

DEMONS 461

Chapter 461: The Wall

In the end, Stone did acquire a set of earmuffs for the pair that had been keyed to each other. This meant, apparently, that they wouldn't block out the sounds produced by whoever was wearing the partner set. They were warned that this did mean excessive noise generated by one of the two would still be a problem of the other.

"So, you don't NEED to put these on but I've got them now and even managed to find a paired set. This should work the best for your job because it'd be bad if you couldn't communicate with each other during combat." Explained Stone.

"Thanks!" said Kamiko cheerily putting them around her arm for the time being while Kat set hers around her sash for a second before immediately hitting them with her arm. *Seems Kamiko had the better idea here. I thought the gap would be a bit wide for keeping on our arms but seems to hold mostly strong. Not sure HOW considering how slippery our skin can be when it wants.*

As they started to head into the mine stone said. "One last thing. Don't run here. It's considered common courtesy to walk in the mines to prevent things getting too loud, or just hard to dodge. Some people who work here are FAST but their reaction times are horrible, so neither them nor the person they run into can dodge. Might take a while, but it is what it is"

With that, Stone headed off without waiting for a response. Kat and Kamiko followed easily behind him, though, when he said 'walk' clearly power walking was included in that definition because Kat found herself basically jogging to keep up. A small part of her mind argued that because demons were so much faster, they were much slower than a run could potentially be, but she ignored that.

The mine was mostly what she'd expected. A lot of stone walls, no minecart tracks because they float, but a lot of footprints in the dirt. A few turns here and there, mostly when they ran into a particularly strange looking ore that sucked in light. Some other interesting coloured ores in small quantities that lined the walls, apparently not worth digging out for some reason.

The sound though. That wasn't fun. It only took about a minute before Kat threw on her earmuffs, she didn't even notice them shifting around her horns when she did so. Her mind normally filtered sound in such a way that it didn't overlap too badly. She could tell what came from where to a certain extent, especially when everything else was quiet. The mine though, it just took the sound and mixed it all together into a rather annoying background drone that was just loud enough Kat found it impossible to ignore.

This led her to slipping on her earmuffs and asking what the one ore that never seemed to be dug into was. Stone grinned back at her when she asked and tapped the side of his head. Kat was not happy it took her thirty seconds to realise the issue was that she'd just put on earmuffs and he couldn't tell her anymore.

When Kamiko saw Kat putting the headgear on, she did as well. Her thoughts were closer to trying to tough out the experience with Kat, so seeing Kat capitulate it was an easy decision. Kat's ears were actually a bit better than Kamiko's but the smaller demon was much less used to pain and general annoyance, meaning the effect was more pronounced to Kamiko's mind.

Eventually, after about an hour and a half of walking through tunnels, albeit well lit ones, Stone held up a hand and slowly reduced his speed. Kat didn't see anything strange about this part of the tunnels, and was looking around for any changes but wasn't seeing anything.

Stone took another few steps, bleeding speed each time his feet made contact with the Eart until he'd practically slowed to a crawl, but it took a few more steps for him to stop completely. Kat could see another corner coming up soon, and wondered if that was where the rats were.

Stone tapped the side of his head and Kat took it to mean they should remove the earmuffs temporarily. The sound returned in full force and Kat winced, but she could deal with it for a bit. Kamiko was the same, though her face had gained a frown during the removal. "Ok" said Stone softly "Right around this corner, we'll find some packed dirt. I used my ability to mould stone to put it there and stop the rats from coming any further. I don't know what you'll find.

"What I'm going to do, is make a small door in the wall, about half your height so you'll need to crouch, and then send you both through quickly. The rats might be around, might not, but you'll head through and I'll wait to make sure none of the rats sneak past.

"Once you're in, I'll plug the hole in the while, but only with my weakest dirt. It's not a supporting so if you must leave, you can smash your way through. I'll be coming to get you personally at the end of the day though. Is that fine?"

Kat noticed the distinct change in address, he wasn't asking if they understood, but if they were willing to go along. *And honestly I have mixed feelings about that. It sounds safe enough from this side of things, but I'm not sure I want to bash down a wall if I'm running for my life or something. I can easily survive a few rat bites, but if I really need to retreat we have big problems.

Kamiko might be a better judge of when to leave, but that still leaves us with issues. The whole reason for the wall is not to let the swarm rats through. If we have to leave for whatever reason I don't like the idea of leaving this open to the rest of the mine...*

"Is there a reason you don't create a makeshift door instead of just filling the wall back up?" asked Kat ignoring the background droning and the urge to put the earmuffs on again.

Stone ground his lips together, "You make a valid point. The main issue is that if they can sense air through the door the swarm rats will... well... swarm. They might not be smart, but they have some good instincts, and finding fresh air is one of them. I just can't magic up a door that's good enough to prevent that. A door isn't outside my capabilities, but I think it raises the risk level a good deal for you both if I went that way.

"The one deficit of Swarm Rats that makes them such a non issue is... they don't really have a good pack survival instinct. What I mean is... they don't care if a rat dies, because they 'know' there's always more rats. They'll attack if they see you, and maybe some of the really nearby ones that hear you, but the whole swarm wouldn't come down on you like they potentially might for fresh air" Stone explained.

*Urgh, that makes an annoying amount of sense. Now I'm not exactly sure how I want to go about this. It makes retreat look like such a non option doesn't it? Hmm, I guess if it really comes to that, we can bust through the wall and then freeze rat corpses to block it. They'll dig, but we'd have time to defend. Very gross, but perhaps the only option? Should I mention it? We were told to stay partnered up, so I

couldn't even send Kamiko back to mention the problem. Heck I might need her help just to defend anyway.*

Kat looked over to Kamiko for advice but she just shrugged and said, "I don't know Kat. This is delicate stuff. Despite the miners being known for grunt work, sometimes tricky situations come up or so I've been told" Kamiko nodded towards Stone at the end who nodded and continued.

"Yup, she's right. That's what the Team Leaders and myself are for. Fixing stuff they can't. It's why I had to personally seal this wall up. Had to do it properly, not take too much stone from the surroundings, make sure it was a full seal but no load bearing and easy to knock down. More complicated then it all looks I assure you."

Kat sighed mentally. *Of course it couldn't be easy. Dammit. Well, I guess I'll just have to make sure that we aren't forced to retreat then.* "I guess that's fine then. I have no more questions" said Kat

Kamiko nodded as well, then the pair slipped their earmuffs on. Stone walked carefully up to the wall, and placed his hands on it before looking back at them both signalling he was about to bust it down.

Chapter 462: We aren't the Rats

"NOW!" Stone shouts, as the wall shifts under his hand.

Kat burst through, her mind already whirring with possibilities before her vision even clears. This isn't a spar. And this isn't a fight against humans. This will be a fight against an endless sea of rats. She knows this, and finds a strange sort of peace. Kat doesn't have to worry about holding back, or if this is the right thing to do. She thinks herself ready as she charges forward.

As the dust starts to fall Kat brings her hands up, realising her fans are not with her. Then realising, a mere moment later, she is wrong, her fans rest easily in her hands, ready to be used, even if she knows not how they should be.

Her energy starts to boil inside her body, rotating around her form, increasing the strength in her limbs and slowing her mind. The she can already make out the figures of half a dozen rats with just the small bits and pieces she can see through the falling dirt, and she is ready. Kat plants her foot on the ground to continue her charge, straight into the rats that are have had no time to react. Kat readies herself to go for them... but she isn't prepared for what she sees ahead of her.

In Kat's mind, Kamiko is a sweet girl. A nice sweet demon with shockingly proficient knifework skills. For all Kat's memory is perfect, there are things she can hide from herself easily, especially when she does not wish to think on them. Despite Kamiko's adorable aura,? and her decent performance in the Wrath spars, these are nothing like the Kamiko before Kat now.

Pink fire blazes out of the corner of Kamiko's eyes, trailing behind her like falling tears in the wind, as she charges forward Naginata in hand with both ends showing their blades. For all Kat was using her speed, Kamiko was dancing with it. Several light footsteps on after the other launches her ahead of Kat and straight into the awaiting rats, still frozen in time in both demons' perspectives.

Before Kat has taken her third step into the rat den, Kamiko is amongst them, blade singing as it slices through the rats like butter. Blood sprays out from the cuts, but always away from Kamiko, and never

toward her. As Kat runs to join in, attempt to help, she can't stop herself from noticing the blood is never directed at her either.

Kamiko completes three more clean strikes, ending the lives of another half dozen rats in the process, using both ends of her weapon to dole out death using only instants, before she plants her feet, and the wind catches up to her movements.

Rat corpses tumble backwards away from the demon girl, leaving nothing but dirt and a few splotches of blood. Compared to the worst it could have been, the swarm rats were few in number. Compared to all that rats Kat had seen prior to this moment, it was huge. Easily more than twenty corpses lay about Kamiko's feet, and Kat is stunned with the site not even hearing the shifting of rock signalling the wall behind her closing up.

Kamiko flicks on her light, which changes little for Kat, only adding shadows to the picture really, and highlighting the brutal efficiency Kamiko had carried out the dead from. For all that Kamiko is the things Kat knows her to be, she is also someone trained in weaponry for more than a decade. Someone who has known the need to end, at the very least, monsters, and perhaps monsters that believe themselves men, and, looking at the calm face of Kamiko that is no longer smiling. A tiny part of Kat wonders if she knows the girl in front of her at all.

Of course, that small bit of worry is instantly smashed when Kamiko's posture relaxes and she shivers, grimace on her face somehow more calming than the slight professional smile she was wearing before, as she says. "Gah, that was creepy. I hate rats. Just... little skittering things. I mean... there are worse monsters sure, but I am NOT a fan"

Well... that sure wasn't something I was expecting to see. This... this was nothing like Kamiko in the spars. She was decent then sure but this... this was ruthless efficiency. I'm not sure I could keep up with her in such a state. We proved I'm a little stronger, but I wonder... is most of that just my height? More muscles in my frame to help me win that sort of war? Kamiko is clearly using the ones she has much better than I am.

"I wasn't aware you had a problem with them?" said Kat, letting her intonation show it was clearly a question. There was a story there, she was sure.

Kamiko frowned, but there was a good deal of light that returned to her eyes. She used her weapon to push the rats all together, starting to bunch them up as she said. "Yeah well... I guess it is a bit of a story. In one of my early missions I was exploring an abandoned temple and the rotted floorboards gave out underneath me. Straight into a nest of rats.

"It was... disgusting. I will not tell you some of the things that I saw down there but... well, it taught me rats are truly filthy creatures when left to their own devices and that even if they are easy to kill... I'd rather not be in their lairs" said Kamiko

"Oh... um... I didn't realise this job was that bad for you..." said Kat as she used her feet to help move the rats into Kamiko's pile, very glad that the blood didn't stick to her shoes at all. Rats didn't bother her that much, but walking around with blood coating her attire was not something she was looking forward to.

Kamiko sighed. "It's not sooo bad Kat. I mean... ok, it's not exactly great but... hmmm, think of it this way. It probably wouldn't be something the system would personally assign me because there are better people for this, but if I had to do something similar on a Contract by chance, I'd just get it over with"

Kat wondered if that was the signal to move on, but Kamiko was still clearly piling rats up with her, and while they could go much faster, for some reason it felt wrong to Kat to use her super speed to clean up rat corpses.

Once it was all done, Kat realise she should turn her own lantern on as well. Activating it was easy, the drain so small as to be completely unnoticeable. Looking around, she could see they were in a corridor, much like the one they'd just left. There were no more rats she could see, but the nearby T intersection meant that she was only really looking at fifty metres of tunnel at most.

"Right then... what's the plan?" asked Kat

"Hmm... they are a bit easy to take together even though we should stay within sight of each other..." said Kamiko with a bit of an odd tilt to her voice. Kat couldn't quite work out what Kamiko was trying to say, and it was lost on the taller demon that while what Kamiko said was true, she wanted to stay near her friend, and DID NOT want to be left alone with the rats, even if it wasn't a true phobia, she did find it rather distasteful.

Kat did have a decent enough guess though. "I can take point if you want. Let the rats go for me. I don't mind if I take a bite or two, a scratch on the side. I'm not even sure if they could hurt me majorly if they tried. I think I'd get bored before I passed out"

"Sure Kat!" said? Kamiko, thinking that Kat realised she just wanted to stick together for this, and failing to realise Kat hadn't quite internalised the fact that Kamiko was more than capable of dodging an endless swarm of these slow rats all day.

The pair stalked forward, not willing to use quite the same speed to continue forward as it was hard to coordinate that sort of thing. Still, they didn't bother with just walking, settling for what would be a light run to most humans. Kat led the way, Fans somehow in hand, as she kept her eyes out. Watching the walls for any rats that had been hiding out.

For now, they were still in the part of the mine that had been sealed off and not the section that had been broken into, so it was all lined with support beams and lights, even if those lights weren't currently functioning. When they reached the T section, Kat spun her head to the right, while Kamiko went left.

Kamiko saw a blank wall about two hundred metres out.

Kat saw a sea of rats.

Chapter 463: Parting the Sea

"Over here" Kat shouted as she dashed forward into the fray. It was actually a little fast for Kamiko to understand, but when the other demon eventually turned around she'd be able to tell what Kat meant very quickly.

Kat decided very quickly the brute force approach was necessary. As she swiped her fans through the horde, she found them underwhelming. She had no skill, no technique, no understanding in the slightest about what she actually needed to do with them, just using overwhelming power.

The first batch of rats she hit were all with the flat of the fan, crushing their bodies against the heavy weight of them, but ultimately, doing more to disperse the horde than to deal any lasting damage against it. Kat, without thinking dismissed her fans and they faded away, and Kat spread her fingers wide and further sped up the energy around her body.

Kamiko followed behind her, cutting down the rats that were trying to launch themselves at Kat's 'exposed' back, which was probably the best defended place she had, mostly because of the natural instincts of her tail. Still, Kamiko easily followed behind and used Kat's distraction to slice the rats to pieces while they paid her no mind. The 'clear danger' of Kat who was standing in the middle was a much more attractive target.

But Kat could still pull her weight. *I'm not as technical as Kamiko, but I have reach, strength, and a complete apathy when it comes to getting my hands dirty if it's really required.*

Kat blurred into motion, hands outstretched with nails gleaming in the lantern light as Kat whirled. Nails slicing through the sides of rats as her tail shot through their bodies, skewering multiple rats at a time as she moved.

Kat wasn't efficient with these movements in the slightest. Where Kamiko took a miniscule amount of time to line her slices up to deal the killing blows to as many rats as she could, Kat had decided to let her instincts run wild and simply attack anything nearby as best should could. In the end, for these weak Swarm Rats that must not have been old at all, it really didn't make much of a difference.

A clean slice through the neck to remove a head... or a large gash on the side and multiple broken ribs. They both led to very dead rats with only a small difference in the amount of time required. Kat knew this, and decided to play to her strengths. As her hands swiped through another batch of rats.

Kat's fingernails easily cut through the skin and fur on any rat close enough. She could feel the thick blood and viscera cling to her for just a second before sliding off, taken away by the force of the wind as the limb moved onto the next target and Kat moved ever deeper into the swarm of rats around them.

Time started to blend together. Kat tried hard not to concentrate on the details. She certainly didn't mind the necessary actions but... there is only so many times you can feel yourself running your nails through a rat's intestines before you think it might perhaps be best if your more conscious mind decides to check out.

So Kat did. Letting the blood, skin, and bone splatter around her without a care. Her body simply struck at anything moving nearby as she shifted herself slowly forward. A few rats would always managed to escape. Perhaps they were a bit too close together, perhaps they were right at the edge of her range and her nails scraped the air before them.

Yet it did not matter, for Kamiko was doing much the same behind her. Utilising the full length of her naginata Kamiko sliced any rat that even had a chance of surviving Kat's rampage. She made sure to take out all the healthy ones, and add a few cuts to the ones that might have survived if they got lucky.

Unlike Kat, who really wasn't paying attention properly, Kamiko had entered a warriors flow. Her eyes missed nothing, and yet her mind was still and tranquil like a pond. She allowed her body to act, not on instinct, but on thousands of hours of training drilled into her body that had become something better than that.

Still, while the rats were great in number, they were nothing special, and eventually their number started to dwindle in the hallway. Kat didn't even notice at first when her hands began to hit more air than rat, and then hardly any rat at all. In fact, Kat didn't truly stop until her body chased the final rat nearby into the wall, slamming her outstretched fingers straight through the rat and into the stone, causing a soft thud to echo out, breaking Kat out of her trance.

Looking around, Kat watched Kamiko dispatch two more rats, the last of the group nearby. Shaking her head, Kat carefully pulled her fingers from the wall and let out a long sigh. As Kat rose back to her full height, she absently brushed at her outfit despite its cleanliness simply out of habit.

Well... that was... something. Kat checked her reserves and found them a bit lower than she'd like. They were down to seventy percent, though climbing back up rapidly. *I shouldn't have used up so much. I should have balanced that better or... or just USED it better. I wonder how likely it is Kamiko's still full. Perhaps... I should subtly ask.*

"How are you Kamiko?" asked Kat

Kamiko's eyes softened once she heard Kat speak, and her weapon vanished. She let out a long breath just like Kat before smiling. "I'm still in tip top shape. These rats really aren't much, but I do know they can get scarier... or well, they SHOULD be able to get scarier. All kinds of monsters get worse the longer they've been around. Little hard to tell with these guys because they spawn more frequently and tend to die just as fast..."

I'm sorry what? They get stronger? Thought Kat, choosing to just accept the fact that Kamiko seemed to be if not completely full on demonic energy at least pretty close. "What do you mean they get stronger?"

Kamiko frowned like Kat had just told her that the grass was orange but still wanted desperately to believe the claim because she was a friend. "Um... that's just how it works?"

"Well... um... I don't really interact with demonic energy outside of demons... and even then mostly just myself and the system if it counts?" said Kat unsure.

Understanding dawned on Kamiko and she hit herself lightly in the head. "I am so sorry. It's just... this... this is like the basics of the basics for us. Sorry, it... we are told very early and then repeatedly what demonic energy does to things. Mostly in the context of why we should NEVER give it to human friends for a quick power up."

Kat raised an eyebrow and nodded, asking for Kamiko to continue as after a few seconds pass. "Oh, right right. Um... so, with basically everything other than demons, it happens in stages. Or well, not for monsters. Um... ok I'm bad at explain. Let's explain with sentients first.

"So, normal human, or elf, or whatever. They take in demonic energy. They instantly get... roughly twice as strong, give or take. They keep that strength for somewhere between an hour and a week depending

on how strong they were and how much energy they got, before they crash back down to about half their normal strength.

"At that point, if they just wait, their sanity will drastically decrease as their power rather quickly returns to what it was, and then keeps climbing, much faster than even a demon's power level would. It just keeps going and going, until they lose their mind, and then it keeps going even faster after that.

"Pretty much forever until something kills them, or they explode because their body can't handle the energy, infecting a large amount of the local wildlife. Now, from there we can talk about the wildlife. If it wasn't sentient before it gets... I don't want to say smarter but... perhaps more creatively vicious?

"Then, it develops a special ability, in these rats' case that would be duplication, and then it slowly starts to gain power. It isn't anywhere close to how strong a sentient can get in any length of time really but they do get stronger slowly. Sometimes developing new abilities but rarely.

"If these rats have been in the mine a while, they'll be stronger, and the OLDEST rat in the mine might be some... twelve foot tall super rat." Explained Kamiko cheerfully.

That... that is way too much cheer for somebody who might need to fight demonic mutating rats for a few hours with a big rat super boss at the end. I... I do wonder why Stone didn't mention that but... if it's such common knowledge I suppose it does explain it... somewhat.

Chapter 464: Rat Clean Up Crew

"Actually, wait. Kamiko... is it possible for people to adapt to demonic energy and regain the sanity, or if they were an animal, gain it for the first time thus becoming a demon?" asked Kat

Kamiko winced with her full body as if Kat had struck her instead of just asking a question. "Um... look, I know you didn't mean it like that but... saying something like that, or even suggesting it is... sort of really offensive. Look. I... I understand why you might think that, but it cannot happen. I mean, ok, maybe at the very start instead of losing their sanity if they? have a high concentration of demon blood in their heritage they might just transform instead of losing their mind but I'm not sure...

"Um, look... just. Yeah, sorry, but it CAN'T happen. There have been... some... experiments looking into that apparently. It... it's NOT a pretty history. I know a bit about it because Mum gets told as part of Medical, but... yeah, no, they cannot regain sanity at all. The absolute closest you can get is if a specific type of ghost gets demonic energy into its system, then it will turn into your greatest fear and taunt you with it.

"But it isn't really sentient, it's just using its ability to reflect back a part of your mind. It doesn't always become a person, but it CAN and that's the closest something can get to sane without being a demon."

"Sorry about that. Um... why is it such a bad thing to imply that other things can become demons though?" asked Kat, genuinely curious.

Kamiko sighed. "That's another thing we don't really talk about, though in this case I think it's more something we CAN'T talk about than that we don't like to. Demons were a created race. We didn't evolve like many other sapient creatures, we were made from scratch by something.

"Personally, I suspect Angels. Though, the fact I can say I suspect Angels at all does lead me to question that a bit, but that's my belief. Either Angels or, if Angels are also a created race, whoever created them.

"So, to a demon, I think the insult is from the implication that your rejecting our heritage, or maybe implying that we are anything less than made for our tasks. Which... if it's the second one I think it's kind of silly because well... we DO change across the generations, we aren't just clones of each other, and unlike some races like Sirens for example, we don't always have kids of our type obviously. Wait... you do know that right?"

Kat nodded, "Yeah when I was in hospital I had the whole thing explained to me, though not that demons were a created race."

*And honestly, it makes a tonne of sense. They don't seem to follow conventional genetics where children are concerned, but that's fine because they DON'T have conventional genetics. I thought it might be a magic thing, but maybe it's just how they were made at the start of... well whenever they came into existence.

Still, it does make me wonder how many generations it takes for someone to stop being a demon. It's been mentioned that it CAN happen, but it also seems like it isn't terribly likely. Especially because well... I exist after all. From what I know, I'm a full blooded demon, or at least the system implied as such.

So... what makes someone less of a demon? I doubt I had much demon blood in me as a child, but now my blood is pitch black. Is it a mutation thing? Like say... your kids have a 1% chance of not being a demon, or maybe 1% chance of being able to have a 1% chance your kids won't be demons?*

Kat shook her head. They were getting way off topic and there was still plenty of rats around. "So... what do we do with all... this?" said Kat gesturing at the path of destruction they'd carved.

Most of the rats were pressed up against the rule, mostly because that's where they were flung by Kat but a number of them were skewed by her tail into the ground and later stepped over easily by Kamiko so they just littered the centre of the pathway.

When Stone had told them to pile up the rats, Kat had been picturing small, knee high, maybe waist height, piles that sat in the corner of the room. This one hallway had enough rats to build a replica of her, along with everyone at the orphanage, and still leave enough left over to make sculptures of Vivian and Callisto for fun as well.

The corridor wasn't exactly huge of course, but it had been packed. Now the rats were bundled against the walls, compacted very slightly due to the fact that some of them had been cut apart and allowed to fill in the cracks unintentionally making things a little less cramped. Still, you did have to watch your step if you wanted to walk through the corridor with no trouble.

Kamiko returned to smiling at this, though it was more like a thoughtful pout. "You know Kat... I'm not sure. It is a LOT of rats... we could maybe push them against the walls? Hungh... seems a bit lazy though... unless killing more rats is more important? Stoney didn't say which was better, just that we should kill them and make sure to pile them up."

Kat tapped her foot lightly on the ground but quickly stopped as she was causing the blood under her foot to splash everywhere as she did so. "We don't want to block off the hall though. If we piled them all up in a big mound it's be large enough to block the tunnel."

"Yeah... we can't have that" said Kamiko humming a bit at the end. "we might be able to just... push them into that dead end that went the other way? It wasn't very long, but it was enough for all the rats... it'd be a pain rounding them all up though..."

Kat looked down the tunnel, and sure enough, there was a short dead end path in view. It could fit the rats, but Kamiko was right... there was just so many of them strewn out in the hall. It would take a good deal of time and effort just rounding them up, and that didn't account for any of the 'loose bits' of rat that didn't get caught in the initial sweep.

Kat tapped herself in the chin with her tail a few times, biting her lip in thought as she glared at the problem. "I think... I think we'll just have to push them against the wall. We just don't have the skills for this. I mean maybe we could both freeze them all into like... cubes or something to move them that way and keep any stray bits from being left behind but we don't have the reserves to get even close to half, and we have other rats to kill"

Kamiko puffed up her cheeks before squeezing the air out in a long drawn out exhale. "Guess you're right Kat. Even if I used my naginata to push them around it just... wouldn't work. We'd be hear for... heck maybe even a few hours and I doubt one hall of rats is all. We could take off our headphones to check?"

"That's a good idea" said Kat as she lifted off one earmuff. She was wrong. It was a terrible idea. The sound of chittering and scratching from thousands, ten of thousands, heck maybe hundreds of thousands of rats slammed into her with an almost physical force causing her to stumble and lose her grip on the earmuff securing it back in place.

Even once it was there though, her ear kept ringing, the sound almost clinging to her ear drum crawling around in there and giving her no peace for a few moments until the sound finally left her, after effects and all. Kamiko gave a worried glance at her friend.

"Ok... new plan... never do that again. Um... it's no wonder the rats can't call for help Kamiko. It might not be that they don't care, but that they can't hear it over all the other shit, or that they've gone deaf from the noise..." said Kat

Kamiko winced at that. "Um... yeah that's... that's not good. Let's just get to cleaning up then shall we. I'll start at the end and work my way back in."

Kamiko then proceeded to dash back to the end of the tunnel where the rat sea started and, using the flat of her blade, pushed the rats to whatever side she felt like, mostly basing it on what needed more rats to balance out. Seeing this, Kat got to work as well, mostly using her tail as a way to sweep things, while still bending down and using her hands for the larger and more intact rats that were in her way.

Chapter 465: One Hallway of Rats...

One hallway of rats is much like another. Once the pair of demons had finished cleaning up the first hallway they moved onto the second and found a very familiar sight. "Same plan?" asked Kat

"Same plan" said Kamiko. Kat personally, had no better ideas, and Kamiko was proficient enough in martial combat to see that Kat didn't have the training to allow for any more complex plan. If they were to work together in concert, they'd need either much more time together to get used to each other, or a few life and death fights where they had to work together.

A bunch of low level rats were never going to provide that challenge, so Kamiko smiled and followed behind her friend as the taller demon tore through rats Kamiko would gracefully follow behind and execute the ones left standing. That wasn't to say Kat was completely lacking in grace. She naturally flowed from one move to another using only her instincts, which as a Succubus, meant they were predisposed to looking at least somewhat good.

Once they'd finished up with the hallway, they didn't speak, Kamiko sprinted back to the start, and Kat began her clean up right where she was, they just pushed these rats against the wall this time, as they didn't have any easily accessible hideaway for the bodies.

After this the next hallway was around a couple of corners to reveal a T junction filled with rats. Using the same form as before, they tore their way up to the middle before they started speaking. "So how do we get these ones out of the way? I go left you go right? With both go one direction? I don't really know what would work the best..." said Kat.

"Well, it depends what we want to prioritise, and I think... that has to be making sure all the rats are in fact dead. I'll stay behind you cleaning up, and make sure that no rats sneak back into the corridor we've already passed through. Lets do a little bit to the right, then freeze a line of rats and keep them burning a bit before turning around and cleaning up the left side" suggested Kamiko.

Kat nodded, and did as she was asked, blurring into motion and cutting down all the rats she could reach for about twenty metres, once there, she jumped to the side and let her hands burn. Kamiko, realising the plan, jumped to the other side once she'd confirmed the rats had been killed and let her own pink fire blaze.

They planted their hands on top of the pile of rat corpses they'd pushed forward and watched them freeze over. The pink and purple flames mostly staying on their own half but mixing slightly in the middle. Kat and Kamiko didn't really know how to use their demonic flames together and this could be considered a... passable attempt. They were mostly aided by both being frost types, and the simple plan for what they were doing with them.

Once that was done, Kat and Kamiko quickly dashed back to the middle, where they caught a few rats trying to escape down the part of the T junction they'd come from, and made sure that none of them made it far before tackling the left side. For Kat it was business as usual, for Kamiko though, it was quite a bit harder. She was using her superior battlefield awareness to attack mostly blind, because she was using her eyes to watch the line of flames that was still burning.

A few rats had tried to jump through it, and luckily, had perished in the attempt. Others were just sort of watching the fire warily, while a few 'brave' rats had tried to take a bite out of the flaming corpses of their brethren. That didn't go so well, as the still burning chunks they'd torn off froze them from the inside out... but didn't seem to spread the fire further.

Kamiko's eyes narrowed as she cleanly cut three more rats in half. "I'll need to watch they don't accidentally build a bridge" mumbled Kamiko in between strikes. Luckily though, Kamiko was vastly overestimating the intelligence of the standard Swarm Rat. Having seen the first try eating a piece of flaming rat... around eight more tried it as well. Just to be sure of course. This all lead to their deaths of course.

So, seeing this, the rats finally got the message not to eat the flaming rats... right? Well, apparently not because it seemed like they thought the problem was taking a big bite out of the side. So another batch of rats tried eating various parts from the flaming wall only to find themselves suffering a similar fate.

It was then that the rats finally realised that the fire wasn't healthy for them and back off... mostly. There was still one or two that tried something stupid, either jumping through again and shattering when they impacted the floor or taking a few 'innocent' bites out of the dead rats.

Kamiko almost felt disappointed in herself for bothering to use mental power watching them for something, she was now realising, was intelligent behaviour far beyond the rats capabilities. Still, she had heard the saying about imps and typewriters so continued to watch over the rats just in case.

Kat wasn't completely oblivious either. This time, instead of giving herself over to instincts completely, she made sure to check on Kamiko every few minutes just in case they needed to act. It was a bit overprotective, but Kat had cultivated the art of protecting children from their own stupidity, and it was a little hard to get out of that mindset even with her friends. Especially one so new.

Still. Nothing happened. The rats were idiots and couldn't adapt, so once the first half were cleared out, Kamiko and Kat jumped over the wall themselves and started to clear out the rest of the rats. Kamiko had a slightly easier job. As quite a few rats watched the demons jump through the fire unscathed and tried to repeat the performance without any success.

Once that batch of rats were killed the pair went to cleaning everything up before moving on. They got through another two hallways worth of rats before Kat called a time out. "I think we should rest. I still have full energy, and I imagine you're close as well but I remember how much a good break did for us back at Greed"

Kamiko nodded and sat down right where she was. They'd pushed away the rat corpses in this area and Kamiko was at the edge of the blood so she didn't have to worry about touching it. "Yeah we really should. This is as good as spot as any, if you ignore the rat corpses."

Kat rolled her eyes and took a spot across from Kamiko, who pouted and scooted over to Kat's side and gave her friend a hug. Kat smiled and leaned into it, letting her wing on that side wrap around Kamiko slightly. "See, much more comfortable" snickered the smaller demon.

Kat let out a quiet sigh that likely didn't sneak past Kamiko's hearing. *Of course it is. I have to lean on the wall, while you get to use me as a pillow. Aw well, it's not like I'm unused to the feeling so this is fine. Hugs are great anyway so it's worth it.*

"So how are you finding the slaughter of these rats? I'm personally very glad I won't have to spend hours trying to get the blood and dirt out from under my fingernails. Probably a bit of time sure, but it'll be no major effort," said Kat.

Kamiko winced. "Yeah, I can imagine that wouldn't be fun at all. In terms of what I think... honestly I'm a little annoyed with how long it all takes to clean up afterwards, even just pushing things to the side. We probably spend more time on that then clearing out the rats and I'm not sure we'll make all that much progress.

"Based on the fact we're still in the clearly mined out sections and haven't found the real nest of these damned things I wonder how bad it is. Now, ideally, they'll have been hibernating in a dead end cave and were awoken by the miners. More likely though, there's going to be a tonne of them." Explained Kamiko

Kat bit her lip, *That doesn't sound good at all. How are we supposed to kill masses of these things? One, easy, two, no problem, hundreds take time though and I'm just not sure we have the abilities to really clean them out. Especially if more dangerous varieties show up.* "Do we have anything for that?" asked Kat

"Not really" said Kamiko "If it's really that bad, we might have to have Stone send us some help, or just... let our demonic fire loose. We don't want to do the second thing in the mines but there's only so much we can do if we find like... a pit full of rats. I do NOT want to jump in a pit full of rats."

Kat felt a shiver run down her body. *Yeah neither do I Kamiko. Thanks for that lovely imagine that's now stuck in my head.*

Chapter 466: Rest Stop

After relaxing for a minute, and trying to remove the 'lovely' imagine Kamiko had implanted in her head, Kat realised something. "Not that this isn't comfortable but... how long should we rest for?"

"Hmmm" hummed Kamiko as she thought, "I don't really know... I'm not sure it's really come up before. When I was training with my family I'd just rest when I was told, and even then it probably wasn't as intensive as those days with Gluttony... this sort of thing isn't really something I've encountered.

"I bet you're the same as me, even with two years of Contracts under my belt, I'm pretty much always with weaker sentients so I just rest when they are around and that's always more than enough to keep healthy..."

Kat let out a huff of air, "Yeah it's the same with me. All my missions include them in some fashion and they were always the limiting factor in one way or another. The only time I got taken out first is... well that Contract was a mess. I had to take out the big boss of a whole sect, alongside both his sons AND the person who gave me the damned Contract because he entered some weird feral state."

Kamiko winced, "Yeah... that doesn't sound... representative..."

"Hang on, did you say two years?" asked Kat "Is that how long you've been doing Contracts?"

Kamiko shook her head, "Yup, I've been doing Contracts since I was fourteen. That's actually a little late for most demons, as we tend to start a bit after puberty. It depends though."

"Hmm... is that so?" asked Kat rhetorically, "That does lead me to something I've wanted to ask though, how hard is it to Rank up? It didn't take me all that long I don't think... but at the same time I don't have a proper timeline at all..."

Kamiko grinned, "That's something I can tell you. It's covered multiple times. Though... we do get some conflicting information because people don't quite agree on a few things. Still because I have Nira for a mother I've got more accurate information than most.

"So, to start with, when you get to Rank 1, is... not random per se, but it might as well be. Nobody has ever been able to find evidence to suggest it makes you stronger or weaker to reach Rank 1 early, or late. The only time it matters is if you never make it to Rank 1.

"Everyone will always make Rank 1 before half of their lifespan is up. Most people it's within the second and third decades of their life, but sometimes it's later. Once again, it seems like that never matters. Rank 1 is just a starting point and it seems environmental factors play a large part in it. [novelnext.Com](#)

"For myself, I got to Rank 1 on the early end of the average... if that makes sense. Fourteen isn't quite early, it's decently common after all, but fifteen and sixteen are much more common starting ages. Still, it's not too rare. Our Ice flames are rarer for example."

I wonder what it says about me that I started at seventeen? Seems like it's actually average but I wonder if the average changes for people who aren't demons? I wish I could ask the system about it... I got used to it not being around in the dream world... and I can get by, but I kinda miss it.

Kamiko continued on, unaware of Kat's thoughts, "Now, Rank 2 is where it starts to get complicated. More powerful demons either spend really really long on Rank 2, or they knock it out quickly. The average for Rank 2 is about a decade, but that's a really skewed number. About fifty percent of demons manage it in five years, but if it takes longer than three... then the chances of you getting to Rank 5 drops like a stone.

"I managed to get to Rank 2 in only a year, which is quite early, but not spectacularly so. I think the record for going from Rank 1 to Rank 2 is like... a month?" said Kamiko

Kat thought about that. Hang on... did I beat the record? "I might have beaten that record. I was only Rank 1 properly for a couple days. I ranked up the very next Contract, though it was a longer one"

Kamiko shook her head with a grin, "Nah, all the information I'm sharing with you is for people born as demons. Nondems mess with EVERYTHING. Still, I think that might be a record anyway. Depends how they count it, and if you have a weird demonic flame. The weird the flame the faster you'll rank up as a nondem."

Kat thought of the fact that her flame was very person shaped and decided that if that didn't count as a strange flame, nothing did. "Yeah mine's... mine's not normal in the slightest."

Kamiko nodded, "See you don't count. I'm talking good old fashioned demons, and not the crazy nondem stuff. Mum might know about it but it's not something I cared about before. Nondem are cool don't get me wrong but... they're half legends really. They're like High Elves in some dimensions. Every dimension with Elves in it likes to claim High Elves exist there, but most of them time it's just a normal elf with good genetics.

"Anyway, I'm losing my train of thought again. So, from their Rank 2 to 3 is normally a minor jump. Most people get that within the year they manage Rank 2. Rank 2 is... it's more like a holding Rank. It's exceptionally rare for somebody to be at Rank 2 longer than ten years. It's weird like that. Unlike other Ranks that go up in difficulty exponentially, Rank 2 just sort of... does whatever it wants really.

"It's a fast Rank for everyone but the least skilled demons who may never get further than it. Now, once you're Rank 3, things start to slow down a fair bit. One hundred years is the average to ascend, with twenty five years being considered excellent time.

"That's nothing compared to Rank 5 though. Most people just... don't get there. They hit a hard wall at Rank 4. They just never progress. It's a bit sad sometimes, because for most of the other Ranks, you can tell pretty early if you'll progress. If you start struggling on Contracts as they ramp up for you, or you're still really weak compared to where you should be at that Rank, you kinda just... know you're not getting any further.

"Not Rank 4. It's known as the Soul Crusher because there seems to be no easy way to tell if you'll EVER get to Rank 5." Kamiko shivered. She wasn't even close to Rank 4, but she feared getting stuck there more than the average demon. Elmony was already there, and one of the hopefuls for Rank 5, her parents were BOTH Rank 5 which was quite rare, and the idea of her being the only one in the family stuck at Rank 4 was a real fear she never properly managed to shake.

Sure Aslena was actually the most likely to stall at any Rank really, because she was more focused on her designs, but Aslena had always shown of how much 'better' she was than Kamiko so her heart didn't believe it.

"Now, Rank 6 is different. It tends to take longer then getting to Rank 5 yes, but one of the reasons everyone at Rank 5 is so highly revered is that as long as you don't die, you'll get to Rank 6. It's a bit odd, and can take HUGE amounts of time, but it's something that was apparently tested rigorously a long time ago. Nobody is ever stuck at Rank 5."

Kat bit her lip and hmmd "Really, nobody?" asked Kat

Kamiko smiled back "Yup! Nobody. Not one demon has ever died of old age at Rank 5. They've all either been killed or Ranked up. I don't really know anything about getting past Rank 6, but yeah, getting to Rank 5 is the real challenge."

Interesting. I wonder how quickly I'll get to Rank 3 then? It seems like it might actually be soon? Or well, I got to Rank 2 so fast and apparently Rank 3 is another fast one, faster for most people, so I should get that upgrade.

"Oh, but what was the correlation between speed for the other Ranks?" asked Kat

Kamiko shrugged, "Honestly... it's hard to say once you get to Rank 3. Rank 4 and Rank 5 don't have enough demons to study to get a good study going for them. According to Mum the data suggests that fast Rank 4's can actually be bad in certain types of demons, but only certain types. She won't tell me what those are though, apparently it's classified. They just have a lower rate of getting to Rank 5."

Chapter 467: The Real Rest Stop

The pair of demons spent a little longer cuddled into each other relaxing. Neither of them really knew how long they should rest, or if the slight resting they did when they shoved all the rats into place without really using energy counted towards that number or not. In the end, after another ten minutes though, they got up. Neither was the type to leave something undone... and the rat corpses were starting to smell, just a bit.

Kat was never more thankful that of all her enhanced senses, her taste buds and nose were the least advanced. Her sense of touch was also fairly dull in comparison to her eyes and ears, but she wasn't really thinking about that. Just a great deal of gratitude that her nose was still around peak human level.

*Wait... is that why Gluttony demons are obsessed with food and stuff? They have different or better taste buds. Wait! Is that how some of them can eat weird stuff like dirt? Kat thought, easily forgetting the time she ate something hot enough to melt a normal human from the inside out when she was participating in Thyme's Tournament.

It must be. Hmm... that makes me wonder then... do people who join the different factions actually have their brains changed? Oh shit my brain has been changed. I... do I still think the same way? I think I think the same way... no well... I'm very touchy about my tail now. I have a bunch of instincts I didn't before... do I have any others?*

Will I GAIN more? As Kat dusted herself off she turned to Kamiko and asked, "Hey um... before we go kill more rats, I had an odd thought. Does... does what faction your in influence your Rank ups, and if it does, does it change the way your mind works to better keep in line with the factions?"

Kamiko opened her mouth, before slowly closing it, before a frown settled onto her face. Nose crinkling and adding a few lines to the girl's face making it clear she didn't know what to think about the question. "You know Kat. I... I have no idea. I don't think I want to know either..."

Kat bit her lip, "Isn't it... I dunno, important to know that before you pick one for yourself?" asked Kat.

Kamiko kicked at the dirt and tried to look anywhere except at Kat, but she didn't have the heart to leave Kat hanging. "I... I don't know. I mean... like... maybe? It... it's hard to know. Like... I know people tend to fit in more with a faction the longer they've been there but... that's just how any group works right...? And I mean, Wrath lets people leave ONCE if they really want..."

"And... Elmony does bodyguard stuff but she's still in the Lust faction... but... hmm, yeah um... I don't really want to think about it. I'm... I'm going to say that... it probably doesn't inherently change you, but you might want to fit in more... and... your body changes to accommodate the new idea of... better... I wish we could ask D.E.M.O.N.S... that seems like the sort of information it'd be happy to warn us about"

Hmm, well... I guess it is. "Hey, that does make me think though... the factions all have a few people lined up to go into them... why doesn't your family do that?" asked Kat

Kamiko shrugged, "It's not really that common. Your view of things was probably skewed by the Wrath teens and... even Wrath, the faction that probably gets the most young demons interested still doesn't have many. That's why we had to go there as punishment.

"People even remotely in their skill range are hard to come by. There might be like... a hundred people lined up to join Wrath immediately? Less for the other factions, except Envy and Pride... because those guys are both weird. I don't want to go into that though we have rats to kill" said Kamiko.

Kat nodded and lightly slapped her cheeks. *Yeah, I need to stop procrastinating and get back to killing rats.* Kat cracked her neck and started powerwalking. Kamiko hardly noticed the difference, but Kat knew herself well enough to realise she was trying to make up for wasting time. The break was needed, the questions though, should have been asked before they'd decided to get up and move.

Of course, Kat soon found another corridor of rats and couldn't even find herself excited. It was just more rats. So they cleaned out another corridor of rats without trouble or interest. The one right after that though, was strange. Kat noticed that the wall of the mine seemed to have something on it. *Hmm, that probably should be investigated but... I'll get the rats out of the way first.*

A quick 'clean up' later and the pair of demons found themselves staring at a door. It was hanging open somewhat and had yet more rats inside. They cleaned them out as well, before pushing all the corpses out and taking in the room. It was a little hard to identify it's original purpose at first.

This was because everything was damaged at least a bit. What Kat was fairly sure was a table had been reduced to little more than wood chips. A whole two larger pieces remained... somewhat intact though not without bite marks all over the edges and even across some of the centre. The walls looked like they once held something, but whatever it was, now it was too damaged to tell. There was only a few scraps of something wrapped around a few metal spikes that were probably responsible for holding up whatever had been there originally.

In the back of the room was something that had been a fridge, but was the most damaged thing in the room. The door had been ripped off and chewed into majorly leaving a door that had taken after Swiss cheese consisting of more air than steel, even the insulation that remained in the holes had been mostly chewed through.

There was some evidence in the box itself that there had been racks to hold food. They were completely destroyed and only the guess that it was a fridge let Kat figure out that the few intentionally carved markings had to have been places to slide in fridge racks. The back of the fridge had seen better days, and the only thing that saved it from total collapse was that when the room was made they seemed to have welded the fridge to the wall or some similar process, allowing the free floating chunks that remained to stay stuck to the wall and help support the top which was the most in tact piece of the fridge.

Next to the fridge was the only thing in the room slightly intact. It was a heavy duty steel box with a big metal handle like you'd find on a bank vault. The surface had more scratched sections than clean ones, but hadn't been opened, likely due to the low intelligence and lack of hands the rats possessed then a lack of effort on their part.

Based on everything else, there should have been some chairs in the room, for what was the table, or at the very least, one for whoever watched over the box but there wasn't the slightest remaining identifiable piece of one. Still, Kat found herself a little annoyed.

I wish we'd known about this before we took a break. I mean, it isn't much, and there's blood on the floor plus debris everywhere but it's not the main corridor and it has a door to close us off. If only we'd gone a little further. Kat then realised they were already probably past half of their allotted time down in the mine, and that it probably was still best they took a break when they did. novelnext.com

"So... do we like... open this?" asked Kat gesturing at the metal box.

Kamiko eyed the offending article speculatively. "I'm not sure..." as Kamiko said that, she moved forward and placed her hand on the handle for opening it and gave it a light turn. "It depends really. If this was meant to be secure, I'm not going to get in. I'm no vault breaker..."

"On the other hand, I do know a little bit about locks, and the simple things. If this is more meant to have a bit of security from monsters like it clearly has and less to keep highly secret documents I could probably get it open with some time. Or you could rip it open, I doubt the hinges are strong enough to stop you just based on the fact the rats could scratch it at all. I'm just not sure we should. Stone didn't mention this at all... and while it wouldn't take long... it just might not be any of our business."

Gonna be honest. Didn't think Kamiko would be the type of girl to know anything about safe cracking. Lockpicking seemed like a cool skill but I never felt the need for it before. I feel it even less now because of all the magical potential for locks, but it would be useful right now...

Chapter 468: Am I a Bad Daughter?

The pair stood and stared uncertainly at the box. Kat was pacing around in place as she thought while Kamiko was leaning against the wall and running her hands over her horns. "I think we're best leaving it" said Kat after two minutes of silence.

"Oh?" said Kamiko. There was no malice in the word just pure curiosity, and slight wonder, at how Kat had finally figured out the answer to the question.

"The way I see it, is that the chest isn't going anywhere. The rats couldn't get in before, and I doubt leaving it here will make them any more likely to succeed in the future. This isn't a dungeon, this is a mine owned by... well I don't know exactly who owns it but lets say Sloth. We aren't explorers right now but exterminators."

Kamiko's eyes widened and she slapped her face into her hand. "I can't believe I forgot that Kat I am so sorry..."

"Wait what?" said Kat confused, immediately stopping her pacing to turn to her friend.

"It's like... contracts 101 Kat. I just... I can't believe I forgot something so simple. I've been on a few dungeon runs" *Dungeons are real?! I mean I assumed but...* "and they've all be similar to this you know. Kill mobs, look around, rarely find loot before you fight a boss. I guess I slipped into dungeon mode at some point and forgot the current job is cleaning out the mine. Let's just leave this here and report it to Stone" said Kamiko with a slightly biting tone.

Kat nodded and headed out towards the door. *I can see Kamiko's actually a little annoyed at herself for this. Why though? It was a valid idea. If she CAN open the box I don't think it's bad to ask if she should. We don't need confidential documents from the mine so we'd just put them back no harm done.

Or is it a matter of professionalism? Like... like if somebody is a cleaner paid to go to houses and clean things but also a thief for fun on the sides. They don't open things they shouldn't when just doing the cleaning job, only when they're actually stealing things.*

Kat realised as soon as she thought it, that was a terrible example, because if you were both a thief and a cleaner, you'd certainly take advantage of it. You'd either use it as a way to case the place or somewhere nearby or just outright steal small things that would go unnoticed during the cleaning itself.

Ok that example was horrid but maybe it still is a matter of professionalism. Like... um... hmm, maybe how Gramps wasn't supposed to favour any kids over each other. I mean sure he DID but pretty much only with me and it took him over a decade to get to that point and really, how can you resist.

Kat stood beside the door and waited for Kamiko to be out before closing it behind the other demon, then she looked at it for a second longer. "Should we seal it off with ice? We were told not to touch the walls like that though..." asked Kat

"Yeah... let's not. I don't know enough about rock composition to know if it's safe to inject demonic energy into. I mean I'd think it was because they could hollow it out but I don't know." Replied Kamiko with some bounce returning to her step.

*You know, I do wonder what it would take for Gramps to favour someone other than me now that I've left. Will he eventually pick up some other troublesome child that never gets adopted? Or will he just check in on me sometimes instead... you know. I should probably do that when I get back.

Things have been so busy recently. Finishing my second big summoning or first with power, then straight into dealing with Minor and Major nearly dying, which was not fun, and then after that dealing with Xiang and his bullshit before finally ending up on Punishment duty. Man it feels like a lifetime since I've visited Gramps.*

Kat walked into the next corridor and was unsurprised to find it filled with rats. This one was even extra long so she just bent her knees and charged her hands with demonic energy. *Well I guess this gives me more time to think.* Kat had gotten more efficient with her energy since the first rat hallway. She knew she only really needed to keep her energy flowing with a little extra for her nails. She didn't need to hand over any extra energy to cut through the weak rats that she'd encountered so far.

She'd also tried dropping some of the energy she was pushing around her body by only empowering it when she was about to strike, but found that little idea failed spectacularly when she tried two hallways ago. Perhaps if her combat awareness was better, it had potential, but as she was, especially with her reckless strikes against the rats, it just wasn't practical at all.

The issue was, her movements always wanted to flow. As a Succubus, while she was very strong compared to when she was human, compared to most other demon types she'd lose out in strength majorly. Her nails were more than sharp enough to compensate for most combat situations, and her speed and grace were big helps, but this meant when she tried to limit either of these things, especially the easy grace her body had acquired, her instincts freaked out. It was something she was considering now.

*So, note to self visit Gramps. Other than that any interesting thoughts? Not really? Combat is what it is, and I wish I could improve somehow because this is not fun. Just... letting myself go... well not berserk

but full instincts? Not good at all. I can see the difference between me and Kamiko really easily and I know I have no proper training.

I just... I didn't think it was that bad. My instincts don't really let me get creative with things, or adapt to the situation. Oh sure, I bet I could dodge for days if I was fighting something of comparable speed, but attack wise I'm hardly better than a rabid animal. Sure it LOOKS more graceful, but it really isn't.

I need to take Minor's grandma's offer up and learn how to use my weapons, or even just fight. I don't want to use up my break for it though. It's IMPORTANT sure. Quite likely VERY important, but I just... I feel like I'm already so separated from everyone on Earth already. *noVeLnext.com*

I don't get to see Sylvie every day, or Lily most days, though if she has her way she might be joining me somehow. Anyway, for Sylvie... even though I do probably spend more time with her overall, just barely, it's not the same as spending a bit of time with her every day. For Vivian and Callisto it's much worse.

I... I hardly no them. Oh sure, I don't regret being adopted by them, they've both been great even if Callisto is... Callisto... but they aren't parents to me, they certainly aren't Gramps... I... I don't even know if they're friends really? Callisto seems... friendly for what she is, but I wonder if it's more because I'm interesting then because she actually likes me. At least I know she does get along with Sylvie which I'm sure surprised her, but...

Vivian perhaps is the hardest. She's really stepped up. Not that I've seen too much of it but... she went from doing whatever she wanted, with Callisto even dealing with most of the meals, probably cleaning and laundry too, to having two children one of which is a demon and... and she seems to have done quite well.

I mean, I don't see her much, and that's a bit annoying, but let's be honest here. Thought Kat as she sliced through another group of rats. I really was just tagging along. Not in a bad way... but Vivian knows I can take care of myself, and has just... sort of let me do whatever I want when I'm home... Am... Am I a bad daughter?*

The sudden thought hit Kat rather hard and she hadn't been expecting it or the reaction that followed. A few rats even managed to bit into her arms, but she just slammed the disgusting things into the floor and splatter their brains around.

Am I a daughter? I've said before she feels more like an older sister to me but... should I be treating her that way? Now that Kat was thinking about it, she flashed back to the mall, and the insistence Kat pick up something for herself, all the times Vivian had gone out of her way to include Kat. That time Vivian had, with basically no questions asked once it was determined, driven her out into the middle of the WOODS just because Kat felt like it. Sure she was serious, and it was important but... Vivian didn't complain she just did it.

Am I a daughter? And if so... am I a bad one?

Chapter 469: Probably Not Right...?

When Kat had finished clearing out the nearby rats she was no closer to finding an answer to her question then when she'd started. She'd certainly thought on it more, spending the rest of the fight, as

well as the entire walk to the next one thinking on the answer to the question with little to no success really.

*I suppose what this really boils down to is how Vivian sees me and what she expects from me... which saying it like that feels kind of bad? I'm a mostly self sufficient teenager that had been expected to move out on her own when she turned eighteen not a child. Still, I never did do any of that planning because well... first the demon stuff then second the adoption. Still I think I could have managed.

I know how to cook. I am aware of how to budget both from school and those few times I tried helping Gramps with tax returns. I didn't exactly have a job lined up but before the three stooges took over from me I was basically working a part time job keeping all the kids in line, and then still helping more than I really should have been afterwards anyway.*

So it's not like I didn't know how to work... Kat jerked her head to the side so that the blood spray that was heading for her eye slipped past her instead. *That was a wake up call if I ever needed on. I'm getting sidetracked now, focusing on the wrong things. It's not about if I could have managed on my own. That ship has sailed. I'll be living with Vivian until my demon activities make me enough to move out if I so desire...

Though really, it's more likely I'll hang around as long as I can for Sylvie especially. I'm not there often, I don't take up much of the food expenses and Lily lives right there as well. I'm not sure I could bring myself to move even if I had the money.*

A small part of her pointed out that she had no idea how the demons currency system worked, and if gold or something equally valuable was cheap she might already have enough money but she shut that thought down hard, not wanting to properly contemplate the idea of moving out so soon.

It had been strange, not taking care of all the kids in the orphanage, but she'd manage to restrain herself from doing the stooges job somewhat, then having it be just her and Sylvie was almost the same, but the idea of just being by herself without any other people was not something she wanted to think about. Kat didn't consider herself a social person, or really a much of a caretaker, especially considering her lack of friends in school. However, she could not properly image a world in which she lived alone. It just wasn't something she could do.

So once again. Perhaps it really is something I should clarify with Vivian. Thought Kat as she let her feet dance around a puddle of organs from the rats in front of her. *From what I understand, families are something that you build up over time. Even the people born into them. I mean, Lily isn't on the best terms with hers at the moment, but she still spends a bunch of time with them despite that.*

Kat of course, was politely ignoring just how strange Lily's family situation was. It was very rare for parents to disapprove of their daughter's only friend, especially when she wasn't a delinquent or just a bad person in general. Kat didn't see much of the behind the scenes details in person, but she'd listened to Lily both complain and praise her parents enough to get some vague ideas.

So Kat's idea of family wasn't all that well realised. Still, she did know from various novels she was forced to read for her English assignments that family wasn't just the people you lived with, but the people you chose as well, with your friends being just as important. So, she could easily recognise that Lily and Sylvie were both easily the most important factors to her decision making in this instance.

Which of course, complicated the whole thing really. *See, the problem with treating Vivian like a big sister figure is that Sylvie deserves the chance to have a mother in her life. If I treat Callisto and Vivian like... well Vivian like an older sister and Callisto like a very strange sister is that undermining Vivian's place, reducing her to my level?*

Of course, Kat, being the 'expert' on families that she was, had completely forgotten the fact that while she treated Sylvie like a little sister, Sylvie saw Kat as a combination big sister and Mother figure all in one, being the main source of older female influence on her life, even if she was rather mature. So in Sylvie's mind, Kat could never undermine Vivian, because Vivian was just taking on Kat's role when she wasn't around... and Callisto was great for learning about crazy ideas.

Kat was so caught up in her thoughts that once the rats had been cleared out she slashed into the floor a couple times before her body awkwardly stood up. With Kat not really in the driver's seat at the moment, she just awkwardly stood there as Kamiko ran to the end to start tidying up the rats... only to notice Kat's excellent statue impression.

Kamiko carefully jogged back towards Kat, and pouted at her. When that got no reaction, Kamiko took a few seconds to debate if tapping Kat on the shoulder was dangerous, or simply necessary. After a few moments, Kamiko decided necessary was the answer.

Kat's mind slowed down to process things as her body tensed to jump backwards, only to find a Kamiko with a goofy smile and a raised eyebrow looking at her with an arm outstretched. Kat instantly untensed and her speed returned to normal.

"Are you alright?" asked Kamiko

"It-" Kat choked on the words as she tried to say 'it's nothing important'.

Kamiko gave Kat a flat stare and a big grin when she saw what happened. Compared to even Kamiko, who didn't exactly enjoy abusing the ability to tell 'not quite the truth' to avoid scrutiny was still better than Kat, having lived her life that way. She instantly saw Kat's attempt to brush off a problem and made sure her facial expression conveyed that explicitly.

Kat sighed. "It's... it's not something I really want to dump on you Kamiko. I... I don't even really know if it's a problem"

"I'm surprised you could actually say the second half of the sentence Kat. You're kinda bad at avoiding the question, but I'll admit you tend to get away with saying things that are only true on a technicality pretty well." Said Kamiko while bouncing her eyebrows up and down showing that she wasn't actually impressed at all.

"Ugh..." moaned Kat as she started shifting the rats around just to avoid the question. Kamiko however, didn't go back to her end of the hallway, but instead helped Kat from nearby. "Fine... then" continue Kat seeing that Kamiko wasn't going to leave it alone. "I've been thinking about things.

"I mentioned I grew up in an orphanage, and I don't want to dig through my memories to check if I mentioned it, but I recently got adopted sort of... It was more that my little sister figure was getting adopted, and refused to leave without me.

"Now, normally, this wouldn't have been the worst thing ever, I'd just say it's all fine and that she deserves a family but... this little one had stuck by me a lot longer than normal, she's probably smarter than me even at half my age, and knew that I'd have to leave the orphanage soon anyway because I was getting too old.

"So when the person involved, Vivian, said yes instantly I was basically screwed. I had no chance to get out of it and keep any semblance of the high ground. Now... now I've realised that I don't really know what we are? Like... Vivian isn't much older than I am. I haven't asked, but it can't be more than 10 years, probably not even 5.

"So... it's not like she's my mom... but... I don't know if I should treat her that way. She's actually done quite a lot for me now that I've thought about it. I was thinking about it for the last two rat clearings but... honestly a lot of it boils down to what she wants..." Kat let out a sigh as she finished, not really wanting to further elaborate lest she get stuck in another endless spiral of non answers.

Kamiko smiled brightly at Kat and said. "I'm sure you have nothing to worry about. If my madhouse of a family can manage to stay together without anyone killing each other than I'm sure you'll be able to figure something out."

Chapter 470: More Deep Thoughts

"I guess..." said Kat, because really, Kamiko's family, while very functional, was also kind of a mess, "It's just that... I feel like I sort of intrude you know? I never had the chance to settle into the family because I've spent so much time on missions and stuff..."

"Oh? I wouldn't think it was that bad" said Kamiko

"Well, at the start it wasn't but very quickly it's changed to missions no lower than three days. Is that normal?" asked Kat

Kamiko shook her head, "Not really no. For Rank 1, it's very rare. Most of them are a day, or two if it's an easy but somewhat lengthy job. Sometimes three happens but that's the limit." Kat grimaced thinking of her journey through the caves with Minor and how long that mess took. "For Rank 2 it's mostly the same, things don't really expand much. It's Rank three where missions start to get longer"

Kat scoffed, "If they get longer at Rank 3 then I'm honestly kind of scared. I... it really just hit me that I've spent more time away from my new home than I have staying there. So... I kinda got to thinking that maybe I should spend more time with them?"

Kamiko smiled a sad smile at Kat, looking at her as if she was an idiot. "There's nothing you could have done Kat. It seems like you spend as much time as possible with them, and it's not like you knew this was going to happen. Not only do you seem to go on longer missions than normal, you didn't grow up a demon. You didn't what was going to be required, and you're getting more asked of you than normal anyway."

"I guess... the difference is that they aren't demons, they had no way to see this coming, and then my little sister... well, I wonder what my relationship should be with the person who adopted us because of her..." explained Kat.

"I don't see how it's an issue. She adopted you right? So that makes you her daughter." Said Kamiko

"She's at most ten years older than me, and I doubt it's much more than five" said Kat deadpan.

"Oh." Said Kamiko "Oh" she repeated this a few more times. For Kamiko, ten years was nothing, ten years was sibling territory. To hear that the person who was now responsible for taking care of Kat was so similar to them both hit home the issue much harder than any of Kat's previous problems.

"She's not really the age to be a mother is she... and even if for a human it's not the earliest, you're very close in age, and... anything else?" asked Kamiko

"And I'm mostly self sufficient. For humans eighteen is when you are considered a full adult. So... I'm like a year off that, and my guardian is still in her twenties. I can't really see her as a mom because she's so close in age to me, but..." Kat trailed off

"But?" asked Kamiko. She was invested now, she wanted this answer

"Because of my little sister, Sylvie, she's like nine but really tiny. Anyway, she's a very mature nine year old and... I feel like she'd follow my lead. If I treated Vivian like a sister, she'd do that as well, and... I feel like I'd be taking away her chance for a mother?

"Like, I'd given that up ages ago because it wasn't really important to me. A lot of kids at the orphanage wanted parents, and some that said otherwise, were always clearly lying but... I was one of the few people that were sent to the orphanage young enough to just... not remember my parents

"I was only just barely two, or so I've been told, and from the sounds of things, I might have been away from them for a bit before I got to the orphanage. So unlike a lot of them, I never had parents and didn't feel the need to have them back.

"Initially, I was younger than the normal orphanage age. Gramps sort of specialises in like... kids say, six to twelve? So, nobody was looking to adopt a two year old if they came to our orphanage. I'm not sure why I was sent there actually, it's not something I asked

"But anyway, so I was too young to start with, then as the years went by, and I settled in, I was passed over for adoption a few times. I did the interviews and they didn't really work out, so I started to suggest other kids go instead of me.

"Gramps told me off for it, but a lot of those kids ended up getting adopted so... I never really got in trouble for it. Anyway, at that point I was maybe... seven? And I just... let go of the idea I'd leave the orphanage. I was only really going along with the idea because that's what all the other kids wanted.

"Then, as the years went on, I very quickly ended up in charge of things. Not fully, but by the time I was ten a lot of kids looked to me when things needed to get done. That... that wasn't too bad of course, but it did make it hard for me to be offered the chance at adoption. This is both from a logistical standpoint, as well as from a... social one?

"See, I helped tell Gramps which kids were ready to be adopted. Some of them would have reacted really badly, they'd have only left kicking and screaming, so you'd let them calm down and deal with the grief. Others though, you could see were practically suffocating in the orphanage

"So, I'd help look through the families and match people up. This meant I couldn't really in good conscious match myself with a family when other people needed it more and I was the one doing the

matching. Then on the other hand, because I was doing so much, not only would Gramps have been down a considerable amount of help if I left...

"I was a major stabilising factor for a lot of the much younger kids. They KNEW I'd be there. It... it felt to them, like I was off the market so to speak, and that I'd been there so long I'd never leave before them... so they always tended to come to me with there problems. Then, because they did it, all the new kids learnt that I was the go to person... and it sort of spiralled." Said Kat, reminiscing about her past.

"That doesn't seem particularly fair..." said Kamiko with a confused tone of voice. "Why would you even be put in that kind of position?"

Kat shrugged "It just sort of happened you know? Little things over time. See, the oldest was unofficially in charge and would take on those jobs... but the oldest other than me... I think was fourteen? I think that's the oldest a kid has ever been at Gramps orphanage barring myself.

"Which was fine, until they got adopted, then someone needed to be trained to pick up all the jobs they'd left behind. I liked being helpful anyway, and the orphanage was more my home then many other kids... so I always helped with that transition once I was old enough. At some point, there wasn't a pass over

"I just did part of the work, and the oldest shared some of the duties... until one day, it was just me, and I did it all by myself. They actually need three people now, to manage what I could do alone..."

"Still... I'm not sure I like how that all worked out" pouted Kamiko.

"It is what is, I'm not bitter about it. I loved staying there, even if some things were hard. I spent most of my time with the kids up until I was told to start giving up my duties for when I inevitably had to leave. Well, the excuse at the time was for my last year at school, but looking back it was for when I'd need to finally leave.

"Yeah... once I got past fourteen, there wasn't any attempts to get me adopted and there were no thoughts on my end to change that. It was my home, and even if I didn't like it, which I very much did, I could move out on my own in a few years so... everything was pretty good from my perspective.

"Now I have a family somehow, and the little girl that I treated the most like my actual little sister managed to tag along with me. Problem is... I don't want to be the reason she can't have a mother."

Kamiko gave a huff and put her hands on her hips, "Really, it sounds like you were as much a mum to those kids as you were a big sister. I imagine that Sylvie thinks she's got two now"

Kat smirked, "Well, if you're including me it might be three. I may have even less of an idea where I stand with Callisto but Sylvie likes her a whole lot."