

## DEMONS 651

### [Chapter 651 - 651 Gushing About Lily... Sort Of... She's Trying Alright?](#)

After Nixilei finished speaking she let the silence hang for a few moments until she determined Kat wasn't going to speak. "Well, you've been avoiding it so far, but do you want to just gush about Lily properly? I've tried to lead you towards it but unlike Green you haven't really taken the bait."

"Oh... um... I'm not sure that I can? I mean... Lily routinely says she could write an essay about my thighs and I believe her... but I'm not sure that I could do the same thing without being sexually attracted to her," answered Kat.

Nixilei let out a small laugh. "I'm sure she could, you do have fine legs. Still, I bet you can talk about her more than you think. She's your girlfriend now. Just start talking and I bet words will spill out. It's interesting... the first time at least. You do not want to know how many times I've heard Green describe Gareth's muscles. Not my thing so I can't even appreciate the poetic descriptions, but I'm curious what an asexual girl will talk about."

*\*Well it's not like I know where to start Nixilei! Well, perhaps start at the fact she's adorable... but that's not really appropriate for a girlfriend, is it? Then again... maybe it is.\*?*

"I guess I can start with the fact that she's adorable and that was before she turned into a little kitten. She always looked so small when I first met her. In actuality she isn't that short, but you've seen me. I've been about this height for years really. Always on the upper side of the girls. When Lily transferred to my school, I know now it wasn't a good time for her. She looked so small and vulnerable and I suppose my protective instincts from growing up in an orphanage kicked in..." said Kat.

"Ah yes, I know the feeling," said Nixilei absently.

"... so I watched her a bit more than the other girls in our grade and I noticed instantly that the three bitches of the school, the bullies, went straight for her. Well, I wasn't going to put up with that. I beat them up a bit and basically said 'I'm your new target, I won't fight back unless you go after someone other than me. Go nuts.'" Nixilei's eyes widened but she didn't say anything yet, "Once that happened Lily started watching me in turn. I'd sit with her at lunch times but she wouldn't really talk with me just yet. Eventually, after a whole lot of not talking to each other she started to trust me... and our friendship, and her crush apparently grew from here..."

"For me it was nice to have someone I could understand on some level. At this point I hadn't really had proper friends in nearly a decade. As horrible as this might sound, it was much easier for me to be friends with someone I was protecting than just about anyone else. For Lily... well without saying too much it was nice for her to have a friend that would stand by her after what happened at her previous school."

Nixilei glared slightly at Kat. "This is just the start of your friendship Kat. You lost it again. This isn't gushing this is storytelling. I was almost willing to accept it as an answer but I can tell there's something more. Just compliment her dammit. I don't mind if it seems crass or strange or whatever is holding you back. Just... just throw compliments about her out there. I'll even promise not to tell her if that's what you want."

"No... no it's fine. What do I like about her... well she's adorable, she's the perfect height to hug, she's willing to put up with my craziness, and I really appreciate the fact that she never thought I was strange," When I suddenly became a demon "for growing up in an orphanage. That was always the major jab people hit me with. I didn't care but it was annoying for being repetitive at the very least. Lily never minded that.

"Her parents, well they're... I wish I could say horrible people but really they just didn't like me, or well, her mother didn't and her dad went along with it? Frankly I don't want to touch that mess... but the point is Lily didn't care. Even though her mother repeatedly asked her to stop being my friend, repeatedly tried to stop us hanging out and just being a general nuisance... Lily never once acted like it was acceptable, and until I got her to stop she'd always stand up against her parents to support me when she didn't have to.

"I love how she gets super involved in research for such silly things sometimes. It hasn't happened too recently, things have been busy... but it wouldn't be strange for her to wonder about the origin of... Sunflowers or something and spend a week just combing through every book in the library on the subject before going online and looking some more. By the end of it she'd know more about the topic than anyone really should... before resting for two weeks, if that, and doing it again.

"Her handwriting is also very nice. I think she decided at some point she wanted it to look overly fancy and practiced and practiced until that became the default. Sure she can write in quite a few other ways, but just giving her a pen and paper can easily lead to producing artwork instead of a bit of writing.

"Even back when we were friends she'd always try to hang out with me. Perhaps her crush makes up a large part of the reason, but I don't really care. The fact that she just wanted to be around me most of the time was so nice. Kids at the orphanage would regularly come to me for problem, but they also didn't really like just... hanging around me. I was that one strange kid that never got adopted, then when I was older, I was that weird old kid that's kinda nice.

"It'd been years since somebody just... sought me out to spend time with. Sylvie got to that point eventually as well... but she's a lot younger than me. More a little sister than a friend even if I love her as well, but the dynamic is completely different. For Lily... I really did feel like she wanted to just spend time with me, and I was always happy to spend time with her. Listening to her rants about whatever odd topic she was on was always amusing and she would regularly help me with my schoolwork. Hardly took no for an answer on that second one. I tried to help her a bit as well, but the truth of the matter is my girlfriend is better at research and smarter than I am so..." Kat gave a 'what can you do' shrug.

"She doesn't chew on her pens. Underrated attribute is what that is. I cannot stand people who chew on their pens and I lived in an orphanage full of literal children who new better but apparently school girls my age, well recently we've both graduated, but my age STILL DO IT." Kat sucked in a large breath as she realised she might have gotten a little heated. "Um... yeah... so that's some of the things I like about Lily I guess..."

Nixilei beamed over at Kat before glancing over the side of the carriage and correcting the course a little bit. "That's lovely. Actually, this was a lot nicer than listening Green gush about Gareth. So many of the things you like about Lily are really sweet. I guess it comes with the fact that you can't just say you like her muscles, or I guess maybe her tits or ass instead. Hmm... I don't really know how to keep that

aligned in my head. You aren't really a lesbian even if you have a girlfriend... but I can't joke about things you might find attractive about guys either... yeah I can see why you tried to persuade Lily to pick someone else now. It does create quite a few odd situations doesn't it."

Kat nodded alongside a shrug, "Yeah it does. I mean, I wouldn't give it up for the world, but it does cause a few odd things to pop up. It hasn't come up yet but I bet in the future it will be very tempting to just tell people I'm a lesbian. It's much easier than explaining what's actually going on, and it's not really like I care what random people think... but the issue is that if I care enough about the person asking that question to actually confirm or deny our relationship I probably care enough to explain it properly you know?"

Nixilei nodded and said, "Yes I do actually. For me, it's rather easy to say I'm Green's bodyguard but to also explain I'm a trained spy and actively reporting what she does back to her parents always ends up being a bit strange... though unlike you I don't really have anyone to tell. They all already know what I'm trained to do, or are a member of this adventuring party. A lot of the people we cycled through didn't even get to hear about what I do because I didn't think they'd last long enough."

"Glad you have such faith in me," said Kat with a grin.

#### [Chapter 652 - 652 Reaching The Tournament Grounds](#)

Up ahead Kat could just barely make out a big arrow sign. It wasn't the distance but the fact it was somewhat obscured by trees that made identifying it hard before now. She could see the words, 'Tournament Teleporter Here' written in frankly horrible hand writing and the sign looked to be falling apart.

"I see the destination up ahead!" said Kat pointing towards the sign.

Nixilei squinted and looked towards the area but couldn't really make out the sign like Kat could. "I'll take your word for it. What's actually there though?"

"It looks like a really run down sign with some writing on it. It looks like it's been around for a while... which is strange because I mean... surely it can't be from an old tournament right?" asked Kat.

Nixilei nodded and said, "Yes, they are quite good with cleaning up after everything is said and done. I really doubt that they would have missed such an obvious sign, not to mention Thyme specifically said our teleporter was down this road. If they managed to somehow miss this arrow with it so relatively close to our destination I'll eat my robes."

With that established, Nixilei banged heavily on the side of the carriage, likely to wake Green up and get the others' attention. If it worked or not... Kat didn't really know. The cabin had to be soundproofed because she realised that she hadn't heard a single thing from them at all, which was somewhat strange now she thought about it. Before she could really dwell on it too long though, the arrow was coming into vision for those with more normal eyesight and Kat needed to make a difficult decision.

Did she just let Lily sleep, or wake her up for the teleportation? Knowing how horrible it felt to use Thyme's teleporters Kat knew it would be better for Lily to sleep through the experience, but waking up BECAUSE of the teleport would be much worse and potentially a freak out waiting to happen. In the end,

Kat didn't really make up her mind because Nixilei drove the carriage straight onto the circle and the damned thing activated.

Kat pulled Lily from her lap and into her arms, she could feel the smaller 'girl' twitching and sent a wave of calm through the link as best she could while slowly running her fingers through Lily's fur. Truth be told, it wasn't actually as bad as the first time. Kat wasn't sure if this was because of her increased Rank, or the fact that Thyme had somehow improved their teleportation. Kat watched Lily somewhat anxiously as she pushed down her growing nausea. Lily didn't seem to be enjoying the experience, but it also didn't seem to be enough to wake her, so Kat counted that as a win.

When the teleportation ended Kat looked around sharply at the scenery. It looked like some kind of overgrown ruins. The nearby area specifically looked like a collapsed building of some kind that once had a much higher roof. The walls had collapsed inward and were now using each other as supports. The 'front' and 'rear' 'walls' were completely gone, just rubble piled high with vines growing through everything. The thing was though... if Kat looked closely she saw that it was indeed the case that vines were everywhere, especially in places that needed extra support.

Kat lightly hopped off the carriage with Lily in hand before transferring the Memphis to one hand to help Nixilei down as well. While that was happening the rest of the group exited the carriage. Green cheerily jumped from the door even though based on the state of her hair it was clear she had just been sleeping. Gareth followed behind with a slightly pinched expression, and pointedly didn't look at Kress who exited behind with a scowl.

Before anyone could really get their bearings, a crashing sound echoed out and all heads turned to the shaking rubble. A few more bangs sounded out before the rocks exploded outwards. Kat flared her wings to cover her front while tilting Lily behind her slightly. In the end it was a slight over reaction as only a few loose stones pattered against her wings with barely any force. "Crikey that wasn't quite as planned"

Kat looked over towards the voice to see Thyme looking like an old timey explorer. They had one of those crème coloured hats, a jacket with a bunch of pockets, shorts that went just past the knees and a pickaxe over their shoulder. Oh and no shoes. For some reason... *\*Why does Thyme have a thick Australian accent though!? Wait. I'm translating everything so EVERYONE has an accent... so why only Thyme getting such an over the top one? Does this actually say more about me then it does about Thyme? No they must be hamming it up.\*?*

"What the heck Thyme?" grouched Kress, with slight fear as he glanced around at the 'caved in' area around them looking for any signs of instability.

"I'm not currently Thyme, I am Ted the intrepid explorer and you five will be needing to make your way to base camp to meet your fellow explorers. This hear ancient ruins aren't going to explore themselves you know!" said 'Ted' with a grin.

Nixilei gained a serious look before saying, "I just wish to confirm, but the Tournament has already started this round and we need to follow you to a campsite?"

'Ted' frowned before splitting off into another Thyme making it very clear that despite naming themselves 'Ted' it was a familiar dryad. This knew Thyme had a suit and a monocle on. "As you have

requested confirmation I have formed this more serious form to inform you that the form of this Tournament round is indeed based on a ruin exploration. Further rules may be imposed as you journey forward, but for now your goal is to follow and protect the version of myself dubbed, 'Ted' so that he may lead you to the camp," said Monocle Thyme.

"I see," said Nixilei. As soon as the words left her mouth Monocle Thyme popped out of existence. Nixilei stared at the spot Thyme had disappeared from... "I was going to ask if we're on a time limit or judged based on time at all?"

Nixilei glanced around, and 'Ted' seeing this glanced around as well. "What are you looking for mate?" asked 'Ted'

Nixilei turned her glare towards 'Ted'. "Fine I suppose it's going to be like that. Lead on then," said Nixilei with a sigh.

"That's not nearly enough SPIRIT. Where's your spirit of adventure? No good explorer can go without it!" said 'Ted'.

"Ooo!" said Green dashing forward. "I have it. I have the SPIRIT OF ADVENTURE. Nixilei's a bit of a stick in the mud, and Kress is angry all the time these days but I still have the Spirit! Let's GO FORTH" Green continued on passed 'Ted' down the path he'd just come from. Gareth grumbled a little under his breath and started to jog after her. Kress sighed, seeing how this was going and joined in the train. With 'Ted' following suit.

Kat glanced at Nixilei who was just staring at the whole in the wall now. "I feel... I feel... nothing." Said Nixilei before sighing and joining the line as well. Kat, seeing Nixilei was... 'fine' for a given definition of the word following behind her taking up the rear. She knew she probably should have been in front for safety reasons, but it wasn't like Green was untrained.

The open tunnel was rather rough looking with uneven flooring that required some careful footwork to avoid simply falling over. It really looked like 'Ted' had carved the path out using dynamite or something similar. There didn't seem to be any on 'Ted', but that didn't really mean anything consider that as Kat watched 'his' back she saw that the pickaxe had vanished somewhere. They continued down the path for maybe ten minutes before Kat noticed everyone had stopped in front of her. Kat and Nixilei sped up a bit to catch up and saw a large gorge.

"Curses. The bridge seems to have collapsed after I got through. I wonder what caused that?" said 'Ted' as 'he' 'carefully' kicked a handsaw into the ravine. "Yup, no idea what coulda caused the bridge to collapse like that. We'll need to find some other way across.

Green started eyeing the walls, intently, perhaps debating if she could run across them, either by herself or with passengers. Gareth looked down at the rope and picked up the frayed ends to examine the cut. Kress looked pointedly at 'Ted' as if trying to decide if knocking the dryad out would be an acceptable way to deal with the problem. Nixilei looked thoughtful. Kat looked at them all like they were idiots.

"You guys do know I can fly right?" asked Kat.. Everyone paused and slowly turned towards Kat slowly focusing on her wings.

[Chapter 653 - 653 Cross With Kress](#)

The gap wasn't quite as large as a true ravine, perhaps 50m across at most. As such it was quite easy for Kat to ferry people across. Green was carried princess style while a sleeping Lily dozed on the Fae's chest. Once Kat dropped Green off, Lily was left in her care. Kat wasn't totally pleased with the arrangement but decided it was better than carrying her back and forth, especially with Kress on the list of people who needed to be carried.

Nixilei was just as easy, taking her spot in Kat's arms and making a comment that, "Lily might get jealous if Kat went around doing this all the time," but she was promptly ignored. Not only was this a rather necessary action, for Kat it held very little intimacy and with their bond it would be easily felt. Of course Kat had no true understanding of jealousy and the irrational nature of it. Still, Lily was asleep for now and what she doesn't know won't cause issues, even minor ones.

Kat was considering what she was going to do with the boys, but 'Ted' took matters into 'his' own hands by shrinking down and jumping up on her shoulders. Kat just shrugged and accepted it as 'Ted's' chosen method of transport. It wasn't uncomfortable and it worked so she flew 'him' across with no troubles as well. Kat assumed there would be an issue with Gareth but he just sighed and said, "Same way as Green I suppose,"

Now it was a bit more difficult than carrying Green. Gareth was a fair bit taller than Green and had much broader shoulders. Still, this wasn't an insurmountable obstacle. No it was the full set of plate mail armour he was wearing. Kat it was awkward to pick Gareth up with all of his armour but Kat managed it with a little finagling. The problem was she could already tell before taking off that it was a bit too much to fly with Gareth AND his armour. "Ok... I can only really glide with you because of how much your amour ways. I'm going to need a run up. Just, hold on tightly."

Gareth grit his teeth and nodded, shifting slightly to try and make himself easier for Kat to hold as best he could. It was... mostly ineffective. Kat sped up to a light jog as she moved back down the tunnel to get a proper run up. She didn't want to increase her speed too quickly while holding someone without regeneration like her. After about a minute of jogging, and a few more turns than Kat was entirely happy with she turned in place and set off. She quickly built speed while making sure not to take any of the turns too sharply. As the gorge came back into view she rapidly increased her speed for the remainder of the runway before kicking off with all her strength right at the edge. The rock under her feet shattered, but it was enough. Kat launched herself over the ravine, flaring her wings when she reached the top of her jump to keep a steady glide all the way over to the other side...

Of course, she was a little too good and was currently on track to slam into part of the rock wall on the other side. The jump was easier than she'd expected with the large runup including. Still, it was no major issue, she folded her wings and braced her legs. As she reached the edge, Kat took the weight of herself, Gareth and another 100kg of armour, much more than what you'd find on an Earth knight. The impact cracked the rock underneath her feet, as Kat deftly danced between what barely stable footing she could find as she slowed them both down, managing to stop just before they both hit the wall.

Kat, and everyone else really, let out a long breath they hadn't realised they were holding. Well, except for Lily who kept her slow steady breathing, not a care in the world. Even 'Ted' looked shocked, but how much of that was an act was unclear. Especially because as a dryad they didn't really use lungs to breathe the same way most other humanoids do. Gareth awkwardly exited Kat's grasp. She'd loosened

her hands, but made no move to really let him down, so he stumbled out of her grip and pulled himself up. "That... that wasn't ideal..." said Gareth.

Green shrugged and pointed off to the side where a small hole could be seen if you looked. It looked just barely large enough for someone of Gareth's size... and that was without the armour. "Perhaps not but I think the intended path would have been much worse for you," said Green. She hopped over to Gareth and gave him a quick kiss before patting his shoulders. Kat took this as her cue to head back over to grab Kress.

When she got there he raised an eyebrow and said, "You need to make a crazy jump with me?"

Kat shook her head, "No that was almost entirely because of Gareth's armour. I can't fly with that much weight so it had to be done. How do you want to be carried though?"

Kress' face scrunched up like he'd bitten into a lemon and his eyes held a flash of anger but it was pushed down quickly. Kress study Kat closely, focusing mostly on her shoulder as he debated internally if he could get away with using 'Ted's' method before deciding it wouldn't be the best idea. He didn't want to ride on Kat's shoulders like a little kid... though being carried like a girl wasn't ideal either... but it was the best option he could think of. "Same as Gareth," said Kress through his teeth.

Kat just nodded and picked Kress up. Unlike the others she moved slowly so that it was clear to Kress exactly what she was doing. He didn't look happy about it but he put up no fight as he lay in Kat's arms. Kat, for her part, bit back a number of jabs she could make at the situation. *\*So many jokes. Like 'I'm really carrying this team' or 'seems you're a bit of a princess' or even 'trusting your life to me? Am I supposed to be flattered?' but... if he's going to act like an angry child I'll treat him like one. Positive reinforcement is a good tool and he's swallowing his pride for this. Then again... I wonder what he'll think if he spots the same hole Green did.\*?*

Kat would never know because as soon as she landed on the other side Kress flopped out of her hands as fast as he could, no matter how ungraceful it was. Once he was on the ground, 'Ted' popped back to 'his' old height and said, "Good job mates. I thought we were going to have to really work to get around that obstacle. Nice to see you thinking outside the box. Still, we can't rest just yet we aren't at camp. ONWARDS!"

'Ted' took off at what looked like a lot jog down the open cave mouth expecting the rest of the group to follow... which they did. Knowing that 'Ted' needed to be protected they didn't really have much choice. Kress was actually fighting the urge to catch up to 'Ted' and force him to take a break, or give proper directions or something other than just running mindlessly ahead... but he wasn't sure if that would get them penalized and nobody else was making a move, not even Green who certainly had the speed to pass 'Ted' easily... or Kat.

Kat wasn't really paying attention to that at all. She was considering what 'Ted' had said. *\*Hmm... is flying across the gap really 'thinking outside the box'? I feel like if you can fly, flying across an obstacle is the first place your mind should go. It makes me wonder if he only answered that way because it's always the response for getting across the ravine? Like... is this Thyme actually smart enough for things like that? Or is it just programmed... I bet Thyme could do both and I don't know which is more likely.\*?*

She didn't voice these thoughts though, she just caught up to Green and had Lily returned to her before sliding to the back of the group again. Everyone was able to keep pace with 'Ted' with no issues at all. It was just a light jog, and the only person with any sort of burden was Gareth and his armour, something the man in question was well used to carrying. Green walked at the front of the formation, just a step behind 'Ted' making sure to watch the surroundings closely, searching for any traps.

Something that Kat hadn't noticed because of her night vision, and the others hadn't yet questioned though... was that the whole cave system was lit up. Nobody was carrying torches, Nixilei wasn't using a spell to help them along. There were no special artifacts.. There was simply light for everyone to see by.

#### [Chapter 654 - 654 Like A Poorly Oiled Machine](#)

Five minutes into their renewed trek Kat tensed. She could hear something right at the edge of her hearing range. It was unclear but it wasn't there before and set off some alarm bells in her head. Seeing Kat's action, the others slowly changed their stances to reflect the newfound wariness in the party. The next person to react at all was actually Lily, though she did remain sleeping. Kat could see Lily's ears twitching trying to catch the sound but it was not enough to wake her yet.

Minutes passed and Kat relaxed somewhat though the others stayed tense... except for 'Ted' who had returned to marching without a care in the world. This proved to be a mistake as the sound suddenly picked up, and Kat turned to face the wall where it was coming from just moments before the rock burst apart and a giant insect exploded out of the wall and headed straight towards 'Ted'.

The world slowed as Kat took everything in. The insect looked somewhat like a giant millipede, or was it centipede? Kat didn't know the difference. All she knew was that it had hundreds of legs sprouting from its segmented body. From what little she could see of it at the moment... though it didn't change much across the length she could see, each leg looked like small sharp blades and its head had clearly adapted to chew through rock. Its 'face' was more jaws and teeth than anything resembling a true face. It split into four separate jaws that seemed to work in pairs of two, followed by its half a dozen tongues that shifted rock and debris out of the way as it moved... and that same mouth was heading right for 'Ted'.

Kat wasn't overly worried though, as she looked around the party was reacting effectively even in this slowed time. Kress had his daggers out and ready, though he was only looking roughly at the sound and not at the creature or the path it was following. It was clear that while he knew something was wrong but hadn't properly heard where the creature was coming from at all. In contrast to this was Nixilei, she was making herself as small as possible without compromising her mobility. She didn't even try to look at the sound of the noise. Her gaze was fixed on Green and Gareth in front of her. 'Ted' wasn't reacting at all, but that had to be an act, Thyme was more than powerful enough to know.

Green and Gareth were the two making real moves. As soon as the rocks broke apart Green started moving, even before the monster showed itself. She could clearly identify where the sound was coming from and was waiting for a signal to move. Green was currently heading towards 'Ted' despite her eyes being locked on the wall. Kat wasn't entirely sure what her plan was, but she had drawn a small dagger while her bow remained on her back. Gareth on the other hand was clearly moving towards 'Ted'. He didn't know where the sound was coming from, same as Kress, but he was ready to cover 'Ted' in the event of an attack so simply headed straight toward him without thinking.



For her part, Kat didn't really know what to do. She had no proper practice with the team for situations like this. She was fast enough to catch up to Green, and maybe even strike the giant bug but wasn't certain she could take it out in one strike. *\*Dammit. Do I move up and help? I wish Lily wasn't asleep right now because I could just leave her on the ground or let her hang onto my shoulder or something... will Gareth or Green need more help? Where would I be useful??*

*Those teeth look deadly... but they are just at the front. The damned thing has knives for legs and hundreds of the things. Should I be focused on cutting them off maybe? No that's stupid I should just take the thing out straight away if I can. But... I can't use my fire. That would be a bit dangerous with the others around.\*?*

Kat dug her feet into the ground and was about to launch herself into the fight but froze again before the action could be completed. *\*Wait... how can I be sure this is the only one? I can't hear that well through solid stone and I don't know if I should risk attacking if another comes in from behind. Dammit. I wish I knew what the standard response should be. I'm fast but not quite fast enough potentially...\**

*\*If it's just one, I think going in is the right call... but with that up in the air... I think I have to stay here.\** Kat let her feet settle back into the ground but didn't release the slowed time. She kept feeding demonic energy to her brain so that she could ensure nothing went horribly wrong. She just eased up on the degree of the slowdown a bit. No sense watching essentially no time to pass, she could slow it down further if necessary.

She watched everyone moving in slow motion. Gareth was surprisingly fast in his armour and was moving at a decent pace towards 'Ted'... it just likely wouldn't be quite fast enough to prevent the insect taking a bite out of their guide. Luckily, Green was on the move as well. She was aiming for the gap between the head and the rest of the body. It was just a thin line of exposed flesh, but to Green it was a clear beacon of weakness. She burst forward, wind swirling around her as she leapt feet first towards the thing.

Green's boots collided with the thing's head, knocking it off-course as she let herself be pushed into a crouch on its head while stabbing into its flesh. The insect instantly started writhing, using speed it didn't have before to shake its entire body in just a moment. Green went with the spasm letting it push her away as she flipped around and back onto her feet, never letting the thing leave her sight. Gareth had managed to impose himself between 'Ted' and the creature, eyes now fixed on it as well, waiting to intervene should it be necessary.

Kress had actually taken a few steps forward, not quite standing in front of Nixilei, more to the side if anything but clearly ready to step in the way of something should it come for her. Something Kat felt a little ashamed to be surprised by. Kress then glanced backwards at Kat slightly before they locked eyes and Kress jerked his head back towards Green. Kat let the world slow completely once again.

*\*Is that the signal to go attack? I mean it really looks like it is. I suppose it must be. With Kress guarding the back it should be fine right? He isn't really a tank though... I... hmm... I guess I'll go. Green's cut looked a bit shallow.\*?*

With that course of action decided, Kat tucked Lily into the crook of one arm and dashed forward summoning just the one fan to her right hand. It took only a few moments to cross the entire distance,

easily matching Green's speed. In this time Green did try to take another swipe at the creature but it was moving too erratically, slashing out with its legs and screeching with all its might.

When Kat did make it there, she spread out her fan and tried to slice into the armour. The sound of metal on metal screeched out as she cut into the thick plate of the insect. It cut through, but it was shallow, only superficial damage was done to the creature, even if it was a thick cut in the armour itself. Seeing this Kat ducked easily under a trio of legs before closing the fan and slamming it into the bug's side.

The thing moved with the blow, even as the armour on it cracked. That segment and a few neighbouring ones got flung forward even as the bug's head abandoned its strike on 'Ted' to turn to face Green and Kat now side by side. Green tried to find a way to dash in and slice at the gap once again, but the teeth and jaws moved to intercept her while the bladed feet kept her at bay. They had an incredible degree of movement, able to cover almost an entire circle around them with seeming ease.

Kat bit her lip. *\*Dammit if I wasn't carrying Lily I could take a few hits no trouble. I AM carrying her though and that limits my options. I'm certainly faster than the damned thing but that doesn't mean anything if it just has to wave its legs around a little to dice me up.\*?*

Things were reaching an uneasy stalemate between the two parties.. So of course it was the perfect time for the ceiling to explode open revealing a second bug right above Nixilei.

#### [Chapter 655 - 655 Like A Poorly Oiled Machine Part 2](#)

Nixilei and Kress jumped backwards towards the rest of the group, shrinking the space they had to move around largely. There was still enough space for the group to move around, but with a millipede on either side that distance was liable to shrink sooner rather than later if things kept up. Kat moved to slam her closed fan into one of the blade-like legs after seeing the limited success of going for the armour, expecting it to do at least some damage. Instead, it just caused the limb to spin around rapidly, eating the momentum she'd imparted to it, to turn itself into a facsimile of a blender.

*\*Dammit! One behind, one in front, neither of them easier to deal with. If I had two hands maybe I could try prying apart a section of armour? Should I be smacking that spot I already broke? The damned thing is slippery. Its armour protects from slashing attacks, while its large stringy body simply eats the impact from blunt force. That's not even getting onto the damned BLADE LEGS.\**

*\*Why did I let Lily talk me into bringing her along? It's limited my options so much and HOW IS SHE STILL SLEEPING? Dammit. What I need is a bag or something to hold her in so I can use both hands, or a bag for Nixilei to hold her in maybe. It might be a good time for you to WAKE UP LILY.\** Kat waited in her slowed time for a moment before continuing her thoughts. She didn't have time to wait to see if that actually worked at all.

As Kat was doing that, Gareth was making a move based purely on his many hours of practice. He slammed his shield into the ground, channelling mana through it the whole time to force a wall of stone to rise up to cover Nixilei and Kress. Of course, the slight widening of his eyes after the wall went up revealed he already knew the error being made. A creature that chews through stone to move around, isn't going to be bothered by a thin slice of magic rock.

It did give Kat a chance though. Slamming one more strike against the millipede that didn't really do anything, Kat dashed back towards the wall and sucked in a deep breath. Lets hope my practice hasn't gone to waste. Kat summoned her demonic fire from the tops of her arms, and head letting it shoot up to coat the wall Gareth had summoned in thick purple fire. She used a large chunk of her concentration keeping it there and ensuring it wasn't spreading anywhere it wasn't supposed to.

Kress and Nixilei were now backing further away, even though it had only been a few moments they could feel the chill coming from Kat's fire and had no desire to get in the way of it. On Kat's end, even though she couldn't feel the cold, she could feel the pressure of keeping the fire where it was. She'd been forced to keep it at the edge of her range because the tunnel was pretty high enough though it wasn't that wide. Part of her wanted to fly a bit just to get closer but she wasn't entirely sure she could afford the mental energy to take off at the moment.

The stone had completely frozen over at this point. Surrounded by her fire, it only took a few moments, so when the insect burst through, jaws and teeth snapping all the way with its long thin tongues exploring for prey, the iced over stone shattered and cracked, sending fragments of it everywhere. Kat grit her teeth and gripped onto the fire embedded in those pieces hard. Forcing them to stick in place instead of flying along with the ice. A safety measure for the rest of the group but one that was rapidly giving Kat a headache. The pain of forcing so many small pieces of fire to her will was getting to her. She'd never properly practiced with so many bit of flame and it was proving to be a bit much.

Despite this pain though, it was effective. While Gareth and Green had returned to the first millipede and Nixilei was keeping an eye on her three fragile team members, if Gareth could be called fragile, Kress was keeping an eye on the flank, though he wasn't watching Kat. He was keeping his eyes and ears fixed onto the walls. With two of the monsters already coming for them, a third would not be remiss and he had no plan for dealing with it aside from stab it where he could. His teeth were clenched so tightly together a slight creaking sound could be heard... if one was close enough to hear it over the cacophony of screeches coming for Kat's direction.

When the millipede had burst through the rock, the fire Kat held in place as well as the fire it had originally touched 'burned' into the bug, causing ice to start forming around its armour. It could feel its insides slowly but surely freezing, yet it had committed too heavily to its downwards attack and now it would be forced to continue. So jaws wide it aimed for Kat as best it could, bladed limbs reaching around to try and get its pound of flesh before the ice got to it.

Unfortunately for Kat, it did look it would be getting a few attacks in. Her demonic fire was spreading quickly across its body as she fed it more and more demonic energy but not fast enough it seemed. The question was, what to do for those extra seconds it would take to freeze to death. *\*I don't have a lot of space behind me. I really don't want to back into the others and catch any of them on fire. Ok I'm mostly worried about Kress. I've already seen I can stop my fire hurting people I'm friends with but I don't exactly trust it would work for Kress.\**

*\*Though now that I think about it... I wonder if it would cause issues for magical items like Gareth's shield obviously is and everyone else's weapons likely are? Never mind I have to work out where to move... maybe I should just punch through the wall? I wonder if it would be sturdy enough to stay together after that though... actually will it stay together at all now there is a massive hole in it and its been set on fire? Yeah... lets go through it just in case.\*?*

Direction set, Kat dashed forward making sure it was her right shoulder busting through the rock wall to prevent jolting the STILL SLEEPING Lily. Kat was starting to wonder if she should be more concerned about that fact, but the crunch of rock as her shoulder broke through the wall brought her thoughts back to the moment. The millipede hit the ground and bit a large hole in it before turning its body around as the rest fell behind it to follow after Kat.

It seemed that while it was somewhat intelligent, it was not smart enough to go for the rest of her party instead of the one damaging it. The beast charged again, now completely covered in fire and movement getting sluggish. Frosh clung to every inch of the insects body and the tongues that once moved with alacrity were starting to freeze from the base up. Kat checked her reserves and found them at around 50%, lower than she'd like certainly but enough. Kat spat a stream of dense fire straight into the millipede's face causing it to scream in pain before falling silent as the frost overtook it.

Though it was clearly dead and its body no longer moved with purpose, its final charge hadn't been stopped just yet. It barrelled forward, legs damaging what remained of the wall Gareth had summoned as its numerous legs caught on the rock face, causing cracks to appear in the blades and the wall. Kat easily stepped to the side, even though the thing took up a large chunk of the cavern's width, the lack of proper movement made it easy. It tumbled forward a few more metres before falling off to the side, luckily away from Kat.

Sadly though... its rear end had not quite cleared the wall and that extra weight was enough to break through what little structural support the wall still had causing a chain of cracks to form forcing the rock to lose the rest of its cohesion and collapse into a heap, blocking most of the pathway back to the others. A small gap remained at the top, though it clearly wasn't large enough for Kat to squeeze through. Rocks would need to be moved, all the while the others were still fighting their own millipede.

*\*Dammit. Hopefully I can dig through this quickly. I can't force my way through the bottom, I'm going to need to widen that gap at the top... or maybe Gareth can move it somehow? Crap, I can't really afford to wait for that though...\**

#### [Chapter 656 - 656 Grounded.](#)

Kat reduced the amount of energy she was feeding to her mind to keep time slowed as she clambered up the rock wall. There was no reason to keep everything so slowed when there was nothing to react to. With Lily still sleeping in her left arm, she relied mostly on her legs and tail to keep herself balanced with her right arm doing what it could, but really her tail was what stopped her falling several times during the climb up. Once at the top of the pile, Kat could see that what she thought was a small gap was actually two small gaps on either side. The extra height from the frozen millipede corpse had made the pile of rocks much taller but only in the centre.

Seeing this as a chance, Kat moved her wing forward and past the pile of rocks before using it to push the pile backwards onto the pathway she'd just left to open up a decent enough pathway to squeeze through. It wouldn't be the terribly comfortable, and was sure to give her a few scrapes had she been human still, but it was enough. As she dragged herself through the gap, Kat cast her eyes over to the rest of the group to see how they were doing.

Things had changed a fair bit since the wall went down. The millipede was missing two of its front legs on the right side, and one of the jaws was cracked, but at the same time Green was now back with

Nixilei getting an rather nasty looking cut on her arm healed while Kress did his best alongside Gareth to fend the thing off. 'Ted' mostly just made 'himself' small without actually shrinking just behind Gareth.

What truly made the largest difference though was that the millipede's tunnel had been collapsed, trapping the back half of the insect in the wall. Kat could hear the scraping of metal on stone as it tried its best to get more space to work with but without the powerful jaws to remove the stone, it was trapped. Kat watched a few attempts from the insect to turn and chomp away at the wall, but Kress would normally be there with weapons drawn, forcing it to back off. Kat sent her energy back to her mind, slowing things down drastically once more.

*\*Hmm... there isn't a tonne of space near the thing to help out. I could maybe sneak around past Gareth and attack it from behind... but I don't know if that would put Gareth too far out of position. I could... maybe? Maybe fly over the top... the ceiling is barely high enough for it... but if the millipede managed to knock me out of the air we could have a major problem.\*?*

*\*The best idea I can come up with right now... and frankly it's a horrible idea but I'm considering it... would be to try and catch a bunch of its legs on my right side. I don't think it's strong enough to cut through my bones... so I could simply take the damage and keep it in place that way... but would the others be too freaked out about my near impalement and instead of going for the kill react poorly instead, trying to get me to Nixilei for healing. It would certainly be necessary for anyone else, and that sort of instinct would be hard to fight. Yeah... I think it'd be too risky. Especially with Green already getting healed.\*?*

Kat watched as Kress dashed to the side to avoid a slash from the legs that remained attached to the millipede's front. Kat could see the rustle of Kress hair as it was pushed out of the way from the wind generated. He was rather close to losing an ear, and only years of practice saved him from a rather bloody wound. Deciding proper planning could wait till later, Kat slid down the rocks, causing Nixilei to cast a slightly panicked glance behind her that calmed instantly when Kat came into view instead of yet another enemy.

Nixilei glanced intensified when she spotted Lily in Kat's arms and realised where the major difference in Kat's fighting style came from. Keeping a firm hand on Green and most of her concentration on maintain the magic circle hovering over the other girl's injury Nixilei made a 'pass here' gesture. Kat wanted to sigh, or perhaps argue but there wasn't really time for that. She was still moving in slowed time and her energy was still rather draining, and even if she had the time to argue Nixilei didn't share that benefit. In fact, she was currently only halfway through the gesture, but it was clear what she was meant.

Kat 'walked' forward and with a good deal of reluctance handing Lily to Nixilei while curling the woman's hand up carefully to get away faster. Kat knew Nixilei would've done it herself, but that was so slow in Kat's current perspective. Once Lily was passed off, Kat summoned both fans back to her hands and her gaze went cold. She dashed forward covering the small distance between the back and front lines of combat before waiting on Kress to step backwards from a strike.

As soon as he did Kat moved into the vacant space, relying on her flexibility to dance around Kress and the mostly ruined blades of the millipede before bringing a hard slam down on the creature's 'head'. It moved with the blow, slamming into the ground and bouncing somewhat, the rest of its body moved like a string that had been flicked, carrying the momentum down and into the wall dissipating a lot of it.

Kat was ready though, before it could recover she slammed her other fan down into the cracked section of chitin. Striking straight down with the weapon vertical rather than horizontal. There was a slight bit of resistance before the fan made its way inside the bug's head. Kat wasn't quite finished though, having her tail follow up slamming it down further and pinning the bug to the floor. Kat stepped back and let time resume, falsely believing it to be over.

Kat was forced to duck backwards as a blade sailed through the place her neck had just been and Kat couldn't help but stumble. She'd used a lot of energy in a short amount of time and no longer had her accelerated thoughts going to help her. The surprise nearly caused her to fall over, and only the instinctual intervention of her tail saved her from hitting the deck.

The bug could clearly still move after Kat destroyed most of what she'd assumed to be its brain. It wasn't having a good time at all though. Its back half was stuck in the wall, its front stuck to the ground and its midsection doing its absolute best to inflict any damage at all on its attackers before expiring. Kress simply backed off, Gareth with him. Kat glanced at the two and followed suit backing off slowly from the struggling insect.

Kat felt time returned to normal as she stepped back. Part of her just wanted to find the wall and relax till her energy returned, but it wasn't quite safe yet as the millipede writhed on the ground in front of them, legs scratching the hard stone of the path. "Nixilei, chance of this thing dying like that?" asked Gareth with seriousness.

Nixilei glanced at the bug carefully, formulating her answer over a few seconds before answering. "I... believe so? It's not a native to the area we're from so I don't recognise it off the top of my head... but that being said... there are a few similar insects... it SHOULD die eventually. The blood loss alone would be enough and I think most of the brain is dead. A few insects can survive that for a while... but it is stuck in the wall. The question isn't 'will it die' I think but 'will it die soon' and to that... I don't really have a good answer."

"Eh, it'll be writhing for a good while I think," said 'Ted'. "They are nasty buggers and while the mind is dead, the body doesn't really know it yet. It'll be going at it for a while if we just leave it... but that's probably safer than trying to get close to it at the moment."

"Yeah maybe, but we'd have to leave Kat's fan stuck there if we did that," said Green. When Kat glanced back to see the Fae, she could also see that the cut had been healed almost completely. There was a faint red line where it had been.

"No, it's fine I can summon them back. I... I'm not quite sure how far away I can be from them actually.. I do know I can summon them from wherever, but it might disappear at some point and will certainly disappear when I summon my fans again," said Kat.

#### [Chapter 657 - 657 Team Performance Review Part 1](#)

With the information that Kat's fans could be retrieved from a distance the arguments against leaving it behind fell away. Gareth pulled up another wall, this one only shoulder height, to corral the writhing insect so they could pass it without fear. Once the wall was up, the party started to shimmy through the small gap. Gareth had a little trouble with his armour, but everyone else had plenty of space. Kat had a slightly more difficult time because of her wings, but it was still very easy. Kat even managed to

acquire Lily once again during the process. The Memphis hardly stirred during the transfer... but she did purr softly for a few moments once back in Kat's arms.

Once everyone was past the stone, 'Ted' tried to return to his place at the front of the party but Gareth put a firm hand on 'his' shoulder and pulled 'him' back. "I believe that in a cave without any turns or splitting paths you need not risk yourself leading us."

*\*Hmm... I see that Gareth is treating 'Ted' as if they're not time but a real person in their own right. I suppose in terms of the Tournament it is best to go along with the act... though I wonder why Thyme didn't make further effort if that was truly the intention? It's not like any effort was made at all to hide the fact that 'Ted' is a dryad.\*?*

Of course, Gareth couldn't hear Kat's internal commentary and continued speaking, now addressing the rest of the group. "So, after action report. Considering Kat is new, I want to hear everyone's thoughts now and not when we make camp. Don't make this just about Kat now, in fact we can save her stuff for last. For now, how did everyone think they did?"

Nixilei cleared her throat and spoke first, "I think I have further determined the need for a proper ranged weapon, or something other than a dagger. While it did make it so I could heal Green immediately, and healing should always be my priority, I had to just stand there while Kress tried to protect me at the start when I really should have been doing something. Maybe a buckler?"

"You say that nearly every time Nix," said Green with a pout. "Every after action report you talk about how you could have done more, but whenever we try to get you an additional weapon it's always, 'do we really have the money' or 'I don't have the time to learn that right now...' can't you just accept healing magic needs a lot of time and effort to keep up with? Not to mention your other jobs or your dagger training. It's FINE Nix."

"I disagree, but understand your complaints," said Nixilei succinctly.

Gareth just sighed at the byplay from the two, having heard almost the same argument four dozen times. Deciding to hop in before it spiralled at all he said, "Well I certainly failed with that rock wall. I simply reacted instinctively and while Kat did well with it, something we'll get to later, it was a mistake on my part to waste so much of my mana summoning a wall to block something I KNEW ate rocks.

"That being said... the reaction was still a good one, and in most situations would be the correct choice of action at our level. At higher levels the wall would be stronger, and likely still correct. I am unsure if, despite the fact it was a bad call, I should endeavour to do anything about it. It really does seem to be a worthwhile reaction. Simply training reaction speed might be the only option."

"Speaking of not changing things," said Green cheerily, "despite getting that cut, I believe I did the correct thing. I traded what is, with Nix's help, a minor injury, for a fairly major blow."

Kress jumped in next, "I think we should have discussed Gareth's actions a bit more, but Green, I think you made a mistake with that trade. At the time, you didn't know boosting the cutting edge with your wind would be enough to cut through the blades at all. While it DID work out, and I agree it was an acceptable trade, the fact you didn't test it out a bit was a needless risk. You simply went for it... and after seeing that Kat failed to cut through the chitin with significantly more strength I think it was the wrong move,"

"I have to back Kress up on this one," added Nixilei with no hesitation agreeing with Kress. It seemed they were all able to be professional when it was called for. Despite Kress' attitude last time, he didn't cause problems during combat at all. "The fact you didn't even test your idea a bit really is a problem. You need to test these things in the future."

Green pouted and looked towards Gareth for support, but he shook his head. "Sorry Green I think they are right on this one. It was worth it, I'm not going to deny that. With Kat on the other side of the wall and no great idea of how long it would take to get her back in the right, or knocked out of it you had to take a chance at crippling the enemy somehow. It was the right call, but it wasn't a perfect call. That's the whole point of this. It's not to point out what you did wrong, but how we can do better... and you really could have done better in a simple way. Testing. Now, can we return to my wall?"

"I have no real complaints about it. Kat used the wall exceptionally well, the instinct is a good one to have, and even if the insect was able to get through it quickly it still delayed it slightly, perhaps just enough for Kress and I to get away. While perhaps there were better options, I can't think of any off the top of my head. You didn't need to be doing something else, and you didn't run out of mana during the fight. It was a good choice," said Nixilei.

Kress made a so-so gesture, "While I don't necessarily disagree with Nixilei, a second round of shrapnel from the ceiling could have become another issue. I don't really know if Kat freezing it made things better or worse, but if there was a bit more power behind some of those chips it could have done some damage. Just one to the back of the head, or a chip on a weapon."

"I'm not sure the shrapnel was that much of a risk..." said Green with a frown on her face as she skipped along. "the wall wasn't too thick and none of the little pieces that big. The speed that would be needed to potentially cause damage would require effort on behalf of the worm thing. I don't think just breaking through the wall could have caused enough speed."

Gareth tapped his chin a few times as he took in the feedback. "I suppose. I see both sides here... I guess I'll have to keep it in mind. Perhaps run a few test once this round is over so we have time to test everything thoroughly. I personally do not know how fast the rock would need to move to cause damage... and even if it was just a bit distracting, in a fight that could still be potentially fatal so its something to bear in mind."

With that, everyone turned their eyes to Kress who looked up at the ceiling before dropping his head. "Frankly, I think I did everything correctly. I took up guard while watching the situation unfold, I took Green's place attacking when I could, and I was the reason Kat moved forward to attack the first centipede, she would have just stayed in place otherwise."

"It could be argued that was the wrong call though," said Nixilei with a slight hint of tension to her words.

Kress shrugged his shoulders, "Better that she move than do nothing."

Gareth and Green glanced at the two but didn't interrupt. "Well unlike you, Kat could probably take a hit from the thing, perhaps you should have been the one to move up," said Nixilei with a raised eyebrow. Kress thoroughly ignored, keeping his eyes forward.



"Maybe... Nix..." Nixilei scowled at Kress' use of Green's nickname for her, "but Kat's fast, at least comparable to Green... and as much as it pains me to admit, I'm not their match when it comes to speed. Perhaps you are right and I should have been the one to move up... but on the other hand, I couldn't have moved fast enough to react to the second bug like Kat. The speed factor is not something you can overlook."

Nixilei glared at the back of Kress' head but Gareth cut in before more words could be exchanged. "We can go over that during Kat's section. Is there anything specifically about Kress' actions and only Kress that we can cover right now?" Gareth's answer was silence.. As annoying as Kress could be, and as incompetent as he seemed last time around, Kress new how to fight a monsters just as well as the rest of them, if not better than some.

#### [Chapter 658 - 658 Team Performance Review Part 2](#)

"Seeing as this is Kat's first real helping of team combat, especially since it was in an enclosed space, I'm sure there were quite a few mistakes. I'd like everyone to point out what they believe to be the most critical mistake that was made, and then we'll have Kat speak on what caused her to make that decision," said Gareth before turning to face Kat, "Now Kat, don't worry too much. While we are going to be pointing out mistakes, I think for your first real fight with us you did well, so nothing we'll have to say is a big condemnation. Who wants to start?"

Green waved her hand like an excited child in the classroom. Seeing this, Gareth just waved a hand in her direction. "Well, I think Kat was a bit slow on the uptake really. She should have charged in and started attacking that insect straight away rather than waiting for Kress to tell her. She's pretty fast and doesn't need to wait around."

Gareth frowned slightly at the 'mistake' suggested by Green but didn't say anything, simply looking towards Kat for her answer. *\*So... am I trying to justify why I did it or explain what I was thinking in the moment? Perhaps both? Hmm...\** "So... something you should know is that I can speed up my thoughts a lot. So much that it makes it look like everyone is moving slowly. My mind can spin up to be much faster than my body so I did spend quite a while thinking about it.

"At the time, I was unsure if I should be watching the back, or moving up to fight with Green. Kress seemed to be on the defensive, but at the same time... I wasn't sure he could really defend against a second millipede. Green also seemed to be doing somewhat well, and with Gareth to help there wasn't a lot of room nearby. I wasn't sure if that space was more valuable than a third attacker...

"And I suppose the big one is that my demonic fire, the purple flames that took out the second one, are quite vicious. I'm not entirely certain I could keep them from damaging you guys. That being said, they are my strongest weapon against most things. With enough demonic fire and some time, everything can fall."

Gareth nodded at Kat's response. "Well reasoned. I think in the future perhaps keeping Kat on the backline might be the best... though I'll admit Green has a point. With the speed you can move at, letting you roam around the battlefield is ideal... this tunnel isn't really the best place for it though. I think in this instance, standing back or moving forward were equally valid options. I don't disagree with Green's statement, but Green, that's how YOU are used to fighting. It might not be the best way to use Kat's talents."

Green gave an easy shrug at the answer, not overly worried. She'd pointed out where she thought Kat had gone wrong from her perspective, and that's really what it was, her perspective. It's how she fought, and seeing Kat, someone with a similar level of speed, not make USE of that speed was a rather big hang up for the Fae. Still, Kat had plenty of other talents and her speed was great, it wasn't her best asset.

While this was going on, Kress was eyeing Gareth and Nixilei, as if hoping they'd speak up. As the group walked and nobody else made a move; Nixilei because she noticed Kress' gaze and Gareth because he was planning to go last. Kress let out a sigh, "I suppose I'll have to be the bad guy in this then. The real problem happened before the fighting even started, you brought your girlfriend along," Kress could see the others starting to bristle but he raised his voice. "NO. You lot CALM DOWN. Just because I'm the only one willing to say it, doesn't mean it isn't a problem. Kat was down an arm for nearly the whole fight. That's a costly mistake, and the little cat didn't even wake up!" *nOvElExt.cOm*

Nixilei glared, "They are magically bound. Kat can't just leave Lily behind, not right now anyway. Taking her along is the ONLY answer."

Kress nodded alongside a shrug, "Ok, I can accept that, somewhat. If that is the case, the issue is that she didn't plan for it well. A backpack or a sling or just... some way to carry around the cat without using her arms is necessary. Or even just a box or something to put off to the side during fights. Or heck, just wake the girl up? I don't want you to think I'm saying this because I don't like her. This is a major problem and hampers her, or after passing Lily off, someone else's combat potential."

Nixilei grit her teeth but didn't argue back knowing he was right. Eyes turned towards Kat who seemed relatively unphased. "I agree with Kress on this one," said Kat, "I didn't really plan for it at all. I thought Lily would be awake more, I also thought she'd be fine on top of my head, but I probably move too fast for her to stay there safely. I also never bring anything with my on Contracts. I just bring my Attire which is something I can summon back to me. The idea of bringing along a backpack or something similar never crossed my mind, and even if I did, I don't think I'd really have thought about putting Lily in one. It would just feel... demeaning perhaps? I don't really think that anymore. Now I think it would be a useful idea... but it's not like I can just conjure a backpack into existence"

Kat paused. Right? I mean... no I doubt it. My school backpack is still in the cupboard... I guess I could try though? Kat focused on her hand trying to summon up her backpack like she would her fans. About thirty seconds past and nothing happened. "What are you trying to do?" asked Gareth.

"Oh... um... I did say 'its' not like I can just conjure a backpack' but I can in fact conjure my fans, and my clothes so I thought I'd give it a try. I didn't think it would work, but I didn't really have anything to lose," said Kat.

Gareth nodded and didn't say anything else, turning to face Nixilei, waiting for her to take a turn at addressing Kat. Nixilei saw this and sighed. "Well, I don't really think you made any serious mistakes Kat. I'll admit, reluctantly, that I agree with Kress but that's not really something you can improve or change, you'll either find a backpack or you won't. Green might be able to weave a basket for you if we find some long grass... but that's not really something you can do. I suppose I could just repeat things...

"Hmm... I suppose if I was to say anything perhaps your choice of cutting through the rock barrier would be it. It was a decent plan, and the bug did follow you, but there was no reason to assume that it would. It could have just as easily turned to go after us, and while the wall didn't fall until the bug crashed, I

doubt it would have stayed standing forever. In a cave, it is imperative you stick together if you can. Semi-intentionally stranding yourself on the other side of one is almost never a good call. I get why you did it... but perhaps keep it in mind for the future."

"Sure thing," said Kat. "I mostly just didn't want to try and fight it in such a small space right next to you and Kress, but yeah. I think a smarter foe wouldn't have been tricked."

Nixilei nodded and looked over towards Gareth, who spoke easily. "Well, taking a note from Nixilei's book, I don't necessarily consider this a problem, but perhaps you could tell us more about your demonic fire and why you chose to use it the way you did?"

Kat sucked in a deep breath. "Ok, sure. Well... the thing you have to understand is that while demonic fire is usually different, it is also quite similar. It'll 'burn' for lack of a better example word, anything it comes into contact with. Now, I can change that, but it's hard. It likes to spread and consume and cause problems if it can. I sent it onto the wall because I knew I could hit that, and then I simply held onto the stray pieces afterwards.

"That was actually a lot harder than I thought it would be but I don't regret the move. The big problem with my flames is that... while technically they only burn what I want, and I have indeed had a friend stick their hand into them unharmed..." Kat glanced pointedly at Kress, "I wasn't really consciously doing that. I'm only just now learning to control it. So... it was mostly a way to make certain the bug was the only thing that got hit.. The wall was a nice target and it very kindly dove straight into the flames. Even that small amount that first covered it was a nice to be its end..."

#### [Chapter 659 - 659 Dwarven Brothers](#)

The discussion continued with the fight being analysed from all sorts of angles. Discussing alternate courses of actions for each of the participants. Kat... didn't really understand the point. Most of the alternatives were worse, or equally valid at best. Nothing discussed really stood out as 'must do next time'. Her best guess was it helped with time cohesion by hearing about what they'd do in slightly different scenarios.

For Kat, the best thing that came out was the decision to make her... mostly a solo unit. She didn't know how to fit in with team and rather than trying to force something it was decided Kat's job would be finding the largest enemy, if there were multiple, and isolated, cover it in demonic fire, and just generally keep it out of the way as long as it was needed. In engagements with larger groups Kat would be responsible for diving into the backline and causing as much havoc as possible. In these instances, Nixilei would keep hold of Lily, if necessary, as she needed her hands the least to do her part. Well, that and she was the best at dodging after Green.

'Ted' was mostly left out of these discussions, and didn't try to involve 'himself' either. They would occasionally comment on a particularly shiny piece of rock, or direct them to a split in the tunnel instead of continuing forward, but didn't do too much otherwise. Their 'spirit of adventure' didn't seem to be dampened though. Despite walking behind Gareth, 'Ted's' steps were still rather bouncy, obviously relying on dryad body trickery to actually bounce, and the grin on their face hadn't disappeared at all. Occasionally they'd pull out a lantern or pickaxe to swing by their side for a while, but inevitably they'd get 'distracted' and it would hit someone and a few glares later the offending instrument would be secured away in the seemingly bottomless pockets on the outfit.

The further they went, the more the cave started to open up. The ceiling slowly stretching until such a point where Kat could easily fly without worry of hitting anything, even if the sides hadn't really expanded all that much. It was when crystals started appearing on the ceiling, providing a soft blue glow to everything, that Kat started to feel like she was missing something. She flew up and looked around, but couldn't see anything noteworthy before the next corner. The fact nobody said anything assured her all was fine.

A few more twists and turns later and the cave practically exploded in size. The walls nearly vanished and the ceiling was so high that the blue crystals turned it into a slightly funny looking sky. The big marquee tent in the distance the only real landmark in the room. The ground was covered in a soft green moss that made you think of open fields. In fact the whole room did. Even the soft flow of air that brushed around everybody helped try to sell the fact this was a pleasant field on a nice day. The fact it was underground seemed almost lost on the scenery, though easily remembered by onlookers.

"Welcome to base camp mates. Just head on down to that big tent over there to get yourselves sorted. We're waiting for everyone before any big announcements get made so... head on down and don't keep anyone waiting!" said 'Ted' before dashing off into the distance with speed 'he' never revealed before this point. The rest of the party looked towards each other before heading towards the object in the distance.

It didn't take too long to arrive, the tent was set up in the centre of the room, and as large as it was, it was still an underground cave. It took perhaps five minutes of jogging to reach, though they heard the sound of other people long before that. Raucous laughter and the occasional heavy thumps. What those sounds indicated together was beyond Kat. Well, at least until the party pulled open the tent flaps.

Now, the first thing to note is that the tent was clearly larger on the inside than it appeared. The first room was a large sitting area at least twice the size the marquee appeared to be. Tables and chairs were strewn about, with more than enough seats for all the groups twice over. Currently, there appeared to be only one other group in attendance, a group made solely of dwarves.

At first glance, they all looked the same, reminding Kat of the all elven group, but closer inspection revealed that was simply a deliberate obfuscation on the dwarves' part. They all had a small metal shield the size of a buckler with the numbers 1-5 engraved on them, alongside a full set of plate mail that easily rivalled Gareth's in quality. They all had large helmets that likely blocked their sightlines somewhat but made it hard to see their faces.

In terms of weapons, each dwarf had a dagger at their side, and three of them had maces of appropriate size. The other two had crossbows on their backs beside their shields and a short sword on their hips. Finally, if they could be called weapons, was a bandolier filled with flasks. Each dwarf had a full bandolier, but the flasks contained liquids of varying colour. The most common was a thick brown sludge looking mixture, with the second most common being a clear but obviously viscous liquid that could nearly be qualified as a paste with grains of what looked like sand imbedded in it. They also each had a belt with two large pouches that sat somewhat in the middle and slightly towards their backs, bulging with their contents.

In terms of appearance, they all had long beards and short hair, though the short hair thing might just be because the helmets were hiding the true extent of the hair on their heads. At first glance it looked like a

dusty grey colour but closer inspection proved that to be a dye... and perhaps some coal dust. The dwarfs with 1, 3 and 4 on their shields had undertones of brown in their beards they could be seen, mostly in the new growth and in a few stray hairs. The dwarf with the number 5 on their shield seemed to have a couple of blonde hairs, thought that might have been a trick of the light. Number 2 appeared to actually have the colour as their natural hair.

*\*Ok, I get dyeing your hair all the same colour... but why not dye it brown to match the 3 people with brown hair? Am I missing something here? It's not like they don't have brown colouring, that flask they all have at least one of looks like nearly the right colour. Wait... \**

Kat counted the viscous potion and noticed that 2 had none, 5 only had one and the other three had two bottles. *\*Is that the hair dye? Why is it clear?! I don't understand this. \*?*

The final thing each dwarf had was a hip flask that looked rather small. That was of course, because they were dumping the contents into tankards that looked to hold twice the amount the flask should. Clearly, they were enchanted, and Kat thought it was rather appropriate for dwarfs to each have a magic flask for alcohol. The closest dwarf, dwarf 3, shouted, "Ay laddies, look we got the next team coming in, and they don't have a dwarf. Two fairies, two humans and a..." Three looked at Kat for a few seconds, "Ah they be the team with the demon I see. Still, a surprise they got through the blade worms so quick with just surface dwellers"

*\*Why do they SOUND like dwarfs? Do they actually sound like that? Am I the reason? No... no it can't be because I know Kara said SHE was the one making herself sssound like that... so what does this mean? How do accents work? Maybe I should try talking to other people on Earth that know different languages. Maybe that would answer some questions. Also... why are they called blade worms? They aren't worms at all, they looked like they were from either the mili or centi pede family. \*?*

While Kat was pondering, Gareth was already stepping forward. "Indeed, we finished them up with only a bit of trouble. How long have you guys been here?"

"Eh, maybe ten minutes?" said Five. "We mostly just sat down. Thought about taking our armour off... but the dryad never actually said we weren't on the clock. It was all still part of the setup for getting here. Didn't want to chance an attack just yet. Plus, we're used to the armour."

Gareth took a nearby chair. "Yup, no what you mean. It's a bit much at first but once you can fight in it, relaxing in armour for a bit isn't any real trouble. I see you've stocked up on booze for this. We didn't really think to bring anything like that."

Two shrugged, "Can't go anywhere without a good pint. I suppose most humans wouldn't understand, though I am surprised you didn't bring any water. Sure neither did we but..." Two trailed off.

Gareth grimaced. "We did ask about that and were told only weapons and armour... but perhaps you're right. Water might have been necessary."

Nixilei spoke up this time, "Perhaps but there is a stack of water barrels over there," the dwarves all whipped their heads around in surprise as they gazed at the water barrels like a personal offence.

[Chapter 660 - 660 A Beary Cool Team](#)

After pointing out the existence of water to the group of the dwarves, the main party went around and introduced themselves by name. Once that was done, Kress asked, "Well are you guys going to tell us your names?"

"Nay," said all the dwarves together.

"Wait really?" asked Green in surprise.

"Aye" chorused the dwarves again.

"Well... ok then..." said Kress oddly before taking it upon himself to choose another nearby table. Still close enough to yell out, but far enough to make listening in a problem... for people other than Kat. A shame the dwarves weren't really talking about anything important. Once everyone was seated Kress said, "I know people say dwarves all look the same but this is ridiculous."

"They're doing it on purpose though," said Kat easily.

"What?" asked Kress confused.

Kat raised an eyebrow as she glanced around to see everyone else was as confused as Kress. Seeing this, she explained the differences she could spot between them all as well as her suspicions about their hair dye. "What an interesting strategy," said Nixilei at the end of Kat's explanation.

"Does it really help though?" asked Green, "I mean, sure we don't really know which one is which, especially if they swap around their shields... but like... does it matter all that much when they all have visible weapons and clearly lack a spell caster?"

"Actually why is it they don't have a caster of any kind?" asked Kat, "I assumed it was sort of mandatory?"

Nixilei made a 'so-so' gesture, "I suspect based on the bandoliers that one of them is an alchemist. My guess is they loaded up on useful herbs for whichever one of them is actually the alchemist and that's how they keep their health up. It's actually a rather interesting choice. A lot of potions don't keep all that well, but ingredients do. Taking the alchemist along, especially if they know how to fight, means they can craft potions in down times while having a proper fighter for most situations.

"Honestly if I was a normal healer with at most basic staff training or we didn't have Kat being Kat, I'd say we would be in a spot of trouble. I can't believe I didn't consider the potential benefit of taking up alchemy... then again I don't really have the talent for it..." Nixilei sighed, "nevermind. Point is, they're actually a strong team as is but, no, I don't understand the point of the numbering system."

Everyone nodded along with Nixilei's explanation. It made a lot of sense though ultimately how true it would be remained to be seen. While in theory having an extra combatant was a big step up... if they weren't really up to the level the rest of the group was there was a good chance they'd just drag everyone else down. If they could keep up remained to be seen... but the fact they managed to make it to this round did say a bit about the quality of their team.

"Kat... could you explain how you tell them all apart?" asked Green. Kat glanced over at the Fae and thought for a few moments before nodding. Kat quickly went on to explain where the largest patches of undyed hair could be found on each dwarf, something Green happily took in before testing the

knowledge herself by looking for those spots. It was surprisingly easy once she knew she could find undyed hairs and it wasn't just a trick of the light.

After that the group settled down a bit and found the food storage area. It was past the tent flap next to the water barrels and contained an unappealing mix of trail rations, dried fruits, smoked meats and hard biscuits. Kat wasn't hungry and simply skipped the meal, but after encouragement from Gareth the rest of the group did have eat a meal.

It was shortly after they were finishing that up that the flap connecting the tent and the outside opened up to reveal the next group, this one much more varied than the dwarves. The three people standing at the front all had leather outfits on and looked mostly similar. They had the same emerald eyes, same nose shape, same colour of hair... the issue preventing conclusive relation was the fact that all three were from the beat tribes and while two had pointed fox or wolf ears, Kat wasn't yet sure, the third had adorable little bear ears. The bear, and one of the wolf beastkin were female while the final wolf was a man.

The bear woman had large gauntlets on her arms that looked much too large for someone of her size. The rest of her outfit was thick leather spread out around sensitive areas but allowing for a good deal of movement if pressed. She had the same dark black hair as her potential siblings and was flat enough to use her chest as a cutting board... the muscles Kat could see on the girls arms also implied the rest of her was similarly muscled under her leather.

The wolf siblings, who clearly were siblings at least, seemed to be mirrors of each other in many ways. They both had a sword on opposing hips, left for the man, right for the woman. The man's leather was dyed a reddish orange while the woman's was dyed a blueish green. The woman seemed relaxed while the man seemed tense. They both had long hair, but for the woman it was swept off to the left, and for the man it was to the right.

Behind them was a Fae, easily spotted because of her bright blue hair and the wings Kat could see thanks to her True Sight. She had a close-fitting robe on with large sleeves that looked a little like a kimono and a dress had a child together. The lower half was platted and spread out somewhat, but she still had a sash around the waist to keep it all together. The large staff carried on her back made it easy to guess at her weapon.

Finally, the last individual was a male elf that looked rather regal. Long flowing robes, the light from outside of the tent leaking in, long golden blonde hair... and standing at about five feet tall which rally did ruin the look a good deal. They had a staff as well, though were using it more like a cane at the moment because of the large cut on their left side.

"Hey Nixilei, do you know why the elf hasn't been healed?" whispered Kat as she leaned over.

The new group was still looking around and getting there bearings as Nixilei answered, "I believe I mentioned it before but as a healer it is rather difficult to heal yourself. There is a separate class of magic for it. While it's not impossible to heal yourself it takes a lot more concentration and a lot more mana. I'd guess that either he's out of mana or they didn't want to take the time loss necessary to deal with it."

The group walked over to stand between Gareth's team and the dwarves. The bear woman came forward first, though Kat was feeling a bit awkward calling the beastkin 'bear woman' because other than the ears and likely tail she couldn't see, the woman didn't look bearish at all. "Greetings to you all, my name is Walanella Margund, but please call me Nell. These are my siblings, Bonas," Nell pointed to the female beastkin, "and Nabras," the guy, "along with Ellenell," the elf "and finally out faithful Fae, Blue."

*\*Ok! Why does Nixilei have a normal name... or at least not a colour... but Green and BLUE?! Really? I have complaints.\** While Kat was mentally questioning the sanity of the author, Gareth stood up and introduced himself as well as the rest of the party. Once that was done everyone looked to the dwarves who once again did their routine and dismissed the requests to provide names. Seeing this, the newer group sat down at the table next to Gareth's team.

The elf took up a two chairs, one for sitting another for resting their leg. Nixilei glanced at Gareth, silently asking if she should offer to heal the injury. It was a long cut, and if they fought the same monsters likely from one of the many legs, but rather shallow all things considered. Nixilei suspected it wasn't outside of the elf's power to heal it, and offering would be a way to at least make a friendly impression. When Gareth eventually nodded, Nixilei asked, "Would you like me to heal that for you?"

The elf nodded instantly, "Yes please. I'm sure you understand the annoyance of being unable to heal your own injuries and I thank you for the offer." Somehow even when accepting help for an injury they still managed to look twice as regal as the elves Kat met last time she was in this dimension.. She wondered if there was a special trick to it.