

Clash Champions
Season 2 - Episode 11 - Part 3
Rumors

Princess Strawberry Fragar giggled as she read her messages on a holographic display.

"Is there something interesting?" asked her teammate Sergeant Arthur Hawk, who had just poured himself a glass of water in the kitchen.

"Yes," Strawberry said. "There is a rumor coming from Corporate that the referees were sent on a mission and they were all wiped out."

"Wiped out?" Hawk asked with surprise and concern for their safety. "Meaning--"

"There were no serious injuries," Strawberry informed him, "but they lost the fight, and Corporate is destroying all records because they do not want anyone to see it."

Hawk sat down at the table. "I find that hard to believe," he said. "Highman can beat anyone, and they are packed with veterans this year. They should be able to handle anything."

Strawberry shrugged. "That's the rumor."

Hawk tried to think of a reason the referees could have lost. If the problem could not be defeated by Highman's strength, perhaps it was magical. "Do you think it could be because they don't have Cat Black? Maybe the new sorceress they got to replace her is just not as good, despite the hype."

Strawberry was not willing to add another derogatory rumor to an already derogatory rumor for no other reason than speculation. "I would not say anything without knowledge of what had happened, assuming that anything did happen. It is just a rumor."

"Right." Hawk nodded. He offered to change the subject. "Are there any other interesting rumors?"

"There is one," Strawberry said. She wanted Hawk to know. "This might be my last year."

"You said that last year," Hawk reminded her.

"Yes, but..." Strawberry smiled. "I can still fight, but I am slowing down a little every year. I don't know how many 'another year's I have left. And I never did what Midnight is doing, and I am running out of time for that." Lady Midnight had retired at a young age to find herself a husband to continue her royal bloodline. Strawberry was quite a bit older and it was showing in her growing number of gray hairs.

Hawk began an inappropriate suggestion. "Well, if you're feeling lonely tonight..."

Strawberry gave him a disapproving smirk. "Arthur, don't even start."

"Too late," Hawk said with a teasing grin.

Strawberry sighed. "To change the subject back to what it was, I think that the rumor of the referees' loss is real."

"You trust the people you heard it from?" Hawk asked.

Actually, Strawberry did not know who she had heard it from. "It was an anonymous post, but what was said had the air of truth."

"That does not pass the reasonable grounds test," said Hawk.

"No," admitted Strawberry, "but I believe it. I think I might see if one of the employees saved a copy of the footage and I might charm them into letting me see it. That might be fun, and I want to know what could possibly have beaten them."

"So that you know not to mess with it if you run into it," Hawk said half-jokingly.

"Correct," Strawberry replied.

Hawk warned her. "They'll be able to track it down that the footage got out through you, and they can punish you. It will probably be a large fine for breaking a clause in your contract. I'm sure there's something in there against it. It might also be a crime. I'm not sure about the planet's laws, and there might be laws specific to the city or territory."

Strawberry smiled as she imagined skullduggery. "Perhaps you could advise me on how to acquire it without tripping over any legal wires."

"You are asking me to help you steal it," Hawk suspected.

"Yes." Strawberry smiled.

Hawk refused. "I am a cop. I can't do that."

"What you can do," Strawberry suggested, "is you can look into the planet's laws and I will look over the contract to make sure that we are in the clear, legally."

Hawk thought that would be a waste of time. "If the order to delete it has already gone out, it will be gone by the time we are done looking."

Strawberry playfully feigned a pout. "You're no fun."

Rose and Natasha sat at the kitchen table to have breakfast. They were both having a bowl of fruit-flavored flaky cereal, a rectangle of fake meat that resembled a cube of butter, and a biscuit, all manufactured from base carbohydrates and proteins. The glass bottle of milk that they shared was real. They had gotten it from the castle town in Natasha's world. It had been sitting out for several hours the day before, but it had not spoiled yet.

"It was kind of fun visiting your place yesterday," Rose said to Natasha. "It was like Renaissance Faire but it's not. It's real."

"Of course it's real," Natasha said. "Why would you think it's not real? It's not the arena. It's real."

"Well, it's..." Rose tried to explain in a manner that would not insult her teammate. "We have different technology, but there are people who admire the old ways, so they... they're actors. They'll put on clothes from an old style of a thousand years ago, use the old technology just to show that it still works. Your town reminded me of that."

Natasha suggested that Rose return the favor with a visit to her own world. "Maybe you could take me to that mall you were talking about and show me the new technology on your world."

Rose was not sure if the mall was the right place to find that. "The mall is not really a place with technology. It's a market where they sell things."

In the nearby living room, their third teammate Dick Wood had a conversation with their manager Irene Harkness. "Have you heard back from Mick yet?"

Mick had been more punctual than Harkness had expected. "It's only been half a day, but he did get back to me and he said he would look into it. Knowing Mick, that doesn't mean he will."

"Hmm." Dick turned his head and looked at the two girls.

Rose continued with the conversation about visiting Ohio. "I just have to warn you, when you visit my world, they won't let you drink alcohol."

Natasha frowned, and then she smiled as she imagined a solution. "I'll just have to drink a lot before we go!"

Dick turned back to Harkness. "The girl doesn't seem to be concerned, but... she's not the brightest lamp."

Harkness understood. Natasha might not understand what was happening on her world. "I should send him another message and ask him to let me tap into his probes and have a look around."

Mick and Horace stood in a field speaking to a man from the Transdimensional Authority. "It's good to do this from a planet rather than space. We can just walk in and out and we don't need to worry about the ship getting stuck there."

The TDA man nodded as he worked the virtual controls of a handheld holodisplay. There was a low hum as a portal appeared above a portable generator.

"All right," Mick said. He turned to Jill, Alex, and Siobhan. "Are you ready?" Jill shook her head to signal 'no'.

"First we need to prepare for Jill's arrival," said the TDA man. He bent down and picked up a plastic tarp that was folded into a square.

"What is that?" Mick asked.

"It is a tarp," said the TDA man.

"I know what a tarp is," Mick said. "What's it for?"

The TDA man answered as he picked up a plastic 5-gallon bucket. "We should contaminate this world as little as possible," said the TDA man.

"Alright," Mick said. "but, uh, what contamination? The nanites are supposed to be inert. The world is supposed to disable them somehow, just by them being there. So they should not cause any problems."

The TDA man took a last look back at Mick before walking toward the portal. "It is best to take no chances."

Horace agreed with the TDA man. "We should leave the world looking as good as it did when we entered it. There is no need to leave a puddle of dead nanites behind."

"I can't disagree with that," Mick said. He turned to Jill and her friends. "All right. Let's check out this... World of the Rainbow Sky."

Jill took a deep breath and a step forward. She stopped. "Wait. My gun. My nanites talk to its nanites so it might be infected."

"That's all right," Mick said, "I got you a new one."

Jill thought that the abandoned gun might still be a threat. "But if I go back for it or if you pick it up in your power armor... I don't know if it can infect your power armor or anything but it's supposed to be a virus, so..."

Mick agreed with Jill. "Alright, we'll go back to get it and we'll take it in with us." He turned to the TDA man. "Uh..." He only got out a sound before the TDA man walked through the portal.

Alex raised her hand. "I'll tell him."

Mick nodded. "Alright. Jill, Horace, let's go back and get that gun. Alex, don't worry, we'll be back. Siobhan, you can do what you want. Stay or come, we'll just be coming right back."

Siobhan smiled and nodded. She knew what she wanted to do. "I will pay a visit to the old witch." She skipped to the portal and hopped through.

The still-young Cat Black munched on popcorn while she watched a video. She was on leave from the tournament because of her pregnancy, but she liked to keep up to date on the things that were going on.

She smiled as she watched her replacement Celestia van Rijndael absorb a magic attack from the alien warlord Febreeze and return the force as a powerful spell that blew up the ground underneath him. "Nice..." She continued watching. A few seconds later Febreeze shot out from the smoking crater like a missile, barely missing Celestia's head with his fist. "Whoa!... that lady's lucky to have survived that. Did she just take his hand off? No. He still has two hands."

There was a knock at the door, so she turned off the video. "I guess she's here."

Cat opened the door to see the expected Princess Strawberry accompanied by her teammate Sergeant Hawk. Strawberry held a bottle of wine as a gift, while Hawk held a gift in a white box.

"Good afternoon, Catherine!" Strawberry greeted her.

"Hi Strawb," Cat returned the greeting. She pointed to the wine bottle. "You know I can't have that, right?"

Strawberry blushed with embarrassment. "I'm sorry! You can save it for later."

Hawk rescued her. Actually, Strawberry had rescued herself. Hawk only said so. "She also baked you a cake."

Cat grinned eagerly. She loved Strawberry's cakes. "Now that I can have! So what's the occasion for this? You don't usually drop in on people with gifts and a homemade cake. Well, you do. Most people don't."

Strawberry danced around the subject. "Well, while we were here, I was planning to ask if you might have heard the rumor of an amusing record of a recent Corporate expedition. Given your contacts in Corporate, I thought it might be something you are aware of."

Cat poorly feigned ignorance. "Hmm, I might have heard of something like that."

Hawk added to that. "And if all she does is watch it, she has not broken any laws."

Cat grinned.

Soon the three of them were watching and laughing as Febreeze swung Highman in circles by his cape. Cat happily enjoyed a forkful of Strawberry's strawberry cake while Strawberry helped herself to the popcorn.

Sneaky Weasel put a hand to his chin. It was a simple decision, but the deciding was taking a long time. Finally, he resolved to come to a resolution. He had to decide. He had to pick one. And so he pointed his finger at one doughnut among several and said "that one."

"Okay," said the doughnut shop boy. He reached into the cabinet with his tongs, then looked up at Sneaky Weasel. "Which one did you say again?"

"That one." Sneaky pointed again.

There were few additional mishaps before Sneaky was happily sitting at a table munching on a doughnut while checking his messages on a holodisplay. He had a new message, and it was work.

From: V. James
To: S. Weasel

Subject: Appointment for 1400

Mr. Legato is bringing Jill to the dispatch center for a rescan due to a change in her nanites. You will be her guide. I have scheduled the appointment for 1400.

"Hm. Okay. I get to do something today." Sneaky stretched his arms and relaxed. The appointment was not for a few more hours.

The hours passed more quickly than he had expected. Sneaky Weasel was soon greeting Mick, his business partner Horace, and Jill who carried her heavy weapon because it needed to be re-scanned also. Jill looked unhappy to be there.

"Let me guess," Sneaky said, "you want to get this over with as quickly as possible." Jill nodded. "I don't blame you," Sneaky continued, "but the arena's going to take as long as it does. If you want to get going now, we can."

"Alright," Jill said. She stepped forward.

"Wait," Mick said. "You can scan two people at once, right?" He looked to the side, and Sneaky followed his eyes to the fourth member of his group who wore a futuristic purple space suit.

"I'm pretty sure they can," Sneaky said. In fact, he was certain of it. "They scanned three people at once during our training. Now... who are you?"

"I am Siobhan of Ardor, Mr. Weasel," answered the young lady in the suit.

That answer surprised Sneaky even though it made sense. He sputtered and laughed. "Siobhan?! Ha ha ha. You're trying something new, I see."

"I am creating the option of trying it," Siobhan said.

Sneaky grinned. "I like it. Someone will spend a week training to fight a sorceress, gear up with anti-magic, and they end up fighting Alex Smith." He chuckled.

"I am certainly no Alex Smith," Siobhan said.

Sneaky gave her a word of advice. "Well, you had better practice and become one if you want your trick to work."

There were multiple Alex Smiths in multiple dimensions. Mick had hired one of them to train his fighters the year before because another Alex Smith fought in the tournament for Howie Gutman. This Alex had just come out from the shower after of a day of fitness training. Her muscles were sore, and she was going to grab something to eat, something to drink, and just relax.

Something to eat was sitting on the table waiting for her. There was a slice of strawberry cake with a note that said 'for Alex'. Alex looked at it and sighed. "Well, there goes all the good that working out did."

Alex had finished the cake and most of a real meal when the front door opened. "Hello!" "We're back." Strawberry and Hawk had returned. "Ah! Alex! I have something for you." Strawberry skipped ahead to the table while reaching into her handbag for something. She stood at the table, still searching since she had not found it yet. She set the bag on the table and opened it wider to look inside, then reached in and pulled out a black rectangle the size of a quarter.

Alex could guess what it was, but asked to be sure. "Is that a data storage device?"

Strawberry nodded. "Simply put it next to your holo and it will read it. There is a video on there of the refs losing a fight."

Alex chuckled at the thought of it. "Now this I have to see."

Sneaky Weasel interrupted the departing guests before they left the dispatch center. "Uh, Jill, uh... I'm getting word from the engineers that they don't like what they see."

Jill frowned. "Don't tell me I have to go through that again."

Sneaky Weasel came close. "You will probably have to go through that again."

"Damn it," Jill muttered.

"What is it?" Mick asked. "What's wrong?"

"Its about her mass," Sneaky said.

Jill was not proud of that. "Yeah. I'm heavy. I know."

"No," Sneaky continued. "It's... there is a big difference her mass now and her last scan. She's a lot lighter, and they're wondering if there was a mistake..."

Mick knew what caused that. "Oh, that's because all of her old nanites are out and her new nanites need time to grow."

Sneaky could see how that was a problem. "So if her mass is changing over time between now and the match--"

Mick saw the problem also. "We'll have to scan her in again right before the match. Schedule us a new appointment--"

"Damn it," Jill muttered again.

"It needs to be done," Mick told her.

"I know," Jill answered with resignation.

Sneaky listened to a word from the engineers through his earpiece. "Also... I am told that you should have had a multiple body scan. It would have been nice if they had told me that before." He asked Jill about it. "You can shapeshift?"

Mick answered. "No, she changes her power level between strength and shield, so each extreme needs to be scanned in separately. I'm sorry. I forgot about that."

Siobhan spoke up. "Pardon me for asking, Mr. Weasel, but were there any problems with my scan?"

"There had better not be," Sneaky said.

"All right," Mick said. "We'll get here really early on game day, get her scanned in, and if there are problems slowing it down we can reschedule her to one of the later matches."

Jill groused. "And if something goes wrong, I can't fight my match and I'll lose."

"Nothing's..." Mick started. He threw up his hands. "I won't jinx us. We'll hope for the best."

"If it makes you feel better," Siobhan offered, "the rest of us shall be coming on the same ship, so we will be waiting for you for the same amount of time as your scan."

Jill was not sure if that made her feel better, or worse about herself for making her teammates go through it.

Another friendly word of encouragement came from Jill's little sister Anna. "That's right! We're going through this together!" Anna put her arms around Jill's waist, then stepped back and vanished.

A flustered smile appeared on Jill's face. Her old hallucinations were back so she was not well, but hopefully this meant she was better?

Mick misinterpreted Jill's smile. "All right. Looks like you're okay with it." He turned back to Sneaky. "We'll be back on game day. Just tell us how early we need to come."