

DEMONS 681

Chapter 681 Master Plan

Kat's Perspective

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Kat soared up into the sky feeling her normal freedom restrictive heavily by the damned bracelet. Her movement through the air was now choppy, changing directions risked dropping a few feet as well. It was simply inconvenient. Kat still wasn't sure exactly how the bracelet worked, but she was leaning towards gravity manipulation that needed a few moments to catch up to what she was doing properly to keep the effect 'consistent' without pulling her off course if she turned or jumped or something similar.

Even with the growing distaste for the enchanted artifact Kat managed to get a good height to look down at the final fire properly. It was immediately more interesting than the other two. The area was a mixed between three, or four distinct 'zones' depending on how you wanted to count things. The nicest part was that the whole industrial area was very much separated from the rest of the town with a large wall around it to keep things out, or in this case the fire in.

The first of the four zones were the ashes. Many buildings had already been reduced to nothing and stood completely burned out, with a slight glow from the cooling ash after the fire had moved on. Even that was hard to see because of just how bright surrounding fires were, but it was still evident to Kat, her eyes able to somehow just deal with the drastic difference in lighting. Something to make note of as well.

The surrounding fire was normal... sometimes. That's where they became arguably two separate zones. The more standard orangish yellow colour that was unsurprising to see... and the dots of bright white flame that would burn a normal pair of eyes just for looking at it. *Hmm... I don't know if this world has sunglasses... but the others are going to need a few pairs for that I think. The only thing I can hope for is that Thyme will heal the damage looking anywhere near those pillars of light will do to a normal eyeball.* *novelnext.com*

The final zone was a series of glowing rainbow barriers that shifted and flexed in place. It looked quite similar to a when the sun shone through the edge of a bubble on a bright day. The flaring of strange colours that seemed to twist around the surface and spread out for a few moments before breaking up and repeating the process. These zones were scattered around the industrial complex in a haphazard manner. The largest one was right in the centre, but the rest seemed to be all over the place. Some were next to fires, some were surrounded by ash, and a few were actually surrounded by flames still.

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Once Kat noted down everything, even spotting what she thought was Kress and Gareth working together to sort through some of the ash near the edge of the compound, likely because the fire was too intense in the nearby areas with about half of it being white. Still, Kat could see a group of Thymes jogging down the street away from the industrial area with what looked like work uniforms clearly headed out of the town. So it seemed that they did manage to rescue at least a few people.

So, chemicals making the flames hot, several things already totalled, a good chunk of people saved but more likely in those magic domes. I think that's everything. I wonder what Nixilei will make of this. Kat tried to loop around instead of just turning in place but her bracelet seemed to kick in at the worst time forcing her into a barrel role and drastically off course. It took a few further moments to correct it.

Fine. Not to self, no fancy flying at all until I take the damned bracelet off. It's good, but not actually THAT good.

Kat flew back to Nixilei carefully, keeping her speed consistent and her angle unchanging. Well mostly unchanging, a few small corrections were necessary. This was to ensure the bracelet didn't start freaking out again providing the smoothest trip since she'd put the cursed thing on. *Hmm. That's an interesting question. Does this count as a cursed artifact because it reduces my power? Or just a normal artifact because I'm all but certain the entire point of it is to reduce power. So it's working as intended. Then again, many cursed items are intended to cause problems if they were cursed during the making. I guess it's a matter of perspective.*

Kat's feet touched ground and before she could even start the report Nixilei was already on the ball, "So Kat what did you find?"

Kat efficiently started to explain the broad strokes of what she'd seen before asking if Nixilei wanted to hear about the specific locations of everything. "No that's fine," denied Nixilei, "the basic outline is still enough. I think... hmm... I'll want Earth mages working on the white flames, they'll be in charge of smother them while the water mages try to rain over the area. I worry that might make some of the fires worse, but I think on the whole it'll be an improvement. The protection domes sound like panic rooms.

"I'm just not sure how well those barriers will work. Depending on the type it might be as simple as grabbing a person out and carrying them to safety, or they might let nothing at all in and have a supply of oxygen for everyone inside. The first type is a bit more expensive. Keeping just bad stuff out is harder than you'd think. Keeping everything out including fire is actually much easier, if more energy intensive assuming all of the enchanting was done efficiently, which it might not have been I suppose."

Nixilei started tapping on her cheek as she ran. Mind processing the options she had for this particular venture. "Hmm..." mumbled Nixilei before saying aloud, "Kat, how easy would you say it is to get to most of those barriers?"

Kat made a 'so-so' gesture with her hand. "Some of them would be really easy for anyone to get to, they're just surrounded by a fair bit of ash but I doubt that would be too hot as long as you're wearing decent shoes," a quick check revealed everyone was though Tophat's could have been better, "others are near some intense flames, not always white, and would be a bit of a hassle but with proper care... I can see it happening. Then there's the ones just surrounded by fire. I think you'd either need to put those ones out or just send me in."

Nixilei frowned at that, "Sure I COULD send you in but Kat... how are you supposed to get anybody OUT of them?"

"Um... oops?" said Kat with some embarrassment.

“Kat this is a bit of a bigger deal then just an ‘oops’. I’m sure the people in them would be smart enough to warn you Kat... but you really should have seen that coming. I mean, they’re in those bubbles for a reason. What made you think just getting them to leave with you would be a good idea?” grumbled Nixilei

When she puts it that way I feel like kind of an idiot. I mean, the easy answer is I DIDN’T think. I just knew I was fireproof and I’d go in... and then figure things out. I mean, if the barrier started failing or something surely they have backup plans? Alternatively, I could maybe just throw them through into like some water? Hmm... isn’t there that trick with molten metal and a wet hand? Lily explained it to me once but... that memory is a little fuzzy.

“I wasn’t really I guess...” admitted Kat after running through her thoughts.

“Kat, it’s fine but just, keep it in mind in the future. For now I think I want you working on the domes close to the edge of the fires. You can rush them out quickly before the heat gets to them, and you can more safely approach the edges or even go in through the sections near the fire if that proves necessary instead. What you need to do, is find out how long that particular barrier can last, if the answer is a while, leave them. If it isn’t long, try and escort them out. Oh and ask them how it deals with water. Some barriers let in rain but don’t let it out. It’s actually a very common oversight in the enchantments and happens all the time. Make sure to check for that. While I doubt Thyme would make that mistake, I wouldn’t put it past them to do it intentionally,” explained Nixilei.

“Ok got it. What will you be doing?” asked Kat

“I’ll be focused on organising the mages and the rescue teams. Making sure they can get to the domes without getting hurt, that the water the mages are pulling is from different areas... and I’ll probably sent the Earth mages over to Gareth. He can lead them,” explained Nixilei.

“Sounds like a plan,” finished Kat with a grin.

Chapter 682 Pompeii

Kat sprinted ahead down the road. Now that the plan had been finalised it was time to get to work. Part of her wanted to fly back into the compound but the bracelet reacted much more poorly to her flight then it did to running; her speed was also higher by a few notches because of that same bracelet, so it was all around better to stick to the ground for the time being as long as you didn’t need to see more than the nearby area.

Kat jumped over the walls and into the compound. The edge was covered in ash and lacked the fire that had spread deeper in. When Kat hit the ground a cloud of black and grey dust burst up around her, clouding her vision and getting stuck in her mouth when she reflexively breathed in. Spitting out a glob of dust though Kat could still taste it. Keeping her mouth shut and her nose covered Kat moved away from the ash cloud, a significantly more deadly foe then the fire for someone like Kat.

She moved past two bubbles that were situated in the ash, and waved at Gareth who was digging around in the rubble. Kat wasn’t sure what he was looking for with the bubbles so close by, but she had a few guesses. *Perhaps he thinks the people in the bubbles are safe and don’t need attention? Alternatively, they could be looking for bubbles underground. I mean they are panic room, safe house things. It wouldn’t be weird to find them underground or something.*

Kat kept running until she got to the first bubble bordering on the edge of some fire. Kat could actually feel the temperature difference. It certainly wasn't a problem, more like a warm spring day, but the fact it was noticeable at all was certainly something to be concerned about. The bubble was a simple one and covered the area around what looked like a bunker in the back of a building. It had rough edges that cut off abruptly around the bubble with some slight charring on them. It was clear the surrounding building had been turned to ash at this point and the white flame nearby was likely some chemical compound that had continued burning after the structure had been completely destroyed.

Kat's hand reached out carefully towards the bubble, making sure to apply as little force as she could while her hand moved forward. After Nixilei had explained that she really shouldn't just bring people out of the bubbles, Kat was endeavouring to be more careful. As such when approaching this bubble, Kat wanted to ensure it let her in without issue. The chance she had enough power to force her way through was higher than she'd like for safety reasons so a light touch was required. When Kat's fingers finally met the shining surface there was a slight tingling, similar to the pins and needles experienced after limiting blood flow to one's limbs.

Despite the strange sensation though, Kat's fingers felt no resistance at all, managing to make their way through the bubble as if there was nothing there at all. Kat walked forward kindly, the bubble giving way to her with no trouble except for the strange feeling being particularly prominent in her horns for the few moments it took to completely cross the threshold. Once she was completely inside it all stopped, as if things were completely normal.

Kat walked forward up to the door set into the panic room. It was a big steel thing and looked to be air tight. There was no handle, which Kat thought was slightly poor design, though perhaps she was just missing something. Kat stood in front of the imposing steel door and gave it a good knock in the rhythm of, one, two, one, before stepping off to the side the door didn't open. She waited a few moments, and was about to knock again when a creaking groan sounded out before air started to rush out from the door as it swung back.

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Inside the room was Kat couldn't see too much. There was a small sitting area with four bunkbeds pressed against the walls and a table in the middle. There was another door at the back and a single light in the dead centre of the room. Three worker Thymes were half dressed in work clothes. Their boots were on the ground and their jackets were resting across the bedheads. Two of them had even unbuttoned their long sleeved work shirts, though the one who opened the door looked slightly more professional.

"Hello?" said the Thyme uncertainly.

"Hello," said Kat with as much cheer as she could muster hoping it would put them at ease, "I'm here to potentially help you guys out. I'm just checking in to see how long your barrier will last and evacuate you if necessary."

Foreman Thyme frowned, "I'm afraid you've caught me in between somewhat of a rock and a hard place. The fact you could make it here suggests could things about your competency and the current state of the outside world. However, company policy prohibits me from disclosing any specific details about the panic room setup to unauthorised personnel. Additionally, for liability reasons, without due

cause or a manager, or manager equivalent employee present we have been instructed to wait in the panic room after activation.”

Kat’s jaw dropped open as she tried to figure out if Foreman Thyme was actually as sorry as he currently looked or if he’d done the equivalent of telling her to ‘fuck off’ using corporate jargon. Kat... wasn’t sure and suspected the answer was whatever Thyme personally thought was more entertaining at the time.

I... I have no plans for this. I mean... who expects this? Do I just like... leave them here? Is that the right call? Hmm...

The fact they seem rather unconcerned makes me think this bunker will last a while and the beds imply that ‘a while’ is at least twenty-four hours. The thing is, is that just for the bunker or is it for the bunker and the shield. I don’t exactly know what these sort of rooms were actually designed for. Industrial accidents perhaps? Earthquakes? Fires clearly to some extent... but exactly what extent. That’s the question and I don’t know if I can get answers. Hmm... I suppose I’ll stick with polite for now but perhaps I can get something.

“I... I understand that sir, however with the large fire nearby and the exit clear I was instructed to help you all escape the area if necessary. I’m currently working with the fire fighting efforts and the industrial area is still potentially dangerous. Due to my own speed, strength and fire resistance I was sent in. If this barrier can last for an extended period of time I’m happy to leave you here, but I CAN get you out,” said Kat.

“That’s not nec-” Foreman Thyme was cut off by one of the ones sitting on the bed, who had a scar over one eye.

Scar Thyme interrupted with, “Just tell the lass. Company policy ain’t going to mean much when it’s all been burnt down. I’m perfectly happy to leave with her,”

Foreman Thyme frowned and turned to the side so they could speak to everyone, “There is something called, insurance. Plus, the business has a good chunk of cash saved, we aren’t out of the job just yet. If you really want to walk out I’m not going to stop you. I’m also not going to promise YOU still have a job at the end of this whole fiasco so perhaps consider what you want to do here a bit more carefully.”

Scar winced and said, “You’re the boss I suppose. I’ve lost a cousin in a similar incident you know? Enchantment was rated for a week but it failed after just three houses. Didn’t even make it seven hours let alone seven days. Forgive me for wanting to get out boss. If you’re making me stay here... well I suppose you trust the enchantments enough. As much as I don’t like it, that’s good enough for me.”

Foreman Thyme nodded and said, “Good. The company keeps the enchantments updated, and this is nothing. Well, they might be due for an update once the fire clears. The constant use will wear on them but I think this was money well spent. Makes me wonder if investing in some general fire suppression wards would be worth the money. Something to look into perhaps.”

Kat felt the need to add, “Not sure ‘general suppression’ would really do any good. Theirs white fire right next to this and the area is ash. I feel like to keep it constantly up would take too much mana or be rather expensive. Not that I’d really know,”

"I suppose it really does depend on prices and effectiveness. We aren't just down a warehouse and all the product inside it, we're also down all the lost time it'll take us to get things back up and running. Still... it probably wouldn't be worth it. A Thyme can dream though," said Foreman Thyme.

Chapter 683 Clean Freak

Kat got through two more bubbles and heard much the same thing as she did the first time, "company policy, can't do it, yad yada," and was really starting to question exactly how good this 'company policy' was overall. The only bright spot in her three attempts was the third group who had revealed the barrier would hold up against the fire for three days before it exhausted itself. Leaving them was by far the easiest choice she'd made so far because they KNEW it was good enough to last. The others assumed, and that comment from the first bubble about them failing occasionally was a slight damper on things but it was mostly fine.

Still I wonder if my time could be better spent elsewhere. In fact, maybe I should turn back to Nixilei and ask her what to do? Three for three is fairly conclusive that this is the norm here. Is it worth searching for that needle in a haystack where I CAN actually help rather than being a glorified door to door salesman nobody wants?

Kat approached the next bubble with a sigh, testing it lightly with her fingers before pushing her way through the bubble and shaking off the unpleasant feeling. She opened the door once again and set her face into a smile even if she didn't feel it to ensure she didn't look too scary... only to see an empty room on the other side. "Hello? Is my smile that scary?" said Kat with a joking tone she really wasn't feeling.

Stepping into the room Kat glanced around and found it to be about standard for these kinds of bunkers if you ignored the lack of people. The beds were made, the floor was clean and the slightly surprising thing was that the light was on. Stepping forward carefully Kat wrapped her fingers around the door handle and carefully pulled open only to reveal stacks of canned food lining the shelves with bottles of water filling the floor space. Even if someone wanted to hide in here, there just wasn't any room. All the space was being used up and unless they had the ability to shrink to such a small size not even Kat could see them, there was nowhere to hide.

Food for thought. Do my eyes see through invisibility? I'd imagine they do, but when something is invisible I can see more, as in the stuff behind it, if I don't... nah that's dumb, I'm certain I can. That just means this place is empty. Why though? All the other ones had people inside them. What triggers the barrier?

Kat walked outside to gaze out the shimmering defensive bubble for a few moments as she tried to work out what to do now. *I should mark this one as being empty somehow. Maybe with a big O? My first thought was an X but that might make people think there's something important here when in fact it's the opposite. Additionally, I'm going to go find Nixilei after this. Not being able to help anyone is getting annoying.*

Course of action decided Kat jumped onto the roof and used her nails to gauge a deep circle into the roof of the building and one of the sides. She hoped it would be enough to make it clearly distinct from the others before speeding off. Kat glanced up at the sky and saw the small black cloud gathering over

the compound. It wasn't very high up and trying to fly through it would just block her sight. Kat could see the water carefully flowing from the river up into the cloud and smiled a bit at the clear progress.

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Kat ran back to the area she'd seen Gareth in before, keeping an eye out around the flames and shells of buildings for anyone, and was happy to spot Gareth after just thirty seconds of wandering. Kat pulled up beside him as she summoned a large stone wall and slammed it down on a patch of white fire... it didn't work at all. The flames quickly burnt through the stone and just kept going. Gareth clicked his tongue at the molten rock, "Damn we need that water before doing anything else. I can't make a wall solid enough to stop this,"

"Glad I'm not the only one feeling useless," said Kat offhandedly.

Gareth spun around at the noise, not having heard Kat approach. His shield was in hand thrust in front of him ready to confront whatever 'danger' was there... only to realise it was Kat. "Um... woops. Yeah. Not too much to be done just yet I suppose... why are you feeling useless though? There are plenty of bubbles around near the fires,"

"Because they keep giving me the polite version of 'fuck off we're fine' or fine enough really. Something about company policy stating they can't give out details about the defences, so I don't know if they'll last long enough for everyone to be safe, and that they can't leave without a superior officer letting them know it's all good. I've accomplished nothing since entering the industrial district except some minor vandalism on an empty panic room," explained Kat with some bite to her tone. She kept most of it from her words, it wasn't Gareth's fault at all, but she was a bit miffed that when surrounded by fire and offered an opportunity to leave, company policy was apparently still more important.

"Huh... I have no idea how normal something like that is. That's more Nixilei's wheelhouse," mumbled Gareth not really intending for Kat to overhear, though not minding if she did.

"I know, I was looking for her, I just ran into you first. Got any suggestions at all?" asked Kat.

"My suggestion is find Nixilei," said Gareth completely deadpan.

"Gareth... aren't you the leader normally?" asked Kat with some concern.

"Yes, and as the leader I've decided Nixilei should be in charge for now," said Gareth with a hard stare.

"Right..." said Kat slowly before dashing away at top speed. *That is perhaps the weirdest interaction I've had with Gareth... what's his problem anyway?* Kat was cheerfully forgetting that dust and debris slide off her and that the literal tonnes of ash nearby and floating around in the air wasn't causing her any issues. For Gareth, not only was it getting into his armour which would need a beyond thorough cleaning... it was getting EVERYWHERE and it was not a remotely fun experience. He was using his full experience as a noble to project a calm air of 'this is fine' and not start cursing.

So it was a bit more running later that Kat ended up next to Nixilei and her team of water mages. The process was interesting to watch. One mage held the spell maintaining the cloud, another pulled the water up while the third rested. They would then swap roles with water lifter maintaining the cloud, the one maintaining the cloud moving to rest, and the mage at rest would then pick up more water. It was a

smooth process at this point that kept things going without delay but it was clear the mages were reaching their limits somewhat.

“Hey Nixilei,” said Kat with a wave to get her attention. Once Nixilei glanced over at Kat, the demon continued. “Sooo... I’ve been through a few of those panic rooms but nobody wanted to leave. Something about it being company policy to just... hole up until someone more important comes along. Most wouldn’t even tell me when the damned shield could go down.” *nOVELnext.com*

“Well that isn’t good...” grumbled Nixilei, “it’s not even a terribly common practice. I know some BIG businesses in the capital operate like that... but that’s because their employees have valuable company secrets, valuable enough for others to set a fire then use the rescue as an excuse to kidnap or poach them. I didn’t really think this town would be big would have any business that large, let alone three. Unless... hmm... if just one or two companies own the entire district then it COULD happen I suppose. It might be a major hub for a business or two.

“Yes... looking at it that way does make the most sense. The thing is though... I think that’s still where you can be best utilised Kat,” explained Nixilei with a nod before turning back and calling for another swap of the mages. Kat frowned at the news, pouting. *I don’t want to feel like I’m doing nothing though...*

“Surely there’s something better right? Anything? I don’t mind digging around like Gareth?” offered Kat as alternatives.

“Kat, I understand you want to FEEL useful. The thing is though, this really is the best job I can give you. We just don’t know how stable those barriers are or if all of them are rated for multiple days. You getting people out is the best idea. Gareth and Kress are mostly just killing time while the cloud charges up. It’s not likely they will find anyone living. Normally I’d give Green the job I’ve given you, run around and scout basically, but you can do a bit more and Green’s completely out of it. This isn’t about feelings Kat. This is about results, and you can get the best results where you already are.”

Kat sucked in a deep breath before letting it out. “Ok”

Chapter 684 After the Rain

In the end, the task was finished not with a bang, but with a whimper. Kat ran around through a few more domes and even managed to convince one whole panic room worth of people to freedom. It really helped her get through the other five that rejected the offer of safety. Kress and Gareth didn’t really do anything interesting either. Digging through the ash yielded nothing of note, or at least nothing of note Kat heard about.

There was very little warning for the rain. One moment the black cloud was rumbling above her head like usual then the next it was dumping water by the bucket loads. Kat could hardly comprehend how the cloud had managed to stay afloat as the thick streams of water dumped themselves into the compound extinguishing the strongest fires and washing away much of the ash. Plenty still clung to the building and it would be a lie to say things were clean, but nothing was on fire and there was a clear path through the streets at the very least.

Once the water had finished washing through the streets glowing circles appeared bellow everyone, or at least Kat assumed they did. She hadn't seen Green or Nixilei at the time, but everyone appeared once again in front of the fire chief Thyme.

"Good job rookies, you managed to save the town. Not the best performance, but I'll admit I'm proud of ya. Your final tally for the round is 73 out of 100," Fire Chief pulled a large sign from behind his back that really shouldn't have fit there at all considering it was twice as tall and thrice as wide as the Chief. It had the numbers carved into it with what looked like amateur skill but the wonderfully carved, 'final score' at the top left the quality of the overall product up to question.

"Can you explain why that was our final score?" asked Nixilei, "I do not wish to dispute it but I am very interested in the scoring system,"

Fire Chief Thyme nodded, "Of course. Not every team has finished so far and we have time. To provide the most basic overview, there was a certain amount of damage that was unavoidable. Nothing you could do about it at all. There is a second set of damage that, while not completely unavoidable, may be rendered unavoidable depending on how and in which order you dealt with things. It was deemed unfair to punish you when the whole town was open to you from the start. You could have gone to any of the three areas and found a slightly different challenge there depending on how long it took you to arrive and in what order you dealt with them.

"For example, the street you, Gareth, and Kat went to first, if left till last, would have been the entire neighbourhood instead, requiring you to work with the water mages to find wells, the earth mages to make new ones, and the volunteers to help rescue people trapped by the blaze. Instead you dealt with it first, negating these issues.

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"If you'd sent more people to the Industrial area at first it would have been a gauntlet of burnt and unburnt buildings with the goal of getting to the bubbles and getting everyone out back through the maze safely. As it stood though you went there last and used the water mages and the river well to flood it and take out the fire."

Fire Chief took in a big breath before hiding the oversized sign behind his back and pulling out another one. He started marking the first line off. "So, the first major point loss was letting Gloves destroy that fire crystal," everyone glanced over to see Green passed on the nearby grass, "Oh... right. Um dropping character for a moment. Would you rather I remove her fatigue and restore her mana or let her sleep before doing that?"

Gareth wanted to answer but held his tongue and looked over to Nixilei for advice, "Well Gareth this is your choice. Letting her sleep is probably better for her mind, but healing her up would let her hear this debrief. While I don't doubt Thymes prowess you can't really restore the mind, only push the effects back to deal with later. I think it's best to let her rest personally as your team healer, but I won't stop you from choosing the other option,"

Gareth waved Nixilei off and said, "No you're right. I bet if she was awake enough to answer she'd chose the option that gave her more sleep, plus this is more for your benefit then the teams. While it's a good

way to kill time, I don't see it as an integral debriefing. It might be nice for us when we discuss this all after the tournament, but by then it'll be mostly academic,"

Seeing everyone accept that answer Thyme dropped back into character as the Fire Chief, "Back to the fire crystal. That cost your team a full ten points. While the village in the forest was always going to be destroyed, the crystal itself is quite valuable and if you handed it over to the residence would have been used for repair cost. That's not to mention that it drastically increased the difficulty of getting everyone out, but Kat managed to negate what was supposed to be a way of splitting the group by just... supporting the tree a bit. Good move in truth.

"The next biggest point loss, from your remaining 17, was five points for missing a well hidden panic room with no bubble built into the floor. It flooded when the rain started 'killing' that Thyme. Additionally, you lost another three points for just flooding the area. It was great, and definitely the best choice at that point, but the flood water damage still comes to three points lost. Now the last nine..." Fire Chief made a 'so-so' gesture, "is mainly a cumulation of a number of small mistakes each worth one, or less then one point that added together.

"For example, during the first fire that was fought, the street, minor damage was done to nearby houses that while you did put out, weren't gentle with at all. The collapse of two additional houses also cost you a point each. Another good idea, that might have saved you more points than it cost, which is why they were only worth one point each. All of those little issues on the street add up to six points lost there.

"The final three were from accidents that happened out of your vision. If you were around and ignored them a bigger point cost would have been incurred. The Thymes you left to just exit the city had issues, trips, falls, debris, and a brawl. None of these were addressed, but you didn't exactly leave anyone capable of handling them either and as such you weren't punished too harshly for them. Just some minor points."

Nixilei frowns at that. "Would sending Buff with them have helped? I don't regret the decision to have him looking after Green, but I'd like to know,"

"Not really," said Thyme dropping the fire chief outfit for a moment, "while in practice the version of myself you designated as Buff had the strength to deal with these issues, 'he' would never act without orders until things reached a certain point, which would still have cost you points because there was a fight you guys weren't around to stop. Buff is the big tough guy, the strong silent type. If you had sent Buff and a minion ordering them to keep an eye on things that would have worked though, the mages and volunteers were... 'higher functioning' I suppose is the word,"

Nixilei looked like she'd swallowed a lemon after hearing that explanation, clearly unhappy with the idea that the Thymes were so stupid as to not just deal with their problems as a group. This distaste was only compounded by the fact she knew real were actually that stupid, or worse, wilfully ignorant with the potential to make things even worse. "I have no other questions," grumbled Nixilei.

"Wonderful," said Thyme with an overly large smile, not bother to shift back into their Fire Chief persona. "See you soon for the next round,"

Suddenly the ground lit up once again and everyone disappeared for a moment before Kat blinked and found herself in an empty room. Thyme appeared in front of her a moment later, "A shame with your

eyes I can't really play this whole thing up. Anyway, I guess you'll just have to wait here a bit for the round to start in earnest. It's simple in concept, but delightfully complex in execution.

"You'll have a series of task to complete with another team. You need to work together to get to the end of them, while following the rules as listed on the board you'll be set down next to. The twist... well the twist is that you won't be alone. Every single person involved with have a double working to sabotage everyone.

"Between each task you can vote out two 'people' as doubles. The rounds will continue until 5 people are left or all the doubles are gone. However... a slight twist. The team that has the most players left will receive... something special based on how many more people from your team have survived. Good luck."

Chapter 685 If It Bleeds...

As soon as the explanation finished there was another flash of light and Kat felt herself being compressed for a moment. She didn't know it at the time, but Thyme was compressing time around her to line up the teleport for everyone else. The feeling didn't last long in Kat's eyes, and soon she found herself in a medium sized room with a low ceiling. In the centre on the low ceiling was a signboard that says, 'pick two imposters you have 20 minutes'. The 'floor' was by far the nicest part of the whole thing. It was made up of a squishy surface that had a velvety texture and felt like slime. Kat could already feel herself relaxing somewhat.

In the circle there were two teams, Kat's team of course, and 'The Numbers' the dwarf team. Of course, there wasn't just the original team members but a second set of everyone in question, even a second copy of Kat herself. The two sides were mirrored with Kat sitting across from her doppelganger and next to Kress on one side with the dwarf labelled three on the other.

Well well well. I wonder how what makes the copies different. Plus there is that bonus... but I have a feeling it isn't anything good. Thyme didn't say it WAS good and I clearly remember Thyme saying this was all about teamwork. I'd be willing to bet my left horn that we don't want the prize at the end. We want to get through this with the same number of people. Now... how do I prove that I'm not the copy?

Kat gazed at her hand absently for a second before realising an answer. "Kress, can you please stab me?" asked Kat. When she finished there wasn't even a split second of hesitation, Kress just whipped out his dagger and stabbed towards Kat. She moved her hand in the way letting it cut through her palm. It didn't pierce her bones or even all of her muscles but the force was enough to shift them off to the side allowing the dagger to clean through.

"WHAT THE HECK!" shouted the two Greens in a panic. Everyone else was starring at the real Kat rather intently trying to work out that exact question. The only outlier were the two Nixilei's that were keeping their eyes on the other Kat who looked just as shocked as everyone else, as if she could not understand why Kat had done that. The other Kress had drawn his weapon as if to throw it but saw he was clearly 'behind' on the order. Kat wasn't entirely sure as she was mostly focused on her own double's reaction, but she suspected the other Kress started moving after the one next to her.

"You can have your dagger back now," said Kat. Kress hesitated for a moment, before shrugging and pulling the dagger out of her hand letting black ichor leak from the wound and drip over the soft flooring that seemed to absorb the mess. "To answer your question Green. While these fakes do seem quite good... does it bleed black?"

Suddenly every eye in the room was turned to the other Kat instead. The two Nixilei's were the only outlier, giving some signal Kat missed and one turned to Original Kat while the other turned to the one Kat herself was certain had to be fake. "Hey guys? Why are you all looking at me like that? What sort of madwomen just asks to be stabbed?" said the Fake Kat.

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"Seems very easy to test though..." said Nixilei 1. Nixilei 2 then added without turning away from Original Kat, "I agree. We've seen Kat bleed before and know that it SHOULD be black. If your blood isn't black we have one easy traitor."

Fake Kat's face seemed to twitch for a second before whipping her arm around to stab Kress in the stomach. Obviously not expecting it, the move hit true digging deep into Kress' stomach. If it mattered, the blood was red. That was about as far as Fake Kat got because Nixilei was ready with a dagger, throwing it straight into Fake Kat's eye burying itself deep. Before Fake Kat stopped moving an arrow drawn from two Green's embedded in Fake Kat's chest and a potion exploded over her side setting the body alight. Dwarf Two, who was next to Kress quickly pulled him away uncorking a bottle of potion with his mouth before pausing. "Wait... should I heal this guy?" asked Dwarf Two 2. Oh, and Fake Kat did bleed red.

"We've got him," said the two Nixileis together. They moved in sync summoning an identical circle and pouring energy into Kress who growled at the callous response. "Don't be such a baby" said the Nixileis, "Hmmm... if that strike actually punctured the stomach badly I'm not sure this is going to cut it..."

"I hate the fact there is two of you now. Can't you just let me bleed out? It'll be less painful and I'm sure Thyme will heal me," grumbled Kress 2 as they screwed up their nose in distaste because of burning corpse next to him. It didn't smell though. As the body burnt it just smelt like normal wood smoke and everyone was very thankful.

"Don't be such a wuss," said the Nixileis with a synchronised eye roll. "Just because we don't know the spell for fixing organs doesn't mean that the job will fail fast. You'll almost certainly live until the end of the task and we trust Thyme not to kill you,"

"Oh joy," spat Kress, "what a wonder to be forced into stupid tasks with a stomach wound. I am ever so happy you decided to heal me,"

"Thanks accepted," said the Nixileis with a cheeky grin, clearly just doing it to annoy Kress.

Gareth 2 slammed his steeled hands together. "Well, now that... that... is all being taken care of. Shall we try to determine a second fake? I doubt it'll be so easy, but there is surely an easy way. We at least know they all bleed red, so if anyone else doesn't for some strange reason I'd ask you to speak up."

“Hang on there,” said Dwarf One 2, “are we just supposed to ignore the fact that one of your teammates was perfectly willing to stab the other? That doesn’t seem... strange at all?” at this point, much like the Nixileis the other Dwarf One picked things up, “Indeed, surely only an imposter would be so willing.”

Everyone on Kat’s team, except her of course, winced, both copies. “Um... hmm...” the Greens struggled to answer.

So Gareth 1 picked up the slack and said, “No... no that’s... honestly very in character for Kress. Permission from Kat to stab her. Well, he’d stab her in a heartbeat. If you didn’t notice the other Kress was readying himself to throw a spare dagger at Kat as well. It is... to our disappointment... quite believable.”

The dwarves all just stared at Gareth 1 like he’d grown a second head. That was Until Green 1, decided to flop forward. They were sandwiched between Dwarf 4 and 5 so they didn’t have a shoulder to lean on. “Welp, you can deal with that I’m going to sleep.”

This time it was the turn of Green 2 to get everyone’s scrutiny. She just shrugged and said, “What it might be a great idea but it’d be weirder to try and copy myself second. I mean, I think I’m the original of course, but does the copy know it’s the copy or does it think it’s the original? Also, I don’t know which Gareth is my Gareth. I can’t go to sleep on his lap until this problem is solved. It’s too big of a risk and one of the two Nixilei’s would pick on my if I tried.”

The dwarves upon seeing the Nixileis’ combined nods looked at each other until Dwarf Fives said, “Your team is feckin weird.”

Nixilei 1 shrugged as the two Nixileis sat down, “I suppose but it’s our team. Also, based on the speed of the healed wound, the copies can use mana. That’s not too surprising... but the fact they can use basic healing magic is somewhat of a surprise. I don’t really know what that means for everyone else, as I’m almost certain Thyme has a healing affinity, or a similar enough affinity like nature that they can use low level healing spells. The thing is... I don’t know if the copies are just Thyme with illusions over them or if they’re something else.”

“What about items?” asked Dwarf Four 1 “Do you think Thyme went to the trouble of making sure all of our equipment works on both ourselves and the copies?”

The Nixileis shrugged together, “No but we can test it,”

Dwarf Ones and Threes had their maces light up with a bright glow reminiscent of a torch. Green 2, the awake Green pulled out a dagger and let the wind spiral around it, and the Gareths frowned. “I don’t think it’d be a good idea to summon a giant rock wall with such a low ceiling.”

“Ah...” said a mixture of voices in understanding.

Chapter 686 Who Named these Damned Dwarves

After it was established that magical items did indeed work, either because Thyme had copied them all, or some strange work around nobody was willing to put forward, things settled into an awkward silence. Nobody wanted to just call out there double as the fake and risk prompting a backlash against themselves. Kat was tempted to try and get the dwarves to proffer some information or make a guess at who was a fake to even the numbers out a bit but she didn’t want to say anything. *nOVelExt.cOm*

“Question,” said Green 2 suddenly cutting through the silence, “does anyone actually know how to vote? Obviously, we didn’t vote for Kat’s double... but I don’t think the other fakes will be so easy to guess. We can’t just go around stabbing everyone and comparing blood samples. Not when it seems like Kat’s fake has the correct colour blood for everyone else...”

At Green’s question a box appeared slightly off the middle of the room alongside a bunch of paper and three pens. The cause of its slight offset was of course, Green 1 who was taking up enough space that she would have needed to be moved to fit the box in. “Well, I suppose that answers my question...” mumbled Green 2 with an odd look on her face.

Indeed. It also tells us that Thyme is watching, or Thyme has someone watching us at the very least. Not a major surprise... but it does mean rougher tactics might be on the table. I wish it was that easy to figure out a rough method though. Stabbing people other than myself doesn’t really help, I’m the only one with fire immunity so chucking more of that around is kinda pointless.

Kat let her eyes get to work, looking between the individuals that were present and trying to find difference. To her surprise, she actually did find a few. There were new dings and scrapes on the dwarves’ armour... both of them. *Shit. The armour must have gotten damaged in the first task. Neither of the sets match up perfectly with the ones in my memories. That’s just what I needed.*

Kat next tried looking at the beards for clues but wasn’t having much luck at all until she spotted Dwarf Two 2. Instead of being naturally coloured like it should have been, Kat noticed that there was a small patch of brown hidden in their beard. *That means Two 2 is the fake right? They have fake dye in their beard, or well, real dye that they shouldn’t need... unless...* Kat scanned the dwarves again and cursed internally Dwarf One 1 had naturally grey hair by the looks of things. The issue was, Kat couldn’t tell if they’d switched outfits, or if that was an intentional mistake by Thyme for them to catch.

*They both use the same weapon as always, and the big problem is that while their hair is a different colour if you look closely... their faces are really similar. Even with my eyes I struggle to really tell them apart. Perfect memories I may have, but perfect eyes... not yet. To my mind they look the same, but they can’t be... hmm... then there’s the fact that it’s Dwarf Two 2 and Dwarf One 1. Does that matter? I doubt it’d be as simple as every 2 being a fake. That would be much too easy to sort out now that I’ve proven who I am.

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Urgh. I don’t know enough about the dwarves. Do I call it out? Do I call both of them out? The only thing I really have at the moment is the knowledge I AM the original and that everyone knows it. I could easily let this knowledge out onto the field... but do I want to? Is this a tactic from the dwarves to try and catch the fakes? Wait... no, there’s no way they could know... but they might have swapped them around anyway just because they can. Ok. Here’s the plan. I’ll wait.*

And wait Kat did. The time ticked down slowly with some hushed whispered Kat picked up on... but weren’t anything noteworthy. It was all nonsense just to make it seem like they were saying something important. Kat let this go on until she was fairly sure there was only five minutes left. “Ok. So... I see we aren’t getting anywhere but I want to point this out. The dwarf with a two written on him had grey hair originally, now, he has dyed grey hair with brown hair underneath,” Kat watched as her two sets of teammates tensed, but the dwarves all narrowed their eyes. “Now wait. Before getting too excited I also

noticed the dwarf with a one now has that grey colour. I don't know if they swapped places or not. However... you dwarves SHOULD know."

"It's called compartmentalisation," grumbled Dwarf Four 2. "We do not in fact know, only One and Two would know if such a swap happened."

Oh that's just great. Not even the dwarves know which one is which.

Kat noticed the set of four dwarves, the pairs of One and Two were pointedly not saying anything.

Grrr... they aren't going to say anything it seems. They aren't even reacting. Shit. Why would they do something like this like dumbasses.

That's when a somebody decided to through a wrench into the whole thing, Dwarf Three 2 said, "Just because we try to compartmentalise doesn't mean much when there's limited space. I saw One and Two swap so those are the fakes," Dwarf Three 2 pointed at Dwarf One 2 and then Dwarf Two 1.

The tension in the room ratcheted up another notch, most people eyeing One 2 and Two 1 while the Nixilei's kept an eye on the other half of the equation. "Well I DIDN'T see anything," said Dwarf Three 1 "One of us is a liar you know that much. But I'm staking the claim that I saw nothing,"

Well, that's just lovely. Just when I thought we had some confirmation.

"One minute remains!" said the voice of Thyme echoing throughout the room.

"Shit, we need to vote for somebody," growled the Gareths together. Green 1 popped her head back up upon hearing the growl and looked around at everyone very much on edge before sitting up straighter and glancing around.

"What happens if we just don't vote for anyone?" asked Nixilei 2. Nixilei 2 was expecting, or at least pretending to expect, an answer to that question. The only response she got was after a few moments.

"Thirty Seconds remain. You will be forced to vote for someone between rounds if you do not vote before the time is up," said Thyme's echoey voice.

Shit shit shit. Who do I vote for?

"Well, I'm just going to vote for the other me," said Green 2, "No sense worrying about this too much. If everyone does that it'll be up to Kat to break whatever tie she wants,"

"No don't be so foolish," said Nixilei 1, "the copies can vote together to vote out a real person... assuming they can. Wait can copies actually vote? Was this covered?"

Once again, no rule clarification appeared and Green 2 wasn't wasting anymore time. She moved forward and quickly scribbled 'Other Green' on the paper before showing it to everyone and dumping it into the box. Kat however, noticed a bit of slight of hand at play and was able to clearly follow Green 2 as she hid the ballot, she'd shown everyone in her sleeve before dropping another paper into the bowl.

Damn, I bet that's blank and she'll vote in the darkness. Wait that means this has to be the fake Green! Not only would Green just sleep everywhere she can, I don't think Green would make such a ballsy play.

"That Green-" Kat's tried to point this fact out to everyone but the teleportation sucked her away from the room before she could make her point clear.

"Greetings Kat," said Thyme, this time they had a Victorian era dress and a parasol and were standing in front of a table with a single piece of paper with a pencil beside it. "You will need to vote for somebody right now. If you do not vote within the next minute, you will be eliminated instead despite finding your double already."

*Urgh that'd be right. Kat thought as she slowed her perception of time. So who do I want to vote for? Green 2 is definitely the fake. I didn't exactly get a chance to bring that up with everyone though. Would it be a waste of a vote? Hmm... maybe I shouldn't look at it that way. If I vote for the fake Green that's one MORE vote that's definitely going to the fakes. I mean, who else am I going to vote for? I don't know enough about the dwarves to pick between them. The Nixilei's are scarily in sync. The Gareths haven't made any big moves. Hmm... the Kresses... well I don't really think either of them acted out of character. I... hmm...

I think I'll have to vote Green 2.*

Chapter 687 Green 2 I Choose You!

As soon as Kat put the pen down the world lit up in greens and Kat felt her stomach rebel slightly. Apparently while Thyme's teleportation was getting better, repeating it in quick succession made it feel worse. The teleport dumped Kat back into a circle, though this time everyone was more spread out and all standing. Kat glanced at Green 2 and kept her eye firmly on what she was sure was a fake. Kat also noticed that Dwarf One 2 had been voted off. For better or worse.

Before anyone had time to wonder properly about what was going on Thyme appeared in the centre of the circle. Thyme had a pirate outfit on with two eyepatches that covered both eyes completely and a parrot sitting on their shoulder. They had puffy pants that may have once been white but had clearly yellowed with age and excess use. They had an open admiral jacket that was torn in three places and faded across most of it from a bright red to more of a pink. When they started speaking, it wasn't 'Thyme' who spoke but the parrot.

"Listen up maties. I'm sending ya down into this here caves," Thyme pointed behind them but there wasn't actually any caves there, "and I need ya all to pick a partnarr. You canna be pickin yer teammates or ya copies.

"Each parth be holdin different challenges. It be first come first serve and I can be givin ya a little info but for the most part ye will have to take care of yaselves," the oddest part about the talking parrot was that it still sounded like Thyme. The parrot just moved in concert with the words and the sound seemed to leave its mouth. Kat wondered if Thyme was also the parrot or if they were using ventriloquism for a moment... then she noticed something specific in the wording.

Thyme said I can't pick teammates, OR copies of myself. That means I CAN pick copies as long as the copy isn't mine. Seizing the initiative Kat spoke out before anyone else could. "I chose THAT Green," Kat pointed towards Green 2.

Thyme's parrot turned and looked between both of them. "Are you certain? If you are wrong and that Green is actually a teammate you will both be eliminated from this round,"

"Yes, I'm sure," said Kat.

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Thyme's parrot nodded and said, "In that case, I can accept the pairing. You will not find out if either of you is a fake until you enter the challenge. What sort of challenge do you desire Green?"

Wait what?

"Oh I can chose?" said Green 2 innocently, "I don't know... it's a bit annoying Kat doesn't trust me... is there any challenges that could help with that?"

Thyme smirked while the parrot squawked but didn't leave Thyme's shoulder. "You could accept one of the trials of combat, the trial of trust, or the trial of teamwork."

"Hmm... the trial of trust seems like a bad idea for me... Kat seems to think I'm the fake... actually wait. Thyme can I protest this? Why can Kat just force me into this as a partner? Shouldn't I be able to refuse?" asked Green 2.

"Nope," said the parrot somehow managing to pop the 'p' something a parrot really shouldn't be able to do without lips. "First come first serve including when it comes to partners. Kat made her choice and you have to abide by that."

"Wait so if I'd said Dwarf Two then we'd both be paired up then and there?" asked Green 2 with a frown on her face.

Thyme nodded alongside the parrot. "Yup"

Green 2 sighed. "Just give us the trial of teamwork. Hopefully we can get through it,"

Thyme clapped and the parrot said, "Accepted. Let it be done,"

Kat felt the world light up again and frowned. *Shit. While I don't regret this choice, now I have to deal with a fake in a teamwork test. At least I've taken one fake out. I'm pretty sure if it comes to a fight I can beat this Green. I mean, I can beat the real Green in a fight or at least make it to a stalemate.*

Kat blinked away the feeling of nausea that continued to build up from rapid teleports and found herself in a small room across from Green 2, or Kat guessed, just Green considering there was now only one. Kat couldn't help but pull her arms over in front of her chest and raise an eyebrow. Green looked at Kat and said, "What? I'm trying to prove I'm not the fake remember?"

"Green... if I can call you that... Thyme said that if you weren't the fake we'd both be eliminated for this. The fact that we're both still here means that you ARE the fake," said Kat.

"Well YOU could be the fake?" offered Green.

Kat just raised a questioning eyebrow at that and Green's shoulder slumped and said, "Fine. I admit I'm the fake. What gave it away? I thought I was doing pretty well?"

"I saw you switch the ballot you were trying to put into the ballot box. Green is many things, but I'm not sure she'd ever consider swapping her ballots and I'd guess she'd know my eyes are good enough to make out the movement. Not entirely sure about the second one," explained Kat.

Green turned to kick the wall an angry grimace on her face, "Dammit I thought it was a good plan a well. Not that I'm entirely sure it matters. I don't think the fakes votes actually count. Though, funny thing, we don't know who the other fakes are either."

Kat nodded, "It is what it is. I guess I'll just have to take you out now. Thanks for being a good sport about it I suppose,"

As Kat took a step forward and reached out to attack the fake Green, said fake jumped backwards slamming into the wall with her back, "Now just wait a minute let's not get too hasty there," spilled out of the Green's mouth. "We can work out a compromise surely? I mean, you don't have to kill me? I don't want to die?"

Kat felt her eye twitch at that and internally agreed with the 'involuntary' action, this was rapidly getting annoying. "Is it really killing? You're not the real Green," said Kat, something that seemed very obvious.

"Oh what? So jut because I'm not the real Green means that I'm not a sentient person deserving of love and affection? Or at the very least I deserve not to just be killed out of hand right?" pleaded fake Green as she started to tear up slightly.

Kat frowned. That LOOKED like real emotion. *Hmm... this... this has gotten more complicated. Wait. No Thyme wouldn't use real people right? Kat considered the option and realised she wasn't quite willing to believe that. Shit. Thyme MIGHT do that. I mean, Thyme wouldn't let them die... so does that mean they ARE fakes? Fake me looked very dead back there... but Nixilei said people can be healed a short time after death. Is twenty minutes a short time? Dammit Thyme.*

"Well... can you forfeit or something?" asked Kat, trying to find a solution to her current problem.

"I doubt it?" said Green, "I mean... that wasn't exactly on the rules for this challenge right? We were told to get through it with a partner. I imagine that the fakes will try and take out the other real people,"

Kat noticed that Green didn't even try to forfeit before dismissing it as unlikely. She also noticed something else, "Well, here is a question then. You said the fakes will try and take out the other real people? How will they know if the person they are attacking is actually the real one?"

Green opened her mouth to answer... and then closed it finding she didn't actually have a good answer for Kat. Kat tapped her foot a few times and looked around the room. It was just a small box with a door nearby. She wasn't even sure what the 'teamwork' challenge was yet. *Well at least I can deal with this before any real tests come up. Not sure how I'll deal with the test, but small mercies I suppose.*

"You know what Kat?" said Green after another few moments, "I don't know. I'd guess that might just know... but that seems dumb. Maybe they wouldn't? Could that be part of what makes this round a pain in the ass? Genuine mistakes leading to people getting taken out and bad actors taking out the real ones or fakes failing and the real ones surviving... or fakes pretending to be the real one that survived a fake attack. Lots of double bluffing opportunities are available." Green pouted, "Why did you have to out me Kat? I could have messed around so much with this round!"

Kat rolled her eyes. *I still don't know if it's more likely Thyme hired people to be the fakes, or created the fakes as real people. Seems just crazy enough to be possible. Then again... maybe not? But they don't LOOK like Thymses. Sigh. This is going to be a pain.*

Chapter 688 One, Two, Three, Four I Declare a War!

Kat took another glance around the room as if it could possibly hold some answer to the annoying moral problem, she'd somehow found herself in. Of course, it was just a blank room and that hadn't changed in the few minutes Kat had taken to chat with Green. She was no closer to a good answer and it was getting annoy. The crux of the issue, was that Thyme wasn't human. They might find creating life, using said life as a prop in a tournament, and then letting them go out into the world was payment for that gift. Thyme was a tree after all. Who knows how they think?

Now, a large part of Kat wanted to say Thyme wouldn't be that cruel, and in truth she would be right, not that she knew it yet, but the problem was the line was thin and Thyme was clearly at least somewhat crazy. Both for a dryad and for a human. So Kat simply stared, hoping for answers. Well until the fake Green said, "You alright there?"

"Honestly Green, not really. I'm currently debating how real you are and if I'm morally justified in causing you likely short term harm, if rather brutal short term harm. I know you are the fake, and you've admitted as much. I do not have any worries that you are the real Green. I do however worry about if you're a person or not," explained Kat. *nOvelnext.COM*

Green just shrugged, not really wanting to way in on the issue. She wasn't real, but Kat didn't need to know that. Green's job was to try and eliminate as many contestants as possibly. Kat, being a contestant meant that playing on the demons somewhat surprisingly strong morals in the face of what would be an easy decision for many, was simple for her. The longer Kat agonised over this the more chances she had to potentially take the demon out of the contest. Not that Green thought it was currently very likely.

"I suppose we might as well try and get going then. Teamwork? Is that what you said? I suppose we might as well try at least a bit. No sense waiting in this box forever," said Kat finally just not wanting to deal with this anymore. *At least I can get out of this box.*

Green shrugged and threw the door open. The hallway was dark, which... Kat pushed a bit of energy towards her eyes to see that no, the corridor was not dark, it was simply lined with black cloth, both the sides and after a few metres in the front. Green skipped in first and as she moved forward the cloth towards the front did as well, giving the illusion of a long dark tunnel without actually using any illusions.

Kat carefully followed behind at a sedate lope. *I'm almost touched time went to such lengths just for me. They made sure the room looked dark and creepy without any illusions or lighting tricks that would have only sort of worked. Truly, Thyme knows what they're doing when it comes to atmosphere.*

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Kat was just getting used to the somewhat creeping look when she heard the sound of rushing wind coming from above her and reacted instinctively, raising her arms to block whatever it was that she could hear above her. It was well timed, as just as her arms managed to reach above her head but before they could extend fully a stone slab slammed into Kat the weight forcing her to bend slightly alongside it. Green heard a similar sound but instead of trying to block it, she crouched low to the ground for a few moments before looking around and spotting Kat.

“Well, we’ve got a right good hero here. I’m practically swooning from the attention. Lifting a thousand pound weight just to keep me safe? How lovely,” said fake Green not even trying to keep up the charade of being Green at this point.

Kat rolled her eyes at Green’s words. Part of her wanted to deny it, to say she wasn’t holding the weight up for Green... but the larger part of Kat knew she’d never actually be able to say that. It might have started as a reflex but she certainly could have let go of it by now if she wanted. Kat didn’t even know how low the device went. Kat also knew she’d easily survive the crushing, simply too much surface area and not enough force Green might not be so lucky. “Can you just find a way to deal with this?” grumbled Kat.

Green smiled and bowed, “Of course milord. I shall endeavour to locate the device which is causing such consistent grief and dismantle it using my skills gained through years of toil,” Kat rolled her eyes again as Green turned around and skipped off to the edge of the slab where the curtain hung. Green reached out and pulled it to the side, revealing a panel with three buttons on it, up, down and a big red button in the centre.

Green paused and looked at them with a finger pulling at her mouth trying to be thoughtful. Her finger hovered over the up button before moving down. “Green,” said Kat warningly. Green turned to Kat and smiled lowering her finger further to rest on the ‘down’ button. “You might be a fake but that doesn’t mean you have to be an ass about this,” Green pouted... and pressed the button.

Kat felt the weight on her arms increase pushing them down further until she decided to drop to a knee and lock her arms in place over her head. Seeing this, Green moved her finger back up and pressed the button to raise the stone. Kat stood with the slab, letting her arms fall to the sides. A mistake clearly because Green slammed her other hand onto the button to lower the slab back down again.

It raced down and Kat didn’t have the time to raise her arms to block because of the damned inhibitor. The stone slammed into her horns. There was an awful grinding sound and then... something cracked. It was the stone. Kat gave a deadpan stare over to Green. Her legs were locked in place to prevent the stone going further and her horns were buried in the rock above. Green smiled ‘innocently’ and pressed the up button, loose rock and dust falling onto Kat as her horns pulled free.

Kat took a step forward and the damned Fae slammed the stone down again. “Really?” asked Kat without any real emotion. She wasn’t even mad, this was expecting after all, it was simply inconvenient. Green gave a ‘what can you do’ shrug before pushing the up button once again. Kat raised an eyebrow and stayed in place for a few moments. Clearly that was a bad idea because Green took it as an invitation to slam the stone back onto Kat’s head.

She felt the skin split open and her horns were reburied but her neck was up to the task and her skull bone was more than able to repel the jagged edges of the rock. Kat let out a long sigh and started to walk forward, rock cracking and falling as she did. Green’s eyes widened. “What the fuck? You can still walk like that? You can just walk through STONE?!”

Kat shrugged as she strode forward. It wasn’t particularly thick stone, more like concrete really and even at Kat’s reduced strength she could destroy that easily. Sure destroying it by walking forward was doing bad things to the muscles in her neck and thighs, but with her regeneration that was a momentary issue at best. It took Kat about a minute to slowly walk through the rest of the stone and stand beside Green.

The idea of just knocking the girl out or temporarily removing her from existence was much stronger then it was before.

“Well wasn’t that a f- an interesting experience,” said Kat with an overly wide smile as her tail snaked up and to the side pointing towards Green’s throat like a scorpion’s tail, poised to strike. “I can’t say that’s ever happened to me. I thought you wanted to try out teamwork GREEN? You chose this after all GREEN. Didn’t you want to get along GREEN? Maybe keep me from killing you GREEN?” each repetition of the name a clear mockery Kat was all to willing to press on.

Green gulped, thinking that perhaps smashing the demon on the head with a stone slab repeatedly might not have been the best idea. It wasn’t like Kat had no thoughts at all about just killing the fake, and Green was starting to realise Kat might have been closer to the ‘just deal with it’ side of things then initially thought. Green was thinking Kat wasn’t quite as nice as she originally thought. In truth, Kat was still somewhat apathetic, she just now didn’t want to deal with emotional manipulation and physical damage at the same time.

Chapter 689 Is there an Opposite of Icarus?

Kat stepped around Green, stopping her tail from instinctively lashing out at the nuisance and pushed open the door to the next room. This time it was a long but well lit corridor with humanoid stencils carved into them. Kat could tell there was multiple walls all stacked together and at least the first stencil was designed for two people. It had one standing on the hands of the other. What Kat couldn’t understand was why the smaller member of the team didn’t just hide behind the taller avoiding the extra effort.

So I guess I’m just in a game show now. Though I suppose one could argue this entire tournament has been like a game show hasn’t it? Kat looked closely at the material the frames were made out of. It seemed to be a kind of wood and that said good things about her chances to simply bash through the frames. It was probably the best idea, as while the heads were large enough that with a little bit of extra effort put into the positioning of her head Kat’s horns wouldn’t get caught... but her wingtips that stuck out over her shoulders were a different issue altogether.

“Hey looks like we can work together for real this time!” said the fake Green cheerfully as she entered the room. “This kind of task is right up my alley. Balance, reaction time and a healthy dose of confidence is all that’s required. I don’t even need to use my speed or wind mana.”

Kat rolled her eyes and stepped forward onto the slightly raised platform. As soon as she did the wall started moving towards Kat and about the speed of a fast walk. It was a simple pattern and Kat didn’t bother destroying it just yet, turning herself sideways to use the extra width of the cut-out to avoid clipping her wings.

Green was originally content to just sit back and watch Kat if they weren’t going to work together. That’s when she felt herself getting zapped by a powerful electric shock. “Eep,” shouted Green as she jumped forward reflexively and ended up on the platform anyway. She managed to slide through the gap as well, mostly due to her smaller size and instinctive crouch.

The next frame was coming down the aisle this time increasing the speed to about that of a normal human jog. It was another easy shape just requiring Kat to make a star pose, and theoretically have

Green sitting on her shoulders. For Kat, that space above her shoulders was perfect to avoid her wings getting damaged to another frame passed by easily.

The next frame sped towards them at the speed of a human sprinter, but still it was more than enough distance for Kat to adjust. This time the cut-out was two stacked circles on the ground that Kat was clearly supposed to crouch down with Green on her back also crouched to get through. Kat wasn't interested in that. Kat's punch slammed into the speeding wall, her skin bruising under the impact but the wood shattered, giving way easily enough.

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Kat glanced at her knuckles, watching the splinters force their way out and seeing the skin bruise for a split second before yellowing and then returning to normal. *Hmm... my regeneration is amazing but my skin isn't exactly up to the task of matching my strength is it. I really should use my fans for this.*

Kat didn't even look at what the next, much faster, wall looked like. She just grabbed her fans and swung shattering the wood a second time, then a third, then a fourth. The walls kept speeding up, presumably testing her reaction speed and ability to work with her teammate but in the end, strength was sufficient for this task.

It's a little weird that the black curtains seemed to be in place specifically for me to make it atmospheric but that none of the traps were really designed for me. My best guess is that the black cloth is actually standard for all the tasks nothing as made sense.

A few more shattered wood panels and then Kat swung, hitting nothing but air, and pausing. Kat glanced around. The floor was littered with wood chips and the path forward wasn't much better... but there were no more panels, just a standard doorway at the end of the path. Green glanced around Kat's body and noticed it was over, "Well... that's one way to go about it I suppose. Not really much of a teamwork thing is it?"

Kat shrugged, stepping forward through the woodchips without any hesitation. "Maybe not, but frankly I'm surprised you didn't try and push me of course," said Kat.

Green shrugged, not that Kat could see the motion, "I thought about it, but honestly, I didn't want to end up like the wood panels if you reacted instinctively in your panic," said Green honestly.

Kat nodded, "Yeah that doesn't sound impossible. I'd love to say I'm not that bad... but after dealing with you slamming rocks into my head repeatedly and my only very recent strength control exercises I wouldn't have been too surprised if I wacked your head off. I mean, I'm not going to just end people randomly I have enough control for that... when I'm not panicked. At least that's pretty hard to do," Kat finished speaking just as they entered the next room.

This one seemed to be one for people scared of heights. They were on a platform that looked to be very high up in the air but with Kat's eyes she could tell it was just that the floor was painting to look that way. The drop was very much survivable for... well not quite a normal human but adventurer standard human. Kat didn't think she'd take any major damage at all from the fall. Perhaps slightly strained muscles for a moment before they healed.

Hanging over the gap was two swing trapeze set. They were set much further apart then you'd see in any show on Earth. The one closest to them was attached to a hook on the wall, while the one on the other side seemed to swing freely. It was clear the idea was to work together to use the trapeze to get across the large gap. Kat gave a glance at Green looking for her reaction.

Green, for her part, was fairly pleased with this last challenge. It looked easy enough for someone of her skillset and if she wanted she could probably drop Kat down the hole. Green sadly hadn't noticed the lack of true depth to it... nor had she noticed one crucial detail Kat hadn't forgotten at all. Green's head snapped up when she started to hear the sound of rushing air.

In front of her was Kat, just, flying across the thing. It wasn't very fast but she was making progress clearly. "What the hell Kat?" yelled Green in shock.

Kat turned around, raising an eyebrow as she flew in place. "What? This is by far the best way to get past this obstacle," said Kat confidently but knowing the real issue Green was taking with this.

"You... you can't do this? What about me? Aren't you going to fly us both across at the very least?" asked Green slightly panicked.

Kat grinned, showing a full set of shining white teeth that for the moment seemed all so sinister.

Finally, this stupid band is good for something. "Now Green, why would I do that? Not only has this given me a great chance to get rid of you, it can't even weigh on my conscience. You see, with this stupid bangle on, I can't fly you over even if I wanted to. This way, I get to leave you behind, I don't have to knock you out or... 'kill' you, and you can't follow me. I couldn't have thought of a better solution."

Green growled for a few seconds and Kat, seeing no response forthcoming turned around to keep flying. Green used this chance to throw a wind infused dagger straight at Kat's wing. It struck true burying itself into the membrane and causing a sharp pain as well. Kat struggled a bit to stay in the air as she let her tail navigate itself carefully around her moving wings to wrap around the handle and rip it out. Kat winced again as she felt a chunk of flesh going with it, but she managed to stay in the air by reducing the flaps on her good wing. It only took a few seconds to heal and Kat turned around to glare at Green.

Green shrugged, "I had to do it,"

Kat glared back, "Fine but you throw another one of those daggers and I'll return it right to your eye. Don't think I won't. It's not even like the fall will kill me, or injure me all that much. The drop is only a couple of metres, the rest is just fancy paint.

Green glanced down and threw another dagger towards the floor, watching it fall much 'faster' then it should have. "Well shit," said Green.

Chapter 690 How Many Fakes are Left?

After stepping through the door at the end of the trapeze rooms Kat was whisked away back to the voting circle, complete with plush seating and blood stains. The only thing worth noting was that the order was mixed up again. The two teams were separated this time with Kat and her team on the left side and the dwarves over on the right.

There was only ten people left, theoretically enough to have eliminated all of the fakes. It was immediately obvious that they hadn't completed the task though. The reason for this was that Gareth

and Dwarf One were nowhere to be seen. There was neither the real or the fake left behind only empty space. There was only one of each Dwarf Two through Five which might be a good thing, or a really bad thing. Trying to figure out which of them were the fakes would be a nightmare, if any of them were.

The real problem was that there was a Nixilei on either end of the team, a Kress for each of them, and then Green and Kat in the middle. Once again there was a sign in the middle 'twenty minutes before a vote is required' and Kat couldn't help but groan. *Ugh. How am I supposed to figure out who is who? It's not even clear which Nixilei is which. Better to treat them as 'new' people jut in case. Dammit, I might have been able to find a clue otherwise. I'll call the one on the left 1 and the one on the right 2 for both Nixilei and Kress.*

"Welp, seems clear who we need to focus on now," said Dwarf Two. "We got two fakes over there,"

Green stuck on her tongue and said, "Sure but at least we have two people on our team we know are real. The whole lot of you could be fake!" Kat was somewhat surprise Nixilei wasn't the one pointing out that little fact.

Dwarf Three huffed, "Well I helpfully pointed out the real Dwarf One and Two, so I think that speaks in my favour. I also managed to get rid of the fake Dwarf Five when they attacked me during the challenge. It was a bit of a gamble... but YOU LOT rigged it so I had to pick between them,"

Nixilei 1 shrugged, "It's not our fault. We picked the best course of action at the time. It just worked out that way with you two left behind."

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"Yeah, Dwarf Four and I had a great run, we managed to speed through the challenge together!" said Green cheerily.

"The real problem is...we have two Kress' still..." grumbled Nixilei 2, promptly ignoring the fact she was also part of a set of doubles, "They both picked a Gareth to team up with and the fact they're both here means that they crazy shits were lucky enough to get matching Gareths... honestly I bet the real Gareth couldn't attack Fake Kress,"

"Even Fake Gareth didn't attack me," said Kress 1 and 2 together.

Lovely. Kat looked over the two Kress' wondering about that particularly bit of information. Looking closely, she noticed that one Kress had a set of armour with a few nicks and scrapes on it, the other, Kress 2, actually had a completely clean set of armour. Not a spec of damage in sight. *Hmm... does that make Kress 2 the fake?*

Kat didn't say anything because the two Kress' started to growl at each other and everyone else decided to just ignore it. "How will we deal with us though?" said the Nixileis together, "personally, we vote that we try to find a dwarf imposter and the Kress imposter."

Kat let her tail rest over her mouth to hide the smile creeping onto her face. *That's so Nixilei. Even though one of them is a fake they're still willing to just go for it. Really, she will be the hardest to deal with in the end. Well, maybe not. If we try not to rely on luck she'll be the hardest.*

“How about we all go through who we were paired with and what happened, well asides from Kat who we all know,” offered Dwarf Three, “We’ve got a few of them out of the way already, including mine,”

Nixilei 1 huffed and said, “I fought Dwarf 1. We got along fine for the first two puzzles but they took a swing at me right before the final puzzle started and I threw my dagger into their eyes. How about you go next other me,”

“Well, I went with Dwarf Two,” Nixilei inclined her head, “and we’re both still here. We actually managed to work together without any kind of betrayal. Perhaps you’re a bit too incompetent to solve a puzzle while avoiding attacks other me? Oh, and Kat, the choice after you was Kress trying to show off and selecting ‘Gareth’ as his pick. The crazy bastards managed to do it at the same time.”

Kat wasn’t really sure why Nixilei was insulting ‘herself’ or what it meant in terms of if they were the real one or not, Dwarf five hopped in, “Well that just leaves me till last. Dwarf One and I were doing the fighting challenge and he got hit by a surprise attack. I think he was the fake though, otherwise would I still be here? Doesn’t the challenge end right away if we’re both on the same team?”

Ok, that was... informative, I guess. I still don’t really know who the fake between the Nixilei’s are. They both have reasonable stories. I am however pretty sure Kress 2 is actually the fake. They both claimed Gareth didn’t fight them but if that was the case, they’d have similar looking armour. One of them is lying and I think the liar is the fake, Kress 2.

“Five minutes,” said Thymes voice coming from everywhere.

Kat decided this time she was going to point out her suspicions early, “I believe that Kress,” Kat pointed at Kress 2, “is the fake. If you look closely, you’ll see his armour is completely clean, not a scratch on it. If they both supposedly didn’t fight their Gareth why is that the case?”

“What?” asked Green confused, “Why would he be the issue if his armour doesn’t have anything wrong with it?” *NOVELnext.COM*

Dwarf Two jumped in, “Nay Kat is right. He hasn’t got any wear marks at all on his armour. That means it was repaired, or its new. I reckon it was badly damaged in the fight and during the transition Thyme cleaned it all up. Notice that none of us have issues with our armour?”

Kress 2 put both hands up, “Who guys, remember I also went down the combat path, I just got a bit banged up during the fighting and needed repairs that’s all,”

Kress 1 scoffed, “Well if you couldn’t handle those monsters when we are so much faster then them I bloody well hope you’re the fake. Don’t think I could live with myself if I actually got hurt fighting those weaklings,”

“Yup that’s the real one,” said both Nixilei’s and Green all at once pointing towards the bragging Kress 1, or just Kress now.

Kress 2 rolled his eyes and looked away, not wanting to engage in the argument anymore, perhaps hoping it would prove his innocence but it didn’t seem to be working.

“Now, how do we decide between the two Fae lasses,” said Dwarf Five, “They don’t have any fancy armour and they went to the intellect challenge.”

Kat looked closely at them both but there was no damage on either set of robes. Well, there was, the general wear and tear that came with simply existing was present on both sets in about equal measure. Oh sure there was a thread loose here a pulled stitch there, but nothing major and nothing obvious. "We could always look at the dwarves?" offered both Nixilies.

The dwarves all huffed in unison. "I can't believe we have two poisonous lasses," said Dwarf Three, "Why don't you lot vote for ya fake Kress and we can split our votes between the two ladies. Mayhaps you'll both get caught out. Might even be better in the long run,"

The Nixileis pursed their lips in frustration, both knowing very well that the chance all the dwarves were the real deal was nearly impossible. That's when one of the Nixileis, Nixilei 2 sneered at the dwarves while turning herself slightly. Kat wasn't able to see from her angle, and thus neither was Nixilei one, but Nixilei 2 let the light hit the dagger clearly still strapped to her waist, indicating she still had it... but when the dwarves looked over to try and spot the empty holster that should have been on Nixilei 1's hip was a her own, blood stained dagger.

"Thirty seconds left!" said Thyme cheerfully.

Kat glanced at everyone and walked up slowly, picking up the paper marking which Kress she wanted, showing everyone, and slowly letting it fall into the box. After Kress followed suit, while Fake Kress huffed in annoyance. The dwarves, noticing the hint Nixilei had given them, waited in the hopes of being forced to vote in the black space once again, not wanting to risk the other fake noticing their change of heart.