

## DEMONS 1041

### Chapter 1041 Rushing up the Mountain

"What are you going to do Sue?" asked Kat as she picked up the backpack she planned to carry Lily in.

"Um..." Sue glanced around the room as if looking for an answer to the question, but found nothing. "Shit... I don't really know? I mean... I'm not strong enough to be useful in a fight, and I can't fly anywhere near as fast as you can. Dammit, I wish I could help!"

"You can warn Bodeir's household," said Lian as she ran back into the VIP box. She didn't hesitate to jump into Kat's arms when the demon held them out. "Once you do that, perhaps you can also warn Bing's family's servants... but I'm not sure if that's worth the risk. If Meng is compromised, Bang, her husband, must be as well. I don't know what's happened, so trust your judgement." *NoVelaNext.com*

Sue gulped and nodded before saying, "I think... in that case I'll try and talk to Hromdir and the boat captains. I don't know how strong the captains are... but if they can get a message back to Bodeir Sr then we'll be in a much better position. It might be an issue for you guys..."

Lian shook her head rapidly and explained, "No, it's too late for that. If Meng has been compromised and nobody important has noticed... or worse... if they HAVE noticed and chosen to do nothing about it we're already in a horrible situation. Bodeir Sr cannot make things worse. Though... the Holy Icy Wind Sect is not likely to survive whatever has happened here... certainly not unscathed,"

Everyone gave grim nods at that. Kat shared a second nod with Sue, who was pacing around, chest bouncing with every step because she'd not taken the time to secure it properly. "I'll leave now. Lian, you'll need to direct me as we go, and perhaps give me some warning about what I can expect,"

Nobody said anything to contradict Kat, so she went to jump out through the window... only to remember the announcer's words about not flying out of the stadium. \*Shit... would it be faster to just take the ground route until I'm out of the arena? Probably. I'd hate to have to fight the announcer over it, especially if they take issue with me carrying Lian along for the ride. Plus, the announcer might be in on it. Dammit, guess I'm taking the long way.\*

Kat kicked off the wall, hard, cracking the stonework that went into the stadium as she burst into the hallway and started running. As expected, Lian questioned her actions, "What the heck are you doing Kat! We're in a hurry why are you exiting normally!" hissed Lian as Kat built up speed.

"I can't risk a fight with the announcer over flying out of the stadium," answered Kat.

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"I can tell him off! I'm a known part of the sect," returned Lian.

"Lian, no offence, but there's every chance that they ignore you, or use it as a chance to punish you for basically nothing. Remember, Meng and presumably Bang aren't running things anymore, the announcer could be in on the deception, or they could just decide to cause problems because you're a curse cultivator. It wouldn't be the first time and we just can't risk it," finished Kat just as they reached the outside world.

Kat wasn't running at full speed, she was limited by Lily and Lian. Kat knew her top speed would be too much for their bodies. Lily might take it better, being strapped to her back and saved from the buffeting of the wind, but Lian was taking the full weight of the wind, alongside the changing forces from Kat's turns. Kat just had to hope this speed was fast enough. "Which way?" shouted Kat.

"Up the mountain!" said Lian back, "I can feel her in that direction,"

Kat didn't need to be told twice, she kicked off the ground and her wings got to work, flying as fast as she could up the mountain, ignoring the few people that called out nearby. None of them looked important or spoke with authority, so Kat decided they weren't an issue. Especially not right now.

"What can I expect Lian?" asked Kat over the rising winds, "Where are they likely to be?"

"Um..." Lian racked her brains, there were quite a few places they could be, "Well... based on the fact that they're still on the mountain means they aren't leaving the sect just yet. Part of that is probably because we don't have a long distance teleportation array set up... but... well the fact that whoever is impersonating Meng hasn't started running means they don't know we know... and I'm not sure what else really?"

"Um... I think they are trying not to blow their cover just yet. I'm not totally sure why they think they can get away with kidnapping Bodeir while you're here... perhaps they're trying to make it seem like the sect knows nothing? If... if they're trying to keep up the charade... then they have to be at one of the vaults, and there are two of those up near the top of the mountain.

"They... hmm... they might be looking to lock everyone in one of the vaults? But... but that doesn't make sense. The vaults are full of treasures for a reason. Locking someone in a vault is like locking them in heaven. They'll have everything they could need and want in there. Sure they can't get out... but with all those treasure artifacts and cultivation herbs... I just can't see why they'd do it..."

[It's quite possible one or both of the vaults have been robbed already. An empty vault is a great place to store high value hostages.] Kat's eyes widened at Lily's interpretation of events, and quickly relayed the idea to Lian.

"Shit... that... that might just work. Fake Meng could even say that they are meditating to consolidate their gains, and... and they'd just sort of have to believe her. The risk of interrupting somewhat while they are cultivating something important or absorbing energy from spirit stones is BAD. If the vaults are mostly empty... they could even lay out something moderately powerful, but well worth it for a Rank 2. If we're the ones interrupting... we could get in a lot of trouble..." said Lian with a tinge of horror in her tone.

"Well... how deadly is it to interrupt them while they're doing that sort of thing?" asked Kat as she continued to fly towards the summit. "Is it like... something it would take a day to recover from, a week, a month... or is it more permanent maiming? I don't want to be the reason they're in trouble, but obviously I'll bust down the door and cause problems if I need to,"

"Um... yeah pretty much that whole range," said Lian with a wince, "It really depends what Fake Meng was handing out. If it's just taking in energy then the worst that could happen is ending up in the medical wing for a week... but if they've been offered the chance to attune with a powerful weapon... death is on the table,"

Kat cursed under her breath but Lian continued, "Um... that's not likely... we, that is, the Holy Icy Wind Sect, tends to trade away those sorts of weapons because we consider them more trouble than they're worth. Some of them can be really arbitrary when it comes to choosing their next wielders so we don't like to take the risk on that sort of thing. Especially not when most of those weapons don't scale up to higher Ranks. What did Meng say to me... um...

"I think it was 'If you have to risk your life for such a minimal and temporary increase in power, even if you're the luckiest cultivator in existence, something will kill you before Rank 4. Unless you cultivate luck as your affinity. In that case you're a cheating little shit that cheats,' though she might've been a touch more... explicit about luck cultivators,"

Kat laughed, feeling some of the tension draining from her shoulders, though still remaining somewhat wary. \*True, they might not keep that sort of thing around normally... but if Fake Meng really wants to kill them... and make it look like an accident... having a bunch of cursed weapons around as a 'reward' seems like a really good way to go about it.\*

[It's a risk... but I think they are probably worth more as hostages. Bodeir at least, certainly is... though... Bing and Feng... might not be. If Meng and Bang have already been handled, perhaps... permanently... then I don't know how much value Bing and Feng would have to whoever sett this whole thing up. They can't exactly be ransomed to their kidnapped parents.]

\*We... probably shouldn't mention that last past to Lian. If she hasn't thought of it already... it will just worry her unnecessarily, and she's already fairly panicked. Plus... I dunno, maybe having Bing and Feng around without them noticing is good cover?\*

[Yeah... best not mention it. We can only hope for the best]

## Chapter 1042 I'm Still Flying

There was a short exchange after the group passed the inner sect retreat, but Lian was clear that Meng and Bang had a more personal home higher up the mountain with some vaults for relics, and that Bing had to be in one of those. Kat upped her speed a bit hearing that, yet still feeling no pull on her soul because of the contract.

\*Is it because the contract can tell I'm already doing my best? Or is it that Bodeir isn't in any trouble just yet. Or heck, does the Contract even work that way? I'm pretty sure it does. System? What's the word on that.\*

User Kat will experience minor pain that increases in intensity if User Kat considers taking steps that will break the Contract. Contract does not provide any inherent tracking abilities for target. If a Contract did, then Users with tracking abilities would be unnecessary.

\*Well... that's somewhat nice to know I suppose. I could've sworn that I felt a connection between... no that connection would've been with the old man that summoned us and Bodeir Sr because it was on his orders, so even if those links could be traced properly, because I'm protecting Bodeir Jr they don't actually help. A shame.\*

Lily didn't have anything to add. She just kept practicing the feeling of bringing up her spells. She didn't want to be a burden... but based on the fact that nobody except Kat could see through the illusion on

Fake Meng it was looking likely that they were going to be fighting another Rank 4. The last Rank 4 had nearly killed Kat, if not for her last minute ability, and luck pushing Kat to Rank 3 herself.

Lily wasn't confident in the spell she was practicing, it was an attempt to give herself something defensive, a big wall of paper that was made of stacks and stacks of the stuff. It probably wouldn't stop a Rank 4 if they were serious, and Lily hadn't tested the spell in a practice range, let alone in a proper fight. She'd been too busy mastering her attacks spells. It seemed more useful when combat was in the far future... but it was clear that defensive options were more useful in the now.

Lian was just trying to keep herself calm, and trying not to waste qi. She was shivering slightly. She desperately needed a coat, but Kat and Lily hadn't noticed and she wasn't going to get them to stop. Because of this, her qi was trying to keep her warm... but she was actively stopping that. Lian wasn't quite full on qi yet, and she certainly didn't want to burn away precious energy just because she was a bit chilly so she remained silent on the matter, trying to disguise the shivering as nerves. Perhaps if Lily could see her, or Kat wasn't so worked up someone would've noticed.

Kat breaking through the clouds didn't help matters either, drenching Lian in condensation, her dress now clinging to her. It was only wet for a few moments before the rush of the wind, and the cold froze it to her skin in patches. Lian was now starting to think she might have to stop.

Kat finally noticed, when she could hear the chattering of Lian's teeth. "Lian, are you alright?" asked Kat, even though she could tell Lian very much wasn't.

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"I'll be fine, we need to get to Bing promptly and we've still got a bit of travel before we reach her private residence, let alone breaking into the bolt. I can put something on later," said Lian.

Kat frowned, and summoned up her demonic fire, putting all of her mental energy towards it NOT burning Lian. The flames listened, and Lian soon found herself shivering for a different reason. As pleasant as these flames might have been for the moment, her senses were screaming at her that they were a danger she could not overcome. Well, that and they didn't do anything to stop the cold at all.

"That's not working Kat. I don't know how you made fire cold, but you did! Can't you turn the heat up on it?" hissed Lian through chattering teeth.

Kat winced at the reprimand, "No... I'm afraid I can only make my flames cold. I'm an ice aligned demon I guess? Apparently the most I can do is stop them burning you. I have an aura that would help you relax... but if that relaxed you so much you fell asleep it would be really bad... I'm not sure what to do. You said you didn't want to stop to put on a coat, and... that's... well it's not fine exactly but acceptable for now. Possibly. Are you sure we can't stop?"

Lian shook her head, "No, time is of the essence,"

"Don't you have like a blanket or something?" asked Kat.

"Hmm... I might actually..." mumbled Lian. Diving into her storage ring she managed to find a few jumpers, but no blankets. Lian was about to give up, when she noticed a sleeping bag. Good enough. She summoned it into her hands and worked her freezing fingers around the buttons, slowly peeling

open and one minor fight with the wind later she was insulated. Not warm, but at least the wind wasn't making things worse.

"Can you... I dunno curse yourself to be hot?" asked Kat.

Lian shook her head rapidly, "No. I could probably curse myself to be cold, taking away heat as it was... but without preparation and a few notable things to sacrifice I can't increase my temperature that way. Plus, I already have curses on myself, you have to be careful how they mix together lest you get something you don't want..."

"You have curses on yourself?" asked Kat.

Lian winced, "Well... a few... one to stop hair growing where I don't want it... another to... god I can't believe I'm telling you this... it has to be the cold... but one to make me infertile so I don't have to deal with menstrual cramps, mine used to be really quite bad. I have another one that makes me immune to a lot of diseases by making my blood a bit too hostile for them... so... yeah.

"If I tried to get something to warm me up without prep I could end up with a supercharged reproduction system that eats the rest of my body, or perhaps one that makes the hair on my head molten hot, or I could start boiling the blood in my veins. Too risky. Much too risky."

"Holy shit Lian..." whispered Kat. "I hope that infertility curse isn't permanent"

"Eh... it probably isn't? It's not GOOD for me that's for sure. Even if I eventually remove the curse, I will still have a womb and ovaries filled with curse qi. Which is great for my cultivation... not so great for my prospects involving children," admitted Lian.

"Does Bing know?" asked Kat.

"Not... not exactly?" admitted Lian. "God I must be loopier then I thought if I'm sharing stuff I haven't even told Bing... maybe I should tell her..."

"Well why didn't you? And why do it at all?" asked Kat before pausing, "Not that... well not that there's anything wrong with not wanting children... as an orphanage girl myself I know there are plenty of kids you can adopt if motherhood still calls to you... but it just doesn't seem healthy. Then again, with Lily and my own preferences... having kids the normal way is off the table... still, you get my point,"

"Long story short?" said Lian, "I was an idiot who didn't want to deal with the monthly pain. Now, it was quite bad, even looking back on it. I got really unlucky with them... or it might just be something all curse users have to deal with... but I don't remove it because then I probably couldn't put it back... and I might have screwed up the casting for it anyway. Possibly. Maybe. There is a reason I didn't tell Bing,"

"God dammit Lian," mumbled Kat. "Actually you know what?" Kat changed her trajectory, zooming towards the earth, wings in front of her to shield Lian from the wind as best she could.

"Kat! What are you doing!" hissed Lian.

"I'm landing so you can get out of your frozen clothes and put on a fucking jumper. I was willing to believe that you were... not fine, but that you'd live. Now I find out that you're rather reckless when the fancy takes you. So I'm ensuring that I won't have to return you to Bing missing some fingers and toes, or worse yet, dead all together,"

Kat crashed through the cloud layer, but most of the water caught on her wings. It was just a blink later when they hit the ground, earth cratering under Kat's feet. "Now put some damn clothes on," said Kat with an air of finality that would brook no argument.

Lian glared but didn't wait long. She knew Kat would force her to waste time changing, and the longer she put up a fight, the longer it would take to get to Bing.

### **Chapter 1043 Can You Dig It?**

Lian rushed to put her new clothes on and was still shivering when she hopped back into Katt's arms. The delay had already been too much for her taste even if it had taken less than a minute to remove her previously soaked garments and put on something more weather appropriate.

Kat hopped back into the air and took a look around, realising that they were not just on a mountain, but part of an entire mountain range. Probably something she should have expected, given that a single mountain wasn't all that much territory for a sect to manage, but it hadn't properly registered. Still, that hadn't seem too important as she reached for the summit... until Lian spoke up, "Over there!" shouted Lian, pointing at one of the other peaks. It was covered in heavy cloud cover, and only slightly below Kat's current position, if a bit far away in the horizontal direction. "That's the peak Bing's house is, and where her signal is coming from,"

"Understood," said Kat as she started to alter her trajectory. The peak didn't look like much at all, because it was covered by clearly unnatural cloud cover. It was a single cloud that seemed to swirl around the peak. It looked remarkably fluffy, and it stayed in constant, rotating motion.

Kat wondered if the point was just to give some privacy, or perhaps there was also a layer of illusions over the structure she simply couldn't see. The cloud cover was clearly unnatural, but it didn't give any hints as to what was going on inside, such was the thickness of the clouds surrounding the spot.

Eventually, Kat broke her way through to reveal that it was actually two peaks, one much larger than the other, though the smaller one was still slightly larger than a football field. It had been flattened into a practice range, with targets lined up around the edges of the peak and the ground flat enough to practice martial arts without fear. The other peak, was much larger, and much busier in design.

There was a garden that was likely more a place to grow herbs than relax. All sorts of greenery was packed closely together with only small, overgrown paths to get between the foliage. An open air dojo that had a roof and no walls, perhaps to provide level flooring, or just a place to meditate. There was a frozen pond next to the dojo as well, and it had the Holy Ice Wind Sect's symbol carved into it, clearly visible from above and under a few layers of ice but very visible. It was likely created with mystical means.

The house itself was a large collection of smaller buildings. One cluster on the edge, likely for servants, consisted of closely packed rooms that didn't have any space between them. The main compound was all built off a large rectangular building that had a courtyard in the middle and a tarp for keeping the bulk of the snow off. It must have been heated, because what snow did land on it, quickly turned to water and ran off into a pond that ran the outskirts of the courtyard.

The courtyard itself wasn't all that large, the rectangular building surrounding it was wider than the courtyard was. There was a few other rooms that branched off the central building, but they looked

more like small huts, and it was unclear what exactly they were all for. The central building seemed to have enough space for all of Bing's family and then some. Kat could see a few servants walking around, but they weren't paying any attention to their surroundings.

Kat landed at the closest available spot, which happened to be near the gardens, and not the main structure of the house. Much better to remain unhidden as well, no servants roamed the garden right now "Right... so... where is Bing likely to be?" asked Kat.

Lian winced, "Um... well... now that we're here I can tell that's she's below us..."

"Yes... something I feared..." mumbled Kat, "So we have to get into the vault then? Lead the way!"

"Ah... well... you see... I have no idea where the vault is..." mumbled Lian.

"How can you not know?" asked Kat.

"It's not like that sort of information is handed out casually Kat! I'm lucky I've even been to a vault. I had to be blindfolded, and I think Bing and Feng were as well! Look, it's not ideal... but I do know there is a transmission array to take us there somewhere in the house. I was blindfolded and carried to make it harder for me to work out, but I know at the very least it wasn't too far away from the house," explained Lian.

"Right... but how do we find it?" asked Kat, "In fact... can we even use the array if we find it?"

Lian winced, but didn't say anything. [Could you just dig straight down to Bing and Bodeir?]

\*Possibly... but it would take us quite some time and I'd really want a shovel of some kind. Sure I can just use my hands, as annoying as that would be... but the real problem, other than being annoying, is that I can only move so much dirt that way. Sure I'm fast, and strong, but my hands are only so large. Unless I want to just punch the dirt continually, compressing it as we go... but then I'd need to bust through hardened dirt at some point so it just wouldn't work.\*

[So what... we need to look around for either a teleportation array or a magical shovel that can withstand your strength long enough for us to dig to the vault?]

\*It's really looking that way Lily. Unless Lian has a better idea, I think that's what we're going to have to go with.\* "Lian, do you think we can activate the array at all?" asked Kat.

"Umm..." Lian frowned, "So... right, arrays are very complex things, and the one for the vault should be extra secure... so secure that there's no way Fake Meng and possibly Fake Bang could figure out a way to change the permissions while keeping their cover. I suspect they found some workaround, the most likely one, letting the array activate for everyone that stands on it. If it's a bit more complicated than that, I might be able to curse it and get it working for us..."

"After finding out you might have messed up a curse you put on yourself... I have to ask HOW are you going to get this array to work with a curse?" asked Kat.

"Um... probably stick to keeping it simply... curse it to work once for anyone at all, in the next few seconds, in exchange for it imploding afterwards?" answered Lian.

Kat felt about ready to slam her head into the wall. "Right... Lian can it take all of us at once?" Lian nodded, "Even though Lily has mana instead of qi and I have demonic energy?" Lian nodded... slowly. She looked very unsure about it. "Lian, if this fails, then not only will it, implode apparently, but all the servants will hear that and realise something is wrong. If you fuck this up, we won't have the chance to dig down, because Fake Meng, and Fake Bang will certainly be alerted. Will it work?"

Lian bit her lip and looked down at the ground. She swallowed heavily and answered with a shaky voice, "I... I don't know? I mean... look I don't really have a way to test this. It should work, in theory... but... curses aren't just 'in theory' things. They take into account a wide variety of external factors that you can't truly account for every time... so... well... it SHOULD work but... no I can't be certain that it will,"

Kat breathed deeply, restraining the, admittedly small, part of her that wanted to yell at Lian. We were on a time crunch, and wasting time suggesting risky strategies that aren't likely to work was not what they needed to be doing right now. Even still, Kat had to ask. "In that case, with your professional opinion. Is it worth the risk?"

Lian thought it over again. The various parts of her warring with each other. There was so much that could go wrong... but taking the other option, the slower option, that could just as easily doom their attempts as trying the quick way and failing... but... well... Lian knew what she had to do. "It is," said Lian with confidence she didn't quite feel. "I believe it's worth the risk," what she didn't say... was that with curse energy, it was always possible to force some extra effect... by risking yourself instead.

Kat and Lily weren't totally convinced by Lian's statement but they had no choice but to trust her expertise. A quick mental communication between them, and the two decided it was best to split up. Lian would go with Kat, as Lily was the stealthiest, and Kat was easily able to float around and make less sound. They just had to hope they found it in time.

## **Chapter 1044 Leave it to Lily**

Lily's perspective.

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It didn't take that long for Lily to find the secret door. It was only five minutes of sneaking around. The servants were much too casual, and the clues for the hidden door easily found by someone that had eyes at ankle height. In one of the hallways, there was a display case between two rooms. It showed off a number of poorly done clay sculptures and water colour paintings. If Lily was all but certain the display case was for little arts and crafts projects Bing and Feng made growing up.

It was actually rather sweet. The secret to the vault wasn't behind the suits of armour, the legendary blades, or the medicinal pills cabinet. It was behind the deeply personal examples of Bing and Feng's childhood. Lily felt her respect for Meng and Bang, the real ones, rise by a good margin at the discovery.

As to how she discovered it, well, the cabinet clearly moved away from the wall to reveal something hidden, and Lily could see the marks on the floor to prove it. They were subtle things, and the servants had cleaned wonderfully... but the slight gauges in the wooden floors were unmistakable. It was the mark of something being moved across the wood over and over and over. The vault might not have been a particularly regular place to visit, but this was a cultivation world, these marks had likely been growing in prominence for centuries.



A short time later, Kat and Lian made there way over, and Lian seemed shocked at seeing the hiding place, but nodded, as she too understood the reason for it. "Can you open this Lian?" asked Kat as she examined the cabinet.

Lian frowned, "Um... yes probably but it would take time. I think it's all mechanical... can you just... force it open?" asked Lian.

Kat tapped her foot a few times before moving up and placing her hands over the cabinet. Meng and Bang had tried to protect this entrance through obscurity rather than a bunch of seals. Lian's guess was correct, it was purely a mechanical lock that kept this cabinet in place as a door. Kat tested it, pulling lightly, and felt the cabinet wobble with less then a percent of her strength. "Yeah. It's not stuck to the wall much at all. I can lift it... but it might cause a bit of a disturbance with the noise..." said Kat.

Lian just shrugged, so Kat returned with one of her own and got to work. Their was a screeching sound of metal on metal, but it took no effort to peel the cabinet away from the wall revealing a small hole and a well lit room with an intrigue design carved into the floor. "This is it!" said Lian as she jumped into the hole. Kat and Lily followed quickly, with Kat starting to shut the door, only to hear more metallic screeching. Kat winced and left the cabinet as is.

Lian was already working on the array, mumbling to herself, "Yes... right one... where does... but if I... no... made an imprint key... not the easiest curse... what if... no... yes... hmm... eleven by three, carry the remainder... wait but if I scratch this here... hmm..."

Kat and Lily shared a look, but didn't want to interrupt Lian and risk the hole exercise failing. They did keep an ear out, and when after about four minutes, they could hear someone approaching, Kat spoke up, "Lian, someone is coming. Can you do it? And are we good to go?"

Lian nodded, "Yes... I should be able to send you through..." said Lian slowly.

Kat, missing the phrasing in that moment, hopped onto the transporter with Lily in her arms. It was only as she turned around to see Lian as the glow started up that it all clicked. Lian had a look of determination and resignation. It was the look of someone that knew they were about to do something stupid because it needed to be done, and wasn't about to regret the consequences.

Kat had fractions of moments to decide what to do. Her mind sped up to maximum speed, even as the light was rising around her. She ran through a number of situations, of what she could do. Of how they could all get out of this. And Kat's heart clenched. There was only one way to keep Lian safe. Lian wasn't quite so resigned that Kat suspected Lian was about to die... but it wasn't much better.

[LILY! I TRUST YOU. PROTECT LIAN]

The world sped up for Kat in that moment. For Lily, even with her improved body and brain, she hadn't the time to reach the same conclusion. Kat's message reached her, sped up and distorted even as the light surrounded Kat and Lily felt herself landing on Lian. The light built up in intensity and then it was gone. And so was Kat. Lian collapsed with Lily on top of her, and Lily had a moment of panic.

\*KAT!\* mentally shouted Lily, not quite expected a fast response...

Which of course meant Kat was able to answer instantly. [Yes?]

\*What the fuck Kat!\*

[What's wrong? Did you think I'd died or something? Lily I'm off to fight Fake Meng, but Lian looked like she was about to go off to war. I couldn't leave her alone, and she clearly wasn't coming with us. What else was I supposed to do?]

\*Give me a bit of warning perhaps?\*

[It's not like we had time for that Lily. I trust you. You've gotten better at magic, and it should just be the servants. If Fake Bang shows up... or well, to you it should look like real Bang... I'm not sure really. Just do your best?]

\*We WILL be talking about this later Kat. It was the right move, I don't want to criticise that, but I barely got that mental message, from my perspective it was like you were speaking five times faster than normal. I panicked massively, and that was before Lian collapsed. It really wasn't good for my poor heart. And yes Kat, for a moment I did think there was something wrong with the teleporter and you were day. It wasn't rational, I shouldn't have jumped straight for that but dammit I was worried.\*

[Look, you can chew me out for it later, but you need to focus on Lian for now and I need to focus on my own upcoming fight. I think I'll be closing the link so that things don't bleed over, on either end. Too much of a risk.]

Lily cursed mentally as she felt the link closed like Kat said and returned to her human form. Lian was panting heavily on the ground and sweating somewhat. Her hands were shaking even though she'd collapsed, and her eyes were closed. "Lian? Can you hear me?"

"Lily?" rasped Lian as best she could.

"Yes it's Lily you absolute MORON. What the hell have you done to yourself?" hissed Lily, keeping her voice low. She could hear the a servant approaching faster now, they didn't have much time.

"It... it's nothing..." started Lian only to be cut off by Lily summoning her claws and resting them on Lian's neck.

"Lian. I am rather pissed at the moment. Not for any real reason. A simple misunderstanding and poor assumption on my part just a moment ago. I am not in the mood to deal with misdirection and self-sacrificial bullshit. I get enough of that from Kat, and I let her get away with it because I love her, and she can regenerate. You are not well and you will tell me what the problem is OR SO HELP ME whatever you've done to yourself will be the least of your worries," hissed Lily, even as she could hear the footsteps just outside the room. A glance at the array revealed it was trashed, so that wasn't going to be useful.

"I... didn't have enough qi to power the change... so I had to... on the fly... swap out qi for a sacrifice of blood. Not... not all of my blood obviously but I might've sacrificed... like half..." answered Lian shakily.

"Half your blood? Half your blood?" hissed Lily, and now that she was looking Lian had paled massively. It hadn't been obvious before, considering how pale Lian normally was, but now Lily had been told about the blood loss, it was beyond obvious. "How are you not dead?"

"Qi mostly, and good living," said Lian with a dark chuckle.

At that moment, the servant who had come to check things out reached the door. Before he or she could see anything though, Lily poured mana into her spell. Wall upon wall of paper quickly appeared to cover the gap inside, buying them precious time, at the cost of arguably more precious mana. Lily just had to hope it would buy her enough time to regenerate a big chunk of the cost.

"Ok Lian. We're going to need a plan. How dangerous exactly are the servants here? And are we running? Or fighting as we go?" questioned Lily.

## **Chapter 1045 The People have Spoken**

The Poll is in and the People want Lily's perspective to happen first so here we go!

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"I think we might have to fight..." said Lian with a wince. "The servants here are quite dedicated, and they might assume that I've turned against Bing if they aren't all that familiar with me... or they might just not recognise me... or think that someone is using my face to infiltrate the house. The real issue is that about a quarter of them are wind cultivators and they can keep up with us. We'll need to knock those ones out if we want to get away..."

"Is surrender an option?" asked Lily.

"What?" returned a confused Lian, thinking that the blood loss had caused her to mishear Lily.

"Surrender. As much as it would leave a bad taste in my mouth, we could simply surrender and wait for Kat to come and get us. She will have Bing, Feng, and hopefully Fake Meng. It might be less dangerous than trying to fight our way out. I can fight if you think that's for the best, but I'm not certain I can properly fight off all of these servants. If we surrender... and just sit around in a cell for a bit, that's rather safe all things considered," explained Lily.

As if to punctuate her words, the paper guarding the door took a large impact, Lily could feel it creasing under a rapid series of blows, but her multi-layered defence was taking the beating well. Until more servants arrived to help, they were likely safe. Lian seemed to share that sentiment, looking over at the exit with a slight smile on her face. They had time.

"Hmm... I'm not really sure how safe it would be. If we surrendered the servants won't kill us... it is not their job to decide... but if they take us to one of the sect elders, especially one that doesn't like me... they might just have us executed before Kat can finish with Fake Meng," said Lian with a wince.

"That... surely that isn't something they'd do right?" asked Lily, voice shaking.

Lian gave a 'so-so' gesture, "Technically they shouldn't... but because I'm a curse user they can make special exceptions. If I was locked up, and I wanted to... I could trade my life for a nasty curse on the sect or something. They could argue they need to execute me before I have time to make up a large scale curse. Bing would be furious, if the real Bang and Meng find out, they'd definitely make life hell for whoever did me in..."

Lian sighed and shook her head "... but with that being said... if we're dead there isn't much they can do to bring us back. Our souls are too weak. Perhaps if I cursed my own soul to remain attached to my body... but my mind wouldn't likely survive the process. That's not even considering the fact that if Fake

Meng and Bang have been around for a while, it is all but certain one of the elders is in on the deception. If that elder finds us, they'll have no hesitation.

"They'd know that the real sect leaders are missing and they can get away with doing us in. Bing might swear vengeance... but if she's silenced as well... then it ceases to be an issue. Perhaps they make it a show of it, perhaps they send a strong spirit beast after her to make it look like an accident..."

Lily groaned and interrupted Lian before she could continue on her rant, "Ok, I get it. Letting ourselves get captured is a horrible idea and I'm sorry I suggested it,"

"No... no I'm sorry," said Lian as a loud, thwap, rang out through the room. The paper shuddered, and Lily could feel one of her layers tearing a bit. Sending a bit of mana to reinforce it, Lily gestured for Lian to continue, "Um... right no... just... that's always been one of my worries so... I wasn't a fan of hearing you suggest it as a good idea..."

"A lot of people in the sect still don't like me... and while I'm safe with Bing around... if she isn't here... and her parents aren't here... there really isn't many in the sect who would vouch for me. The risk of death for myself is quite high... or perhaps they'd do me a 'kindness'" Lian spat the word out, "they'd cripple me and return me to my parents, for obviously if I cannot continue in the world of cultivation I'd want to be with family right?"

Lily winced. "Is it really that bad?" she couldn't help but ask.

Lian shrugged again, even as Lily heard the assault on her papers redouble. It would be time to leave soon, but Lian was looking better as she talked, perhaps this chat was helping her focus mentally and recover a bit from cursing the teleporter.

Lian once again made a 'so-so' gesture, "I'm certainly not well liked, and I can't honestly say just how bad things are. I know for a fact they are not GOOD but I can't say for sure just how bad things truly are. It is a fear of mine, perhaps an unfounded one... but one that has certainly become more powerful after finding out Bing has been kidnapped, and Meng and Bang are missing. I... I don't know how much of a worry it should be... but it IS a major worry I can't get rid of,"

Lily let out a long puff of air. She didn't know how to play psychologist here. It was clear that Lian had issues and they weren't helping right now. It was causing Lian great distress, and when one considered that cultivators were all about understanding yourself and being at peace with your place in the world... it was not a good attitude for Lian to adopt right now.

\*Kat would know what to do. She'd deny that of course, but she would have some sweet, and perhaps somewhat harsh words to cheer Lian right up... or at least get her to look a bit less like she's going to break out into tears.

The problem is that I am NOT Kat, and she asked me not to bother her. Not that I think I could get through her block TO bother her at the moment... but what do I do here? I'm not sure Lian is even well enough to run... but if I push for the surrender route Lian is liable to do something really stupid. I could see her sacrificing a few things she really shouldn't to avoid getting caught if I don't help her... \*

The sound of tearing paper informed Lily she didn't have time to worry about this anymore. \*Welp, guess I'm fighting.\* Lily glanced over and saw that one of the servants had managed to find a sword.

\*Well that's just cheating really.\* Lily dashed over to Lian and picked the goth girl up into a princess carry. Lily frowned as she shifted Lian around her hands as best she could before realising that Kat was cheating being so tall.

\*That extra bit of height makes all the difference. I've got no freedom at all to use my arms. Dammit.\* "Sorry Lian!" said Lily as she adjusted her hold on Lian to throw her over a shoulder. It was difficult, and Lily's shoulder wasn't really wide enough to fit a whole goth girl in winter clothing on it, but Lily could hold her down with one hand. It was... good enough. Lian uttered not a word of complaint.

Messing with Lian's positioning had given the servants time to get into the room. A female servant stood at the front with the sword, while three others fanned out to block the door further. Lily could here more servants surrounded the exit, preparing for them to make an escape.

The woman with the sword was thin, with a scar running along her cheek. It looked like she'd managed to turn her head away from a sword-blow in the past and only been mostly dodged. Her apron had been sliced in half and tied around her forearms for a bit of protection, and she was you ignored the shaking of the sword in her hand. While she was more prepared than the others, wearing long gardening boots that protected her feet quite well. She was ready for a fight... well... if perhaps that just meant she was more aware of the true reality of combat.

The rest of the group looked both more and less prepared. They had various sharp implements that had been scavenged on their way over. One had a garden trowel as a makeshift dagger while the other had a butter knife in each hand. Lily really wasn't sure how deadly something like that was in a magical world. Did cutlery need to be supernaturally sharp? What about gardening implements? Lily just didn't know.

\*Right. I'm mostly full on mana. I'm carrying a mostly useless Lian and I'm very surrounded right now. Is there anything I can do to get away? Sure we might need to fight some off... but better a few then the whole damn household!\*

#### Chapter 1046 Lily and the Not-as-Great Escape

"If you surrender peacefully you will not be injured before being brought to trail," said the lead maid with the sword.

"Counter offer," said Lily, "Would you be willing to accept the fact that Meng has been replaced with an imposter and we worked mostly by accident because of true sight?" Lily wasn't going to mention that it wasn't her true sight, or that there was another person involved in this at all.

"While that sounds impossible, I'm sure the elders will be willing to hear you out," said the maid with a toothed smile. Lily was getting the feeling that while they would 'hear them out' it was more so that they'd be able to laugh at the absurdity of the claim afterwards, not that they would take her seriously.

\*Right... so can I get out of the room? Probably? I don't feel all that intimidated by a bunch of servants that needed to get a sword to break through my rather pathetic barrier. Sure it was pretty good... but it was a first attempt that if done right would've been able to stop the blade as well. The fact that it took such a beating from just fists says more about the weakness of these guys then the strength of my barrier...

At the same time... it's still going to take a good deal of mana to get through them all without killing anybody. Perhaps not a certainty, but Bing would be sad if we killed someone she knew and liked. I can't exactly ask 'Hey you friends with Bing' before sending thousands of razor sharp pieces of paper in their general direction. I'd have to soften the edges massively and brute force it with a wave of paper to knock them out and away. Which... well last time I went too hard on that spell I passed out for hours afterwards. Really not ideal in this situation.\*

"It's true though," said Lian, mostly just to buy time.

"Ah Lian, I recognise you. So that's how you intruders managed to get this far. I suppose Bing will be disappointed by your betrayal," said the maid.

"Look, Lian is only here because I forced her to be," said Lily, hoping in the worst case scenario that Lian wouldn't have to shoulder the label of traitor. Plus, one could argue that Kat and Lily did abduct her. If you squinted. And were missing an eye.

"She seems awfully comfortable right now, so I can't say I really believe you," said the maid.

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"Well, considering you haven't believed anything I've said so far that doesn't surprise me. Is part of your job being obstinate? Oh, sorry, I suppose I should introduce myself before throwing out insults. My name is Lily, what's yours," said Lily as she brought time to go through more escape options.

\*The walls look surprisingly thick considering this is a hidden room. In addition to that, I can't tell if there are more servants waiting for us there. My ears are good, but not quite that good. There is simply too many people milling around now. What about the back of the room? Hmmm... same problem I think.\*

"I don't need to introduce myself to a criminal," hissed the maid.

"Well in that case I dub you Swordy," said Lily without any shame, taking a page from Kat's book. Might as well give them a dumb nickname to piss them off and order them better in her mind.

"I will not fall for your tricks, criminal. I will provide you no more information than what you currently has, which seems to be basically nothing," said Swordy.

"Lian you know this girl?" asked Lily with a chuckle.

"Um... no... I don't remember her name," answered Lian honestly. Though, it was a little unfair. She was facing the back wall with her legs facing the maid so she had to guess Swordy's real name based on just her voice and how she spoke. Sadly, there were too many female servants that liked to antagonise her, so it didn't exactly narrow things down.

Lily on the other hand, COULD see Swordy, and her eye was spasming, her jaw was clenched, and her sword was being held in a death grip. Apparently what Lian said was much more inflammatory. \*I'm surprised that Swordy took such offence. I mean, if you supposedly think so little of Lian that you're not surprised she'd betray Bing then why would you take offence at her words?\*

Lily looked at the ceiling and sighed, making the gesture really obvious in hopes to bait out an attack to dash around the servants... but as she stared up at the ceiling... she saw that it was wood. Slightly rotted, and poorly maintained wood. \*THEY DIDN'T REINFORCE THE CEILING. HAHAAHAHAHAHAHA. I KNOW

HOW I'M GETTING OUT OF HERE.\* Lily quickly schooled her face into the best mask of indifference she could manage. It seemed nobody here was thinking about the roof, and she wanted to keep it that way as long as possible.

"So, are you sure there isn't anything I can say to change your mind? I mean, as a demon I can't lie, so that should be worth something right?" said Lily. Which was, very much a lie. She was neither a demon, nor forced to lie... but it could work? Perhaps? She had demonic energy, and if they had the senses to pick up on that perhaps they'd just believe her.

Swordy narrowed her eyes and looked Lily over. "I don't see any horns on you. Pretty sure you're not a demon,"

\*Welp. I didn't practice this for nothing. It's a massive pain to do though.\* Lily focused on her forehead, and imagined her transformation. It was an unpleasant experience, both in the lead-up and in success. Lily felt it as her skin split and horns grew in, wincing as she felt her own body fighting against her. It wanted to either keep going, letting the rest of her body change, or retreat and return to human form. \*Should've practiced this more.\* "This enough proof?" asked Lily, trying to hide the effort this was taking.

Swordy looked genuinely surprised, but they returned to frowning not long afterwards. "Hmm... those are horns true... and I can sense... something about them. Yet, you could simply be a shapeshifter or an illusionist, and I know both are much more common than a demon,"

"True, but I have demonic energy!" insisted Lily, with a smile on her face that showed off her canines quite intentionally.

Swordy frowned at this, but then remembered the paper Lily had summoned. It had been filled, not with demonic energy... but with mana. "Liar! You are but a mage playing pretend! Now, enough talk, face my blades!"

"Fuck!" Lily hissed as Swordy blurred in front of her. Lily let go of the transformation on her head, and pushed it into her hands. Claws came much more naturally to her, and barely caused any discomfort despite the major changes to her hand's musculature and nails. The sound of metal on metal rung out when Swordy's sword connected with her gleaming nails.

Lily hissed, like the part feline she was, and slashed at Swordy's face with her claws. Swordy leaned back and threw out the sword to try and cut Lily's midsection. Lily, had been waiting for that though and jumped up on the sword instead. Swordy's eyes went wide as Lily leapt off the weapon and slashed through the rotting wood in the ceiling. "See ya bitch!" said Lily as she cackled.

The ceiling was dark and musty, with cobwebs everywhere and enough droppings to cause her to gag from the smell now that it was registering properly to her mind. She could hear the servants scrambling down below, but she was already moving, ducking and weaving around the support beams as she ensured that Lian didn't get smashed into anything by accident. That was when she heard a growl of effort and glanced behind her.

\*Swordy is persistent.\* Lily's mental complaint was accurate. Swordy had jumped up into the roof as well, though her larger frame would make navigating her way through it much more complicated. \*I could probably fight her here if I wasn't carrying Lian... should I leave Lian somewhere and take Swordy

out? Ehh... probably not. We're just wasting time till Kat can come and get us. I shouldn't risk taking fights I don't need to.\*

#### Chapter 1047 A Running Battle

Lily pulled up her sigil and summoned a series of three sheets of paper, this time, she made them as far apart as the spell would allow, not expecting any of them to last more than a moment, but hopefully it would still slow down Swordy a bit. Lily didn't even look back. Lian however, could see the lacking effect they had. Swordy didn't even pause in her stride, simply swiping once to rip her way through the paper. Even the first time, where the paper caught on the blade and bunched up for a bit didn't slow Swordy down at all.

That was why, when Lian saw Lily cast the spell again she spoke up, "Um... not to put down your efforts Lily, but that didn't do anything the first time, I'd suggest not wasting any more mana on them,"

\*Well that's not really a surprise. I guess I'll just have to think up something else...\* A new idea didn't take long to come to Lily at all. Once again, trying to waste as little mana as possible Lily summoned large stationary pieces of paper, but this time she focused on cutting down their height, and summoning them at ankle height. "Tell me how this goes" said Lily.

Lian watched Lily's new barrage. Swordy stepped over the first two, though the first step was a bit awkward, it didn't slow her down much, and the second one didn't matter at all. The third looked like it was going to share a similar fate, but Lily had made the fourth even smaller and placed it just a bit ahead of the third.

Swordy stepped over the third gracefully, without noticing the final slip of paper, she stamped down on it accidentally and when she went to push off again, Swordy found that magically summoned paper was pretty slippery, especially when you're running at such a high speed. *novelnext.cOm*

Swordy's hand whipped out to grab the nearby support beam to keep herself up, but instead of a nice handhold, she found her hand full of splinters as the wood crumbled under her hands proving that they really needed to renovate the roof at some point. Arms still flailing, Swordy's sword slashed through the roof, and dropped a bit of snow on her. It wasn't enough snow to be an issue but it was humiliating enough for her to let out an angry scream. "RAAGH!"

There was a moment, where that all seemed like a great idea. Swordy was delayed, the roof was at risk if Swordy did something stupid like attacking with a qi ability, and Lily was gaining distance from Swordy. That was until Swordy started to glow and launched herself after the two at about twice the speed. "Lily we have a problem! The sword bitch is gaining on us!" yelled Lian with all the strength she could muster at the moment.

Lily spared a glance behind her and found Lian was very much correct. \*Shit. Shit... um.... PAPER CANNON!\* Lily fired a dense cloud of paper straight at Swordy's chest. Wasting a good chunk of mana in an attempt to slow down Swordy who looked a lot like an angry bull in that moment. That was part of why Lily and Lian were so shocked when Swordy gracefully dodged around the barrage of paper, barely slowing, and taking no damage whatsoever.

\*Well. That ain't good chief.\* Lily frowned at that as Swordy made up what distance Lily had grabbed with her paper trick. Now she was down a chunk of mana, Swordy was still catching up, and the roof was



about to end. \*Wait what was that last part?\* That's when Lily looked ahead, properly, and realised that they were about to run into the corner of the house. Shit. \*Forward or take a left? What's the better option here?\* Lily didn't have long to decide, and without really knowing where she was trying to run to, Lily decided to take the left.

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Lily was very tempted to swing herself around, hooking her clawed hands into one of the supports and letting herself spin around, but Swordy had already proven that was a bad idea. Lily herself might be lighter than Swordy, but she had Lian as well, and it was pure grip strength that shattered the previous support. It didn't even have the chance to hold up the weight.

So Lily instead dug her boots into the wood as best she could and tried to change trajectory quickly. It was... mostly a success. Lian might've had her shoulder clip a support beam, but Lian didn't complain and the beam didn't shatter so Lily was counting that as a win. Especially when Swordy had to slow down noticeably to make the turn, giving Lily a bit of distance she was, once again, losing rapidly.

\*Gah. What am I supposed to do? I only know like two spells! It's hard learning magic alright! I don't even know who I'm complaining to! Kat I guess? Urgh, don't think about how your girlfriend is going up against someone who is at least Rank 4. Think about more important things like the sword maniac that's rapidly catching up to you!\*

A small part of Lily, the romantic part, was complaining that Kat was ALWAYS more important, but the rest of her mind pointed out that if they died, they'd never see Kat again anyway so their focus was better served on running away right now. The romantic part, shocked at this revelation agreed.

Sadly, that agreement didn't give her some newfound burst of speed. Lily was surprised at just how fast she was, and it wasn't overly tiring just yet, but sadly, that speed wasn't better than Swordy. A quick glance behind her revealed Swordy looked just as determined as before. They'd only cleared a small distance really so it's not like Lily was expecting Swordy to be exhausted, but it would've been nice certainly.

\*Hmmm... so I need to figure out where to get off this merry-go-round, hopefully before Swordy catches me or I reach the next corner because I can't just keep running in circles forever. Well... hmm... actually... maybe I could? What are the chances they bust through the ceiling I'm running on? A good portion of the workforce were surrounding that room... and I doubt they're all quick. Then again... we're not exactly quiet up here, so I wouldn't be surprised if they're starting to follow down below. Yeah... dodging attacks from below and running from Swordy would not be ideal. So what do I do about it?\*

"Lily!" hissed Lian, and Lily reacted instinctively. She didn't know what the problem was, so she just leapt forward and to the side. The spot Lily had just been sitting in was sliced through with a blade of air. Apparently Swordy was starting to be less concerned with property damage.

\*Shit. Shit. Shit. Ok, I need to figure out where to go. Can we... I could just head off the property right? Kat can find us later... but can we get down the mountain if I do so? Maybe? I'd need to see it... so I guess it's time to gamble a bit.\*

Lily glanced down at her hand and pulled her claws back to the surface. Listening carefully, and noting that Swordy hadn't caught up just yet, Lily kicked off the ground hard and slashed towards the roof.

Now, sadly, this roof was not so poorly maintained, and while she did slice through it, the roof didn't completely crumble under the blow. Eye's widening in horror, Lily pulled her legs up and kicked out with as much power as she could, succeeding in breaking through...

At the cost of Swordy catching up. Lily felt a hand tighten around her tail and pull her back in. Thinking quickly she threw Lian to the side, onto the snowy roof, as Lily herself twisted around as best she could. Swordy had her sword raised and it was coming down to strike at Lily's neck. Apparently mercy wasn't on the table at the moment. Lily grimaced as she brought her claws up to defend herself, a clang ringing out as they collided with the sword.

Lily tried to transform to escape the grip even as she was pushed backwards into the ground, but found something blocking it. Her mind went to the obvious. She couldn't transform while Swordy had her tail in hand. Lily didn't know if it was the qi, the grip, the tail specifically, or if she was just panicking and failing the process, but she was ready to fight. For her freedom.

Lily landed as best she could, her tail was still being pulled away from her, but apparently it was pretty sturdy. It wasn't a pleasant feeling, but Swordy wasn't crushing it, and her tail didn't feel like it was being pulled out of her back. Swordy lifted her sword up to bring down on her tail and Lily came in, one hand to block the sword, the other to stab the bitch's neck. Lily was starting to run out of mercy too it seemed.

#### Chapter 1048 Fly Away on Southern Winds

Swordy twisted out of the way, making her sword swing awkward and ineffective, but she managed to avoid having her throat clawed out. Lily couldn't say she was all that broken up over the failed attack. However, she was **PISSED** that Swordy still had a hand wrapped tightly around her tail. It might not have been the same anger Kat would have if someone was doing the same thing, but it was still immensely frustrating, and anger was starting to cloud her thoughts.

\*Calm. Calm Lily. Don't fight when you're angry. You make stupid mistakes and take risks you don't need to. Like right now. You should've just tried to claw Swordy's hand. Then you would've been free of her grasp, and not still held by her. On the other hand. **VIOLENCE!**\*

Lily knew, in the abstract, that the anger wasn't helping her. Kat was able to remain calm in most fights due to a combination of, apathy, her regeneration, and her trust in D.E.M.O.N.S to keep her alive. Lily had none of those things, and so fighting the anger at the situation was particularly hard. Especially because large parts of her didn't want to fight the anger. They wanted blood. Perhaps it was just the feline instincts, wanting to bite and claw at the offender for chasing her, for causing problems, for touching her tail.

So when the idea came up to blast her with razor sharp pieces of paper to force Swordy away, even if it was a waste of mana when something more limited would work... Lily couldn't find it within herself to reject the idea, even when she knew that it wasn't an ideal course of action. She did reduce the amount of paper, cutting on mana that way... but she had to reinforce and sharpen the ones that remained. And she shot two separate ones. One was aimed at the air just above Swordy's hand so she couldn't move closer to avoid the second one, aimed squarely at her chest.

Swordy growled, but dropped to the ground, trying not to give up her hold on Lily. She had seen how much it caused Lily to rage, and was hoping to abuse that a little longer. Lily, having none of it, forced the sigil to turn downwards towards Swordy. Her mind was straining against the action, it really wasn't safe to move sigils while you were casting but not only did Lily not get that particular memo, as it was considered 'too basic' for the paper magic book, Lily wouldn't have cared.

Swordy tried to roll out of the way, but her arm was clipped, hundreds of paper fragments flowed over her arm. Most still missed, and many got caught up in the threads on her shirt, but enough cut into her arm, to cause her to wince and let go of Lily's tail once and for all. For Lily, she felt the mana in her sigil start to rampage, and lost control of it shortly after. Her mana was spasming in her chest, and she had to force it down as it tried to cause her other problems. Lily's arms were shaking as the mana rumbled around her insides.

\*Shit, why is this happening? Is it because I moved the spell while I was casting it? But there are spells that you can move! Spells that can home! Why?!\* Lily was of course, mistaking the difference between a spell designed to move, and a spell you moved through interfering with an active sigil. Two very different things.

In a split second decision, to help alleviate the rampaging mana in her body, Lily decided to cast a follow-up spell. This was a variation on the paper cut spell focusing more on spread then direct damage. It was only a small variation, and Lily was all but certain she understood the spell well enough to make such a minor adjustment.

A swarm of paper exploded over Swordy's down form. The woman growled and used her first instance of true qi techniques. A ball of air expanded to cover her form, diverting the paper with ease. At the same time, Lily felt herself cough, her mana NOT calmed by additional casting. A small part of her mind scoffing at the thought that it would ever have worked that way. Lily felt blood welling up in her throat, and she turned around, sprinting for safety.

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Lily grabbed Lian, who had been standing, ready to help if necessary. Lian was shaky on her feet and clearly in no position to render much assistance, but the goth was trying dammit, and Lily felt her heart go out to the cultivator. \*That's it. I'm making sure you get out of this as unscathed as possible. Even if I have to do something a bit dumb. You've helped Kat and I so much, and the fact that it was mostly for Bing's sake? Honestly that just makes it better.\*

Lian sat heavy on her shoulder now as Lily's knees creaked when she dropped down from the roof. Lily winced, and started running. She could already feel herself flagging from the effort. Her mana no calmer, and sapping her mental and physical energy just to keep it from acting out. The fact she was low on mana at this point, apparently not doing anything to help the situation at all. The only way Lily could think of to stop the rampant mana now would be to drain herself nearly completely, but then she'd be likely to pass out. Not ideal in the circumstances.

Snow crunched under Lily's cheap shoes. They weren't designed for even the light snowfall that coated Bing's estate. Granted Lily hadn't packed for winter, but she was very thankful for her tail after the second moment of panic where her foot started to slide on the ice. The third time it happened, she

heard Swordy crashed down behind them. Lily winced and glanced back to see what she was dealing with.

Swordy's arm was still bleeding profusely. Perhaps her paper had anti-coagulation properties? Lily didn't know but she was thankful for it because Swordy seemed to be breathing heavily in the snow even as she charged after them. Swordy also had some minor cuts on the tips of her fingers, and the edges of her clothes. Apparently that bubble of air hadn't extended quite fast enough to save her completely from injury.

Despite the snow, Swordy was breathing heavily and there was sweat upon her brow. Lily was thankful for that. She felt like she was on her last legs in many ways. Her ideas had... sub-optimal results multiple times in a row now, and that was taking its toll. Swordy looked tired yes, but not exhausted, and Lily felt herself edging closer towards that territory. With her mana freaking out like it was, Lily felt she had perhaps one more good spell in her and that was it.

Lily kept sprinting as fast as she could towards the edge of the cliff. Not really sure what she would do once she got there, but with no better plans than to hope there was a path down she could take. Lily tried to flex her transformation a bit, perhaps encourage wings to grow and let her glide down... but a spasm of her back muscles proved that it wasn't happening, not while her mana was ravaging her body. Which is why, when they made it to the cliff edge and there was nowhere to go Lily's mind went into overdrive. The cliff's edge was sheer, there wasn't even a deadly looking spike. Just nothing as far as Lily could see, which was to the cloud cover around the place, but that was at least a kilometre down.

"Lian, I'm about to do something dumb. I trust you to keep me alive in the meantime," said Lily with determination. I just have to figure out what that dumb thing IS first.

"Lily!" shouted a panicked Lian, not really sure how to argue, or what she was even really arguing against.

\*Ok. I need to get down, and I can't summon my wings. I have mana for one good spell, maybe. It's hard to judge how much mana I have at the moment, the amount seems to spasm and fluctuate when I focus on it. So I've got one spell, if I'm lucky. How do I get out of this? It's not like I can just summon a plane and fly away... \*

Unless... fuck maybe it IS possible... "I'm probably going to end up unconscious making this permanent, or as close as I can to that. Lian, make sure to keep us on course!" shouted Lily as she jumped. Swordy was but a moment behind, but the swordswoman skidded to a stop instead of going over the edge.

In mid-air, Lily summoned up her spell, the one that made large sheets of paper, and forced it to bend to her whims. The piece was folded like a giant paper airplane, and wingspan that would put pelicans to shame. Lily grinned, and triggered her transformation, less weight that way.

She fell unconscious just as the air picked up on the wings and they started to glide. \*Hopefully we have enough wind to keep us from crashing... \*

Chapter 1049 Lian into it

“Lily I swear to the heavens, if you die on me I’ll find some way to curse you back to life!” hissed Lian as she grabbed the sides of the paper plane she was now riding. Lian shifted her position to alter the planes angle of attack and hopefully stop them from just crashing into the nearby mountains.

In Lian’s mind, this was a minor thing. She leaned back and stabilised the plane before leaning to the right and taking them away from the cliffs she knew surrounded Bing’s home. Not too far though, she wanted to ride the updraft that the mountains provided, even so high up and so cold. To Lian, this was a somewhat challenging thing, but of minor not overall.

She was forgetting that she’d grown up as part of a sect of Wind cultivators. Even if she didn’t cultivate wind qi at all, she’d picked up more than a few tricks just from living with them so long. She had an intuitive understanding of air currents that could only come from spending hours upon hours of class time learning about them and all their intricacies. For Lian, she knew it would never be as important to her as the others, but she hoped it would be useful when she eventually learned to fly. She learnt later on in her life that it wasn’t, not really, but the information was proving its worth right now.

Lian glanced down at the still figure of Lily. \*Dammit. You better still be breathing you little rat. Getting me out alive might be nice but your demon girlfriend will FUCKING MURDER ME if you aren’t recovered by the time she finds us. Honestly, I’d rather face the sects justice. At least I know they’ll kill me quickly. Can’t risk damaging their precious image of righteousness so it would be over quickly.

Well... that’s a little unfair. The sect does good work, and provides a number of services for the needy mortals. Wait... is that a rude way of putting it? I don’t know who I’m arguing with... I just mean that the mortals who are need. The sects soup kitchens are surprisingly relaxing to work at for example, because we come down HARD on troublemakers interrupting that sort of thing.

So it’s not like the sect does NO good work... but I grew up with Lian. I know about the black division, and the inquisitors. I know we’re not all sunshine and roses... hmm... I suppose I could end up with them... but as Bing’s friend it’s a bit too necessary to make my execution public, and they’d need me to look somewhat ok for that... though... if they cut off a hand or foot ‘during a fight’ perhaps. Ugh, still better then letting Kat get her hands on me if Lily isn’t ok.

I mean what was Kat thinking really? Lily did wonderfully in getting us out, but I can’t believe Kat let her help. It clearly wasn’t Lily’s idea, and based on the fact she’s out cold... or... well no she’s out cold, I can’t be upset about that fact on Lily’s behalf. Clearly she wanted to help... and it probably means a lot that Kat was willing to trust her with my safety, by herself. I get the feeling Lily doesn’t get a lot of chances to do that.\*

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Lian sneezed, and sadly, the paper plane went with the jerking motion. Lian had to struggle a bit to keep from flipping the plane over. One of her hands had to snake over and grab Lily before she could roll out of the plane. Which of course, caused more issues with the stability of the plane. Lian was stuck fighting the wind, and her exhaustion for what felt like an age but was in reality only five minutes at most.

Lian was breathing heavily when she finally got the plane floating calmly once again. They were still going to crash at some point, but it would be far in the future, and hopefully away from anyone who

wanted to chase them for the time being. With Meng and Bang being fake, Lian was hoping they didn't know the mountain as well as she did. It was a bit of a fragile hope, but one that she was banking on.

\*If I'm really lucky I should be able to find one of the cave systems Bing and I found playing on the mountain. I have vague memories of a few of them... hopefully I'll spot a landmark or something. Urgh... hopefully this isn't too much effort. I'm still basically out of qi, and the fact that I was hyped up because of the fight isn't helping matters. I've got just barely enough energy to keep myself from collapsing but no more than that. I can't do anything too strenuous, not even fight this plane more than... once? Maybe twice more? Ugh... Lily why did you think this was a good idea?

Actually, how did you know this was going to work? And how DID it work?\* Lian looked down at the paper plane for the first time and really started to think about the physics behind it. She wasn't from a modern society, but she was from a sect that study the wind religiously and now that she was looking the paper plane over, it was large yes, and might be able to work as a glider in ideal circumstances...

But it was almost certainly performing above expectations. It reacted to her movements a bit too well and Lian was now certain that it was gliding smoother through the air than should be possible, especially while keeping so much altitude. \*Damn mage bullshit. I bet that has to be it.\*

Lian was of course, being a bit of a hypocrite considering just how many things she could do with curse qi. This notion would be reinforced by the fact that Lian wasn't taking into account just how rich in qi the mountain was. The sect settled here for a reason after all. The ice and wind qi mixed in strange ways, making both more potent. Perhaps if this was a normal mountain, and the wind wasn't so rich in qi the flight would've been over sooner... but as it was? Lily had just conjured oversized paper that was barely thick enough to maintain flight. The real magic was that the snow wasn't melting and causing issues when it hit the paper.

\*I was useless in that fight. Not that I really planned on fighting. I was already exhausted when I cursed the array. Honestly, I expected it to cost a bit more blood. Though perhaps I should be glad it was blood, and not bone marrow, or just the ability to produce blood that I sacrificed. Besides Lily did...\* Lian winced, and then pressed her hand to where she was 90% sure Lily's lungs should be, and smiled when she felt movement. \*...did well enough. She's alive. I'm alive. Nobody got hurt... much.\*

\*Her performance was... not ideal. Not that it was worse than mine... and really I shouldn't criticise her considering it turned out fine and I don't think she's that much of a combatant... but dammit she made so many mistakes. Why didn't she throw some of those razor sharp papers while we were running? Why stick to large but thin paper she knew that maid could cut through easily.

Why did she not bring down the roof to block off the path? She busted out of the roof to escape, so clearly she wasn't avoiding something like that. Why not bring down a large section on top of our pursuer? Lily could've used her claws to slice through a few supports as she ran. That would've gotten the maid right? Why didn't she try to disarm the maid either? With her claws, a strike to the hand would easily disarm a lesser opponent, of which that maid was almost certainly one.\*

Lian sighed and glanced at the mountain, spotting one of the boulders she'd used as a landmark in the past. Probably. Lian was pretty sure it was one she'd seen before. Lian looked down at the paper plane. It was sturdy considering the material used in its construction but Lian was under no delusions that it would survive the landing. Perhaps, if Lian had enough qi and was careful it could be prevented but even

just getting through the trees intact would be a hassle, and she didn't have enough qi for the job anyway.

\*Gotta risk it I think. I'm starting to feel the chill, and I don't know how well Lily can handle it normally, let alone unconscious and exhausted like she is.\* Lian angled the plane down, aiming to hit the ground near the boulder. The wings clipped the trees, as she'd expected they would, but Lian held strong. The plane shook and shuddered, but she managed to pull it up just before hitting the boulder, halting most of their momentum, before crashing hard into the snowy ground.

"Welp... I'm alive, and cold, but we're near shelter... probably and the plane is wrecked so... guess we just have to hope," mumbled Lian.

## Chapter 1050 In the Vault

We're back with Kat. This is just after Lily was thrown at Lian.

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Kat frowned as she was carried through the teleportation, biting back the worry and unease in her stomach. Despite the smooth transition, Kat was certain she'd never felt more uncomfortable using teleportation. \*God? If you're real, please make sure Lily stays safe. I want to trust her. I NEED to trust her. I've seen how fragile her confidence has become, and as much as I want to protect her from everything...

I know she needs to stand up for herself. She needs to realise that she can become a powerful and fearsome mage in her own right. She wants nothing more than to stand beside me and if I keep growing in strength and Lily can't keep up, neither of us will be happy. Lily will forever be at risk, and on her end, she'll think she can't help me properly. Even if she's the brains and I'm the brawn, if a Rank 5 can sneeze on her and kill her... I'll never be comfortable and she might start to hate herself.\*

Kat stepped out of the light in a daze, barely ready for a fight as the emotions swarmed around her stomach. She felt ill, and every instinct she had was screaming at her to tear her way back through space and time to stand beside Lily. To make sure she was safe. Even if intellectually Lily was probably safer where she was. Lily wasn't HERE and that was an issue.

Kat couldn't help but mentally eye the closed link between her and Lily. It was still there, it still existed. Even with no traffic it comforted Kat deeply. She wanted to rip open the connection, to KNOW that Lily was safe... but that wouldn't be TRUSTING her would it. \*It would be as good as telling her that I don't trust her. Even worse if I tried to hide the fact that I was watching without letting her check on me. She'll ask, I'm sure. Perhaps not immediately... but she'll figure it out. No. I have to leave it closed. I have to trust her.\*

Kat sucked in a deep breath and walked forward, with purpose in her step she didn't really feel, taking in the room. Kat was almost certain she heard a faint sigh... then she realised something. The room was small. It was barely a corridor in truth. A painting hung on the right, and a vault door took up space on the left. The floor was densely packed ice covered by a layer of glass, and the walls were painted green.

And there, staring at the door, with slumped shoulder was Fake Meng. Kat watched as the woman slowly turned to face Kat with a frown on her face. Kat walked slowly forward, letting her be watched

until they stood a few paces apart. There was that sigh again, and Kat realised it was the woman in front of her. "Um... hello?" said Kat with a touch of confusion.

"Hello Kat," said Fake Meng, making Kat raise an eyebrow, "oh don't give me that look. A demon bodyguard? Bodeir that overprotective fool WOULD do such a thing. I know who you are, I know that well. I was all but certain you'd come eventually, though, I must ask, how did you find out it was a trap?"

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\*This is a surprisingly polite conversation.\* "True sight," admitted Kat, seeing no reason to hide it.

The woman cackled. It was a bitter, painful thing, as tears leaked out of her eyes. It was like hearing the sound of broken animal, knowing the end was near. It was... strange to Kat's ears. She didn't know if this would be a fight to the death... but Fake Meng seemed to think she'd already lost, horribly. "I can't believe it. Decades of work... and all because an overprotective father happened to get lucky with his demon guard!"

Fake Meng shook her head, "I told my partner it wasn't worth it. We even checked in with our superior, saying we should cancel the plan. That it was too dangerous with everything that has been going wrong lately... fucker told me I was going soft. Yeah? Well FUCK HIM TOO. I was RIGHT. God I can't believe this. How old are you by the way?"

Kat wasn't sure why Fake Meng wanted to know, but it was an easy question to answer, "Eighteen, though, I think my birthday is coming up soon? Days get a bit blurry when I'm on a Contract,"

Fake Meng nodded, "Yup. Bested by an actual child! Fuck I don't even know what I want to do now,"

"Um... what do you mean?" asked Kat.

"Do I bother fighting you?" answered Fake Meng, "I'm not sure I could win, and even if I do, I'm not sure it would matter. At this point I'm sure Sue, your partner, has already informed the servants of Bodeir Sr that I'm a fake, and that my partner likely is as well. Dammit. Would it have been so hard to stick to the original plan? But NOOO the hostages are too valuable they say. Talents of the generation they said. Worth the effort they said. Well FUCK that old codger, it clearly wasn't worth it now was it!"

"Huh..." said Kat, unsure how to take this.

"What's got you so confused?" asked Fake Meng.

"Well... all the other cultivators I've fought have this whole 'DEATH BEFORE DISHONOUR'" said Kat, shouting the words in the best cultivator voice she could manage, "so I haven't exactly had an experience where a cultivator just... isn't interested in fighting to the death? Or at least, trying there best and running when it turns out I can stop them. The fact you don't even want to try... well..."

Fake Meng nodded, "I see, well, you can call me Meng," 'Meng' paused at Kat's raised eyebrow, before answering the unspoken question, "it's actually my name you know? A lucky chance, though my partner ISN'T really called Bang. I'm not going to rat them out if you haven't seen them yet... but my name is Meng... and I raised that girl,"

Meng pointed sadly at the door. "Wait what?" asked Kat shocked. "But... but you look nothing like Bing or Fang,"



Meng nodded, "Oh, I'm not their biological mother but I replaced her months after the birth while she was weakened because of it. Bang, the real one that is, didn't even fucking notice. Biggest disappointment of my life. He wasn't even MY husband and I still felt disgusted by the fact he didn't notice his WIFE HAD BEEN REPLACED. I'm not EVEN A WIND CULTIVATOR." Meng was breathing hard, chest heaving. "That useless PRICK didn't notice when 'I' was replaced, and I took great joy in poisoning and replacing him eventually. I might have felt bad, but he was a shit father, and a worse husband."

Kat's mouth was open, gaping in shock, but Meng was on a roll now, "So when I say, Bing is MY daughter, I bloody well mean it. I raised that girl. I cared for her. I loved her. I don't fucking care what the pricks up the chain of command think, 'Don't get attached' they said, 'It's for the mission' they said, 'You'll get your revenge it will all be worth it' they said. FUCKING ARRAGONT SON'S OF WHORES!

"I didn't fucking WANT revenge on the stupid sect, I wanted a family. Why would you give the barren spy a FAMILY! What did you think was going to happen? That I'd just happily hand them over to you fucks after I fought and bled for them! That I'd let you take my daughter from me? My son? That I'd just be a good little doll?

" 'Oh it's what you were trained for' they'd say if they knew. Pricks. Fucking hopeless chucklefucks that don't understand the idea of empathy if it bit them on the ass. Well guess what? Pretty sure I'm ready to take a few bites myself!"

\*I have no idea what's going on anymore. I'm so confused. Do I like... take the opening and disrupt her momentum? Point out how silly she's being? Or just let her rant? Honestly I have no idea what I'm meant to do here.\*

"Um... why keep working for them?" asked Kat, not really sure what the results of her question would be.

"Because I still hate this shitty sect. Have you heard the shit they say about my second daughter? Lian? I wouldn't normally admit to that, but you already know Bing isn't biologically mine, so I can fucking claim them both if I want it! Those stupid mortals didn't know what they were giving up I tell you! Lian is such a dutiful daughter, and she tries not to show it, but the little scraps of affection I felt I could get away with slipping her mean so much to her.

"It breaks my heart every time I do it. She shouldn't NEED to fight for scraps of my affection. I just want to hug her and squeeze her and tell her it's alright. That I know what's going through. I was an illusionist specialised in seduction. I know what people say about people like us. BUT NO. I'm MENG, MATRIARCH OF THE HOLY ICY WIND SECT. WHAT WOULD SHE KNOW ABOUT THE PLIGHT OF A HATED CULTIVATION AFFINITY. FUCKING NOTHING APPARENTLY."

\*Welp. I officially have no idea how I'm supposed to navigate this fucking mess. \*