

DEMONS 151

Chapter 151: Cracked Fountain

In the end, the group spent another ten minutes finalising their plans moving forward. Grace was leading by about 5 metres. She was much faster and could take more round about routes to fully inspect the area and make sure there was nothing for Kat or Skye to run into.

Kat followed behind, keeping her body low and her tail in close. The original plan of having Kat hover quietly behind was dropped when she realised just how hard it was to stay airborne but below the walls. Her wings wouldn't lower her much even if she brought up her legs and the position was really uncomfortable.

Finally Skye brought up the rear. She didn't really have any special role but her experience in adventuring allowed her to move across the ruined stone with more ease than Kat. She was also quick to point out the issue with Kat's tail.

When Kat crouched low, her tail tried to move up and compensate for her shifted centre of mass, making large movements behind her head. Sadly this meant it quiet frequently poked above the walls, so Kat had to bring her tail in close and make sure it didn't wave about.

Kat's balance was good enough without her getting her tail involved. She'd gotten used to her body rather quickly, since her final awakening, and even when she limited the movement of her wings and tail, they never really caused her balance issues.

The same could not be said for her footing though. Kat's balance as extraordinary but she simply didn't know how to walk over crumbling rocks without allowing them to shift. Grace routinely pointed out easier sections for Kat to walk on to limit the noise she made, but it was only a mild success

After around an hour of walking the group walked into a clearing. Well, a clearing in so far as it was a large abandoned courtyard. It had much higher walls than the surroundings, making them nearly twice the height they were before. Kat hadn't noticed in her original lookout of the city because the area was all sunken.

There was a cracked water fountain that still had clean water in it, with nothing leaking out. *Guess we can be real sure that this is Thyme made now.* Clean water from nowhere. Grace slid up to the fountain with light steps and took a small, sip before nodding.

"Water is clean, I suggest you drink up and then we move out" said Grace

Kat nodded and grabbed her own handful of water before straightening and examining the courtyard. It was a rather lacklustre affair. High walls, a few vines, really only the fountain made it any more than just a large corridor.

Skye took a quick drink and then said, "Would it be best to rest here for a moment?"

Grace shook her head "Well, we haven't been moving for that long. I think it's best we continue"

Skye grimaced a little at this "I'm not quite so physically capable it seems. Sure I can continue but I'd like to be in peak condition if it comes to a fight"

Grace bit her lip "Well, I'm not tired at all, I could do this all day, perhaps two even if we have some more stops for water. Kat?"

Kat rubbed her eyes and examined her energy reserves. Confirming they were pretty much full, and would be completely so with just a minute or two of rest she said "I'm in top condition"

"If you both insist, we can continue" said Skye with a sigh.

Grace glanced at Kat who shrugged in return. "Five minutes, we can spare that much, and we can have a proper drink"

Skye nodded at this and let herself slide down the side of the fountain until she hit the ground. Kat took another sip of water but didn't really feel thirsty. Grace took a few large gulps before letting her eyes scan the area.

As they were waiting Skye took out her book once again and started writing. Grace kept her eyes peeled, looking at the two other exits to the left and front, while Kat contented herself with some minor stretching.

As the time wore on Kat started to get uneasy and she wasn't sure why. Enhancing her ears didn't reveal anything and the walls prevented the ability to look out. Examining Skye and Grace confused her further.

By now Skye had put away her book, but she seemed completely relaxed. Taking occasional sips from the fountain and relaxing against the wall. Contrary to this, was Grace who was looking just as on edge as Kat if not more so.

Walking slowly over to stand next to Grace, Kat asked "What's wrong?"

"Something isn't right" said Grace.

Just as Kat was about to respond her tail lashed out at Grace and yanked on the elf's arm. Grace's eyes went wide, her head trying to whip around to face Kat, however just as she started an arrow flew past right where Grace's head had been

Kat only noticed this too after the arrow had fully landed. Taking further control of her tail she used it to pull Grace in close against her back. Turning to face Skye, Kat was about to shout a warning when a fireball flew into her face.

Kat's wing rose to block it and the flames dissipated harmlessly against Kat's wing. Lowering it to check on Skye however showed the healer much further back against the wall, and another participant by her side.

Kat narrowed her eyes. "Kutruph" said Kat expecting to trip over the name but succeeding first try "I suppose this means you aren't here to join our little crew. Could always use a defender"

The draconian shrugged, steel armour grating in the process before bringing his shield down to cover most of Skye's body. "Afraid not lass"

"A shame we couldn't take out the elf. Well then, how about it? Want to defect Grace?" asked Skye

Grace pushed past Kat to yell a response "You just tried to take me out why the-"

Grace's complaint was cut off by Kat's tail yanking Grace out of the path of another arrow. Seeing the movement flash past her face a scowl lit up the elf's face "I see how it is"

"Nothing personal I assure you" said Skye "We simply have to take out Kat, and well, you happen to be in the way"

Kat kept her breathing calm but her senses alert. She wasn't going to waste energy just yet but she was ready. "I'm flattered, but I have to ask why? Why so much trouble to take me out?"

Skye glanced to the left, and Kat's eyes followed. When she saw nothing though the pair locked eyes once again. "Well, there were other plans of course, but it's clear none of us could beat you in the finals if we allowed that so-"

Kat ducked under an arrow that whizzed past her head before looking up at Skye and gesturing for her to continue. The healer coughed before continuing "Right well, I'm sure you understand"

"I suppose, a little disappointed though. I guess" Kat was interrupted by Grace pulling on her wing. "Stop talking, we need to do something"

"It's three against two, we can't jump into this" Kat whispered back.

"I bet Eva and Dusk are on their way. We need to move" said Grace

"Had enough of our little chat?" asked Skye

"Well, you know how it is" said Grace edging slightly towards the fountain "Can't be wasting time when we have places to be"

Right as Grace finished her sentence she took off. Kat followed behind, pouring energy into her legs. Sigils on Graces' pants flared, and she took off towards the exit. The pair felt a few arrows targeting them, but at their speed, small corrections were enough to dodge them.

Just as they were about to make it through the door, Kat heard the soft ring of metal. With Grace in the lead, Kat pulled the elf backwards, throwing her of course into the wall. Grace reacted instantly and angled herself to let her legs take the hit.

Kat flared her wings slowing as much as she could just as a huge wall of metal came swinging in from the right side of the doorway. Digging her heels in further, the stone cracked slightly, and Kat came to a stop.

Jumping backwards and away, Eva walked out from behind the wall and brandished her sword.

"I'm afraid our Eva isn't one for quips, but I assure you her sword skills are top notch" said Skye.

Kat refrained from looking over her shoulder. Keeping her eyes firmly fixed on the swordsman before her and keeping Grace in the corner of her eyes. nov**El**next.com

The elf didn't look to be in the best shape. There was a cut in her pants likely from the arrow now imbedded in the wall, and she was breathing heavily but keeping an eye out for the enemy archer.

Chapter 152: Surrounded on All Sides

"Grace what's the plan" said Kat as she took a step back to avoid Eva's follow-up swing. Dodging left to keep herself between the swordsman and Grace.

Grace pinned herself against Kat's back and drew her bow, scanning the left side for any sign of the enemy's archer but finding none. "I'm not sure, can you fight them"

Kat had to stop herself ducking under another sword swing. Instead enhancing her strength and catching Eva's hands she threw the swordsman off balance and 'lightly' encouraged Grace to move forward, with her tail, so Kat could follow behind. "Not sure, at least, not while protecting you" *nOVelnext.cOM*

Grace wanted to retort at that, but it was clear which of them was reacting better to the situation. As Kat was keeping Eva at bay, Kutruoph was moving up, closing in on the pair while the archer remained hidden.

Deciding now was the time to use up a bit of her reserves Kat set her hands on fire, letting the purple flames build up to a formidable level. Eva took a defensive stance but looked ready to attack until Skye shouted "Don't touch those flames, they are beyond your level"

Eva nodded at this, as Kutruoph closed in on Kat. "Well, I've bought us some time, but now what" said Kat

"Go on the offence, I'll protect myself" said Grace jumping away from Kat but keeping close to the wall, running further away from Skye and Kutruoph.

***Welp, I guess it's as good a plan as any.** Kat stepped forward and swung her hands towards Eva who dodged with large movements, making sure to not allow Kat any chance to get her flames close.

Kat swung down with both hands, and the moment Eva backstepped, she brought her tail around, coated in flames. Eva blocked, bringing large sword into the path. Kat's tail collided with the metal and a ringing sound ensued. Kat's tail bounced back but it was enough to leave a good chunk of fire behind.

The greatsword glowed, as the purple fire spread slowly along its length leaving ice in its path. Eva eyed the fire warily but didn't let go of her sword. Kat was about ready herself for another strike when she caught something in the corner of her eye.

Looking left she found a wall of steel approaching her. Kat jumped to the sky letting her wings flare as Kutruoph charged below her continuing into the wall but taking no real damage.

Kat was ready to take stock of the battlefield when she felt a sharp piercing sensation in her wing. Shuddering, Kat's rhythm broken she dropped back down out of the sky. Kat hit the ground hard and then leapt to the side to make distance from Kutruoph and Eva.

Kat could feel the arrow imbedded in her wing, and it wasn't pleasant. Pushing some energy towards the wound she felt it try to close and fail. Pushing more energy, the arrow itself caught fire and froze, before shattering. After another moment there was nothing left of the damage Kat had sustained.

Kat let out a long breathe before glancing over at her opponents once again. **That one had been a bit worried. After what Nixilei said about that one guy who had an arrow stuck in his knee. Seems I don't quite operate on the same principle.**

Kat checked her energy reserves as Kutruoph, and Eva got in position. Eva took her left and Kutruoph her right, with Skye remaining far back behind them, but likely within healing distance. *Seems I'm doing alright.* Kat's minor stunt with the flames hadn't diminished her supply quite that much. It was a noticeable drop, but not a major one.

Plenty of chances. "How are things on your end Grace" Kat shouted keeping an eye on the two in front of her.

"Can't see the archer but I know where he is. I'd say it's probably Clive" said Grace.

Kat nodded. Hearing this conversation though, Eva moved up as Kutruoph made to dash away, presumably to go after Grace. Kat lashed out with her tail stopping his escape, while pouring energy into her arm and blocking Eva's attack with it.

The greatsword cut deep into Kat's flesh but was instantly halted by the bone. Kat drew in a ragged breath, as it did so. *Perhaps this wasn't the best way to block a sword.* Eva ripped her sword out of Kat's arm and took a step back.

The deep wound healed over instantly, leaving nary a mark and only a phantom pain remained. Kat grit her teeth, *Really shouldn't be doing that. Effective perhaps, but painful.* Kat let her eyes follow the two in front of her. *I need to keep these two busy. I'm not sure what Grace is doing but it has to be more productive than getting stuck together.*

This was the moment though, that Eva and Kutruoph activated a sigil, one on the draconian, shield and on Eva's sword. Eva made a slice at Kat but was very short, she didn't even need to dodge...

That was until Kat felt a massive cut tear through the front of her kimono. *Ah shit, wind blades.* As Kat was orientating herself though an ice spike shot out from Kutruoph's shield and went straight for her head.

Kat hurled demonic energy toward her mind and time slowed. *Ok, shit. I'm off balance, in pain, and I can't dodge in time.* Kat could see just in the corner of her eye the icicle, mere millimetres from her head.

Plan please plan... Though the icicle kept approaching. Kat stopped her panicked thinking and entrusted herself to her instincts. These instincts of course told her to lean into the attack. Fighting the urge to do the opposite and leant forward.

The ice slammed into Kat's horns and shattered, without so much as a scratch. Kat empowered her legs and took a large step back breathing heavily. She let her front regenerate as she looked up at her three foes.

"Well, that is less than idea" said Skye "I'd hoped this would be easy"

"You know how it is, always harder for traitors" said Kat with a light tone.

Skye groaned "Know this Kat, I do this only because it is a contest. I see no other way to win without this fight and know it brings me no joy"

Kat was about to nod in understanding when she saw Eva take another slash at her. Not willing to make the same mistake twice Kat let her back fold over and leaned backwards allowing the slice to carry over her.

When she raised her head, she saw an icicle aiming straight between her eyes. This once again was easily solved but leaning forward further and catching it on her horns. *You know, I suppose its my turn to be a bit mean.*

"Know this gives me know joy Skye" shouted Kat as she pushed her hands in front of her. Torrents of purple fire spewed in the direction of the other two. Kutruph slammed his shield into the ground and his armour glowed.

A wall of ice rose up and caught Kat's flames stopping them in their path. Kat cut the energy as soon as she saw this and checked her reserves before wincing. *A quarter? I used up a quarter of my energy on that shit?*

Of course the attack wasn't exactly over. The ice was now blazing with Kat's flames, and the area around it was slowly being covered as well. The flames leached the heat from the air and continued to spread, slowly seeping away from the pillar.

Eva and Kutruph dashed around either side, with Skye following the defender. Eva and Kutruph both came charging in weapons raised. Just as Kutruph was about to bring down his shortsword though an arrow shot towards his exposed neck.

The defender reacted instinctively, raising his shield to block the arrow, but now leaving him open to Kat's attack. Kat hurled herself away from Eva and towards the draconian who was now realising his mistake.

He brought the shield back down and took the arrow with a grunt. Lodging in the side of his neck but not sinking very far. The shield however was in a much worse state. Taking the full brunt of Kat's attack on just the side.

The shield screeched in protest and buckled slightly as it caught fire. Kat wobbled and regained her balance as Kutruph stepped back and used his sword to cut his shield free. Leaving the still burning steel on the ground far away from his hands.

"A good one lass" said Kutruph "Let's see you do it again"

With a roar Kutruph charged at Kat. She was about to meet said charge when she remembered the other combatant behind her. Dodging away to the left Kat backed up against the ice wall that Kutruph had made letting herself be enveloped by the flames as she kept them both in sight.

Chapter 153: The Trap is Sprung

I can't just keep dancing around these guys. Little hits might be a bit deadly but if Skye heals them, I'm not sure I can keep up. One against three is a bit much and I'm sure Dusk has to be on his way.

"Grace need a plan here" said Kat hoping the fire around her would by her some time.

Looking over at the elf she could see her pressed up against a wall facing Kutruph and Eva. "Well, I know their archer is just behind me, but I can't get over the wall without exposing myself. Neither can he of course. We are at a bit of a stale mate"

Well that's just great. "Now Kat, why not come out and fight us. Surely hiding away in your little hellscape can't be honourable" said Kutruph

"I think your mistaken if you believe I care about honour" said Kat

The draconian shrugged as if this was the expected answer but Kat caught a glint of sadness in Eva's eyes. *Hang on Eva, isn't that a little cheap? It's three against one, why would it be honourable to leave my only advantage.*

Kat shook her head and glanced around hoping to have missed something that might help. Nope, same old empty courtyard. She did miss something though, as a dagger came flying in from her side. Kat's tail lashed out at it though, causing it to clatter to the ground.

Kat's eyes turned to face the attack to find Skye with a big smile "What, can't blame a girl for trying can you?"

Kat rolled her eyes "Trying to bait me with honour while attack three on one is a little cheap"

"Well, your powers hardly allow for conventional tactics. I'd say you were cheating if I didn't know how much stronger Thyme is then all of us" said Skye

Kat wanted to argue the point but... *Skye's kind of right. I do seem to be much better of then the others.*

Kat looked around hoping for an opening but found none. Skye was well out of reach and off to her side. Kutruph looked ready to jump in and defend as needed so that was out. Eva had her feet ready to charge but sword in front ready to block if necessary.

So can I just sit in here and wait? I mean, statistically speaking as long as I hold all of these guys up here my team has a better chance to win. Kat felt a twinge of complaint within her energy.

Um... trying to find the source was quickly apparent. Stalling the group here was not in Grace's best interest. It wasn't so strong that Kat was certain to break the contract with her current plan, but it was thin ice.

Ok... well, that's fine, I like Grace, it's been fun hanging out with her. Let's try for something else. Kat dug her hands into the ice and ripped two large chunks out. The fires stayed firmly attached and she looked between her attackers for a moment before hurling them both at Skye.

The healer reacted instantly, dropping straight to the ground and letting the ice fly over head. Kat wasn't going to let that be the end of it though as she dashed out of the fire towards the downed opponent.

Kutruph wasn't the defender for nothing though as he dashed in to halt Kat's charge. She swings her flaming fists down at the draconian, who raised his shoulder to take the brunt of it on his large pauldrons.

Kat only got one attack in before she felt the need to dodge. Luckily, she did, because a wind blade left deep gash in the stone where she was just standing. Kutruph didn't get out unscathed though. He was breathing heavily, and had to crane his neck to the side to avoid his now blazing pauldron.

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Skye clicked her tongue as she stood up, but stayed low, and behind Kutruph's large figure keeping herself mostly from Kat's sight. Not Graces though, as the elf let loose a three arrow volley towards the healer.

Kutruph moved to the other side taking all three on the back of the hand before tossing them away. Kat tried to move in to attack Skye but had to stop as Eva brought her sword down in Kat's path.

Suddenly, Kat felt her hair stand on end. "Grace GET OUT!" she screamed.

The elf reacted instantly, sprinting for the nearby doorway. Good thing she did, as just as left the courtyard a massive sigil lit up the ground. Lines connected to all the arrows that had been fired so far lit up. Thick lines of mana traced the paths between them, forming the largest sigil Kat had yet seen.

Kat's eyes went wide as she felt the power it held, and then a moment later was a blinding flash of light and then all she could see was a dark blue wall. Kat tried to move, but felt her hands were bound. Kat circled demonic energy throughout her body and tried to move but found it still impossible to move.

Except... now her ears could pick up something.

"Do we chase the elf?" asked Kutruph

"No, I don't think so. Making sure that Kat has been taken out by the spell is more important" said Skye

"How could she survive this" said Kutruph "Well, I'm sure Thyme will have saved her, but she'd be out of the contest"

"No" said Skye with finality "I know Dusk had to use all his mana for this, and I know it can kill any monster close to our level. But you haven't seen the things I have. That woman walked. WALKED across the red desert like it was nothing

"Then, when we were attacked by some giant worm, she led the thing on a merry chase, with sand flying everywhere. And let's not forget that time she held onto that orb when it was so hot it could melt stone.

"No, we do this right. Take her out" said Skye

Kat could hear a rustle as presumably Kutruph shrugged, and then a ringing sound, like metal on metal.

"Ah, boss, I think we might have a problem" said Kutruph

Skye sighed "Yeah I can see that. Shit."

"Do we trust this to hold her?" asked Kutruph

Well I sure wouldn't. Kat poured the energy into her tail. It tended to come through when she needed it. Trying to flick the end with as much force as possible Kat felt something shift.

"I sure as hell don't" said Kutruph

Kat heard a slicing sound and a crack. Trying to move her tail around again she found then end was moving much more freely. Charging it with even more energy, Kat brought it to bear against the ice, cutting down on it towards her legs.

The structure groaned and whined, as ice was compressed even further by Kat as she started to free her legs. Once a little bit of room was made though, it was already over. Ka tensed her leg and kicked out, sending a wave of cracks through the structure. Freeing her other leg.

"Get back" shouted Skye

Kat kicked out with her other leg and felt something giving way. Kat wrenched herself sideways. A horrible screeching sound rang out and then another crack and her legs came free, ice falling from her body...

Her lower body that was. *Ah shit.* "Hahahaha" laughed Kutruph "Seems she's not quite as strong as you think"

Kat wanted to retort, but with her head still trapped in the ice and her vision taken up solely by blue, she couldn't see or speak to Kutruph to tell him off.

Kat stomped her feet and turned to face the voice, hoping she was mostly right. "Ooh, looks like the missy is somewhat upset. Ha, come on charge at me" said Kutruph

"Now wait just a minute Kutruph" started Skye

But Kat was already taking his advice. Charging straight for the sound, Kat channelled her flame out of her hands and let it seep into the ice. To the outside, it now looked like a purple fireball was barrelling straight towards them

"Ah shit" mumbled Kutruph as he dodged to the side. Kat heard and tried to follow but got tripped up on the ground, missing the chance and stumbling forward. *Ok I really need to free my eyes.*

Kat brought up her tail and started to hack at the ice around her head hoping to free herself in the same way but found it wasn't yielding quite as much as she'd like.

"Ooh, seems like your still a bit stuck there lass" said Kutruph

"Hmm, I think the wings and tail might have thrown the spell off. It isn't meant for things with extra appendages, Dusk has that other spell for monsters" said Skye.

Kat wasn't making much progress when she heard something going for her tail. Moving it out of the way she heard a thunk, as something, presumably Eva's sword, bounced off the ice surrounding her head.

Chapter 154: Ice See You

Kat lashed her tail out behind her hoping to catch Eva before she recovered her balance, but she didn't feel an impact. She could just barely hear someone taking a step back but focusing on the sounds of everyone nearby was extremely hard.

The ice limited Kat's hearing drastically and it was only with the generous use of demonic energy that she could even vaguely hear what was going on. *I need to do something about this ice. My wings are trapped, my hands are trapped and I can't see anything.*

Kat heard the clinking of metal in front of her and knew that Kutruph was making a move. However his technique was much better than Eva, Kat couldn't hear any trace of the draconian's weapon so instead chose to jump sideways, hopefully away from Eva and Kutruph.

Kat's jumped carried her away from the melee, but when trying to stop in place found a slight issue. Her wings tried desperately to arrest her momentum, but they were rather tied up. Tripping sideways Kat tried her best to regain her balance.

This failed though, Kat's tail wasn't quite enough to offset Kat's own weight along with a large chunk of densely packed ice. Crashing to the ground, Kat didn't hear so much as a crack from the ice around her.

Shit got to get up. Throwing her knees back Kat threw her body weight forward, trying to right herself. While successful though, she heard a thunk. Straining her ears Kat tried to identify what she'd run into.
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All she could hear was the whistling of wind. Bringing her knee up and coated it with flames, Kat hoped to block whatever follow-up strike she could hear... but nothing came. Kat's tail flicked in annoyance as she backed up further towards the wall.

Ok, new idea, attack the ice again. Hearing no forthcoming attack, Kat used the moment to try and break more of the ice away. Slamming her head down towards her knee as she brought her leg up, Kat heard a satisfying crunch.

Righting herself, she heard shards of ice drop around her, and the vision in her left eye cleared up ever so slightly. She could now vaguely make out the outline of Kutruph in front of her but not much more.

He seemed wary of her now but was still ready to attack. As Kat was still examining her surroundings with her slightly returned sight, Kutruph charged in. Deciding to take a chance, Kat let him approach.

Just as he brought his sword around, looking to cut into her side Kat bent her knees, dropping in height. Kutruph's sword clashed against the ice, but before he could regain his balance Kat launched herself straight at his chin.

Ice collided with scale, and a cracking sound could be heard. *I'm not sure if I want that to be the ice or his jaw*. Kutruph stumbled back regardless. Kat was about to push her advantage when she felt a heavy cut to the back.

Kat stumbled forward but didn't fall and sent energy towards the cut area. The slice had been much quieter, and Kat hadn't noticed it in the heat of the moment. Straining her ears further to here if Eva was following up Kat heard nothing.

She could hear, her blood as it slowly dripped to the ground, she could see the deep breaths Kutruph was taking... but something was missing. Suddenly a blinding light engulfed Kat. Shutting her eyes instinctively she strained her ears and waited for the follow up.

And yet still nothing. *Um... what was the point of that?* Opening her ears slowly though revealed the answer. Kutruph now stood steady once again. Any trace of damage on his face had been healed, and he once again charged at Kat. *Oh right they have a healer.*

Kat was about to step backwards again but remembered the wall behind her. Eva had cut off her left, so Kat had no choice but to dodge right. Slipping past Kutruph's strike, Kat continued to back away as he followed up with a series of light slashes.

Kat watched his rhythm closely as she backed off. Left, Left, Right, Left. Kat watched the swings intently and just as they came in for another left hand swing Kat thrust her face forward right where she'd created the crack. *Boy I hope this works.*

Kutruph's sword bounced off the ice with a ringing sound. Kat could see the shallow gash the sword left and was rather disappointed. Ok so clearly, I have to do this all myself.

Kat turned and tried to sprint away, heading away from the fighting to take a moment to break open the ice shell... This was no to be however as after Kat had taken a mere six steps an ice wall rose up in front of her.

Slamming into the new obstacle, Kat let her head swing around to the side to bring herself face to face with her attackers again. Skye was still missing from view, but Eva and Kutruph both eyed her cautiously.

Kat tried to take a deep breath to steady herself but found that impossible. Starting to panic a little Kat tried again to breathe in what air she could before it hit her. *Oh no. My head is frozen, that means I'm not getting any air.*

Now that Kat was aware of the problem, she could feel her lungs revolting. Demonic energy had automatically tried to fill the void, but it was burning through her reserves much faster than she'd like. Already now, Kat was down to around one half of what she started with.

Kat decided to take a risk. Kat slammed the ice down on her knee once again. Repeating the action multiple times, breaking off pieces and sending it flying everywhere. She could feel the force of the impact cutting away at the skin on her knee but now wasn't the time for halves.

Kat could vaguely hear Eva and Kutruph approaching but chose not to stop. This ice needed to go, otherwise it would be an easy end to her. Bringing the ice down one final time, Kat heard a satisfying crack as the ice shattered.

Shards of ice flew everywhere, forcing Eva and Kutruph, back and impacted Kat's own body in multiple places, not the least of which her own face. Kat backed herself up against the ice wall and tried to get some vision on her adversaries as blood dripped down and covered her view.

Kat brought up her arm and tried to use the tattered remains of her kimono to wipe away the dark blood staining her vision. Luckily the stuff came away rather easily, it seemed her blood was more willing to stick to her than most things, but a little push was all it took.

What Kat saw shocked her though. Kutruph had stepped in front of Eva to take her hits for her. Most must have bounced harmlessly off his armour, but one particularly large piece was imbedded halfway through his wrist.

As Kutruph's sword dropped to the ground and Eva's face widened in shock and horror Kat charged the two. Unleashing a kick straight to the draconian's head, Kat put her full body weight, bringing even her wings and tail into the motion.

The draconian flew backwards into Eva who looked torn between dropping her sword and catching him and blocking to stop the momentum and keeping her guard up. Interestingly though she chose a third option.

Stepping around the falling Kutruph, Eva swung heavily towards Kat, who danced backwards, not willing to block the full swings of Eva. The swordsman danced forward, linking her swings in various ways.

Eva traded hands, used one or both, and kept her momentum going. Kat could do nothing more than back away. There was a fierce glint in the warrior's eyes once Kutruph fell, and it seemed she was really going for it now.

Above Kutruph a big number appeared reading 10.

It started counting down the seconds.

9

8

What could that possibly be about?

Just as Kat was going to consider it further, Skye ran over from the sides. She now had an arrow stuck in her shoulder. The shaft had been broken but the tip left in. She skidded to a stop and summoned three sigils around Kutruph.

As she did so she ripped the icicle from the warrior's arm who didn't elicit so much as a grunt. As the light enveloped him, and his wounds closed, Skye herself looked increasingly more ragged.

Kat looked for a chance to interrupt the healing but didn't see anyway for her to get past Eva... it didn't matter though because an arrow came whizzing past going straight for Kutruph's eye.

Skye's face contorted in horror as she saw the projectile. She tried to reach over and block it but wasn't fast enough. The arrow flew true, and just as it hung over the downed warrior's face ready for the final impact he vanished.

Chapter 155: Two Free Swords

Kat would have loved the chance to relax. One combatant down, a second virtually exhausted. Yet Eva had other ideas. Not letting up her charge in the slightest the large woman brought her swordsmanship to bear on Kat.

Kat could do nothing against the flurry of blows, and it was really starting to dawn on her that Grace had been very correct when she said Kat needed a weapon. *I mean really. If I could even half competently use my fans I might be able to actually fight this off.*

But as it stands- Kat's thoughts were cut off as her rampant backpedalling forced her feet to collide with the fountain in the middle. Her tail shot down into the water to try and stabilise her as she fell backwards.

Eva wasn't willing to let this chance go, lunging straight for Kat's exposed stomach she charged. A burst of wind exploded from her boots further increasing her speed. Kat made the decision to keep falling backwards.

Making her tail go limp she kept her backwards momentum and fell into the fountain. Water spraying everywhere, as Eva slashed the spot Kat had just left. Kat kicked the side of the fountain and let herself spring back, adding the slightest angle to she didn't hit the decoration in the centre.

Putting her hands out to stop her momentum Kat then quickly pulled herself from the water and stared across the fountain at Eva who had her sword stuck in the stone edge. Seeing this struggle Kat used this as a chance to find Grace.

In the far-left side of the area, Kat could in fact see Grace, she didn't look so great. Despite not being injured her chest was heaving and her outfit was showing signs of various cuts and slices.

Deciding that the elf was safe enough for now Kat stood ready on the other side of the fountain as she thought of a plan. *What can I do? Should I just try and tire Eva out? What about the archer? I can't see Clive anymore but that doesn't mean his gone.* *NOVELNext.com*

Taking another glance at Grace revealed another potential issue. The elf only had three arrows left. *Well, that's just brilliant. Exactly what I'd want to see.* Kat's head snapped back to Eva as she heard the woman give a loud grunt.

Watching her free the massive sword from the stone wall, Kat readied herself for the warriors next move. Eva gave the blade a quick glance over, before turning her eyes back to Kat. Kat readied herself for whatever move Eva made next.

She was not ready for the move Eva made next. The warrior crouched, and with the sound of rushing air leapt over the entire fountain plunging her greatsword down into Kat's face. Luckily for Kat, Eva's flight was rather slow. Giving her plenty of time to jump out of the way.

As Kat landed though, she found herself mistaken. Eva's sword glowed and after a flash, the loose stone that was just knocked up flew out in all directions, plenty aiming for Kat.

Bringing her wings in front of her face to cover her eyes Kat felt the stones pelt the back of her wings. As soon as they stopped, she opened them to reveal an angry Eva once again slashing away at her.

Kat continued to backstep, unsure of what she needed to do next. A quick glance over her shoulder revealed she was backing up into the passageway, so she was in no danger of running out of room just yet as she tried desperately to think of a plan.

A couple swings later Kat stood at the threshold of the area. Just as she was about to jump backwards once again a searing pain assaulted her. Kat stumbled and looked downwards to find twin swords sticking out of either side of her stomach. *Well that shouldn't be there.*

Eva capitalised on this by coming in for a strike, but Kat spared no expense and released a torrent of fire encapsulating her. Whoever was behind her jumped back leaving the swords in her side.

Kat let out a hacking cough, spitting out blood as she took a knee. *Didn't think they'd hit my lungs. Surely spitting blood like that isn't healthy for me.* With a shaking hands Kat grasped onto the blade slick with blood.

Just like a bandage. Just gotta rip it off quickly and then it'll all be over. With a heave, Kat pulled the first of the swords from her side. Kat grit her teeth and let out a shuddering breath. *Nope, not like a bandage. Feels like getting stabbed... OH WAIT!* Ignoring her own dark humour Kat wrenched out the second sword. Just as painful, and infinitely less funny.

The wounds in her sides started to rapidly heal. The fire surrounding her leaning towards Kat's wounds and providing a bit of help from the outside. As Kat turned around to see who had the gall to stab her, she was shocked at the figure she saw.

It was Kress. Well, it was Clive half unconscious on Kress' back, but that wasn't the point. Standing tall, now armed with what must be a spare dagger staring her down. Kat's gaze flicked from Eva to Kress and saw no surprise on any face.

"Brghshl" Kat tried to make a quip but blood bubbled into her mouth preventing that. Spitting it onto the ground Kat tried again "Hey Kress, buddy, what are you doing here? I'd have thought you'd be busy harassing Nixilei right about"

"Shut up" said Kress "I'll defeat you here and now, fair and square"

Kat raised an eyebrow and looked from Kress, to Clive, to Eva, and back. "Um... fair how exactly?" at this point the flames were dying down, but she kept talking hoping to by more time to recover her energy. It had dropped to its final quarter and she wasn't sure how much longer she could keep the act up.

"You know nothing demon" said Kress

"Well, I know a thing or two about fairness, what with the contracts and all. And I have to say, fighting what is it, 1,2,3 Oh and Dusk must be around as well, four, five, six? Six on two? Is hardly fair" said Kat.

The flames had all but died out at this point. She had sent most of them into the air like a fool, and the area simply burned down quickly. The floor still had a light coating of flame in her immediate vicinity, but Kat doubted it would actually stop anyone should they charge at her. *Better keep them distracted.*

"Shut up. You have too much power. I bet your much older than us. Hell I'm surprised Thyme even let you into the tournament" said Kress

Kat gained a wry grin "And I suppose you know my age better than Thyme? A rather bold claim I must say. Besides, who is to say what is and isn't too much power" said Kat

Kress grit his teeth but didn't say anything. Kat hoping to keep the conversation going spoke up again "What's in it for you anyway? I thought we agreed to run away if we encountered each other. Seems like you planned this one"

Kress furrowed his eyebrows "I never agreed to such a ridiculous plan. I'm doing everything in my power to make it to the finals and then they'll see how much I've grown. See the power I've obtained. Besides, you're just the hired help, why should you get any of the glory"

Kat chuckled and coughed up a bit more blood. To not give the image of her weakening, she stood back up. Flaring her wings and striking a more imposing figure "I believe, I was told to at least try and win this final round Kress. I believe I'm fulfilling my end of the bargain here"

"I won't have you twist my words demon spawn" said Kress

"Well, I mean, calling a demon, demon spawn isn't much of an insult is it?" said Kat with a shrug and a grin. Kat could feel her energy notably recovering. It wasn't fast but every second they wasted would be to her benefit. "It's like me calling you spawn of an ass. It's just a fact"

Kress looked ready to charge but Kat brought a little flame to her hands and looked at him questioningly, especially eyeing his small dagger. "What? Want to come at me with just a little dagger? I've got your swords now. Shame I don't know how to use them"

Wait a minute. No Kutruhp that means I can use my flame thrower move. If I can just get one of them close enough, I can end this fight. It'll cost me, but it might be the only way. "Ha, as if a barbarian like yourself could wield such fine blades as mine" said Kress smugly

Kat heard a swish behind her. Glancing back she could see Eva's glowing sword coming down in an arc. Dodging out of the way, Kat felt the wind blade pass by her. Ah right... I have someone not so prone to talking eyeing me as well.

Chapter 156: Done and Dusted

Kat turned so she could keep both Eva and Kress in her slightly expanded vision. "Now, Eva, that was a little rude don't you think? Kress and I were having such an engaging conversation"

Eva's response was to pull a dagger out of her boot and throw it straight at Kat's head. Kat leaned backwards to let the dagger fly past her face... but miscalculated about one thing. As she pulled her head backwards her wings came forward to compensate for the disrupted balance.

The dagger sunk deep until it was stopped by its hilt into Kat's wing. Gritting her teeth Kat quickly reached for the dagger and pulled it out cleanly, dropping it to the ground. "That hurts Eva, on an emotional level more than a physical one" said Kat

Seems however that the time for jokes was over. Eva stomped forward and Kress dropped Clive... while it was more like he hurled him away, but Clive wasn't complaining, he grunted as he hit the wall though.

Kat watched her foes approach from either side. Eva going for an overhead strike and Kress for a stab. Kat glanced at her wing and saw it healed over. Jumping high Kat let herself float just out of reach.

Kress kept his momentum though. Eva had already halted, just on the edge of the flames but Kress let himself be carried by his reckless charge. Every step he took froze his boots a little further, but the flames didn't spread to them.

Eva realised the fool was still going and raised her sword to block the dagger. It wasn't even hard, she just let it run straight into her sword and then glared down at Kress.

He glared right back of course and looked ready to take a swing at her. While this tense exchange was going on, Kat took a glance over at Grace. The elf was now circling the healer. Each with a dagger in hand, looking much worse for wear.

Kat was tempted to try and ice blast Eva and Kress, but it wasn't quite the right time. Instead she shot down next to Clive slumped near the wall. "Sorry about this one" said Kat

Angling a kick right to the temple, Kat was very glad when she felt her foot collide with the stone behind him. Looking down the scout had vanished. As he did though Kress and Eva snapped to face her direction.

Kat waved awkwardly in response, and was met with a charge, though compared to the early attempts it was laughable. Eva was slowing, her speed drastically reduced from her previous frenzied blows.

Kress, while looking to be in better condition, was blocked from taking further speed by Eva's large sword blocking his path forward. And so the two ran awkwardly in lockstep and Kat let her wings carry her over the charge.

"You know, this isn't going to end that well for you guys" said Kat from above.

"I can see your underwear" said Kress pulling a dagger back, and looking for an opening.

Kat shrugged "You can see a hell of a lot more than that" said Kat as she bowed to the two from mid-air "My outfit is practically shredded. I suppose I should fix that though"

Kat dipped behind the wall for a second and dismissed her attire before resummoning it and jumping back up to stand on the wall. "So how do I look?"

Eva growled at her, and Kress started to get a bit red in the face. Kat took the time to look over at Grace once again. *Um... what the heck?* What Kat saw, was the two wrestling with each other.

Somehow they'd lost their daggers and now then lunged and dodged around each other trying too... *Well, I'm not really sure what they are trying to accomplish.*

Kat redirected her attention to the more immediate problem in front... or rather below her. "How about we make a contract? You both forfeit and I won't have to fight you anymore?"

"Ha, it's two against one, we won't give up" said Kress

Eva however looked thoughtful. The warrior glanced over at Skye to see her status and was shocked at her state. Swapping her focus instantly the warrior sprinted towards the fighting pair.

Oh no you don't. Kat dived after her. Kat beat her wings and was beside Eva in an instant. Lashing out with both arms, blazing with fire with her tail not too far behind. Eva turned to block with her greatsword, but it wasn't to be.

She was able to catch both of Kat's hands with the side of her blade, digging deep into the flesh. It was that flesh that held it in place though, as Kat's tail snuck through Eves guard and set her chest ablaze.

Just as Kat was about to disengage, the warrior vanished. Kat stumbled forward, the weight of the sword no longer supporting her. She was about to take the chance to help Grace but heard the tell-tale rush of wind behind her.

Turning around she saw Kress with his swords in hand swinging both swords from either side trying to enclose her paths to escape. *Ooh... probably shouldn't have let him pick those up.*

Kat made a move to jump backwards but felt her wings touch stone. Oh dear. Kat could see Kress' boots light up with two sigils, liking responsible for the wall now blocking further retreat.

Here goes nothing. Kat pushed her hands out and let her fire burn. Channelling as much energy as she could into them. Purple flames engulfed Kress, starting to freeze him as he charged forward, but he didn't stop.

Kress brought the sides down, aiming to cut off, one or both of Kat's arms. Kat just kept pouring energy into her flames, until right before Kress's swords were to make contact... and he vanished.

Kat reacted quickly and cut the supply of energy to the flames, but it was too late. She fell forward flat on her face crashing to the ground with no energy to spare. *You know. This is really happening too often for my liking. I have to get less wasteful about using my fire. Or perhaps just rely on it less in general.*

Kat heard footsteps approaching beside her and tried to tense up... of course her body didn't react in the slightest. *Well... who is it?* Kat heard a thump, as something was dropped beside her.

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"Hell of a fight" said Grace panting as she sat down next to Kat.

Kat tried to answer and found she had just enough energy to force a response if she wanted. And she did. "Yup, though I'm pretty much tapped out"

Grace sighed and stroked Kat's hair, needing her hands through it. "Yeah, so am I. I'm glad we won though"

Kat tried to shift herself, and found her body responding. Checking her energy reserves, it seems she wasn't quite out, but it was close. *Can probably sit up, chat a bit, but not much more. At least I'm not completely tapped out like the other times. *

Groaning Kat pulled herself into a sitting position before letting her head fall towards Grace to rest on her shoulder, only for Grace to push her forward and onto her lap. "I don't want those horns anywhere near my face" said the elf

Kat let out a sigh. "Fair... very fair"* I'd have probably stabbed her in the eye just before if she wasn't paying attention. Gah I'm too tired for this.*

"So, what's the plan" said Kat

Grace let out a long breath "Well, that's a good question. I'm not sure if the others will have encountered anyone. And this was a pretty big fight. Maybe we'll need to rush for the tower"

"Are we in any shape for that? Give me maybe half an hour and I'll be close enough but what about you?" said Kat

"Well, I guess it depends. My wounds are light, but I'm out of arrows, out of mana, and I still need to pick up my dagger" said Grace.

So really where does that leave us. "Well, really though, who would we have to fight?" asked Kat
"Boring is out as a whole, we got them all... well, Dusk might still be around but I'm not sure"

"No, he's out. That spell took more than enough mana to knock someone out. I'd guess he had or found something, that he charged to cast it" said Grace

"Couldn't he still be active then? If whatever it was had enough mana?" asked Kat

Grace scrunched her face a bit "I mean, well... not really? Even just channelling so much mana into a sigil would be hard. He's in no better condition than us, if he's even still conscious"

"Ok, so really all we have to worry about is the God Crusher right? I mean, I'm sure I can convince my team to leave us be, what about yours?" asked Kat

Chapter 157: A Short Breather

"Well, shouldn't we first discuss why you think your team will let us passed? Kress did just participate in an attack against us" said Grace

Kat shrugged lightly "He seems to have some problem with me specifically. The rest of us all agreed to just run away if we could, but we were under no circumstances to team up with each other"

"Huh." Said Grace "Why would you decide that? Surely your own team would be the most trustworthy"

Kat nodded "Well, perhaps with the exception of me and Kress yeah. But we decided the scariest thing would be to team up and then have everyone else team up against us. We weren't sure where we'd get spawned in"

"Spawned in? I don't think that translated" said Grace

"Uh, dropped, teleported" said Kat and Grace nodded

"Well, I can see that being a reasonable fear. Even you struggled fighting off a full team of people, I doubt you'd have managed against fifteen others" said Grace

"Well, the real concern was fighting twelve and having three of you guys run for the orb" said Kat

Grace nodded "Yeah, if that rest stop wasn't in the way I can see how that would be an issue for you all. I wouldn't count you guys out though, I bet Green could make it to the orb if not first, at least before it completely expires"

Kat nodded but then her eyes went wide. "Grace, do we have time to be resting right now? Green might already be at the orb"

Grace shrugged and leaned further back until she was laid flat. "Well, we aren't even in any condition to catch up with her let alone fight. Plus, no offence but I'd rather fight Green in the finals than you if it comes to that"

Kat let herself relax and let out a deep breath to copy Grace. "Yeah, I'm not sure I'd really want to fight you either after all this. What about the rest of your team? Do we have to worry about them?"

Grace bit her lip "Yeah... well... yeah" Grace let out a sigh "Most of them would want to fight you for the experience. Even though we are still trying, the team doesn't have a shot at winning anymore. Ryo and Rakhor would want to fight because they can

"Lynn might as well, depending on the mood, though Estelle would be able to talk her out of it, and she wouldn't be interested in fighting if she was by herself" said Grace

Kat nodded "Rakhor seems like a bit of a strange name for an elf, is there a story behind that?"

Grace wheezed out a laugh "The same as the rest of us. We weren't always beautiful elven maidens. Well, I mean, I was, but even I've taken on a different appearance"

"Oh?, So are you guys related at all?" asked Kat

"Lynn and Estelle are real twins. They hardly batted an eye after we all got changed. Just a couple more look-alikes for the pile" said Grace *nOVeLNext.com*

Kat smiled slightly "Sounds like you are pretty friendly with them" said Kat

Grace lifted her shoulders in a weak shrug "I guess? Ryo's family, and we've known the twins our whole life. Rakhor is new, but he's been a good friend. I suppose considering what a little terror Ryo has been sometimes I get along better with the twins"

Kat tilted her head "Didn't you say you were the only elven maiden before? How does that work if Ryo's family?"

Grace nodded "Adopted cousin. Ryo was a cat beast person before. An absolutely adorable little terror. They took the transformation rather well. I... well, I think it bothers them a bit, but being the same race as the rest of the family more than makes up for it"

Kat nodded "Yeah that makes sense"

The conversation stopped for the moment. Only the faint breeze and the bright sun to keep them company. Kat was trying to recover her energy. Forcing herself to talk was more uncomfortable then she was letting on while she was so low on energy.

Grace for her part didn't know what else to ask. She wasn't sure if she even could enquire about Kat herself, and was happy to let them sink into silence. It was a companionable thing though.

Despite perhaps not having full trust in each other, neither doubted the strength of the contract binding together and had enjoyed their time working together. After five minutes had past and Kat felt more comfortable speaking, she did.

"Did you know?" asked Kat

"What?"

"Did you know that Skye would attack us later on?" asked Kat

Grace bit her lip "Well, I didn't know per say, but I certainly wasn't surprised. On the one hand, it's just a contest, and on the other it's perhaps the most important challenge they've ever faced.

"She just seemed the type of person to not feel too strongly about betrayal when something so important is on the line and the consequences are minor. Especially with it being, well, you" said Grace

"I don't quite follow" said Kat

"Well, I imagine, at the start, she didn't care at all because you're just a demon. Then after getting to know you, she apologised, but hoped it wouldn't be a problem because you're a demon" said Grace

"Ok, but I still don't follow" said Kat *You more or less just expanded the point without adding much Grace... though I guess she is tired.*

"Right sorry. Let me get my thoughts in order" said Grace. After a moment to regain composure, she resumed speaking "So, you are here because it's a job. Maybe a bit of fun as well, but you aren't emotionally invested in this the same way the others are.

"Skye, and the rest of your team have probably trained their entire lives for this one shot at glory. The rewards for winning are nothing to sneeze at, and I think that she'd trusted that those rewards didn't matter to you. What mattered was completing your job"

Kat nodded "Yeah I don't really know what the rewards are, and you're right I'd never heard of the tournament before a couple days ago. But what about you? Are you not invested the same way?"

Grace sighed "Not really? I mean, we are doing this to break the curse, but that only really effects Rakhor. Sure I look a bit strange, but I'm still an elf. The twins went from human to elf and hardly batted an eye.

"Ryo... well as I said it's a bit more complicated for her, but I'm not sure her hearts in it. I mean sure, she'd do anything to win, but not anything to break the curse? If you understand the distinction

"Really, we are doing this in large part for Rakhor. He's the only one who'd certainly, 100% choose to change back. Hell, he'd probably pain a rather large tithe for the privilege. I'm just not so sure the others would.

"Of course, now that you've said something owns my soul, perhaps the others are missing theirs as well. Maybe winning is a bit more important now, but I just don't know, you know?" said Grace

"Hmm, I think that missing your soul is different than having it be owned by someone else. Not sure why but I feel it's an important distinction" said Kat

Grace nodded "I can imagine why. Just because I don't own my soul doesn't mean I'm not using it. Or perhaps I'm like, paying rent or something. If it was missing, I'd likely be having more issues."

"Hmm, yeah I guess that is somewhat of a concern for you now isn't it?" said Kat "I'm not sure if I should apologise for that one. Ignorance is bliss as they say, but I think I'd rather know than not"

Grace nodded "I to agree with that. Though I wonder about the others. I'd certainly like to hide it from Ryo... perhaps the twins as well. Rakhor should know, he'll be fine, but..." Grace sighed.

Kat was about to nod along when a large booming sound rang out like a ship's horn. The ground shook, and the loose stones kicked up from the recent fight clattered along with it. The water in the fountain shook tremendously as the sound continued to ring out.

After thirty seconds of that alarming sound, Kat sat up and looked towards the tower. Above it now shone a bright white light, shooting up into the domed ceiling surrounding the final stage. Looking at it closely revealed it to be coming out of the left side of the tower, but it was unclear how high up it started.

Kat and Grace shared a look of concern before dragging themselves to their feet. "I guess this is the call to end our break"

"Well, I suppose it is" said Grace as she started to walk around the area. Stretching her legs and picking up any intact loose arrows she could find.

Chapter 158: A Long Sprint

Kat was steady on her feet. Checking her energy reserves however, painted a bleaker picture, but she'd recovered enough to move around freely. *As long as I don't use any fire attacks, I should be good for quite some time... it's that flamethrower move that does it. I really need to learn better attacks.*

Grace had just finished picking up a bundle of arrows, she had around twenty in total now, and had just sheathed her dagger. "Should you carry me or should I run myself?" asked Grace.

Kat's eyes flicked towards the elf for just an instant before sprinting over and picking Grace up in a princess carry. This was promptly followed up by Kat sprinting as fast as she could towards the tower.

"Well, I'll take that as a yes" said Grace as she lightly activated her wind shield to allow for communication despite the rushing wind. "Why did you decide to go with this?"

"I'm much faster than you, and carrying someone doesn't slow me down that much???" said Kat as she approached a turn in the mazelike ruins. Pouring as much energy into her wings and legs as she could Kat took a jump and soared over the offending wall.

Kat kept herself to only gliding, and it wasn't much time before she found her feet back on the ground "Plus I can do that. I recover much faster than you as well. I think at this point speed is what matters" said Kat

Grace nodded as Kat continued to speak "So what's the plan now? What do you think we're likely to find?"

"Well, I'd have to assume that Green is one of the people who has found the orb in question. Nobody else is quite so fast" said Grace "Though, at the same time, we did take a while with that fight of ours"

Kat nodded "That's reasonable, I guess. Do you think that Green is likely with anyone else?"

Grace shrugged "Hard to say. I'd lean towards no, but I am aware that Green is certainly capable of reaching the end faster I'm sure of it. She might have been waiting up for some others"

Kat flew past a small shrine off to the side and noticed the chest in it but kept going. *It likely isn't worth detouring.* "We don't need anything from the chests, right?" asked Kat

Grace shook her head "I doubt we have time. Anything even close to the length of the vault would kill our momentum"

Just as they said that though strange sound rang out again, though quieter this time. It still projected across the whole area, but there was no rattling of bones and stones. After this, the beam of light wobbled a few times before sputtering out.

"What the heck does that mean?" asked Kat slowing down.

"Don't stop" said Grace, though after a short pause "Well, I mean, as long as you're fine... I don't think it's over yet.

Kat nodded and picked up the pace again, quickly approaching her full speed. She was pleasantly surprised at the practically straight path towards the tower they were on. Seems skipping over that first wall was a great idea.

"I'm fine Grace, I just... I didn't know what that meant exactly?" said Kat still a bit confused.

"Well, I'd bet that Thyme has a cassette ready for us once somebody succeeds. The fact there was no announcement means that it isn't over just yet" said Grace

Kat wanted to facepalm, though managed to resist the urge to drop Grace to complete the action. "Of course, why didn't I think of that... though speaking of, where are the Timmy's?"

As if on queue the Timmy's in question suddenly appeared in the corner of her eye on a branch that leaned onto the path.

As Kat passed underneath said branch the two Timmy's dropped down onto Grace's lap popcorn in hand. Kat examined the bowls carefully as she ran, trying to figure out what was wrong with them.

Ohhh... As she ran Kat realised the kernels weren't reacting, the bowl and the popcorn contained within were all fake... *Actually is it a fake bowl? It has fake stuff in it and it's full, but does that constitute it being fake?*

"Hey Grace, is that a fake bowl of popcorn?" asked Kat

"Well, Kat you see..." said Grace "that is completely irrelevant!"

Kat pouted in response, but the elf was paying attention, so Kat quickly diverted her focus back to running.

It was only another five minutes of full speed running through corridors that they arrived at the tower... which was actually a lot smaller in person. The original, seemingly massive structure was in actuality perhaps twenty metres across and twenty metres tall. Still an impressive building but compared to the spire which towers over all surroundings and reaches for the sky... it wasn't much.

The front had a very obvious wooden door on it, and Kat could see in her peripheral vision other doors that ringed the edge of the tower. The whole thing was a strangely smooth yellowed stone.

It seemed like it was meant to look like it had aged in the sun for a number of years, but the colour was a bit too clean for that impression. The construction was seamless. There were no cracks, chips, or even bricks for that matter. The whole thing was one giant, smooth almost marble-like structure with a vibrant yellow of a pleasant summer afternoon.

"Ok, what is the game plan?" asked Kat

Grace took this chance to escape Kat's embrace and slid up to the wall. Putting a finger to her lips, she then gestured for Kat's silence and put her ear to the wall. A moment later a green sigil lit up on her bracers.

Grace's face broke into a frown. "Shame" said Grace "It seems like the whole thing is warded. Or at least magically insulated"

"And that means?" asked Kat

"We have to go inside and figure out what's there ourselves" said Grace.

"So, what? We kick the door down" said Kat as she took a fighting position.

Grace sighed and shook her head. "No, we slowly open the door and hope that it's well-lit or that whatever we're dealing with isn't in the room" *Novelnext.cOm*

Well that's just boring and sensible. Who could possibly want to do that? Thought Kat as she nodded in confirmation and stood off to the side behind the door.

Grace held her breathe and slowly creaked open the wooden door. It was well oiled, but still made a bit of noise. The elf glanced into the room and was pleasantly surprised to find that it was both well-lit and empty. Perhaps the best configuration possible.

Of course, being well-lit and empty did not stop the sounds of clashing metal that now emanated from the tower. Grace allowed herself to carefully put her full head into the room and took a glance around.

The room was still, whatever noise wasn't from this floor. Looking around it was a completely circular room with a floor and high ceiling, perhaps halfway up the tower or thereabouts.

There was a stair set into the side of the room. They weren't so much on the one side, as a slow meandering spiral that lead upwards towards presumably the second floor, but the view of the final stairs was obscured by... well stairs.

If you ignored the stairs though, the rest of the room was in terrible shape. There were deep gashes in the floor, and what looked to have once been a dining table, however the various wood shards that had been thrown around the place made it hard,

Strangely, Grace couldn't see the other doors. Despite noticing that there was at least one more on the sides. Shrugging this off Grace examined the pathway between the door and the staircase... it wasn't horrible?

The wood and small amounts of food scraps scattered about littered the path between the two, but Grace had sturdy boots and Kat could fly.... so hopefully they'd be alright.

Grace pulled herself out and shut the door before whispering "Ok, so Kat, the room is pretty much empty. You'll need to fly a little just in case because your boots don't look that strong and we don't want to make too much noise"

Hey I'm sure my boots are plenty strong... though perhaps not. Kat thought back to the gashes and cuts made during her fight with the others. *I'd assumed my Demonic Attire would hold up a bit better but apparently not? Or maybe it was holding up better but they had even stronger weapons?*

Grace reopened the door and gestured for Kat to follow behind. Kat did as bid and carefully flapped her wings and tried to hover through the doorframe. Luckily it was tall enough for her even while hovering around half a metre off the ground...

That didn't help her wingspan though. So, dropping back to the ground Kat snuck inside the doorway and then started to hover... for real this time.

Chapter 159: Heading Upstairs

Grace manoeuvred her way around the various debris with minimal effort, if in a slightly strange way. Ensuring she was tiptoeing and twisting her body to ensure that she didn't come into contact with the loose wood around the floor she made her way to the stairs.

Kat followed behind utilising her extreme flexibility and additional limb for balance. So, Kat flew across with her wings of course. Kat followed easily behind Grace and they both starting to make their way up the stairs.

I could just skip the effort and go straight to the next floor but... Grace can lead the way. As Kat followed the elf, the sounds of clashing metal only intensified. Focusing on the sound, Kat felt like she could identify just two combatants. The swords, or at least the steel, only seemed to impact once at the time, though occasionally in quick succession.

Finally, Kat and Grace approached the door to the second floor. Trapdoor that is. Set into the ceiling was a small ladder. It was obvious if, unremarkable, made of seemingly old but sturdy wood.

The pair shared a glance. Kat hovered off to the side, now in line with Grace instead of beside her unsure if it would be best to speak up or not. *Do we want to give ourselves away?*

Another series of clashing steel and heavy footwork answered that question. "Grace, how are we doing this?" whispered Kat

Grace eyed the ladder, clearly designed for individuals larger than either herself or Kat. "We can probably go up together, that might be best"

Kat eyed the doorway suspiciously "Sure, it might be, but I think my wings are too wide" replied Kat

Grace shook her head, "Not if you close them. The ladder can hold both of us. If we climb side by side it should be fine"

Kat examined the ladder in turn. *I think she might be right. The ladder is actually surprisingly wide, clearly not human sized. Hmm, in fact, you could probably get close to fitting three copies of Grace on the ladder. So even with my wings closed there should be space for us.*

Kat floated past the elf and grabbed onto the side of the ladder. Closing her wings tight against her back she looked towards Grace to see if she could fit. The elf responded with a smirk and lightly jumped onto the rung and stood there without her hands.

Ooh, so it's like that. Kat smiled. *Seems Grace has recovered from the fight better than I thought.* The two slowly made their way up the ladder in tandem. As they approached the top, Kat stretched out her tail.

Grace raised an eyebrow at that but figured it out pretty quickly. Slowly, and in tandem, Kat used her tail to lightly push open the trapdoor and Grace followed. As she did so, a strange scene began to unfold before Kat's eyes.

The room was even more barren than the bottom floor, but it was completely clear of debris. The only piece of furniture was a single pedestal in the centre with a large white orb, perhaps twice the size of a basketball. It emitted a faint light, but that was faint compared to the bright lights that seemed to shine from nowhere and kept the floor well-lit.

What they did find though, made no sense. Two combatants moving at lightning speed. Without her eye enhancements, Kat could hardly make out the two aside from the sparks that flew whenever their blades met.

Even then, everything was just glancing blows. Even at the short moment of impact it was hard to actually make anything out. Whoever they were they never stopped, even after disengaging always moving, never at rest.

Enhancing her eyes to get a clearer picture revealed even more strangeness. The first figure was actually Green. The speed was actually fairly expected to Kat. It was impressive yes, but she suspected there was a bit more of a trick involved to make them hard to visual.

No, the real surprise was that the second figure was Nixilei. The healer was keeping up with Green and seemed to be hardly breaking a sweat. As Kat watched she noticed that not only was she not breaking a sweat... Nixilei was holding one hand behind her back. *Novelnext.cOm*

Kat's eyes grew wide and she let her head creak around to face Grace who held a similar feeling of shock. That's when Kat noticed the third person in the room. Behind Grace's head was one of the other members of her team... which one wasn't exactly clear, but the robes meant it had to be one of the twins.

Kat raised a slow figure pointing behind her. As soon as she did Grace whipped her head around to see, before instantly relaxing her shoulders. "Well, Estelle, what exactly are you doing here"

The other elf sighed, Estelle, presumably "I'm asking myself the exact same thing Grace. I see you found a friend"

"Um, well yes." Said Grace glancing towards the fight. "Should we be doing something?"

Estelle shrugged "I dunno. We're outnumbered three to one, and I doubt I could beat either of those two nutjobs even if I was by myself. Besides, crazy thing is I actually came here with the pair of them. I met up with them when we were looking for a sand skipper, so I doubt they'd turn on me now"

"Right, but what exactly is going on?" asked Grace "Why are they fighting between the two of themselves? Aren't they on the same team?"

Estelle shrugged. "Nixilei suggested it. Said something about Green skipping out on training recently or something? I dunno I wasn't paying attention. Anyway, she told me to sit tight and just wait for them to finish"

"And you just let them?" asked Grace

"Well, what would you have done Grace? I already said I can't fight either of them. I certainly wasn't planning to fight both" said Estelle

"I mean, I dunno, can't you like touch the orb or something?" asked Grace

"Oh sure" said Estelle "Only if I wanted to stand in the middle of that fight for a good chunk of time. The cassette told us that we hold to be holding it for ten minutes. In that time, we can't move the orb, and can't release our hand from its surface"

This time it was Grace who sighed. "Yup, that sounds about right. So what? We just watch them?"

"Unless you've got a set of dice or something then yeah I guess so. I really hope they sort this out before the others show up though. Those fools will be tired, and I'm not sure we want to fight too many others, Skye and her lot would be especially problematic"

"Oooh, we fought them off already" said Kat

Estelle raised an eyebrow at this. "How many of them did you take out?"

"The lot" said Kat

Estelle's eyes both went wide this time and her face paled just a little. She let her eyes meet Grace's searching for confirmation and the scout provided it the form of a short nod. "That changes things then" said Estelle

"Huh, I guess we really do just relax then" said Estelle letting herself slump against the wall fully letting the strain bleed out of her.

Huh, so what does that mean exactly. And who do we want to activate the orb? I said I'd help Grace as much as possible, and she agreed to the same. Though, I guess we might not be the ones who actually claim the orb.

"What do you want to do Grace?" asked Kat

"Well, what exactly do you mean by that?" asked Grace

"First order of business. Should we get off the ladder" said Kat

Grace looked down at her hands and feet still securely on the ladder, and past that stood the two Timmy's tilting their heads to the side in a confused manner. Shaking her head Grace pulled herself up past the lip and sat next Estelle, though keeping herself tense and ready unlike her counterpart.

Kat shrugged and followed suit, letting her tail curl up in her lap. The temptation to try and tickle Grace was strong but seeing how serious the scout currently was, Kat tempered that urge.

"Second order of business then" said Kat "Who do we want touching the orb"

Grace looked confused for a second before understanding washed over her. "Well, I mean, certainly not you right?" said Grace with a cheeky grin.

Kat shrugged "If that's what it comes to. I'm not too concerned now that Nixilei and Green are both here"

As Kat finished her sentence there was a ringing of metal. The three turned their heads to see what was happening. In front of them the endless movement had finally stopped.

Nixilei seemed to have caught Green's dagger in her own. The two blades were interlocked, utilising the small guard on both to keep them in place. Green had a slight frown, but Nixilei had the same impassive expression as standard.

Chapter 160: Duelling Daggers

"You're getting sloppy Green" said Nixilei pushing the dagger forward towards Green

"Why Nix? Why go through so much effort" said Green holding the dagger back, if barely

Nixilei leant further forward pressing the dagger ever closer to Green's body in the process. "Well it's only right that the strongest combatant moves on, right? Have to make sure you are still in peak condition"

Green's frown deepened "But, the strongest combatant is over there sitting in the corner" said Green as her eyes flick towards Kat.

She waved in response. *Not sure I actually believe that but I'm sure I don't want to get in between those to right now.* "Now, that's hardly fair to put all the work onto Kat. We hired her just for a simple tournament at standard rates. This is far from standard already" said Nixilei deadpan.

Green didn't look happy with this answer at all. "But... but then why can't you do it? You're stronger than I am"

"I'm just the weak healer of the group that needs protecting" said Nixilei deadpan, pushing the dagger noticeably closer with each word spoken.

Green looked between Nixilei and the dagger slowly approaching her body and was not impressed.

"How does this indicate that I'm stronger than you of all people?"

Green slipped her dagger out of the hold and dashed to the side letting Nixilei fall forward. Nixilei didn't let this upset her balance at all, taking a large step before whirling on Green with an overhead strike.

"Green, you're much faster than I am, perhaps more skilled. I'm sure you can beat me" said Nixilei, though her tone stayed constant. *Does she actually mean that? It's unbelievable hard to tell with her.*

"Come on Nix, I'm tired, we've been out here for literal days, I need a good rest" said Green

"You had at least a day's rest in the resting area, not to mention you arrived before I did" said Nixilei

"That hardly counts" said Green breaking away and taking her first swing at Nixilei only for the healer to duck under it and return with her own slash.

Green twisted out of the way to avoid the dagger moving forward to try and push Nixilei off balance. This failed however when Nixilei hardened her stance and managed to control the motion bringing Green in close.

Nixilei brought the dagger down, attempting to stab Green over her shoulder. Seeing this coming though Green moved forward a bit and then locked Nixilei's elbow in place preventing the dagger from being brought closer.

Nixilei made good use of the extra space though. Bringing her leg up and in close she managed to slam it into Green's chin, breaking her hold. Green jumped back and away to avoid any follow up attacks from Nixilei, but the close space prevented major damage.

"What? Not willing to make your own strike against my back?" asked Nixilei

Green sighed "No way. You've gotten me with that trick way too many times. You'll happily trade one injury for another and get away with it. I don't have that sort of pain tolerance"

"A pity, I really ought to convince you to fix that error, but I doubt your parents would let me. That's their job after all" said Nixilei stepping in for another attack.

Kat started to think over her fight with Boring, and Kress. *If I could manage to take attacks without flinching it would be really useful, so I guess I do understand.*

Green for her part just nodded and ducked out of the way of the strike. Nixilei followed this up with a swift kick, that was avoided with a swifter move backwards towards the edge of the room.

At this point, the fight once again entered into a state of rapid exchanges. Punches, kicks and dagger swipes flew about in rapid succession and Kat started to look towards the two she was sitting with.

"So... what we just sit here?" asked Kat

Grace and Estelle shrugged in perfect sync "Well, what else did you want to do?" said Grace

Kat looked out over at the pair of fighters then back to Grace. "You know you make a good point" responded Kat.

"So Estelle, any notes on where the others are?" asked Grace

Estelle shook her head "Nope. I haven't heard anything at all about the others. It's possible that they got delayed. I'm not sure that Ryo knows how to pilot a sand skipper, and I doubt her fire resistance is enough to just walk"

Grace nodded "That does make sense. What about the God Crushers? Have you seen any of them?"

Estelle shook her head "Nope, not even a peep"

Grace got a thoughtful look on her face. "Well, not to be rude to the guys, but you think perhaps they never made it out of the forest?"

Estelle's eyes went wide at that. "Oh, you might just be right... or at least they might have been sufficiently delayed. I'm much too used to forest sense now, I'd somewhat forgotten"

"Actually, that is a good point, how does anyone that isn't an elf get out of the place" asked Kat

Estelle gave a confused look towards Kat, but Grace seemed more understanding of the question. "Well, it's a bit hard to say, because I couldn't feel the full effects myself but, just off the top of my head. Making a small compass, waiting for day and following the sun... and I'm sure there is something else but it isn't coming to me"

Kat nodded but then Estelle spoke up "Wait, if you didn't know how to leave then how did you get out Kat?"

Kat flexed her wings in response "Much easier when you can see the whole thing... and the next section... and a little of the one after that" *NOVELNext.COM*

Estelle gaped open mouth at Kat. "Yeah, the others are right. Your powers are stupid. Why is that even allowed?"

Kat shrugged "Seems to be an age thing. Though I wonder..." *Hey System, how old am I in demon terms? I mean I've only been a demon for like a week haven't I?*

User Kat's age was not affected by the Awakening. User Kat is still 17 Earth Years Old.

Ok, just checking.

"Well, it is an age thing, but Estelle does make a semi valid point. You do sort of outclass everyone except perhaps Green, and well Nixilei if she can keep up with her as well" said Grace

Kat looked over at the still ongoing fight. "Wait why aren't they using magic?"

Green and Nixilei instantly paused in their current poses. Turned to Kat, and said "No magic in duels between us" in almost perfect sync before returning to their rapid exchange of blows, Nixilei even tried to go in for a headbutt but Green was able to duck to the side and catch the healers neck with her shoulder.

Right... but that doesn't really properly answer me why?

 Kat looked over at the elvish pair. Estelle shrugged but Grace did speak up. "Well, traditionally, elves and fey don't use magic in duels unless expressly stated"

"Doesn't that seem a bit strange?" asked Kat "Don't a lot of them have fairly strong magic"

Grace nodded "Yes, but that's exactly the point. You don't use magic when you fight a friend unless you're specifically duelling to improve your magic... it's like um... well say your fire? You wouldn't use that in a duel amongst friends, it's just a bit too deadly so children are taught not to use it unless the situation calls for it"

Does that actually make sense? Also how does my demonic fire work against other demons? Would it work?

User Kat's demonic fire would likely work rather well. Most demons do not also have high tolerance for the call, though some do. The main consideration is that each demon's Demonic Energy will try and fight for dominance and control, so if User Kat sends off User Kat's Demonic Flame and it encounters an opponent which can subvert your control it will accomplish nothing.

Of course, Demonic Energy is rather stubborn and will not easily leave User Kat's control. Fighting a demon of a Rank and skill would lead to each demon burning their Demonic Energy reserves slowly as that energy cancelled each other out.

"Ok, I think I understand. It's a bit like bringing a knife to a gunfight" said Kat

"Exactly" said Grace "The gun is practically worthless once you reach any level of power, so if you're duelling in good faith you wouldn't use your better weapon. Magic is just a step above that"

Kat tried very hard to keep her face still. *It seems that gun does translate, but that they aren't all that good. Let's just pretend that there is nothing strange about that at all and go back to watching Green and Nixilei fail to defeat each other.*