

DEMONS 1141

Chapter 1141

Kress Still

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Ok apparently it's not that easy. Kress' brow was thick with sweat, his mind was racing and even though he hadn't put in too much work yet, it felt like his legs were on fire as the rally continued. *That bitch was sandbagging, and I showed my hand too early.* Kress grit his teeth as the ball was batted back and forth. Kress and Willow were keeping the rally light in strength out of fear for the paddles, but the ball was still speeding up.

But let's back up just a bit. For the first point, Kress won the coin toss and managed a decent serve, then when Willow casually batted it back, Kress lunged forward and slammed the ball off to the side, just barely clipping the edge of the table before it bounced away, out of Willow's reach. A good way to get a point up... but a bad play if Kress wanted to win.

Willow served next, a soft, easy serve, and Kress had thought it would be an easy second point for him, slamming the ball down in the exact same place as last time. Willow was waiting for him, she was already at the corner, and simply dashed around, hitting the ball right back, aiming straight for Kress' chest instead of the board.

Kress regretted his next move as soon as it happened. He tried to block it by moving the paddle, but that put his arm at an awkward angle. So even though he caught the ball, he was once again caught out because it was an easy return for Willow who had stayed on the right side corner. Willow had slammed the ball back over the net and off to the left, away from the hand holding the paddle.

Kress served next, and he thought he was ready for things this time. He sent a strong, but not paddle breaking strong, serve at Willow. She'd hopped onto the table and slammed the ball out to the left side again, giving her the lead. Though, Thyme had something to say about it. "While I will give Willow the point because I didn't specify against it... there will be no more sitting, standing, or kneeling on the tables. I'll accept leaning, but if you fall over and put your full weight on the table, then that's a point to your opponent,"

Kress nodded, even as Willow pouted, but didn't argue. Kress didn't know what was going through Willow's head in that moment. His best guess was that Willow did want the free point it would give her, but not enough to risk it as one of the final points, perhaps just in case it gave Kress the win.

So now he was down one point and Willow was serving. This time, Willow slammed the ball down, angling it in such a way that once it hit the table it shot upwards. Kress grit his teeth as he walked backwards, carefully lining up the shot and returning it... only for Willow to step slightly to the side, letting the ball clatter to the ground. *Dammit. Just off the edge.*

Willow was up to three points now. Just two more and she'd win the first round. Kress couldn't have that so he hit the ball over with as much strength as he could use without risking the paddle cracking, which was what led to the current rally. For Kress it seemed like it had been tens of minutes instead of

perhaps two or three at most. The ball was slapped back and forth seemingly endlessly from one end of the table to another. *NovElnext.com*

Kress and Willow batted back with little tricks thrown in here and there. Sometimes Willow would send the ball up, but Kress accidentally figured out that while the ball had to touch your enemies half of the board before the ground, hitting your own side was also acceptable, though so far it had only been a single bounce. So Kress was still unsure of how acceptable it was.

On Kress' side of things, he'd try to send the ball off the edges but Willow always seemed to be ready for them. Every time Kress sent it, left or right, front or back corner, Willow always seemed to be ready for it. This was of course, that Kress had a major tell. When he was gearing up for a shot to the edges, he held his paddle back against his stomach so that he could use that bit of extra mass to absorb the momentum and hit the ball more accurately. It wasn't a terrible strategy... but Kress moved with the paddle already in place, giving the game away massively.

Eventually the rally was broken, not by a trick, but by a small mistake. Both Willow and Kress had been fighting for a while at this point. Noticeable amounts of sweat had dripped off both of them, and the floor had been waxed... generously. For Kress, it was less of an issue. While he wasn't as nimble as Willow, his heavy leather boots held their ground. Yet, as Willow slid to the side to catch a ball... she kept sliding. Her hands pinwheeled, as she reached out for the table and stability, but it was too late. The ball smacked into her shoulder as Willow fell into split, causing the ball to roll off onto the floor.

Willow was shocked, and... hollow, as the room was silent. Nobody had thought things would turn out this way, even as the ball bounces sounded like pounding drums to Willow's ears. Willow gulped, thankful that the table was held securely in place and her rash action of using it for support hadn't sent it collapsing on top of her, unaware that Thyme had fixed that very issue as she was falling, as Thyme had not really considered the need before that moment.

"Two, Three to Willow, Willow will be serving, but do either of you want some water before you continue?" asked Thyme.

Willow, perhaps in a fit of anger, declined the offered water with a huff. Pulling herself back to her feet. Kress' lips twitched downwards at that, not liking the fact that Willow was giving him a clear advantage with this. Still, she was an opponent right now. As Kress was carefully drinking some of the supplied water, one of Willow's teammates, March, looked like she wanted to say something but Thyme shook his head. 'No interference' was the silent message.

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Willow was clearly shaken after that, and despite the multi-minute rallies that followed, Kress thought was almost laughably easy to get another two points, bringing him up to five. It could arguably have been easier if he'd pressed his advantage pulled out more tricks, simply tried to play a bit dirty... but Kress didn't want to reignite that fire in Willow. Instead, one point away from victory, Willow was angrier with herself than every. She was falling apart under the pressure, and her teammates were clearly trying their best to comfort her with gestures. Willow wasn't looking.

Kress took another sip of water as the time between rounds stretched out. It was Willow's serve, and though Kress wasn't trying to make things worse, Willow glared at him angrily as he sipped. *Is this... is this what I'm normally like? Surely I was never so... easily goaded into things?*

Even as he denied it in his thoughts, his heart betrayed him. He was ridiculously easily goaded into things. Perhaps whatever in that cloud powder was giving him perspective, perhaps it was just the casual calm and joy he had experienced under the effects. Whatever it was, he was free of that anger, for now at the very least. Hopefully into the future too, if Kress had anything to say about it.

So Willow grit her teeth. Her sweat covered the ground, she had felt the need to be overly careful with her footing to prevent slipping a second time, and perhaps that was necessary but it was slowing her down. The fact that she was denying the chance to drink wasn't helping either. As if water was the true reason for her failure, and not that she needed grippier footwear for the surface.

Kress mentally thanked his love of his combat boots once again as Willow served and the rally began. Back and forth, the ball bounced without issue back and forth between them, until Willow sent the ball flying upwards once again and Kress could almost swear he heard the paddle in Willow's hand creak a touch. Kress stepped backwards calmly, and ready for the ball. He hit it back lightly. It bounced once not on Kress' side, but instead on the net in the centre. Kress' eyes went wide as he panicked internally... but it fell to Willow's side and she wasn't ready for it.

Willow dove onto the table reflexively reaching for the ball, and succeeding... but she was stuck on the table now, and the hit wasn't strong so Kress bopped it back onto Willow, and Thyme called the match. "Match one, Kress. Five to three."

Kress spun his paddle as he grinned. *A bit of luck, but I got it done.*

[Chapter 1142](#)

Kress

In between rounds, Thyme clarified some of the rules just to make sure everyone was still on the same page, but they aligned with Kress' assumptions so nothing turned out to be a surprise. The only one Kress was worried about, was a rule against swapping paddles, either during a round, or in between them, yet there was nothing. Kress was somewhat curious about that, and still doubted that you could just swap out damaged paddles whenever... but it would certainly be fine between rounds... right?

One interesting thing to note, was that even though Romilda wasn't allowed to float around on her metal, Thyme had raised the ground up on Romilda's side of the board so that she could reach properly. Kress wasn't sure what he thought about that change. Romilda's drastically reduced reach with her arms was still a problem. Kress wasn't complaining though.

In addition to that, Kress' desire to keep his final secret strategy ready seemed to be ridiculous as he watched Vanya and Romilda bat the ball back and forth. It was... somewhat sad after the rallies he'd shared with Willow. They weren't even five minutes in and the score was already 3-3. Their skill just

wasn't up to par. It was mostly in regards to their arm, regularly trying to hit edge shots like Willow and Kress had, but Romilda and Vanya were more likely to hit the ball off the edge.

In fact, the only reason things had been going on for as long as they had, was because Vanya and Romilda would occasionally hit the ball back even when it looked like it was going over the edge, artificially extending the rally. Kress just rolled his eyes, and watched it all happen. A few minutes later they were up to 5 all, and there was still no tension. It would come down to who fucked up the least.

Which, eventually, was revealed to be Romilda. She went for careful shots, continually hitting the ball back towards the middle of the table without trying for anything fancy. Vanya tried a bit harder... and to nobodies' surprise, it blew up in her face. Romilda just happened to be one point up already, and as such won the game in that moment. Vanya pouted but didn't complain as she stepped back from the board.

Bonas was giving a chance to try out the paddle a bit before the match started, just like the others, and Kress got an extra break. Bonas, apparently, didn't know how to control her strength quite as well as he did because already Kress could see the paddle breaking, and just a few hits later, it shattered.

Bonas frowned down at the stick in her hand and picked up a new one, ready to try again with what time she had left. She... sort of succeeded? It seemed that when she wasn't using her full strength then her aim was poor and her reaction time was stilted. It was like mentally holding back her strength was holding back her everything. So Kress had a nasty idea.

I'm trying to be a better person... so should I really be doing this? Yes, Kress thought to himself as he took up his space opposite Bonas. It was a competition, and he wanted to win. Nicer he might be, but he saw nothing dishonourable about what he was about to do.

The rally was a bit slow once Kress served. Back and forth, Kress wanted things to stay calm. He made no plans to do anything fancy, until Bonas made an attempt at a corner shot to get him moving. It failed. The ball was smacked just slightly too hard, a recurring theme with Bonas. Kress just had to step back and away from the ball and let it fall to the ground.

The second rally started with Bonas' serving, and continued much the same way until Kress changed his tactics up. Each time the ball came to his side, Kress would smack it slightly harder and send it flying for Bonas' face. She just had to move back a tad and it would be fine, but the first time she was caught off-guard and barely managed to hit the ball back so Kress sent it to the corner with force, scoring his second point.

Third rally, Kress serve. He didn't even try to disguise what he was doing. Kress sent the ball straight to Bonas' face, increasing the power a bit every time she stepped back until Bonas' a few paces away from the table. Kress, trying to be tricky, sliced the ball, killing its momentum. Perhaps, with some practice it would've been a killer move, and another point to him... but instead it landed on his half the board and then spun off to the side. Point to Bonas.

Which was the last point Bonas would get for two rounds. The first point Kress earned was after a decent rally, Bonas had tried to hit the ball low and it got caught in the net. The second point Kress earned was one he actually felt a bit bad for. He was back to hitting towards Bonas' face exclusively, and in a moment of panic, the wolfgirl swiped at the ball and clipped it with the edge, sending it straight upwards into her nose.

Kress had to wince at that one. *Sure I was trying to hit her in the face... but that's just unfortunate.* Even as the pair walked over to the side to take a gulp of water, Kress had to look away. Even if he knew that the reason for Bonas' tears was almost certainly the strike to the nose, and not any true feelings of sadness, it still pained him a bit to see. *I really didn't want to hit anyone in the nose because this is what happens. Now I'm one point away from winning and I feel almost like the bad guy. It was a good plan. It worked, it got me a point... but I'm not sure I want to stick with it for the future rounds.*

Kress twirled the paddle in his hands as he contemplated what he wanted he wanted to do. *Right. Bonas is still drinking, and that's fine. Not going to push her after that, even if it might get me free points. How do I want to get it then? I'd just be off my game if I felt bad because I kept aiming at her face. So the question is... what CAN I do? Just play well perhaps?*

Kress nodded to himself and walked back over to the table. It was a subtle pressure for Bonas to hurry up a bit, a slight edge, but one he could deny if pressed. Despite that, Bonas took one more gulp of water and walked over, ready for the what could be the final point. Bonas' hands were shaking as she got ready for her serve, and Kress made the decision not to press her on it.

They held position for one minute, two, and Bonas only seemed to get more on edge as the time passed. Kress didn't know what to do. *Do I force her to serve? She's only getting more agitated the longer we wait, but I don't want to make it look like I'm pressuring her. Not only would that be a dick move, but Nixilei will give me hell for it, let alone the rest of the watchers.

Actually, why the fuck am I the only guy in this contest? I didn't really think about it before now, but how did it shake out this way? It's not like we have an overwhelming number of women in this round. Why did I end up the odd one out? Why didn't I just play dodgeball? Then again... that might not have helped.

Wait... is it more sexist to not want to fight women? It's not like they're strength is usually in question. I wouldn't want to fight March in a wrestling match... but these ones just... well only Willow seems like she could possibly have beaten me. Ergh... whatever let's stop psyching myself out.*

Eventually Bonas steeled her resolve... but apparently not enough. She smacked the ball straight into the net and Kress awkwardly scratched at his neck and looked over at Thyme. Thyme frowned down at the net. "Hmm... I hadn't exactly played for anyone to fail when starting off so I don't have a rule for it... I guess... Kress gets the point? Kress wins?" said Thyme, unsure of the result even as they said it.

"I'm willing to give her another shot?" said Kress.

"No it's fine, I don't want any pity," said Bonas, shaking her head at the result. In her mind, it wasn't worth redoing. Kress was quite far ahead, and she was under no delusions that it would be easy to carve out a win. Better to save the stamina and hope for better luck in the next matches.

Kress just shrugged in response. Turning away from the table and heading back to the sidelines. *It wasn't necessarily pity... but if you don't want to take it, at least I feel less like the bad guy. I did offer after all.*

Kress' final chapter for a while

After that, the matches were... lacklustre. It was clear to Kress as soon as the next match got underway that the only people with a chance of winning were Willow and himself. The Romilda vs Willow match was a joke. Willow just sent the ball from one corner to the other, over and over again, forcing Romilda to constantly run from side to side until the dwarf woman made a mistake.

Once Willow got the first point... she just did it again. Romilda's shorter legs were a bit of an issue, but her shorter arms were a major problem. Thyme was taking notes, and mumbling something about 'longer paddles for dwarves' next time, but it clearly wasn't going to change the outcome of this match. Willow just kept up the pressure and managed a clean victory of five to zero. This is even with Willow starting to do slightly silly plays after she racked up three points. Romilda tried to prevent the fourth still, and completely gave up for the fifth, letting Willow take the win.

Vanya got her point for having a by and then all of a sudden Kress was up against Vanya. Kress had seen that the match between Romilda had been rather close, so he just played a solid match. No fancy tricks, no aiming for the face. There were quite a few shots to the corners, just to keep Vanya moving, but all in all? Kress didn't try to pull out anything nasty in an attempt to trip Vanya. Kress used his full effort, if not his full strength to close out the game.

With Vanya down, that just meant he had one more match. Kress sucked in a deep breath, before blowing air out of his mouth as Bonas and Willow stepped up for their match. It wasn't much closer than Kress' match with Vanya. Willow had seen Kress' tactic work against the wolfgirl and emulated it perfectly. Why fix what isn't broken?*noVeINext.cOm*

Willow didn't get hit in the face this time, but it was a close thing. She managed exactly two points against Willow... but a large part of that was because Willow wanted to find out if she could manage the slice that Kress had attempted. The first attempt failed, the second attempt failed, but the third one got Willow a point and lead her to winning the match. Sure Willow could've just kept playing normally and likely gotten a 5-0 match record again, but where's the fun in that?

Romilda got a by this time, and that was nice for her. Not so nice was the next match against Kress where he stole Willow's strategy of forcing Romilda to run from side to side. This time, it got to three points and then Romilda asked, "Can I forfeit?"

It was Kress' serve, and technically he could sneak in an extra point right now if he wanted... but he held the ball. No sense in being a dick. *Just gotta remind myself of that more often. No sense in being an ass if it's not necessary. It wouldn't even be that funny.*

Thyme tapped his chin a few times, "Are you certain? I will allow forfeits because I'm sure Kress could just score too easy points if you're not interested in defending yourself, but is this something you're serious about?"

Romilda nodded, "It was a bad call on my part. We just didn't consider how much of a handicap my height would be in this. I see that you consider it at least somewhat, providing this raised platform for me so that I wasn't completely annihilated, but I'm just not likely to win any matches at this point. I'm pretty sure that second place is already impossible, and third place might be as well,"

Thyme revealed a wry smile. "I do apologise for this. I hadn't considered it to be such a problem either. I could mess with space so that your relative heights are the same... but then that would mess with both the size and perspective of the ball for both players, and likely cause its own problems. I clearly did not design this game with dwarves in mind... and I wonder how many other games I have created suffer from similar issues. I suspect twister might also present a problem..."

"Alas, there is nothing to be done now I'm afraid. I'll likely be hearing a complaint from the dwarves on the committee... but in my defence, they didn't bring up any of these issues either when I presented the plan for this round. I even forced them to play a few matches and get back to me on the results... I suspect that the dwarves just played against each other... or once you get to that level of power, the height difference stops mattering."

"Now I think it's more likely the latter... positions on the planning committee are quite prestigious... and I cannot think of a single member below Rank 3 off the top of my head. So once again, I apologise for this. Would you like to forfeit this match? Or all remaining matches?"

Romilda thought about it for a few moments then looked down at her paddle and grinned. She looked over at Thyme, with a slightly raised eyebrow. Thyme, realising what she was hinting at winced a bit but nodded. Romilda grinned and then slammed the paddle down over her knee, snapping it in half.

Thyme sighed, "It seems that Romilda has broken a paddle, and thus she is eliminated from the table tennis section of this round. Bonas will receive a win in the following round as Romilda has decided not to contest it. Bonas and Vanya, you're up for the second final game,"

The fight kicked off and the first few rounds were tense. They traded points back and forth until they both got to three. They were both panting, and Vanya said, "Hey, you think you can go a bit easy on me? I've still got to fight Willow after this, who knows, I could win if you don't exhaust me first!"

Bonas just glared back, flipping her paddle around in her hands. "I'm afraid I need to get at least one win. Otherwise I'll be a disgrace. If anything, knowing that you wanted me to just give up? It makes me want to win this round even more,"

Vanya grimaced as Bonas increased the power of her strikes. The paddle creaked as she did, but Bonas didn't stop, not even after she managed to get a good point from Vanya by slapping the ball quickly across the net.

Bonas was serving for the win. She looked over her cracked and broken paddle, and placed her spare hand behind it before serving, just to keep the paddle a bit safer. The rally between the two started up again, and Bonas wanted to push the limits on the equipment. The paddles creaked, the cracks spread. Bonas slapped the ball as hard as she could, and heard the paddle groan, but when Vanya tried to return the ball, Vanya heard it.

Her paddle gave out a crunching sound, and a few pieces chipped off, but Thyme didn't call the match just yet. She looked down at her paddle, it had a tiny hole in the centre and cracks all around it. Still, Bonas returned the ball once more, the cracks on hers growing larger. Vanya was about to return once more... but something twigged in her mind. She just had a feeling that if she hit the ball back one last time, her paddle would shatter. Quickly aborting the movement, Vanya raised the paddle out of the way, letting the ball bounce off the table, and then onto the floor.

"Vanya, do you want to take a break before the final match against Willow?" asked Thyme after declaring Bonas the winner.

Vanya grit her teeth, knowing that she really did need a break... and expecting it to make no difference. She looked over her broken and battered paddle... before reaching into the bucket and grabbing a replacement. Thyme made no comment, just stood there waiting for an answer. "Yeah, I'll take a short break," said Vanya.

It wasn't enough. Thyme gave Vanya ten minutes of extra rest, and it didn't help. Willow was ready for her, and Vanya hadn't completely recovered from her last match. It was mostly a mental thing, the fact that she lost three points in a row against Bonas. Once to tie it up, and then two to strong hits. Vanya cursed herself internally for letting her paddle break so much without stabilising it with her hand. Bonas had handed her the answer... and she'd ignored it.

In the end, Willow wiped Vanya out of the tournament, 5-1 using everything she'd learned up to this point. This marked Kress as the winner overall. The mini-tournament had all been decided in that first match, where Kress and Willow faced off. Willow was cursing her sweat, cursing her shoes, and cursing that fall.

[Chapter 1144](#)

Kat is in Kontrol

As Kress made his way back to the group, Gareth slapped him hard on the back and smiled, "Damn Kress, you smoked that one. You've done alright in the last few tournaments... but man that was something else,"

Kress grinned at the praise but waved Gareth off, "It's not that impressive. I only barely got Willow due to a bit of luck, and this was just a silly game, really,"

Green spoke up from the side, "You've been a bit out of it for a while Kress, probably since we lost the guy we had on the team before Kat... though now that I hear about this crush Stan has on you... were you heartbroken?"

Kress sputtered and glared at Green, "Of course not!"

Kat's eye twitched and she tried not to laugh at the response. Regardless of if it was true or not, it was funny to watch Kress' reaction to the news. *Though that would explain some part of why he was so mad that I was recruited to the party. I'm certainly not a handsome man Kress can seduce. Perhaps he was just lonely.*

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[I feel like that's giving him a bit too much credit. Surely the rest of the team would've noticed right? Even if Green is... sleepy a lot of the time, Nixilei is a spy and Gareth is his best friend! Surely they both pay enough attention to Kress to notice that sort of thing.]

I'm not sure... if they were both assuming Kress was straight, or just not gay then maybe they missed it.

[IS he gay though?]

Signs point to yes right? He didn't shut Stan's interest down straight away, there were other concerns sure, but it wasn't 'no way I'm straight'. Like, I can imagine your response to being asked out by a guy, it'd be an immediate look of disgust if you weren't ready for it.

[I don't like that you're right about that. Makes it seem like I hate men though.]

If you say so.

Thyme clapped their hands to get everyone attention... and show of the fact they were now in a pinstripe suit. Kat just accepted the wardrobe change. "Because it seems that I've not completely thought over my rules, I realised one I need to add to the dodgeball section. If you block a ball with another ball, it doesn't count as a hit, but it also doesn't count as a catch, even if you do catch it afterwards. Oh, and you need to hit people FIRST not bounce into a hit. Is that clear?"

Everyone gave a round of nods, so Thyme clapped their hands together. "Excellent." Suddenly the world seemed to expand for a moment, as Thyme separated everyone and expanded the space. The five contestants participating in this game were spread out around in a five point star while the rest of the contestants were outside of the circle. Said circle had doubled in size and right in the middle was a spinning cannon painted in a bright red. Kat also noticed, that somewhere in the transition, Thyme had managed to slip a band around her wrist. "Are you ready!" shouted Thyme.

Sneaky Thyme. I wonder if you were trying to trip me up... or if you trusted me to notice? I'm not sure what's more likely with you Thyme... but I'm hoping for the latter. I suppose regardless of the truth... I'm ready for the match.

"YES!" returned all five competitors. Kat was of course, her team's representative. From the Wild Ones Nell had stepped forward. Her gauntlets were missing and she was stretching her fingers out with a few little exercises. From Romilda's team, Borgick was taking charge. Really though, Kat was just glad he didn't have his cannon in hand. The only other notable detail Kat grabbed in her quick glance was that Borgick's beard was wrapped around his neck and pinned down to prevent it moving.

From March from Willow's team flexed slightly to warm up. Kat winced at that. She was sure that March was just moment away from snapping the seams on her poor abused outfit but it wasn't giving up just yet. Finally, from Vanya's team Burnice had decided to participate. Her knuckledusters were missing, and this clearly disturbed the elf, as she didn't stop rubbing her knuckles since the transport. Though that was one more thing, with a closer look at Burnice, Kat was now 90% certain she was a woman.

*Right. What's my strategy here? March has to go first. Her throws are going to be the fastest by far. Not sure how good she'll be at dodging... but I'll also have to watch out for catches. They're so much more likely in superhuman dodgeball. Sure we can throw faster, but with wind resistance our reflexes probably scale better. I know mine certainly do. Even with this band restricting me... getting my hands in position shouldn't be hard.

So March is priority number one... but I don't know who should be priority number two. Borgick maybe? He had the forethought to pin down his beard just in case it counts as a 'hit' in case someone got lucky, or it was trailing behind and in the way. Then again... not sure how well pinned down his beard even is... so that could be a weakness to exploit later in the game.*

Thyme clapped his hands, and then all of a sudden, a row of cannons dropped down. One in front of Thyme, and one to the north. Kat's jaw dropped as Thyme grinned madly behind their row of cannons. *SHIT. Thyme strongly implied we'd be throwing balls at each other... but he just said we lose a life if we get hit and can return the favour if we catch it. No wonder Thyme added that line about blocking with another ball. We're going to have plenty to grab soon.*

Does that change my plans? March isn't as flexible as everyone else... probably. I mean, she's got muscles on her muscles, no would she have the kind of flexibility she's going to need... right? Kat bit her lips and glanced over at March who seemed remarkably unconcerned with the addition of the cannons.

*Then again... magic is allowed this round. Just not against people. Should I be going a mage? I don't think any of the people in this round are mages... probably. Hopefully? Everyone has obvious weapons, or at least, had obvious weapons on them. Thyme specifically allowed magic this round though! Did the teams just think that it wouldn't do enough? I feel like I should abuse the heck out of it. Not only is there no rule against flying, I can shoot a bunch of ice everywhere. That being said... *

Kat glanced over at the wall of cannons that stretched all the way to the ceiling. *Perhaps my flight was taken into account. So... yeah I guess that's off the table. Ice might not be... but...* Kat once again looked at the wall of cannons and noticed that even the lowest still aimed upwards slightly. *Hmm... not sure if those cannons can actually hit someone if they fell. Laying down on the ground might be a good way to avoid the cannons... even if you can't avoid the balls from other people.*

*So where does that leave me? Perhaps wait a volley and see if March gets taken out by any of the cannons. If she doesn't, then I should go for her unless she seems to be targeting someone specific. Then the next target is... Burnice perhaps? She seems scary. What with the burn scars and everything. Not sure if that translates into fighting power but it's at least a notable trait.

I could always go for Nell... she's quite strong, and is a similar concern to March even if... not one that's so obvious. I just kinda don't want to though? I like Blue and if I can give her team a bit of an edge without sacrificing my own success. It's not like I'm friends with Stan. He might be a demon, but that doesn't mean anything to me. It's not like a grew up and obtained some sort of demon pride. Or succubus pride, for that matter. I mean, technically he's an incubus, but that's semantics.

[Why not go for Burnice because she's closest?]

Wait you can hear me Lily?

[What do you mean? Of course I can. You're not blocking your thoughts.]

Sure... but I'm speeding my mind up a pretty significant amount. You never used to be able to keep up.

[Huh... I... I don't really know how I'm doing this.]

We can discuss it later, test some things out. For now though, I'm going to block off our connection. I don't want anyone to accuse us of cheating.

[Understood. Over and out!]

Kat let out a grin, even as she suppressed the link. Knowing that Lily could speak to her even at such a speed was a massive boon. The tournament didn't require it, but it would be useful in the future. It was great news, and Kat was ready to hold that feeling, and use it to win.

[Chapter 1145](#)

Kat leapt at the sound of cannon fire. A wall of dodgeballs erupted from the cannons, and Kat used all of her time to look at them. Only half of the wall was lit up, so the dodgeballs didn't coat the wall from floor to ceiling. The dodgeballs in question... looked a little odd. They were black as pitch, probably because it was an ingredient in their creation. Most of them looked sticky with dripping bits of black sludge attached to the outside.

The problem were the ones that were closer to grey. Those balls were clearly just a thin shell around a liquid centre. *I certainly don't want to try grabbing any of those! Even with a tonne of care, they might explode anyway! Especially if Thyme has an enchantment on them to set them off.*

As Kat continued to rise, she realised that she'd overshot her jump in haste, even with the limiting around her wrist. Not wanting to miss the chance to grab a ball, Kat flared her wings then used them to flip in place, letting her arms reach out below her and catch a ball as it passed below her. Kat was surprised to find that it wasn't sticky at all, but it did squish under her fingers, even as lightly as she thought she'd grabbed it.

I wonder what it counts as if you accidentally pop one of these things. Kat finished her flip to end up right side up, and used the chance to look around at everyone else. Kat was at the bottom left corner of the circle, and across from her was Borgick, who seemed to have jumped too early. He just barely managed to miss the throng of balls on his way back down to the ground.

Above them both was Nell and Burnice, facing off against each other. They both easily cleared the cannons, but didn't manage to grab a ball during the wave. They were falling now, but watching the rest of the contestants closer. Waiting for someone else to make a move.

Finally, there was March, set at the top of the star, grinning madly as her eyes shone with inner fire. Apparently, her physical capabilities were insane. Despite having the least time out of everyone, March had managed not only to dodge the wall, but also to catch a ball. Not with her hands, but with her feet. As Kat watched, the mountain of muscle deftly pulled in her knees and used the momentum of her fall to catch the ball in her hands, just before everyone hit the wooden floors.

Holy shit go March. She's definitely the person I want to get out... but I'm not entirely sure that I can. She's the furthest away and that was fucking impressive. I bet she could, at worst, just block me with her own ball if I tried to throw mine... and honestly? She might just catch it with her legs to show off. Apparently, she's pretty fucking flexible for someone with so much muscle.

Kat licked her lips as she looked around the field, looking for an opening. March seemed to be doing the same, but she was showing off a bit by spinning the ball on her finger as she did so. It was just distracting enough for Borgick's focus to fixate on the ball for just a moment so Kat made use of it, hurling her own ball straight at Borgick, full strength.

Kat immediately felt the bracelet limiting her, but she pushed on and let it fly. Borgick was turning, just a moment after the ball started to fly, a panicked expression on his face. Sadly for Kat, his body was moving before he even truly knew what he was doing. Borgick dived down and to the left to get out of the way...

Only for March to match Kat's throw, hurling her ball at the falling dwarf. When he hit the ground, he made a good effort to roll away from March's attack, but was struck on the shoulder, just barely clipping him. Borgick cursed but got to his feet, right as the cannons sounded again.

Kat looked at the two rows of cannons... but saw no cannon balls. Burning demonic energy, Kat slowed her mind right down and her vision seemed to expand as she started to really take in her peripherals. Only to realise that the 'empty space' behind her had fired off some dodgeballs of its own. Kat wanted to curse, there was no time, it was RIGHT THERE.

Kat hurled herself towards the ground, using her entire body, wings including to drop her as fast as possible. Kat felt the wind being driven out of her when her back smashed into the ground, and though she bounced back up, ignoring the pain, as soon as the balls past over her head. Only for her to hear another round of cannon fire.

Kat glanced around in slowed time, and saw they were from coming from the same direction as the first barrage, but were being launched in a series of lines. Only every second cannon had fired, but they covered all the way to the ceiling. Kat would be fine, just needed to slip through the gap when it she was sideways...**novelNext.COM**

But March had arms thicker than Kat's entire body. So how is she getting out of this? Kat couldn't spare a glance for Borgick, but he was presumably still in the game. In the air Nell could be seen pulling her hands about her head, stretching herself out and flattening just a bit more to fit in between the lines. Burnice didn't have any issue with the gap, having coincidentally lined up with them when she jumped over the first set of balls.

Kat watched March, who had, it seems, picked up another ball during the previous wave. She'd moved it to her hands... and that was enough to survive another. March pulled her hand back, so swiftly the dodgeballs had barely moved from the cannons. March then launched the ball with such strength that the wind from the movement scattered the nearby dodgeballs everywhere. March did have to duck into a ball to avoid getting clipped, but she made it through.

Not without cost though. Nell was watching and managed to catch one of the stray balls that flew straight towards her. Not a life off of March, but a weapon in the hands of an enemy. Burnice looked ready to try for the same, but realised that two were coming right for her. Acting quickly she leaned forward and caught the first, then threw it into the second, knocking it off-course and keeping her on two lives.

Borgick was far enough away to avoid the mess, and managed to grab his own ball for retaliation. As everyone landed, Kat looked at the floor. In a few places, the thinner dodgeballs had splattered against the floor, leaving behind a thick, tar like substance that would no doubt slow anyone attempting to cross it. Though... there were a few dodgeballs stuck to the black tar like substance. So perhaps braving it would be the right move.

Everyone glances around once again. Waiting for someone to make the first move. Kat kept an especially close eye on Borgick just in case he was looking for revenge. Nobody moved for five seconds. Then ten. Then the sound of cannon fire went off. Kat moved into slowed time and looked around for the balls... only to see nothing. She frowned, looking around. Nell and Borgick had jumped at the sound... but there was nothing.

What's going on? Kat released her increased mental speed, but she couldn't see any indication of balls coming from anywhere. It took her a moment to realise what had happened. Borgick to the chance to hurl the ball at Nell, trapped in the air as she was. Nell glared back, hands full, and made to intercept the ball with one of her own.

Burnice, seeing an opportunity, burst into motion and flew over to one of the stuck balls. She reached down to grab it and pulled... not prepared for it pulling back. She stumbled forward, but managed to catch herself at the last second. Nell was tempted to capitalise, to throw the ball in her hands at Burnice...

But she couldn't for it was in that moment she needed to block the dwarf's attack. Still, she could try. Nell smacked the incoming ball downwards, towards Burnice. Despite Burnice's lacking footing, she could still catch a ball, especially since it was just redirected. The ball found its way into Burnice's hands easily even if the elf was in a bit of an awkward position right now. It was worth it.

Wait... does that count as a catch against Borgick? As Kat asked that question mentally a piercing whistle cut through the silence. "Time out! You've managed to stumbled into another edge case. Stay where you are, while we discuss this,"

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"You guys really like making work for me don't you?" said Thyme with a sigh. "Right, here's the issue. Burnice caught the ball, that complicates things. As, Nell, Borgick, or nobody could lose a life from it. An argument could be made that because Borgick threw the ball, and Burnice caught it, he should lose a life...

"But I'm not a fan of that interpretation of the rules. It doesn't make too much sense when looking at the bigger picture... especially when it bounced off the ball in Nell's hands. So then should Nell lose a life? She was the last person to affect the ball, even if she wasn't technically in contact with it...

"But that wasn't a throw. Did I specify throw? Because if my memory serves me correctly, then I specified that when you caught a ball, it was the person who just threw it that lost a life... and while I might be old, bouncing a ball off of another ball is not throwing a ball at all, it's bouncing a ball at someone else.

"This is compounded by the fact I specifically mentioned that bouncing off the ground and then catching the ball doesn't count as a catch. Right. I've talked myself around. If nobody has any complaints, then I'll add this to the rules. Nobody loses any lives in this instance. Does anyone want to contest this ruling?"

I'm a bit surprised Thyme needed to say that all out loud. I mean, now that they've talked it all through, it seems pretty self-explanatory? I mean, I guess the argument could be made... but why did they need to go through it with us?**ηOVELnExt.COmm**

[Thyme might have needed to say it all out loud? I dunno, your guess is as good as mine.]

I suppose it is. Though... I didn't notice the fact the link was open again. How did that happen?

[I... I'm not sure? I just sent you the message.]

Hmm... not good. Well, I mean, it IS good you can bypass it.... Possibly. I might've just got distracted. Maybe it's because I was expecting an answer? I really shouldn't have been, just in case Thyme gets mad because the game is only paused and not over.

[I'll be careful but I'm pretty sure Thyme wouldn't be that petty.]

Kat chose not to argue with Lily, and so, like the rest of the contestants she stood still. When it became clear that nobody wanted to argue, Thyme counted down from three, and when the count was over, everyone in the ring just sort of looked around awkwardly. After the break it just felt a bit odd to jump right back into the dodgeball fight. All the tension had drained away.

Burnice took the chance to slowly walk back to her old spot and Nell made no move to throw anything at Burnice's back. Sure Burnice was looking over her shoulder, but the chance could have been taken. Kat, for her part, made note of the fact that the black gunk on the floor from the burst dodgeballs didn't seem to stay sticky for long. *I wonder if that's just a factor of time, or if we got a big enough puddle it would remain sticky for a while? That batch is spread pretty fine...*

Kat jumped as the cannons in front of her went off, with the rest of the group following behind. Trick was, this time the dodgeballs had shot out from almost the entire wall of cannons. There were just two rows that failed to fire, about two thirds of the way up. It wasn't enough space to stay standing up straight, even if you did time the jump perfectly. But it was more than enough space for everyone, even March, if you were to move yourself to be laying flat in the air. Unless you were Borgick.

The dwarf simply jumped to the correct height and then let the balls pass him by, snatching awkwardly at one just off to the side of his head. The closer ones were all too thin. For a moment, it looked like the ball was going to slip from his hands, but eventually he dug his fingers into it for purchase. The ball popped, sending goop flying out and covering him entirely... but Thyme didn't call for a point loss there.

For Kat and her wings it was an easy thing to fit through the gap, and grab her own dodgeball for the trouble. Burnice curled into a ball and made it throw easily, march grabbed her own dodgeball, and Nell... well she was in a bit of trouble. As soon as the dodgeballs past by Burnice, she hurled the one in her hand straight at Nell. Nell managed to catch it out of the corner of her eye. She shifted the ball in her hands to block the attempt... and at the same time had one of the cannon-fired dodgeballs hit her elbow.

"Nell is down one life!" said Thyme as everyone dropped down. Three contestants armed. Only Borgick and Burnice were missing a weapon... but arguably she wasn't in the most trouble, for even if Nell was looking for revenge, it was clear the dwarf had a problem. His boots landed heavily on the floor, and

when he went to shift slightly the gunk clung to the ground, stopping his movements. Borgick's eyes went wide as he carefully surveyed the competitors, even as he continually tried to free his feet.

I guess it's nice to know that I have to be careful even with the thicker ones... also I'm sorry Borgick. Kat looked around once more and saw nobody was willing to make a move. So Kat coated the dodgeball in demonic fire, pouring demonic energy into it so that the blaze was strong. Those who could move, turned slightly to face Kat more closely, but Borgick just paled. "Sorry for this!" said Kat as she let the ball fly.

Borgick tried to wrench a foot away from the ground but it wasn't happening. His boots were tied on properly and he was stuck to the damn ground. He wanted to surrender, knowing the dangers of that sort of fire, but he didn't have time. Kat had aimed, not for his upper body, but for his stuck boots. Borgick cursed, and tried to move, but there was nothing to be done.

Moments before the dodgeball would hit him, Thyme clicked their fingers, and the ball vanished. Then a moment after that, Borgick was moved to the side of the arena, "Borgick is out!"

While this was happening, March was making use of Kat's distraction to throw a ball at her. Kat saw it coming a mile away, her cone of vision large enough to watch the movement even before March let the ball fly. It was aimed squarely for her chest, but coming in fast. *Ok, I can try to catch that... but honestly? After seeing Borgick burst one of the thicker dodgeballs? I think it might be too big of a risk at that speed.* Kat followed her thoughts and slid to the side, keeping her eye on the others as she did so. Nobody else moved and the ball whizzed past before vanishing when it left the circle. With Borgick out, the fully back of the circle was free, so Kat moved over slightly, staying at her current 'elevation' and leaving some room to manoeuvre backwards if required.

Borgick fell down onto his backside, "Thanks Thyme. I thought I was a goner,"

"No problem Borgick. While I could potentially heal you after the demonic fire got on your clothes and body, it would be a rather significant effort on my part, and no shortage of pain on yours," said Thyme.

"Yeah. Deadly stuff that. I'm just glad you got me out of there early enough. No complaints for me," said Borgick.

Burnice and March shared a look at that statement, realising that while nobody could directly attack anyone else with magic, Kat had thrown down the metaphorical gauntlet by setting the dodgeball on fire. It was much more difficult for them to use what magic they had in similar ways, and so that made Kat enemy number one. They shared a nod of understanding, and turned to face Kat.

Kat gave a wry smile and looked towards Nell who shrugged back, not willing to commit to a 2 on 2 team up just yet. Especially not when she too was a touch scared of Kat in this fight. Nell thought it was probably best to try and get Kat out now, while they still could.

Well damn. Guess I'm on my own. Two, or maybe three vs one is a going to be annoying... but the cannons might be able to help me. I should see about catching a ball and perhaps knocking into the other balls? Try to get them to explode out and hit people maybe? Might be my only shot.

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Kat bit down hard on the inside of her lip to prevent herself from bursting out into laughter. *I've just had a deliciously horrible idea. Sure it won't be necessary to use right now. Burnice and March don't have anything to throw at me... and Nell isn't quite willing to commit yet. Still... I could do this just to scare the rest of them off?*

The evil idea that had just struck her like a lightning bolt... was to make use of her Rank 3 ability. The one that let her turn into water. Even if getting her watery body hit counted and she lost a life... Kat could control all the water that she was made up of. Stretching herself out into miniscule droplets and then spreading them all around the arena would make her impossible to hit... if she didn't just float them all up to the ceiling and spread out there.

When the cannons sounded, Kat was ready and willing. They were behind her this time, and it was back to the standard jump. Thyme probably wanted them to pick up a ball... but Kat noticed that this volley was made up of mostly flimsy dodgeballs, primed to explode. Especially in the top rows.

Still, Kat grinned at the challenge, and let the balls sail under her, before she reached down and plucked a ball from the second line. Nell could dodge easily, but March and Burnice wanted a ball each. March let out a clap right as the balls approached her, causing the ones nearest to her hands to slow ever so slightly. Then March reached down and grabbed a usable ball before continuing her path upwards and avoiding the hit. Burnice was the one really showing everyone up though. *NOVELnext.com*

She let out a long, smooth breath and placed a hand underneath one of the risky balls, letting it spin up her arm all the way to her face, where she gently rested her cheek against the ball, catching it between her neck, shoulder and face. *HOLY SHIT! I was scared to catch the dodgeball March threw... but Burnice is living on the edge. How is she even going to throw that thing?*

Kat imitated March, spinning the ball on her finger. It was surprisingly easy, and a skill Kat didn't know she actually possessed. *Right. So Burnice is absolutely crazy and now I really want to take out that team of two. How do I do it though? The real issue is that as fast as these balls might be, they really slow down over distance... unless. Wait. That's just dumb enough to work!*

Kat grinned, putting March and Burnice on edge. Kat didn't mind, the plan was to wait for the next set of cannon shots to ring out before truly starting on her plan. Nell wound up her arm and looked ready to throw the ball at Kat... but she just held the position once she was in it. March and Burnice shared a look, before nodding. Burnice went first, not so much throwing the ball as she was spinning around with it and letting it fly. Kat spat a glob of fire out at it, colliding with the ball in midair and burning through the small outer shell.

Nell's shot came as the fire obscured Kat's vision slightly, but that was easily dodged, Kat just ducked off to the side... and into the path of March's attack. Kat was ready for that too though, and simply bent forwards, letting the ball fly over her, going through the space her chest used to be. Kat grinned. Sure the cannons hadn't sounded, but nobody else had projectiles now.

Kat dashed forward straight to Burnice and the elf paled upon realising Kat's plan. Burnice sped over towards March who stood menacingly in the way, hands outstretched and feet planted wide, like a goalie ready to defend for their team. Kat decided to test that, she weaved the ball around, swapping it between hands, making dozens of feints in just a few moments, and then winding up for what looked like a real shot... only to have her tail pluck the ball out of her hand as she threw it.

It had looked like the ball was going to curve around March, to try and hit Burnice, but Kat's tail was really launching it towards March's leg. A slight risk, but hopefully one that wouldn't be seen through. March instinctively started moving to the left, shuffling over only to realise the ball wasn't there. Her eyes moved to Kat's other hand, also empty. Then, without properly recognising why, March leapt upwards just in time for the ball to pass through the spot her right foot had been, after moving to catch the ball.

Kat clicked her tongue and back off just as the cannon sounded. Should've waited for that. *Aw well. I didn't think they'd go full goalie on me. March moved well, and Burnice was good enough to recognise even with the limiter on I can out speed her.* Kat noticed that the balls were coming from her back, where Burnice had been standing and were covering everything except the bottom row.

Kat did the splits, letting herself drop down that way before leaning backwards to catch a ball as it flew overhead. As soon as that happened, Kat threw it straight at March, who was flat on the ground facing forward. March's hands shot forward to block the shot, but they weren't quite fast enough. Instead, March got caught on the arm, and Kat danced away as Burnice threw a ball at Kat's previous location.

"Life down for March!" said Thyme.

Nell managed to grab a ball during the scuffle, but didn't throw it at anyone just yet. Kat was no longer trapped and would easily dodge. Burnice and March were somewhat open, but Nell didn't want to face the focus of those two, alongside Kat. Part of her wanted to team up with Kat... but that would doom her to second place, and she wasn't quite willing to accept just second place yet.

Glad I managed to hit March there. I'll try and get her out with another hit if I can. Burnice is scarier, but I might as well take out one of the two... and if March is going to volunteer...

As everyone popped back to their feet, Kat took some distance, while March and Burnice looked warily at each other, but seemed to come to the conclusion that there was no betrayal in the near future, as they shared another set of matching nods. Nell sighed and got their attention, properly joining the trio.

Kat smiled at that. *That seems like a good excuse to break out some of my more unfair tactics then.* Kat breathed out deeply, expelling flames from her mouth as she back up further. The fire didn't burn long in any one place, but it coated the flooring in a nice dusting of ice, sure to ruin someone's footing if they weren't careful.

The cannons sounded again, and Kat was surprised to see just how much things were being stepped up. There was two lines of free space, directly in the middle of the area, and it not a single dodgeball looked sturdy enough to grab, if you weren't Burnice. Kat dashed for the space, keeping a close eye on Nell as she did so. Burnice and March ran for it, and managed to get in position just as the balls would've caught them out.

When everyone was in a line, Burnice managed her spinning trick to grab a ball out and threw it at Kat's back, as Kat had turned to face Nell to watch her better. Kat ducked down, letting the ball sail over her, at the same time Nell threw a ball directly at Kat's face in an attempt to catch her out. It was fast, very fast, but Kat was feeling a little risky.

So she went for the catch. Kat extended her hand out and let the ball impact her palm. It tried to bounce out but Kat brought her other hand behind it and managed to prevent it bouncing away or popping.

"Catch by Kat! Nell is out!" said Thyme with a click of their fingers, removing Nell from the playing field.

Nell clicked her tongue, "No going easy on me for our old friendship?" asked Nell.

Kat backed up away from Burnice and March as she answered, "I was! But then you had to go and throw a ball right at me! It was too easy to catch. You should've tried... I dunno bouncing it off the ground and into me knees or something? That might have worked!"

Nell just let out a sigh and a shake of her head but didn't say anything further. *It really is a shame. I wasn't specifically targeting Nell at all. I went about as far out of my way as I could without feeling like I was just bullying the others or ignoring her... but a catch is a catch, and that throw wasn't up to March's standards so it wasn't too hard. Though I think it nearly popped even so.*

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Burnice and March exchanged glances as they slowly backed away from Kat. They'd come out of that interaction rather poorly. Nell was down, Kat managed to catch the ball, and they missed their own shot at Kat. Things were looking rather bleak for the duo, but they weren't ready to give up just yet.

On Kat's side of things, it felt like it was already over. She hadn't pulled out any of her ruder tricks and two people just didn't seem that scary anymore. *I wonder if Thyme actually turned this thing on properly. I can feel it limiting me... but nowhere near as much as last time. Wait. Does Thyme know I'm Rank 3 now? Surely they can tell... right? But it's been so smooth... hmm...*

"Thyme, just to check, this armband is calibrated for me at Rank 3 right?" asked Kat.

Before Thyme could answer, Stan shouted out, "You're RANK 3!"

Kat just gave him a nod as Thyme let out a polite cough and answered, "Yes, I am aware of that. Is there a reason you're asking?"

"Um..." Kat kept her eyes on Burnice and March as she answered. Sure they didn't have any balls right now, but they might have a magical trick or two. "It just feels different to last time. It was... I don't want to say bad... but rather noticeable when I was being restricted. It seems to stop and start even while running in a straight line, but now it seems quite smooth,"

"Those were all intended improvements," said Thyme. "Once I knew it was something I needed for the tournament, I commissioned someone with more experience than I to make one. They managed a much superior version in only a week,"

Kat nodded, "Right well... as long as it's working that's fine then,"

"Wait, are we not going to talk about the fact you're Rank 3 and yet somehow eligible for this tournament?" asked Stan.

"I mean..." Kat looked around, nobody was moving, the cannons hadn't sounded. I don't know if this is a distraction or not but I can answer I suppose. "I'm in the right age range? And I've got two good friends around my age that are Rank 2 already, so is Rank 3 that much of a surprise?"

Stan shook his head in, "Kat, Rank 2 is something some demons take decades to reach! And you're at Rank 3!"

Kat just shrugged. While she was doing this, Burnice and March were whispering to each other. They were using Kat's responses as a way to sneak under the radar and hopefully avoid being overheard. Sadly for them, despite the restrictor band working on physical prowess... it did nothing to stop Kat's enhanced hearing.

"You got any spells you can use?" whispered Burnice.

"Not really. Mostly just channel through ma armour and weapons. I got exactly one move, but I'm not sure it'd help us," whispered March.

"I'm in pretty much the same boat. My knuckles have wind enchantments in them but as I am the only thing I could do is summon up a bit of wind, but nothing sharp or whatever. I've been trying to learn a technique that speeds up my movements but I haven't got it down," whispered Burnice.

Huh, so Burnice has wind affinity? Interesting. March nodded and continued the conversation, "My affinity is steam, and I happen to know my family technique 'Steam Engine'. The full version of the technique can drastically raise my physical abilities... but I can't use it properly, I need to rely on my armour for that. What I can do though, is spit out a respectable amount of steam from my mouth using my poor-woman's version of the technique. You think that would be worth trying?"

"We don't know what Kat's other powers are... actually, do you think we could get away with spitting steam just towards her? If she's an ice based demon doesn't that mean she's weak too heat?" whispered Burnice.

"I don't know? Is that how it works for them? Oh... and I can't make me steam too hot. It does need to form in my body after all. So I suspect... no?" whispered March.

Kat felt a change in the air, the cannons hadn't quite sounded, but it felt like they were just a moment away from doing so. She opened her mouth to try and distract the two... but she was too late. The cannons went off and the conversation was cut short. The cannons fired just barely over everyone's heads. It was at March's head height, which meant Kat needed to duck a little bit because of her horns.

The only problem was the bottom row was filled with thin dodgeballs. Burnice had clearly gotten the technique down though, because she snatched up TWO dodgeballs in during the 'attack'. Kat managed to make use of her tail, and smack one of the dodgeballs higher up into her hands... but well... "Hit on Kat," said Thyme.

Kat winced. *Dammit. I want to protest that but fine. I understand why I still got 'hit' by that ball even though I was clearly smacking it into my hand. I wasn't thinking so that's on me.* March and Burnice grinned widely at the news, ready to capitalise on Kat's mistake. Kat just rolled her eyes, deciding to bring them down. She was going to inform the two that she'd heard their plan... but after that? Kat was going to make them pay for underestimating her hearing.

Kat watched them both carefully, Burnice made an offer of one ball to March, who shook her head, denying the offer. Kat just continued to star them down, for a moment before dashing forward. March

once again took a goalie stance, but Burnice didn't move behind this time. Perhaps to take the hit? Kat wasn't sure but she was ready for anything.

Just as Kat was about to approach, Burnice hurled the first ball, not at Kat, but at the floor beneath her feet. Kat leapt over it and hurled the ball straight at March's feet in the same instant. Burnice retaliated by throwing the ball back at Kat, while March tried to catch the speeding projectile. Kat's shot hit March's hands... then exploded, showing March in gunk. "March out!" said Thyme as they teleported March out of the arena.

March yelled "GET EM BURNICE!" from the sidelines, seemingly not too annoyed about her forced retreat.

Kat bowed, to Burnice. "It was a good match... and I'm sorry for what I'm about to do, but I think I've won,"

"Getting a bit cocky aren't you?" asked Burnice.

Kat nodded, "Perhaps I might be, down a life as I am. But well..." Kat summoned up a large amount of demonic fire to her hands. Burnice watched carefully, but Kat kept the fire building for a few more seconds before unleashing it around Burnice. Encircling her fully. Burnice's eyes went wide, she went to jump over the mass but Kat closed the top off as well. **noV£LnExt.Com**

"Hey! This is a cheap way of winning!" hissed Burnice from inside the fire.

Kat nodded and said, "Yes it is. I was attempting to win without resorting to this sort of thing... but I'm down to one life, there's only you left and it's within the rules. I might be a good sport, but I do want to win, and it would be disrespectful to hold back too much and lose because of it. Perhaps if I had some formalised honour code I could get away with it without looking like an arrogant ass... but I don't,"

"Can she really do this?" asked Burnice to time.

Thyme thought for a moment before nodding. "Yes... it's not exactly a glamorous strategy but it's not breaking the rules. You could technically run through it... but then you'd be on the clock for permanent damage so I don't recommend it. Do you want to forfeit?"

Burnice clicked her tongue, "Not just yet. I'm probably not winning... but I've gotta give it at least a try don't I?" Thyme nodded and didn't say anything else. Kat and Burnice both waited for the cannons.

It took a while for them to fire, and Kat even sent a confused look at Thyme who answered with, "The cannons are preset. I'm not triggering them manually," which did explain the holdup.

Eventually though, the cannons went off. Burnice tried her best. With just sound to guide her, she managed to shift to roughly where she thought she'd be safe. The cannons had shot in lines again, and Burnice was correct in her guess of safety. Sadly, she wasn't quite keeping the best ear out. The cannons had fired from two separate walls, and the second set smacked into her. Multiple dodgeballs exploded against her side.

"Multi hit on Burnice! Kat wins!" shouted Thyme.

Kat instantly dismissed the fire and walk over to Burnice, and put forward a hand. "No hard feelings?" asked Kat.

Burnice glared at the offered hand but shook it. "Some hard feelings. I do feel a bit cheated, and I feel especially bad March took the fall for me at least once, maybe twice... but I do know I'd feel a lot worse if you let me win. So... I'll get over it,"

"Yeah..." Kat paused in her speech, letting the handshake win before stepping back and turning into water for a moment. "I had a few more tricks too... so... yeah,"

"Damn, I guess we should've sent our magic users into this one," grumbled Burnice.

Kat shrugged. Perhaps... but then Kat likely could have bullied them all with speed, and it was doubtful they'd have been able to catch the balls like Burnice. *Might have worked. Might not. I doubt it would've really helped that much.*

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"With game we'll be entering a short intermission. You all have thirty minutes to do whatever you want. Just make sure you're back here in time for the next game, or I'll be forced to mark you as forfeited for the event. Feel free to take the elevator back out, if you all want," said Thyme with a bow... before disappearing entirely along with all the cannons.

Kat jogged over to her team and grabbed onto Lily, who transformed to return Kat's hug. *That was stressful. I nearly lost there at the end because I got a bit tricky with my tail, and I had to abuse my fire to get the win. I do feel bad about that. I was so close to getting through the game too...*

[Hey, Kat it's fine. This is an important contest for everyone here. The fact that you managed to win isn't something to be ashamed of. It was all perfectly within the rules, and it's not your fault that the other teams didn't bother to put a mage into the fight.]

I... I guess but I just sort of feel bad? I'm not some new demon like the first round, and it's not cooperative stuff where we all work together... now I feel sort of like the boss monster at the end of the dungeon. I AM the final boss. Stan seemed so surprised that I was Rank 3 already... and I just don't know what sort of advantage that gives me...

[Well Kat, Thyme is at least Rank 5, but think about how strong they are. I bet even if you got to Rank 5 yourself, that wouldn't suddenly make you strong enough to fight Thyme, so just... don't worry about it for now Kat. It will be fine.]

I know... I just can't shake the feeling that all of this is wildly unfair to the others.

[Kat. It is not your job to reduce your strength down to their level. Thyme has already bent the rules a bit to ensure that you're not overpowering people with your strength. Thyme could have limited you more than you already are if it was really a problem. Don't you trust them?]

I... I suppose I do? Is it weird that it makes me feel better to look at it that way? I trust Thyme... and I trust Thyme not to give out any unfair advantages... so I guess I should trust the expert? I mean... Thyme has been around for a long time... so it should be fine.

Lily very pointedly didn't mention that Thyme had just recently realised how poorly designed his table tennis game was when a dwarf was facing off against someone of taller stature, or that Thyme had to

pause the dodgeball game to talk through exactly what the rules should be when Nell deflected the ball and Burnice caught it.

"Naw, look at them Gareth, they're so cute together. Is that what we look like normally?" asked Green from the side with a big grin on her face.

Gareth coughed awkwardly, "Well... I can't exactly say. Kress?"

Kress rolled his eyes, "I find nothing adorable about this scene. Clearly, you're seeing something that I'm not,"

"Come ooonnn... Nixilei back me up here," whined Green.

"You have a somewhat different dynamic with Gareth, but the reason this is cute is because Kat is taking comfort in Lily's presence... it's a bit similar to if Gareth was tired and slept on your legs for once, instead of your normal routine," explained Nixilei.

Green's eyes glazed over as she picture Gareth curled up in his full set of armour, resting his head on her lap under a tree. Green started to drool a bit until Nixilei slapped her on the back. "Focus Green, you're in the presence of royalty. Please control yourself,"

Green looked around the group confused, but Nixilei shook her head then jerked it slightly towards the group of fae and elves with Burnice in them. Green looked over, then back at Nixilei, before looking back at the elves before once more returning her gaze to Nixilei. "Nope. I've got nothing. Who's the royalty?" asked Green. I think you should take a look at

Nixilei sighed, "Green, that sort of thing is important for politics. We covered this in a number of your classes, do you mean to tell me you really don't know?"

Green looked around sheepishly, and Kat decided to save her, "Well I don't know, and I have no reason to have known. Perhaps you can share with me?" *Novelnext.CoM*

Nixilei glared at Kat with a face that told the demon she wasn't fooling anyone but Nixilei decided to answer anyone. "The princess is Marigold, the one with the axe. The Elf King is... well he's known for his harem. Elves are known for their exceptionally low birth rates... but the elf king... does not suffer from that issue. Some say he's actually just a half elf, some say it's his age, others proclaim it to be his magical affinity...

"Whatever the case, he... is rather infamous for his large harem of queens that act as his advisors in many things. Marigold is one of the younger princess, and daughter of Queen Ivy, head of agriculture. Despite Marigold's young age, Queen Ivy is actually the oldest Queen, and she's been a part of the King's harem the second longest. Marigold is her... well..." Nixilei pursed her lips, not entirely sure if it was a good idea to confirm something.

"Let's just say that Marigold is the first child of Queen Ivy. It's... mostly accurate," Kat gave Nixilei a weird look but didn't comment. "Now, the King proclaimed an heir centuries ago, it is no question who the first princess will be... but the King seems committed to... repopulating the elven race.

"Marigold is eighty-seventh Princess, which might sound like a lot, but considering King Auctifer has had over forty wives... eighty-seven is not considered unreasonably high until you realise that he's an elf. Many elves have tried for a century without a single child. Auctifer allegedly just needs a year,"

"Huh... well I mean, I remember that guy," said Green. "The king obviously, and like Ivy's pretty important I think... but I've never heard of her daughter so..."

Nixilei wanted to slap Green for that, but she'd already said it. A quick glance revealed the elves probably weren't listening, but Nixilei wasn't going to count on that. Nixilei was trying to calm herself down, as Kat asked, "What do you mean 'has had'. I'm somewhat scared of the answer,"

Nixilei waved Kat off. "The king is... rather free with his affections. I suppose I should also mention that... not all of those forty wives were actually women. Auctifer is perfectly willing to sleep with anyone they deem beautiful. Yet... he's surprisingly realistic about some other things.

"Elves can get old, and they live for a long time. Auctifer doesn't force anyone to stay with him, and there's this big... anti- marriage? I suppose that's the best word for it? Auctifer has an anti-marriage ceremony where he officially frees them to seek the affection of others. It's a bit of a show, but there's a somewhat popular story about Auctifer's third wife.

"It's a comedic play about her leaving Auctifer's harem because he was too gentle a lover. So the woman... hmm... I don't remember her real name. In the play she's called Bofat, which I know isn't her actual name in the history books... anyway, I'll just use Bofat. Apparently she was legendary for her... alternative tastes. Nothing was too extreme for her.

"So she first went back to take up her old job as a courtesan... only to be turned away for being the Queen. Despite her insistence Auctifer let her go with no ill will the business wouldn't take her. The play then goes through several acts where Bofat goes first to a few other business, then to the least then legal avenues, then finally just walks around towns naked hoping for someone to jump her...

"Only for each and every man or woman to realise that she's the Queen, apologise and then leave. Bofat finally had enough, and ran off to the woods where she met an old blind hermit. Bofat thought that might finally be her chance... so she seduced the man. Yet the night he finally lay with her... as he ran his hands over her body... he said 'Wait, that's the Queen's Ass! Shit!' and bolted,"

Kat couldn't help but let out a slight snicker at the image as the others laugh. Nixilei continued, "Yes it's a great play, and one I found very funny. Though I'm not sure how closely it matches true historical accounts. However, it is always cited as the reason when asked why Auctifer hosts a big ceremony for divorce. It's unclear how much of an issue it would truly be these days. Auctifer is well known for letting his queens leave when they desire to, not that many do leave...

"I suppose it's better to err on the side of caution. Besides, I've heard it's always a good excuse for a party," finished Nixilei with a smile.

Chapter 1150

"Hey, so... I get that the elf king is a bit weird... but what about all the others?" asked Kat.

Nixilei gave a shrug, "Depending on your definition of weird, Auctifer might be the strangest. That being said... the whole situation surrounding the human lands is pretty funny,"

Gareth let out a groan and put his head in his hands, "Urgh, I don't want to hear about it,"

"Is it... embarrassing or something?" asked Kat, confused.

Nixilei grinned, but Kress stepped forward first, "It's... certainly a story and a half, but I think it's better if a human tells it no?" said Kress. Nixilei's grin dimmed a bit and she made a 'go for it' gesture. Kress bowed mockingly, and Nixilei walked off to grab a glass of water from the table Thyme had out.

Kress watched Nixilei go for a bit before shrugging and turning back to Kat. "Right so, let's explain how we got here. The human king before the most recent king is VERY old. He's known as the strongest being on the continent and is considered one of the main reasons the humans have held onto their lands throughout time. He fought all the way back in the wars that lead to the founding of this tournament, and apparently he was pretty old even before that.

"Anyway, somewhat recently, though 'recently' is a bit of a relative term considering his age, his wife, the queen, died. It was a sad time apparently, but I've only ever heard of her in history books so I can't really say. If you listen to some of the older folks, it sounds like the whole country cried rivers at her passing.

"The King and Queen loved each other quite a bit, if what happened next was anything to go by. See, it turns out that the King had married her for political legitimacy... and to have someone to handle the affairs of state. The Old King, just didn't care. Like Auctifer, there was a play about their meeting.

"Apparently she kept trying to go behind his back to do all these various things... and the king kept trying to subtly hint that he knew and was fine with it... until eventually she started getting bolder and bolder, with her 'schemes'. The king finally had enough, so he just walked in on the meeting with one of her spies.

"And by walked in, I mean he walked through the ground, breaking the wall of their secret underground bunker without breaking a sweat. The spy ran, and the king let him. Then he told the queen she was an idiot. If the play is anything to go by, it was this whole big thing. The king chained the queen up, and then, in plain words, explained just how little he cared for ruling.

"In the end, she took up the reigns of the kingdom, and allegedly she was very good at it. The king was still around of course, and he helped when asked, mostly with training and logistics for the army, acting as the general in most instances, and clearing out problematic monsters when necessary.

"Sadly, the Queen had to die. She just wasn't as powerful as the King. He's rumoured to be Tier 6, though some people believe he's only Tier 4. Tier 5 is a reasonable guess... but nobody knows in truth. At least one of his Affinities is for Regeneration and he managed to accidentally make himself immortal, apparently.

"And while he might live forever... the queen could not. She never trained to that level, and even though she was forced to train to a certain level... it wasn't immortality. Eventually she got old, and they had to pass the mantle on.

"That's where things started to get messy. You see, the King and Queen didn't have many kids. The King didn't want to sleep around because he grew to love his wife, and the Queen didn't want to take the time necessary to have and raise a child, at least, not often. In the end, they had three children.

"The first child died a long time ago. They were a poet, and a bit of a wastrel. I'd call them a womanizer... but he only liked men. His name was Appolian, and he's still considered one of the best poets of the human empire. Anyway, he died comparatively young age of 150, having only reached Rank 2.

"Their second child, a woman by the name of Artema became one of the Queens of the elf kingdom. Sadly she's baren, rather famously so, and she heads up the Elven Hunters. They're charged with dealing with monster incursions. She's still alive... but when she joined Auctifer's harem, she renounced her claim to the throne. I think you should take a look at

"Then there was Hekule, the baby of the family. He clearly had his eyes set on the throne. So he trained... it's just... apparently he was awful at it. Both as a magician and as a warrior. Still, he trained. Day in and day out, until the Queen eventually passed away after he turned 200.

"The Old King was already looking to retire, with no interest in ruling now his wife was dead... so Hekule took up the task. The Old King... or right his name. Right see it was... Ulf? I think? Most people just call him the Old King. Anyway, Ulf watched over Hekule's rule for a decade then announced he was retiring and no longer wanted to be bothered. Which was reasonable. The man had ruled over the human lands for almost as long as the human lands existed. Ulf was fucking old, and even the people that were sad to see him go thought it was a very reasonable request...

"Well basically the first thing Hekule did after his dad left was to try and prove that he was just as strong as the old man now that he was Rank 4. He decided he wanted to take out the scourge of the dessert. It's a massive sand worm thing that has a mouth the size of a city and some people worry might BE the dessert. Plenty of people theorise that the sand is a result of it shitting out chewed up rocks.

"Could be right, could be wrong, but it really is THAT big. Plenty of people tried to dissuade Hekule from this, but he was adamant. So, he went off to kill it... and promptly died. It was a massive disgrace, and Ulf sent a letter to the palace saying this 'I will not morn my son. For clearly, he wished for death. I can only say that I am disappointed he couldn't take the stress of the job for even a decade without me'.

"Which of course, prompted this big manhunt for Ulf because... well... Hekule was... promiscuous. He had quite a few scandals but the oldest kid was still like... twelve. So the nobles all wanted Ulf back.

"We... might have found him?" offered Kress uncertainly.

Kat just raised an eyebrow and Kress let out a long sigh. "Yeah, it's a bit of a thing. See, they found the person they think is the Old King, just... up in the mountains with a small farm next to a lake. Said farmers insists he isn't he king... but he looks like the king, he talked like the king, and there was the corpse of a sea serpent sitting next to his house at the time.

"So... he was probably Ulf, but he insisted he was 'Steve the farmer' and didn't want to be bothered by anyone. Which... well... he set up his farm in the middle of monster infested lands and was apparently fine so nobody really believed him...

"So they kept trying to get him to come back, but everyone knew they couldn't force him if he was Ulf... so they just kept asking him politely. Once a week. Apparently, we still do," noVe~~l~~next.Com

Nixilei snickered but didn't say anything and Kress rolled his eyes. "We still don't know if he's Ulf or not, and it's been so long that the fact he hasn't aged at all has swayed a lot of people but," Kress just shrugged. "So for now Ulf is out. So obviously the crown prince should've been king right?"

"Wrong. Because as he aged it became apparent to everyone that saw him the crown prince looked awfully like Hekule's first Queen's childhood friend. One magic test later and 'woops he's not actually the prince' so the Queen and 'prince' were thrown out. So they went to the second Queen and tested the kid immediately, and found out that she wasn't the kings... OR THE QUEENS."

Nixilei snorted, as she held a hand over her mouth but Kress just ignored it and continued, "Nobody knows what the heck happened there, and the Queen was very surprised to learn that one. Still, the second Queen decided she'd like to raise the girl regardless of the fact and withdrew from politics.

"Then they went around testing Hekule's bastards, and found a whole bunch... but nobody can agree on which one should actually inherit so it's a big mess and then the council of Earl's took over 'temporarily'...

"Except it might really be temporary, because shortly afterwards Ulf sent another letter, with the royal seal, telling them that SOMEONE had to be King or Queen in a century or he'd just hand the kingdom over to the elves... but never specified that it had to be his descendant that rose to the seat,"