

DEMONS 91

Chapter 91: A Fun Little Game

The Thyme in the back stood much taller than the three kneeling, not just from the fact they were standing but because they were at least eight feet tall, towering over Green as well. It had a judge's wig and a black cloak covering the body. In Thyme's hand was a long weapon that looked like a cross between a judge's gavel and a reaper's scythe with a flat rounded end on one side and a long sharpened blade on the other.

"Breaking character for a moment" said the cloaked Thyme as he shrunk down to a more reasonable size. "This challenge has a few unique rules. Firstly no lies will be told during this event in accordance to the scenario. Secondly nobody actually died, this whole scenario has been made up. Thirdly an incorrect sentence dished out by you will cost you an orb. We will be investigating three murders, and only once they have all be covered will you have a chance to guess. Once everything has been laid out you me anyone one question which I will answer in full. The only exception to that is asking directly for the name of the murderer or asking me to point them out or something like that. Finally, you may leave at any time"

Judge Thyme stretched himself back up to 'full height' and a spotlight shone down upon it as it shouted "Now, take your places, for I am judge and executioner, who has travelled many miles to appear before you. Our jury of one is now present, and so are the accused. Let the trial commence" *novElnext.com*

Wooden platforms responded to Judge's call as they lifted the three bound Thymes from the floor and a light was turned on for the first Thyme. They were a short and stocky version of Thyme, with powerful limbs. This Thyme was wearing a blacksmiths apron with various slots for tools though it was empty at the moment. To the side of this Thyme was a small hammer and a few wooden pegs.

"The first accused is a builder of minor fame. He was once the town blacksmith but developed a rare skin condition among dwarves that prevented him from working the forge. As such he took instead to construction and has lived in town since he was young. To his side are the tools that were on his person at the time of apprehension, please refer to him as Builder."

The light went off on Builder's platform to highlight the next Thyme. This one was short like the first but was thin and wiry looking slightly malnourished. They were covered in rags so dirty that you could no longer discern what colour they might have been originally. To it's side was an old dagger, rusted with the edges serrated and chipped from years of overuse and poor care. Their face was covered with black dust making it hard to see their expression.

"The second accused is a poor street urchin, struggling to survive. Nobody knows how they arrived in our small town, not even the poor boy. He has had a hard life, and is only trying to survive. Nonetheless, his dagger might have been bloodied when he found it originally, but has it drunk again since? You may call him Beggar"

Once again the light dimmed on Beggar and highlighted the third and final platform. This one contained a very feminine Thyme, made obvious by the tight fitting robes that they wore. The garment was grey and stained with blood. The figure also wore grey gloves though they were stained more thoroughly

with a variety of alchemical ingredients. This Thyme was actually the tallest on the platform and kneeled proudly. On the ground surrounding the doctor was various vials and a small rubber mallet.

"The third accused is a young surgeon of little renown. They have only just finished their apprenticeship and is still unexperienced. Nonetheless the residence of the small town counts their blessings that she would be the one to attend them, for her kind and gentle demeanour and reassuring voice does wonders for the patients, perhaps more so than her medical skill. You may call her, Doctor"

The light dimmed on Doctor, and Judge spoke again "Now that the light of justice has shone upon the accused, let us turn ourselves to the gruesome murders that have been performed this past night"

Judge threw his arms towards the side where another light began to shine down on a small set portraying the scene of the first murder. It showed a corpse of Thyme in the shadow of a building under construction. There were bricks piled nearby as well as wood and a few other things of little note. The ground seemed to be the standard compacted dirt pathing of small and developing towns.

And the corpse itself was in horrible condition. The head had been completely destroyed with nothing remaining. Blood coated the body and clothes of the victim as well as some of the ground nearby. There was no other visible wounds, but Green could determine with head trauma like that there didn't need to be. Just as Green was sure she'd seen everything she also noticed a small piece of dark dirt covered cloth attached to part of the roof.

"This is the site of the first murder. It is near ongoing construction on the edge of town. The murder was performed late at night. There were no witnesses. Most apparent cause of death is the large amount of head trauma sustained from a blunt force. Onto the next one"

The second scene showed an indoors scene with the light streaming in from a window instead of above. This appeared to be the house of the victim. This knew Thyme had their hands collapsed over the collar bone. The corpses face was covered in small red dots and had a tattoo of a flower on their lower chin. They had a deep gash where Green knew their heart to be. Despite the size of the cut, no blood was present in the surrounding room other, but a small amount was present around the area of the cut. Green did note however, that in the corner of the room, was a thin piece of wire.

"The site of the second murder. Poor Maurice, murdered in his own home. There are no witnesses. This murder took place an hour after the first, but still in the middle of the night. Most apparent cause of death is a stab to the heart."

The third and final scene was the most shocking of all. Thyme was skewered to a wall. Every few centimetres was another wooden stake that plunged through the body and into the wall behind it. The details of the individual were impossible to make out, as they were now more wooden stake than person. There was twenty large wooden stakes and uncountable small shards of wood that littered the body. Each stake was twisted and gnarled a dark black like wood from an old tree dying tree and contrasted with the cleanly lined brown wooden body of all the Thymes. Green couldn't find any seemingly hidden things in the area this time.

"The final site... Well there isn't much to say really? Pinned to a wall, and you can't even tell who it was. This was found in the centre of town just before sunrise. Now, please ask your question Green"

Green thought for a moment before asking confidently "Please tell me everything about the poison used to kill the second victim"

"Are you sure that is your second question? How do you know they were poisoned? If they were not poisoned, you will simply be told you have wasted your question. Is this acceptable?" said Judge

"Yes"

"Indeed, you are correct, the second victim was poisoned, though this may not have been the cause of death, only the supplement. They used a very rare poison known as the Last Breath. It is made from several ingredients, though most of the ingredients used in it are common and can be found throughout the kingdom, the rarest and most expensive of is Vacriacress all can only be found in the darkest corner of the sewers in small cities.

"The other ingredients are all much more common. Arriltro, a common spice sold in every market, Viper Weed a nasty pest that grows in every garden, Ubbiavil moss, which grows in the nearby forests and the slightly rarer Ivory Blossom, is a common but well hidden plant that disguises itself as marble and eats through the surrounding rock. It is well liked by alchemists but hated by masons, thus most buildings are treated against it.

"The effects of Last Breath are likely as you would imagine, they make it difficult for the target to breathe, resulting in a lack of oxygen and sluggish movement, making it easier for them to be taken down in combat.

"Does this sufficiently answer your question Green?" said Judge looking down at Green from his full height.

"Yes, I do believe it does" whispered Green, not willing to look the imposing figure in the eye. "I'm certain I know who it is, though I just need to go through everything once more"

Chapter 92: A Lesson in Magic

Winding back the clock a bit, to when Green was still searching for Judge's hall Kat was watching intently but her interest was fading. There was only so long you could watch someone sneak around a repetitive surrounding without getting a bit bored. Originally Kat was going to try admiring the planes, but there wasn't much of anything to see... and she had a better idea.

"So, Nixilei, can you explain how exactly Green is casting those spells of hers?" asked Kat

Nixilei turned away from the screen displaying the competitors to focus on Kat and said "Green is not casting any spells, so I would have to ask what you might mean by that?"

"Well, sure she isn't casting spells right now, but she was, like back when she was levitating" said Kat

"Well, no even then Green wasn't casting any spells. But you have access to spellcasting do you not? I have seen you summon flames without enchantments layered onto your outfit, and I detect no runes within the patterns of your robes, so surely it is only possible with magic" said Nixilei

"Ah, um no, I don't cast spells like you do I can just summon it" said Kat as she willed a bit of energy to appear on her finger. A bright purple flame appeared, chilling the air slightly with it's presence but giving off a relaxing feeling to those gazing into it.

"Hmm" Nixilei study the flame intently, before bending down and pulling a clump of grass from the ground. Holding a single blade she then carefully dropped it into Kat's fire where it promptly froze, fell to the ground, and shattered. "Fascinating. You have not called upon an element, and you should not be sufficiently skilled to call forth and combine multiple. Indeed it does seem to be a different system to mana

"How should I explain then? Covering the scholastic study of mana is likely not to your interest, but at the same time I doubt that you would be satisfied with the truly standard answer that you pull it through runes or sigils to perform miracles?" Nixilei watched Kat shake her head.

"Of course, I would expect nothing less from you, considering you seem actually willing to listen to my lessons and you are in fact supposed to be our mage I suppose I shall inform you of some intricacies of the craft

"Firstly" said Nixilei as she summoned a runic circle with a number of characters imbued within it "Healing works differently, try to ignore that. For some reason it is a power that we can use earlier than should be possible as we combine multiple elements for it to function. Many people theorize as to why this might be, but nonetheless healing is something we are capable of, with additional training

"Wait do I need to go over that as well? How people actually become wizards?" asked Nixilei

"Yes please" said Kat

"Well, right, so most sentients are born with the power to feel mana in their own bodies, a very small number can feel nothing, and an even smaller number can feel the mana around them. You are capable of training yourself from nothing, to internal, to external but these things all take unbelievable amounts of time, especially once your magic matures at around our age.

"Most wizards are those who started being able to feel mana outside of themselves, however some stronger families or dedicated commoners manage to achieve it within a reasonable time. Once you can sense mana outside of your body the next step is learning to manipulate it outside your body. Once again, this might sound easy to someone with the capacity as you seem to, but that jump is exceptionally difficult even for those like myself who were born with external mana observation.

"Once you can move your mana outside of your body, you may form it into a sigil with mana and then charge it further to produce an effect. Think of sigils like a language. You add runic characters to the sigil for different effects. Say you want a fireball, you might want to add runes to increase the size, or perhaps you are a water mage, you add the central rune water, and then the extra runes focus on changing it into a spike and lowering the temperature. Does that all make sense?" said Nixilei

"Yeah I mean, I guess so? Though, if you have a water mage, and you also have a water rune, why do sigils need to match the mage type? Can't you use whatever type you want?" asked Kat [novelnext.Com](http://novelnext.com)

"Well, yes and no. If you are aware of those runes you may in fact cast a spell with them but everyone has their mana... tainted? No I don't like that... coloured? No I dislike that, though it is a favourite of many..." Nixilei trailed off into mumbling as she tried to find the best word.

"Gah" Nixilei threw her arms up "Truly, there is no great word for it, but each individual is more adept at using a particular element. As you use that more and more, you find the mana changing towards that

type quicker. Think of it like a muscle, the more you work on it, the stronger it becomes, however for some reason each person is born with one 'muscle' if we have to use that word, that has already been exercised. Though it normally has the greatest capacity as well"

"Right... that makes some sense, but if that is the case why does Green pool mana around her occasionally? And how does she cast spells? I mean, you said she wasn't but can you elaborate" asked Kat

"You are asking to very different and branching questions there Kat, could you perhaps focus on one?" asked Nixilei but then immediately continued speaking "No, never mind I will just explain. Firstly, you saw Green pooling mana around areas, which is impressive you could actually view it in the first place, because internal manipulation of mana enhances that area of the body. Pushing it towards the legs lets you run faster, the arms punch harder, and the eyes see further. You cannot place it within the mind though... for some reason it resists improvements.

"Though if I am honest, it does not provide the sort of boost you would desire. For most the effects are minimal, unless you pour obscene amounts of mana into the task. It is simply not worth it when enchantments exist though they are slower to activate. You may see Green doing this more than usual because for someone with only internal mana manipulation she has a shocking pool of it to draw upon

"In fact, I do doubt she is actually limited to internal manipulation, but that isn't something I am willing to discuss further. As to how she is casting spells, well any spell can be inscribed onto a piece of armour, or a trinket and then later empowered with mana. The way they are designed the sigils automatically suck in nearby mana, so by manipulating it under the skin to the closest point to the sigil you can charge it.

"This will then cast the spell, and you receive the effects. They tend to be either inefficient for the mana cost, or ineffective compared to their spelled counterparts, but most simply lack the ability to truly cast so it is still a very powerful tool to them" said Nixilei

"So, why not just have a tonne of sigils on your armour? Then you can cast a bunch of spells" asked Kat

"Well, you can only have one sigil per item. Now some exceptions do apply but, that is how it is for the most part" said Nixilei

Kat stared at the multiple sigils sewn into Nixilei's robe and then back at her face waiting for a follow up.
How can you just say that you get one sigil and then walk around wearing that. And all the mages have these. How is this an exception?

"Well, please understand that mages and healers cheat a little with our robes. Technically speaking the robe is one item, and the sigils are sewn in separately, with special material to count as an accessory all on their own. A warrior could not utilise this system because the mage has to pull out their mana and channel it outside their body and into the sigils on our robes. They consist of favoured spells, with generic variations. So fireball straight ahead for a fire mage, or in my case a generic boost to the bodies regeneration as one of mine"

"Ok that makes sense, is there anything else I should know?" asked Kat

"Hmm, well I suppose the only other thing is that a measure of a mage's strength is how many circles appear within their spellcasting" said Nixilei as she pulled up a spell with three rings "This is considered a two-ring spell"

Kat opened her mouth to interject but Nixilei stopped her with a hand "Yes I know, everyone asks that question. The answer is that the centre circle containing the element doesn't count as a ring. You may notice that my central rune is in fact multiple, that is a unique feature of two ring healers, other kinds of mages only acquire that ability at around five rings, and then they only get two"

"Well that isn't confusing at all" said Kat Though at least I know it all now.

Chapter 93: The Thrilling Conclusion to Judge Thyme

Green shook out her appendages and let out a burst of mana into her surroundings to loosen her muscles. The mana was ineffective, and wasteful but it was the one bad habit she'd kept after her parent's training, and it was somewhat special to her in a strange way.

Green let out a long breath and looked the Judge in the eye. "I'm not making my guess when I say this. But it is you. You are the one responsible for the three deaths and no other"

"Oh" Judge straightened his back and added a little to his height "You mean to accuse the judge as a murderer? That is quite the claim young one. And yet you said it isn't a guess? Are you saying that you know for certain? Or are you not actually accusing me?"

"Both. I said I want to go through everything one more time, but if I'm right, then I know it's you" said Green projecting a confidence she rarely truly felt. This time though it was real. She was a scout, she had seen the clues, gathered the hints, and figured out the answer. It was a puzzle she loved, and was actually quite thankful that Thyme came up with it at all.

"Let us start with the clues that didn't involve the victims, shall we? The first thing I noticed that you said 'now that the light of justice has shined down upon the accused' at that point in time, you had those same lights shine upon you, and one of the rules is that there is no lying to be done. That means that all of the lights represented an accused, including yourself.

"That made me go back and think, when you introduced Doctor you didn't say they were the final accused but the third, which, and perhaps I'm cheating a bit hear, simply isn't how you talk. You love to have final or finally at the end of your lists" said Green

"Oh? But that reveals nothing about the victims does it? And you said I committed all the murders? Conclusively? Are you sure about that?" replied Judge staring intently at Green matching her gaze.

Green faltered "Eh, um, yes I mean"

"Where did all the confidence go Green? Weren't you certain that I committed the murders Green?" asked Judge as she took two heavy steps forward, one each time he said Green.

"Ye- Yes, yes um..." Green activated her enchantment that let her fade in the background and the enchantment to give her a speed boost and hid behind the mural of the first body.

Dismissing the two enchantments as she hid behind the display, she activated a third, one on a necklace hidden from sight that projected her voice. "Looking at this first body here. The implication is that

Builder killed him. But this is surely impossible, both Builder and his hammer are short and this man was struck from above. That is why his clothes are dyed red. Which also means the blood was placed very deliberately. This isn't your real blood Thyme it should be a different colour

"This means that even the blood splattering's are part of the clues, dryad blood is green, much like how my own is blue. The next thought then would be that it was actually the Beggar. The dirty cloth and the bricks strewn around imply that perhaps they were dropped on the victim's head. But then where are the bloody bricks? Not a single one has a drop of blood on them.

"Finally, the cloth, this actually pardons the Builder further as despite his profession his clothes are very clean. It seems to indicate Beggar, but Doctor, and Judge are implicated just the same. So it all comes down to the bricks. The only way to inflict that much trauma without them is with a blunt weapon... Much like your gavel... scythe thing... actually what is that?"

"I don't believe you get a second question" said Judge

"Really? That's your problem. I'm trying to be brave and accuse you of murder, and you respond that I can't ask more questions"

"I believe that too is a second question. Or would you consider it a third? I suppose it would depend how you want to judge these things... Oh wait I'm the Judge. I say third" said Judge

"Is this a joke to you?" asked Green

"Fourth Question" said Judge

And Green couldn't help it. She really did laugh. Her anxiety was building, and she was accusing the clearly most powerful person in the room of being a murderer. Sure it was a game, but if they were playing the character of judge and executioner what was stopping them from just attacking her? Thyme... Thyme and his sense of humour.

"Thanks Thyme" Green whispered, dropping the voice amplification for a moment, but knowing Thyme would hear.

Moving places to hide instead behind the second victim's mural Green continued "So, this one got me thinking in a number of ways. The apparent dagger wound was too obvious. I didn't think it could ever be the answer. This was confirmed when you answered about the poison, but we won't get to that just yet. The main issue is that Beggar's dagger couldn't make such a clean cut. Not in the flesh of the clothes... is it flesh? Thyme or Judge, what do you call living dryad wood? Is it flesh?"

"Fifth question" said Judge

"Right right, anyway, that wound is too clean and it looked like this person died of suffocation, but there was no marks around the neck, so the conclusion I had to draw was that poison was used. This instead implicated the Doctor, and honestly I wasn't too suspicious at this point. I thought Beggar was the culprit for the first one back before I thought about the cloth properly and Doctor killed the second one.

"However the third victim is when I really started to formulate the idea that perhaps you were in fact the killer Judge. See, victim three" said Green as she moved to the final mural hiding behind the wall "has clearly been impaled... multiple times. Builder has those pegs and maybe Builder killed 3, Beggar

Killed 1, and Doctor killed 2, but you never actually said that all three were killers and those pegs don't look even close to the spikes, not to mention the number you would need to carry.

"In fact, I kept getting the feeling that I was looking at the challenge wrong. Why did I need to match them up to the murders and that's when I remembered. Judge, you lifted the accuse with magic, wood magic. A very high level of magic that not just anyone can possess. Perhaps if you were a dryad yes, but in this you aren't Thyme, you are Judge, and Judge clearly demonstrated wood manipulation.

"That's what got me to look back on the other things, and so when I asked you about the poison it was actually a trap" said Green poking her head out to look at Judge for the first time since starting her explanation on the victims.

She was of course surprised to see Judge directly next to her once poked her head out. Jumping back slightly in front Judge just laughed. "Well, how did you trap me? I do believe that I said I'd answer any question not identifying the murderer yes?"

Green smiled awkwardly, and used her speed enchantments to hide behind Doctors pillar, keeping an eye on Judge the whole time. "Well, you said you would only tell me if poison was used. But here is the thing. How did you know they were poisoned? Only the killer would know that, especially with Last Breath as it's very hard to identify, though the ingredients you listed were wrong, I was willing to overlook that part

"Nevermind though. The fact you could identify the poison meant you were familiar enough with them to make it... and I mean, you also said it was expensive, and none of these three could afford it" Green started to bumble a bit at the end as Judge showed no reaction to her words.

"And I mean, ah, I know this is sort of wrong, but um it's a puzzle right? So it wouldn't be something like the local mayor hired Doctor, or Beggar so they didn't need to pay right? Because um, that wouldn't be fun?"

Judge remained still clearly waiting for something else. Green swallowed. He wants me to say it. *That Judge is the murder. Am I prepared for what will happen though? But I mean what will happen?*
novelnext.Com

Steeling herself once more Green said it. "Judge, I accuse you of the murder of all three victims"

Judge burst into laughter as a grin split his face quite literally. The smile cracking the wood on Judge's face as it extended into his ears. "Now, for the execution"

Judge picked up his weapon and turned the blades edge to his neck. In one swift motion his decapitated himself and the body quickly decomposed and vanished before Green's eyes.

Chapter 94: The Final Sprint

Green paled, hiding her face from the scene. She had seen plenty of monsters being killed in front of her, both from training with her parents and adventuring with her friends. But never had she seen something like this, a crazed smile and the ending of their own life. Despite logically knowing it was just one of Thyme's many bodies it disturbed Green greatly.

Green felt a hand on her shoulder and she tried not to panic but she couldn't help but shiver until she heard the voice speak. It was Thyme, but tuned drastically to the feminine "It's ok Green. I've altered the feed the others see just for the moment. I'm sorry I scared you, really I am. This isn't part of the test, it's ok"

Green leant into the figure and nearly fell over. "Woah careful their Green. I'm just a hand at the moment. Truly this was not meant to be scary. What caused you such concern"

Green tried to force composure on herself, and when that failed she made it at least appear that she was fine. "That face, the madness, I... it scares me. I don't think I've ever seen something like that... but I know that some people are like that. It might be different for you with multiple bodies, but I recognise that madness"

"I've seen it before. Last time they were stopped, but... I'm not sure I was ready to quite confront that madness again" said Green in a quiet voice.

"I understand. I can remove that scene from your memories if you want?" asked Thyme.

Green shuddered, her false composure cracking at that. **Remove it? Does he mean the originals? Or just this most recent scene of his...*

Green wanted to take the time, to ponder things, but she was no fool. There was only ever one answer to that sort of question. "No, I cannot turn my eyes away just yet"

Green felt Thyme nod. Which was strange considering Thyme was just a hand and didn't move, and yet she could. "Open your eyes, and when you do I'll be gone"

Green was sorely tempted by the offer to keep her eyes shut, but the competition was still going, and she was still losing time. Cracking one eye open just barely revealed an empty room. The podiums and the murals had all disappeared, and in their place was an orb ready for the taking.

Gingerly putting picking it up and placing it in her bag Green let go of a breath she didn't know she was holding and turn towards the exit. Light was streaming in from the door and Green felt it a fitting scene. Just one more orb. *All I have to do I rush to that locked room and grab that one orb, then I'm done.*

Green started to exit the room and climb down the staircase. *Just one more orb than I'm done.* As she descended she started to charge the her enchantments, both levitation and increased movement to further increase her speed.

The staircase once again was finished way too early but Green payed it no mind. Shovelling mana into her enchantments Green took off. A grand rush of air whipped through the courtyards whistling between the statues creating earie sounds as she sprinted away from the area.

Green's speed didn't even let us as she approached the first corner, simply angling herself and letting her momentum carry her forward spurred on by the levitation enchantments she through her whole wait into rounding the corner. As she approached the wall Green jumped onto it and continued to run at full speed.

As she ran, she slowly transitioned back to solid ground, but not for long as more turns would approach. Weaving beautifully between the corridors she was making great time. *Just one more orb. *

The mana in the area responded to her call. Eyes glowing, hair shining, and the faintest hint of wings could be seen on her back further propelling her at an increased speed, Green practically flew around corners and soared down hallways.

It took a mere five minutes to approach the halfway mark where her ears picked up the sound of fighting. This however did not stop her charge. Blazing past the intersection the shocked faces of John and Clive could only watch Green tear past them.

As she sped past their figures, they were barely able to make out her appearance. Turning on instinct and preparing their weapons for a counter attack they were unprepared for the rush of wind that hit them on the back and knocked them to the ground.

*They must have been fighting, whoever loses might have enough orbs. I just need one more.** Mana visibly poured out of Green at this point, the sigils on her arms shining in the bright sun and would blind a mortal who gazed upon them at this point.

After passing the two Green's speed increased once again. She would finish. She needed to finish. *Just one more orb.* A minute later she could see the final corridor, the turn just before the iron door.

But there once again was a figure in her path. Grace was about to head in the direction of the door. *Just* Green took a step forcing wind mana into her feet instead of the enchantments *One* exploding off the floor Green rocketed forward again *More.* Grace turned at the sound, eyes growing wide at the site of Green but quickly realising she must have been after the door.

Grace desperately tried to power her own enchantments and sprinted ahead around the corner. Green quickly reached the spot Grace had just left and pooled her mana once again into both her hands and legs now and shot down the corridor.

Grace was halfway down the corridor but slowing she was not prepared to run head first into an iron door. And yet Green continued, not slowing in the slightest, approaching it at the same speed that had carried her this far.

Grace made a futile effort to catch Green as she sped past but wasn't able to even grasp her coat. *Orb!* Green burned the rest of her mana to activate the enchantment that let her shift and pass through gaps, curling around the side of the door she had left open and hurtling into the room.

The room she entered instantly lit up with countless lights, signalling the wards had been triggered, though it was for someone trying to sneak in and not out, they blinked to life and started to charge up mana to activate their effects.

As Green soared through the air she used the dregs of the mana around her to line herself up properly and open her carry bag wide. Stretching the bag's mouth wide she placed the bag in the path of the orb and flew. *novelnext.Com*

The moment before the bag came into contact with the orb, Green could feel the enchantments trying to take her from the room. *I've not come this far to lose to faulty enchantments.* Green threw the bag forward, closing it over the orb and letting the strap circle it around her neck.

As the bag settled a flower popped up from the ground and scooped Green up. Green's consciousness stilled for a moment before she was shot out back on stage.

Green flew through the air towards Thyme. She desperately wanted to crash into him, but it was not time to crash, and she was a scout trained by Elthiff family, she would not disgrace herself so... just yet.

Flipping and to regain her footwork Green dropped the speed boost but left the dregs of the mana in her levitation as she slid towards Thyme. Thyme raised an eyebrow but calmly stood to the side allowing Green to do her thing.

Of course she just kept sliding... straight past time and into the crowd straight towards her true target, Gareth. Sliding right up to the plate clad man she jumped slightly at the end, trusting to catch her.

As Green jumped, though her levitation had left her she still fell slowly into Gareth's arms as he cradled her carefully "You did well Green" said Gareth

"I hope so, make sure Thyme lets me keep the bag" said Green as she let sleep take her. *Gareth is comfy, it's about time I rested.*

While Green was enjoying the embrace of her fiancé Thyme was summoning the other contestants who promptly emptied their lunch on the floor. Their entrances paled in spectacle compared to Green's.

"Bah, what is this. The exciting conclusion to my fantastic maze and I have one asleep and three remove their breakfast from their stomachs? Unacceptable" Thyme waved his hand four green orbs flew into the contestants.

Grace, Clive, and John instantly perked up shaking themselves and stepping away from the mess they had made of the floor that was already being cleaned by Thyme's magic.

Green however, *It isn't a matter of energy, I need time to hug Gareth... and sleep. Today was hard, and I couldn't share it with the others properly which made it worse... Green sighed Is there anything worse than interacting with people without Gareth and Nixilei to hide behind?*

The fastest scout of her generation, the master of hidden traps and avoiding danger... laid to rest by being in the vicinity of strangers.

#####

Special User Q&A With Kat. (Was an authors note but due to formatting issues has been moved.)

Q&A With Kat

Fotia: Kat, as you know magic exists, are you excited to learn more about it?

Kat: Well, I feel like I really should figure out my own abilities first. Do they count as magic? Then again, I suppose if I had the chance to really learn about magic I wouldn't decline, it's interesting enough and I'm sure Lily would love to hear all about it.

Max: If you could go back to not being a demon anymore and stop being summoned, would you do it?

Kat: Well, I'm not sure. I'd like to wait and learn a bit more before I made a truly final decision, but if I had to choose right now, I think I'd stay a demon. It'd be too hard to give up hugging Sylvie with my tail.

Eve: Do you think you'll like the Demon Life?

Kat: Well, I guess? I'm not sure how much of it I've really experienced. There seems to be groups of demons I haven't met, and other than the summonings nothing too strange has happened really.

Keht Jelicho: Do you have any interest in trying your hand at painting? I think it would be cool if you made some art for your room and/or friends based on your experiences. Trying to make a representation of the summoning flames would probably be an interesting series of paintings. Maybe you could even 'enchant' it if you tried pushing your aura/energy into it while painting?

Kat: Huh, I've never really considered something like that. I'm not particularly good at art or at least I wasn't before. I have much finer motor control so maybe it's worth looking into. I think it would actually be really cool to show Lily some of the places I've been... wait no she'd just prefer I draw sigils for her...

Chapter 95: Now We Return to Our Regularly Scheduled Protagonist

Returning to Kat's perspective

##

Kat watched a flower open up beside Thyme in the corner of her eyes. She was more focused on Green's final mad dash but the strange movement in her peripheral caught her attention. A bright flash emitted from the flower and as she turned to watch Green come flying out.

How is she so fast? The video didn't really capture it but this is insane. Kat watched as Green barrelled towards Gareth. Kat was tempted to intercept her in the air and take the impact but was surprised to see that when Green jumped just before the collision her momentum dropped significantly and rather than a brutal collision with a steel wall she softly drifted into Gareth's arms.

Huh, her wings are glowing. They are also phasing through Gareth so I'm betting the others can't really see that. Is that comfortable? I mean surely it can't be? Then again don't my wings phase through my outfit... "You did well Green" said Gareth.

"I hope so, make sure Thyme lets me keep the bag" said Green. *Um what? Why is the bag important?* And didn't Thyme say you couldn't keep anything. While Kat was trying to figure out what Green was on about the rest of the scouts had returned.

"Bah, what is this. The exciting conclusion to my fantastic maze and I have one asleep and three remove their breakfast from their stomachs? Unacceptable" said Thyme as it waved its hand and four green orbs flew into the contestants.

Three scouts recovered quickly but Green didn't budge. *Um, Green are you alright?* Kat didn't want to ask because Green had a big smile on her face, though that had been present since she closed her eyes.

I should I keep an eye on Green or listen to Thyme? Eh I'm sure she's fine. Turning once again to face Thyme and see what event was on next Kat realised she had forgotten about the improvements to her

eyes, standing next to Green and Gareth it wasn't even hard to keep them in focus even though they were in her peripheral vision.

Ok... I did not realise my eyes had been so thoroughly upgraded, I'd noticed the vision increase but why can I focus anywhere I want? That isn't how eyes work... then again it is less crazy then how my wings seem to work so nevermind I guess.

Thyme let out a sigh before splitting into three "I suppose I'll ignore the fact Green is sleeping, on account of her success" sang the three Thyme's in harmony. It was very soothing, like the sounds of a clearing on a warm day.

"Ah Thyme, is it really helping matters if you sing like that?" asked Grace.

"Ah, our apologies" said the Thyme's. They then proceeded to split into a five Thyme each totalling fifteen now.

"Is this better" said the Thymes in harmony that threatened to lull everyone to sleep

"No, this is the opposite of what Grace asked for" said Clive equally unamused.

The Thymes nodded in understanding and split in threes again for a full 45 man(?) choir. "There is no need to worry, it is all a passing dream. Our friend who is named Green, they have succeeded in collecting the orbs, and set us free" sung the Thymes

Kat started clapping slowly. The instant she did so everyone's eyes turned to her. *What? It's good singing. Though I imagine it isn't too difficult for Thyme it's still impressive.*

"How long are you going to continue this farce?" asked Clive.

The Thymes all shrunk down into a small form, a bit shorter than Sylvie. The 45 Thymes all pouted and looked up at Clive asking what they'd done wrong.

Of course from everyone's perspective, it was terribly creepy, 45 wooden eyes staring unflinching into Clive's face with an unchanging expression and no movement as if they were just dolls.

Everyone except Kat that is. *Hey those are actually pretty cute.* Kat walked forward until she was behind the Thymes and picked one up. Everyone looked at her like she'd gone crazy. "What? Thyme actually looks pretty cute like this and it felt like the right thing to do in the situation"

Kat may not have been weak to the pouting eyes, but she was still in charge of an orphanage full of children for many years. Forty five eyes with such a stance couldn't be overlooked. The Thymes all smiled and nodded, as an extra, normal sized, Thyme appeared beside the groups.

"See at least one person appreciates my sense of humour" said the large Thyme looking disapprovingly at the groups.

"So, as I was saying, congratulations to Green, yada, yada, you guys are no fun, yada yada, congratulations again to Green for actually completing four challenges and not fighting anyone, which, I must say, was disappointing at first but upon further consideration was actually pretty impressive. Also, I may or may not have forgotten to hide the potions around the place but don't worry about that so much" continued the large Thyme.

Clenching his fist the bags the contestants were holding started to fly towards Thyme but Green caught onto her and held it against her chest. "I do believe the rules stated you couldn't keep things you obtained in the maze Green" said Thyme patiently.

As Thyme said this the Thyme choir turned their pouts to Green instead. Green looked to Gareth who returned with a look that asked what she wanted him to do about it. Green pulled herself up to his ear. *Hmm, do I use energy to overhear this?* Kat was leaning towards no, but it didn't actually matter because she could hear Green anyway "The rules... said that... um, we couldn't keep stuff from the maze, we got this... first.... So I mean"

As Green trailed off Gareth nodded in understanding "Your rules only said that the groups had to return things found in the maze, but these weren't found in the maze were they"

Thyme's face split into the same madness induced grin that Judge had in his final moments, Kat didn't recognise it but she could see Green pale as she watched Thyme. Just as quickly as it appeared though it disappeared as if but a lie, it was so fast that only Green and Kat were likely to see it, and certainly the only ones fast enough to react.

"Hahaha, I'm glad you found that loop hole actually, please take them as a present" said Thyme nodding to the other contestants as well.

Grace just nodded happy to have a bottomless bag, and while John was much the same Clive let out a big smile while he though nobody was looking. Of course, Thyme and Kat didn't let that escape their notice. *That's cute, its nice to see he does care about Skye, even if he doesn't share her... forwardness.*

"And one more gift" said Thyme he pointed towards the small Thyme in Kat's hand. Kat watched as it transformed in front of her gaining a kimono in a similar style to her own, with wings and a tail. The wood softened to be more like a stuffed toy and the life left it as the head lolled forward.

"Sadly that one isn't magic anymore, but I hope you can appreciate it" said Thyme with a big smile.
novelnext.Com

Kat turned the now doll around to face her and was surprised to see that, it was the face that had hardly changed. Despite now sharing many of it's characteristics with her it was still undeniably the smaller Thyme's face and Kat was pleased with the result. *I'm glad he didn't just give me a doll of myself, that would have been weird, but I can appreciate the theming.*

"There won't be any issues if there is a lack of mana assuming I keep this right?" Kat whispered both to the system and to Thyme, keeping it low so it was likely only it could hear.

There will likely be no adverse effects on the item in question. The item was fundamentally changed, and the mana has left it.

"It should be fine, though I'm not sure what Demonic Energy will do to it" said Thyme's voice on the wind.

Well that's nice. Hopefully Vivian won't complain so much if I have a doll to liven up my room. It's actually pretty cool to have a proper memento of this summoning and not just a bunch of money. Like the rug, this is much cooler.

The Thymes all clapped their hands and rotated on their left foot, including the large one. "Now, I'm glad you are all happy with your gifts, it was a nice spotting of the loophole, but don't get too caught up. We aren't finished yet" said the large Thyme.

"We have not finished" sang the choir in an haunting chorus that carried across the plains and made the groups shiver. Of course, that may have been due to the leaves Thyme got to tickle the backs of their necks, but they didn't need to know that.

Chapter 96: Thyme Just Having a Bit of Fun

As the choir reached a peak the smaller Thymes all jumped into a ball together. As they merged it continued to spin around and around until a giant wheel dropped down to the ground. "Welcome to the return of the wheel, please keep your hands and feet inside the carriage at all time"

The wheel itself was similar to the previous instances, but it was now at least three times the size and where before it stood level with Thyme, it now dwarfed Thyme, every Thyme. Thyme jumped to the wheel and spun it hard. The shapes on it blurred even for someone with great vision like Kat. "So, you guys got anything interesting to talk about while we wait?" asked Thyme.

Everyone just stared at Thyme's seeming inability to read the mood. "Don't be so boring, come on, we have a good what...?" Thyme pulled out a massive sundial from seemingly nowhere and placed it in front of him.

Thyme crouched down and examined the sundial closely as if inspecting it for the correct time. Of course, the fact that the wheel was blocking any sunlight that might have reached it was being blocked by the giant wheel behind him. "Hmm, I don't seem to be able to figure this out..."

"You've blocked the sunlight with the wheel so this was never going to work" said Skye.

"But this is a moondial, it operates on moonlight instead" said Thyme the picture of innocence.

"Well in that case you're to early by a few hours, and haven't taken into account we have 3 moons" said Ryo, the lookalike with twin swords.

"Damn, I knew I was overcharged for this bespoke moondial. That crazy old homeless man certainly got me good. Then again, he might have also been my cousin trying to get back at me for the time I filled his birthday cake with fertiliser..." said Thyme as it stroked it's chin, growing a beard to accommodate the action, before swiftly removing it.

After Thyme's shenanigans the wheel had slowed down considerably and looked to be stopping soon. Just as the wheel was about to stop on the scout Icon for the third time, Thyme reached over and spun the wheel slightly more making it end on wizard instead.

"Hey wait a minute, you can't do that" said Skye

"Why not?" asked Thyme

"Well... you can't just spin the wheel again?"

"Why not? I don't remember making a rule about it" said Thyme

"Didn't you say it would be wherever the wheel stops?" asked Skye

"Yes, and I didn't stop it, I continued it. Besides, do we really want a third scout challenge? Seems a bit unfair to me" said Thyme NovelNext.com

Skye looked like she wanted to argue but stopped perhaps thinking better of it. I mean, he has a pretty good point. *There were no rules broken, and Green certainly has no interest in whatever challenge.*

It was a moment later Kat realised that she was the wizard. *Oh wait, now I have to do these. Well I guess that's fine? But the challenges so far have really played to the rolls skillset, and didn't Nixilei say that wizards are supposed to know a lot of spells for different situations? *

Then again, the team also said I didn't need to do anything, which is fair considering how thoroughly Green won the first two events.

Thyme did that weird scratching bark thing that looks like someone clearing their throat. "If the mages would be so kind as to join us on stage. And scouts, while I do appreciate your presence, you don't need to stand here still, Kat your fine"

It was then that most of the groups realised that they might have gotten distracted by Thyme's ridiculous shenanigans and stopped paying attention to proper procedure. Whatever jokes Thyme might perform, at the end of the day this was a serious tournament that was considered to be extremely prestigious. On top of that, it was likely that Thyme was the most powerful being any of them had ever encountered.

Well, actually... is Thyme? Does the system count as a being? And how powerful was Kraks really? Sure he looked mostly harmless behind a desk but he said he was retired and I haven't even heard of that as an option.

The contestants scrambled to get into places, Grace at least made some effort to maintain an air of dignity and Dusk did his whole creepy figure in a dark cloak shtick but that didn't stop people looking somewhat concerned by their behaviour. Except Dusk, his mask did a pretty good job of hiding that.

"You know, I really do take no offence. Sometimes you tell a bad joke, and I quite literally have all day. I'll outlive you all just by accident if we are honest with ourselves... Well maybe not Kat, but she won't be in this realm, so it isn't super relevant" said Thyme

"No, it is only right we respond to you with at least some curtesy. Even if you weren't so powerful you have gone out of your way to oversee this section of the competition" said Gareth. Of course his formal attitude and recommendation of respect was undercut by his sleeping girlfriend in his arms, but everyone ignored that part.

"Oh, don't worry your pretty little head noble boy. I do this for the love of the craft" said Thyme as he summoned a miniature boat underneath "See? Just look at the workmanship on this. Surely, I should spread this lovely image as far and wide as possible"

"Anyway" said Thyme "Gather round, gather round, we got everyone? Lynn?"

"Here"

"Jack?"

"Um? Here?"

"Dusk?"

"Present Sir

"Ooh really fancy, and Kat?"

"Here"

"Great now that rollcall's done we can finally describe the next game" said Thyme

"Do we not need some strange and convoluted way of picking what game is next?" asked Dusk.

"Well, now that you mention it I believe we do" said Thyme pulling out a bag similar to the ones from the previous round except it had a copy of a male and female version of Thyme waving on it.

"Please Dusk, if you would, reach into this bag" said Thyme.

Dusk looked calm but Kat could see his hands shake slightly. Clearly, he wasn't prepared to be the one called on for actually choosing the next game. As Dusk reached in he seemed to find something, but he didn't pull it out. After a moment of hesitation he pushed his other hand into the bag and brought out one of the orbs from the maze competition.

"So what is this?" asked Dusk

"The Orb"

"Right, but what does it mean?"

"It means it's The Orb"

"Well, what does it do?"

"Whatever The Orb wants"

"Ok, I hate to interrupt your gag, but can we here the rules?" asked Lynn

Thyme pouted, which didn't look so endearing on the larger version "You wound me my dear Lynn, how could I miss the chance for a great joke? But alas, I suppose I can explain.

"So, I somewhat wasn't lying with my answers. This is in fact The Orb, though it's just an orb really. Your goal for this next round is to stand a few metres apart, lets say ten-ish? And prevent your orb from touching the ground

"This will be complicated by the fact that every so often the orb will do something, perhaps it will start spinning, maybe it will get hotter, heck, it could explode for all I know. Everyone's will change at the same time, and everyone will have the same change. Now that might look fair, but it sort of isn't, though I don't really care.

"Finally, no interfering with other contestants. If I think you might be I'll move you further apart, and if I know you are then I'll disqualify you with extreme prejudice.

"How extreme" asked Kat

"Depends on how deadly the interference was" replied Thyme. "Any other questions?"

The mages shook their heads. "Well, in that case let's see the arena"

Wait why does there need to be an arena?

The ground rumbled beneath Kat's feet as stone walls sprung forth separating the mages from the contestants with Thyme in the middle. The wheel was stretched until it lined the circular walls enclosing the contestants with the symbols redrawn and shining.

A moment later the groups were raised up high in separate private booths for their viewing pleasure. The God Crushers box was a farmhouse, with hay bails as seating and a water trough filled with water, though everything looked quite clean.

Not Related at All's box seemed to be made out of something similar to glass. Whatever it had reflected them perfectly, and it had a bunch of randomly placed walls to further increase the confusion. All they needed was a little distortion on the mirrors and it'd look like a carnival funhouse.

Boring got two rows of plain wooden chairs with old looking cushions on them. They had water to the side in a jug with the rest of the enclosure looking clean but lived in.

As for The Unfortunate Four...

Chapter 97: The Orb

Well at first it might seem like The Unfortunate Four had a much more robust and extravagant setting this was quickly revealed to not be the case. Their area was split into four, with each section representing a supposed interest of each of the members. The first section was lined from floor to ceiling with various swords and weapons from all over the continent. While the main focus was swords, a full third of the weapons falling under that classification there was also a number of others along with a chair of blades for someone to sit on.

The second area looked like someone had taken a chunk out of a library, the walls were covered in books with a thick rug carpet coating the floor of that quarter. In the centre of it all was a large table filled with a 3D map of the continent painted and model with exquisite detail.

The third and forth areas were combined together to look like a lavish bedroom. A large bed sat in the very centre of the room and various different plants in vases of different shapes lined the 'room'. The flowers within them were rare and exotic looking that Kat couldn't recognise, and the bed was well crafted and much larger then one would typically expect.

Of course the truth of this matter was a bit less grand. The chair of swords was impossible to sit in, various blades would dig into the sides and behind of anyone who tried. The library contained only walls that looked to include books, none of which could actually be moved and while the map looked impressive it was completely incorrect.

So the only real place to sit was in fact the large bed, which would have been strange if it wasn't for the fact it was solid as stone and had a backboard along its side instead of the head, clearly it was actually meant to be a chair and not for sleeping.

This didn't stop Green who promptly claimed the front section of the bed and fell asleep with her legs levitating off the end. Gareth sighed and took the place next to her sitting down properly as the other two joined him.

Thyme pulled out three more orbs and handed them to another version of himself. This one was dressed in a long frilly coat with a hunched back, a walking stick, glasses, and a grey wig. "Now dears don't forget, you can't let this touch the ground, that includes bringing the ground up to touch the orbs"

Thyme handed out the orbs like a Grandmother handing out candy, slowly walking between the contestants. The time this took was a bit ridiculous because Thyme kept up the kind old lady act the whole time.

"Remember dears, this is a test of endurance. The first leg will be just standing in place, and I don't want to see such strong children fail early"

Thyme finished handing out the orbs and vanished, leaving the announcer Thyme to start the round. "Everyone, in positions? On the count of three the competition will start"

"One"

"Two"

"Tree"

Thyme glanced around at the competitors who were still just holding the orbs in their hands.

"Good none of you were tricked by me saying Three instead"

Thyme quickly looked for any sign of hesitation or unpreparedness. *Thyme what are you doing? Sure the contest has technically started but you even said nothing was going to happen.*

"Good good, I'm glad you weren't tricked by that either" said Thyme "Suppose that might also be because you don't want to waste mana, what a novel idea"

Thyme nodded to itself, as if being congratulated on it's marvellous idea. "You guys are free to do whatever. As long as you don't sit down or something and the orb stays off the ground go nuts"

The contestants just stood there looking around awkwardly. *So what exactly can we do? We can't interfere with each other and we can't just rest? But the orb isn't even that heavy so why does it matter?*

##

After ten minutes there was no change in the contestants. Everyone just stood around awkwardly watching each other in silence. *Nov&lnExt.cOm*

##

After twenty minutes had passed Jack found himself yawning... but nothing else of note happened.

##

After thirty minutes nothing happened... To Kat. The other contestants all quickly threw the orb into the air. Dusk coated it in water, Jack coated his hands in earth and Lynn didn't seem to do anything but caught the orb again and seemed fine.

Um? Kat looked around in confusion just as the contestants looked at her the same way. *Why are you guys looking at me like I've grown a second head or something? Is it behind me? Kat looked behind herself and then back at the contestants.*

"What?" asked Kat

"Can you not feel that?" asked Lynn

"Feel what?" asked Kat

"The damned heat" replied Jack, who now that Kat examined properly was sweating.

Kat examined the orb in her hands, rolled it around a little, passed it from her left to right. "Nope no idea what you are talking about"

Lynn sighed and shook her head and mumbled "Stupid demon powers"

Kat just shrugged, she didn't really know what else to do.

##

After another thirty minutes had passed the other contestants let out a long breath and stopped their magic... well Jack and Dusk did, Kat wasn't sure if Lynn was doing anything at all. *I guess it's back to endurance, right? But this isn't so hard.*

It was at this moment Thyme walked to the centre of the arena and clapped his hands. The contestants all got pulled in closer to Thyme as the ground got sucked up. Slowly compacting the extra dirt a large ornate table was placed in centre of the arena.

Compacting the dirt over and over made it quite solid. Beautifully renditions of various foods were then carved into the stone. Lynn and Kat were treated to a lush jungle scene filled with fruits and vegetables of all kinds. As they were carved colour started to bleed into them making them seem much more lifelike.

Dusk and Jack were greeted with a different scene, it was a carving of a raucous dwarven bar, with cheering dwarves and alcohol aplenty. The tables in the scene were lined with various meats all cooked to perfection with steam wafting on them.

Of course they were all hardened adventures, just some lifelike looking food wasn't enough to interrupt their concentration...

So of course Thyme started to hum happily as it took out various dishes from the bag. Steaks, salads, gleaming sets of red apples, a full pig marinated to perfection, fish from the northern see piled high, with lemons. Then came the drinks, nothing was left out, fine wines, strong meed, potent concoctions of whiskey and a few others Kat would never recognise filled the remaining gaps in the table.

To make matters worse Thyme then started to conduct a small breath to waft the scents towards the four contestants. Man am I lucky that my smell hasn't gotten any better. At least that's what Kat thought. She was wrong of course, even if she had not had that sense enhanced during her awakening, just condensing her demonic flame had enhanced everything Kat was.

Of course that meant nothing considering she still wasn't interested in food, so she simply stared disinterestedly. The others though were more affected. Lynn had her nose pointed up looking away from the food but if one examined her eyes they would see it locked on the plate full of apples.

Jack was unashamedly looking at the table and gulping, hardly paying attention to the orb in his hands though luckily had enough wherewithal to not drop it. Dusk meanwhile looked completely unphased. Standing straight and unmoving in the face of the temptation, though his thoughts were betrayed by a line of drool that leaked out underneath his mask.

Thyme stepped forward and examined each dish closely. Rotating around the table once. Upon completion he started a second lap. This time with a monocle and a plate. Examining each item steadily without ever touching it, Thyme moved at a snail's pace as it examined the various things on offer. Thyme paused for a moment in front of the plate of apples. Reached out to grab one but then retracted its hand instead.

Eventually Thyme stopped once again, this time in front of a fish Kat didn't recognise. Thyme carefully loaded it onto his plate like he was dealing with delicate silk. Moving to the side he pulled a knife from his bag and cut carefully into it right next to Kat.

A thick fishy smell exploded from the fish the moment the cut was made. A mixture of herbs and spices quickly overwhelmed the senses and Kat placed the orb in one hand so she could use the other to cover the other.

"What, you want some?" asked Thyme

"Why would I want something that smells like that?" asked Kat

Chapter 98: The Honour of Food

"Eh..." Thyme stumbled "I mean, wait what? This is rare fish you know?"

"Well, yeah, everything looks nice, even the fish looks nice, but the smell is so overpowering, and it mixes horribly" said Kat crinkling her face.

Everyone else included the people in the stands looked at Kat like she'd gone mad. They couldn't understand what she was talking about.

"I'll take it then" said Jack with zero hesitation

"Sure you can have a piece if you drop the orb" said Thyme.

Jack's face instantly fell as he grumbled "Damn traitor. How could you do this"

So that was his temptation? Why? I don't even feel hungry, and the scents are much too strong, why would... Kat noticed that everyone else looked like they'd swallowed a bag of lemons upon hearing that they'd need to drop the orbs.

Wait am I crazy? Indeed Kat was. It had been some time since breakfast and it was just past lunch time for the day, not to mention unlike Kat the others were using at least a minimal amount of energy to keep the orb in their hands.

Thyme then turned to the stands, splitting into four so that he could be facing them all at once. "What about you all? Those watching in the stands? You've got no orb to drop so you've got free reign"

Not even a moment later Jeff, the God Crusher with the wheel for a shield spoke up "Ye! Send it up here!"

"Sure thing" said Thyme "Anything you want in particular?"

"Send a bit of everything" said John

Thyme nodded at this and created a number of small plates and that hovered around him, then with a snap a large table appeared in the God Crusher's booth. It kept on theme, with one leg being held up by a barrel and the other had boards nailed to the table legs to keep them in one piece.

Thyme then armed itself with a conductor's baton and started to wave their hands towards music nobody could hear. Except the plates, which immediately sprung to action sliding under steaks and over apples, grabbing bits and pieces of food as they went. They collected everything in but a few moments and headed towards the God Crushers... after making a short detour of course.

Each plate slowed considerably and circled around Jack three times, making sure to get extra close to his nose as each dish passed. After the third plate Jack started trying to bite them with his teeth but the plates would dodge expertly every time he got close.

"Now you're the damned traitors!" yelled Jack "How could you do this?"

"Jack..." said Jeff solemnly "It's free food, how could we turn this down? What's rule number one"

Jack gritted his teeth in defiance not wanting to answer the question, as he looked towards his brother Josh.

"Don't look at me Jack, Jeff has the right of it. What's rule number one" said Josh looking at least a little repentant.

Jack still unwilling to say the words glanced at the rest of the God Crushers for salvation but found none. Sighing like a man on his last breath he said "Any free food offered for a job must be eaten and appreciated"

"Right" said the Thymes as they clapped their hands to get everyone else's attention "Anyone else interested?"

"Wait no hold on" yelled Skye, so that she could be heard "Before that, why is your first rule to accept free food? How is that a good rule for any self-respecting adventurer"

The God Crushers turned dark eyes towards Skye who shivered slightly under the intensity of their gaze. "Excuse me, Ma'am, but we work closely with the community, take on small meaningful jobs, and sometimes the only way we can get payed is a homecooked meal, often times by folks so poor the best they can offer you is dry bread and muddy water

"And still those folks will offer you the last they had, because they understand the danger and appreciate the work. We will never decline such kindness. Everyone from nobles to commoners understand the importance of a good meal" said Jeff.

"Why would you take such an offer then? If they are truly so hard up" asked Skye as a thud sounding next to her. Turning her gaze to the sound she found a dagger sticking into the wall next to her head.

Kress leaned out over the edge and glared at Skye "They give you what they can, and you accept that, because they'd never forgive themselves otherwise. Peasants aren't some foolish lot who give their last meal away for trivial things.

"When you get offered a meal, the best that can be provided, you accept that, because they show such sincerity with that one action. They are telling you that the job you have done means so much to them, that they'd risk starvation to thank you.

"And just because you accept it, you don't be a fool about it. You offer them a meal in return if you can. You build trust that way, understanding too. A community lives or dies off it's stomach and perhaps you're a bit too well off to understand that"

Skye looked rather pacified as she returned to her seat. Nodding slightly in understanding but not in true comprehension.

I wonder if I've ever considered something like that. Gramps has always kept me fed, but I think I can still understand. Back when I was younger, we didn't always have enough blankets come winter, so the younger kids all jumped in one bed. It was a bunch of fun, but we knew why it had to be done.

And I've seen how careful Gramps is preparing food, for someone who doesn't seem phased by anything he always made sure we were fed well and on time, that was something he never compromised on.

As Kat's eyes wandered across the contestants, she noticed that Dusk's mask had a faint shine to it. Wait a minute. Kat put a bit of energy into her eyes to get a better look. *Oh he is, ha, Dusk froze his mask so he isn't breathing the smell in through his nose.* Kat tried and failed at not laughing at the sight.

"You find something funny about what I said demon?" asked Kress holding a dagger towards Kat.

"Ah, no Kress, sorry. I was laughing because Dusk chose to freeze his masks rather than smell the food" said Kat.

Kress continued to glare at Kat before looking towards Thyme and saying "Send me a plate of your best"

"Certainly" said Thyme as he gathered up some alcohol and one of the steaks. Thyme once again conducted the procession to loop past Kat three times, but she really wasn't phased at all by this.

Nixilei looked at Kress in distaste and said to Kat "You can tell him off if you want, this is your event and he's trying to cause complications during your participation" *NovelNet.com*

"Nah, it's fine, you can all order something if you want" said Kat

As they were speaking, Thyme was taking more dishes out to replace the ones sent off to the booths ensuring the table stayed fully stocked at all times. Nixilei looked to Gareth for confirmation who just shrugged.

Nixilei examined Kat closely, looking for a sign of annoyance or discomfort, trying to be a bit subtle about it, but failing. "Look Nix, it's fine. Order something for everyone, I don't really need to eat three meals a day anymore, and I just don't care for food that much, especially if I'm not hungry.

"I mean, this all sure looks impressive" said Kat as she raised the orb up to gesture at the table "And I can appreciate the time and effort it took to make and prepare dishes of this calibre, but it just doesn't get to me like it does the others"

Kat heard Lynn mumbling something along the line of, "Desolate winds, demons and their demon powers" but chose to ignore it.

Nixilei bit her lip unsure but eventually seemed to accept the answer after the third steak passed by Kat's face without her so much as blinking. "Fine, can I get one of every fruit for myself and a large bowl of that salad nearest to Lynn for Green thanks?"

Nixilei then gestured for Gareth to step forward and order but he seemed glued to Green's side for the moment, not wanting to stand and leave her, or shout and wake her.

"Fine" Nixilei snapped her fingers and a green spell circle lit up before encasing Green in a soft glow. "There now she can't hear you yelling are you going to order?"

"Sure... Thyme, just, uh, I'll take a recommendation" said Gareth

"Of course, sir, I'd recommend the Canyon Peppered, Vexbrute Steak, that has been tenderized to perfection, or alternatively Bocriogella Salad mixed with Sugio Vumice, and topped with Southern Island Galangal if you aren't one for meat in your meals" said Thyme.

"I'll take the salad for now thanks, something light to keep prepped for the competition" said Gareth

Thyme shrugged "Suit yourself"

Chapter 99: In for a Pound...

Gareth's plate of salad flew around Kat a few times not even bothering to get in close or slow down. Thyme understood this wasn't the distraction for Kat and so mostly just followed the pre-planned path for consistencies sake. "Thanks" said Gareth

As the dishes reached The Unfortune Four a wardrobe popped up, it was placed on its side to act as a table. Nixilei tried to open it when it appeared but the doors didn't budge. *Guess it's just for show then.* *Nov&InExt.cOm*

Once the dishes lined up Green sat up, cast haste on herself and devoured her portion of the meal in an instant before returning to her resting position. Kat could see Nixilei's eye twitch under her glasses as she debated if Green deserved to be reprimanded.

I wonder what's stopping her? Is it because we are in public or is it because Green did so well in the first two games.

"Well, that's two teams settled, you other guys want anything?" asked Thyme

Skye spoke up first "Hey demon girl! Did you say Dusk froze his mask?"

"Yeah?" asked Kat somewhat confused

"Sweet, in that case... Thyme I'll take that steak you offered Gareth" said Skye.

Dusk's shoulders drooped when he heard this but didn't actively complain, of course, that might be because he was trying to avoid speaking and breathing in more of the food's flavour than he already had.

"Clive, Eva, you guys want anything" asked Skye

Is she just going to ignore the other guy?

"Are you just going to forget me?" said Kutruoph

"No, you are perfectly capable of speaking for yourself but Eva can't talk and Clive is my husband so they get called out" said Skye.

Kutruoph just sighed and muttered under his breath "Favouritism I tell ya"

"I can hear you Kutruoph" said Skye with her hands on her hips.

"Good" said Kutruoph "Thyme I'll take the hog in the middle"

Kat's eyes widened in surprise at that. The dish Kutruoph was talking about was a hog for sure, but it was almost the same size as Kat herself. *Is he ordering for Eva as well? Are they sharing it? I mean, sure he's a bit bigger than I am but there is no way he can eat a whole hog.*

"Ah, a man after my own heart. A true meal, one fit for a king" said Thyme who created a tiny version of itself with wings and a servant's outfit. Servant Thyme grabbed the hog from the middle of the table and carried it above its head towards Kutruoph, not forgetting to tease Dusk suitably.

Dusk's response was to freeze the rest of his mask temporarily to deal with the increased temptation. Oooh, that does not look comfortable. *I wonder if he can still breathe? What happens if he falls unconscious because of it? Thyme would help right?*

"Come on Clive, get your order in, and Eva dear you can just try and point it out and I'll interpret" said Skye.

Eva nodded in affirmation and studied the dishes trying to work out what to order. "I'll have what my wife is having thank you Thyme" said Clive

"Of course sir" said Thyme pulling out two fresh Vexbrute Steak's from its bag, "And Eva take this"

Thyme threw a small package directly to Eva. Kat enhanced her eyes to follow it and saw that it was a tiny model of the table. Eva expertly caught the object and took a moment to examine it before getting a large smile and nodding towards Thyme.

"I can't have anyone left out now can I, just because you can't order with your mouth, doesn't mean you can't order" said Thyme "Now while Eva is looking that over, what about you four?"

Thyme turned towards Not Related at All's booth expectantly. There was a pause as everyone turned their eyes in that direction, but instead Lynn spoke up first "Don't you four even think about it. If you order, I'm dropping this orb right now"

"Now, Lynn... don't be hasty about this. There is no need for you to throw the competition just for a bit of food" said Grace

"Shut up Grace, you lost the first two rounds. Both of them! At this point we'll need to make up all out points in the final round anyway, so why not" said Lynn

"Look, Lynn, it's fine, those points are still important, and it's just a bit of food isn't it?" said Grace.

"Well Grace, if it's just a bit of food why don't you also abstain from eating" said Lynn

"I've been running around for hours! I even skipped breakfast because somebody, and I'm not naming names here, insisted we get here early" said Grace glaring down at Lynn.

"As I said, order if you want but I'll be eating as well if you do" said Lynn.

The pair continued to argue around in circles, Lynn insisting that she was hungry and had as much right to the food as the others, while Grace insisting that they shouldn't miss out on food just because Lynn was upset, and also that the food was much less important than the points.

Seems a bit counterproductive to get so heated over this. What are you pair even accomplishing at this point? You are just talking passed each other.

While the pair continued to argue unnoticed to Grace and elf with a shield walked behind her. With a satisfying bang, the elf smashed her shield into the back of Grace's head. "Will you shut up! Fine, we get it, you're both angry, but stop your insistent wining and reach a consensus"

"Ow, ow ow" muttered Grace "Why is it only me getting it Rakhor?"

"I'll smash Lynn on the head as well once the contest is done. We are professionals, and instead you pair are arguing of scraps of food like little children. Why? We packed food. We don't need to be doing this, but instead you've spent twenty minutes screaming at each other"

"Well, to be fair it was only five minutes" said Thyme from the stadium.

Rakhor gave Thyme a sidelong glance but didn't address the criticism. "Look Grace, is the food that important"

"No" said Grace letting out a long sigh

"So we won't order anything ok?" asked Rakhor

"Ok..." said a thoroughly browbeaten Grace.

Of course, unknown to Grace and Rakhor the other two elves had snuck down into the stadium. While nobody was really paying attention they were speaking with a copy of Thyme on the outskirts of the arena.

This Thyme was in a chef's outfit and had a notepad. "So, one fried chicken extra carasone sauce, three orders of the koringway salad and my recommendation of pie, all alongside two servings of elvish wine?"

"Yes please" said the two in sync

"Here you go" said chef Thyme as it reached under its chef hat and presented the two with a covered plate "This actually contains all the dishes, think of it just like a storage bag, but in plate form"

"Wait you aren't teasing Lynn over this?" asked the one with twin tales.

"Of course not, you came to collect it yourself" said Chef Thyme.

"Really?" repeated the other elf

"Really" said Chef Thyme

That's allowed? Kat tried not to look in the direction of the pair of elves as they received their bounty.

I mean good for them I guess, but who wins the argument now? Grace got her food, and Lynn didn't get teased with it?

Once the two elves vanished behind their viewing tower the chef Thyme disappeared into the ground once again. The transaction had taken place behind Jack so he missed it. Dusk was currently thawing his mouth, and Lynn clearly had better things to do so for most the transaction went unnoticed.

Should I be mean and point everything out? Nah... Though it turned out Kat need not have even consider it because as soon as the pair returned to their booth a glass table appeared to separate Rakhor and Grace

"Grace... why is there a table here" said Rakhor

"Um... I didn't order anything I swear" said Grace

"Grace! Why the heck is there a table then" yelled Lynn for the stadium.

"We have secured our food" said the twintale elf

"Ryo?!" said Grace "But how?"

"Just asked" said Ryo as she walked to the edge "And I placed an order for you as well Lynn, but your only getting it if you finish the round"

"That's not fair, I. I made my point, I'll drop this orb right now!" said Lynn

"Don't be like that Lynn, Fight on!" said the elf with the left side of their hair tied back

"Nooo not you to Estelle, why have they corrupted you so" said Lynn

"Sis, we just went and asked for food. What's the problem?" said Estelle

"It's the principle of the thing..." said Lynn

"Ah yes, because sister, you are known for being a paragon of principles" said Estelle

"I'll do it! Don't tempt me, I'll drop it I tell you!" shouted Lynn

Chapter 100: Not Having a Special Planned for: is a Sign the Author is Lazy

Lynn stared at her teammates waiting for them to try to say anything else. Anything at all to justify their decision to grab food despite her complaints. When none was forthcoming Lynn seemed to shrink into herself.

"Fine... I guess I'll keep going" said Lynn as she turned back to face the table gloomily.

Why are you so distraught anyway? Didn't they say they had some food for her as well? What's the point getting so upset over it.

"Don't worry I understand your pain Lynn. At least your teammates ordered some food for you anyway" said Dusk

"I don't wanna hear that from the guy who froze his own face so he didn't have to smell this delicious food" said Lynn

"Why must you be like this, smile more perhaps you'd look nicer" said Dusk

"Says the one wearing a mask" Lynn shouted back

"I have no desire to engage you in a shouting match to see who can yell the loudest. I simply was trying to ease your burden by understanding the pain you are going through. To think that my kind gesture was so thoroughly rebuffed brings me nothing but dissatisfaction" said Dusk

Lynn groaned and rested her head on her orb. "Hey Lynn, don't worry I bet Thyme's fancy magic plate will keep the food warm for you, so it'll be perfectly fresh when the contest is over. How else could he have kept all this food warm? What do you think he has a hoard of pixie chefs in a pocket dimension he gains access to that are cooking the meals on demand or something?" said Kat

"Wait how did you find out about that" said Thyme in shock.

The contestants all turned their heads towards Thyme. "What? Pocket dimensions set up for the sole purpose of cooking are a wonderfully innovative idea" said Thyme.

"But that's impossible" said Nixilei "Keeping living things inside of a spatial enhanced region should be impossible, or at the very least so mana intensive that the expenditure alone would bankrupt multiple kingdoms it simply can't be done"

Kat just laughed. Trying to stifle her giggles she nearly dropped the orb but her reflexes were more than good enough to compensate. "See, Kat get's it. Can none of you understand a good joke?"

Nixilei felt her eye twitching again but ignored it as she continued "Be that as it may, multiple things you have shown us so far border on the impossible or at last improbable such as the maze, that bizarre room in the maze, and the stone wood. Nonetheless you have managed it anyway. That, and please consider your status somewhat Thyme, if you were to say the sky is green we are half obligated to believe you"

"You mean to tell me it is some other colour? What like red? Or heaven forbid blue? Why I must have been lied to all my life" said Thyme who had changed to a sky blue instead of it's usual green tinted wooden surface.

Just as Thyme returned to the its original colour scheme the table vanished. The contestants had been rather distracted up till this point and so most were ill prepared for when their orbs suddenly turned into a puddle of water.

Kat let her flame surge into her hands freezing the water in an instant. Now, it was less that Kat was holding the orb and more that the orb was frozen around her hands... and on fire. *Um... can you go out please? Pretty sure I stopped feeding you energy...*

And yet the flames continued to burn. As for the others, Jack summoned a mug underneath his hands and let the water fall into it. A small bit looked like it was going to splash over the side but he quickly responded by raising the edges another few centimetres and so was fine.

Dusk had... summoned more water? In front of him was an orb of water, though it was larger than the initial one and wobbled strangely in the air. To sigils were lit up on either side as Dusk continually supplied them with mana.

And Lynn... poor Lynn. Lynn was just staring at a puddle of water at her feet. Their was a sigil next to her hands but whatever it might have been trying to do clearly it had failed in one form or another.

Lynn collapsed to her hands and knees and just knelt in that position for a while. "Um Lynn, are you alright" asked Kat

"No"

"Do you want to talk about it?" asked Kat

"No"

Well... that accomplished a whole lot of nothing. Kat looked towards Lynn's teammates. Most seemed occupied with the food they had acquired, but Estelle looked down at Lynn with a strange expression on her face.

There was a smile, but her eyes were filled with sadness, though Kat wasn't exactly sure who that emotion was directed at. Estelle also didn't seem to be eating, and in fact had no food near where she stood, with no empty plates on the provided table.

Well then... ignoring that for now. System why is my orb still on fire?

User Kat pushed sufficient energy into the object to keep it alight for some time. Without further directive the energy is simply holding position on the orb for the time being.

Wait but it's fire isn't it? Shouldn't it burn out or something.

User Kat, your Demonic Flame may be referred to as a flame, but it most assuredly is not natural fire. It is a form of higher energy, and like all others it has unique properties.

Can you tell me what some of those are?

User Kat requires a higher rank for that information.

Can I just get a list of things that I can't know? Or better yet a list of things I can?

User Kat requires a higher rank for that information

Can I get a super generalised version of what you can and can't tell me?

Considering query

Examining circumstances

Identifying optimal solutions...

Discarding optimal solutions...

Loading sub-optimal solutions...

Discarding sub-optimal solutions...

Considering comedic solutions...

Discarding comedic solutions

Loading Ideal solution...

Failed to find Ideal solution...

Settling for a compromise...

Upon examining User Kat's circumstances a vague list will be compiled. However it is determined User Kat cannot receive this list during a summoning.

Right of course... Can you at least tell me how to unfreeze my hands?

No.

Well at least you're consistent.

"So..." said Thyme "Hate to break you out of the whole, the world is over and I can never recover shtick but I'd like to politely ask if you could exit the stage"

"Cake" said Lynn

"Pardon?" said Thyme **NovelNext.Com**

"Can I have some cake now that I'm out" said Lynn

Thyme turned into a small version of Lynn "Can I have some cake now that I'm out...?" said the Lynn
Thyme she stretched out the words

"May I please have some cake Lynn" said Lynn looking up slightly at her lookalike.

"See, I can be a polite host and teach life lessons who woulda thought" said Thyme as she handed Lynn a cupcake.

The real Lynn opened her mouth to argue but Thyme got in first and said "Now now, you can't honestly think I'd let you just eat a whole cake do you? This is enough for now, and if you want more you can come back"

Lynn took a second look at the cupcake in her hands. It was delicately made with little chocolate drawings over the white icing that coated the top. They depicted Lynn and her companions, in various poses. Or perhaps it was just Lynn, awfully hard to tell with those guys.

"Thanks Thyme, or Lynn, or whatever I'm supposed to call you when you look like me" said Lynn.

"Just Thyme, anytime. I might like to play up these caricatures, but I do like my name. It's been with me for many centuries and I won't be discarding it quite so easily" said Thyme as they morphed back to their taller shape, though keeping the elvish ears this time.

Thyme snapped its fingers and sent Lynn hovering up to go join her teammates. Kat noticed that a smile had already found its way onto her face. *I guess she recovered. I wonder if it was the food or the artwork that did it*

"Now Jack, I'm torn as to what I should do with you..." said Thyme

"What do ya mean" asked Jack

"Well, first of all, good job altering that spell so fast to increase the size of the cup, masterful work done there and I congratulate you on your effort" said Thyme

"I'm sensing a but" said Jack

"Well of course... see, as expertly done as it was, you did miss some of the water... but it's such a tiny amount that I'm not sure if I should count it or not..." said Thyme examining a dry patch right next to Jack's right foot.