

DEMONS 721

Chapter 721 Knockout!!

Kat looked around to get her bearings while her stomach was healing up only to notice Five, sword ready, next to Kevin. Kat wrenched Kevin out of the way with her tail before Five had the chance to take him out. Kat felt her wounds get aggravated with the movement as she moved forward, pulling Kevin along without much concern and kicking hard into the dwarf's neck.

It wasn't enough to take him out, but the kick was enough to push him backwards... and snap the binding rope around the two of them. The instant the vine snapped both were teleported out of the arena and Kat couldn't help but stare at the place he'd just been. *It's that easy to snap the vines! Why the hell have I been brawling with Nell when I could have just tried to sneak in a tail attack and slice the vines!*

Kat glanced up at the battlefield but things were wrapping up. Kress and Merick were helping keep the remaining enemies behind that big stone wall and they were no more than thirty seconds from falling off so Kat decided to focus back on Nell.

Things were not looking the best for the bear girl. She was still clearly smiling and the dwarf was trying to use a healing potion on her wound, but what Kat didn't know was the damage was a bit too extensive for a potion like that. Nell's tendon couldn't just knit itself back together like magic. It needed to be stretched into place and then healed or completely regrown. The potion just didn't know what to do with something like that so it didn't bother.

The wound closed up, the other muscles knitting together slightly as the skin grew over the area. Nell knew enough about how potions work and the likely quality the dwarves had. They were good for long cuts, could deal with some deep cuts, and bruising was easy to fix. They did not deal with major muscles like the achilleas tendon being sliced through. Something like that required better supplies or a better healer.

Still, with the floor closing in on her and the rest of her team slowly falling to everyone else she needed to go after Kat hard. The only issue was that she couldn't exactly charge Kat anymore. A charge, even a suicidal one, for a given definition when Thyme was around, was impossible due to the state of her leg. She could hope for at most one good hit and that would be her limit.

Still, she shuffled forward towards Kat and Kevin. One of course, was doing what he could. Supporting Nell from the side as best he could with his height. Kevin's spear in hand, and mace forgotten at his back. It was clear anyway that he wouldn't get to use it. He needed the reach and this white spear was good enough for that.

.....

Kat glanced behind her and saw that they had a rather large amount of space. Part of her wanted to go back into the fight but... she had time and space to move and Nell just didn't. Kat started to move backwards but Kevin was gearing up to fight instead. "Kevin, we can just back up," whispered Kat. The twitching of Nell's ears made her suspect it didn't matter.

"I've had my spear taken from me Kat. I cannot let this go without a fight. I'm afraid I cannot let you drag me away from this fight," said Kevin with a steely look in his eyes.

*Oh come on. Why is now the time he finally gets a bit of a spine? If I wasn't so worried about Thyme calling me out for it I'd knock this guy out. I've had to deal with him causing me so many problems. We just needed to fight together but he couldn't do any damage to One even with a huge range advantage and nearly no retaliation meanwhile I had to keep Nell from taking either of our heads off while doing as much damage as I could.

Sure I might have taken a few hits but every time I managed to keep us together and prevent the vines from snapping like Five and Blues. I wouldn't mind carrying this team if I felt like Kevin was appreciating the effort or at least pleasant to work with. Ugh... whatever. Fine I guess we're fighting.*

Kat rolled her eyes and followed Kevin as he stepped forward to meet Nell. As soon as they were in spear range One lashed out and that kicked off a battle between Kevin and One for the control of the thing. One was trying to do damage, while Kevin was trying to catch a solid grasp on the surprisingly slippery spear without the plate armour to trap the head.

Over to the side the remains of Nell's team tried to get around that rock wall. Sadly for them, Gareth was underplaying the wall. For the last ditch effort, instead of meeting them head on Gareth let it drop to the ground then increase in size to wrap around the four. There was nothing they could do anymore. The dwarves threw a few potions over that managed to explode, but Irwin and Gareth took the brunt of that on their shields, and body respectively with Nixilei healing what little damage was done.

Nell, seeing this decided she needed to take this chance. She stepped forward, putting what weight she had to on her bad leg, stomping it into the ground, cracking it, and using the divot for support, even as she grit her teeth against the pain. Nell pulled her arm back and the gauntlet started to glow. Kat's eyes widened. She wanted to run away, dodge, find some way to get away from whatever the heck was coming for her. She could probably manage to trade the blow for a cut on the vine, but that didn't matter at this point.

Kat just wanted to delay somewhat but she knew Kevin would never let her pull him back. The spear strikes against him didn't help either and she wasn't sure she could safely get her tail around him without getting it cut, and Kat felt sick just thinking about putting her tail in such excess danger. She knew it was part of her demonic flaw, but she didn't much like acknowledging that fact.

Kat grit her teeth, while she was daydreaming the lightshow had settled into a fierce orange with steam coming off the gauntlet. Kat didn't think the heat would be a problem, but what was coming next would be. Kat sucked in a deep breath and pulled out her fans, trying to get ready for what was to come.

With a yell Nell threw her fist forward. Kat was ready to deflect and dodge right up until the gauntlet tripled in size, steam billowing off the gauntlet making it look as though the increase in size had been four or five times instead. Kat realised in that moment she wouldn't be able to dodge. Not with Kevin. Maybe not even without him. Kat threw her fans in front of her, choosing to block with her thumbs barely hanging onto the front and all of her fingers at the back.

Kat tried to loosen herself up as much as she could even as she readied herself for the strike. Kat knew she wasn't strong enough to resist. She wanted to smoke out, but that would mean the vine was left

behind loosing anyway. A small part of her mind told her to do it anyway. Cut the vine, let Thyme teleport her out...

But Kat felt she couldn't do that. She felt like she needed to at least try and take whatever this attack was. It was a good thing she decided to do so, because she also no longer had the chance to do anything else. Nell's armoured fist struck Kat's fans like a freight train. Even with four fingers this time instead of one they snapped like dry kindling, knocking the fans towards her face, one leaving a large gash on its way back past her, the other hitting butt first and bouncing off.

Kat's arms were being forced back, as if in slow motion but Nell's fist kept chugging forward, as if nothing could stop it. She caught up to Kat's arms and Kat felt as they snapped too. Her bones creaking for a moment before giving out as well. Then that fist hit her in the chest. Kat blacked out in that moment.

The impact was simply too jarring. The pain of multiple broken bones in quick succession before the punch took all the wind out from her and sent her flying. The vines holding her and Kevin snapped instantly and they were both teleported away for Thyme to heal. It was all Nell could do, for she collapsed down to her one good knee. Even as her fist smoked and burned. Nell sucked in a deep breath and tried to get up, only to find her face meeting a rock wall, and One and Nell found themselves falling off the edge.

Chapter 722 Figure it out Yourselfs

Kat shot up out of bed, mind still telling her she should be in great pain. Then the fact she was able to sit up without issue seemed to cause a record scratch for a moment as her mind reevaluated what was going on. This was helped by a wave of reassurance that Lily was sending down the link, further calming Kat's mind down from the adrenaline charged battle mindset she'd just been bottled out of. When her mind gave back the all clear, she took the time to actually take in where she was.

Lily was purring on Kat's lap, something Lily knew from research was supposed to be good for calming people down and a few other things besides. She was sending reassurance that Kat was alright while trying to convince herself of that fact.

The room was a quick job on Thyme's part. This was because it clearly showed its leafy origins. The walls looked like bark, and seemed to have been made by expanding part of the tree, pushing the walls out like they'd placed a giant balloon in the centre and kept blowing until the space inside was large enough to fit a bed... and not much else really.

The light on the ceiling looked like a pitcher plant that had been stuffed full of glowing water. It was a soft blue light that shone down on everything, tinting Kat's vision somewhat. There was a Thyme standing at the end, no clothes this time, just looking as Thyme did with their recognisable facial features and a clipboard.

"Urgh... what happened?" asked Kat as she pulled herself into a proper sitting position.

"It should come back to you, if it's even gone in the first place..." said Thyme, "What's the last thing you remember?"

“Getting hit by a steam train,” answered Kat reflexively. Then she paused, as the rest of the memory came together properly and she open and closed her mouth a few times. *How was I able to say that? I wasn’t actually hit by a steam train... it just felt like it... is it because I could only sort of remember? Hmmm...*

.....

“Yes that does sound about right, though the translation was a little funny on that one,” said Thyme.

Kat’s eyes widened. *Is that it? ‘train’ probably doesn’t translate well in a world where magical horse carriages are one of the better modes of transport. So... was that the answer? It translated to be a true statement? Wait... if a demon lies in the forest with nobody to hear them... is it really a lie? Like does it count? I’m pretty sure I can lie in my head... can I lie to myself if I speak aloud? Perhaps something else to test.*

“Yeah... um... so what happened after I got knocked out?” asked Kat.

“Well, Nell and One were taken out pretty quickly, Lily freaked out, your team won the round and now the score is all tied up. In a few moments I’ll be taking you back to everyone who is uninjured. We’ll be deciding what to do next. I’d designed the tasks in such a way that you couldn’t end up with a tie between teams... but that was before we had one drop out. Anyway, we’ll get to that later.

“What I want to cover is your healing. I didn’t actually need to do much despite the extensive damage. Your body was doing that on its own and managed to basically fix you up all by itself. I couldn’t have done it much faster myself so I let it go on and waited for you to wake up. You’ve not even been out a minute yet.

“What I wanted to check though, is if you’re aware of how your body heals? You see, most regenerators do a good job, but their bodies focus on getting things in working order as fast as possible. This tends to leave little bone chips or other issues inside the body. Not a major issue for a regenerator who is constantly keeping themselves healthy, but can build up into one. You however... your body seems to be able to piece itself together and whenever it grows new material, it makes sure to completely remove the old. Were you aware?” Thyme explained carefully, making sure to explain both properly and succinctly without devolving into medical terminology.

“Ah... sort of?” said Kat, “I mean, I know that my body can eject stuff like that. I had a bunch of gravel digging into my body at one point and that all got removed either through my skin before it got healed or coughed up. I guess I just assumed other issues would be dealt with as well... am I likely to ever have health complications because of my regeneration?”

Thyme shook their head, “No, it’s some of the most comprehensive healing I’ve seen in a regenerator. The fact that it isn’t time magic instead is actually a surprise. It seems to try and find an ‘idealised form’ of you as a baseline. So, instead of ‘fixing’ the issue it’s more ‘optimising your body’ if that makes sense?”

It makes a lot actually. It’s probably why Succubus Regeneration doesn’t leave scars. It’s focused on improving my body. I wonder what that means for my hair and nails... I know my hair and nails don’t really grow anymore, but I wonder if I can change that? I also wonder if it’s helping make my muscles better? Nah, that seems a bit too good. I could ask I suppose...

"Is it making my muscles and bones better?" asked Kat.

Thyme shook their head, "No not that I can see. They have improved since the first time I met you, but I suspect it was..." Thyme paused and let the words 'ranking up' almost hang in the air unsaid, "something else all demons go through,"

"Right..." said Kat.

Thyme nodded, "Well, I'll have to take Lily back off you for now," [What?] "because you'll be with the others working out how we go from here."

Sorry Lily thought Kat as she gave Lily a light scratch and a nod towards Thyme. The light engulfed her for a few moments, this time she didn't feel sick, though it was on the edge of acceptability. When the light dimmed Kat found herself in a chair next to Green who was leaning on Gareth, Nixilei came after a wry smile on her face, and finally Kress, and he actually had a smug smirk on his face. Kat decided to let him have his moment.

The rest of the teams were spread out through the room. They were in a moderately sized auditorium with each team having their own raised section off from the rest of the theatre. The thing is though... there wasn't a large section of chairs in the centre, just Thyme on stage. "Everyone is here now... and it's time to talk about where we go from here. 'Wild Ones' and 'Numbers' I am afraid this isn't so much for you as it is for 'Men With Hats' and 'Demona and the Misfits' considering the point score, but I decided you should be included.

"Originally, I was going to have the final round be a game show, you'd all be partnered up, have five minutes to chat, and then given a series of questions. You would be then tasked with trying to get the same answer to the question as your partner. Any questions you missed, would then be thrown over to the other teams where they had a chance to get a point by trying to match up with either answer of the teams that failed.

"This however, won't work. You've all been paired up once already and I don't have a way to retool that particular game into a solo experience in a timely manner. The questions are much too easy for people who are actually teammates and now you know it's the final round... I feel as though the temptation for sabotage, which might have been an interesting temptation before, would now be too much.

"So I'm left with the issue of needing to pick a winner between two teams and no game in mind to find a winner between them. A game that can't really be used or retooled and a desperate need for a winner. The floor is yours,"

Nixilei wasted no time in suggesting, "Why not just call it a draw?"

Thyme shook their head, "Fun idea, but we DO need a team to move onto the next round. Even if I was willing to declare this match a draw, which I'm not then able to pick who should go on to the next round. You'd still need to decide that between the two of you, and it'd be in a less controlled environment. Even if you decide to just fight it out, if you do it as part of the contest I can monitor it properly. Weird rules involving judges not interfering with contestants between matches. Sorry,"

Chapter 723 All In Favour Sneeze

"Is it possible to simply come up with a fresh quiz?" asked Blue, "I mean, it seems like the quiz was supposed to be the last round and even if the rest of us don't participate, a two team quiz show seems like it could be interesting..."

Thyme seemed to consider the option for a few moments, but realistically, Thyme probably spent much longer internally considering the idea, "Hmm... I don't think it would work. All the questions I prepped aren't really built for a quiz show and I'd need to prepare a fresh suite of them. I could cobble it together yes, but..."

"Turns out people are a lot pickier about quiz shows being included in things like this, especially when it comes for performance reviews. I need to balance the difficulty of the questions, ensure that each race has questions they are likely to find easy but still hard enough that other races are unlikely to have the answer.

"You have to avoid stereotypes, have to throw in a few math questions or similar things that are more about computational power. Then there are history questions... it took ages to get approval for them last time. While history is largely agreed on between the races, the kind of obscure trivia you want for a gameshow are less concrete. Even if I personally was around for the event in question it can still be an international incident waiting to happen.

"In fact, I'm not sure if Green remembers," Thyme looked over to spot Green sleeping, "well never mind I won't talk about the riddles. Umm... hmm... no probably shouldn't bring up that quiz either. Blue... the quiz for you really wasn't the same, it was about memorising parts of the maze and remembering details to be brought up later so not really applicable"

Thyme frowned at this, seeing as the examples weren't really the best. "It seems I am lacking in easy examples. That's fine. The point remains, that it's much more complex then you might think to set up a quiz. I can and will do it, they're fun, but I don't really have the time if we want to wrap this up before the end of the day."

"Well what is possible?" asked Irwin, "It hardly makes sense for us to keep suggesting things outside of your capabilities... I was never quite clear on exactly what you CAN do."

Thyme tapped their chin a few times. It would be a normal scene if Thyme hadn't extended their finger into a vine to tap their chin without moving their hands to do it. "Hmm... well... I can construct things in a matter of moments but not design them, so if we had to re-use older sets that's possible. Of course, you know I can heal you up from the brink of death" Thyme paused to whisper, "and a little past it." before continuing, "I've got several islands that have never been properly explored before available for wilderness survival..."

"Hmm... what else... I can teleport you just about anywhere though that takes a little bit of time to set up for long distances only like five or so minutes so that's not a major issue. The permission to use wherever we go is more likely to be a problem. Hmm... I have a large storage warehouse with practically infinite food... probably a few other things. I think I've covered most of the important ones. My combat capabilities and other such things probably won't come up..."

"They could if we were to fight ya," said One, "Might be a challenge to see who can last the longest!"

Thyme frowned heavily, "I have Time Affinity though. I can just... stop time and throw you out of the ring. Nobody here is really strong enough to stop it. Even if I didn't use it, I'm still so much faster that it wouldn't make all that much of a difference. It'd also be very hard to limit myself in strength to your level... because I'm not entirely sure I was ever conscious and as weak as you all. So hard to judge really,"

The room descended into silence again. Nobody on the two 'winning' teams really liked One's idea, but at least it was an idea. "Still, why don't we just fight?" said Kress, "Either a one on one, a serious one on ones, maybe do a last man standing solo match? There are all sorts of fights we could do, and they're simple to set up. Just need a basic arena and some rules."

Irwin took a deep breath and looked over at his teammates. Sandy looked ready to go, not really able to contribute much last round. Fir had similar thoughts though was trying to hide it, and failing in front of Irwin's gaze. Merick wasn't terribly concerned either way... but Kevin. Kevin saw the type of punishment Kat had taken, and still wasn't sure that final hit knocked her out. He'd been burnt pretty badly just from being NEAR Nell's final last ditch effort and was not keen to fight after seeing Kat's strength.

"What do you all think?" asked Irwin in a whisper. Thyme snapped his fingers to set up a sound barrier around the group, blocking those like Kat with excellent hearing.

"I want nothing to do with a fight," said Kevin. "You didn't see Kat fighting. I don't think any one of us could actually beat her in a fight. In a group, I can't imagine it would be much better. She can disrupt us in so many ways..."

Fir slapped him on the back, "Don't be a wuss lad. Sure we'd have to fight the demon chick but if we petition for 'ring out' as a condition that could be a big point in our favour. Don't fight her, just get Irwin to throw her out of the ring. Problem solved. She might be tough but she's a dainty thing."

Irwin nodded but didn't say anything, looking over at the human brothers. Sandy was about to speak when Merick jumped in first, mostly just because he could, "I don't really care one way or the other. We have to fight them in some way. I'd rather it be simple. A contest of strength, a battle, whatever it doesn't really matter."

Sandy glared at his brother and made his opinion known, "I'd like to go for the fight, a smaller ring this time. My sand can shred through any of them I'm sure. We just need another chance to show them whose the boss,"

"I'm telling you guys, we're gonna lose if it comes down to a fight," hissed Kevin.

"You can't even hold onto a spear," laughed Fir, "why should we trust ya to correctly evaluate a threat?"

Irwin slammed his hand on the railing, a loud thump that got everyone's attention before things could escalate. "Stop trying to bait Kevin into accepting when he doesn't want to. Kevin, everyone else seems either interested or ambivalent. If we do accept a martial contest can you keep your head on straight and do well?"

Kevin bit his lip hard, drawing a slight bit of blood as he tried to calm himself down. "I... I can. I know I'm not going to die. It's not fear that prevents me from acting," which was a lie, they could all see it. "but certainty that I couldn't beat her. If we DO decide on a fight or a series of fights or whatever... I'm willing

to put forth my full effort. I just don't want to be fighting Kat. Or Gareth really. Maybe I should just fight the healer..."

"Ay ya pansy, sure we'll let you loose to the healer," snorted Fir.

Irwin glared at the dwarf who just kept his smug grin. Irwin sighed, running a hand over his face. He wondered sometimes, why he put up with the amount of work it took to keep the team together. Then he remembered how much worse the standard adventurer rabble was and promptly threw away that idea. Especially with fools like the ones who used dynamite underground managed to get to this round.

Over back at Kat's area Kress was coming up with more good ideas for once. "I've got it. How about this, we agree to a fight, but each team gets to add one rule. Five rules each, and we announce them one after the other. So say... we start as basic free for all as a baseline. Lose condition everyone is unconscious or temporarily cripple,

"Then say... they add in that... fighters fight one at a time. We fire back with winner stays in the arena or something. They add in... o... I dunno, after five minutes you can add another fighter or something and things keep going like that. It makes it as much about adding in beneficial rules as it is about the fight."

"I hate to agree with Kress... but that actually sounds like a wonderful idea," said Nixilei.

The group looked over at Green, saw she was sleeping, and turned their eyes to Kat, knowing that Gareth would mediate if necessary. It wasn't though, because Kat also liked the idea, "I'm with Kress as well. Sounds good,"

Green let out a light sneeze and everyone froze, as if scared to wake her up. For about half a second. *Wait why am I worried? Green can sleep through Thyme's speech she can sleep through some minor chatter.*

Chapter 724 Nixilei Rules Lawyer at your Service.

There was a few more minutes of discussion before they presented the idea to Thyme, and it was immediately accepted, contingent on the 'Men With Hats' agreeing of course. It took another five minutes for them to signal time they were ready to drop the silencing barrier though. Irwin stood up as the clear spokesperson. "We are willing to engage in a martial contest if a few concessions are met..."

Thyme raised up a hand, halting the speech, to interject their own, "Before that. Your competitors suggested a basic fight, with the twist that each team is able to add five additional rules to the fight. This way you can both try and customise things to your hearts' content. I think it's a good suggestion and not too in favour of one team or the other. Are you willing to agree?"

Irwin smiled at the offer. He couldn't help but be amused by how things had turned out. It wasn't quite what they wanted but it did sound interesting, much more so, then just a basic brawl. "Sure just give me another few moments to confirm..." Thyme nodded and the barrier went up once again.

What followed was mostly just a round of confirmations. Kevin still wasn't terribly happy with the idea, but was more in favour then he was before. Merick had changed from ambivalent to very interested with the newly suggested format. So it didn't take long to confirm they were happy with the idea.

The barrier dropped and Irwin announced, "We accept!"

Thyme nodded and clapped their hands. The two balconies with the 'losing' teams were retracted disappearing into the walls as the stadium started to rumble. Kat and crew were moved slightly to the right, while the other team was moved to the left so that they were now opposite each other. The stadium floor rumbled, swapping to a lacquered flooring before Thyme split in two.

One Thyme had a big hat that looked like an impression of Yggdrasil. It had water flowing out of various holes and a few branches, clouds orbiting the construct after about the midpoint. Various little homes, or at least windows with lights shining from them, and a series of pulleys and levers connected to platforms with figures of little Thyme's on them. This Thyme was actually facing Kat.

.....

On the other hand, the Thyme facing the 'Men With Hats' had turned completely red, a spade tipped tail much like Kat's swung from their back. They had stiletto heels on that seemed to come out of carapace that was covering their legs as if it was boots, even though they looked to very much be part of Thyme. A closer inspection revealed it to be black bark designed to look like chitin, but Kat doubted anyone else could notice, especially with Green asleep.

They had a form fitting blouse on that made it hard to tell if Thyme was going for a male or female body. There was the slightest hint of breasts but that could just as easily be pectoral muscles, and considering the lithe but chiselled arms that Thyme had showing it just confused the matter more. Especially because the chitin legs hid any muscles they might contain, looking completely smooth.

An androgynous voice sung from both Thyme's mouths as they spoke the next words. "For the final, and tiebreaker round, we will have a contest of strength. A match to end all matches. It is a match, designed by YOU my dear competitors.

"The standard rules start off like this. Five vs Five, ring size of 100m diameter. You can't be knocked out of the arena. When you are rendered unconscious that is the end." Thyme threw up their hands, both sets of them, and gestured all around, "But that's just the beginning. I will now present each team the chance to add their own rules. You will be able to add one, rule before swapping to your competitors.

"If you suggest something that isn't one rule but two, I will take the first part of the rule as your answer, and then ask your competitors if they want the second rule or not. If they allow it, it will count as your next turn as well, giving your competitors the chance to add to rules in a row. If they disallow it, it will become a negative rule. A rule that cannot be imposed. So make sure you're all careful with your wording,"

Thyme smiled a sly slightly seductive smile. It looked very weird to Kat and crew considering they were not looking at the demon Thyme. It looked very out of place and the face that seemed designed for calm introspection. Thyme was clearly unphased by the looks and continued, "Each rule can change 1 thing, and it cannot contradict any other rule made by contestants.

"This means you can say, 'First rule, the ground is actually lava'" Thyme started to step up and start floating as the wooden flooring turned into a pool of lava. Kat couldn't feel the heat from it, and neither could anyone else it seemed, though the fact her eyes weren't playing up did imply it was real lava, "or you could say that the arena is only two metres in diameter" the circle shrunk to the aforementioned measurement.

"You can also dictate other things, such as 'No weapons' or, World Tree Forbid, 'No hats'" Thyme grinned at that as if they'd figured out all the secrets to the universe, "of course, with such freedom there was to be some limits. If the floor is lava, it can't also be made of wood. Additionally, you can't make a rule that stops people competing. For example, you can't say 'no demons allowed' or on the other side, 'no men'.

"I think you all get the basic ideas. If you come up with a rule that toes the line we'll work it out as things go, considering this isn't a pre-planned game," Thyme jumped back to the ground as it swapped back to the old flooring and size. "Seeing as 'Men With Hats' took the lead early on they can chose the first rule."

Irwin stood up as the representative. "The fight will be a series of one-on-one matches" he stated calmly. This was to keep Kat contained to just the one fight. That and any other issues. They may have been a good team, but they suspected that, if you excluded Kat, their competitor had quite good synergy. This killed two potential strategies for their team.

Sadly, it wasn't Gareth that stood up it was Nixilei. As soon as they saw her smile, they realised they'd made a mistake somewhere. "Each fighter will remain in the ring until they are defeated," said Nixilei.

Irwin cursed under his breath. Having missed the obvious solution to one-on-one matches. Just let the winner carry on. They didn't say it was 'best of five' or something else smarter. They'd said, 'series of one-on-one matches. Irwin ran his fingers across the banister, tapping heavily as each hit one after the other. He had a rule, the next rule perhaps, that could cause a headache for the enemy team. He just wasn't sure if he wanted to introduce the kind of escalation it would invite.

Irwin glanced at his team, and let out a long heavy breath. He wanted to say it. But he was scared. Somehow, he was sure that Nixilei would be able to come up with something worse. Against his better judgement though, he said "Women are not to use weapons,"

Nixilei raised an eyebrow and glanced at Thyme. Thyme with a hat gave an 'all clear' sign and Nixilei grinned, realising the can of worms that Irwin had just opened up. "Nobody is allowed to use mana,"

The words hit Irwin like a freight train. He would be fine, he knew he would be fine... but nobody else on his team would be. Kevin used mana to help move his spear, and that wasn't even getting started on the teams mages. Irwin realised, he truly had made a mistake opening up that avenue of attack for Nixilei. It was bad enough he genuinely considered forfeiting in that moment.

It was only the fact that Thyme would prevent any permanent injuries that he did not. He knew he'd been outplayed at this point. There was nothing much he could do. He did know enough about demons though to say, "Nobody can use demonic energy"

Thyme frowned at that one though, sending a glance over to Kat. "Um... yeah I can't really stop using it? I mean, I can stop a lot of it, but my regeneration would work regardless of my wishes. I have no way of preventing that,"

Thyme, both of them, turned back to Irwin. "Is that acceptable? Are you willing to keep that as your rule despite most of Kat's abilities being bound for this tournament and her regeneration something that will continue to work even if you put that rule in place?"

Irwin just groaned and tried to remind himself that conceding wasn't the right idea.

Chapter 725 Strawberry Rain

"So there's nothing to be done about the regeneration? Or demonic energy in general?" asked Irwin.

Both Thyme's frowned at the question. "I really shouldn't be answering this question. I'm not here to give you additionally information about your competition. I want it to be noted the only reason I'm allowing this is because Kat's situation is rather unique. It caused some problems in the first round, and now it's causing different problems in the second. The issue, fundamentally, is that I have no way to stop her demonic energy, and she has no way to prevent it from healing her.

"I don't even really have a way to test if she's using demonic energy. It just... isn't mana. I could probably cobble something together, but she emits small amounts of demonic energy just by existing so I'm not sure if they'd be able to tell the difference between active and passive use. The only way it can work is by asking Kat after her match if she used demonic energy or not, and as she cannot lie, we'd know. That's all I'm giving you for this question,"

Irwin tapped his fingers heavily on the railing as he took in that new information. It was annoying, and really not what he wanted to hear but it was very much a case of 'nothing to be done' surrounding the whole issue. Irwin recognised the real mistake was preventing women from using weapons. It probably wasn't even a good idea in theory.

Irwin certainly didn't think it was sexist, if anything, it was the opposite. He believed all three women on the enemy team were capable combatants and took steps to neutralise that. Nixlei just took better steps. So that left them with four rules. One-on-one matches, Winner stays in, no weapons for women, and no magic. Great.

So Irwin was left trying to think of how best to maximise his own effectiveness now. He didn't know if he really wanted to commit to that. He was part of a team and trying to fight everyone all by himself was NOT a good look. He was also a leader though, and it was his job to keep his teammates safe, and to pull out a victory against the odds.

He knew he was the best fighter once magic was out of the question. Kevin wouldn't be bouncing around like a rabbit hopped up on caffeine and the three mages were looking like they weren't going to be much use. Only Fir had any martial training at all really and he was very rusty. In fact, Irwin would almost put money on that being a liability. The master swordsman fears not the average journeyman but the complete novice and whatnot.

Irwin's thoughts suddenly froze. The gears in his head had turned and turned onto a brilliantly crazy idea. "Each round allows the contestants to ignore one rule," said Irwin.

Thyme's eyes went wide as they processed the question. "Interesting... very interesting... but... I don't know if I can allow it. What if one of the contestants decided the rule to ignore was the one you just proposed? That would mean no rules were ignored. It gets messy in other ways, but I think I'm going to have to veto this one,"

"Can... can I make it so that all demons have to fight with a hand tied behind their back?" said Irwin jokingly in desperation.

The fact Thyme nodded and said, "Yup sounds good," was not part of his plans at all. Irwin's large mouth dropped down as low as it could go. Kat could hear the jaw bones bottoming out. *Well. That's a thing apparently. I'm not all that annoyed. Little weird, but not the worst thing ever.*

Nixilei raised an eyebrow at Thyme, "I'm surprised you let that pass,"

Thyme shrugged, "Gotta be honest, I feel a little bad for the guy. You were pretty brutal you know,"

"I could add in the rule that everyone not required to bind another limb has to fight with their legs tied together you know," said Nixilei, deadly serious tone in her voice.

"Please stop Nixilei, he's already dead," said Thyme gesturing and Irwin who looked very much like he was trying to avoid just giving up. Nixilei's eyes met Irwin, and she saw the odd mix of determination and resignation.

"Hmm... I can see where you are coming from... but isn't making good rules for your team the whole point? If I was really rude I could have limited it to beastkin considering we have none, or said that everyone has to fight without their feet touching the ground," said Nixilei with a grin.

Irwin decided he was very outclassed in that moment. The 'horror' Nixilei was putting forward was overwhelming. In an attempt to pre-empt anything worse he said, "How about we all agree to start with our legs bound with vines but we're allowed to break out of it?"

Nixilei raised an eyebrow and turned to Gareth who gave her a look of 'what you're the schemer don't look at me'. Nixilei sighed and voiced the question instead seeing Gareth try and avoid it. "Gareth, as you know, these Tournament matches are public record. Do you want us to be gracious with the rules, or go for full annihilation?"

Gareth sighed, he didn't want to make this choice. It would have been easier to leave Nixilei off the leash, but... he also felt Nixilei had demonstrated that they really could have won just using the rules part of the fight. "Let's... remain gracious,"

Nixilei nodded at Thyme, "Ok then... that's an acceptance for those without any limbs bound to start the fight with their legs tied together with vines. To make things fair, it will be possible to break them using just strength but it will take some time," explained Thyme.

"Can I take a six metre diameter fighting space?" asked Irwin looking at Nixilei, somewhat for permission instead of Thyme. It was clear who was really running the show this round. When he received a set of nods from both of them, Irwin relaxed somewhat.

Nixilei now had a bit of a challenge. She had to think of a rule that wasn't completely crippling for anyone on the enemy team. She had to discard a lot of 'hard' work to find something more acceptable. She flicked her mind through the options before realising there was one that would work quite well. "You can now lose by being removed from the arena,"

Irwin looked like Christmas had come early when Thyme jotted down the rule on a piece of paper they'd summoned from nowhere. Thyme used an oversized quill to do it in their Yggdrasil hat side and used their tail dipped in ink, suspicious red ink, for their 'demon' side. "The final rules lady and gentlemen?"

Irwin wanted to ask 'where is the lady' but decided that was tempting fate a bit too much. Irwin thought about his next rule. He knew what he wanted. It wasn't terribly unfair one way or the other, at least he didn't think so. It was a nice rule that did give him an advantage but not one he thought Nixilei would be terribly offended by. "I'd like my final rule to be that it is raining inside the arena"

Thyme jotted the rule down and looked to Nixilei. Part of her, that slightly sadistic part, wanted her next and final rule to be 'the rain is at 100 °C' or 'the rain is lava' or something else equally restrictive that made it only safe for Kat to fight. The lava would probably be rejected by Nixilei knew if she offered that first and then walked back to scalding rain she'd have a better chance of being accepted.

Nixilei was also aware that it was very much too far. At least under the rules Gareth set. Irwin wouldn't be able to do anything about it, but now that Gareth had made it clear she wasn't to completely terrorise them they had their word on the line and she'd hate to be called a liar or worse, unable to uphold their end of the bargain.

The other idea the sadistic part of her had for keeping things to 'fair'... somewhat at least, wanted her to suggest that everyone fight blindfolded. Nixilei had experience with that, it was good training for fighting at night and in caves. Green did as well... though she wasn't great with it. Gareth would be fine with his heavy armour, and maybe shield? It depended on how that counted weapon wise. Kress wouldn't have a good time, but she really didn't care about that. Kat... Kat would probably be fine?

Nixilei just wasn't sure if that counted as crossing the line or not. After about a minute of thinking, Nixilei found she didn't really have any rules that both mattered and didn't cross the line in some way. So she asked, "Hey Irwin do you dislike strawberries?"

"Um what?" asked Irwin confused. Nixilei repeated the question of course, and his response was... "I mean... I guess? I don't dislike them? Why?"

"Well for my last rule I want the rain to taste like strawberries," said Nixilei.

Chapter 726 Completely Brutal

With the final rule, strawberry flavoured rain, things got ready. Perhaps, had things turned out differently, it would have been less of a slaughter. In truth, it could be argued that it wasn't so bad... but only the first three matches.

The first match was Kress against Irwin. Irwin had guessed Kat would simply go in to clean everything up and he was hoping to take her out. Kress however, insisted on having a good fight first. It didn't really matter. Kress was good, especially for his age group. Being at this stage in the tournament already elevated him over many of his peers, something that shouldn't be forgotten.

The issue however... was that Irwin was the bulwark for his team. He was the physical powerhouse with greater muscles, more dedicated training, and a height and weight advantage that made a big difference in the small arena. Kress didn't really get any good hits in, at least nothing that pierced Irwin's armour anyway. They managed to remove the bindings in about the same amount of time. Kress slashing it, and Irwin simply ripping them apart with pure muscle.

Irwin then quickly traded a few scratches on his armour for a decisive blow straight to Kress stomach followed up by a hammer strike, two hands threaded together into a large fist, slamming right down on

the back of Kress' unarmoured head. The rain hadn't really mattered at all. It was enough to knock him out, and Thyme called the match there. Irwin of course chose to stay in.

Kat was ready to go, but Nixilei asked for her own chance. She handed her dagger off and said, "I doubt I'll win, the chances are rather low. I would like to make the attempt though. It is a great chance to test my hand to hand combat skills against a brutal opponent without the risk of death,"

Gareth wasn't going to deny her the chance, Kat was willing to let Nixilei try, Kress wasn't back from the healing and Green, the only person who would have objected was asleep. When Nixilei entered the ring things moved quickly. Irwin had the bindings reapplied to him, but it was a simply matter to break them again. Nixilei took a different approach, abusing her flexibility to drop to the ground and roll the vines off her feet.

She jumped back up just as Irwin was regaining his posture. She jumped in, abusing her superior speed and martial training to make accurate strikes in the areas she thought she'd find his pressure points. Nixilei went for every single weak point she could short of the eyes as they were well protected and had an extra set of eyelids anyway. The armour Irwin wore covered a great deal but Nixilei was a rather cunning opponent.

So of course, when Irwin stopped moving halfway through, some people were impressed by Nixilei's prowess. Irwin was not one of those people and Kat could sadly tell why. Once Nixilei had exhausted herself Irwin took one easy step forward. "Fuck," was all Nixilei could say before Irwin grabbed her by the neck of her robes and hurled her out of the arena. That was actually a scarier situation for Irwin then others might have thought though. Once again. The rain, and it's strawberry flavouring didn't matter one bit.

He didn't want to brutally take her out. Nixilei was clearly exhausted after her assault and in no shape to properly fight. Taking her out in a way that made him look bad would be undermining a lot of his good work. It wasn't like Kress in the heat of the moment, so that was out. He didn't want to just barely knock her out either. Nixilei was too fast for him to stop, and it was only her lacking knowledge of his body that prevented her from actually doing damage. Well, that and the toughness of his skin.

So, Irwin settled for tossing her out of the ring. It was a good compromise. Irwin wasn't breathing heavily, but he did know that he was going to be rather bruised after that round. Disabled he was certainly not... but Nixilei could still hit quite hard and he was in a bit of pain. He almost wanted to just yell out to Kat and challenge her now but he held his tongue. He had the odd feeling that if he woke Green, Kat would be extra brutal.

"Do you want to go in?" asked Kat.

Gareth shook his head and whispered back knowing Kat would hear despite being a few chairs away. "No. I don't really feel the need to show of my fighting skill like the others. I get why Nixilei did it... but fighting Irwin wouldn't really be a unique challenge for me. I have to deal with plenty of larger monsters as the tank. Keeping them under wraps either while the rest of the group deals with it, or with the other enemies. I could fight Irwin... but I think we both know what fight everyone really wants to see,"

*Can't say I'm all that surprised. I guess I'll go fight Irwin. I... I don't know how this will go. I'll probably be best using my sharp nails to try and cut him because jabs didn't do much and I doubt punches will. I

can take a hit but I can't let Irwin throw me out of the ring in a moment of carelessness. I can probably take whatever he throws at me though so if I need to cling to him and take the hits I can.*

Kat was calm as she stepped into the ring and felt her right hand being bound to her back. It was with some kind of sticky good. It allowed for a bit of movement, and her hand was positioned under her wings so that those were still accessible. Perhaps overly generous, but not something she would complain about.

Irwin stared across the mat at her and prepared for her attack. The signal sounded and Kat was off. Irwin had to bend down to break the bonds, and Kat was more than ready for that. She pushed herself, full speed ahead, bracelet tax be damned. She was beside Irwin in moments and shoved her sharp nails straight into his eye.

Irwin didn't see it coming, and only managed to reflexively shut his eyelids. It didn't really help and her hand managed to dig deep into the eye. Growling in pain Irwin tried to backhand Kat but she was able to jump over that and slam a kick into his back forcing him forward. With his legs still bound and his whole world in pain, Irwin didn't have a chance to avoid it.

There was a loud crash as Irwin hit the ground. Kat didn't want to give him the chance to recover, as brutal as this beatdown was. She tried to go for the other eye, but Irwin was now keeping a proper eye on her. Irwin rolled and made it so his good eye was facing up at her. His legs were in close, and his right hand was on the ground ready to move if necessary. His left was held warily over his body while his legs were in close.

Kat made another jab for him but Irwin nearly managed to grab her arm. Only yanking it off course at the last moment prevented him from grabbing on and Kat was certain he could break her rest with grip strength alone. *Dammit. I wanted him out already. He's down but very much not out. I can tell his watching me, waiting. Ready for just about anything I can throw at him. I wanted to get this done without having to just beat him up... but I think I'm left with no choice.*

Unless... Kat glanced at the soaking wet floorboards. "Thyme... if I pried up one of these floorboards and use it to beat Irwin like a drum... would they count as weapons?"

Irwin's single eye widened. He tried to use the distraction as a chance to cut his bindings but Kat raised a foot threatening, preparing to kick him in the head while she glanced back over at Thyme. Irwin got the message. While this was happening Thyme looked at Irwin and made the decision. Perhaps not an entirely fair one... but Kat didn't need it. "I'm going to say that counts as a weapon."

"Well I tried," said Kat with a shrug. After that, it was a rather brutal beatdown. Even though Irwin was able to block her attacks, Kat kept wailing away. He tried to dodge a tail strike during it but that just moved him into one of Kat's kicks. Eventually, Irwin was kicked off the edge.

Kat then went on to soundly trounce the rest of the team. There wasn't anything they could do. She just threw them out of the arena with that one hand tied behind her back. It was no issue. Irwin was the last bulwark against victory and he was taken down.

Chapter 727 Goodies!

Thyme had completely restructured the room now that Tournament was wrapping up. Kat's team were sitting at the back of the stage and all three other teams had their balconies back, looking down at the wooden stage. Thyme stood in the front with a Tophat, golden teeth, and a dress. The beard really threw out the look. The outfit actually looked good otherwise, it matched Thyme's thin build, emphasising the curves they'd given themselves. Long green hair cascading out from a large blue Tophat and matching blue dress.

Then Thyme just added in a massive white beard that would make Gandalf jealous. It was also an obviously fake beard. Kat could SEE THE STRINGS that held it on Thyme's face. Kat didn't understand. Everything else melded together really well. Why did Thyme feel the need to throw a wrench into things? The answer was 'why not' or 'because it's funny' of course, but Kat was too busy try to understand the mind of an insane person.

Lily was curled up on her lap and having similar thoughts. They were sharing their observations back and forth across the bond and neither of them were any closer to simply accepting that this was just how Thyme was.

"Welcome, to the best and final part of any tournament... the AWARDS CEREMONY" Thyme's voice boomed out with a particularly feminine lilt to it. It didn't help answer the question of the beard at all. "For the second round, I'll be offering everyone a prize up to a certain value. They can ask for anything, though money is of course always on the table. Who wants to go first?" *novelNext.com*

Thyme turned around to look at the five winners. Green was asleep, Lily was purring, Kress looked ready to jump out of his seat, Gareth was thinking it over, and Nixlei... well Kat couldn't tell what she was thinking. She either knew exactly what she wanted but was waiting patiently, or was disguising the fact she had no plans for this.

"Kress, you can go first!" said Thyme, not mean enough to pick on Kress specifically two rounds in a row. After the quiz fiasco with Kress, it would have felt like bullying.

"I'd like a new set of armour please," said Kress in the most polite way Kat had ever seen from the young man. He'd asked, politely, like a normal human being. Something that seemed to be a rather high bar for Kress.

.....

Thyme frowned at the question though, and it wasn't until they started speaking Kat understood why. "Ok, that's fine, but what kind of armour? Do you want it to protect against stabbing? Slashing? Blunt force trauma? Do you want it to be enchanted? If so..., what do you want the enchantments to do? Do you want it leather like you current attire or would you prefer something sturdier? Chainmail? Plate? Maybe lighter and go for an expensive cloth? You've not really given me much to work with Kress,"

Kress' mouth made an 'O' shape. Kat thought it wasn't terribly surprising. You couldn't just get better things, you needed to make trade-offs. *I wonder if he actually had a picture in his head? Or if he was just hoping for some nebulous idea of better armour without a proper plan. Neither would surprise me. I feel like Kress should know better... but this is a big moment so maybe he got excited and forgot?*

"Um... leather please, around the same weight I currently have or just slightly heavier... um... probably just all around decent armour? I don't think mine is set up to counter anything specific really. If you can

enchant it... just a basic sturdiness or repair maybe, if you could fit that on without burning out the material?" Offered Kress after a bit of thought.

Thyme nodded, "Ok, I can offer you your choice of self-repair moonbull leather armour. It's not much sturdier than your current set but the self-repair is obviously a big step up. I don't know I'd recommend it because it really isn't that much stronger otherwise. Still, it is an option and if you find yourself needing to patch up your armour regularly in the field, it's likely the better option.

"On the other hand, I have some hellbat, no actually demonic relation, leather armour. It's a good deal sturdier especially with a durability enchantment laid into it. It'll take a good beating against most things but blunt force will travel through it a bit easier than your current set. It just isn't good for it. Additionally, this kind of leather, while not particularly precious, is quite rare still because you live in the wrong area of the world for it. That might make repairs expensive,"

Kress thought the question over for a good few minutes and still didn't have an answer. Thyme said, "We can let Kress think about it. Who wants to go next? Gareth perhaps?"

Gareth gave a glance over to Nixilei and Kat who gave him maxing shrugs. Neither were in any rush. Seeing this Gareth huffed a bit but looked to Thyme again. "Hmm... would an expanded bag be within the budget?"

"Certainly. Would you like to have it in a larger but more fragile backpack shape? A smaller ring based pocket dimension that is rather sturdy, or a purse. Sort of a medium option. You'll receive whatever has the largest size in the category you're interested in," explained Thyme.

"How big is the ring? It sounds like a good idea for emergency supplies and what not," asked Gareth.

"Um... hang on..." Thyme mumbled before summoning a small chest. It was about knee height for Kat, 50cm wide and 150cm long. "About this size? It can shift its dimensions around to fit things better, but it could hold this chest and no more. To keep items organised it makes little barriers around each item separate. If you did that though it loses a little bit from the max size. Not permanently of course. Just... hmm... ok. Say you want to put in 100 marbles. You could stick a sack filled with them in no problem, but if you put them in one by one you might only get 95 in."

Gareth nodded and said, "Ok I'll take the ring," Thyme nodded and threw a small ring over to Gareth. It was a plain band that looked to be silver, though considering the magic involved was certainly just a coating. Gareth caught the ring with ease and lobbed it over to Nixilei just as fast. Nixilei raised an eyebrow but didn't give any further comment, simply slipping the ring onto her finger and grinning when it resized itself to fit perfectly.

"Well I guess Nixilei is next? Excellent excellent, what shall our brutal rule setter be seeking?" asked Thyme.

"I'd like a new dagger. Sharpest you have. I don't care if it's sharp from enchantments or the material. Repair is appreciated but sharpness takes priority. Weight limit is up to twice my current dagger but extra weight is not desired, simply tolerated," explained Nixilei succinctly.

Thyme didn't even ask for confirmation, he simply threw a dagger at Nixilei (in the sheath of course) without any additional fanfare. "Now... seeing as Green is still asleep, I'll ask Kat. What would you like?"

I'm getting a spellbook for you.

[Kat! I didn't do anything at all. I just slept for most of it and watched your fights like a TV show.]

Lily. I don't really need anything, and if I did, which I don't, I'd still prioritise this. Not only do I want to get a cool gift for my adorable girlfriend, this will make you a lot stronger. We don't have a way to get you a teacher and this seems like a good stopgap.

[Fine. Let it be known though that you will be subjected to cuddles and a LOT of kissing... with tongue. As soon as I get my human... or well... humanoid body back I will be holding nothing back!]

Good. Lily was trying to make it sound like a chore for Kat, an overstepping of Lily's boundaries. It really wasn't and Kat had no complaints. She resolved to do this more often. "I'd like a Paper Affinity Spellbook if you have one," requested Kat.

Thyme nodded and pulled out a small tome, looking no larger than a 200 page novel. "This is the only one I have. It is larger on the inside than it looks. It goes all the way up to 5th circle but can only be read by Paper mages," said Thyme handing the book off instead of just throwing it.

[Wait... can you ask why this is allowed? 5th circle... that's a LOT Kat.]

Kat repeated the question and Thyme gave a shrug. "Well... yes and no. See, 5th circle books are normally quite rare and valued, especially for common or powerful affinities. The thing is though, we've only had one Paper mage to reach 5th circle in our entire history. They're just so rare for us. Despite that, as a Paper mage... making paper isn't exactly an issue.

"So they produced millions of copies of that book you now hold. As I said, it can only be read by Paper mages and they aren't rare at all. I was actually given 200 copies personally before they left on a journey. Nobody knows if they're still alive or not. Age won't have gotten them... but the world can be dangerous and they weren't really a fighter. Mostly a spell researcher. Take good care of that."

Chapter 728 Tournament 2 Over!

Thyme spared a glance at Green and noticed the fae girl was still asleep decided to return their gaze to Kress. Sensing the eye contact Kress looked up and sighed. "It's a bit of a tough call... but I have to go for the bat leather. I don't exactly set out to take hits and if I'm getting hit, it's probably not my intention. I'll need what armour I can get and if it saves my life a time or two... well... I'll just have to work out how to repair it,"

Thyme nodded and pulled a bag out from behind themselves, and threw it towards Kress. Kress caught it and let the weight carry the bag down to the ground. Kress wasn't exactly confident to take the full weight of a set of armour, but putting it down gently was certainly possible. "What about Green?" asked Thyme, "Shall you wake your companion or are you willing to take responsibility for asking a request on her behalf?"

Gareth nodded, "Yes, I suppose I can. I doubt she will complain considering it means I don't have to wake her up. I know what she was after anyway. Green was looking for some kind of enchanted headpiece that would protect her without obstructed her vision at all. Perhaps enhance her vision a bit as well, but that's a secondary concern,"

Thyme nodded and said, "Yeah both of those together would be out of your price range... but I have two different items I can offer that might interest you. The first is a helm enchanted to be invisible and resizing. You have to be a bit careful because it doesn't have a faceplate at all. It's basically a metal bucket for your head. It's able to stay invisible basically forever because of the material, but it shouldn't be forgotten that it is still a helmet. One that might make breathing or seeing a little difficult if not worn properly or while bleeding. Remember, no faceplate so blood from head wounds just gets stuck inside. If the helmet gets covered inside or out they won't be able to see at all.

"Now as for the second item, it's a circlet enchanted to activate automatically to prevent blows to the head. The issue is that it only works once every 24 hours or so. No storing charge in advance. It's designed to block 1 attack and only one. It'll deal with most things up to around 4th circle, and maybe some 5th circle spells depending, but it'll trigger for anything that can cause injury. If I threw a rock hard enough to break skin it'd trigger just as surely as an arrow enhanced with wing magic,"

Gareth paused at that. "Hmm... yeah I might actually have to wake Green up for that... I don't actually know what she'd prefer," Gareth let out a long sigh, shaking Green's body to wake her up. When her eyes finally cracked open she gave a big yawn, a plague that spread to a few of the watchers and Lily.

"Yes? What's up?" asked Green.

.....

"I couldn't decide between two helmet options for you, so I had to wake you up," explained Gareth.

Green nodded and rubbed her eyes a few times before letting out another yawn and turning to Thyme. "So what are the options Thyme?" asked Green. Of course, Thyme quickly repeated the explanation for Green. "Hmm... so I can either have a good helmet I can see out of most of the time, or a great defence that only works once a day. I think I'll go for the circlet,"

"Really?" asked Nixilei, "Taking an item with only one charge to a fight seems a little risky,"

"Well Nix, it's not like I have a helmet at all right now. I also don't think I've been hit in the head except a few times in training. It's a big weakness, but not one I've had exploited against me all that often. I want it for that one lucky shot you know? It just feels like the better option. The invisible helmet seems likely to cause a few issues... and what if I dropped it or something? I'd never find the thing again!" said Green cheerily.

Nixilei grimaced realising that was probably the real reason. Nixilei knew that if Green really had gone for the helmet, it would've been lost before the end of the week if she didn't help Green with it, and likely a month of keeping track of it would be her limit as well before Green left it somewhere and Nixilei wasn't around to notice.

"Well," said Thyme with a clap to grab everyone's attention. "That's everything dealt with. The winners have triumphed over their competition, the prizes have been handed out. Unless anyone would like to take this as a chance to say something, we can all head home for now!"

Irwin stood up, taking the chance to say, "Nixilei, thank you for going on easy on us in regards to rules. You are one scary woman and I'm glad I didn't need to fight you while you still had access to a dagger."

Blue glanced at the rest of her team and took the chance as well, “Well... Irwin was a bit... well never mind. I want to say that thing was actually really cool. I liked working with all the different teams, for each and every event. It was weird working with people who weren’t the teammates I know and love, but working together with new people is not an experience I’ll soon forget. It makes me think adventurers should occasionally mix around their team compositions. Not for serious high level jobs of course, but to keep things fresh.

“Kat, it was great working with you. I wasn’t ever scared while you protected me and I feel a lot more comfortable with the recent unbanning of demonic summoning. You took good care of me and I’ll not forget that. I don’t really have anything to say about a single person in Irwin’s team, but it was an interesting game. As for the numbers... sorry I used all my mana up so quickly. Looking back on it... might not have been the best plan, but I got one enemy team out, which is probably the best I could hope for so I’m not too mad at myself,”

After Blue’s speech everyone looked over to ‘The Numbers’ expecting them to say something. After an awkward thirty seconds of staring though, nothing had been said. It took a full minute but One eventually stood forward, only to say, “What? We’ve got nothing to say. Let us go so we can have a good drink,”

Thyme seemed to be expecting this answer, but everyone else had their jaws drop, even Fir the other dwarf in this round of the tournament was surprised. Thyme sent them off with a wave and their balcony disappeared alongside them. Irwin raised an eyebrow and gave a nod to Thyme. A moment later they’d disappeared as well.

Nell glanced at her team. “Well, I guess if everyone else is heading out we might as well. It was nice seeing you. Shame we lost, but hey, we might be able to make our way back in through the loser’s bracket or something,”

Wait we have a loser bracket? Thyme just waved another hand and the last team, and Kat voiced her question. “Do... do we have a loser’s bracket? That... that seems like an odd thing to have for a tournament like this...”

Thyme gave a ‘so-so’ gesture. “We offer a difficult task for all the eliminated teams to complete. It’s announced after the semi-final match happens. There’s two spots for those who’ve been eliminated. It might be... which team can climb this mountain the fastest, or who can survive the longest in a desert. I can’t say what it will be this year, as it’s possible for you all to end up in it still.

“Not everybody bothers though. The loser’s tasks tend to be somewhat deadly. We also don’t keep a judge on standby like myself. It’s mostly automatic. This means that if they get injured or, in an extreme case, die, there’s nothing to be done about it. Sometimes the judge will be in the area at the time and help, but not always. Most of it is just recorded with special spells from a distance, whatever the task may be.

“The loser’s challenge is only for people who are desperate or confident. The normal tournament, while still brutal, always has a judge on hand and regularly has a healer on hand as well. You could have your head chopped off with me nearby and still recover. It makes things dangerous, but not deadly, painful, but not crippling, at least not in any permanent manner. The tournament is to strengthen bonds and test adventurers. The prizes are just incentives to do well for the most part...

“But of course, for some it’s more than that. And when the chips are down... well we like to give those people a chance too,”

Chapter 729 After Action Tournament Review

After Thyme’s explanation on the losers challenge there was nothing else for the gang, and they were teleported back to the clearing they’d been taken from. Gareth took out the enchanted carriage, placing it on the road. Kat hopped onto the top, Lily in tow, but Gareth spoke up and said “I’d like everyone inside so we can have a bit of a chat about how the tournament went down,”

“As much as I might like that,” said Kat as she flexed her wings, “The carriage isn’t exactly ideal for someone with wings like myself. I mean, we can squeeze in if we want to, but I just don’t think it’ll work,”

“I suppose you’re right Kat. Just choose one of the nearby trees and we can gather around it. I’ll just pack the carriage up again and we can head over,” said Gareth. Kat nodded and headed over to the edge of the clearing, followed by the others. Well, Gareth was still carrying Green, but everyone else headed for the marked area.

Once Gareth had the carriage shrunk, he headed over as well, leaning Green up against the tree and taking a seat on the nearby grass. Nixilei and Kress had grabbed other nearby trees while Kat was just sitting down cross-legged with Lily sitting in the gap. “So, I suppose the first question is, was everybody happy with their performance in a general sense,” asked Gareth.

“I’m a little annoyed I couldn’t take Irwin. I didn’t manage to do anything against the guy... he just... I feel rather outclassed. He shouldn’t be that much better but he was and I messed up in that fight. I’m still process my annoyance over that... but... I think we did well. I didn’t get to do much against the fire, but I didn’t sign up to be a firefighter, I’m an adventurer,” said Kress.

“I have similar feelings I suppose,” said Nixilei, “The fire stage was mostly hit and miss. I think we as a team did rather well, but I didn’t really get to contribute much. Any fool with half a brain can give basic orders as long as they avoid panicking. I’m also a bit annoyed none of the pressure points I know work on Irwin. It seems I’ve been lax in studying other races. I’ve specialised too heavily into Fae and Human networks.

“I’m not a martial artist, so perhaps that looked forgivable to you all, but that’s not why it’s a problem. I should still know where they are for my healing. To have such a large oversight in my toolkit is making me wonder what other obvious things have I missed. Pressure points for dwarves almost surely, and dryads... well I don’t know if they count.

.....

“I’m a little annoyed I couldn’t come up with a way to prove myself as real in the duplicate round. I suppose the issue was that Thyme was also accounting for my intelligence and not just the looks but I’m not sure that’s really an excuse. I should have had some creative way to prove it like Kat, even if her way was a rather unique. The mansion was fine. I didn’t feel lacking there, and it seemed as much a matter of luck as anything else. The group fight was... fine. I didn’t really need to or get the chance to heal, it was over much too fast,”

Gareth nodded and took the chance to speak next, "I'm a little annoyed with how I handled the clone round. I think I could have done better. I'm also pretty sure I could have done better combating the fire. The mansion... well... that was annoying and I don't think I performed all that well with my partner. We got stuck on the chessboard for quite some time and then had to open doors for at least an hour trying to find the bedrooms,"

Kat continued to give Lily scritchies, distracting the Memphis from the magical book she'd stuck into her sash. Lily would want to dive into its contents but Kat was equally sure it was best to go home first. Less mana in the air. Less chance of doing something nobody wanted it. "I guess that makes me next. Hmm... I don't really have the experience with these things... I'd say I'm disappointed with my performance during the fire round. I didn't tackle the houses all that fast or well and I had a particularly obstinate family that ate up a bunch of time talking to. In the mansion... no I'll do that last.

"In the clone one I think I did really well. My unique blood was clearly something Thyme didn't account for. Not sure about my regeneration other me didn't really get a chance to prove things one way or the other. The fighting was... alright? I mean... I learnt I can't just brute force things so much, and that I can be overpowered...

"But I had that stupid bracelet on..." Kat glanced at her wrist to double check and confirmed it had been removed. When exactly that was, Kat was unsure, her current guess was during the teleportation, "and that was limiting me a fair bit. Speed was always my go to just as much as strength. With my speed suppressed punching things looked like a better idea, especially while I had someone else tied to me. Ugh, working with Kevin ended up being such a pain.

"The final fight... well I think I did good. Maybe not perfect, but good enough. The mansion... hooo boy. I don't know how similar it was to your experience but first off, I didn't get taken out by the sleeping drugs, then I had to fight ninja butlers, until I got chocked out. Then I woke up, not bound in rope like Blue but bound in metal wire instead. So... got Blue free, or well she got herself free mostly. Used my nails as a file and then chopped my hands off because I was tied up a lot more... *ηοVελNext.cOm*

"Then we managed to travel the dungeons for a bit until we found this weird screaming monster that could leap out of shadows and seemed hell-bent on trying to bit chunks out of the closest person to it. I took quite a few hits but that was because I didn't want to risk Blue. In the end though, it's scream got us good... so we had to find the nurses office before finally finding a room. It was a bit hectic, but we did it."

The rest of the group gaped open mouthed at Kat. "You... you ah..." Gareth struggled to find the words to properly explain just how different Kat's mansion adventure was from his, and based on the looks on Nixilei's and Kress' faces they were in the same position.

In the end, he couldn't say anything before Nixilei spoke up, "Was the chess match really that bad? It seems your experience was much deadlier than mine. I mostly snuck around and sure the chess set came alive but I just played well enough that it wasn't an issue. I don't even know what happened if you failed... Gareth, Kress?"

"I didn't get stuck on the chess set," said Kress a little smugly, though more subdued than the normal smug because it was Gareth. He still couldn't help himself completely though.

"No... I mean... well... if you failed the chess set beat you up for a while and then tossed you back to the side of the room you came from. It wasn't... ideal but not the worse thing ever. Mostly just bruises and stuff you know?" said Gareth.

Nixilei gave a 'see what I mean' look towards Kat who just shrugged, "Look it wasn't ideal in the end but I'm not all that confident in my chess playing, that's more Sylvie's shtick. Blue and I agreed it was probably best we found a way around it. We managed it, and even got a map for our troubles,"

"Wait you got a map?!" shouted Kress. Green stirred slightly at the shout, but just rolled over before nodding off completely again. Kat nodded in answer to Kress' question, "What was it like?"

"I mean... it seems cool to hear about but the map kept switching things up, changing all the time. There were a few patterns but it wasn't as useful as it sounds," said Kat.

"Oh" said Kress disappointed, shoulders dropping upon hearing that. Kat quirked an eyebrow at the reaction. She'd assumed Kress would be happy to find out the map didn't give her that much of a leg up. Disappointment wasn't really on the list of plausible reactions.

"Kat," said Gareth slowly, "I think I speak for the rest of the team when I say... despite the map not being all that important... you seem to have the weirdest luck sometimes,"

Kat shrugged. *Not as lucky as the test of how long you could hold that forever changing metal object last time around. The fact I could just casually hold it after the temperature increased was probably the luckiest I've been in quite a while. If we don't count Lily of course.*

Chapter 730 I feel Like We Did this Before?

After that the discussion continued but Kat didn't really participate all that much. They went into the details but Kat couldn't see them as anything other than excessive. Thyme's challenges were unique by design and trying to plan for the likely non-existent next time didn't really seem worth it. Especially when it was likely they'd all be stronger in the unlikely event it did actually come around again.

Lily made a few attempts to get at the paper book but it was easy to fend her off... physically at least. The mental pleadings were harder to ignore but Kat just sent back retaliatory feelings of love and affection, something Lily had no defence against either. In the end, Lily decided to pretend to sulk. The feelings of joy and love that continued to radiate across the link were 'clearly' false, Lily was pouting, and wasn't happy with Kat at all.

Of course, pretending to sulk didn't last long either because the Memphis kitten was rather tired. Lily ended up falling asleep long before the discussion was over. It meant Kat could start messing around with her demonic fire. She'd been rather... confined with that bracelet on. Her energy hadn't been used properly and she was very willing to rectify that. So Kat was messing with two rotating plumes of fire keeping them spinning around her hand while Green napped and the others discussed tactics.

Finally that was over and Gareth called for everyone to hop back on the carriage. *Hmm... should I just head off now? No... I'll wait till it's time for everyone to go to sleep. I feel like leaving in the middle of the day would be... weird maybe?.* In the end, Kat hopped on top of the carriage roof again, Lily nestled carefully against her stomach with her tail curled around herself and Lily. Nixilei once again joined Kat on the roof before it began moving.

Nixilei sat across from Kat with a soft smile, seemingly waiting for a question or conversation topic. Kat decided it was only polite to give it to the fae. "So... why go for such a sharp knife?" asked Kat.

"Despite the question you're asking, there are actually quite a few reasons not to get a knife as sharp as the one I received," said Nixilei easily, "though to answer the question you actually asked... a knife has always been a holdout weapon for me. I'm trained in them, but in ideal circumstances I shouldn't be using a knife at all. Martial arts is similar, but it's good for humanoid opponents and dealing with brawls. I don't want to be that stereotypical weakling mage.

"If someone tries to punch me in the face, I want to be able to dodge and slam my fist into their nose. Martial arts also helps with my spy work. Teaches you how to move properly. Never mind I'm letting myself get side tracked. What I'm saying is, is that once my knife comes out something has probably gone wrong. I'm still going to keep my current knife for things I don't necessarily want to kill... but for most situations my new, much sharper knife, will be perfect.

.....

"It's for cutting things. The blade is sharp and the enchantments are layered piercing and slicing enchantments to help cut through tougher materials and not catch on anything. This knew knife... it is for killing things Kat. It's a good holdout weapon and easy to conceal and it's for stabbing things I'm not wanting to deal with,"

"Right..." said Kat carefully. *It really does drive home that she's a spy. As much as she is an adventurer. Her friends aren't. They fight monsters and whatever else they would normally do on a quest. Nixilei though... this almost feels like her hobby. Spending time with Green, playing at the group healer. She's a deadly individual. So I guess the knife makes more sense then anything else.*

"Want to ask my about my reward?" offered Kat somewhat jokingly. *NovelNExt.com*

"I don't think anyone would even need to ask to know how that one came about," said Nixilei with a grin, "you'd do anything for the little kitten and she's a paper mage. I know you well enough to see you don't really need things, and want even less,"

"Yeah..." said Kat, "Growing up in an orphanage you get used to it," Nixilei nodded so Kat continued, "the biggest difference between us though... is that I was the oldest kid in mine for a LONG time. I'd also been there since I was... two I think?" Kat noted that particular part of her memory was rather fuzzy these days, like a lot of her human memories were. "So long before I was the oldest, I took the title as the longest resident. I've only just recently left too. A few months really,"

"I can see how that could be isolating, and lead you towards using minimal resources. I had to learn that as part of my training, not as a state of being," said Nixilei. Kat just shrugged. "Do you... if you um... if you don't mind... do you miss your parents?"

Kat glanced down at Lily, letting her hands run through Lily's fur for a few moments to give what she was about to say the right weight and tone. "No. I don't. It's... I can't really understand what it was like for you... but I never knew my parents, and I found out rather early on they were dead. I didn't have a home to go back to, or well, the orphanage WAS and in a quite a few ways, still IS my home.

“Other kids... they were a bit older, old enough to really know their parents, understand what they were missing. They were always clamouring to be adopted, to get a chance to leave the orphanage. Oh some were sad to see their friends go, but it was quite strange for me. Gramps was my family, he ran the orphanage. I never felt the need to leave. It was a comfortable place.

“I didn’t really get jealous of the things other people had either. It might be because a lot of the other kids... while they could be happy and run around playing every afternoon... I was the one comforting them a lot of the time. Helping them cry it all out with someone who wasn’t Gramps. They saw him as an old man, and I mean... he IS an old man, but they never saw him as family. At least I was a peer you know?

“So I guess... I saw quite a few kids who weren’t happy like I was, and I tried to help out where I could. When I was old enough to ask about parents it was more an academic curiosity, and finding out they were dead was mostly just a fact not some crippling realisation. I don’t know if I can ever understand how you felt learning the truth about your parents, because mine are dead, and they aren’t much more to me than names,”

Nixilei took in that information and digested it as best she could. It certainly did answer some questions about Kat, but in the end Kat was right, she couldn’t understand what that meant. “I’m not really sure if I’d prefer that. I mean... no I don’t know. My parents... as horrible as they are... well I at least KNOW them. I have closure that... well I guess you do as well but I’m not sure I would be able to have that same closure.

“I feel like if I found out my parents were dead, I’d think it was some big conspiracy or something and search for exactly what happened to them. Probably take a few false turns and still not really accept that they were completely dead just because it was the way of things. My parents were scum, but I know they’re scum. I saw with my own two eyes they were scum. There was a bit of denial of course... but the resemblance and the information all lined up,”

“We both got great little sister’s out of it though,” said Kat trying to lighten things up.

Nixilei glanced down at her feet, clearly picturing Green dozing underneath them inside the carriage. A smile on her face Nixilei nodded, “I suppose I did. Tell me about yours?”

“Well, her name is Sylvie. She’s similar to you in quite a few ways actually. Frightfully intelligent and mature for a child of her age. She’s still a kid of course, but that feels like a rare event rather than the norm. She likes to play games of skill and memory. Chess is a good one, or pairs if it’s one of the other young kids. The fact she goes easy on them is another odd note. She’ll still beat them in whatever game, but she likes to somewhat match her opponent in games. Taking the extra effort to make sure it isn’t the curb stomp it is in truth,” explained Kat.

Nixilei showed a fanged smile, “Tell me more,”