfortably to try and observe the course as it went up. Her vision zoomed in slightly around twice as powerful as normal human vision, much weaker than Kat's own. *Oh no, everything is twisting and bending way too much I can barely make anything out. What a waste of mana.* Quickly dropping the mana from her eyes she tried to calm herself down and absorb the mana lost in the empowerment as quickly as possible.

Eventually the course solidified but Green didn't bother trying to examine it closer because the course was heavily obscured be vines growing over the whole thing. *It's fine Green, everything will be fine. Sure you can't see the course but you trained for this. Your parents trained you for this, Nixilei trained you for this... And your grandparents, and your grand grandparents... Ok, ignore how much my family loves forcing obstacle courses on young children*

Focus on the positives, like how there is less fire, a lot less fire, and poison darts. I mean, there are probably less poison darts right? "Hey Thyme, does your course contain poison darts?" asked Grace

Grace! Why would you ask that. "Oh yeah tonnes. I've set up darts for days" said Thyme

"Darts for days?"

"Darts for days"

*Why! Why would you confirm that. Green tried desperately not to just bury her head into her hands. What is it with powerful individuals and poison dart traps? I've been to ancient ruins so old that the walls crumble. BUT THE DART TRAPS STIL WORK.

Wait, does this make my parents extremely prepared? Did they know this would happen? While Green was contemplating if her parents were actually wise beyond their years with incredible foresight and didn't simply enjoy torturing their daughter Thyme was admiring his work.

"Well then everyone let me explain the rules of this obstacle course" said Thyme as he brought the scouts together.

"First rule, only scouts are allowed to participate in the course. They are to receive no assists from anyone else in any way

"Second rule, you are allowed to keep your armour and weapons on you as long as they are made up of materials weaker than Elder Hacon leather in untreated form. You should know this already considering it is tournament standard but if you have broken it already tell me now and you won't forfeit.

"Third rule you may use any spell, or enchantment on your person

"Fourth rule you may not cast spells on your opponents. This includes both beneficial and detrimental effects.

"Fifth rule, once the course has started you cannot leave the course bounds unless you are starting from the beginning

"Sixth rule, everything not covered in the rules is allowed. If it is an oversight too bad for me"

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Thyme stopped and waited for anyone to come forward with illicit items or questions about the rules. Why is he pausing like this? Is he looking at me? Green tried to track Thyme's gaze but his strange wooden eyes made that task difficult. I don't think he's looking at me...

"Well then if you have nothing left to say, and nothing to hand over let us approach the starting line" said Thyme.

Waving his hands Thyme created a sturdy wooden staircase leading up towards the obstacle course. The top of the staircase ended at a section that seemed to have a number of suspended platforms set around a metre apart. A difficult jump for a civilian, but not for a scout.

The participants lined up at the base of the stairs. Getting into their various running poses. Clive looked ready to pounce on the stairs and run on all fours, Grace stood leaning forward slightly on the balls of her feet. John stood there with his legs spread slightly. Green was about to get in position as well when Thyme started speaking "I appreciate the enthusiasm but, the starting line is at the top of the stairs..."

Chapter 83: This is not a Bicycle Race

The four scouts climbed the stairs at a decent pace for a scout, which was closer to a sprint for most other people and it only took them a few seconds to correct their mistake. Now that they had reached the top, the starting line was very clear. Once at the top there was a small hurdle separating the two halves of the starting platform with boxes for each contestant to stand in.

The four got into their previous positions and waited. Green started to hold her mana just short of connecting with the haste enchantment she had. *Just gotta start first. I can't collide with anyone in the air, I'm the smallest and likely the lightest so I'll be the one to be cast aside.* Green found herself shivering slightly. Despite knowing she was almost certainly the fastest taking the risk of starting first was still not something she really wanted to do. *But I have to prove I'm capable. Everyone thinks we have this one already and I can't betray that.*

Without warning the bar in front of them lowered. Green despite her worries was ready for any starting sign and pushed her mana into the haste rune. Green took off, already ahead of the pack practically bouncing from platform to platform. They started off flat but as she continued they were getting more angled and further apart but Green didn't slow down in the slightest, this much was easy for a scout, especially one like her.

Quickly clearing the suspended platforms Green was face to face with a wall and some ropes intended for assisting the scouts in their climb. Green didn't even stop, simply racing up the near 80° angle. Right as Green cleared the edge she could feel the haste she had enacted starting to fade. *Ok, I've gotten myself a lead, probably... Um,* Glancing ahead she saw that the course took a turn and whatever obstacle was next was hidden from her view.

Recharge spell, don't recharge spell, recharge spell, don't recharge spell Green continued her debate until she rounded the corner and saw the wall lined with holes. *Oh great, dart traps, well, this is fine... I've got practice right?* Deciding to head forward without renewing her haste rune Green kept an even pace going into the tunnel.

The hall of darts was a simple construction, with two walls a roof and floor, all made out of a plain looking beige wood that Green could already tell based on how it reacted to her running was much tougher than it looked. *So it's darts right? Definitely darts... I mean, you wouldn't use slits like that for poison gas right... or um, knives? Could be knives I guess? Feels like an arrow trap though.*

Green searched for some indicator as to what would trigger the darts but her eyes couldn't make anything out. Empowering her eyes once again she examined the room but was disappointed to find that other than a large pressure plate that seemed to cover the entire floor and a bit before and beyond there wasn't anything to trigger specific traps. *Ok, so this is all or nothing. I can trigger the darts and try to dodge them, or I can try and wind walk or wall walk all the way across...*

But that is silly, this tournament is supposed to be impartial. Just because I'm a wind attributed scout doesn't mean the rest are... None of the other school would be able to cleanly avoid a trap like this... And it will take up so much mana... Green's indecision had slowed her slightly and it was at this moment Grace came charging past Green, wind mana swirling around her. Clive was hot on her heels but without the tell-tale signs of wind magic it was hard to know how he was keeping up.

Oh no, they are just going to charge in... Ok maybe I should wait and see how well they deal with it. Stopping on the edge of the trap to watch the others Green saw Grace power a wind enchantment likely in her boots and sail across the whole platform without triggering it. Clive on the other hand continued his made dash. As soon as he stepped foot on the platform Green could hear the whirring of gears and darts started to fly from the crevices. There were gaps Green could see, tight pockets of arrowless ground to step in between shots.

Clive didn't care though he simply sprinted forward knocking any arrow that came close to him out of the air with some sort of barrier surrounding his hand. As Clive cleared the obstacle Green came to the realisation she had wasted too much time. *This is a race and I'm worrying about safety... This is safe, it is fine, there are no deaths in the tournament...* Psyching herself up Green decided to copy Grace and jump the whole thing. The loss of extra mana pained her a bit but it wasn't really that much when she thought about it.

Rounding the corner Green found herself faced now with a series of hanging vines. They were thick, healthy specimens and laid out a clear path across the next area if one had the courage to swing between them without fail. Green's quick clearing of the arrows left her just a moment behind Clive but a few steps behind Grace. They had both already taking to the vines and as such they left vines swinging in their wake as they left each purchase.

Green took a deep breath and calmed herself. *I'm panicking, I'm making a fool of myself.* Green started gathering wind mana around her. *I've trained for this my whole life. I know how to hide, I know how to move, and I will not lose to such a pitiful obstacle course.*

Green started emitting a strong green mist, her eyes glowed and the mana visibly pooled at her hands and feet. The light grew in intensity before she leaped. Green soared through the air landing high at the

very top of the vines near where they connected to the trees that made up the ceiling of this section of the course. As soon as she made contact with the vine she flung herself to the next.

As Green moved across the vines she almost seemed to shift a little, like she wasn't truly there. When she touched a vine it stayed in place and drifted only slightly as Green launched herself through the course.

Quickly she passed Clive who didn't even notice her blurred figure as it passed above him. Grace however noticed as soon as she'd been passed. Her eyes locking onto the strangely ethereal figure of Green as she flittered through the vines. In response Grace pooled her mana in her hands and used it to launch herself from vine to vine.

Grace had gotten much faster, but she was burning even more resources. The vines she left swung wildly and the ones she grabbed tried to slip from her grasp as the intense wind currents knocked them aside. Despite this Grace was skilled enough to keep on track chasing desperately after Green as she tried to keep pace.

Despite this though, Green simply continued to gain speed. Whatever technique she was using was far superior to Grace's and showed no signs of slowing down. Just as Green reached for the next vine though she sensed something amiss. Glancing over her shoulder she saw a compressed wind blade heading her way. *Wait, what? But but, isn't that's against the rules?*

Green watched as the blade went past her fading form and instead cut into the vine she was reaching for. Green increased the amount of mana circulating her and jumped off the falling vine to the next mostly unhindered.

Grace however, was now falling. She too had been reaching for that vine and unlike Green she had no way to jump from falling foliage. Green noticed this too and decided to help a little. As she reached the vine after that she flung it far behind her towards Grace.

Noticing the lifeline she had been thrown Grace grabbed for the vine. Just barely hanging on the end much lower than intended. Grace felt herself jerk as she pulled the vine down instead of forward and the momentum she had was killed.

Green had no more time to worry about Grace. She'd already jumped two vines ahead and was trying to figure out what was going on. *I can't believe Clive did that... I mean it had to have been Clive right? Is that allowed? Why was that allowed? * ***NOvElnext.cOm***

A few more vines and Green managed to reach another platform to rest upon. Dismissing the mana around her Green felt a wave of fatigue wash over her as she glanced back. Grace was still struggling with the vines climbing back up under her own power, but it was slow going. Clive was fast approaching but still a moment off and John was nowhere to be seen.

Chapter 84: Have You Ever Seen Those Japanese Game Shows?

Green turned to face the path ahead of her and found that this time it was split into four. Each tunnel had a contestant's name on it. *Um, is this a trap? Do I just pick my name?* While Green debated internally, she was already running down her marked tunnel. *No I've wasted too much time on indecision already. *

As Green continued deeper the vines got thicker blocking out what little light could enter. The floor seemed to become smoother and Green was losing track of the walls as they slowly expanded. Green started spreading her mana throughout the air in the room trying to get an indication of what was coming for her.

Green continued like this for around thirty seconds. Eyes closed and senses spread out trying to garner any additional details she could from her limited mana control. *Why didn't I train this more? I know I'm not a mage but this is important. What am I supposed to do?*

In that instant Green felt something approaching her. Throwing her eyes open in panic she was blinded by the now brightly lit corridor. Placing her hands in front of her to protect herself from whatever it was flying towards her Green struggled to regain vision.

The rushing of air and a large object flew past Green. As her eyes started to focus, she could see a second thing flying towards her. *Ooh, I wish I had basic healing for my eyes.* As her vision cleared, she came across a strange sight. It was a series of interlocked grey vines with a human cut out rushing towards her.

It was posed with its arms and legs outstretched in a star shape with the feet firmly planted on the ground and fast approaching. Green glanced behind her and saw a similar shape racing away from her though this one was had the legs together and arms facing up to make a box shape. *Novelnext.com*

Wait so does that mean?

Instead of standing in the correct pose like a normal person Green started sprinting towards the wall once again. Just before it made contact with her she tucked into a ball and flew through the centre making use of the large torso section. Green repeated her tactic with the next three walls completely ignoring the increasingly elaborate poses she was requested to do and simply jumped through them all. The final one, that was supposed to be a challenge was just what she had been doing the whole time. A small gap around chest height she would have needed to bunch up for.

After Green cleared the final wall the vines that made up the room's walls and ceiling thinned significantly allowing natural light to flow in again. Green looked around to find herself standing in front of a truly exceptional number of spinning blades.

That... that's a lot of blades, I mean, I guess it isn't really that many blades compared to my parents, and that one time Nixilei designed the obstacle course...

Green looked worriedly at the wall of ten thousand blades set up on rotating stands that would require someone to dance and weave their way through the whole thing. Green took a deep breath to steady herself and caught a whiff of Kirin berry poison. *That really takes me back, Thyme even has Kirin berry poison? I wonder if he really did design my parents' old obstacle courses...*

Taking a break to look around further Green nearly jumped out of her skin when she saw John beside her. *How in the name of the endless storm did he get here?*

"Apologies ma'am didn't mean to startle you" said John nodding his head slightly towards Green.

"Um, eh um" Green stammered.

"Now, don't worry too much, I ain't that scary am I?" asked John. Sadly though his words did nothing to calm Green down.

So she decided to charge into the whirling forest of blades. Infinitely preferable to social interaction and much less likely to get someone like her killed. Green activated as many enchantments across her entire outfit.

Green wove through each blade like a dancer, up down bending backwards and forwards it was a surreal sight. She'd thought to just jump over the blades but she had found that they simply continued upwards and there was limited space for her to leap from once she left the ground.

As Green approached the end of the sea of blades she found a large wall simply churning blades forward, looking less like a trap and more like a grinder. There were perhaps more blades in this one segment alone than in the rest of the trap combined so densely packed was the contraption that lay ahead of her.

This doesn't look nice. Isn't this super rude? Why would anyone do this? Who makes it through that safety? Well I mean I can but that just isn't fair to anyone else. Green took a deep breath and dismissed her enchantments. Dodging the few blades that targeted her space wasn't too bad as there was less just before the wall.

Green gathered her mana into the most compact form she could manage. Pushing it towards her back compressing it further and further. Faint wings appeared for everyone to see, a shame there wasn't anyone to see the splendid sight. After a minute of constant dodging and compressing of mana Green blurred, this time not just slightly but her whole body seemed to break apart as she stood there.

Green leapt through the blades. Swords and daggers cut into Green leaving long marks that... did basically nothing. She was almost entirely unaffected. As Green stepped out of the contraption she found herself back on stage again. Immediately releasing her mana she stood tall confident in her success... on the outside

I'm so tired... I need to go take a nap... but Nixilei won't let me during the contest... hmm I can probably lay on Gareth, I bet she won't complain about that right? I mean it's fine right? Green's facade of pride and confidence was broken when she heard a grating sound from behind her. She sprinted over to hide behind the nearest thing, which happened to be Thyme, who simply smiled down at her and looked to the blade wall.

It was opening up slowly to reveal Clive covered in a few cuts pulling on a massive lever. He walked through the opening and collapsed. Shortly afterwards John and Grace followed him through.

There was a lever! I didn't need to waste all my mana!? Green wanted to go sleep for the rest of the week. The stress was too much for her. In her panic she had missed one of several extremely obvious levers to allow for the opening of the blade wall.

"Congratulations" boomed Thyme though he intentionally projected his voice away from Green "You've all completed my obstacle course. Green has come first and received this rounds point for speed. She also managed to take the unintended route for quite a few obstacles but isn't it more fun this way? I hoped everyone enjoyed watching"

Green paled as she looked around and spotted a giant projector that was currently zoomed in on her face. *Everything is fine. This is fine... I look fine. Gareth help please...* Green felt a hand on her shoulder and was very happy to find out it belonged to Gareth who took her into a hug.

"Good job" he said.

Green let herself melt into his arms. *I am tired. Sleepy time.*

"You can't sleep just yet Green" boomed Thyme "The tournament is just beginning"

Thyme swiped his hand and the obstacle course collapsed in an instant. The ground rapidly absorbing the structure as if it was never there in the first place.

"We get to spin the wheel again!" said Thyme "Would our current first place leader like to do the honours"

Green rapidly shook her head from the safety of Gareth's arms who was slowly bringing her back to the team. Anything that wanted her to leave was not something she wanted to do.

"Well, boooo then" said Thyme "Guess I'll just have to spin it. I mean, the other three are all about to collapse from poison... hmmm guess I should do something about that"

Thyme waved his hand and hundreds, thousands of shining green lights flew out. They went towards every scout, including Green. As they touched her skin she felt like she'd just had a full night's rest... which of course meant it was still time to go back to sleep as she hadn't had her morning nap yet.

While Green was trying to do her best sleeping princess impression Thyme struck the wheel once again. "Around and around the wheel it goes, where she stops, I still know. Perhaps I should make a worse wheel next time"

No one was really paying attention though. They all knew it would take too long. And for Green she was enjoying a nice place to rest. What could she possibly have to worry about.

"And the winner for this round's contestants is.... Scouts! Again!"

Chapter 85: aMazeing race

I'll just tell you guys when we are back to Kats perspective. (Still with Green)

##

Green didn't react. *I am a sleeping girl. I am sleeping. You cannot call me to compete if I'm sleeping.*

Green felt the faint press of lips on her forehead and recognised them as Gareth's. "Come on sleepy, you just had your energy returned, I'm sure you're fine to keep going" Green fought down a smile. *Isn't Gareth just the sweetest, I'm happy he... wait no, don't get distracted Green. Focus. Do. Not. React.*

A smile instantly blossomed on Green's face. *I failed! Quick distraction.* Green buried her face further into Gareth. This was made difficult because of his metal armour but it wasn't impossible. Green heard a sigh and felt a calm hand patting her head.

Her smile double in size and she just barely managed to suppress the desire to curl up into his arms. This was all underwhelmed though when a chilling sensation started to emanate from behind her. A grave danger was fast approaching.

"Green, I believe you have an event to attend" said the menacing voice.

Shakily Green raised her head to look at the figure standing over her. *A demon! A demon has come for me!* Of course, Kat was nowhere in Green's line of sight. The individual in front of her was Nixilei.

"I'll give you one more chance" said Nixilei.

Green instantly empowered all her enchantments and appeared next to Thyme. Whatever Nixilei was threatening to do she wanted no part of it hopefully she would be safe near Thyme. *That's Gareth's one failing as a fiancé he never protects me from Nixilei when it matters... Then again, maybe she should be nicer. She's very scary when she wants to be.*

Green dismissed her speed enchantments but kept up the ones that were making her less noticeable. Green could see that Kat and Thyme could still see her clearly but the others, even the other scouts seemed not to notice her despite being right next to her.

"Well now that we have everyone here, let's find out what the next event is shall we" said Thyme pulling out a new box. This one was bright green with red swirls on it "Who shall I pick this time... hmm" suddenly the box vanished from his hand and grew up in front of Kat.

"I'll have you pick this time Kat, reach in and tell us what it is." Said Thyme.

Green watched as Kat lit her hand on fire and placed it inside the box. *Why did she light her hand on fire? Won't that burn the box?* Of course, nothing that Thyme would make with its power would be so easily destroyed. Kat reached into the box and then ripped her hand out. Grasped in her hand was a woodpecker that looked like it was trying to peck Kat's hand as she held it.

Wait, isn't the fire really strong? Isn't that just a normal bird? How come it isn't taking damage? "Ooh the woodpecker this time, always one of my favourites" said Thyme as a hand appeared out of the ground to grab the bird.

Thyme made to crush the bird in the hand that was summoned. Kat reacted turning to face the hand with a fighting posture before relaxing. Thyme's eyebrows raised as it brought out its right hand from behind it's back to reveal an intact woodpecker.

From Thyme other hand a large log was brought out. Thyme then placed it next to the woodpecker. Over the course of a minute the log was moved up and down as the woodpecker carved something into the wood.

The letters

M

A

Z

E

Were spelled out for the audience to see. "The maze it is then" Thyme snapped its hand and a giant structure of wood and hedge rose forth from the ground. The obstacle course paled in comparison to the sheer scope of the maze that rouse before the scouts. Green couldn't even see the end of it and the outside was covered in thick vines to give it more of a hedge maze feel without giving the visibility or weakness such a maze wood bring.

"The rules for the maze are completely opposite the obstacle course. Firstly each contestant is not permitted to leave the maze until the challenge is completed. You are not trying to escape from the maze at all.

"Second, your goal is to try and find and collect several orbs. They will be hidden within the maze and each contestant will start with one. Originally you only needed to find four, but that was back when there was five people in this contest so instead you need to find five."

"Three, combat is allowed and encouraged. Standard tournament wards are in effect so fatal damage will result in the contestant being removed from the challenge. Additionally, unlike standard rules, crippling blows will also remove you from the competition if they are not healed within ten seconds.

"Third, standard rules about equipment apply as outlined before, but" Thyme paused here for dramatic affect. It hadn't breathed during this entire speech but perhaps as a plant it didn't need to "Anything you find in the maze is something you are free to use. They cannot be removed from the maze afterwards so use it or loose it.

"Fourth, there is actually an exception to this, the orbs, they are quite fragile intentionally and will shatter if you apply too much force. So I don't recommend using them for combat. If an orb is destroyed it's worth half an orb if, and only if you have all the pieces in your possession. If one piece gets stolen or lost then it won't count.

"Five, you will all be provided with a satchel to carry your orbs. You are not required to use it but you are not allowed to place anything that you didn't find in the maze. For example health potions found in the maze acceptable, bows and arrows you carried into the maze, unacceptable.

"Six, you will be entered into the maze equidistant from each contestant. This distance will be as you would walk, not as the dragon flies. This means that two contestants could potentially be wall to wall with each other.

"Seven, it's more of a suggestion then a rule. The walls are completely unbreakable, don't bother with trying to destroy them. Most of the other environment will be destructible though, and I don't care for it so go nuts.

"Lastly, there is sixteen orbs scattered around the place. This is technically enough for someone to find their five for completion but in a more realistic sense you will probably end up with three or four each.

Thyme clapped its hands together and spun around in place once "So are there any questions?"

"Indeed I have a question" said Clive "Is it considered leaving the maze if we climb over the walls?"

Thyme let out his barksy laugh "I see you are looking for sneaky loopholes again. I'm afraid it isn't quite so simple this time. I've placed an enchantment over the whole thing to prevent people jumping the walls. I'll give you a little hint that there is some places you can look over them but no, I will not be allowing you to cheat that way"

"You said we were free to try and break the walls, does that apply to the invisible one over the maze" asked Clive.

"You know what Clive, go for it. If you can really break it, go nuts" said Thyme with a dismissing wave of its hand.

Sigh, a maze. They aren't nearly as fun as obstacles courses. Reminds me more of work then of training with my parents. I guess at least I can just find the orbs.

Thyme attracted the contestants attention once again "Let me provide you all with your bags"

Thyme flicked its hands and fanned out a number of bags like it was holding a hand of cards. There were four variations of the basic formula. They were all messenger bags fit to be worn over the shoulder. The first one had a chibi version of Skye on it waving, the second one had the entirety of Grace's group in various poses... though they all had their hair down... and were missing their weapons... perhaps it was just five copies of Grace. The third bag was completely plain with spots of dirt on it.

Despite looking well made it seemed well worn and like it had been used as a working bag for a decade. The final bag, which clearly belonged to Green had a small version of Gareth on it equipped with full plate mail and his trademark shield in front of him as he waved. *noVelnext.com*

"Now-" Thyme was cut short when the Gareth bag vanished from his hands and entered Green's own. Grace and Clive flinched at the speed but John seemed unfazed... or he wasn't paying attention anymore. "Um, well anyway... Now I have these for each of you, please come up and collect them"

Chapter 86: Cookies and Milk

Now with bags in hand the four scouts prepared to enter the maze. Thyme waved his hand over them and waves of grass shot out covering each contestant. Green felt the grass coming for her more than she sure it, it was simply that fast even for a trained scout like Green.

Darkness enveloped her for a moment but then Green opened her eyes again. Immediately regretting that decision Green emptied what little remained in her stomach on the ground. *Ugh, yuk, oh why... can't you just I dunno fly us or something. Why does it have to be teleportation.*

Green only half recovered looked around to address any threat but was surprised to find that the scenery was beyond expectations. She was in a small log cabin with a sofa and some cookies left on the table. There was a fake fireplace in the corner and one real window next to the door and three fake windows on the other walls. The chair was decorated with embroidery over the back and sides and the cookies smelt freshly baked.

Oooh, warm cookies. Wait no bad Green that will only make you tired. Head for the door and get on with it. Green walked briskly towards the cookies and picked one up. Taking a bite she was pleased to taste a very soothing flavour, they were shortbread cookies with a little bit of something added to the middle.

A big smile spread over Green's face as she munched on the batch of cookies. Her smile only got wider. You know these are really good. Suddenly a warm glass of milk appeared next to her which she happily consumed as well.

Just as Green reached for the next cookie she froze. *Wait a minute... is this actually the first test of the maze? Does Thyme think he can distract me with cookies! Because he is right.* Thought Green as she finished yet another cookie.

After consuming all the cookies Green noticed a note on the table. It read "I hope you enjoyed the cookies. This is a little apology for the transport method and a nice way to deliver your first orb. You can find it under the logs in the fake fire place. Once you pick it up the front door will unlock... though I wonder if you even tried it. Sincerely -Thyme"

Green blushed a bit at that last part. She knew that the first thing to do in any strange situation is to get your bearings and find out what your options were. *But the room was just so comforting... I think these starting rooms must have been tailored for us just like the bags. Even looking through the fake windows shows trees as far as I can see, but from a treehouse perspective, something you would never find outside my home.*

Sighing Green walked over to the fireplace and moved aside a log underneath it was a glowing green orb she placed into her bag. *Of course it's green, why wouldn't it be green. You know just because it's my name doesn't mean I like the colour that much... Ok maybe I do but that's doesn't mean anything.*

As Green walked to the door another thought occurred to her. *Oh wait, wait, that obstacle course was broadcast... Oh dear, I hope I haven't made a fool out of myself already.* Green had to exert a grand amount of effort to not burry herself into the couch. The tipping point was that everyone would see her make even more of a fool of herself if they really were watching so she decided to push the door open instead and while it was expected she couldn't help but feel disappointed to see the dull grey stone-like walls.

A short ten metres away was an intersection branching off to the left and right. Green kept a light amount of mana in her eyes to dry and identify any obvious traps. The moment she crossed the threshold to enter the intersection though a wall rose up to block the room she was just in from the rest of the maze.

Green overloaded her eyes with mana searching for the trigger that caused the wall to rise. Green stared intently at the stone like wood, that with closing inspection could be certainly confirmed as wooden in nature. However there was nothing. *I really hope that was the only manually triggered trap in the maze. I bet Thyme is watching and that's why it went up but I just wish I knew if this was a reaction time test*

Green glanced left and right but could only see the same grey walls that took a left turn after a few metres. *Does it even matter which way I go? I know this is a maze but the challenge is to find more orbs. So does it actually matter if I know where I'm going? I guess it does so that I'm not backtracking...*

Green decided to head left, and then left again. Pondering the correct way forward had cost her lots of time in the obstacle course, despite the fact she won. As she walked her guard was both raised and lowered. Green was able to spot a number of small traps. A pressure tile here, a trip wire there. Nothing

to serious but simply the fact that she could see any traps at all was actually a good sign. *If I can see the traps that means that most traps should be visible. I can't drop my guard too far but I don't know how long I will be trapped here.*

##

Ten minutes of wandering around, taking turns left and right while easily keeping her bearings Green arrived at a door... or at least what she thought was a door.

The dead-end Green had arrived at featured a beautifully carved wall. It seemed to depict the great clan wars that caused the divide between the upper and lower planes. Five clans all surrounded a glowing object in the centre, it looked a bit like the orb she carried in her backpack, but Green knew enough history to know the clans never fought over something so trivial as a single artefact. *NovelNExt.Com*

The first corner of the wall depicted the forest tribe, made primarily out of the elves and the fey, her people. The elves outnumbered the fey three to one, but in this mural what would pass as the front lines had an equal number of fey and elves stood ready to fight with a number of shockingly detailed civilians hiding amongst the trees in the background

The second corner had the mountain tribes, made up of dwarves and dragons. Unlike the fey and the elves who worked together there was a clear divide between the tribes as they were depicted. The dragons flew above the dwarves and rained fire down on friend and foe alike. The dwarves for their part held grand shields redirecting any misplaced fire towards their forges to further increase their strength of arms.

The third tribe was the tribe of the planes, the humans. Their section was overwhelmed with bodies, with each figure and face individually carved. You could see signs of infighting and betrayal within the human masses but also quite a number helping those on the edges, and once on the front lines they all stood together, a stalwart bastion against the other races.

The fourth tribe, the tribe of the sea, was made up of naga and naiads and a few other less tribes of the sea. They didn't look ready to fight so much as they hid away, with only their eyes touching the surface. The section depicting the sea tribe had intricately detailed water with various twists of the waves that made it hard to tell if you were being stared at or not.

The final tribe, the beast tribe, depicted the grand variety of Kemono no ko, the children of the beast. Despite their vastly different appearances they were the most cohesive of the tribes even compared to the elves and fey. Their issue was that they were spread amongst the others, nomads for many years they had settled around the globe.

Green looked at the slot in the centre, and took out her own orb. Slowly lifting it towards the gap she hesitated. *What if I'm wrong... I mean how fragile is fragile? Like, never touch this ever fragile? Or like fine glass?*

Green returned the orb to the bag. Instead she felt along the edges of the crevice. Pushing lightly on the back she found made small pieces of extra stone poke out over the cover to keep something in place.

Green took out the orb once again and looked at the hole. Ever so carefully she pushed it into the slot until she heard it click. A bright light started to radiate from behind the carving, giving a whole new life to the scene before her. It gave it an eerie beauty as many of the smiling faces now had dark shadows

cast over them, and yet ever tribes base, the place with the citizens remained brightly lit against the darkness. *Ok... but what now?*

Chapter 87: The Wall

Seriously though what do I actually do with this? Green examined the mural, and while it was quite pleasing to the eye and had also accepted the orb without issue there wasn't any clear path forward, no riddle to potentially solve in fact it wasn't clear if the wall could be interacted with any further.

Green stepped back and examined the area trying to see if there was anything noteworthy in the dead end other than the mural. Scanning the grey not-stone walls and flooring Green looked for even small inconsistencies but nothing could be found. *Hmm... must be the wall then, I doubt you'd need higher level observational abilities... well I what if I'm not good enough though.* *NovelNExt.Com*

No Green that's silly, this is the first round, you are one of the best scouts of your age. Then again... Thyme seems more powerful than a normal examiner, most of them have crews of people and build the sets ahead of time. They don't just raise them from the ground with a wave of the hand...

Green gripped her head in her hands and rested it on the wall. Shutting her eyes and letting her thoughts run wild in her head. Doubting that she'd found all the clues, that she'd missed something.

What snapped her out of it was an errant thought, Wait, can't everyone still see me? Green instantly recovered her posture and started pacing back and forth in front of the mural and pretended she had calmed down somewhat. *Is this a history question? Should I know more about the war? I mean... I wasn't really trained for this, this is Nixilei's job she knows all this sort of stuff. I mean really why are there riddles in the scout test.*

Green slammed her fist into the wall to try and let out a bit of frustration. She wasn't normally someone who used violence to lower her stress levels, but she couldn't cuddle up in a corner to sleep or munch on some nice food so violence it was. As Green's fist made contact with the wall the section of the mural that was hit slid into the wall and faded. Green panicked, thinking she'd done something wrong and hit it again causing the stone to return to its previous state.

Green let out a long breath. *Is that the real reason father always advocated to hit things when stressed over a puzzle? Surely not...* Green moved to the other side of the mural and tried again, being gentler with her press and found the wall slid in easily dimming as it did over the first section.

Ok, so I can make the wall dim... but what can I do with that? Green tried the simplest thing which was dimming all of the wall sections. After she did that they all pushed themselves back out again resetting the puzzle.

Right, um that's something? Progress right? So... I guess I need to push them all done in the right order maybe? But what order? I really don't know that much about the war. Um, could he be who came off the best? No... we sort of all lost I think that was the point. Um... who started it? I don't even remember... well plan B.

Green got close to the wall and slowly pressed in the section depicting the forest clan. Green felt the mechanism behind it shift and applied a bit of wind energy to try and get some information about what was behind it. Green wasn't really proficient in trap making but you pick up a few things from trap

disassembly. *Hmm, I think this one isn't quite locked in place.* Pushing it out again Green went and tried the others.

It was the fourth one, the sea tribe that seemed to be different. When it locked into place the mechanism behind it seemed to be completely pushed in, just a fraction of a metre further than the rest. Leaving that one pressed in Green repeated her process from the start, finding out that the forest tribe clicked further in this time.

Green repeated her testing, eventually pressing down the humans, and the beast clans as well, leaving only the mountain clan. *Ok, this is the last one. Let's hope this is right.* Green slowly pressed the final part of the mural down. Clicking and whirring noises sounded from the mural and the various pieces of it started to shift around to follow the order Green had indicated.

A final click resounded, but then nothing happened. Green strained her senses for any change in the mural. Finding nothing she was just about to scan the rest of the room when the sound of pressurised wind resounded from the centre of the mural. Focusing on the orb Green watched it shoot out towards her. Catching it in her left hand she let her momentum carry her in circles and dissipate the energy in the orb hoping not to crack it.

Green held the orb up to her eyes. *Good it looks like it isn't damaged. I suppo-* Green's thoughts were interrupted by another pressurised sound turning back to face the wall to witness a second orb flying towards her Green threw the first orb into the air and repeated her spinning trick to catch the second one. Green then cast the only spell she could actually recall without the help of her enchantments.

Calling forth a light gust of air under her control she buffeted the orb above her head and she scrambled to place the second orb into her satchel so that she could free her hands to catch the second one. The bag opened easy enough and the orb disappeared into it without hesitation. As Green was closing it though she had another idea. Holding the bag open and in front of her she let the orb fall down into it avoiding any unnecessary issues of how fragile these orbs may or may not be by letting it fall straight into the bag.

Green released the breath she didn't know she was holding and leant against the wall sliding down until she reached the ground. *I'm glad the ground is clean at least.* Eyeing the ground Green realised it wasn't just clean though, it was spotless. *I suppose that's to be expected though, this place just came into existence like what an hour? Two hours? Ago. Nice for taking a breather though.*

Green decided to use this as a chance to meditate a little and restore her mana. She hadn't burnt much but without being able to see what lay ahead it was the safest course of action. Nixilei would be proud... as long as she didn't fall asleep instead of just meditating a little.

Five minutes of recovery later and Green was ready to continue on. Returning to the forward march through the twists and turns Green eventually found herself at a four way intersection. The first of its kind. Though having already established that agonising over choices was pointless she continued to march forward without stopping.

This promptly lead her to a dead end, but a quick backtrack and a left turn changed that quickly. *Grey stone there, more grey stone there, still more grey stone. Wait this is wood isn't it? Does that matter though? It looks like stone, feels like stone, just happens to be wood.*

While Green pondered this question she entered into the first wide open area she had posted. Shaking herself out of her thoughts she examined it and found it to be a neatly ordered garden. The hedges that lined the edges of the path and obstructed her vision didn't seem like maze walls, beside she could see over them a little making her more confident in the guess.

At the end of the garden path was a large stone building with a wide-open door and pillars of stone lining the edges. *Though I bet it's wood as well.*?Torch sconces could be seen at the corners of the building, but they weren't lit at the moment. In all it looked a little like a monastery to her eyes, one of the simpler ones but with intricate carvings done over time by a diligent workforce.

Walking closer to the building reinforced Green's idea that it had to be a temple of some sort. The fey didn't really worship any of the gods like the other races but she could at least recognise the sort of reverence and care those races liked to put into their sacred places. *Except dwarves of course, those guys go all out for everything if they can. They truly abuse their long lives... though I guess I can't complain.*

Just as Green crossed the threshold and started to examine the inside of the temple the torches lining the walls lit up and the door slammed shut behind her.

A booming voice echoed through the halls and it said "Welcome to the temple of riddles. Here is your first challenged"

Chapter 88: Thar Be Riddles Ahead

Green instantly sprinted back to the door and tried to open it without much success. *Not riddles, and especially not talking to people about riddles. Nixilei loves the damned things too much. Why couldn't she have been the one in this maze?* "Hey um, temple riddle god thing or whatever you are, can I maybe leave?"

"Of course youngling" said the voice

"How?" asked Green

"By answering my riddles" said the voice

Green sighed "Are there alternatives?"

"Death perhaps? Teleportation maybe but I think I had this place warded?" said the voice.

Great... just great...

"So I have pretty much no way to leave?"

"I'd guess so but I wouldn't want to assume"

Dam, and the door sealed completely shut so my windwalking won't let me phase through it. There are no windows, and I don't even know where this voice is coming from

"Right, so what can I do exactly" asked Green looking around for anything that stood out to her. Sadly it was all torches and carvings.

"You can answer a few of my riddles and then I'll let you go, and I think I'm supposed to give you something..." said the voice. Green heard the shuffling of paper before the sound of one particular piece being grabbed "Aha, I'm supposed to give you an orb of some kind"

Ok, that's something at least. This isn't some random trap it's another orb challenge. Why did these have to be so intellectually challenging though? I mean, I guess it's a scouts job to know some of these things...

"Ok, I accept your challenge" said Green with confidence she didn't truly feel.

"Great, Oh, and I was supposed to introduce myself I'm uh" more paper rustling sounds appear as the voice stumbles through it's words.

"Um, hmm, no that's not right, um... not that either" whispered the voice, just barely reaching Green's well trained ears "Aha, ok um... think of something a yes"

"My name is... Riddle, Mcloudvoice"

"Riddle Mcloudvoice?" asked Green trying not to let a smile show on her face by hiding it in her jacket. Sadly the shaking of her shoulders betrayed her.

"Do you find my name amusing" said Riddle

"Uh, no um, Lord Riddle" said Green

"Yes, Yes good. I Lord Riddle Mcloudvoice shall give you the first challenge. What gets shorter as it ages" said Riddle

Ooh, I already know this one. "A candle" said Green

"Wrong" said the voice. The light started to dim slowly and shadows seemed to reach out from the walls.

"A lit candle" said Green unimpressed at the semantics Riddle wanted to use. Instantly the torches relit as if it was simply a lapse in concentration on Green's part, but she was a scout, she knew what she saw.

"I'll give it to you, uh even though you got it wrong the first time. Next question What runs around a city but never moves?" asked Riddle

Hmm, what runs around the city... Green tried to picture the city she grew up in. The trees and plants that filled it, the overgrown grass trimmed into paths. *But there isn't really anything that runs around the city... I mean there is the couriers I suppose but move. And it can't be the pathways because they go through it if anything.*

What about other cities. What major features do they have? The beast folk have nothing, or at least nothing unique to them... Dwarves have their great stone walls even though they are in the mountains... Wait that's it,

"Is it a wall?" asked Green somewhat unsure.

"Correct, moving on from that.

"I begin eternity, And end space, At the end of time, And in every place, Last in life, Second to death, Never alone, Found in your breath, Contained by earth, Water or flame, My grandeur so awesome, Wind dare not tame, Not in your mind, Am in your dreams, Vacant to Kings, Present to Queens." said Riddle

Oh these are easy, Nixilei hate these ones. Says the 'aren't true riddles but mockeries for any fool with enough cognisance to learn the language?"It's just the letter 'E'" said Green

"Huh, you seem to deride my riddles. Well how about uh" Paper rustles in the background "I weaken all men for hours each day. I show you strange visions while you are away. I take you by night, by day take you back, None suffer to have me, but do from my lack." said Riddle

Oh, I can cheat here as well, my mother used to love this one. I heard it enough times. "Sleep" said Green instantly

"Quite fast there. Perhaps you already knew the answer to that one then? As I was going to St Ives I met a man with 7 wives. Each wife had 7 kids. Each kid had 7 cats. Each cat had 7 kittens. How many were going to St Ives?" said Riddle

Huh, um this is a new one... But it's just math right? So, 7 wives, 7 kids, is 49, then 49 times 7 again for each cat is 343 um, and then 343 by 7... "Um, do you have any paper Lord Riddle Mcloudvoice?"

"Your mortal mind should be more than enough to comprehend the answer without tools to assist you. I suggest you think about it again" replied Riddle.

Right but... wait think about it again? Am I not on the right track... Green tried to recall exactly what was said. St Ives, I was going to St Ives... Wait it's only one man "One"

"Well it seems you realised your error... Um wait..." Riddle's voice dropped "Does that even count as a correct answer? I gave a hint right... well let's give her an extra one then I think I have some"

"Ah yes um What kind of room can you never enter?" asked Riddle

So this is an extra question is it? *What room can I never enter... Trapped rooms? No that isn't right... Jail? No that isn't right either. Um, wait a minute what about a thing... like ah um... it's on the tip of my tongue... a broom, yeah a broom* "Is it a broom?"

"Um, uh, well ah... That isn't what I have written down but I can accept that" said Riddle slightly panicked. "Now for the final riddle then. Many have heard me, yet nobody has seen me. I won't speak back unless spoken to. What am I?" said Riddle

"It's you" said Green

A pause hung over the temple. "I believe that is wrong" said Riddle

"I believe I'm right" said Green

"Well that isn't how this works so I guess you fail then" said Riddle

"Now hold on, that answer meets all your criteria doesn't it?" asked Green

Green could hear riddle scoffing "Why of course not" then a pause "I mean, surely not... why don't you justify it then" stammered Riddle

"Well, firstly I'm pretty sure this whole thing is being watched by the rest of the groups so that means many people have heard you. But of those people that are hearing you, myself included can't actually see you. Finally you only speak when I say something, it has always been a back and forth and you haven't spoken out of turn"

"Well, I mean, I can speak out of turn though" said Riddle

"Ah but you didn't. Making you a valid option" said Green

"Um, just a moment" said Riddle. Green couldn't see what he was doing but she heard a button click.

A minute passed as Green just sort of stared awkwardly at the surroundings. There was never any indication of when or what Riddle was and the room didn't change at all. Green was started to wonder if she would ever hear back when a screen popped up in front of her with Thyme on it and the groups in the background.

"Hi Green, just checking in. So, technically I want to say you got that last one wrong... but at the same time I love the creativity and really, the guy I hired for" Thyme held up his fingers to do air quotes "Lord Riddle Mccloudvoice, which isn't the correct name I might add, didn't really do the best job. So in light of your clever decisions and interesting choices I'm going to give you a pass on this one. By"

Thyme waved and the picture shut itself off. Shortly afterward a pedestal with an orb on it slowly raised itself out of the ground just below where the screen Thyme had appeared on hovered. Green carefully picked up the orb and placed it in her bag. As she did so she noticed that it had changed. Instead of waving he now had a thumbs up directed toward Green.

Hugging the bag against herself Green left the now open temple ready to continue the maze.

Chapter 89: An Encounter Outside of Tall Grass

Green first investigated the remaining areas of the temple grounds. The hedges obfuscated most of it but a little levitation magic solved that problem. What Green saw though was disappointing. The 'garden' beyond the hedges wasn't much of a garden at all. There was simply a scattering of bushes in rows to give the illusion of additional pathing with some colourful leaves thrown in for good measure. *I guess this is just to help build up the illusion of the temple. Clearly that guy was reading from a script and Thyme is controlling everything.*

That first puzzle was well designed, and the atmosphere makes it easy to forget time made all this in just a few moments. Then again, I suppose it's far more likely that he planned it out before hand and summoned it from a blueprint or something. Guess it's back to grey walls.

Now that I think about it though, what's the point of making this look like stone? Green rounded the corner and continued away from the direction she had originally come from. *Sure I understand the idea of making the walls simple to save of energy but Thyme didn't do that, he made it into stone, and converting mana away from your element is very expensive...*

Though, could he have just made plants that look like stone? I feel like that would still be expensive though. It's like if I tried to create enough friction with my wind magic to set something on fire. I could, and maybe if I got good enough it'd even be more efficient than using fire magic but it's still a waste.

Green found an intersection and instantly took a right moving further away from the temple. *And why plain stone anyway? Now that I really think about this it doesn't make any sense. He could have any number of exotic and beautiful trees from my homeland. Even just some relatively exotic things like the hundred-year pines or the roughhune elderwood would be more enjoyable to look at.*

Green let out a long breath. *Ok calm down, clearly you are getting tired, mother is starting to leak out a little.* Green stifled a soft laugh. It had never ceased to amuse her parents that as Green got increasingly tired, she acted almost exactly like her mother did normally. *Dad always liked to tease me when I get like this... At least I'll visit them soon for one of the tournament legs... I hope.*

Green wandered the maze somewhat randomly for a while, thinking of her parents and trying not to give in to the urge to rest in the shade somewhere. Just as Green started to round the next corner she heard something. Pausing in place and putting her ear against the wall she tried to hear the sound again. Tap, tap, tap. It was light, but she could hear it, though the wall had hardly helped. Switching instead to the ground Green leaned in and strained her mana and her hearing to properly make out what it was.

As soon as she put her head to the ground, she recognised the sound. It wasn't typical footsteps; it was a scout's steps. *Oh no, I've actually run into someone else.* Green glanced around and saw that the nearest corner to try and hide around was too far away to risk running. Instead she poured mana into her boots and chest piece activating her levitation and her ability that made people ignore her.

Green leapt up towards the top of the wall. She had intended to jump up to the top and cling to it but she could feel the barrier Thyme had mentioned and couldn't actually grasp the wall. *Thymeee why would you make it so we can't hold onto the wall for stabilisation. I'm a scout, I don't want to fight anyone really...*

Green instead opted for the less ideal position of laying flat against the wall and combiner her lacking levitation with a hint of friction from the wall to allow her to remain motionless and above the average person's sightline. Green gripped the wall and faced the direction of the sound. Her spells would hopefully mean she avoided detection, but she needed to be ready for the worst.

As the seconds past the sound of footfalls became clearer. *Soft but rapid footsteps. Heading with some purpose... I bet it's Clive. He's running around. I doubt the others would run like that. John doesn't have the practice and Grace... well actually I guess it could be Grace but I think she'd be lighter. These footfalls have been approaching for a bit now.*

Just as Green finished that thought Clive sprinted around the corner. Green was shocked at just how quickly the man approached mana whirling behind him as he sped past. This further reinforced Green's idea that the man was well practiced. It was a great surprise that he was as moving as quickly as it appeared with such little noise. While Green could likely do the same perhaps with even less noise she knew she couldn't keep it up for long. It would burn mana much too quickly.

Just as Clive passed the spot Green was hiding, he stopped in place. Crouched down and put his back against the wall. Clive through his cloak over his bag with Skye on it that contained his orbs and looked

around scanning the environment for any disturbances. Clive reached into his cloak and pulled out a dagger holding it in his right hand in a guarding stance as he breathed steadily and watched the hallway.

Green just clung to the wall, unable to properly see Clive because he was about in line with her body, right on the edge of her peripheral vision. The two remained tense. Green waiting for an indication that she had been spotted while Clive was searching for that faint presence he could feel watching him

A full five minutes passed before Clive was the first to make a move. He stood up exposing his back to Green as he prepped his movement abilities again. Green didn't move a muscle. Just as Clive was taking his first step forward his head whipped around scanning the area behind him for the slightest movement. Sweat pooled on Green's brow as she gripped the notstone walls. Ensuring that even the slightest movement was suppressed.

When he found none Clive's armour lit up slightly and he shot off in the direction Green had come from. Green kept in the breath she wanted to release. *I'm glad he ran off. I really didn't want to fight anyone.* Green waited for another minute just in case Clive wanted to turn around to try and catch her when she moved. **nOvelnext.com**

In the end though she could only hear his footsteps continuing into the distance. Whether he truly turned back or not Green wouldn't know as she was stuck facing the direction he came in and couldn't risk the slightest movement just yet.

Releasing her breath and her magic Green floated softly down to the ground again. *Now the question is where do I go. Clive has been down this path already and I'm not certain that there are still any orbs left this way. On the other hand I know there are a bunch of pathways I didn't take at all so I'm sure Clive is the same... unless he sprinted down them all... but he shouldn't have the mana for that... But then again, how large is the maze? Thyme never told us... perhaps he was actually really close and the fact it took so long to meet up was because he checked everything.*

*Ultimately I have no way of knowing. Instead I should look at this as a question of if I should try and remain sneaking behind him or go in the direction I know Clive isn't. I guess that makes it a rather easy question then doesn't it. *

First things first though, a short break. Green moved up to sit in the corner and wrapped herself in her cloak. Green breathed deeply and entered into a meditative state to try and recover her mana. To Green's surprise the air was actually packed with it. *Is this intentional? Did Thyme design this maze to provide extra mana to the contestants? Or is it residual from such a large spellcasting.*

Wait, that must be why Clive was running full sprint, he has extra mana recovery from whatever this effect is. That means I can likely do the same... but perhaps not quite as fast. I could hear Clive coming, and if I'm too loud the others will hear me and maybe they'd rather attack.

Green was perfectly happy to avoid fighting Clive, sure there wasn't enough orbs for her to find if she wanted to win, but that was only if everyone had picked up all the orbs closest to them. Green was sure that she could find a few more just from exploring... with a bit of luck.

Chapter 90: A Locked Room

As it turned out a combination of luck and skill quickly lead Green to her next discovery. The pathway had small flecks of dirt on and around it. This might seem mundane, as every path has some amount of debris on it, but Green had already noted just how clean the environment was and in her slightly tired state these small details grated slightly on her mind.

This trail must be left behind by Clive. This makes it pretty easy to avoid the areas he has tread. Following the path until it reached an intersection Green started to explore the untrodden paths. There were a few dead ends, but it only took Green five minutes to find something intriguing. An iron door was set into the wall. It had studded iron strips reinforcing it and a small handle relative to the doors size.

Green strained herself to open the door. It didn't just look like iron, it felt like it too. *I bet this is wood though... Then again at this point does it even matter? It might as well be whatever Thyme wants it to be. *

Eventually struggling to get the door open Green found an orb in a glass case with a note on a pedestal in front of it. A single light shone down on the note making it clearly visible with just the faint glow of the orb to reveal its presence. Green carefully walked up to the pedestal keeping alert for any traps.

And while the path to the note seemed clear it was the orb that gave her true pause. An unbelievable number of runic sigils had been engraved onto the base and while she didn't understand all of it, she did know that it was several layers of traps.

Green poured mana into her eyes, trying to be as generous as possible as she looked towards the pedestal with the note. She was going to abuse that extra mana regeneration and she needed to be absolutely certain that it wasn't trapped in any way especially after seeing the horror show that was the insane number of traps just on the orb alone. **nOvelnext.com**

And yet the pedestal was clean. In fact the rest of the room seemed to be clean as well. Green inched towards the note. *This feels wrong. My instincts are screaming at me that this isn't the correct decision. But there isn't anything there. I can't make my vision any better, I have no enchantments to further boost it... I have to go for it.*

Green approached the pedestal, and nothing happened. When she stood directly in front of the note, nothing happened. And when she started reading it, nothing happened. The note explained a lot of things though.

"Welcome to the time out box. This box has an orb in it but if you pick it up you will be trapped here for an hour without the ability to leave. Any attempt at leaving will render the challenger unconscious for two hours starting from the time of the attempt. A bed will be provided to help pass the time. You are free to leave at any point as long as the orb is not picked up."

So that's why my instincts were screaming at me. There are other wards in this room but none of them will activate until the primary ones on the pedestal are triggered. They must involve defences against leaving. I could sense them all but they aren't active and they are hidden well.

*So the question is then. Do I pick up the orb? Green glanced around the room. No actually I don't think I do. It says the timer starts after I pick it up right? So can't I just make this my last orb and come back after I've found something else. *

Green swiftly turned and left the room. She was unimpeded and walked out of the door calmly. Stopping to shut the hulking thing, Green left it open just a crack. Walking to the end of the hallway Green went back to studying the paths that Clive had and hadn't taken. Her decision had already paid off because Clive had ignored at least one orb, who was to say that he'd forsaken a second one.

Wait does that mean I've actually been pretty lucky? I've found 3 orbs in total not counting the one 'given' to me in the starting room. And I only need one more if we count the one in the waiting room. I guess I can only look for one more then. Though, now that I've noticed the dirt left behind by Clive. I'd rather use my mana to obscure my traces of passing then speed up.

Leaving the door behind Green started to explore more of the passages that Clive hadn't been down. Most ended swiftly in dead ends. A few ended shortly in dead ends, and two continued for quite a while before looping back to the intersection... which shouldn't really have been possible by Green estimation.

Thyme must have special enchantments hidden somewhere. If I didn't have this marker of Clive's passing, I'd just think that I'm in a new section of maze but that isn't truly the case. Green was certain that these intersections were the same. It may have only been a few flecks of dirt, but it was enough for Green.

After forty-five minutes of wandering though Green was starting to get nervous. *I've already travelled so far since the door. Maybe I should have taken the hour time loss... no that's a loser's attitude. The fact we haven't been teleported from the maze implies that the game isn't over just yet.*

Another thirty minutes had passed. Green wasn't actually that far away from the door with all the backtracking she had done but at full sprint it would still take ten minutes using her enchantments and staying stealthy would likely eat up around half an hour. Just when Green was seriously considering exploring a different section of the maze, she rounded a corner and was speechless at the sight.

In front of her was a large elegant building. This wasn't even close to the same level as the temple of riddles she had previously seen. The building in front of her was extravagant in every single way.

It stretched into the sky towering over the maze itself. *Wait, shouldn't I have been able to see this building from... well anywhere?* And it wasn't just the height. The roof was supported by massive marble pillars inlaid with detailed carvings filled in with gold stretching the length of the structure. The pillars themselves were easily a metre in diameter.

At the front of the building was a large staircase that lead towards an equally imposing door. It may have been opened but the solid wood doors, also innately inlaid with gold seemed to give off the impression that those that were unworthy should not enter.

The grounds surrounding the was a flat sheet of marble with a number of various sculptures instead of trees that seemed to sprout from the surroundings. At first glance Green thought them to be of random individual's but after noticing one on the side with spread wings and a kimono it dawned on Green.

These are all statues of the contestants? Looking closer though that wasn't quite right. They were all caricatures of themselves. The statue of Kat had manicured nails and a pout on her lips. The kimono Green had always seen her wear was down past her shoulders and threatened to expose her chest at a moment's notice. Her tail was tipped with a heart.

The statue that was supposed to be of Gareth was even more lacking, or at least Green thought so. His smile looked painted on, not the easy smile he had when looking at her or the polite smile he gave to colleagues. Not even the strained smile he sometimes aimed at Kress

The statue of Nixilei sent shivers down Green's spine. Her robes had additional runes carved into them, though the statues had no mana. Her face was covered by a mask that left only her eyes which seemed to burn into Green as she stared at them.

Green had no desire to look at the rest of the statues, though she spared a quick glance at the ones resembling Grace and her team. They all looked identical except for their various expressions on their faces. She didn't know them well enough to guess who was who, though. She also, made a point of avoiding the area her statue must have been.

Green climbed the mountainous steps in a few steps. More trickery she supposed, because a mere instant was not enough to climb the hundreds it appeared to be.

Entering the building Green was met with a bizarre sight. There were four copies of Thyme present in various clothing. Three were bound and kneeling and a fourth stood ominously behind them.

The one in the back spoke up "Welcome, to the glorious hall of judges. You must decide the fate of these three. Murders must be sentenced to death"