

DEMONS 711

Chapter 711 In a Detached Manor

As soon as Kat got comfortable on her seat, which as it was the conner of a bed that compressed rather well was more difficult than one might think, a puff of smoke happened and a Thyme appeared. This one was in different attire though, they were wearing a plain black wizard robe, but instead of a pointed hat they had a turban and instead of a wizard staff they had a lasso. Frankly, Kat wasn't entirely sure what to classify this Thyme as. There was no obvious through line in Thyme's theming.

"Congratulations on completing this round, Kat and Blue. You both managed to find a bedroom to call your own first in this round. Nice job skipping the chess set. A few teams are still there actually. I didn't think anyone would actually find that shortcut of mine, so good job on that front. You were the only team to find it, though Nixilei and Nel managed to do really well against the chess set they are having poor luck against the random nature of the mansion.

"I am here to tell you the round is well and truly over and I welcome you to sleep or relax as you will. You cannot leave this room as it has been disconnected from the rest of the house to prevent others stumbling over it," Thyme pointed to the door they hadn't been through yet, "through that door is a full bathroom and shower with a large enough bath for two people to sit in comfortably, about the size of a spa.

"The dressers have some spare clothes, and if you leave your current robes in the hamper in the bathroom they'll be cleaned by the time you wake up tomorrow if you so wish. It's a purely optional service and they won't be cleaned until everyone makes it to a room, or I class that team as 'failing' the round so you don't have to worry about your clothes ending up in the laundry where others might find them,"

Kat blushed slightly at the idea, not having realised that could be a problem at all. *I might be used to cleaning other people's clothes but I went out of my way to wash my own for the most part. It was weird when they were all kids back then and I still find it a bit weird now. I'm glad I don't need to wash anything, and gladder still that if I did there is no chance my teammates finding my clothes. Praise demonic attire.* *novelNExt.com*

"Hey Thyme... if we'd just gotten to the room would I have been healed?" asked Blue.

Thyme made a so-so gesture, "Yes but I would have waited until just before the next task assuming there wasn't anything that would cause permanent damage. That way you would have had a poor sleep as punishment for this round... and I might have docked you some points from your final score depending on how things worked out."

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Blue frowned at that, "Thyme... what do you mean 'depending on how things worked out?' don't you have a point system in place already?"

Thyme nodded easily, "Of course I do Blue. It comes down to how much time I'm willing to add or subtracted. You both correctly guessed that this was a time trial and while I am willing to take away and

add seconds based on performance in certain rooms, only by so much. I haven't looked over everything you both did, just watched more generally so I don't know how much it will effect your final time.

"It's nothing major to worry about though, you both finished first and despite this conversation running a bit longer, nobody else has finished yet either. I'm not changing things more than a minute either way based on performance, so whatever happens you've still won this round,"

"I see..." mumbled Blue as she trailed off in thought. Kat personally thought Thyme's way of going about things made a decent amount of sense.

"What do we get points for?" asked Kat.

"I won't give you specifics, but primarily for how efficiently you dealt with rooms. For example, when you were both tied up I was judging how long that specific room took you, as well as any creative solutions you could come up with. I... I was not expecting slicing of your hands as a tactic but it got the job done..." even Thyme shivered slightly looking back at the thought. Sure, to Thyme losing an arm, a leg, a couple dozen fake bodies, really it was nothing, but Thyme was well aware of how weird it was for a being that could only have two of those to just cut them off even if they could be reattached.

Kat shrugged, "It seemed like a good idea that time, still does," was her answer.

Thyme sighed, "Yes well, sadly I have to give you points for creativity. On the other hand, I'd probably deduct points for your poor dancing during the ballroom song, though I probably won't take the full set of points from Blue, because she couldn't hear the music. That's the sort of details I need to look at closer. From my other viewpoints I know you danced your way through the ballroom, somewhat poorly, but not the exactly how badly, if it was bad at all.

"Hmm... how do I explain this... it's... it's a bit like I'm guessing running is for you both as more standard humanoids. You know how to run, and you can run better when you practice with it... but when you're actually running there isn't much that you do intentionally, you just run, one foot in front of the other. For me, I can choose how much a copy of myself is just sort of running on instinct or how much of ME is actually there.

"For the servants, I gave them orders essentially and just let them do their things. Much like how when you run, you tell your legs to get going rather than playing conductor with each individual muscle fibres."

"Is it possible for you to control them all individually?" asked Kat noticing that Thyme had tried to make their power seem like it was less micro control and more macro control... but Thyme also said it was a choice.

Thyme's face split into a Cheshire grin at the question, "I can indeed Kat. I have a limit, and I won't be spreading it around, but I do have one. I can increase that with the use of time magic though, speeding up my mind or creating a minor time loop where I act out each part one after the other. Of course, I can also handle more than the one body by default, but that's not how I really stretch it. Any other questions?"

Kat started to think of one when Blue threw a pillow at the back of her head. Turning around slowly Kat saw Blue rolling over towards the edge of the bed. When she popped herself up she noticed Kat's look

and said, "What? I want to bath and then sleep. If I let you, you'll just spend the rest of the night asking Thyme questions. The fact that you don't look tired at all says it already. I'm not a demon and I NEED sleep. I might not be Green, but it's been a long day,"

Kat sighed and waved Blue off who gave her a raised eyebrow before heading to the bath. "Well, seeing as I've been told off by my partner... I'll just ask if I can hang out with Lily?" queried Kat.

Thyme nodded and a point in space was opened before Lily was pulled through. She was still sleeping on the cushion Thyme had placed her on back before the first round. "As you can see, she's fine, but still sleeping. You can cuddle up with her if you want though. She'll just have to leave when the next round starts because you chose to leave her out of it. I have to keep things consistent for everyone else after all,"

Kat nodded and happily took the pillow from Thyme. Kat placed the pillow down softly on the bedside table, knowing she wanted to have shower first and the risk of Blue just flopping down on the bed, potentially with Lily there, was too high. Unlikely, but still too high. "Thanks Thyme,"

"It's no trouble at all Kat. She's been easy to look after, though..." Thyme trailed off wondering if they should explain but shrugged before continuing, "ok, I want to preface this with the fact this is just my guess... but I suspect Lily hasn't actually been getting much rest since you handed her over to me. With the link stretched and her not nearby you her body has been keeping itself asleep to prevent any issues arising. Oh sure, she was clearly tired when I checked her over and was a bit sleep deprived, but under normal circumstances she should have woken up already. Not a major concern... but I imagine she'll wake up some time during the night. When that happens, tell her to be more mindful of her sleep in the future,"

Chapter 712 Cute sorta Lily Interlude

For those who have forgotten [These are Lily's thoughts]

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Lily found herself coming out of a long sleep. Part of her mind wanted to just go back to the quiet darkness, to find more chances to rest. The more human part of her though was panicking. She could tell she had been asleep for quite some time now. [Urgh... Kat what happened?]

Lily waited for a few moments, eyes closed, but she didn't hear any response. Slight panic rising up within her Lily poked the link between them and found it was bursting with colours and sights and sounds. It was all mangled together though blue and purple featured prominently within the odd mix she could taste.

The fact that she was tasting colours was, to Lily anyway, a sign that something wasn't quite right. Hackles rising, Lily let a single eye open only to find herself in an unfamiliar room and it was dark. The only light the slightest touch of silver from the moon. Enough for a Memphis, to see, but not to see all that much. Lily was started to get agitated and took a reflexive sniff, an instinct ingrained into her new body, to try and find more information.

What she found caused her to instantly relax. The scent of Kat filled her, it was everywhere and Lily felt herself calming back down. Her puffed-out fur relaxing back against her body, her tense muscles relaxing

completely and Lily flopped back down onto something soft. Taking slightly better stock of her body now, Lily guessed she was on a pillow or a bed of some kind. She was leaning towards bed because she could feel herself being hugged... and now she was paying attention there was also a faint pressure on her back. Likely Kat's wing resting over her.

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Another sniff, this time focused on the more immediate surroundings revealed it was certainly Kat that was holding her... but there was someone else here. A slight twinge of jealousy rose within her before she crushed it back down. [Don't be stupid Lily. Kat wouldn't cheat on you. Even if she did, she certainly wouldn't do it while snuggled up against you. Just find out what's going on, and move.]

Lily wiggled out from Kat's hold, slipping forward with considerable grace she knew was all the bodies. Lily wouldn't have called herself clumsy but she certainly wasn't graceful, or silent when walking. Once freed from the warm embrace Lily could stop the wave of sadness that radiated through her before she slammed down on it. [What are you, five? Kat's right there. You just aren't being held by her and YOU did that to yourself. Why are you being such a baby about it?]

What Lily didn't notice, was that projecting multiple negative thoughts about herself down the link, even if unintentionally, was starting to register in Kat's sleeping mind. She wasn't awake just yet, but she could feel something wasn't quite right and was slowly creeping towards the waking world. If Lily continued distress herself, Kat would likely awaken in response. **NOVELNEX.COM**

Lily, not realising how close she was to waking Kat, for if she knew, she would have done anything to keep Kat in peaceful slumber. Waking her girlfriend up was not on her to-do list. What was on the list, was figuring out what was going on. Looking around, Lily didn't see anything noteworthy around. It looked just like a normal room.

Eventually, her gaze turned towards the area she suspected she'd find something distasteful, and Lily was only very technically correct. There was a brief tinge of annoyance when she spotted the fae sleeping near Kat, that was vastly overshadowed by the surprise and joy that followed. Kat could see that whoever this Fae was, and the blue hair made it unlikely to be Green, they weren't touching Kat at all. Which clearly took a bit of effort.

Kat was currently face down on the bed with both of her wings stretched out. Now, this bed was larger than a normal king-sized affair, more a bed fit for a king than a king sized bed as she knew it. Even still, Blue wasn't exactly provided with a lot of room to stretch out. If it was Nell in her place there wouldn't have been room at all. As it was though, Blue was a rather thin and managed to have her own oasis on the bed. This was helped by the fact that neither of them seemed to move at all in their sleep.

Lily sniffed the room again looking for anything else that might tell her what was going on when she found the strangest scent. It was like smelling the open woods, surrounded by trees and nature... except it was all concentrated to the area just in front of the table. Hopping off the bed, Lily sniffed at the area Thyme has appeared to explain things to Kat and Blue.

Lily couldn't quite work out what it was. This was because she'd never smelled anything like Thyme before and it just didn't occur to her that it could be a person. The smell of nature was just that strong. Sadly for Lily, the annoyance that came with being unable to figure out the answer to a puzzle, while

very natural, was enough to set Kat's consciousness over the edge. This alone would never be enough... but the third strum on the strings of their link. Well, that certainly was.

Kat sat up, not really needing to wake herself up. She just was awake, let herself sit up slowly. Something was wrong, and she knew that... but Thyme would keep things safe. They had explicitly stated they weren't in a round right now and that it was time to relax. Thyme was many things, but a liar they were not. So Kat was trying to figure out where the unease was coming from.

The steady stream of annoyance she felt couldn't possibly be the answer though. *But why am I annoyed? I was having a nice dream and I got to sleep cuddled up with Lily.* That's when Kat felt her thought process crack. She'd just sat up. She'd just sat up without any extra weight in her arms. She'd just sat up and she didn't know WHERE Lily was. Panic started to build, bleeding into the link, and it was only a confused, [Kat?] that halted things from escalating.

Lily... where are you exactly?

[Kat, I'm just at the foot of the bed. I didn't know where I was or what was going on so I was investigating a little bit,] thought Lily as she launched herself back onto the bed. When the little Memphis came into Kat's view, she was very tempted to just dive onto Lily and hug her into oblivion but she held back, letting Lily come to her.

She was swiftly rewarded with Lily crawling up onto her lap and curling up. Kat decided that everything was right with the world and started to calm down. She didn't notice it, but her eyes had been glowing and her demonic energy was itching to be used just moments ago. Once Lily was in position Kat started to carefully run her fingers through Lily's fur, making sure to get underneath her wings and around her horns, eliciting soft purrs from the Memphis.

I'm glad you're ok. You've been asleep for quite a while.

[Yeah... I could sort of tell. Sorry. I didn't realise I wasn't getting enough sleep so... yeah sorry for worrying you,]

I'll live. Thyme has been looking after you so I haven't been constantly worried about your safety or that you might wake up randomly.

[Wait what? Why did you have Thyme look after me? I was kind of hoping to be able to actually help a bit while I was here...]

*Well, there hasn't been too much for you to do honestly. That combined with the fact that well... it was just nice for you to be safe. I trust you to watch my back, and I wouldn't be surprised if you took an attack or two for me in an attempt to keep me safe... but Lily I don't really need that. I'm very tough, and I regenerate. What I actually need is ranged support.

I can't throw my flames far without losing control over them. My dream ability isn't really useful because trying to use just the fog is horribly draining and potentially deadly if I was to reform in something. My true sight seems to have been accounted for... I can't really do much other than rely on my strength. If there was a way to spread my fire around... well it still wouldn't be useful right now because I promised not to use it but... hmm...

The best way to spread them accurately would be to set a stone on fire and throwing that at people or something. Hmm... actually considering I can summon my fans back to me... Lily make a note of that. I think there is testing to be done once we get back to Earth. Or... maybe wait till the next adventure. Don't want to start a magical fire in someone's house. Especially one not even I can really put out.*

Chapter 713 Dust Plate

After Kat's statement about the risk of forest fires there wasn't much else to really get into. Kat would have happily narrated everything she'd been up to so far but Lily was already yawning and Kat felt she owed it to the rest of her team to have the best sleep possible for the tournament. Well, that and she didn't want to wake Blue. Using mental communication meant it wasn't a big risk but it did weight slightly on her mind. So, the two curled back up together and fell asleep again till morning.

This actually meant Blue was the first one awake the next morning. When the light started streaming in through the window acting like a natural alarm clock as the sun or fake sun, whatever Thyme was using seemed to concentrate right on her eyes. Groaning Blue got up and rolled out of bed before looking around and finding Kat peacefully asleep. Face down. Avoiding the accursed light.

"Clearly she had the right idea," grumbled Blue as she headed for the bath to wake herself up more. It wasn't until after she got out that Lily started to wake up, bringing Kat with her. The pair managed to wake up just in time for Blue to pull on her robes. They didn't see anything they shouldn't, though Blue paused as if she was being caught doing something naughty, arms halfway to closing the dresser.

Kat just gave her a raised eyebrow as Lily looked over with a similarly curious expression. "Yes?" asked Blue confused.

"That's what I want to ask, why did you freeze? We just woke up. Why do you look like you got caught with your hand in the cookie jar or something?" asked Kat.

"I... I..." Blue stammered trying to find a good excuse. It was just instinct really, she was getting dressed and her mindset hadn't quite shifted back to normal. Kat and Lily had just woken up though, and didn't realise how close to a show they'd were. All they saw was Blue standing weirdly over a drawer. "Don't worry about it, please."

Kat raised an eyebrow. *Well now I really want to know what's going on. Clearly you're hiding something and last time I let Sky betray us. Well, it wasn't really betrayal but I let her get away with putting Grace and I in danger. Still...*

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Before Kat could make a decision regarding how appropriate it would be to push Blue, Thyme summoned themselves back into the room grabbing all the intention. This time they had an old set of plate mail armour that was clearly a size too small. The joints didn't line up nicely revealing slips of green fleshy bark. The armour itself had scratches all over it. Most looked like they'd been buffed out somewhat leaving only the slightest imprints but were easily spotted by two sets of enhanced eyes.

Thyme carried a halberd in one hand and a tower shield in the other. They stood tall, with dirt and grime and what certainly looked like dried blade caked over the outfit. The only thing preventing Thyme from looking as ragged as the armour was the distinct lack of these substances anywhere else. It was only the

armour, making it look more like Thyme had stolen it from somewhere or was using it as a prop instead of real armour.

"Come forth ye na?ves!" said Thyme in a weird mix of a French and Danish accent. Kat wasn't quite sure how she knew it was Danish, considering she wasn't sure she'd ever heard a Danish person speak, but somehow she knew, and none of it made any more sense for knowing that fact. "The next round awaits you!"

"I have questions," said Kat seriously.

"Well I don't have answers," returned Thyme with a smile and a clap.

At the sound of Thyme's hands clapping together a bright light coated Kat's vision before she felt herself being dragged into teleportation. When she was spat out the other side, it was onto a dirt floor on a raised platform. Looking around there wasn't anything else. Just, dirt and all the contestants from all four teams.

Thyme summoned themselves back into the centre before tripling in size to speak louder instead of using a microphone or a spell like a normal person, "Welcome to the next round!"

The ground started to shake and Kat found herself being moved. The dirt shifted as she was sent flying over to a grouping of the Men With Hats and her own team members. Kat stumbled slightly when the dirt escalator ground to a stop.

Lily? Kat asked somewhat concerned as she noted her girlfriend wasn't anywhere nearby. She'd disappeared at some point. [I'm fine. I'm in a room with sitting on a pillow, there's some food and water nearby, in both a cat bowl and a plate and I've got a few big glowing screens showing me what's going on.]

Oh, that's nice. Thought Kat as she relaxed noticeably, looking around at the other groups. The dirt stadium was moderately large, about half the size of a football field, though larger in the sides to compensate for the oval shape.

[Oh, sorry, a Thyme just popped in and said I won't be able to talk to you once the round starts. If that gets too hard Thyme offered to just let me go back to sleep. Which... I mean, I don't necessarily like the idea and I feel fine, not tired really... but if that's what needs to happen I'm not too bothered I guess,]

Kat frowned, *I don't like the fact that you're being forced back to sleep.* She could also feel the shrug Lily sent back. [Thyme just said it's because I'm not allowed to interfere. Commenting or freaking out or whatever clearly constitutes interference and I can't say that's wrong. I imagine if it was safe Thyme would temporarily cut or mute the link but I'd imagine that probably isn't the case.]

At least this will be good practice for not sending me every one of your thoughts? Offered Kat trying to project an air of cheerfulness he didn't truly feel. Of course it failed spectacularly because unlike the mental sharing part where sharing just some thoughts was somewhat easy, the emotional component was much harder to adjust. Lily did get some cheer, but the undercurrent of unease was very apparent as well.

Kat's thoughts were pulled away from Lily when Thyme's voice boomed out again, "Welcome welcome one and all. Now that you've had a chance to centre yourselves I can speak on this round. Currently, two

teams are tied for first place, 'Men With Hats' and 'Demon and the Misfits' together they can pull further ahead, but as they are paired for this round we will not find a winner between the two.

"After this we have 'The Wild Ones' and then 'The Numbers' coming up last. Still, if they can pull out a victory right here, right now, it could be anyone's game... probably. Anyway, that's not important to you RIGHT NOW. What you need right at this moment is to prepare yourselves for a good old fashion BRAWL!" *novelNext.Com*

The ground shook as their dirt platform started to rise. Kat held her gown, tail letting her balance well now that she was prepared. Most others managed alright, Green had to lean on Gareth... but that was probably more a case of want then true need, or perhaps just a different need. Once the platform had further raised and it was clearly separated from the ground Thyme sucked in a deep breath to continue.

"You've been separated into two teams. You'll both have five minutes to strategise then you'll be turned loose onto each other. Knockout occurs when your opponents fall unconscious, they become unable to battle in some other way, such as freezing them completely solid, or tying them up with rope, or trapping them in a hole, for at least five seconds in every case. It's not much of a trap if they can deal with it so swiftly. Additionally, anyone who falls off the platform is considered to have lost. It doesn't matter if you can fly, or move the dirt to catch yourself after you fall. If you leave the ground near the edges, you're out,"

Thyme waited for this information to sink in, staring out at the contestants through the slitted eyehole in their armour so you couldn't properly see where they were looking. It was all up to the point of the helmet to give you a clue, though as Kat knew Lily had multiple viewing angles, she could also guess Thyme was watching from other places.

When people started fidgeting Thyme snapped their fingers, the ground rumbled again and vines shot out. They moved exceptionally fast, faster then Kat could with the band suppressing her and maybe faster then she was even without it. The vine grabbed her leg and pulled her into... the elven team member, the one with a snow globe.

Kat watched as the vines circled their legs and bound them together. She gave it a light tug and found a surprising amount of give. *What is Thyme's plan with this?*

Chapter 714 Like a Three Legged Race... but with SWORDS!

"Now, I'm sure you're all wondering why you've just been tied together. Perhaps asking yourselves where I might be going with this? Well, I remind everyone that the theme for this round of the Tournament is COOPERATION. So, I thought an all out brawl is a bit standard, but if you throw in some jolly cooperation things get much better. To keep everything interesting, that vine binding you all to your partner is somewhat tough, but not enough to stand up to a weapon strike or both of you pulling each other in the wrong direction more than a few times.

"If the vines holding you together get destroyed in any way, well, then you're a Nigel No Friends and we can't have that. Leaving your partner behind isn't in the spirit of cooperation is it? So keep your enemies close, but your partners closer! Good luck with your planning and praise the sky!" finished Thyme as they posed, reaching up to the clouds before vanishing in a flash of light.

Well, I suppose that answers things. “Um... hello...” said Kat turning herself as best she could to face the elf she was now tied to, “I’m Kat, and I guess we’re working together what’s your name?”

“Kevin,” said... well Kevin.

Kat looked the elf up and down, trying not to focus on the snowglobe hat and wondering how careful she needs to be of it. *I really hope that my horns don’t knock into that and crack it or something. If that’s just normal glass it won’t need a lot of force... surely it can’t be normal glass. What was that hardness scale? Would my horns scratch diamond? Why am I asking myself this. Oh right, to distract myself from the fact that the fantasy pretty boy elf is named ‘Kevin’ of all things. Even Kress has a more fantasy name.*

“So... any plans?” asked Kat hoping to distract herself from the myriad of questions she had like, what was up with his name, why did his spear wobble like it was made out of jelly and was it useful, what’s with the hat? Still, Kat didn’t think it was the time or place for any of these questions.

“Hmm...” mumbled Kevin as he looked out over the battle field. He spotted Nel and nodded, “I think, if you are confident in your strength, the bear girl should be our target. She is strong, and frankly I can’t really tell the dwarves apart even after working with them last round,”

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“There are actually a few ways to tell...” said Kat but saw Kevin just shrug at her. “Ok fine, I agree that it probably doesn’t matter. Even if you can tell them apart... I haven’t really seen evidence that any of them are much better than any others. Then again, it really wasn’t that kind of challenge when we worked together with them.”

Kevin nodded, “Indeed. They have similar enough weapons and the alchemist won’t have time to make any concoction during such a hectic battle. If we see that happening I’m sure someone will go out of their way to stop them. We can if we’re the closest.”

Kat nodded while Kevin tapped his free foot a few times. “Actually, who were you paired with last round? I was paired with Dwarf Three, but I can’t really tell you anything you don’t already know about them. Used a mace well, didn’t have to use any potions. Can’t play chess to save their life...”

Hmm... how much do I want to reveal about Blue? I... I think this is the final round right? Wait no it can’t be because if we win it’ll be a tie... but I doubt Blue’s team will participate if that’s the case. Plus, what can I really tell him? She’s a water mage? He’ll figure that out quickly enough. “Blue is a water mage and fairly accurate with a water bullet spell. That’s the only one she needed to use,” answered Kat.

“How good is she at chess?” asked Kevin. Kat raised a confused eyebrow at the question. *What the heck does that matter?*

“I have no idea, we managed to skip the chess fight and ended up fighting this weird monster that kept trying to eat us and was bound to a chair or something. Blew her ear drums out fighting it,” explained Kat.

“So she has sensitive ears?” inquired Kevin searching for a weakness to exploit.

Kat just had to shrug at the question though, "I mean maybe? The same thing happened to mine but my regeneration meant I got to experience it over and over and over again! Blue's was just a more permanent problem before we got it fixed up at the healers,"

"Hmm... that means she can't use any water based healing magic..." mumbled Kevin under his breath. Something Kat caught easily.

"Wait... there's water based healing magic?" asked Kat

"Everything technically has a healing magic spell Kat," said Kevin snidely, "It's just not usually worth it. I mean, fire spells can be used to cleanse you of disease and stop infections... but there's also a good chance it cooks you alive in the process. It's not for low level mages even if it is possible to cast at lower ring counts. Water sometimes has low level healers though. With enough training it's possible, just unlikely. Still I've seen it done before and wanted to check,"

"Well that's interesting... I didn't know anything could be used to heal," said Kat.

Kevin shook his head vigorously, "No, everything has the potential for healing, but it can just as easily cause more harm during the process unless someone actually has healing as their element. You also really need the temperament for it. Just... just forget I said anything, it isn't something anyone should aim for really,"

Kat raised an eyebrow at her partners. *That was a shut down if I ever heard one. Why don't you want to talk about that more?* "So are you a mage?" asked Kat.

Kevin shook his head, "No. I COULD be a mage, but I was never trained in it," said Kevin firmly. Kevin's eyes had a hard look to them, the face of a man who'd seen more than his fair share of the world. Which was odd because he didn't have it before, and Kat couldn't see any other sign of it... but...

Hmm... I'm detecting some... hmm let's go with repressed anger right there. Why does he seem so bitter about not being a mage? Maybe it has something to do with the healing? Hmm... I want to know... I want to ask... but... maybe I should make sure that my partner is willing to work with me during this round first instead of trying to annoy them.

"How should we move?" asked Kat, letting them get away from the topic with all the subtlety of a jackhammer.

In the end though, she read Kevin correctly. He wanted nothing to do with the previous topic and was happy to pick up Kat's new train of thought. "Well, I'm right handed so... the fact that your left leg is bound to my right is not ideal. I'll need to keep attacking from the centre... hmm... can we..." Kevin paused to stab his spear into the ground and shout out to Thyme, "HEY THYME CAN I SWAP TO KAT'S OTHER SIDE?"

"No need to yell," Kevin and Kat whipped around... separately, pulling the vine tight and nearly bowling Kevin over. The strength difference was a bit much, but they managed to stay on their feet, mostly due to Kat's good work with her tail.

"If your partner is agreeable, we can swap things around for you both," said Thyme. Kat glanced at Kevin and gave a shrug. Kevin of course, nodded eagerly. Thyme snapped their fingers and the vine came

undone before the ground shifted again, to spin Kevin around to Kat's other side while keeping her in place, before their feet were bound once more. "I'll go see if anyone else wants the same treatment.

"Thank you for this. I have a greater range of movement now that my right hand is free to move about on its own. Hmm... as to how we should move... are you capable of following my movements?" asked Kevin in such a way to imply Kat likely could not.

Kat frowned at the question. *I want to say no. I'm not capable of that... but I already know how that will turn out. It'd be a lie. The restrictor bracelet is annoying but it does nothing to slow my perception. Now matter how fast Kevin is, if I keep my mind moving at a fast enough speed reacting alongside him wouldn't be all that hard... I don't really want to though. I could just lift him up with the right hold. Let him have free range to attack while I do the movements... would that be something I can safely suggest though... *

Chapter 715 Waiting not so Patiently

In the end, Kat couldn't resist offering her 'solution' to the problem. She doubted Kevin would accept, but she still wanted to get the words out. This way, if there were issues during the fight, she could suggest it quickly, or just go for it if Kevin looked to be in danger. "I'm certainly capable of it... but I could just carry you around you know. Lock arms or maybe over the shoulder? You don't weigh much."

Kevin's face twisted up, "I'd rather not have my safety so thoroughly tied to you. I might be willing to work with you, and trust that you want to win this round, but I don't quite trust you THAT much," stated Kevin with an insincere tone. Kat didn't doubt this was a reason, perhaps even a large one, but she doubted it was really a dealbreaker.

Then again, Kat also knew she'd been rather blessed in terms of partners so far. Grace had gone with her all the way to the final room the first time around. They had a... not so grand battle over the cup. Kat still smiled when she thought of the strange weapon obsessed elf. *I wish I could have left her a beacon or maybe just some way to contact me. Grace was cool and now that I think about it... it's kind of a shame I might never see her again. Maybe I'll ask Thyme to get us back in contact? Surely they would know right?*

Kat also thought about Blue. There wasn't a moment that she thought Blue would leave her tied up, and Kat hoped Blue didn't have any doubts about her after she was injured. *I wonder why Kevin is so suspicious. Even if I was that type of person Thyme has been very clear this is all about cooperation, so why would I risk that even if I wanted to be a dick. Does he think I could somehow trick someone as strong as Thyme?*

In the end, Kat knew this wasn't the time to dwell on such thoughts. She also wasn't going to waste demonic energy speeding up her perception right now when she knew it would be very necessary to keep up with Kevin during the battle. "I'm not going to risk annoying time and throwing of their idea of 'Jolly Cooperation' but sure, we can do it your way but I reserve the right to carry you out of the way if needed,"

Kevin's eyes narrowed, wondering perhaps if his permission was actually required for something like that. He hadn't had enough dealings with demons to know if Kat was asking permission to be polite, or if she was including this in the plan so that when they both agreed to it Kat would have more freedom

included in the deal. Of course for such a small matter with no real binding intent or circles nothing of the sort would happen, but Kevin didn't know that.

So it took him a bit longer to answer. Kat started to get noticeably annoyed after thirty seconds. They only had five minutes total and most of that had been burnt up already. Her tail was flicking behind her in annoyance, carving gouges into the floor to try and burn off some of her energy and avoid blowing up at Kevin.

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She wasn't overly angry at him, it wasn't like that... but she felt almost impatient. They had the barest bones of a plan that wasn't really a plan at all. Just, 'Targert the bearkin' and there was Kevin's stance that she should follow his movements. That was it. Kat was hoping for a talk about how they wanted to try attacking or how often they'd be blocking and dodging. She didn't want to sign up to be a punching bag, but Kat had wanted to make it clear she could take an attack or two if it was necessary.

Alas, Kevin continued to look unsure at the one minute mark and Kat could tell there time was running out. "Make up your mind please!" hissed Kat in Kevin's ear, not that she had all that much choice of where to speak to him, as they were tied together at that moment.

Kevin frowned further, not really enjoying the fact Kat was trying to rush him, only solidifying the idea in his mind that he shouldn't just accept the deal Kat proposed. Alas, after killing another twenty seconds Thyme appeared. "Was that enough time? Everyone got their pre match jitters out? Too bad if you haven't because just like my name it's TIME," before vanishing once again.

Kat was ready to take off as soon as the word 'time' was said but as she started to move, Kat found a bit of resistance. Stopping mid stride Kat could see that Kevin had in fact, not moved. In actuality nobody else had either. Kat was a bit annoyed at this, considering she didn't even have time to make a proper plan with Kevin let alone their entire team. Part of her wanted to ignore Kevin's reluctance and just pick the idiot up at this point but she held herself in place.

Everyone in the stadium just stared at each other, nobody really wanting to make the second move now that Kat's initial charge had been stopped. That was, until the platform started to shake, the ground at the edges slowly flaking away. "Oh?" said Thyme's all around, "Did I not mention the fact the platform shrinks? Well I suppose it isn't really a rule... if you fall off you fall off. Doesn't really matter how it happens..."

Kat grit her teeth and glared at Kevin who glared right back. The stalemate was going to continue for some time except Kat noticed a flash in the corner of her vision. Blue had summoned a large two ringed blue sigil, "SORRY KAT" yelled the fae in question as a spear of water headed towards Kat.

It was big, heaving, and moving straight towards her... but what it wasn't was fast. Kat had plenty of time to move out of the way once she slowed her perception a bit, not all that much, and not even enough to outpace her regeneration. Kat looked back at Kevin who still had a frown on his face but was beginning to move. Kat just wasn't sure if they were going to get up to speed in time. Deciding she'd rather just not get hit or be in the splash zone, Kat lashed her tail around Kevin's midsection and let her left hand rest under Kevin's right arm, pulling him off the ground.

Kevin's speed no longer a problem Kat was able to move out of the way, heading off to the side... and somewhat forward to avoid the edge. Kat got them just far enough away to avoid the splash zone before letting Kevin back down, "I thought you agreed to follow my lead?" grumbled Kevin,

"In actual fact, you refused to agree to anything, wasting plenty of our planning time. I don't know what your problem is, but frankly, I don't care. Now come on, let's go attack," retorted Kat.

"We need to go in together, not us, the whole team," said Kevin in the calmest tone he could managed but it was undermined by the annoyance leaking through. "If we go up ourselves we'll need to fight off ten of them, and that's not going to work,"

Kat rolled her eyes and looked at the rest of her group. They were all off to her left as she had been positioned on the edge. Blue and her dwarf had as well. She could see that Gareth and the croc beastman were moving up slowly as well, keeping an eye on everyone else now that Kat had started to move. They were just about to step past where the Ks were.

Frankly, I wouldn't be opposed to fighting them all, or at least getting everyone's attention. I can take the hits, and even if I have to move you out of the way or make sure only I'm hit by them, five people's worth of attacks isn't that much for me. There best bet would be trying to throw me out of the ring, but I'm not sure if that'd be any easier really.

Still, Kat wouldn't have to worry about it as Green and her human the one with half a stone arch and black hair, were moving forward with Kress, who was partnered up with the other half of the set the one with the right side of the arch and sandy hair. Kat took a brief moment to smile at that, at least Kress

Nixilei and her dwarven companion were staying back. It looked really comical because of the height difference, the mount hat the dwarf was sporting only making it look more amusing. Though at this point, Kat was wondering what her side's wizards were doing. Blue was the only one to attack so far but Kat knew her side had THREE WIZARDS and Green for ranged attacks but so far, nothing.

Chapter 716 Flailing with Hats.

Note, to prevent confusion, the sandy haired mage is the Earth mage, while the black haired mage is the Sand mage. I'm also going to just say the sand mage is called "Sandy" and the earth mage is called "Merick". Kat doesn't know these names, but it will help with descriptions. Also the Dwarf is Fir and the Croc is Irwin. (Team Members of Men With Hats) Sandy, Merick, Fir, Irwin, Kevin *nOvElN*ext.cOm

Kat realised she might have spoke too soon as by sum unseen signal dwarves 5 and 4 those partnered with Ellenell and Blue launched a crossbow bolt at her teammates. 5 headed straight for her, and four went instead for Kress.

The sandy haired human paired with him through up an earth wall, smaller then Gareth's but just as strong to catch the bolt. Kat took a different approaching. She summoned her fan, keeping it closed, and let the bolt impact the flat metal side. Kat felt her arm jerk back somewhat with the impact but not even a scratch was left on her weapons and Kat smiled.

That seemed to be the signal for their side as well. The mage green was paired with summoned a tornado of sand to attack the enemy team. Kat wasn't terribly amused because it was slow, and the

range was huge. Even from across the battlefield she could feel small bits of sand impacting her body. It didn't hurt her, but she had to be mindful of Kevin who was not looking amused at his teammate.

The dwarf mage, obviously feeling left out, decided to combine moves with the sand wizard. Summoning a two ringed sigil, the dwarf spat a gout of fire from his mouth straight at the tornado. So they now had a flaming tornado made of sand, slowly inching their way to the other team. Gareth had already summoned a wall to block it, and Nixilei was dragging the dwarf off to safety. Green was behind Sandy the best she could and Kress and his companion, Merick, moved to the wall they used to stop the crossbow bolt.

Kat moved to slightly shield Kevin from the winds, while the other side seemed somewhat at a loss as to what to do. Blue seemed to be hesitating while the dwarves seemed to be pushing their group to move together off to Kat's side. *Can Blue not deal with that spell by herself? Or is she hoping they waste mana trying to sustain it?*

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Kat also tried not to voice thoughts revolving around the fact she should be attacking by now. She was able to tank the sand without even a bruise from the granules and the fire was a complete joke. As it was though, she was tied to an elf that was lacking her own hardiness. Everyone seemed content to watch the great flaming whirlwind except Kat.

Eventually though, the ground started catching up to them. Gareth had to move out from behind the wall, and called out, "Stop the spell! It's too slow moving forward!" Sandy and Fir didn't look pleased at this shout but before they could retort the large crocodile beastkin, Irwin, stared them both down, encouraging them to drop the spell.

Kat watched as the spell ended and their shoulders visibly sagged. They'd wasted so much mana on something that had barely made an impact on the enemy. It was deadly yes, and something thought could do a lot of damage to the enemy. That is, if it was ever going to hit said enemy. Kat wondered if they had forgotten about the slowly crumbling platform. They had space to move up before the brawling started... until Sandy summoned that whirlwind.

As the sand dissipated, the enemy team took that as a chance to launch a bunch of projectiles there way. The dwarves with a crossbow fired another volley, while the three dwarves without crossbows threw potion bottles across as well.

Having seen Kat deflect the first bolt, she was one of the people targeted with potion jars. Then again, she was also shot with a bolt again, perhaps to try and distract her, or because most of her team was already behind a wall. Kat watched as the bolt flew towards her and blocked it once again easily. Just as she was recovering the potion came into reach. Instead of going for a straight deflect and risk the glass shattering, Kat moved as carefully as she could at this speed. Carefully limiting herself to just below where the band would start causing issues.

Using what mobility, she had with a leg trapped Kat stepped forward with her left arm outstretched. She gently cupped the glass letting her fingers barely grace the surface, fulling abusing how little friction her skin generated to push the bottle from behind letting it sail between Kevin and her using what space she had created.

The problem was, Kevin clearly wasn't ready for such a move, reflexively jerking away from the projectile and bringing Kat along for the ride, straight into the path she'd just batted the potion. Kat forcefully bent herself diagonally backwards as far as she could while her foot was being dragged along. She waited until the potion had just barely passed her before using her left leg to push herself after Kevin to avoid falling over.

It was a bit too much power though, resulting in her flying forward and knocking into the elf causing Kevin to lose his balance. As they were falling, Kevin tried to stab his spear into the ground but with how bendy it was, and without the wherewithal to activate the enchantments on it, the weight from his hat alone was enough to bring them down at this point.

Kat tried to push her tail into the ground, but with an extra person's weight, the bracelet, and the fact she was running on instinct, it didn't so much stabilise them as it caused them to roll forward. Seeing this wasn't going to work, Kat let her tail droop, stopping the force that wasn't stabilising them at all as they fell to the ground. As they hit the floor, Kat quickly looped her tail around Kevin again as she stood up as quickly as possible.

Kat used her hands and left leg to push herself up, carrying Kevin along with her... right into another water lance from Blue. Oh no. Kat's eyes widened. She still had some time to think in her mentally charged state but not really enough time to move. Currently, Kat was standing forward slightly with Kevin behind her and to the side. The water lance was heading mostly towards her, but Kevin would be hit if she dodged by turning herself sideways.

Ok. What can I do? I don't have time to dodge it unless... no even if I tried to force us back to the ground, it's aimed at chest height, I think I'd just end up getting hit in the head. Ok so... can't dodge easily. I have to take the hit. How do I want to take it? Fans first perhaps? Hmm... that seems like a good way to brake my fingers. Then again, I suppose I can live with that.

Kat braced herself, summoning her second fan and opening them both up, hoping to catch the entire area of the water lance as she stood in front of Kevin as best she could manage with her right leg stuck in place. The lance impacted her fans and she could already feel she'd chosen poorly when it came to how she was supporting the fans. She'd flicked them out and was only supporting them with her thumbs on the back.

Kat was able to hold lance back for just a moment before she felt the joints in her thumbs pop and her fans were pushed back. Seeing the water coming for her she wanted to use her tail, but it was still unwinding itself from Kevin. Cursing that, she turned herself slightly, letting the water slam into her ribs.

Kat felt the water cutting through her skin but faltering somewhat at the muscles. Her side was shredded but the water was weaker than she thought, or perhaps the thick nodes of muscles was enough to disperse the energy. Kat was still forced back, though her tail managed to prevent her falling over again.

It was only a moment of force before the full damage of the lance was over. Kat heaved and painful sigh of relief as her side started to patch itself up. She was already starting to get a bit annoyed though. *I keep having to move swiftly and make all the decisions. Kevin is good, somewhat at least, but not good enough to react to attacks as they are coming. He gets one chance, and that tends to lead to him trying to reduce the damage, not completely avoid it.

What really needs to happen, is for us to work together, but I don't see any of the teams managing that. Currently the enemy two are just leveraging the fact they have some form of ranged weapons. I want to see us doing that. Earth dude chuck some rocks, sand guy blast some sand at them in some other way. Nixilei maybe throw a dagger or two. Hmm... maybe I should be checking the ground for rocks... or throwing my fans? Hmm... haven't really had space for that but maybe...*

Chapter 717 The Competition is a bit Washed Out

Kat tried to survey the scene as she waited for her side to repair itself. She didn't want to move just yet, potentially aggravating her wounds was not on her to do list. Especially when they heal to fast if she'd just let them. Kat could already feel what little muscle damage was done repair itself, all she needed was for her skin to crawl back over the open wound and seal properly. Kevin was somewhat stunned and her tanking of the attack so he wasn't moving just yet.

The enemy side of the field was really just a line up at this point, Blue directly across, with Nell next to her, then Ellenell, Bonas, and finally Nabras right at the end with their dwarven pairs of course. On Kat's side of the field things were more complicated. Gareth and Irwin had at some point ripped the rock wall from the ground and were carrying it as a giant shield, with Gareth's actual shield secured on his back. Kat couldn't see it but Irwin had carved out a small slit to see, while Gareth was simply following his lead. The pair just marched forward 'shield' in hand. Of course, Nixilei and Fir were following behind.

Kress and Merick were moving forward with a similar tactic, though Merick was levitating their shield. They were in a line with Merick in front and Kress back behind him. Kat wasn't sure if this was for practicality reasons or just how things ended up. The stone wasn't quite large enough to cover them both if they were standing side by side, so it was at least somewhat practical. Green was hovering around as well. Those two weren't quite behind anything but it was clear Green could pull Sandy with her behind Gareth's rock wall if it was required.

Kat sucked in a deep breath before exhaling the few spots of blood that had gotten caught up in her lungs. So apparently it wasn't JUST muscle. A little damage to her lungs as well apparently, but it wasn't a big deal. She just spat out the blood and got ready to move. She looked over at Kevin who looked a little Green. *What? Hasn't he seen anyone heal a minor chest wound before?*

Point of fact Kevin had not seen that level of injury just walked away from before. The Men With Hats were a good team, but they were also a very safe one. They relied on consistent strategise to deal with threats at or below their level. They were adventurers that were making a career out of it. They wanted a brand, a perfect track record, and a decent payday. They were working their way up through things slowly, and they didn't have a healer.

For Kevin... Kat's wound just had... so much blood. For Kat, it was hardly worth mentioning. A good chunk of it had been washed off by the water and the rest had fallen to the ground but it was hardly a blood pool. At most it was a light dusting of black blood. For Kevin it was horrific and he didn't know how to deal with it. The previous rounds hadn't really prepared him.

Fire was one thing, that was something he knew, living in cities. It wasn't a pretty sight, but it was understandable, expected. He was a team that took their safety seriously, so he was having more than a few issues as his brain tried to compute the ridiculous that is Kat. He was realising that because of his

movements they had fallen, and because they had fallen Kat had been injured, brutally by his estimation, and she was just smiling as if nothing had happened.

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While Kevin was having a mental breakdown, most people were moving forward, the two crossbow dwarves were reloading. Kat noticed the crossbow was actually cocked using a small crank on the sides of the weapon. Kat wasn't sure if that was for speed or because the dwarves simply couldn't without the crank. She was leaning towards speed considering the lack of power behind the bolts.

Kat could see Blue frowning across the way. *Hmm, I wonder what she's frowning about? How little the attack did? How willing I was to tank it? How much damage it did to me despite taking it easily? I guess I'll never know.*

Kat glanced at Kevin who still seemed very shellshocked. Kat gave his back a good slap with the flat side of her tail shocking him into looking around before giving Kat a wide eyed stare. "What? Everyone else is moving forward, slowly, even if just to avoid the edge catching up to us, though Gareth and Irwin seem to be slowly edging forward. We can't just sit here all day," said Kat.

"How... how..." Kevin spluttered as Kat caught another crossbow bolt flying at her from the corner of her eye. Another easily deflecting, but no spell this time.

"I'm not sure what part your brain has been stuck on but the wound has healed up and it's time to actually get moving. If we stay here too much longer the collapsing platform will catch up to us," said Kat.

Kevin whipped his head around and saw Kat was correct. He took a shaky step forward and Kat matched it, making sure not to hold her foot too strongly in place and the shaking Kevin couldn't seem to stop was able to continue somewhat. It wasn't a pleasant feeling, but Kat could ignore it easily.

Blue's continue frown as Kat advanced did not spell good things. When she summoned a much larger than normal circle, despite still only being two rings was once again, potentially an issue. Blue yelled towards her team, "I'm just going to go for it. I don't know what else I can do this fight. Hopefully it works. I'll be pretty much out though,"

Blue was quite far, and Kat was sure without her hearing, the others, except maybe Green wouldn't have been able to hear. "Something big is coming!" yelled Kat towards her own team. Kevin seemed to pale at the idea that something else was going to happen.

Blue's frown seemed to deepen knowing that Kat had alerted her team. There wasn't anything to do about it though. She was feeding mana to the spell, intentionally overcharging her two rings and waiting for it to shatter. It didn't take long before the spell failed successfully.

An endless wave of water shot out from the sigil, washing into Blue and carrying her away until her dwarf stabbed his short sword into the ground. Nell seemed used to this and held her dwarf against her leg, standing solidly, unmoving. That was fine though, she was the closest and most of the water was crashing towards Kat and her team. *nOvelnExt.cOm*

Kevin slammed his spear into the ground, with much more success this time. Gareth and Irwin dropped the shield and pressed their backs up against it. Merick swapped the shield down to a horizontal one

and hopped on with Kress. It didn't move up any higher, perhaps because it couldn't but it was a bit off the ground. Hopefully it would be enough.

Nixilei and Fir were pressed up as well as they could and Green was pulling Sandy along as well though they hadn't quite made it there as well. Kat dropped to the ground digging her hands into the dirt and locking herself in place.

Then the water hit. It slammed into her and felt like she'd run into a brick wall. She could feel her grip on the dirt loosening as small bits and pieces of it were pulled away by the current. She held on tighter and hoped it would be enough. Kevin was standing, leaning hard on his spear and trying to avoid being pulled off.

Gareth and Irwin were fine. Their large frames in tandem with the wall was enough to disrupt the flow and they stood strong, unfettered. Nixilei and Fir looked so small in comparison, one in height and one in width. They could easily squeeze up against the wall with Gareth and Irwin, the larger pair holding onto their smaller counterparts, though Nixilei was being held by Irwin and Fir by Gareth.

Green, despite her efforts, didn't quite make it to safety. The weight of the water slammed into her, pulling her straight off her feet before she could use her wind boots to launch her up into the sky, assuming they could with Sandy attached. Sadly for them, once they were off the ground the water washed them straight over the edge, eliminated from the round.

It was a somewhat equal trade though, as on the other side Blue's eyes rolled up into her head, tears of blood leaking from the side as she collapsed backwards into the water. The dwarf was able to stop her going over the edge... but she wasn't in any condition to fight anymore, and the dwarf was only safe due to heavy armour. Heavy armour and a dead weight passenger meant they weren't going anywhere, and likely not in time to get away from the collapsing dirt behind them.

Chapter 718 The Problems of OverReach

Green and Sandy were down, as well as Blue on the other side. As useful as Green was though, Kat couldn't help but feel like they got the better end of the deal. Even if Sandy hadn't wasted a bunch of mana and time on a sand tornado that probably caused more issues for his team, Kat just didn't fear the dwarves on the enemy team at all, and Blue was a big chunk of their effective firepower.

Sure Kat didn't know exactly what Blue could do, because from her perspective magic was a bit wishy washy. Like, why did overloading that spell work? Why was it even a thing you could do? Is that always what happens when you overload water spells? Blue seemed to know, so maybe? It just wasn't clear. That being said though, Blue had gotten a good hit on her and Kat couldn't help but respect that.

If she'd had the patience to wait till Kat was closer it could have caused major problems. If she tanked a hit that cut right through her and into Kevin that probably would have caused them both to be sent off. Kat was pretty sure the only reason Blue's teammate wasn't also sent off was because Blue did the incapacitating all by herself.

The problem with the team, was that Kat just didn't think of the dwarves as threats, not to her, but nobody really was. The problem was, at least for Blue's team's chances of winning, was that Kat didn't think the dwarves could get any of her friends either. They just didn't have anything Kat considered threatening.

It was a problem of reach really. The crossbows were already proven to be a mild inconvenience at best and likely wouldn't be fired into a melee once things got started. The jars hadn't done anything so far, and could maybe do something, but Kat suspected most were healing, or general restoratives. More for extended adventures than quick fights. *novelNext.Com*

In a one on one battle, Kat wasn't sure Nixilei would even lose to them and she used a dagger to fight. The primary issue though, was that they were all tied to someone else. Someone much taller, and with a drastic difference in reach. Nixilei and Fir managed because Fir shot fireballs at people and his height wasn't really a factor in that. Nell was tied to, One, it looked like, and even though Nell used her fists, she still had the range advantage on him.

That also didn't factor into the issue of stride lengths, moving around and dodging. Kevin was pretty close to her height, but she actually had longer legs, *Something Lily is no doubt very pleased about,* so her stride was larger, and if it was anyone other than her, it might have been impossible to sync up well. Kat was frankly quite surprised Irwin and Gareth managed. They were both large sure, but if Gareth was 'big' Irwin was 'huge'. Perhaps the fact they were carefully stepping forward helped. Gareth taking something closer to a normal stride while Irwin shuffled forward.

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Still, with those three down, Kat was pretty sure it was time to act. *Focus the lone dwarf, just chuck him off the side if I can then go for Nell maybe? I'm really not sure how I'm supposed to be scared of this encounter now that Green is gone. I mean, everyone else just has conventionally weapons really and I'm starting to think they aren't much of a threat. Maybe one is enchanted? For their sake I hope it's not set to light on fire.*

Kat glanced across at Kevin, and he really wasn't doing well. "One last time, walk forward and I'll follow, our I'll pick you up and go straight for the dwarf. Oh, and we should deal with that lone dwarf first,"

"I resent that!" said 5 "Thinkin I'm an easy target!"

"I resent the fact you managed to answer before my partner did. Though I resent him for it not you," shouted Kat in return.

Kevin turned back to face Kat as if he'd been slapped, leaning heavily on his spear still so Kat spoke up. "What? We have maybe thirty seconds before the edge catches up to us, the fact we haven't been shot with something again is a surprise and you're standing their leg a dead fish, or maybe like someone slapped you with one,"

"How are you ok?" asked Kevin, again.

"We went over this Kevin. I healed up, now get moving," said Kat broking no room for argument.

Kevin finally started into movement when he saw her tail moving into position out of the corner of his eye, a deliberate play on her part as she had plenty of space to get it up to speed to slap him without the wind up. Still, it worked. Kat let her mind slow again so that she could match Kevin's stride as he... Kat wanted to sigh... walked forward.

It was still faster then the rest, but only because they were all weigh down somehow. Nixilei and Fir were limited by Gareth and Irwin, Kress was just getting off the floating rock, just in time for another

two crossbow bolts to go for them, it didn't do much damage to the wall, though the one from 4 actually stuck in this time.

The approach was slower than Kat would like, but faster than she'd hoped for honestly. The team was moving though. Nell was heading over to protect and work with 5, Green's partner, which... Kat was glad for them all being in the same place, but was arguable when it came to effectiveness. The other three seemed to want to head over there as well but Nell shook her head, signalling a dismissal.

I wonder what's going on there? Does she want to fight me? Does she think she can? Is this just a way to keep me contained? I mean it's clear where we are going, and that's nowhere fast. This stage is plenty large, for now. So I suppose she can play for time. Is that the play though? Keep me busy and hope the stage gets me?

Kat however, was underestimating the strength of Nell. As a bear beastkin she was all muscle, similar in strength to Irwin. She might not have been as fast mentally as Kat, but she was certainly stronger with the limiter in play. She also had much more training and a pair of enchanted weapons on her hands.

Eventually, Kat and Kevin got into the pace of things, or more accurately, Kevin was willing to pick up the speed a bit now. Keeping up was easy and soon, Kat was in range. 5 loaded up one more crossbow shot, and even if the arrow was too fast to react to, Kat saw it being loaded and was waiting for it at this point. The impact was heaving against her fan, and she heard her wrist groan in protest from the impact but that was more because she took the full impact to the joint.

Kat used the slight flinch 5 had from the sound to dash forward and go for a kick, yet suddenly Nell was there, massive gauntlet bearing hands reaching out for her leg and suddenly Kat found she didn't want to get caught by them. Kat yanked her foot backwards out of range and thanked whatever deity was appropriate she had her tail, knowing it was the only reason she was uninjured and standing.

Nell moved in at that point though, trying to get up in Kat's space, right in her face. Kevin was ready, spear in hand but his footwork was barely acceptable after the practice he's had. It was what they were working with though, and Nell took a step and swing, going straight for Kat's face. Kat was ready to meet Nell, blow for blow and pulled her own fist back to slam into Nell's.

Skin hit metal, skin lost and blood leaked from the shattered epidermis layer. The real shock was that it wasn't just the skin that lost, it was KAT. She felt herself being pushed backwards, and even the extra leverage from her tail wasn't enough. Kat didn't know if Nell was using any enchantments to enhance her punch, but whatever was happening, it was effective.

In the end, Kat could only take the blow. It had already been met and she had been found wanting. Kat pushed off the ground, pulling Kevin with her as best she could letting the impact send her backwards rather than causing any more issues. A broken arm wasn't much of an issue to heal, but in that time... well Kat trusted Nell to push the advantage. To make things a real problem. She was clearly a brawler and Kat was realising, perhaps for the very first time, that for all her demonic strength, she wasn't. She was a succubus. She was part of a race of demons known for skill and grace, and a few other things. Winning a fistfight with a bear wasn't something that should normally happen. Now that she was abnormal... well she didn't really think on it too hard, so when the normal routine happened, it was certainly a shock.

Chapter 719 What a Light Weight

As Kat was being knocked backwards she slowed her mind as much as possible to get over the shock.

I... I can't believe it. I mean, I really SHOULD believe it... but... I just... huh... Kat let the silence of slowed time wash over her. It wasn't really silent but sounds were far enough apart and thoroughly distorted acting like a similar environment anyway. *Why did I think punching the bear person, or rather, meeting her fist to fist was a good idea?*

Have I really gotten so used to being a powerhouse? I mean, Thyme exists so I should KNOW that I'm not the strongest person around. Kat was of course ignoring the fact that while she was mindful, she was the biggest kid in the orphanage, or at least the oldest, for quite some time before becoming a demon. She was also one of the more fit and physically skilled people in school, especially considering she didn't do sports.

The idea that 'punching the problem' would fail so spectacularly against someone she had intellectually considered a 'peer' instead of just beyond her was shocking, but also something that was bound to happen sooner or later.

*I suppose I shouldn't be surprised... Nell is at least twice my weight, maybe more, depending on if fantasy bullshit means as a bear girl she weighs even more than that. I might have dense muscles, but I'm also a rather lithe individual. Nell has muscles on top of muscles and metal gauntlets that looked like they'd crack a table if she casually dropped them after a day's work.

I'm not even sure if I can blame the bracelet for this. I mean maybe I can, but it seems to affect my speed more so than anything else. And that's another thing. What am I doing trying to use brute force against someone who looks like the queen of brute force. I might know how to throw a punch but I need my speed behind it more so than my body weight. Nell put EVERYTHING into that punch, more as a matter of course and practice, then the need to do so. I... I didn't. I couldn't. I'm tied to an elf that feels more useless by the moment...

Though I suppose this situation is my fault. I thought I could fight Nell without issue. Fight a strength fighter using my superior manoeuvrability... or well no I just thought I could duke it out with her. Trade a few punches, fight around a bit and I guess come up on top.

I mean, what was the point of learning to use my fans if I just keep defaulting to punching things? I shouldn't have taken Nell's punch as a challenge to throw my own back at her. She was even using her weapons too. It wasn't my fist against her fist it was my flesh against a massive metal gauntlet that can double as a shield for her team. What was I thinking?*

.....

Kat didn't have time to think anymore though as her as her feet touched the ground and she also realised that because of just how slowed time was, it was really burning through her energy. With the recent regeneration thrown in and the slow drain from making sure to keep pace with Kevin, Kat was down around a quarter of her reserves, closer to forty percent of useable ones considering her body didn't like dropping below around ten.

Kat grit her teeth as she tried to keep a balance of mental speed. It was faster then before now that she was in a fight, but slower then she would really have liked. While Kevin was recovering from the sudden movement Kat took the chance to flick both her fans at Nell to try and slow her down somewhat.

Nell just raised a casual hand, letting the fans deflect of her gauntlets with ease and no damage to them. Kat wasn't even surprised at this point and summoned the fans back before they hit the ground. That was when Five shot another bolt, this time very much at Kevin. To Kat's luck, or perhaps 5's impatience, the bolt was aiming about knee height to Kevin's left leg. Seeing this Kat pulled with her right foot, the one tied to Kevin, to move it out of the way, letting the arrow wiz through his legs and clatter off into the distance.

Nell advanced, and One was coming up behind her. Kevin seemed to manage getting jolted out of the way quite well because he was already sending a spear strike straight for One, using his superior range to reach past Nell. She on the other hand looked ready to intercept so Kat did the only thing she could think of in that moment.

She tried to punch Nell a second time.

Now, Kat wasn't under any illusions as to how this was going to go. Kat could already see Nell adjusting form 'menacing looming' and 'about to crush this spear' to 'so this little girl thinks she can punch me? Again?!' in the span of a moment, but Kat was ready for it this time. Fist met metal, and Kat didn't put up any fight at all. She let Nell's strike carry her first backwards as if there had been no power at all, rotating her upper body and letting her other hand come in for a second strike.

This too, was easily blocked. Nell just lazily raised her hand up to meet Kat's second fist, simply letting it strike the gauntlets covering her forearms, barely putting any energy into blocking the hit. Kat's strength was mostly coming from Nell's own punch in this instance so Nell wasn't afraid.

That's what Kat hoped for. Because she didn't have two limbs for dumb plans. She had at least three. Kat's tail strike, faster then Kevin's spear, faster then both of her hands. It was packed with as much power as Kat could manage, all zooming straight for Nell's neck.

Kat could see it in Nell's eyes, the moment she realised what was going on. There was a widen of her eyes, and a light that flashed through them, but not a single speck of fear. Nell didn't try to lean away from the attack or dodge it in anyway. Kat was up too close and personal at this point, there wasn't the time. Her neck was fairly wide, at least in the context of distances at these speeds. So Nell did the only thing she could. Nell bent her head forward.

Kat's tail made contact with a mouth full of teeth and Nell's head snapped back. There was all sorts of uncomfortable cracking sounds and Kat hoped that was teeth and not Nell's neck despite the situation. She also desperately hoped Thyme could fix it. She was sure she could, but Kat was feeling a bit of regret for this move already.

Kevin on the other hand wasn't doing all that well. Kevin had managed to land a solid hit... on the full plate mail wearing dwarf. One tanked the blow as if nothing had happened, and Kevin's wobbly spear had bounced back off. Kevin did manage to use that momentum, somehow, to make three other attacks, but the armour was well made and none of those did anything more than dull the shine on the armour.

Back to Kat, she could feel some pain in her tail, but she didn't actually have as much time to worry about that as she might have hoped. Nell was flailing, not quite wildly, but certainly not as accurately as before. It was more a way to make Kat step back, heavy sweeping movements to cover her front. Kat did in fact, follow Nell's lead in this because she saw no way to stop those hands and she wanted her tail out of that mess before it got caught. *nOVelNext.cOM*

As Kat stepped back, Nells head managed to bring itself forward. Kat was expecting a few things. A bloody grin full of broken teeth and blood was never on that list. Somehow the bear girl didn't even make it creepy. This wasn't the smile of a villain trying to tell the hero how much trouble they were in. This was the smile of a woman that lived for combat and had finally found a good challenge.

For Kat, it may not have been scary, but it was certainly more intimidating. Of course, Kat was completely ignoring the parallels. The fact that she walked off having her insides opened up a minute earlier like it was nothing. Or perhaps the repeated destructions of eardrums as a painful annoyance rather than something to never happen ever again? Kat was intimidated that was true, and that was what should would say she was feeling to anyone who asked. Unlike Nell, she didn't enjoy combat, not like that, and she didn't want to.

But Kat was hear for adventure. She was hear to do cool and interesting things, and she wanted to enjoy herself.

So really, the only proper response to something like Nell's smile? Well, it was to smile right back.

Chapter 720 Go for the Tendons!

After a shared pair of grins the two burst into motion. Kevin and One were trading blows, or well, Kevin was flailing and One was trying not to get hit anywhere important. Kat and Nell though were exchanging blow after blow to minimal effect on both sides.

Nell would attack Kat with large sweeping strikes that while powerful were much more about area denial and abusing the fact she was tied to Kevin. Nell primarily used long sweeping attacks from her left arm, focusing on striking at the join between Kat and making it difficult to doge right and take Kevin with her. The only option was to go backwards and risk a follow up that caused them to falter.

Nell's right arm was focused now on blocking Kat's attacks. It rested around her midsection and moved up and down to block any punches or tail strikes Kat made. Nell was always careful to keep her hand specifically ready to try and catch Kat out. It was actually the main part of what was restricting Kat's movements. The risk of getting grabbed was an ever present danger and Kat had a few close calls with her tail.

That was something Kat was learning in this rapid exchange. Her tail was fast, but to get that speed she had to trade off a lot of flexibility. Curling her tail up somewhat like a spring and shooting it forward meant she had to continue with the motion once it was released. There just wasn't a lot of control once she passed that point of no return and it was getting to the point that Nell could read her movements. Kat was sure that if she kept things so simple Nell would, despite the large speed difference, catch her in the end.

So Kat moved onto different things. She was trying to fight gaps in Nell's leather armour but was finding that despite being leather and allowing for extra movement, it was likely harder then steel. Of course,

Kat didn't know exactly how tough steel was, but that would be her best comparative guess. The dwarves armour was clearly tougher than that, but... that was the only thing she could compare it too at the moment. **novelNext.cOmm**

It meant her tail wasn't able to score anything more than light scratches on the leather. Her fan was even worse. It did cut, slightly, but the blades got caught when Kat got in a good swipe that wasn't blocked by Nell's hand. Kat had to let go over the fan to avoid her arm getting crunched but it did allow for a gut punch with her tail. There was a small divot from the tip of her tail but Nell didn't even seem winded.

And that was starting to become a problem. Kat was burning energy to keep her perception at this point. She didn't need it for the movement itself, she was keeping just below bracelet complaint levels to keep her demonic energy usage efficient... but it just wasn't looking to be a success at this point. She had wasted a bit over half her reserves at this point, well, wasted might be a strong word but it wasn't around anymore.

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It did help her feel a more distinct difference between the energy Lily was constantly giving her, and the energy she naturally produced. Kat also noticed that now she was below fifty percent she was actually getting more energy from Lily. She wasn't sure how that worked though. *Is Lily producing more energy now? I doubt it. So that means I'm just RECEIVING more. The question is, how limited is that extra boost?

I know Lily's body can store some energy but I'm not sure it was ever properly compared to my full total. Now I have her regeneration as well as a drain on her reserves... which should be fine. Even if Lily drains them completely dry she doesn't NEED demonic energy like I do.*

Still, Kat didn't know how best to abuse this second wind. It did mean that technically she was no longer losing energy, the extra was enough to balance out her increased mental rate and deal with the few small scrapes she was getting in the exchange. The problem that she'd already worked out was that it wasn't infinite. She might have more total energy to use right now, but could she outlast Nell?

While Kat and her team were fighting it out, the others were doing their own thing. Bonas and Nabras were working shockingly well with their dwarves, all four of them moving like one organism instead of for, stepping in time with each other somehow and trying to press the advantage that provided them. Sadly, Irwin and Gareth bashing them around with that giant rock wall that was still being held made it really hard. With Fir and Nixilei making sure the four couldn't get around the wall, it looked like a stalemate. It would be as well if the floor wasn't crumbling away, something all eight were aware of.

That left Ellenell and Four to fight Kress and Merick, but Kress and Merick were pushing the other duo back quickly. Ellenell was the team healer, not really a fighter and Kress was consistently pushing him back and away from the other members. He wasn't going for a 'kill shot' something he likely could have accomplished, but it was a bit of a risk, no matter how slightly and he was making great progress.

That left Five. Five was currently trying to sneak around the fight while dragging Blue's unconscious body with him. He'd managed to choose Kevin's side. Despite the spear going wide occasionally, Kevin was completely focused on the task at hand and his body hid a lot of the movement behind him from Kat's

notice. If Kat had really been paying attention she might have still seen it, but keeping up with Nell was becoming harder the more Nell got used to Kat's movements.

The only issue for Five, was that Nell and One also hadn't noticed the movement, and they were getting ready to make a push. At a signal they arranged beforehand they acted as one. Five let Kevin's spear glance off his side as the dwarf stepped forward and caught the middle of the spear holding it in place perfectly.

On Nell's end, she let Kat come in for an attack, blocked it with her hand like usual, but was confident Five would stand still. As such she lifted her unbound foot to unleash a heavy kick on Kat's stomach. She saw the foot coming. Saw the kick coming from ages away. Kat also wasn't sure she'd get such a good chance again.

Kat gave up on dodging this kick. Her tail started wrapping around Kevin to take him along for the ride if necessary while her arms came down. The left was blocked by Nell but the right managed to sneak around the back. Fan summoned and splayed out Kat put all of her strength into cutting deeply into the back of Nell's leg.

Kat was rewarded with a squelch and the sound of something under high tension snapping right as it made contact with Kat's chest. The kick was lower down than ideal, missing her ribcage and going just for the squishy organs behind it. Kat felt as Nell's leg crushed her stomach against her spine, and destroying the layer of skin on top, made worse by the sharp twist Nell made right as she pulled back, doing more damage on the way out than on the way in.

Kat's saving grace was that she didn't try to tank it. She was perfectly willing to let that kick send her back. A Tail around Kevin meant he came too without stressing the vine linking them together. Kat flew backwards coughing out blood along the way. As Kat flew, she had an odd straight thought praising the fact she didn't actually have stomach bile, but she blamed the pain on that odd tangent.

When Kat landed eventually, she stumbled and found herself doubling over. Her spine was fine, and her back muscles could support her but her stomach and abdominal muscles had been shredded and the pain was still very much there. She managed to right herself after just a moment, but that moment could have been too long. Kevin was annoyed because in the flight he managed to lose his spear. Five's grip was too strong and now he was down his weapon for now.

On Nell's side though, things were looking much worse. Unlike Kat who was already healing the damage to her tendons wasn't something she could just ignore. She was putting a lot more weight on her left foot now as she tried not to do more damage to the muscles in her right foot. She wasn't a fool. She knew Thyme could heal them... but she also needed what did remain to keep the pressure up on Kat. She just had to hope her legs didn't collapse before Kat did. Easy? Right?