

## DEMONS 471

### Chapter 471: Now there's Two of Them

"I see... I mean, I sort of see what you're getting at, but I don't think you need to be so worried" is what Kamiko said, but internally, she was freaking out a little bit.

Kat just nodded and they got to work cleaning up the rats. Kat of course, was still stuck on the same topic she had been for the last few clears and that didn't look to be changing any time soon. Now Kamiko find herself in a similar position and she had no idea how to deal with it.

The biggest issue was her lacking experience when it came to advice. Her parents and siblings would NEVER come to her for that sort of thing. Her parents of course felt it was their job to provide advice to the family whenever it was needed, and would help their children when they could like any decent parents

Her siblings had picked up this attitude when it came to the younger ones as well. Elmony and the triplets were much closer then one might expect because of this, and was, from what Kamiko knew, an excellent big sister to all three of them, which was apparently quite the task when they were younger.

In turn, the triplets had stepped up to be the real big sisters for Kamiko and Aslena. Sure Elmony did help as well, and Kamiko loved her like the others, but she was busy a lot when Kamiko was growing up, her missions getting longer and the time she spent at home dwindling as she used her free time to train instead of with family.

Aslena of course, really should have played the big sister to Kamiko, and while she had some complaints about her family recently that might have been bubbling for a long time, Kamiko was very grateful that the triplets never let Aslena even attempt to pretend she was a good big sister. They helped her just as much, if not more, then Aslena and that helped her a lot.

So, now that Kat's come asking if she's a good big sister. Well, Kamiko was frankly stumped. \*She has the attitude for it at least. From what I can see, she acts a lot like I'd imagine Elmony was like when she was younger, just perhaps a little less combat focused, but she can be intense in other ways. I think she's a great big sister...

But that's not the full story is it. She's been in that role for years, and can keep it up effortlessly. However, she didn't just play the big sister. She played the big sister without a mother to lean on. She played the big sister for Satan only knows how many kids, tens at least, maybe hundreds with how often people seem to get adopted at her orphanage but I can't be sure.

So... she wasn't just a big sister... she was like... the ultimate big sister. Both big sister and pseudo mother figure all in one. I'm not sure she quite realises that though, just how much of a mother figure she might have been, and perhaps continues to still be. I suppose that makes sense though. Evidently she did have some older girls to model herself after at this orphanage, and had big sister role models of her own.

From the sounds of things though, unlike the others who only stepped into the role temporarily, and likely with no real drive to proper parental figures to the younger kids, she has managed to live it

somehow and can't see that a few rough weeks where she isn't around as often isn't some massive hit to her... what big sister credit?

Also, I'm not sure why she struggles so much with the idea of treating Vivian like a mother. Kat doesn't need one. Or at least, she doesn't think she needs one. That's abundantly clear from what she's said. It's never about wanting a mother figure for herself, it's about taking a mother figure from Sylvie, this little sister she's picked up.\*

The pair of demons had finished up with the rats and moved on... for like fifty metres before they found the next swarm of rats. It seemed that they were increasing in frequency. The others were somewhat spread out, like they were little pockets of swarm rats trying to claim more territory together rather than part of the bigger group. This new lot though, seemed to have just left enough space for both swarms to grow properly and not a metre more.

So they went to town and Kamiko kept thinking on her friends problem. \*I'm really not sure I'm the best to judge this. Ten years is NOTHING for demons. Heck, I know Mum has mentioned her desire to find a way to decrease the gestation period for a few demons because it takes them forever to have kids. I think... was it beholders? Shadows? I can't remember but I know she was complaining about a demon species that has a gestation period of a decade. Granted, I think they also have twins or more most of the time, but still.

It just... it's... hmm. How do I put this without sounding rude to Kat in my head? It's just kinda stupid? Like... ten years is such a small amount of time that she couldn't really be anything other than a sister if she was a demon. Kat is also a demon now, and I wonder if that is playing a part in all this?

I'd have to ask Mum. That's something she might know... but this isn't really her field so I can't say for certain that she'd have any idea really. Then again... how old did Kat say that Sylvie was? Nine? I think she said Nine? Or was it eight? Six? Ten? There were a lot of ages mentioned in Kat's story and apparently I wasn't paying quite as much attention as I'd thought. Shit... am I a bad friend?

No bad Kamiko. Kat's already melancholy, you need to stay positive and help her. Ok, review facts. 1, she's been adopted and doesn't know how to act. 2, she has a guardian that isn't much older than her. Likely has a stable job with a good amount of money if she can afford to just pick up an extra child on a whim when Sylvie requested it. Perhaps so much money that it hardly makes a difference.

Hmm. I've heard humans don't normally get as much money as us demons though. We have more time to collect it so it just makes sense... but I wonder how much money that means this Vivian must have? Plus someone else lives in the house. Though... is that how? They split things perhaps? Is Callisto Vivian's partner or just a roommate? Kat wasn't clear on that part.\*

Kat of course, had no idea what those two would be considered. They didn't really show as much affection towards each other as Vivian did everyone else Kat knew, which was really just Sylvie and Lily, and yet, Callisto seemed to hold Vivian in the highest esteem. This of course meant that Kamiko had even less of an idea and decided to move on from that thought.

\*Hmm, I guess it doesn't matter. Though maybe that's the real take away here? Vivian seems to have taken Kat on solely because Sylvie asked. Based on the fact that Kat doesn't know if she's a bad sister/daughter or not, it is likely that Vivian has been nothing but welcoming to her, as while Kat

doesn't have parental experience, she isn't so young as to be unaware of what abuse would be if it was happening to her.

So I imagine Vivian doesn't care. Or well, perhaps that is a bit callous of me to think. Hmm, I guess a better way to think about it would be that, without knowing Vivian, she seems like the type of person to do as she wishes and make the best of it anyway she can. She clearly decided she wanted to expand her family, weather this includes Callisto or not is irrelevant. She wanted a kid, and got two, and she seems like the type of person to consider that a win rather than a loss.

How to communicate that to Kat though... maybe I should just... not? Is it a friends place to point out something like this? I have no idea.\*

Kamiko's conclusion was reached right as the final rat went down. Shortly after, she got to cleaning while occasionally glancing at her friend. Kat seemed fine now, or at least, her face was back to what must have been her default expression, and not the somewhat lost one of before. Kamiko was unsure if this meant she was fine or if she was just hiding it.

Still, this didn't matter, because all other thoughts left her mind when she brushed a group of rats to the side, and instead of brushing up against the wall, they fell into a hole she'd overlooked. "Kat. I've found something here!"

#### **Chapter 472: Surprise Rats!**

We now return to Kat's perspective.

-----

"Kat. I've found something here!" Kamiko's shout broke Kat out of her thoughts which still hadn't really gone anywhere. Kamiko's words had helped somewhat, but the worry and uncertainty hadn't truly left her, she just had a stronger seed of determination that let her know she'd manage. She would be able to get through the issues come what may.

So, Kamiko's shout almost come as a welcome distraction in many ways. Kat moved herself swiftly over to her friend and saw very clearly what she was talking about. It was the only place that didn't have rats piled up around her. A hole going into the dark, which really wasn't much of an issue for Kat, but she found herself struggling to really see what was going on down there.

"Step back I'll have a look" said Kat with authority. Kat knew she was much sturdier then Kamiko and any damage she might. Bending down, Kat stuck her head towards the opening and found herself immediately rearing back. As soon as her head had approached the gap in the wall, a rat had jumped straight for her face.

Kat's mind slowed as she took in the scene. What she thought was darkness she could see at the bottom of the wall wasn't darkness at all but RATS. If she thought it was a sea before this was nothing short of an ocean, a tsunami. Where before the rats had covered every spot of available ground, the rats in this hole didn't even have that courtesy. There was nothing but rat. The floor was nowhere in sight, and Kat's brief glimpse made it clear that the whole floor was at least three rats deep.

Kat's reaction was natural, trying to get as far away from the rat flying towards her face as possible, yet she was in no real danger. If she'd stayed longer she would have been able to tell the reason no more

rats were flooding the upper level was because they couldn't. A layer or two of rats had been pushed above somehow and now the remainder lacked the strength to escape from their pit.

Still, seeing a rat flying towards your eye from what you thought was a dark hole elicited a very understandable reaction. Still, when a frightened demon capable of lifting cars decides to leap backwards, they really go for it. Kat slammed herself into the opposing wall, nearly clipping Kamiko with her wing

Kat felt the impact before her brain really caught up to the problem despite it's slowed state. She'd just been watching the hole get further away of course, so the sudden pain coming from her wings and back was a surprise she really should have expected. The crunching sound that Kat winced at wasn't helping her either.

\*You know. It really says something that these earmuffs don't filter out the sound of my bones breaking. I'm not sure if what it says is positive or not but it certainly says something.\* Kat let herself drop to a knee as the breath left her in an attempt to control the pain. It wasn't so bad, but her instinctual choice to speed up her mind meant she had a very detailed feeling of pain as the bones in her wings cracked and the ligaments tore around them all the while the bruising on her back formed and healed in a matter of instants, barely there long enough to add to the pain under normal circumstances, but with her mind slowed like this another thing to add to the pile.

Kat her Kamiko let out a gasp at some point, but Kat just focused on pushing her energy towards her wings to speed up the healing. It was a simple matter at this point, mostly instinctual, but she gave it an extra push mostly because she could. The pain no longer clouding her mind but certainly still present.

Kat ran through the memories that led her hear and was rather annoyed with herself when she quickly realised the rat had no chance of reaching her. Kat let her mind return to normal speed and felt her wings quickly fix themselves. The damage was superficial really, from her new rather warped standpoint. Her wings were by far the most fragile of her limbs now, and if they'd been reinforced with circulating energy would have been fine. Now she'd pay for it with a bit of pain which was a cheap price.

"Well. Kamiko. I feel like I should blame you for this really. You know how you brought up the pit of rats?" said Kat with a deadpan voice, and lacking the pain Kamiko thought really should have been present.

"Yeah..." said Kamiko drawing out the word, "wait... no. No, please don't... I have to be wrong right? That is not a whole filled with rats right? Please tell me it isn't?"

"It isn't" said Kat

Kamiko's mouth dropped open "How... how did you do that?"

Kat grinned, "I simply did as you requested. I did as you asked 'please tell me it isn't' thus I gave you the words 'it isn't'"

Kamiko was stunned. That wasn't a tactic she was aware worked on their inability to lie. The meaning was so clear, and Kamiko had to wonder if it was a nondem thing rather than a creative idea she'd overlooked. Still, it was something she'd keep in mind going forward. That was when the true meaning behind Kat's explanation caught up with her and she groaned.

"I didn't want to know. I shouldn't have asked. Now I know it's all just rats. Is... how bad is it?" asked Kamiko really not wanting the answer but knowing she needed it.

Kat sighed. "Perhaps I should spare you the information? I mean..." Kat rolled her hand as she tried to avoid answering the question none of them wanted to recognise. Still, there was nothing to be done. "Yeah it's that bad. Worse perhaps. At least three rats deep and the whole is barely big enough to fit is. In fact... I'm not quite sure if my horns will fit." *novelnext.com*

Kamiko raised an eyebrow at her friend and the rather large wings she had behind her. "You're worried about your horns?" asked Kamiko confused

"Yeah?"

"What about your wings?"

"Oh those won't be too bad..." said Kat "I can fold them up a bunch and worse comes to worse well... they can wrap around me... or break a little" Kat whispered that last part before going back to full volume to say "my horns though. They are rather tough and I'm not sure how well that would work out"

Kat was of course, downplaying her strength. She was not at fault for this, and Kamiko had missed it as well, but it was far more likely the rock would give way before any part of Kat if she was really trying. The fact there was a hole there already implied it was one of the weaker materials in the mines.

Before they could think on it too much though, a flashing light started to round the corner. Turning they saw Stone, flicking his lantern on and off. Kat glanced at Kamiko who raised an eyebrow alongside Kat before they both shrugged.

When Stone saw them both looking at him confused he gestured towards them. He had earmuffs of his own now, unlike before but that was the only wardrobe change. Kat went to walk forward, but Kamiko grabbed her arm and pointed to the hole, before pointing at Stone then back at the hole.

Stone raised an eyebrow, not that the demons could actually tell, and looked at the point Kamiko had gestured to. Stepping forward to get a better look he saw that it must have been the hole the rats came from. Nodding in understanding, Stone moved forward and sealed the hole before gesturing the girls to move back towards the entrance

Once they did, he shifted more stone around him to create a massive arrow aiming itself at the area he'd covered over he backed up a few more steps before pulling stone from the wall and covering it completely. He then carved a basic rat into the wall and surrounded it with a hexagon.

He turned back to the girls before taking off his earmuffs and tapping his ears, indicating for them to do the same. When Kat took hers off the sound hit her even still. It was muted, not painful of course, but still like a low droning, and knowing most of it was the rats was not a comforting thought.

"Right. I've come to say, good job, and the days over for you both. I was going to send someone else so I didn't have to come perfectly, but thought it best I come to seal it all back up again. Good thing too" said Stone, with a bit of false cheer. It was clear the rat corpses and the noise were not pleasant for the demon, but they were also somewhat routine.

"Thanks" said the pair, before Kamio continued "Though we also have something to mention. There was a lockbox a way back. We may wish to open it or at least pick it up"

### **Chapter 473: Leaving the Mine FINALLY**

The group of demons returned the holdout in the wall swiftly. They had all returned their earmuffs to the correct place and distinct clamour of the mines was no longer assaulting their eardrums. Perhaps, this is why, when the group reached the door, Stone simply walked in and picked up the lockbox before widening so that he could walk out without trouble. Kat had wanted to ask a few questions about it, but knowing it wasn't really polite, especially because they'd have to remove the ear protection they said nothing.

The group returned to the crumbling wall that could be considered the entrance to the rat infested section of the mine. Stone once again sealed the place off, cleaning up the dust a little in the processes before marching on. Kat and Kamiko both shared a desire to chat a little to at least combat the silence slightly, but they knew it was impolite.

Kat had decided there must be demons with better hearing than her, and adding to the din of the mines without good reason wasn't particularly polite at all. Kamiko on the other hand, was more concerned that Stone had a master set of earmuffs, thinking it likely there was at least one pair in the mines that had been attuned to them all, allowing for him to overhear any minors chatting, probably with a distance limitation or a filter of some kind.

Both demons had their reasons, and both were actually valid, and in Kamiko's case correct. At least, in the assumption that pair of earmuffs existed. If Stone was actually wearing them or not, was something of a mystery as they didn't look any different than a normal pair and certain friends of Stone did love to switch them out and see how long it took him to notice.

This meant they left the mine in silence. The workers were still operating, coming and going with the minecarts and loads of ore of various colours. Some shined in the light, some seemed to suck it in, others glowed faintly despite the brightness, others swirled with colours like a rainbow had been liquified and compressed into stone.

Kat pulled her eyes away from the sight though, as Stone led them back to the shed they'd arrived in. Stone set down the lockbox with a loud thud, not even attempting to be gentle with it, before taking off his earmuffs and dropping them down on the box and gesturing at it for Kat and Kamiko to do the same.

Once all were freed of their headwear, Stone spoke up "Is there anything else I need to know about the rats? Anything important?"

Kat looked over to Kamiko, indicating her to take the lead. While Kat might have been their frontline combatant, Kamiko's knowledge of the Swarm Rats, while small, was still higher than her own, so the shorter demon spoke up. "Nothing serious I don't believe. We might not have completely cleaned the upper areas, I'm not sure if you want us to focus on that or... the hole.

"Otherwise, um... the rats were easy, nothing special about them yet. They all seem to have come up and were mostly marking territory and expanding up top, but they weren't anywhere close to the numbers in the hole. Kat and I could easily cull the ones we found with not even a scratch between us. The horde might be a bigger problem though..."

Stone nodded, taking in the information from Kamiko and adding it to what he had seen of the place, tapping his fingers against the box in a rhythmic pattern as he contemplated what to do going forward. Eventually, after what looked like half a minute of thought to outsiders, Stone spoke up. "Right. That's fine, clearing out the path to, and finding, the place they broke in is the most important thing here. If they really are as easy as you say, the miners can probably deal with the stragglers up top by themselves..."

"The problem really lies with the rest of them. I might have to come along myself or send someone else down with you to assist." Stone looked over the pair of Succubi as he said that, looking for a reaction that would indicate their displeasure with the idea, but found none. Neither Kamiko nor Kat had any undue pride in their combat abilities and were happy to have help if they needed it. *novelnext.Com*

Continuing on, Stone said "I might even come down with you myself if I can't really line anyone up for it. I'd probably be overkill, and I have other duties that are important and can be done only by myself... but the rats can't be ignored. Overkill or not they need to go. They need to be cleaned up somewhat, and the risks of just shoving demonic fire down their and praying are too high."

Stone chewed on his lip, which, as a demon made mostly of a rock like substance, was very noticeable because of the sound of rocks grating against each other as his teeth failed to crack his lip. "No, I don't like the idea at all. Certainly don't want to risk you needing to let out too many flames to keep yourself safe either..."

"Anyway, don't worry too much about that part. That's on me to figure out. Just be aware that it might not just be the two of you down there. It might be... but at this point I doubt it. I'll send a couple of chumps down to clean things out before tomorrow and maybe take a better look at the hole myself. Anything else?"

Kat and Kamiko shared a look before shrugging. \*Pretty sure that was all. I wonder if we really will have help. Will they be other demons on punishment duty or will they be helpers Stone will have found on his own.\*

"Right then" said Stone, "You'll both be summoned to this shed tomorrow. You won't have to go through headquarters next time around." With that Stone gave them a nod and exited the door. Kat and Kamiko watched this, took each other in hand and teleported away back to Kamiko's house.

Kat saw the cottage again and smiled. This really was a nice place, and while she hadn't had the time to properly appreciate the garden, what was out in front was lovely. As Kat approached the house though, she could almost feel something subtly wrong with it. \*Oh no.\* Kamiko pushed open the door for them and Kat's bad feeling spiked. \*Please no.\*

Kat's prayers were unanswered, as sitting at the table teacup in hand was obviously Aslena. The ram horns coupled with her green hair which was actually slightly brighter than her mother's in person, sat daintily with a finger out and a slight frown on her features. Her outfit stood out the most though, which Kat supposed was a given. Where the rest of the family had simple affairs, even when they looked nice, Aslena had gone all out, or well, this was a casual outfit for her, but to Kat it was extreme.

The edges were all lined with a material that glowed, switching between a flowing rainbow of colours that seemed to lead the watcher's eyes straight to Aslena's chest. Not that... she was overly endowed in

that area. In fact, knowing what Kat did about Kamiko's own chest, hidden as it normally was, Kat could confidently say that it was the smallest of the family outside of perhaps Meridithna. Still, she was a Succubus, so this meant solid B cups rather than anything truly small.

The rest of the outfit was a pencil dress, hugging her curves tightly and clinging to her legs, where it flared out to cover her feet. Kat wouldn't notice yet, but she also wore high heels, very high heels, that were unhidden due to her spot at the table.

When her starry black eyes flickered over to the pair Aslena stood up easily pushing away the chair with the motion. She gave a smile full of teeth that Kat could see was fake from a mile away, longer now she had demonic eyes. "Sister!" said Aslena, "I see you've finally brought a friend over!"

Kat stepped forward past Kamiko, not willing to let Aslena attack her sister to overtly straight away. Holding out a hand Kat returned the smile with one no more genuine than she'd received. "Hello, my name is Kat"

Aslena's brows scrunched slightly at being confronted but they let up as she held Kat's hand and realised it wasn't being reinforced. She let her nails dig into Kat's skin, activating her own toxins trying to cause just the slightest bit of fear in Kat, perhaps prove she was top dog.

Kat however, was having none of it. The pain was nothing and when she pushed her energy into her hand, a genuine grin spread across her face, as by regeneration alone her body rejected the nails, and she didn't get the slightest hint of the fear inducing poison.

Kat watched as the smile on Aslena's face cracked as her fingers were forced backwards. Just because she was also a Rank 2 demon, did not mean she was anywhere close to the strength of Kat or Kamiko.

#### **Chapter 474: Trading Barbs**

Despite the smile growing on her face and the feeling of elation, Kat was confused under it all. \*How can she be so weak? My regeneration is strong, but it isn't that impressive physically speaking... er... is that right? Anyway, point is, I doubt I'd be able to pull this trick off with Kamiko, she'd be able to keep her fingers in I bet.\*

Of course, the liberal use of her fear abilities was one of the main reasons Kamiko still disliked her sister. Even if they weren't being used, Kamiko still wouldn't attempt to fight back physically. For all her training, it wasn't her first instinct, and it was even less of a consideration against family.

"I'd love to say I'm shocked that Kamiko found somebody while being punished..." sneered Aslena, barely keeping the smile on her face as she tried to off balance Kat after feeling her fingers being pushed back "but I suppose it only makes sense that she'd end up with criminals"

\*Oooh, you practically gave this one to me for free Aslena. Normally I'd feel a little bad about it, but I'll defend my friends with body or words. I've done it for years already and I'll do it for years to come.\*

"Well, I suppose you might be right. For, it is the action which are criminal and not the catching that makes it so. I have an appeal lined up as soon as I'm finished you see, what about you?" returned Kat

Aslena however, was much more prepared for a verbal barb than the physical one Kat had accidentally delivered. "Oh? I'm surprised to be accused by someone I hardly know. Has my sister perhaps been misrepresenting me? I'd hate for that to be the case" said Aslena easily.



Kat felt her eyebrows narrow, and decided not to stop them, as she thought over the words. \*I'm honestly surprised Aslena can say she'd hate for Kamiko to misrepresent her. I've known her for less than a minute and I can already see she's a bully. Does that mean she doesn't actually believe herself to be one? Surely she is not so blind as that? Do I have a comeback? Yes actually\*

"Oh? What were you thinking Kamiko had said? The most I'd heard about you was from your father, do you know something I do not? Why would Kamiko be speaking ill of you?" said Kat

In Aslena's left eye just a single star dimmed for a split second before returning to normal. Kat herself wasn't even certain she'd seen it, but it did remain in her memories of the event. "Father has an... overbearing idea of me I suppose. He likes to tell embarrassing stories of when I was younger. I suppose I must have assumed that you got them from Kamiko instead..." Aslena let herself trail off at the end.

\*Hmm, interesting, another thing I wasn't sure she'd be able to say. Is it because she said 'I suppose' at the beginning of it? As she was supposing at that moment a lie? Is that something we can do? I'm honestly not quite sure, though based on Aslena's penchant for... misleading... let's say, her father, I find it likely that if anyone can do it, Aslena is the one who figured it out.\*

"Yes, your father does indeed enjoy his stories of his children's youth" said Kat though she winced internally at not really having a better line to go with, "your mother is interesting as well, I've heard she's rather respected in her field just like yourself" \*Perhaps a bit of flattery? I think I used all my good jabs already. I pretty much had the others preprepared, I've got no idea how I'm supposed to keep up the pressure.\*

To Kat's surprise though, Aslena accepted the compliment well. "Thank you for that. I pride myself on my work, and while I hope to be as big a name in fashion as my mother is in medicine I highly doubt I'll actually reach such a level any time soon"

With that Aslena let go of Kat's hand, realising that she really wasn't getting anywhere, and headed back towards her tea. Kat strode in behind her, taking the seat next to Aslena on this side of the table, whereas Aslena was on the end. Kamiko decided to take the seat next to Kat instead of leaving Aslena in the middle, shielding herself somewhat from her sister.

Aslena hid a grin behind her teacup at that, disguising her smile with a long drink of the stuff now more certain that while Kamiko had an acquaintance at least, she was no more a danger than she was previously, no this new demon was the real issue. Aslena really took in Kat for the first time at this.

She let her eyes first flick up to Kat's strange horn type, and was unsure if she'd ever seen anything like them before. It was certainly not a common configuration, and this meant that whoever Kat was, she didn't live in the area, and was likely no friend of the family. This means she really had met Kamiko during the punishment.

Looking further, Kat's eyes revealed nothing interesting either. They were clear, and rather pretty yes, but a blind woman could tell Kat was a Succubus so that meant nothing. Aslena noticed Kat's outfit was of fine make, perhaps not top quality, but a large amount of skill had been invested into its construction, and, if she was honest with herself, unsure if she could match the level required to produce it. The materials were what brought it down mostly, but Aslena knew if it was Kat's demonic attire they didn't matter as much.

Kat of course, had the full wings that not all that many Succubi had these days, the trait tending to get lost over generations because the smaller wings gave magical flight regularly at early Ranks, and were much easier to keep in check. Kat's tail was standard, as far as Aslena could see, perhaps a little long for Kat's height, but that was unclear.

Kat's bearing also didn't really tell her anything. She had perfect posture and a nice figure, the first a thing Kat hadn't actually noticed properly was that her body tended to sit properly when it could, though she'd had rather good posture before so it was a minor improvement at best.

Aslena really didn't know what to think of Kat, truth be told, she didn't seem like she was all that remarkable at a glance, but her regeneration at least was formidable. Aslena was still slightly offput by that fact. Returning her 'attack' would have been considered rude because it was her family's home, and Kat acting either in spite of that, or unaware of it would have given her more information to work with. Alas, Kat's 'opening move' was even more effective then it seemed at a glance.

Putting the cup down, Aslena addressed Kamiko for the first time since the start of the conversation. "So, sister, what have you been up to during your Punishment? Nothing too difficult I hope?"

"Oh, um..." Kamiko was internally wincing at not having a ready reply. She'd hoped that Kat would have continued to take the pressure of. Kamiko did feel a little badly about that hope, but Kat had taken the role gladly, and Kamiko really wanted no part of a conversation with her sister as long as her parents weren't around, "no... it... um, nothing too bad really. Gluttony was a bit of work, but simple stuff none the less"

"Oh? Fancy yourself a chef now sister?" said Aslena.

Kat debated about stepping in there, but despite Kamiko's actual wishes, Kat believed the other girl would want to answer the questions directed at her. After a moment that let Kamiko realise she would have to be the one to answer, she responded with "Actually, the real cooking was done by Kat here, I just chopped the ingredients."

"So it's your new friend that's the chef?" Aslena said, turning her eyes towards Kat again, "That must have been imposing, Gluttony is known to be tough on their expert chefs"

Kat easily saw through the bait though. Expert chefs they may be hard on indeed, but quantity was just as much in demand. "It was only an old recipe Gramps taught me. I'm not from the Hub so I was able to make something Unique"

"Oh, an off-worlder? I suppose it makes sense you'd end up with Kamiko then, she and you must get along well I'm sure" said Aslena, making no move to hide that her words were intended as insults.

Kat really didn't know how to respond to that one though. \*I mean, everything she said was true, and I give zero shits about peer pressure and social acceptance. I'm not even sure if people from outside the Hub are looked down on if you aren't Aslena. Hmm... guess I should speed up my thought a bit to search for a good answer.\*

#### **Chapter 475: Is that a bit of Humanity I see?**

\*Perhaps pointing out that I'm a nondem would work? They always seem to be rare and somewhat powerful from the way everyone talks about them so it would be a good comeback, but that might be

telling Aslena a bit too much about myself, I very clearly avoided it before by only calling attention to the fact I was born off Hub...

Then again, is this a good enough payoff? This way I can get back at her a bit for just assuming I'm a demon from outside... oh I have an idea...\*? "What's your problem with me being from outside the Hub? While I've been here I've hardly noticed anything that much better..." said Kat letting the thought trail off as if she was thinking hard about it. It was surprising to Kat though, that what she said was an easy truth. Despite the improved tech level from enchantments in some places, it wasn't anything too amazing so far.

Aslena scoffed when she heard Kat's question. "What, you can't even tell class? Then again, I doubt they'd show you any of the good stuff anyway. If you're an offworlder, clearly it's because your parents couldn't afford a plot in the Hub. It's simply better. Sure people have holiday homes but nobody proper lives outside full time. Didn't your parents teach you that?"

\*Hmm, interesting, she seems to have given up being nice to me at all really. I wonder why? Did I manage to catch her with some of my lines? Has she just decided I'm not that important? Well no matter, she gave me an even better target to hit her with. It's great because unlike Kamiko who knows it doesn't bother me... Aslena might feel a little bad.\* "My parents didn't teach me anything, they're dead" said Kat, deadpan, staring at Aslena as if daring her to ask more.

Kat was then shocked when she saw Aslena's eyes widen before her hands grasped tightly onto her teacup. Aslena then very pointedly looked away for a few moments before glancing back at Kat. "Sorry" said Aslena, "That was beyond the pale"

\*Hmmm? Is that a bit of humanity inside the tin man's heart? I'm glad to see she isn't completely heartless but... if that's the case then... why is she so mean all the time? Is it the whole 'dead parents' thing? Does that cross the line for some people?\* ~~no~~next.com

Kat really had no proper context for it. She'd never felt bad about her missing parents, but she was never going to bring it up to the others at the orphanage because most of them had KNOWN their parents, and it just wasn't nice. A few kids at school had hit her with the insult before, but Kat had never cared.

\*Ok... now the question is? Do I accept her apology? She seems genuine and I want to encourage that behaviour, especially towards Kamiko... but I'm not sure that'd teach her anything... I mean, she clearly didn't know, and never would have said it otherwise. Parents dying isn't exactly common... actually maybe it is? I never looked at the statistics for something like that. I wonder if it's rarer amongst demons? Actually, wait... with their healthcare system it's probably MUCH rarer. Huh, makes it look like I drew the really short straw then doesn't it?\*

Perhaps, in another world Kat would have tried to capitalise on Aslena's discomfort, pressing her advantage to try and ensure that it was clear Aslena needed to think about her words more by verbally beating it into her. Still, this wasn't that world. Despite Kat's verbal spar, she was doing it to protect her friend, hopefully going into the future, and not to attack Aslena, though that would be welcome. "It's ok, I never really knew them. Perhaps thinking about what you say more often though? You didn't know it was a sore spot for me, but you'd target other ones without remorse."

Aslena took a sip of tea at that, clearly thinking on Kat's response. Kamiko looked on somewhat awkwardly, more because she wasn't used to her sister looking sorry or introspective at all.

"Hmmmmm" murmured Aslena "I don't know about that. If you're too weak to fight back even verbally then I have no remorse. However... the dead are serious business, parents more so, and that's just... not something I want to rely on to make a point. It's disgusting, and beyond what is acceptable."

\*Ok, sure I can kinda get that... but I just fail to see what the difference is really? If I found someone and called them fat, overweight, a pig, and then further went on to insult part of their body talking about how ugly it was until they cried, which IS something I've seen people do before... I honestly think that's worse then bringing up some dead people...

Sure, it probably hurts people to know about them. I know I'd be sad if Gramps died and someone reminded me, but I wouldn't cry about it too much... probably... hopefully... look in this scenario I'm making in my head let's say it's been a while. \*

Kat wanted to shake her head to clear her thoughts, but she didn't want to give anything away to Aslena either. Kat managed to settle for flicking just the end of her tail around a bit, Aslena wasn't looking at it below the chair, so it was mostly hidden.

\*I just... I feel like, the response should match response. Like, Aslena accidentally bringing up my dead parents super adjacently is not as bad as specifically targeting me in a way that would get me to cry. Then again... maybe a demon without parents is something so rare it's well worth crying about? Maybe I should just ask? Phrase it like I already know the answer perhaps?\*

"Why do you say it so? I'd say the reaction you cause someone is much more important than the means you used to get it no? My parents are not something I remember, but if I was say... insecure about my weight or something, insulting that would be worse if I assume you knew that information" said Kat

Aslena laughed at that. Full on laughed. Oh, she tried to stifle it behind her teacup but it didn't work.

"A... A Succubus with appearance issues? Hah, only Kamiko has those kinds of thoughts," \*Pretty sure it's crowds she doesn't like, at least from the one story I heard, not that she doesn't think she's pretty\* "still, I disagree. If I tried to stab you, doesn't matter if it pierces the skin, it matters that I tried to stab you"

Kat bit her lip and thought it over. \*Hmm, are we really having this argument? I feel like this is apples and oranges. You can't accidentally stab someone the way you can accidentally stumble into a taboo when speaking with someone. Unless you like... what... trip with your sword out or something?

Also really? Targeting Kamiko so casually? What's the point? She's your sister, and you're what... like... wait how old is Aslena? She has to be twenty something... HANG ON?\*

Kat realised a very strange thing. There was a non zero, in fact, perhaps rather likely chance, that Aslena was older than Vivian.

\*Well now I have no idea how to feel. Shit that means everyone in this family other than Kamiko and maybe Aslena are much older than Vivian as well. I... I KNEW the triplets were older. It's not like I forgot but... it just didn't hit me I guess. Well... that's a bombshell. How do I reconcile that strange thought? Hang on... does that mean Elmony is probably older than Gramps?\*

Kat quickly chased away that line of thought. Trying to work out relative and actual ages of demons seemed like a sure fire way to get lost in a very confusing maze. \*Let's just decide that despite Vivian's

attitude she's more mature than Aslena and leave it at that.\* Of course, the idea Vivian was a 'mature' adult was somewhat farfetched, but compared to Aslena's clearly petty grudge against Kamiko for something, it rang very true to Kat's mind.

"I think you're comparing apples and oranges" said Kat hoping the saying would translate if Aslena didn't recognise the fruit "I'm comparing accidents and intentions. Accidentally stabbing someone is much worse than trying to stab them intentionally obviously"

"Of course. Nobody wants to get stabbed" said Aslena with a smile, showing that she knew what she was doing, and not that she'd simply missed the point. "Still, there are lines you wouldn't cross in combat. You don't scratch a woman's face for example"

\*I'm sorry what? If I'm in combat I'm going for whatever is the squishiest target. If I need to go for the eyes I have no shame. I'll go right for them without hesitation!\* Alas, Kat just wasn't built for the full force of mental gymnastics Aslena was willing to bring to bear. That, and Kat didn't really have a concept of honour. Politeness sure, but politeness was not for people fighting. Wrath wasn't exactly going to teach it to people either. It was unnecessary though quite a few of them picked it up anyway.

#### **Chapter 476: Designer Course**

"I suppose I'll just have to agree to disagree with you" said Kat softly, "I don't know if I have much honour in combat. I'd go for the face if I thought it was a good idea. Sometimes it is, but things are generally good at protecting it as well"

Aslena let out a humming noise as she took another sip of tea, Kat was starting to wonder if the cup had some sort of special expansion charm on it. She would be surprised to learn that it sort of did. The teapot was connected to the cup and continually refilled it. This allowed someone to drink extra tea without needing to refill it. Aslena would say it looked more polite if asked. Nira, the actual owner, would say it's because when she wants to relax, why should she need to keep pouring her tea.

Letting the mood settle slightly Kat went over questions she had for Aslena. Many of them weren't polite at all, but it was also now very clear that she wouldn't be able to goad the other demon into a fight. \*She's just too weak. Probably knows it as well. If my regeneration is enough to push her back, I doubt she'd be brave enough to spar out some differences. What should I ask then? I can't think of anything truly snide to go for... maybe just ask a real question?\*

"So... what is it exactly that you do?" asked Kat, not realising she'd managed to sound snide with the question at all.

Aslena raised an eyebrow and was shocked to see the genuine question on Kat's face. Sadly, Aslena, used to dealing with people capable of that sort of control and more, assumed Kat was masking her reaction and making fun of her, so shot back with. "I've been given a special dispensation to skip my Contracts as long as I continue to put out high quality designer clothing"

"Right but how?" asked Kat

Aslena frowned, still thinking Kat was playing her, and in this instance playing dumb. Aslena was under the impression Kat was doubting her abilities, when in fact, that was one thing Kat didn't want to touch

at all. Despite Aslena's personality, Kat wasn't under the impression the other girl was anything less than an excellent designer. "What, don't think I'm good enough?"

\*What? How did you get that?\* Thought Kat, really not understanding Aslena's thought process at all, or the time of environment she was in regularly. The demon fashion industry was a cutthroat place, especially for someone that was only a low Rank like Aslena. "No... I mean... like... um... what was the process? How did it happen? It's a thing you can do? I was told that Contracts aren't something you can really get out of for a while"

"Ah, I see..." said Aslena sceptically, "Well, it's true that YOU can't do anything about it. Neither could I really. You need to get multiple higher Rank backers. I'm not even allowed to know the exact number but from what I can gather it's at least three, and no more than ten. Oh, and I don't think they can be family. I mean... I asked Mother, and she said that 'I can't' and was weirdly insistent on the can't part"

\*I think that might have been more because she's in medical and has nothing to do with fashion but keep going I guess?\* Oblivious to Kat's internal retort, Aslena did just that. "Once you have enough backers, they can send of a petition to the system. If it gets accepted, then they need to share the burden of paying for you to skip missions. I believe it's more expensive then what you'd get as a cut for doing the mission, perhaps by as much as three times more, but I'm really unsure on that part.

"After that, you should be good to go, however you need to keep at least a certain number of those backers supporting you. I'm unsure if they can change. Let's say you need at least five people as a backer. If it drops below that number your permission to avoid Contracts gets revoked. I think it might be less than the initial recommendations, but I'm unsure, and as I said before I don't know if it has to be the same ten.

"However, I was told very explicitly that my status was reviewed once every hundred days, plus or minus up to fifty days randomly to ensure that I was continuing with my craft in some manner. I have to show what I've worked on, including things that I've discarded for one reason or another when called upon and prove that it was me who did the work, normally by showing drafts, sometimes by answering questions though those are very specific to me.

"Stuff like 'why was this dress discarded' or 'what material did you want to use for this suit when you started, and did that change when the design was finished' stuff like that. I'm not a fan of how long it takes frankly. They always assign a different demon for some reason and half the time it's the same questions the last person asked. It normally takes a couple hours but once you've been interrupted it's so hard to continue and just... ugh..."

Kat nodded, she could see Aslena was getting into territory she was annoyed with, and while Kat did sort of want that, she also didn't want it to just be directionless irritation, that was likely to come for Kamiko in the end, at least if it was focused on Kat, she knew she could deal with that. "That's nice, and seems like quite the process, how did you start getting noticed personally? You've described the more... technical side I guess..." said Kat

"Oh, it wasn't anything too special" said Aslena grateful for the chance to move on, but unsure why Kat provided it at all "When I was younger I started with contests," Kat couldn't hide the wince when Aslena's words brought up the one memory Kat knew off in that area "but that wasn't quite to get noticed..."

"Well, it was and it wasn't. Entering contests, well I started because I wanted people to see me and know I could design well even when I was little. I'm so glad I didn't go even deeper into the pageantry but focused on my designs because I was rather bad at the start. Still, it made me known. I wasn't anywhere close to being recognised, but at the start it gave me opportunities. Then, once I hit Rank 1 I did quick Contracts with lower rewards and spent most of my time making and marketing my designs in the Hub instead"

"Hold up," interjected Kat, "how did you manage to get short missions?"

Aslena shrugged, "If you're employed in some other way D.E.M.O.N.S tends to give you easier missions, or perhaps quicker missions would be more accurate? Not always, I've still had a few longer missions, but they tend to pick missions that suit the demon in question best"

\*Really? I wonder... does that mean I want longer missions or that I have what the system would classify as free time? I wish I could actually ask, but no, punishment dictates I cannot.\*

Aslena, seeing that Kat understood, decided to continue her story. "From there, I started to build up contacts in the industry. Sell some designs, fairly cheaply of course, for tiny cuts in revenue mostly. The reason is, I knew my designs were great and I was proven right because I almost always made more money from a profit percentage than I'd ever been offered for a design for the most part.

"Not everything was a hit, sometimes that was on me, sometimes that was on the daft company that purchased my designs and messed with them to 'appeal more to their target demographic' which... UGH I always hated getting those responses back when I asked what was going on. IDIOTS! I'll admit, I tend to branch out style wise more than normal so they might not have assumed, but they really should have just waited and bought something I designed AND fit their style."

Aslena took a long swig of tea. "Sorry, I'm getting heated a bit here. I have bad memories of a couple high profile companies outbidding others on a design of mine, and then they changed it and screwed the marketing. Personally looking back on it, I think it was more about making sure this one other group DIDN'T get the design rather than it being something they actually wanted.

"That's pretty much how it went. Once I was Rank 2, I started to put forward the idea that I wanted to stop doing Contracts out there in the world, because Rank 2 contracts are more annoying for the most part, and rather quickly I was picked up. Which, I'll admit, was a little surprising even for me. I'm good, perhaps the best my age, but some of the others have been designing for centuries."

## **Chapter 477: Professional, Professional**

Kat nodded though she wasn't quite able to fully grasp the idea. \*I guess it really is different when masters can live basically forever. I know older humans tend to have more experience with even just around fifty years to work. When you can have hundreds I imagine that really helps... or leads to major stagnation.\*

"When did you know you wanted to go into fashion design like that? I'm not sure I could make that decision as a child knowing so many masters were still around. Competing against people literally hundreds or even thousands of years my senior seems... hard." Said Kat softly, for she had to admit, Aslena deserved a good deal of respect for that despite her personality.

Aslena tapped her horns a few times with a lone finger, this let Kat realise that Aslena's nails were bright pink matching Kamiko's hair. It wasn't close to her skin tone at all, which was actually a bit tanner than Kamiko and much more than Kat. The pink didn't seem to be nail polish or some other dye, especially because it started right at the base of the nail. "It never really felt like that to me.

"There are two reasons for that. For I am not so arrogant as to believe I'm better than those who came before me. Certainly, I believed I could carve out my own niche, but I didn't truly believe I'd rise fast except in my wildest dreams. The simplest part of it was being a child when I gained this dream.

"I was able to pursue it with the passion only the truly young can hold. I simply didn't realise what I was challenging you see. I didn't, and perhaps couldn't, comprehend the enormity of the task before me. Once I'd set my sights on it, I did everything I could to just go for it. I gave up a lot of things to just keep up my practice..."

\*Wow, Aslena sounds like some of Gramps' friends with their 'pain and sacrifice in my youth you see' talks. It's... a little weird honestly. Still, not that jarring I guess. I wonder if she's parroting someone or if she actually thinks all this?\*

"... So, that's what I did. I aimed for something impossible before realising it was such a monumental task. The second thing is that some demons have... I guess you could call it a preordained profession. It's something that gives us joy and a sense of purpose like absolutely nothing else!" explained Aslena, really picking her voice up at the end.

"Hmm, seems great I guess. I never really felt like I had that growing up..." said Kat, admittedly somewhat wistful. It really would be nice to just... know what it is you want to do.

"It's a bit of a double edged sword honestly" said Aslena "I'm forever thankful I'm one of the lucky ones. The condition isn't... rare, but it's not common either. Perhaps one in ten demons? Around the same rarity as true ambidextrous demons, though I know plenty train for that.

"The big problem for... around half perhaps? The numbers aren't clear really because not a lot of us liked to be studied, and many who fall into the... unfortunate category don't like to speak about it, but some people, despite knowing their true passion potentially have zero skill in it at all. The famous example is cooking, it's actually a children story.

"It's about a Pride demon, it changes what type they are from person to person. I obviously heard they were a Succubus the first time, but I've heard it maybe... eight? Times now, with everything from Shadows to Beholders and more in between. Anyway, the type of demon isn't important. What is, is that the demon involved loved cooking. It was the only thing that gave them joy.

"They found it shortly before they became a Rank 1 demon, and their first Rank ability was poison immunity. Because of this, they would cook, without realising just how foul they were making their dish. They would cook day and night, slowly poisoning the world around them, as the dishes they made and the remains of such leached into the world, causing a calamity.

"Now, here the story differs. In the version I was taught, they swore off cooking when they fed it to their true love, who, returning the feeling, ate it all despite the taste and nearly died. We were young when I heard that tale, so I think the original version of that particularly one actually did cause the death I'm unsure.



"Anyway, after that they swore they'd never cook again, as despite the pleasure it gave them, it caused far too much pain to everyone else. Another version goes similarly, and this is my favourite, where the love interest is a warrior, who fights strong beasts, they nearly die from the food once again,

"But they see the potential. Not as edible food, but as poison, for something so strong to overcome this warrior's constitution would be able to fell even the mightiest beast. The story then goes on to become a story in which the moral is less about knowing when your pleasure is causing great pain to others, and more about finding your talent and being willing to use it in unexpected ways you might never consider.

"So... yes, I thank the stars that I'm not one of the unlucky demons that have no skill in their destined hobby. Personally, I think nothing could be sadder. I'm also not certain design really is my destined hobby. I mean, I think it is, and it sounds nice, but I'm not as obsessed with it as others I've heard.

"Certainly more than most but..." Aslena turned to Kat, and the stars in her eyes dimmed out, showing her true horror, "I've seen things Kat. I am forever thankful I number not among the untalented, but I am even more thankful to not count among the truly obsessed. Though perhaps given time I too may fall to that."

\*That looks is admittedly a little creepy. Makes me wonder for a second what she's seen but honestly I don't want to touch that with a ten foot pole. Though I wonder... does Aslena suffer from imposter syndrome? I mean, based on her response I'd say know but she thinks of herself as 'not a true' whatever the heck the obsessive demons are. Maybe? I don't really know anything about psychology it's more an errant thought.

Still, I really don't know what to make of that. It sounds cool on the surface to just... have a? higher calling sort of? Something you know you'll be happy doing. It does really suck that even if you're happy doing something you might never be good at it. Maybe I'll just... change the topic.\*

"So, with that in mind... what sort of Contracts did you do before you were able to be excused from them" asked Kat

Aslena raised an eyebrow at the blatant attempt to change the subject and found it strange. The information Kat had just been asking for was easy to find, unlike her Contract experience. She was once again looking for the trick where there was none. Still, she answered anyway, "Nothing too impressive really."

"Surely there must be something" said Kat, "I was called upon to advise an Elven King because he was worried all his advisors were lying to him. I felt kinda bad about that one, but I think I helped him."

"Truly?" said Aslena "I was called upon once in my early days to teach a prince how to dance!"

"Is that something you're particularly good at?" asked Kat

Aslena gave a 'so-so' gesture. "I'm not a dance teacher myself, but I did learn it for a few years and learnt how to teach the basics," When Aslena saw the immediate question on Kat's face, she felt compelled to answer even as she wondered if Kat really did have control over her facial features. She didn't of course, but Aslena hadn't quite worked that out. "I learnt how so that I knew better what kind of outfits a dancer could wear. No sense giving a pencil skirt to a ballerina as they'd never be able to kick properly in one without adjustments."

"That actually sounds pretty cool. Another early mission from me was just a master and apprentice making the apprentices first summoning. It was a little scary for them though because I didn't have my horns yet" said Kat, having forgotten she was trying not to mention she was a nondem.

Aslena actually missed it though, getting caught up in the atmosphere. "I actually had something similar, a set of two youngsters that had found an old tome and mostly just wanted to see what it did. I ended up juggling for them. Not quite sure how I was talked into that one."

Kat was surprised to hear Kamiko giggling beside her, which gave Kat her own small smile. \*It seems that for all the bad things I've heard about Aslena from her, she has more than just bad memories. Perhaps I should ask Aslena about some of their better interactions from her perspective? That could be very interesting.\*

### **Chapter 478: Good Tails**

Before Kat could ask about some good memories the two sisters had together, a new thought occurred to Kat. "Oh, before we get too far off from the destined profession talk, I'd like to know if it's more common amongst certain kinds of demons?"

Aslena bit her lip at that and tapped her teacup lightly a few times. "That's another one of those hard to answer questions. Getting that sort of information from Pride or Envy is a lot like pulling teeth. Then, if they give you information, there's an even chance they've messed with it in some way.

"Even still, there does seem to be at least some correlations. Succubi actually rarely get one. Some would argue our natural inclination towards... sensual pleasure let's say... especially in pure Succubi counts, but from a medical perspective it just doesn't hold water. You can see someone with a destined profession actually has a unique demonic energy response to performing their job which Succubi tend to lack. I mean, for a lot of them they still very much enjoy the work, and it gives them..." Aslena rolled her eyes but said it anyway "great pleasure I'm sure.

"Still, it does seem to commonly occur in Sloth demons, especially Shadows. It's a bit arguable in Wrath demons, because they tend to gain a special response to combat, a sort of... priming effect, I'm not to clear on it, this is just something I've overheard from Mom understand?" when Kat nodded Aslena continued "Wrath demons seem to get a very similar response when in combat. It isn't the same, the data is clear on that, but it's so close that it can be hard to measure exactly so the data on Wrath isn't that clear.

"Lust of course, having so many Succubi, has some of the least, with Greed surprisingly also not getting many. Which some people actually find rather strange because they tend to keep things in the family when they can and as far as I know they enjoy what they do, so..." Aslena took a sip of tea and shrugged not really sure what else to say. She didn't really know the specifics, it was just one of the more interesting topics Nira had mentioned in the past, and Aslena had a better memory then Kamiko, nearly at Kat's level, but she used it to much greater effect then Kat herself.

"Huh, weird" said Kat not really knowing what else to say. \*I guess I just don't know enough about the culture or the biology side of things. Or the... whatever extra magic biology comes into play as well. I mean, there's no way plain old genetics is what allows some of the mixing of traits I've seen from

demons. I'm certain there's more. Still, I wonder how that impacts things. Maybe I just ask? Actually let's do that but Kamiko involved.\* "Kamiko do you know how that effects things with the faction makeup?"

When Kat looked over, she saw Kamiko's eyes widen in something that wasn't quite panic, but definitely wasn't surprised. Kamiko floundered for a moment as she tried to deal with the fact she was now required to participate in the conversation. Aslena let out a low snicker at the sight, which actually seemed to calm Kamiko down for some reason. "Oh um..."

"I really don't know Kat... I mean, yeah I just don't know. I think... I don't even think they make up the best workers all the time? I mean... Aslena is actually one of the really luck ones. She's said it already but... having some talent in the profession you feel a calling for is one thing, and something you can work on with effort but... being a genius in your field and having the drive to use it is another. I... I actually think she might have been underselling herself a bit there.

"If one in ten demons have a calling, and half of those are good at what they do, only a tenth of that half are good because of talent, rather than inordinate practice and then of the talented tenth, perhaps... perhaps in a thousand demons you'd get fifteen? True geniuses. Then you have to make sure they Rank up at least a little and well... yeah..." Kamiko trailed off, not willing to look Aslena in the eyes after saying all that.

It wasn't really the information Kat had been after but it was clear nobody really knew that. Aslena's reaction though was actually very interesting. When Kat looked back at Aslena she was now very pointedly not looking at her sister. She had a teacup hiding most of her face but the blush on her cheeks was visible around the edges of the cup and Kat felt her jaw drop. She was just thankful she kept her lips closed to hide the effect somewhat.

\*What the hell is this? Aslena weak to praise or something? No... she surely gets that from work enough times. I wonder if this relationship with Kamiko is as doomed as I thought going into this. Oh, she's clearly still in need of some discipline and a personality adjustment but maybe... maybe time and a little bit of help will be enough for her.\*

"Naw, you pair are adorable" said Kat not wanting to call Aslena out directly lest she spoil the progress she felt was made there. That's what it was to, progress. For Kamiko, that chance to talk about her problems with Aslena had helped her more than she realised, and allowed her to let out at least some of the negative feelings that had been festering about her sister in a controlled manner. This combined with having a friend ask the question compelled Kamiko to answer more honestly then she'd thought she would or a stranger point, more honestly then she knew she could. "Do you have any good stories from when you were younger?"

Aslena, teacup to her mouth swallowed a large gulp of tea as she placed it back down her mind whirring. A part of her had a story ready, the part of her that wanted to rub it in Kat's face how lame her sister was, telling a story that would be amusing for her and embarrassing for her sister. A larger part of her clamped down on that impulse as she swallowed. She'd just gained a compliment. A real, genuine compliment that meant a lot more to her then she was willing to admit even to herself and she'd be damned if she didn't at least try to repay the favour in some small way.

So Aslena breathed, she took in a deep breath and centred herself, letting her thoughts stilled slightly and her face settle into the small smile she wished it to have and not the embarrassed grin of a few

seconds before. "I do actually, have a rather fond memory from when we were little. We tried to play a prank on the triplets see. Oh, I'm certain in hindsight it didn't work, especially because we didn't bother with stilts but...

Aslena started to narrate the story of a much younger pair of demon sisters. Aslena had come up with the idea to pretend to be like the triplets, having seen how comfortable they always were with each other. The problem of course, being how different Kamiko and Aslena looked. Of course, what other reason could it be?

So, over a few weeks Aslena collected her 'weapons'. Paper maché to make Kamiko a set of horns to match her own, and, in a rare moment of humility, some pink hair dye for herself so that they'd have changed one thing each. Aslena was also making on the side, a matching set of two outfits for them that was green with pink fish on one, with the colours inverted on the other.

The dresses were already up to professional standard, but Aslena wasn't thinking it through properly either, she'd made them the same size because of course, they were supposed to be matching. They were even slightly too big for Aslena, who was in her early teens at the time, and wasn't sure when the project would be done.

In the end, they'd dressed up, Kamiko had hidden her horns with buns as usual and placed the fake ones on her head. Aslena had mirrored her, adding pink dye, which may or may not have been the wrong pink for the task, but with a matching hairstyle to 'hide' her horns.

"... and the triplets went along with it for the whole day. Pretended they couldn't tell who was who, but yeah... it was very clear that we'd forgotten quite a few major things. I mean, the hair dye wasn't great, the height difference, the fact that Kamiko's outfit didn't fit her at all, and really the triplets all have a great sense of smell and that alone would have done as in straight away."

"I still have it you know" mumbled Kamiko not really wanting to be heard.

Aslena though. She did hear. Her head whipped around to face Kamiko who was admiring the details on the table. Kat could hear Aslena's hair whip through the air, so fast she turned. "What?" a faint spoken question, one wanting to know but not believing, especially as she used Kamiko's closet frequently.

Kamiko gulped and looked over at Aslena. Spinning cross eyes met the stary night. "I still have that dress, hidden away with my other precious things"

It was too much for Aslena, she bolted from the scene, and Kat was sure, that she could see slight tears in her eyes as she left barrelling down to the second level.

## **Chapter 479: The Weight of Choice**

The remaining two demons just sat and stared at the area Aslena had vacated. Kamiko had a small amount of water that had just started to leave tracks down her face as she tried to cope with the storm of emotions that was locked within her. The many conflicting feelings were ultimately uplifting, but it was mired by confusion and uncertainty. Kat was completely gobsmacked. She wasn't crying like Kamiko, but she felt worse.

\*I... I came into this fantasising about a way to get Aslena to run away crying. I didn't ever think I'd succeed and it was mostly a hope that I'd be able to beat some sense into Aslena how somehow

magically got to one up her in a verbal spar. Both seemed unlikely and they were... but to see it sort of work. To see her run... I feel kinda bad.

Which makes no sense at all. Those are happy tears. I refuse to believe they are anything else. She can't possibly be sad about that fact. I... I wish I could have stopped her, given her a hug but I was so shocked I could hardly move. Kamiko was the same, and it's not like Aslena is slow, she's still a Rank 2 demon and she knows the house.

What the heck do we do now? Is it better to let her calm down? As much as I want to say those were happy tears she did sprint away at max speed, she even left her tea behind. What are you supposed to do when someone is overwhelmed by happy emotions? Should I chase after her? Get Kamiko to chase after her? I can't even send a message to Nira or ask Vivian for help because of the damned punishment. This is kind of important. Curses.\*

Kat looked over at Kamiko who was smiling with tears now turning into a river down her face. It didn't look like a pained smile, but she didn't really know what to do with the emotions she was trying to contain. Kat lifted her tail up to let it sit in Kamiko's lap near the other demon's hands. When Kat felt her tail being squeezed rather hard she just sighed and continued to wonder what to do, apparently letting Kamiko use her tail as a stress ball was a good choice at least.

\*So. Now what? I'm not sure Kamiko is in any state to really help Aslena, and as much as I believe I'm qualified to speak as a friend to Kamiko, I'm know friend of Aslena's. What the hell should I do? She's not like the bullies from my school is she. Those idiots had each other at the end of the day even if they were horrible people. I wonder if Aslena has anyone...\*

Kat was actually right in her musings, Aslena and Kamiko before this had gone along with a polite fiction when around their family, both 'knowing' that neither was all that fond of one another. For Aslena, she'd was willing to sacrifice a lot of things to find her place in the designer world, especially if those things weren't hers in the strictest sense, without realising what she was really losing.

Kamiko had gotten caught with the negative feelings because she always felt there was nobody to complain to. As she got older she didn't think it was appropriate to complain about Aslena as much, or cry about her problems so she'd been bottling a lot of them up not realising the good things that've been done while neither of them were paying attention.

Having such clear proof that Aslena cared was something Kamiko wasn't really prepared for. Aslena on the other hand, was in the same boat. As much as she was able to make fun for not having friends, she didn't actually think her own situation was any better. So, when Kat started asking intelligent questions with a very clear motive, defending Kamiko and learning about Aslena, she couldn't help but answer them.

So the two demons sat there, letting their thoughts about the situation calm down. Eventually though, before Kamiko had fully processed things, Kat decided to speak up. "So... what should we do?"

Kamiko squeezed Kat's tail harder trying to reign in her feelings enough to speak. "I... I d-don't know Kat. Does... what does this mean?"

Kat sighed. \*This is more complicated then the little fights from the orphanage. I can't just put them next to each other and ask them both to say why their sorry. This is years of problems going back as long

as Kamiko can remember, interspersed with clearly at least some happy memories...\* "It means things are more complicated I guess..." said Kat slowly, trying to make sure of what she was saying. "It... it  
hmm...

"It doesn't necessarily change things, unless you want it to" Kat let her words come slowly still, settling on trying to give Kamiko the most foundational of advice here to let her work her own way up. "you've got a bit of new knowledge, but it hasn't changed anything fundamental"

"B-but, Kat. This changes everything" said Kamiko not quite understanding.

Kat let her hand rest lightly on Kamiko's shoulder. "It changes only small things Kamiko. You've still got problems with Aslena, you still have years of problems. Now, you've seen that it might not be quite as hopeless as before, but no apology has been given, no declaration of intent.

"And you are not responsible for starting that. Now, what has really changed is that you've been given an opening. Aslena has shown that maybe this is something you need to talk about. You don't have to, but if you do nothing than things will probably just stay as they are. That is only a bad thing if you want it to be." Explained Kat

Kamiko couldn't help but scowl at that. "But it IS bad Kat. It always was bad. I... I can't just do nothing..."

Kat nodded, "That's fine. I agree with you there, but that's a choice Kamiko. You are the one changing things here. I'm not saying that's bad. It's probably good. It gives you more of a chance to talk to Aslena, it gives you options you didn't have before, and it might be the best. It is a choice though, it's your choice to change everything. I suppose though, that's what you want?"

Kamiko let herself fall to the side towards Kat, using the arm the other demon had provided to guide herself onto Kat's lap. Kat let it happen, seeing so much of the emotion drain out of Kamiko. "I... I think I want that." Said the demon who now looked rather small to Kat.

Kat was trying to ignore the horn digging somewhat painfully into her leg. Kamiko hadn't quite settled far enough across Kat's body for it to avoid jabbing into her. Kat didn't let such a small amount of pain bother her at this point though. "Ok. Now you have to ask yourself. Is it better for you to go to Aslena now, while the moment is fresh in her mind? Or wait? Do you want me there with you? Or should you be alone for this?"

Kamiko shook her head in Kat's lap, scraping her horn further along Kat's skin, and only because it was so resilient and lacking in friction was Kat spared from a large cut. "I don't know. I... I don't want to overwhelm her but... what if she forgets? What if she thinks that I forgot? Or want to forget... I... I don't know. I... I want to wait..."

Kat smiled and brushed her hands through Kamiko's short hair. "Do you really want to wait? Or are you scared?"

"I'm scared" Kamiko answered quickly but hesitantly.

"That's ok, this is scary" said Kat soothingly, letting her hands continue to brush Kamiko's hair. "the question is though, is it scarier to try and fix things? Or to let things continue as they are"

Kat could feel the moment those words sank into her friend. Kamiko's whole body shivered as she processed the full weight of what her options really meant right here. "Oh" was all she could say. Kat just kept running her fingers along Kamiko's scalp, trying to keep her calm. Kat didn't realise it but she was also carefully releasing her calming aura amplifying the effect without making it more noticeable.

"I have to go down there don't I?" said Kamiko, not really directing it at Kat this time. It was more that she needed to vocalise the question, prevent herself from ignoring the question all together.

Kat could tell and just kept up her ministrations, keeping the rhythm slow but steady, something for Kamiko to concentrate on if she needed an escape from her tough thoughts. "Do you want me with you?" Kat whispered, making sure that Kamiko would only really hear the words if she was looking for them.

Evidently she was, because Kamiko nodded, slightly, but she didn't actually voice the confirmation. She didn't know if it was better if Kat went.

#### **Chapter 480: Kamiko's Confrontation**

\*I don't know Kat. I don't know. I want you there. I... I'd be so much calmer if you were but... I don't know if that would be better. She's already calming me down so much. I'm not sure if I can actually manage without her keeping me calm. I wonder if she's using her aura for it, or if she's just that good? I know Elmony can scare people without it easily.\*

Kamiko's thoughts continued to attempt to run away from her, trying to bring her emotions further from her control, but Kat's slow stroking of her hair was doing wonders for the girl. A small giggling thought whispered that she should just stay like this, but Kamiko dismissed that just as fast as it appeared.

\*I have to go alone, don't I?\* Kamiko let the thought crystalise as much as she wanted to deny it. \*I could take Kat with me, and it would be nice, but it'd just be nice for me. She doesn't need to mediate; she'd just be there as emotional support for me.\* "I'll do this alone. I- I have to." Whispered Kamiko, but she knew it was loud enough for her friend.

Still, Kat's fingers didn't stop combing through Kamiko's hair merely slowed a bit. "I trust you Kamiko, if you think that's the best, I'd suggest you get ready to follow her" *novelNext.cOm*

Kamiko sighed as Kat's fingers slowed further as if she was saying 'I'm here to support you but it's time to go' and Kamiko really wished Kat wasn't so right. I have to do it though. Kamiko slowly pushed herself up from Kat's lap even though it felt like her strength was failing her. Kamiko's arms wobbled as Kat's hands dropped off her head and Kamiko nearly gave up right there.

But Kamiko knew that would be unacceptable. As painful as this was going to be, she knew doing nothing would be worse. Standing on shaking legs Kamiko headed for the second floor and let herself drop down. When her feet hit the ground she thought she was ready but she still stumble, falling in the process. Her arms were jelly as she tried to convince them to just let her stand back up but they were refusing to cooperate. Kamiko could see her tears as they gently fell to the floor.

\*I thought I was calm. I thought I'd stopped crying. I wanted to think this didn't still hurt. Why does this hurt? This should be fine? She was happy wasn't she? I have a chance. Please tell me I still have a chance.\*

Kamiko let out a long shaking breath, and wondered for a brief moment if pumping her limbs full of demonic energy would help, but she could hardly even wrangle the energy as it was. Handling it rotating around for enhancement wasn't something she wanted to even attempt currently.

Eventually, Kamiko pulled herself to her knees, then managed to push off with her hands using her knees as a brace and returned to a standing position. She took a hesitant, shaky step forward heading towards Aslena's room. Every step closer felt like Kamiko was adding hundred kilogram weights to her feet. She didn't stop though. She knew she had to continue.

When she finally reached Aslena's door, it looked so tall once again. She didn't feel all that brave. She felt like she was five again, and Aslena was still twice her height. Kamiko gulped and pressed her hand onto the door pushing on it. When nothing happened she felt panic rising up within her and she pushed harder on the door. She felt her hands shake as the door refused to give way. \*COME ON!\*

Kamiko gave the door a shove with what strength she could muster but it refused to budge. Her hands dragged down as she felt her knees weakening until they hit the door handle which let out a click once it had been pulled down. Kamiko stared at her hands in horror, realising that she'd completely forgotten about door handles.

\*GET IT TOGETHER!\* She shouted through her mind. \*COME ON KAMIKO Kat gave you the push you needed to get here. Aslena showed that she really did care. YOU need to show that this is important to you as well.\*

Kamiko pushed on the door again, and this time it swung open. Kamiko didn't even look at the changes to the room, her eyes were only for her sister. In the middle of Aslena's double bed, was the demon she was looking for. Aslena was hunched over hugging a pillow with all of her strength and crying into it.

At the sound, her head whipped up like a startled animal and her eyes went wide. The sisters stared at each other. Matching tracks of tears running down each other's faces. Two strange sets of eyes stared into each other without giving an inch. Kamiko opened her mouth. She wanted to say something. Anything, the words clawed at her throat but nothing made it past her teeth. She let one hand clutch at her throat as she tried and tried and eventually managed to get out "I'm sorry"

This was not what Aslena wanted or needed to hear though, she her crying increased two-fold and her chest started heaving with intense, wracking sobs. Kamiko didn't realise she'd moved until her arms were wrapping around Aslena, pillow and all. Aslena's tears soaked into Kamiko's outfit but that didn't matter.

The sisters just sat there together in each other's arms for a length of time neither could determine. Eventually though, Aslena said, "I'm a real bitch aren't I?" through her sobs.

Kamiko opened her mouth to retort, but the words wouldn't come. She knew this time it wasn't because she was unwilling to say them, but because denying the answer would be a lie. Kamiko searched for an answer, and found "You're my sister"

Another sob wracked Aslena's frame. "Yeah, yeah I guess I am. I noticed you didn't answer though. I... how bad was I? How much did I hurt you?"



Kamiko tightened her arms around Aslena but didn't answer. \*How do I even answer a question like that?\* "What do you mean?" she tried instead.

Aslena cackled through her tears but they didn't stop. "Ha- ha, y-you think I don't know? I... I... it hurts Kami. It hurts to know that despite all the clothes I've made for you, s-something I put together quickly for a gag is the one you treasure m-most. I... I don't think I understood before. I-I know why though. I know why now and it hurts."

Kamiko decided to take a note from Kat's book and started to stroke her hands through Aslena's green hair, which had become a mess. She worked her way from left to right over and over, straightening it out the best she could. "Hey, it'll be ok..."

"Tell me then." Said Aslena, "Tell me you didn't keep it because they're from when I was nice to you. Tell me I'm wrong."

"You know I can't do that" said Kamiko softly, continuing her brushing.

"Why? I... I knew I was bad when we were little I knew that. I... I made a bunch of close for e-everyone but... but I m-made ALL of yours. E-even the ones that Mum would s-sometimes s-say she brought, I-I made them too. I-I think I wanted to apologise you know... I... I'm sorry I thought you hated me..." said Aslena.

"Why would I hate you Aslena?" asked Kamiko

"Please don't make me say it..." choked out Aslena

"Well... why? don't you tell me what changed? Why did this really wake you up?" asked Kamiko

"I-It was the way you said it... I think. Um... I knew I wasn't the b-best when I was younger, and... and I don't think I really got any better. I... I tried to just stay away as we were older but... I could... I couldn't stop teasing you. I... I don't know why? Why did I do that? I think... I think it hurt you ignored me. I-I was hurt you left me alone." Whispered Aslena

Kamiko tried to speak, but Aslena cut her off before she could try. "No. No don't try to make me feel better. I-it was my fault. I should have realised why you... you avoided me. A-after everything I made you do when I was younger..."

Kamiko let out a long sigh and kept moving her fingers. \*What the heck am I doing? Aren't I the little sister here? I thought maybe we'd yell some more. Things would get a little better, or maybe even worse. I thought Aslena would tell me I'm an idiot, or that she just run away for a dumb reason like not wanting to see me cry... even if I only started crying after she left. What am I supposed to do? This... this is almost worse. This hurts me more than just Aslena being mean, this... it's painful to see her like this. What do I do? Kamiko what do you do?\*