

## DEMONS 511

### Chapter 511: Aftermath Ratcovery

Kat sucked in a big breath of air and then let it all out at once as she came off the adrenaline high of the fight. Her mind resetting itself and leaving combat mode as she now carefully looked over the rats once again. They were bipedal, with bent spines that made it seem like they'd been forced onto two legs and weren't really equipped for it. Their entire bodies were covered with hair excluding the gems atop their heads.

"Showing off the abs are you Kat?" asked Sue cheekily

Kat glanced down to find, she wasn't showing off anything. Black blood was coating her side and slowly flaking off already, even her clothes were mending themselves after the attack she'd taken. Her bones, if they'd been effected at all, were back in place and there really wasn't anything to show.

\*Do I have abs? Hard to tell... I didn't really have any before, just faint ones when I tensed them if that even counts... most of my 'working out' was running places so only my legs gained significant muscle definition but that seemed to have disappeared for the most part.\*

"I didn't realise you were looking so closely. I thought you liked guys" said Kat hoping it sufficed as a comeback.

Sue saw it for the weak attempt that it was, but smiled at the fact Kat was even trying to banter with her. It wasn't much, but she appreciated it. "Hey, one of the things I DO like is muscles. Just because I'm not gay doesn't mean I can't appreciate good abs when I see them. Sadly, you don't have any"

"Can we even get abs as a Succubus?" asked Kat thinking Elmony might be an outlier.

Sue shrugged, but Kamiko had the answer. "It's very hard once you get to Rank 1" said Kamiko "Training before your demonic fire starts burning is the best way to get them. If you're thinking of Elmony, she cheated a bit because she's already done things once. Apparently it was one of her big regrets so Mom made sure she worked out enough to get muscles second time around"

"What?" asked Sue very confused

"I'll explain it later if you want Sue, it's a bit personal and a long story" said Kamiko with a smile. It then turned more serious as she glanced between the two. "Now, enough distractions, what do you think of this fight? For me it was easy as they have no real defences against slashing weapons. I can cut them without trouble and they have no regeneration to help with the blood loss.

"Kat, I saw you took a big hit to the side there. How much damage did it do and how did it managed to tag a hit? I didn't think they were that fast but perhaps they weren't the same strength. If that's the case, how many do you think you could fight at once?"

\*Woops, Kamiko's right I should be taking this more seriously.\* "I let myself get hit. I could have dodged for a while but I traded a hit to my midsection for a strike to its head. My regeneration is really good and I'm already back to full energy. It cost me practically nothing and it was clear the rats weren't that strong" explained Kat

"Oh, I didn't realise. I... hmm... I guess that is a valid tactic when your regeneration is so could..." mumbled Kamiko

Kat nodded and continued on, "As to how many I could fight at once... I suppose it depends. I could probably fight a practically endless number of them as long as I didn't need to worry about them. No offence Sue... just... I can kite them around all day, and if I was forced into a corner, well, that just limits the number that can hit me. They aren't fast enough to deal serious damage until I'm out of energy and that would take a long time.

"With Sue though... I want to say somewhere between three and five? I don't know if I could stop any more than that getting past me. It depends on how fast they are. I could probably fight more if Sue was willing to fight these guys as well. I don't think they're outside of her skill range with that hammer. One or two good hits could definitely bring one down, but it'd be a bit risky. I think they might be a tad faster than her with the hammer."

Kamiko nodded and looked over at Sue for confirmation who shrugged and said, "I'm not sure. It's hard to keep up shields on other people if I get overwhelmed. Could I fight one? Almost certainly. I'd use the same tactic Kat did and tank a hit on my shield and use that as a chance to slam my hammer into its head. I don't know if I could keep your shield up at the same time though Kamiko... and I certainly couldn't fight more than one at a time. Maybe three in a row if they are slow following up.

"I think three strikes is about what I'd be able to shield. Then again... with regen between fights... hmm, better just say three it's safer for everyone" Sue finished off with a shrug as she ran her hand along her other arm letting her shield light up just slightly as she applied pressure to it.

"That's not a lot..." said Kamiko "I thought your shield was better than that... no offence"

Sue sighed, "It's a little better than that. The one around you can probably take four hits, but the issue is... these rats are a lot tougher than I think Stone suspected. They are about my match Kamiko. About the match of a Rank 1 demon. Sure, it looked easy for you both to take them out, but that's because they have no regeneration, they have less efficient blood, and their bones aren't as good. They still hit hard. Kat can be excused but have you forgotten that already?"

Kamiko's eyes widened and she looked down at the rat creatures in a new light. Kamiko had forgotten just how much of a jump her abilities had taken when she got to Rank 2. It wasn't necessarily much, but it was still a noticeable step up, and when in combat slightly more speed or an ounce more strength could easily mean the difference between life and death.

What if Kat's rat had been a bit strong and knocked her away. Sure she'd live, but then that would be two rats for Kamiko to deal with, and much more dangerous. On the other hand, if it had a weapon of its own and could properly fight her things would become deadly swiftly. "Shit" said Kamiko

Sue nodded, "Not so simple now is it?" said Sue smugly enjoying the simple facts the pair had missed. "Sure you can both take a few of them at a time, but remember I'm a Rank 1 unlike you both. Taking so many potentially lethal attacks on my shield is actually really good. I can reduce those strikes down to nearly nothing. I'm bragging a little bit, but it IS impressive for a Rank 1 demon"

Kat swallowed the spit in her throat as the implications really sunk in. \*This is much more dangerous than I was really thinking, isn't it? Kamiko is four hits away from death at any given time. Sure, we have great healing facilities but... damn that actually is intense when you think about it that way.

I was thinking these Contracts were all easy. Even when I nearly died in the last one, I haven't really been scared but... I think I see now that I'm the outlier here. Regeneration is such a big step up... I... I didn't realise. I don't know how I didn't see how lucky I've been to grab that early on. Is it really worth continuing? I'm still safe here... but I wonder if the risks are worth it.\*

"I suppose you're right Sue" said Kamiko while Kat was still lost in thought. "I might have been harsh. Would glancing blows be easier to deal with?"

Sue waved her flat hand from side to side in a 'so-so' gesture. "Somewhat. It does take less energy but not enough for it to really matter. I don't know the specifics but it's the way my shield interacts with the world. I can defend really efficiently against full strikes, but partial ones, while cheaper, are hardly worth taking for the discount, so if you are going to get hit use that chance" *nOvEl*next.COM

Kamiko took in a breath before nodding and saying, "Ok let's continue on then. Do you want to try fighting on if we find more Sue?"

Kat took the lead when they headed off, making sure she was completely in front of Sue in case of anything flying at them. Kat was now more determined to protect the pair. She knew she could take way more than four hits from those rats, and in a long fight her energy could regen allowing her to tank even more.

"I'll be fine" said Sue "I don't really care for battle. Sure the little ones are nice stress relief, but an actual fight... nah I'll leave it to you"

## **Chapter 512: The Path of Introspection**

Shortly afterwards, Sue was able to put her words into practice when the next round of rat guards walked into them. She just quickly stepped forward and smashed them all to mush before letting Kat and Kamiko walk past her to continue the journey forward. There wasn't any proof that this was the right way just yet, but the direction the rat guards was making them feel hopeful.

Kamiko had a smile on her face, she was enjoying the fact they were making what felt like real progress towards the end. The rat guards were an obvious step up, and defeating a few patrols was a good way for them to understand that things were escalating even if they didn't seem that way. Every rat guard they ran into, meant one less at the final area. It also made it more likely they were heading the right way. With those two confirming marks, Kamiko was confident they could find the threat behind this swarm.

Sue was more relaxed. Unlike the other two, she wasn't capable of keeping her mind so close to the edge of readiness for a long time. Sure she could jump forward and take care of the rat patrols, but it was a very delayed reaction. Heck, for her comfort the three were walking instead of running, mostly to make sure she could react in time to any incoming threats. Sue knew this, and was thankful for the concern, using it to relax herself, but be ready to activate the shield around Kamiko as quickly as possible. They were showing concern for her, and she would return the favour.

Kat though, had perhaps the most mixed thoughts about the entire thing. Unlike Kamiko who grew up expecting to be in combat at least semi regularly, and had a deep trust in their medical system, and Sue who now believed that Kat and Kamiko would willingly protect her in the face of fierce odds... Kat was having misgivings despite arguably being the safest of the three.

Her thoughts just couldn't get over the idea of how close to death her companions were. Even though in Kamiko's mind she was exceptionally safe for a mission like this, and in Sue's she had stalwart defenders, Kat didn't have the same confidence in them living and being repaired, and she had less of an idea about what they might face in the end. She was also lacking the key detail, that if they killed the thing in charge of the swarm, everything else would drop in an instant. Without that insight, Kat believed them to be marching towards an army general and then needing to fight there way back out again.

So, she stewed on the idea. She was on the wrong side of ready, with her muscles constantly tensing and untensing, her demonic energy swirling around at the ready and slowing her mind down if somebody so much as kicked a stone when they were walking not to even speak of the patrols Sue was taking out. Kat's body was taught, and she was on a hair trigger, waiting for the other shoe she couldn't quite see to drop. She was ready to tank any amount of damage for the other two, despite Kamiko's proficiency for weapons.

And that perhaps was the biggest thing Kat was missing. For all the sweetness Kamiko displayed, she'd been trained in the use of her weapon for over a decade. She knew her big her striking range was. She knew how to fight opponents at and above her skill level. She knew how to block, how to parry, how to take acceptable damage. She wasn't as weak as a human, small strikes could heal before the day was out, even if during the fight would be too much for someone with regeneration.

Kat was missing the idea that Kamiko was READY for this kind of thing, and had been for a long time. Kat knew her as the friendly face that had really grown on her over the week. The one that cried with her sister. That loved her family, that didn't necessarily want to fight. Even the spars at Wrath, Kat didn't really see the other side of Kamiko.

For Kamiko was used to the game. She was sharp. She had the weapon skills to protect herself. And she'd seen so much more combat than Kat could really comprehend. A few months of fighting was nothing to Kamiko, she had a more than a few years, especially if you counted training and not just live missions. Still, she was taking to arenas with weak beasts to test her resolve, to prove she was capable to fighting monsters at the very least, if not people. Kat hadn't seen it yet.

So, when the next set of guard rats appeared, a set of four this time, Kat jumped into the fray before Kamiko could take off. Kat went straight for the two nearest to her and tried to end things before they began with another strike to the head... sadly she telegraphed too much. Rat Guard One was able to see her coming from a mile away, and even if it couldn't keep up with her speed properly, it could still dodge.

One stepped forward, allowing Kat's hand to pass before its head at the same time it drove its right hand claws straight up and into Kat's stomach before quickly withdrawing them and stepping away. Kat stumbled from the impact but was unphased, continuing her assault on the rat to try and get it down as quickly as possible.

Tunnel visioning in the process. Rat Guard Two simply moved to the side and while Kat was trying to punch away at One, which was blocking and taking only moderate damage to its arms, Two managed to claw at Kat's side, causing two wide sets of gashes from its claws to appear on her side.

Kat's tail retaliated instinctively, plunging straight into Two's stomach, and doing more damage than Kat had managed to this point, causing a deep stab wound to open up in the rat and letting blood flow out of it around the matted remnants of its fur around the area. Before Kat could take any joy in that though, One slammed its head into her.

It was a decent tactic... against someone without horns. Kat's took the pitiful attempt to cause her to be stunned full force and allowing only minimal vibrations to be transmitted back to Kat and they were easily ignored.

The fight got blood after that. Kat's injuries healed yes, but the blood from them was sprayed around the area. At the same time, Two was weakening quickly, the strike to its stomach was no small puncture wound and it was losing blood fast, already unsteady on its feet. One was holding up better. Despite its failure of a headbutt, Kat didn't really know how to capitalise on something like that and had just continued punching away in what was now a predictable pattern for even the simple minded rat.

Luck was on her side though. The mix of blood on the floor was slippery and Two was already starting to become woozy. Its intended strike at Kat's head to at least distract her for One, failed miserably when its feet slipped out from under it, sending it falling to the side. It slid past Kat's face as the claw went towards One. Even though it no longer had any power behind it, that was enough to take One out of the fight once Kat followed through. Despite her lacking experience in finer combat, the sort of distraction Two provided was impossible to miss.

Kat swung a full powered strike into One's ungarded temple spraying blood around and ending it right then. This was followed up by a stomp down on Two's head, taking, what might have already been a dead rat, out of the fight for good. Kat turned then to help Kamiko but... she was done.

For Kamiko, this was a much easier fight. When she saw Kat jump in, she followed easily. Taking on two of these rats wasn't any real problem. She slashed at Rat Guard Three while keeping enough distance to prevent Rat Guard Four from easily following up. They both jumped into action when her attack connected. It wasn't a major blow, but it was already a start.

It was simple then, for Kamiko to dance between their wild strikes. They relied on instincts and lacking speed to try and get a blow on Kamiko but she simply used the sharp end of her naginata to displace their attacks and get in a few of her own. After only a few exchanges the rats were bleeding out and losing it, Kamiko managed to get the two of them down before turning to Kat.

She nearly went to help, but Kat was so entangled with her two opponents and moving rather erratically that Kamiko didn't want to risk it. So, she waited the few extra seconds Kat's fight lasted before smiling at her victorious friend.

### **Chapter 513: Taking a Stab at Introspection**

\*I'm really not as good as I thought huh?\* Never before had it been so clear to Kat that Kamiko outclassed her as a fighter. \*I guess she was really holding back against the guys at Wrath. They couldn't

have been faster than the rats so I imagine she let them get away with a lot of things. This might show me that she's more soft hearted then I thought... but it also shows off how strong she really is.\*

And Kat really wasn't sure how to deal with this knowledge. \*I jumped in and tried to take care of things as fast as I could so that Kamiko wouldn't be alone with two of them for long... but I was the one wasting time. I know that fight was sloppy but I had intended to take a few hits to speed things up. Did I even manage to do that? For all the hits I slammed into that first rat it managed to block my for a huge amount of time.

I guess this is why I need a weapon. Even Sue's hammer is a big step up. It's more blunt force sure, but the leverage is much better and the secondary impact from the metal inside it just adds more to it overall. That's not to even consider the very clear and obvious benefits that having a slashing weapon like Kamiko's or my own fans which I really need to get lessons for.

As much as it hurts to admit, I think I should skip out on spending time with everyone on Earth if I need to. Getting used to using a real weapon and not just my fists has never been more obvious. I'm sure that the demons that actually punch things either have gloves with like... spikes or something on them, or some kind of natural advantage. As tough as my hands have become, and as good at slicing as my fingernails are, those are mostly side effects of my all around body upgrades. I need TOOLS, weapons, things that utilise my strength not rely on it.\*

\*And that's the crux of it isn't it.\* Kat dusted herself off and headed onwards. Kamiko seemed to pause for a second and give Kat a strange look, but it was lost on the demon in question. Kamiko just gave a small shrug at that and followed behind. They'd made their choice, and she didn't think the fight was hard, so marching onward was the logical conclusion to her... though Kat didn't even realise she was walking forward at this point, as she was that lost in her own mind.

\*I don't really have combat experience. Never have. I didn't realise how bad things were till now though. Even when I was fighting through that Phoenix clan I didn't feel so bad about things. I fought a bunch of them, got stabbed a lot, and really most of my energy use was from being a bit wasteful.

It was Xiang that really caused the problems in the end too. I was doing... well I want to say well but maybe that's being overly generous looking back at things. I was at least succeeding; I can say that confidently. Being stabbed through the heart was a major setback. Though at least I know I can survive that...

Still just because I can survive horrid punishments doesn't mean my fighting skill has suddenly increased. I know how to make use of the openings my regeneration creates but am I using that as a crutch? The surprise factor alone normally allows for a finishing blow from me.

The only other time that wasn't true, and if we don't count my dream world adventures, is way back when I fought all of Skye's team. I didn't want to just burn those guys though in case I needed the energy later. Now that I look back on it though, that was also a really sloppy fight.

I won not because I outplayed them, or because I was even a halfway decent combatant. I managed to beat them because they were... maybe not quite human, but pretty close to the human baseline, and I just didn't go down. My regeneration was completely ridiculous against them. They had to keep trying to pin me down but my strength stopped that really being a big deal. \*

Kat stepped to the side as Sue came up and smashed through a bunch of patrolling rats breaking her from her thoughts somewhat. Kat watched Sue's attacks carefully and wasn't entirely pleased with what she saw, not because Sue was bad, but because she was good. Her movements efficient, her stance professional.

\*Damn, I'm probably worse than Sue at combat. While I'm better IN combat, that's something that could easily change. If she just ranked up I might be easily beaten by her. I'm not even sure if I could really beat Kamiko. I thought I could manage it before today, but now I'm wondering if that's really the case.

Her slashing weapon isn't a big scare, but at the same time all that really lets me defeat her is my regeneration. If we were just fighting to first blood I'd lose in an instant. The issue is, I really should have corrected this. Grace told me to pick up a good weapon, even went to the trouble of finding something that apparently suits me very well... and I've just left them to languish. Is this my punishment for that? This lingering self doubt and clearly below acceptable combat ability.\*

Kat let out a deep breath, hoping to change her thoughts. They were no longer truly productive. She needed to be ready for a fight and thinking about how outclassed she was or how badly she managed her past fights wasn't helping things. Kat forcibly tried to find a positive spin for this.

\*Hmm... what can I look at in a good light? It took a few moments for the obvious answer to come to her. My regeneration. As much as I've cursed how unskilled I am, regeneration isn't really at fault here. The ability is SUPERB. It's on a completely different level to other Rank 1 skills, and even Sue's rather impressive shielding ability, which admittedly can be shared, still isn't anywhere close to as good defensive wise.

I can take hit after hit without going down. Heck, I know for a fact I can be stabbed in the heart and keep going... twice. Even the supposedly rather serious energy channel damage I acquired was something my regeneration could fix.

While it is clearly bad to over rely on it as I may have been doing, it's a powerful tool and I shouldn't forget that. I should be very thankful. I wonder how many times it saved me life already? Small wounds that might not have seemed like much but would have definitely piled up.

Heck, ignore proper wounds for a second. I've been walking around forests and across dirt roads. How many cuts and scrapes were healed without my notice? I wonder if I could have ever completed any mission without it. Even my calm walk with Minor through the underground tunnels.

My whole face and neck were destroyed from the crash, and my wing wasn't in great shape either because of how things went down. Granted, I probably wouldn't have tried at all if I didn't know I had that sort of regeneration, but imagine if it was only half as efficient or something... or... or... imagine if it didn't remove foreign particles.

Gravel being healed around, slowly having skin regrow around it and forcing the foreign objects to remain in my throat. That would have been torturous. What if it got into my lungs and stayed there? I might have been out of the job before I'd even really started if something like that really came up.\*

Kat's eyes started to burn brighter as they cleared up. The worry and indecision she'd been building slowly falling from her shoulders as she stood taller. Her tail, not that she'd noticed, no longer drooping

down, barely holding itself up enough to prevent scraping along the floor now raised up again in its question mark shape behind her back bobbing as she walked forward in a steady rhythm. Her energy seemed to be cleaner almost, as she circulated it slowly. Not enough to really speed up her mind or body, just barely enough to make it a conscious action rather than its resting state.

When Kat saw the next set of guard rats, she didn't hesitate. This time, there was two either side again, but a rat patrol also happened to be passing nearby. Kat didn't jump into the mess because she was afraid. She didn't jump in to finish her fight first. She jumped in because she was ready, and it was time to start paying attention. To making sure that the fight wasn't too long, but that she learnt something from it. Mistakes would keep happening, but that was fine. Kat could learn.

#### **Chapter 514: Wait... Those Actually DO Have a Purpose?**

It would take Kat a considerable amount of subjective time to realise that she may have been wrong in the assumption she could learn. Jumping into the fight, an action that was mirrored by Kamiko, would later prove a mistake for the pair.

For the moment though, Kat was ready. She was watching the new Guard Rat One and Two closely and wanted to try and get an attack in before they properly reacted to what was going on. She wasn't going to simply bash away at them without a plan, she was going to try for one or two big hits then wait for her chance. Kat didn't even consider the small rats a threat. The rat patrols hadn't even done anything so far, and her regen could take as many hits from them as she needed. They were a non-factor, Kat's mind didn't even register them as much more than a slightly dangerous background object, like being aware there are knives in the kitchen or scissors on a desk.

Kat goes in for the strike, one with her fist, and another with her tail. The first strike, going for One's head gets blocked somewhat far out, letting the limb rock backwards somewhat to take the impact rather than just taking it all head on. The strike from her tail was another matter though. The rat clearly didn't see it coming initially, taking her tail's movement as a part of her lead up. When it lashed out, One was forced to twist itself out of the way the best it could. Stepping forward in an attempt to let the tail go past leads to a shallow cut opening on One's back. Not a major concern, but already better than Kat's previous Rat Guard fight.

\*I'll take this as a win. A little bit of a cut. I should remember to use my tail more in combat... though it's such a good defensive tool I can't use it solely for attacks either.\* Kat's eyes shown and took a slight step back to correct her posture standing now in a basic fighting stance and preparing for One or Two's counter attack.

Because of that intense watching, that supreme focus on One and Two, trying to find any indication of what the Guard Rats were about to do, and hoping to come up with an appropriate counter. These thoughts were at the front of Kat's mind, when she felt a sharp piercing on her ankle. She was so completely stunned that she froze in place. So, while Two wasn't quite in range, One was going to take advantage of that distraction. One raked its claws over Kat's face. In the end, she only managed to avoid having her eyes taken out purely because of instincts.

Her head jerked backwards and the claws aiming for her eyes instead caught on her lips, ripping open her mouth and scraping down to her chine before she managed to pull away far enough. As Kat stepped backwards, trying to get out of range, she felt extra weight on her feet and couldn't help but look.



Even though she had the pieces. Even though she'd felt the pain. Even though SHE KNEW something had to be there, her mind was once again shocked to see the small patrol rats were biting into her feet.

What?! Kat couldn't believe they'd actually decided to do something for once. Kat felt her mind speed up more to try and cope with this influx of information. She wasn't just fighting two Guard Rats she was fighting guards and patrols. \*What the heck should I do here?

I don't want to just take it. The damage is minimal, and only really a mild irritant but I don't want to just take damage like that. I've resolved to be better. What can I do? What other option do I have?\*

Kat mulled over the decision as she jumped backwards to avoid another slash from One while Two started to move up, pressure her, make her step towards the wall instead of just straight back. The little patrol rats getting in her way slightly, but a more liberal application of force when put her feet down meant that it wasn't a big concern as long as she didn't trip.

\*I could take out the little ones... maybe. I'd take a lot of damage from Guard One and Guard Two over there, but it might be worth doing anyway. The little ones are annoying, but ultimately not that hard to deal with.\*

Kat focused on her healing face and decided it wasn't a big deal. It was knitting itself together as she thought and while it was a bit strange because the skin was slowly pulling itself back up as the wound knit together, it wasn't a major concern. Her energy was also pretty much full, having recovered from the previous fight easily. That was when she heard a distorted sound from behind her.

\*What could that have been?\* Kat dodged another attack from One, now with Two's assistance, but even with her limited space it wasn't too hard to dodge their strikes. They used the same relative arc every time, and looked directly at where they were attacking. Kat could handle this. Kat glanced over her shoulder to the source of the noise and found a panicked looking Sue clearly in the motions of saying something, but Kat didn't hear any words.

\*What could she be doing? I can't make out a thing she's saying it's much... to... low... OH she's speaking at a normal speed.\* Kat focused quickly back on the fight, jabbing out at One with a light strike mostly just to prevent the guard rats from closing in any further. \*Ok, I can't drop this speed to listen to what Sue is saying, the rats are too fast for that. She looks concerned though so it seems important.\*

\*What could be the problem? The little rats, while annoying, are no real problem for me...\* And like that the last puzzle piece clicked into her mind and Kat's eyes flew wide in shock as she realised what the problem must be. \*SHIT! We just talked about this as a group. Sue can hold up against strong attacks but with these patrol rats, they can wear down the shield she put on Kamiko! I need to do something!\*

Kat struck, once with her arm, and once with her tail, at One and Two respectively to keep them off her for a bit longer, sending most of her concentration to the right where Kamiko was fighting two of her own Guards, it was a bit further back then Kat really liked. Quickly though, Kat saw that while Kamiko was more aware of her situation and noticed the patrol rats, she wasn't doing as well as Kat.

Kat saw Kamiko halfway between a sliding motion. She was slicing at the patrol rats on the ground while moving backwards to prevent them from crowding her. She had already taken several more steps backwards then Kat had, and her own rat guards had actually pushed up and had nearly past Kat.

\*How did I not notice that? Shit, my battle field awareness is horrible. What do I do now though?\* Kat leaned her head back, this time intentionally, and allowing the claws coming for her face to miss by a small, but anticipated, margin. \*The fact that the Guards are in the way makes this so much harder. I can't just move to the side and start attacking the little ones. I'd be putting myself in harms way. I guess... hmm... if I can trust Kamiko to be fine... this might be alright.\*

Kat tried to slip in a tail strike after her dodge, and was surprised when she managed to get at nick on Two's side. Nothing serious, but it was better than nothing. \*Nice! Now if only I can figure out what to do about these little rats.\*

Kat went back to watching the field, trying to move so that she could get a good look at Kamiko. Sadly, things didn't get better. The Guards fighting Kamiko pushed her back alongside their small carpet of rats coating the floor. Because of this, they blocked a lot of Kat's view, but looking at the floor Kat was pretty sure that Kamiko wasn't bleeding yet, so hopefully her shield was up.

This information didn't come without cost though. Kat was forced to look behind her more seriously, letting either One or Two out of her sight for a few moments, practically nothing, but with both rats working together it was enough to push some damage on Kat. A slash caught on the arm instead of deflected, a slight cut to her side when she didn't move out of the way in time. A few more minor annoyances digging into her legs.

\*Kamiko seems fine for now. I can only pray this state of affairs continue. I'm down only a few percent of energy at the moment though my wounds aren't done healing so that might change if I keep taking extra hits. I don't really know what to do though. Do I need to help? Is Sue at risk? How many hits can Kamiko's shield take?\*

## **Chapter 515: The Grand Opening**

Now that Kat had determined that Kamiko was fine for now, she let her focus return to her own fight. Focusing mostly on just avoiding strikes from all the rats big and small, ensuring that she had the chance to heal from the damage she'd taken recently. The smaller rats were actually the bigger issue as they simply clung to her legs, using their, relatively at least, impressive jaw strength to cling on as she moved. It wasn't ideal, and as she moved the weight dug further into her skin. She was just lucky it was tough enough that it could withstand a bit of force and wasn't being shredded.

\*Though now that I think about it... something weird has to be happening with their teeth. They shouldn't be strong enough to pierce my skin now that I'm actually thinking about all this. Never mind. It's not important. What matters is that they ARE damaging me.\*

Kat took a step to the side, intentionally slamming her feet into the walls and felt oddly satisfied with the sound of cracking rat bones that signalled her legs being freed. Once that was done, Kat focused on dodging, making sure she was in perfect condition for the next stage. It was a good thing she did, as while it went unnoticed for the most part, the smaller rats had affected her legs quite a lot. Throwing off her balance, and doing a bit of damage to her achilleas tendons when they were there slowing her slightly as well.

\*Now that I'm 100% let's deal with this little guys.\* Kat turned her next moves into a dance, ducking, weaving and prancing around the various attacks One and Two threw at her, while also making sure to

shuffle her feet around so that none of the small rats got to close. One she was comfortable with that, Kat started to change things up little by little.

First it was stomps. Using a bit of power, but mostly her weight to land her feet directly on top of the patrol rats as she moved, no longer avoiding them entirely but spending an extra bit of focus to take out one of the many every time she stepped somewhere. The hardest part was making sure she didn't slip on the ground afterwards, but she was making some progress that way.

Still, it wasn't quite good enough. She could tell, when her tail just barely touched up against the Guard Rats Kamiko was fighting that she'd been moving back too fast. To rectify this, Kat started to move sideways more, and endeavoured to slide into more rats throwing them into the wall now in groups.

It takes her only a few seconds of real time, though quite a bit more subjective time, to clear up the area around her. Kat has gotten all the patrol rats near her, now only the one's near Kamiko remain.

\*The question is... what now? I can't communicate properly in this bullet time state. Everyone talks too slowly and I bet I'd be the same. Even if it worked somewhat, Kamiko would have to be moving at almost the exact same speed as my voice however that would match up with my mind, because I KNOW I can get that to run faster than my body which further complicates things.\*

\*I don't know what to do. We're getting pushed back still. Should I try and make my way around Kamiko's guards so that I can take out the patrol rats around her, or should I take out my own two rats and then attack the guard rats in the back?\*

Kat twisted around to avoid a strangely well coordinated strike from One and Two, and kept spinning so that she could take a brief look at the other two Guard Rats, Three and Four. When Kat briefly gazed upon them, no blood was immediately obvious. There might have been more at the front, but if there was, Kat wasn't at the right angle to see, and her speed made it hard to spend the time to make a better guess.

Dodging out of the way of another two strikes that One and Two were able to get off because of her spin Kat let herself sink back into her thoughts as she dodged. \*What would be faster? I could try and get these two down, or I could try and clear the little ones. How would I get there though... wait...\*

Kat glanced at the ceiling and realised she had the perfect route. \*I can FLY. The ceiling is a little low, but my wings don't really behave according to conventional physics anyway so it's not like I couldn't... I'm still not sure if I should honestly.\*

Kat swallowed and struck out twice at One, getting blocked the first time, and letting another tail strike sneak in, but the rat was learning, whereas before it was a somewhat sizeable cut, now Kat only managed one a few centimetres in length. While this was happening, she tried to picture fighting the small rats. It was a mess.

\*No. No it just wouldn't work I don't think. Between what would then be four Guard Rats AND Kamiko I'd have a hard time just clearing them out. Ok. That's settled let's focus on these two. I'll go for One the best I can, if I can take out it first, then the second should be much easier.\*

Kat renewed her focus and stepped up her game. She dodged a few more attacks and let off a few half hearted strikes in return. They weren't a big deal though, none of this was what she was looking for.

Until, a strike going for One's temple caused the rat to jump back, and Two flinched, thinking her tail was going to follow up when for once it didn't.

Kat's eyes glowed in the soft light as she started to rapidly spin her energy, pushing herself into a higher gear. Kat spun using the position she was in to release an uppercut onto Two, letting herself flow back up to full height. Nail's out Kat tried to jam them into Two's throat. Two wasn't having that though, and tried to block using a cross guard with both hands. Kat's fingers dug into the offered arms, digging deeply into the muscle. Kat let her instincts guide her, as she pulled forward, dragging Two off balance and ripping the nails from the flesh pulling chunks along.

Two would have screamed if it had the time, but Kat followed it up with a tail strike to the stomach as she was winding back for a final attack. Two dodged to the side, getting cut in the process and stumbling once more... straight into the path of that final strike to the back of the neck. Kat's hand wrapping around its spine and crushing the bone before One slammed into her side with a full body tackle.

Kat was pushed back into the wall, but it didn't have enough force to do any damage. It wasn't the best position, especially not for manoeuvrability... but there was only one rat left. Only One. Kat took a follow up strike to her stomach, not even trying to dodge, before bringing her own arms in from the side and tearing straight through One's throat. As the rat dropped to the ground, Kat pushed it further away and turned to Kamiko's fight.

She could see the other demon was perhaps having some issues. Somehow Kamiko had been backed much further down the tunnel the Kat thought, even accounting for the previous error. \*Shit. Kamiko's being forced to dodge more. The patrols and guards must be working better now.\* The worst part was that Kat was all but certain Kamiko had been forced out of the comfortable range for her naginata.

Kat ignored the large amount of blood slowly dripping off her and charged. Her energy reserves were fine, and she wanted to end this. There was no telling how much energy Sue had left for the shield.

Kat dashed behind Three, and before the rat could react properly to her presence, as it was still focused on Kamiko, Kat smashed her fist into the side of Three's temple sending it careening off to the side. Four saw this and turned, but that too was a mistake as Kamiko dashed forward, dodging around patrol rats, to run her sword straight through Four's heart, and dragging her weapon out as she continued past.

Once that was done, Kat quickly whirled her way through the patrol rats, not wanting to leave them around, but not expecting any real struggle. When Kat stood next, most of the blood had fallen off her... but that just meant there was a large black trail where she had stood clearly marking her reckless charge.

Kamiko stood tall, but a little uncertain. Sue looked about ready to collapse, and Kat. Well... Kat stood tall as well and said. "That could have probably gone better"

#### **Chapter 516: Sue's Recovery Time and not quite Questionable Questions**

"Holy shit!" shouted Sue, "That's an understatement. Kat are you even ok? You look like you've lost more blood than I have in my entire body... how... how can you just go with a 'well that could've gone better'. I'm freaking out a little here..."

Kat shrugged, "I mean... I'm only down like..." Kat paused her speech for a moment to check her reserves and found she had 86% left, "I'm only missing like fifteen percent of my demonic energy. That's hardly anything. Most of that was one strength enhancements and speeding up my mind. I hardly needed to use any of it to heal"

Sue just gapes at Kat, now starting to realise the sheer difference the other demon's regeneration actually makes. "Right... um... well..." Sue stumbled over the words as she tries to figure out an appropriate response. "I'm just going to sit down then... regenerate my own energy because unlike YOU I'm down to less than half"

Then she proceeds to do just that. Sue just lets her legs collapse underneath her and relies on her tail to slow her down enough not to do any damage. She then leans her back into the wall for the support, despite the jagged pieces of rock now digging into her wings. At least the jacket protects her back.

"Are you ok Kamiko?" asks Kat after seeing Sue basically answer that question by checking out.

"I'm quite good Kat," said Kamiko smiling, "Sue protected my very well. I took two hits because I wasn't properly prepared for the little rats to actually do something. I was just planning to leave them to Sue because I'd stopped registering them as a problem. You'd take two of the big ones, I'd take the other two, and Sue could clean out the small ones.

"They caught me unaware, getting a bite off before I noticed what was going on. I still wouldn't have noticed if the shield didn't give of a brief flash which... well I wasn't quite ready for it and caused me to take my second hit, but I used that as a chance to back quite far off. Thank you for your assistance though, I'm unsure how long I could have kept dodging while making minimal progress. I tried to keep the smaller rats away from me by slicing them up, but stopping them all was hard.

"Especially with the larger rats closing in. The risk of taking hits was quite high, and I knew that Sue couldn't keep my shield up that much longer so I was mostly just buying time for you or to come up with a better plan, whichever came first. Luckily, you managed to sort things out before it became a real issue."

"No problem," said Kat with a slight dose of embarrassment. "I was panicking a little bit once the patrol rats jumped in so... I understand the feeling."

"Huh, patrol rats. That's a good name for them," mused Kamiko

Kat nodded, "Well, in my head I've been referring to the little one as patrol rats, and the big ones as guard rats. It's worked out pretty well. Guards get a number, and patrol rats just don't. Too many of them for their exact designation to matter so I don't bother"

Kamiko nodded, with a smile on her face, liking the sound of Kat's suggestion. "Well, I'm not at risk of running out of energy... so I guess we'll just wait on Sue then?" said Kamiko making it sound partially like a question, but feeling more like a suggestion to Kat.

"Oh yeah, kick me while I'm down" snarked Sue

Kamiko turned a confused look in Sue's direction. "I don't see the problem. You need energy, and we're happy to wait for you, why I don't see how this is an issue, I'm simply pointing it out..." murmured Kamiko

Sue turned a deadpan set of eyes in Kat's direction. "Now that's just not fair as a response. It's like kicking a puppy. Even if it's evil and maybe deserves it... it's still a puppy so you just feel like a bad person anyway. I don't even feel comfortable explaining it to Kam because then I'm responsible for a little less innocence in the world,"

"Don't you routinely try to destroy that innocence though?" asked Kat with a smirk that was trying, and hopefully succeeding, in masking how confused she was at that response.

Sue's whole form brightened up instantly. "Hey you're right!" Sue then turned to Kamiko to continue "I made that joke because while you didn't mean it this way, it's easy to think you're pointing out how much stronger you and Kat are."

\*Wow she actually gave a decent explanation. I knew she was kidding somewhat with her first response, but I wasn't expecting a completely proper response for the second once. Hmm... I wonder if Sue's tired. This has probably been a lot harder on her than on us.\*

"How about we discuss future plans then. This wasn't a great fight, but we can work on the future one, or ones," said Kat.

"Well we can wait for patrols to clear out next time" said Sue in an overly cheerful manner.

Despite the mocking tone, Kamiko and Kat both nodded solemnly. While the patrol rats were no real issue for Kat, and she could fight them easily even if she needed to take a bit of damage, Kamiko was at much greater risk. A few well timed strikes from them could take out Sue's shield ability, cutting her down to no energy. They couldn't afford that for future fights.

A few seconds past and when nobody said anything else, Sue jumped in again, "What, I've given you a good idea, why not send out a few of your own? Or do I have the only working brain here?"

Kat sighed but didn't rise to the bait this time. Things were more serious at the moment, and while a bit of levity was needed, Kat had no good response that wouldn't turn things into a fight. So she ignored Sue's comment and offered her own idea. "If we see Guard Rats, and patrol rats, what is the plan? Do we just wait? Do we back up a bit in case the fight gets heard? How do we need to tackle this?"

"I think we have to back up," said Kamiko. "We can't risk the patrol rats calling out to the guards either. Even if that's not something we've seen them do just yet, we know they interact with the guards and enter combat with them. I think we'll need to make sure we back up a fair way"

There was a matching set of three nods that accompanied Kamiko's suggestion. Once that was done, Sue spoke up again, "So... this is above me even if I'd paid attention... but... do the rat patrols come at specific intervals? Has anyone counted?"

Kat let her tail react and slap her in the face. \*Dammit, I didn't even think to count that. I have the memories in my head too, but there's too much blank space, it makes it hard to judge time even if it's all in my head. Hmm... it seems while my memory is good, I don't have the practice to use it fully... another thing I need to learn perhaps.\*

"Judging by Kat's reaction, I assume she has not. Sadly... I didn't attempt to keep track of it either," said Kamiko slowly. "From what we've seen I'd say it's at least somewhat regular, but probably not perfect. That's just a guess though."

Sue bit back a joke she had in response to her teammates failure to keep track of time. Something about broken internal clocks and night time shenanigans, but she didn't feel like voicing it. She felt her energy returning but that extra muscle she felt not quite behind her eyes that governed her shield power was complaining.

She'd been using the power perhaps a bit more than necessary. Now that she'd started to actually like the pair and didn't want them hurt she'd been putting up the shield whenever she felt like something was coming up. Better safe than sorry... but that combined with the use in the past two fights meant it was feeling a little used up. Especially because she'd kept herself shielded at the same time.

It was a weakness. One that might or might not become an issue, and yet Sue was hesitant to voice it out loud. She was already holding them back quite a bit, at least in her mind, and adding something more to that wasn't something she planned to do. So, instead she asked, "What do we do if we find a bunch of patrol rats just standing around with guards and neither are moving?"

Kat and Kamiko shared a look before a toothed grin spread across their faces. "Sufficient application of FIRE/Sending plenty of FIRE" said Kat/Kamiko with them both saying FIRE at the exact same time.

### **Chapter 517: Of Rats and Demons**

Once Kat and Kamiko reaffirmed their convictions to kill it with fire... only if strictly necessary of course. Things moved on somewhat. They still had to wait a while for Sue to recover her energy but nothing else was said. They were all using this chance to also recover mentally from the series of fights they'd been through. It wasn't much but Kat liked to think it helped her at least.

Once they were sufficiently recovered, they set out again, and it wasn't long till they found a new set of patrol rats. Sue dealt with them quickly as usual and they headed on. It was after one more patrol rat massacre afterwards that led them to a new set of Guard Rats. It was still just the four though, and now with more practice, they didn't think it would be a big deal.

They were right. Kat, now that she was paying proper attention and remember her tail was a weapon in and of itself, was able to take down her two rats much quicker than she had in the past. Kamiko was no slouch either, learning more about how the Guard Rats moved their bodies and used that information to get in even more cuts between the Guard's strikes.

They moved on from them, killed more patrol rats, another set of guards, and then, ended up with a slightly more complex problem. Now they had to deal with six Guard Rats. Three each. They also just barely managed to hold off attacking them for a moment when they spotted some patrol rats.

They all backed up and Sue dealt with them. Once that was done, they set up to deal with the six rats, which luckily seemed to be the limit. The tunnel wasn't really equipped to handle six Guard Rats standing side by side anyway, so they imagined the fight wouldn't be too much harder than the two rat versions.

They were right. Between the cramped space, the pair's newfound knowledge of how the Guard Rats liked to fight, and Kat's still growing combat experience, the six were not nearly as big of an issue as Kat had feared slightly in her mind. Kamiko felt herself perfectly capable of fighting them, and was proven right. Sue made sure to point that out. Multiple times.

The fifth time she rephrased it though, Kat bounced back at her fastest speed and placed an arm over Sue. The other demon froze, thinking she'd done something wrong, but felt no aura pressing in on her as punishment which made her confused. That is until she saw that Kamiko was walking backwards slowly as well.

Kat, with Sue in her arms, and Kamiko backtracked for a full five minutes to get away from the opening they saw before letting out matching breaths of air they hadn't realised they'd been holding.

"What's going on?" asked Sue with a quiet, serious voice.

"We found what's behind this..." said Kamiko softly while staring back at the path they'd come down.

Kat nodded slowly to confirm this even as she tried to go over the image in her mind. "We need a plan... I'm not sure how to deal with it all. I know at the very least it will involve quite a lot of fire..."

Kat thought back to what she'd seen. It was only for a brief moment, as Kat had quickly sped her mind up to its maximum before walking backwards with, what at the time, had been an agonisingly slow pace. She silenced Sue just in case they could be heard but that brief glance hadn't told Kat enough to know if they'd even care.

The first thing, was of course the room. It looked like a massive amphitheatre, with glowing crystals lining the ceiling and the edges of some tunnels. Kat was a little surprised that she didn't notice the light earlier. It had a number of tunnels leaving the area, and that was just from what Kat could see out of the tunnel they were already in. It was likely there were even more tunnels she couldn't see, and the impression this was a slightly bigger deal than they might have originally thought was growing.

Still, that wasn't a problem in and of itself, tunnels were all well and good, but not dangerous in and of themselves. Even with the small ramps of stone that allowed for tunnels to cover more than just the floor weren't a big deal, they looked carved, they could be nothing else. It lent credit to the idea that even the tunnels were carved and not just natural caves.

The ones doing the carving, were of course a veritable army of patrol rats. Every surface was covered in them. Even as they marched out into the tunnels the sheer quantity coating the floor never seemed to dwindle. The really creepy part though, was that even in the brief glance Kat saw, they weren't a mess. They were all packed as tight as they could possibly be, and BREATHING in sync. Kat didn't exactly like the implications of that.

If the army of smaller patrol rats weren't enough. The Section of ten Guard Rats certainly didn't make things any more favourable. They also didn't seem to be entirely standard as far as Guard Rats went. They were all just slightly larger than normal, standing a head taller than Kat... IF you included her horns. They also had slightly distinguishing features.

The first had whiskers, a few others had scratch marks or patches of their fur cut out marking them as unique. Whiskers felt more important, and stood ever so slightly taller than the rest. Not obvious, but very noticeable when they were right next to each other, standing still as statues but with eyes gazing out at the crowd. Of course, the fact they didn't seem to react to the demon's incursion at all raised the question of how good those eyes could be.



These Guard Rats were also more crystal then the others, with their heads being covered with thick vein like lines of the stuff that was working its way downwards, stopping at various places on their bodies. Whisker's had crystal growths all the way to its legs, and the second most crystalline had lines up to where its belly button would be on a human.

As impressive as intimidating as they all seemed to be, there were two more beings in that room, and neither of them were things Kat was looking forward to fighting. The more dangerous looking of the two, was something Kat had mistaken for the back wall when she first saw things. Now that she was looking over the short scene in her mind though, it was clear that wasn't the case.

The back wall, which Kat had thought devoid of tunnels, was no wall at all, but a giant crystalline rat, easily dwarfing the giant rat they'd fought before in size. It's tail alone, once Kat recognised it for what it, looked to be as tall as Kat herself, and twice as thick. She couldn't see how long it was, but she doubted it was stubby.

The crystal rat didn't seem to have any biological features visible, but the crystal structure it was made of grew cloudy quickly with a glow to it that even Kat struggled to look through. If it had organs inside its body, or not, was a mystery for now.

The final being in that room, was what Kat and co were likely after. Compared to the Guard Rats and the Crystal Rat, it... no SHE looked positively tiny, though still larger then patrol rats of course. The obvious thing marking the being as female was the face... or at least the half that had been frozen by crystal.

The rat woman looked like a big scoop of her had been taken out and replaced with crystal. She was 'missing' half of her face, most of her left arm, and the upper left portion of her chest. The only part of her on that side that wasn't crystal was a creepy looking eye that seemed to be constantly bulging out of its socket.

The rest of her body was much worse off. While it appeared the 'woman' had rat ears to start with, now she had fur on the right half of her face, and her nose, at least half of it, was extending into something not quite a snout. The mouth on her was moving up to meet it, but it clearly didn't know what to do.

She had rags that barely covered anything and had seen better days. They were more dirt then cloth and provided her barely a sliver of modesty. What they most certainly didn't manage... was to hide her distended stomach. It was huge, and immediately noticeable. Covered in fur and with a strange red glow inside of it, Kat suspected she made the rats there, considering when Kat looked into the room she was throwing up live rats just like the Giant had been previously.

\*We might need Stone for this. I'm not sure we can take on this room ourselves.\*

## **Chapter 518: Trapped Between a Stone and a Crystal Place**

"What did you actually see Kat?" asked Sue, "I didn't see anything, and I doubt Kamiko really has the memory to go over everything properly..."

Kat nodded and explained everything she saw, focusing on the points of interest such as the excessive number of tunnels, the ten Guard Rats, the Summoner and the Crystal Rat. "...and that's everything I've gotten so far. I'm not sure if there's more details I'm missing, but I can only long over the same memory

so many times before it gets hard to see the details. It's not that they vanish... it's more like my mind is trying to say I've seen it all even when I haven't"

Kamiko bit her lip and tried to consider the information Kat had provided them. Before too long she started pacing from one side of the tunnel to the other, keeping her tail in close so that it didn't fly into the wall every time she turned around.

Sue for her part looked rather concerned. The odds didn't seem to be stacked in there favour, and she did not want to be separated from Kat and Kamiko by a sea of rats. Even if she was mostly safe, the patrol rats could still come after her, and she wasn't sure they could beat everything anyway. "Seems we're trapped between a Stone and a Crystal Rat" said Sue

"That's not a bad idea actually..." said Kamiko

Sue raised a confused eyebrow and nodded, "I mean... yes... yes it is a valid idea..." was the most Sue managed to say without being caught lying. She didn't really understand where Kamiko was going with things, so she couldn't say more.

Kamiko noticed her confusion though, and decided to shed light on the situation, "Stone, Sue, Stone. We can wait for him to arrive before tackling this. He might just be able to take out the Summoner and we can be done with this, but if not he can at least help. I think waiting for him is the best idea."

Sue's eyes widened in understanding before she nodded rapidly. "That sounds like a much better idea then I was thinking of. Stone should be able to help us a whole bunch. He's much stronger then we are, and even if he makes us deal with it for whatever reason I know he won't let us get too hurt..." Sue gave a glance towards Kat, "well, me and Kamiko won't get too hurt. I don't know how you count Kat. Does the damage you take still hurt?"

Kat nodded, "Yeah my sense of pain works fine... probably. I've taken to ignoring it quite a lot honestly. Once you've stood up after faceplanting on a gravel path at a high speed and having it shred your throat and part of your lungs before you cough up the stones dealing more internal damage as they go, nothing really feels that bad... until I got stabbed through the heart. TWICE!"

"Shit Kat... I didn't realise you're so hardcore... or you're just a masochist. Actually, that second one makes more sense..." said Sue with a thousand yard stare.

Due to the wonders of demonic translation, Kat now knew what a masochist was. \*That doesn't describe me well at all...\* "But I don't enjoy pain, I find it troublesome more than anything else. I just... don't let it bother me. I dunno. I think there's a point where I can just ignore it? Maybe my aura helps,"

"Well maybe it does, but you're definitely missing out if you're not a masochist. I've seen things Kat. Horrible yet wonderful things for masochists. Makes me wish I was one sometimes, but... then I think about it a bit more and realise I've been spending too much time with my crazy aunt" said Sue

Kamiko smiled, and interrupted Sue's tangent, "So, is there anything else we want to cover before Stone gets here? I don't mind messing around until he does, because I really don't like the fight we're getting into here so I'm happy to wait. Just... let's get our business done first."

\*Hmm. Is there anything else to point out? Maybe an order of attack? Or perhaps what we're asking from Stone? If he can just snipe the Summoner we might be done with this. Or if he can take out all the

little ones? I think the Guards are certainly doable. I'm just not sure how safe it is for the other two...\*

"Well, from what I can see, we need Stone most of all for the Crystal Rat, and maybe the patrols. They're the two biggest threats assuming the Summoner isn't combat capable"

Sue chimed in with, "Yeah getting the little ones out of the way would be really nice. They aren't a threat in and of themselves, but they'd make it really hard for my shield to actually do its job. This big crystal rat also sounds pretty scary so I think Kat has the right of it here. The only other thing I'd say is, maybe take out a few Guards as well. They might be stronger than the ones we've fought so far and five each is still a lot, especially if the Summoner helps at all."

Kamiko nodded in Sue's direction, "I think she has the right of it. There is a lot of scary stuff in that room, and while we were confident after the Giant Rat fight... I'm not sure how much we really believed we could do this ourselves. Also, I know I certainly didn't expect a bigger, likely tougher rat at the end. It's just not how swarm rats work."

Sue sighed, "Yeah well it's pretty clear that someone got corrupted somehow. No idea how they ended up at the bottom of the mind but this is clearly the work of someone who's been corrupted."

"Is there any way to save them?" asked Kat knowing full well they'd had this conversation earlier when it came up.

Sue just gave Kat a flat 'You serious?' look but Kamiko smiled at her friend for even worrying about it. Still, it was a smile tinged with some sadness, for the answer was "No Kat. There is truly nothing to be done. Never has it been prevented. A Memphis is the closest thing we've found to a way of avoiding being corruption, and they just cheat a bunch,"

"What's a Memphis?" asked Kat

"Yeah what's a Memphis?" asked Sue

"They're a... they're like a winged kitten I suppose? The main thing that makes them interesting is that they have an organ inside them that stores demonic energy. They can't use it, and it acts more like a buffer, but if they're paired up with a demon, they can siphon some of that demon's cast off demonic energy and feed it back to them when they need it.

"They are very hard to corrupt because that organ is quite efficient. They'll get sick as more resources are devoted to preventing corruption long before they are ever at risk of being corrupted so it's easy to take care of them, but even they aren't completely immune to its corrupting effects, and they still can't really USE it. They can just transfer it to someone or some of the older, more intelligent ones can put it into enchanted objects"

"Do they stay kittens forever?" asked Sue with big eyes "Because that sounds adorable and now I think I want one..."

Kamiko turned a soft glare towards Sue. "They're pretty rare, and yes they do stay kittens forever. They don't really get any bigger. Though... I think they might be able to learn transformation magic if they have affinity for it so on a very technical level they aren't totally trapped as kittens but normal they do.

"Also, they can live for a long time, especially when paired with a demon. If they strengthen themselves a bit they can be a companion that will follow you forever. They have the potential to be immortal, or at least, unable to die from old age."

"Boo, that's a shame. They sound really cute, and like one of the few animals you can safely have in the Hub. The demonic energy in some areas gets pretty thick because of how many demons have hung around for ages" cooed Sue.

Kamiko nodded, "Yeah... the Hub isn't exactly a safe place for species that aren't demons or a Memphis. Still, we've at least got artifacts to prevent demonic energy from corrupting people if they come here. Not sure how costly they are though,"

\*Maybe I should look into that. It would be nice to introduce Kamiko to everyone else... though it might be best just to bring Kamiko to Earth somehow. That might be safer for everyone... and her family is a bit much. Maybe if there's a good reason we can all meet up though. Do demons have Christmas or an equivalent? I guess I have something to think about while we all wait for Stone. Hopefully he comes soon. It feels late, but time is a hard concept to grasp when you're underground.\*

## **Chapter 519: A Rock Solid Plan**

The three girls proceeded to kill time for a while. It was hard for Kat to distinguish how long it actually was. The lack of sky made things feel drawn out yet the pleasant chatting between the three helped pass the time quickly... there might also have been a few patrol rat massacres that helped ease tensions

Eventually, the girls could hear the sound of something approaching rapidly. They panicked for a second, before remembering that the fact they could hear the approach at all meant that it was someone with a set of earmuffs and they held out hope it was Stone.

When his tall rocky form rounded the corner, the three couldn't help but smile which caused a confused look to appear on Stone's face. "I get you're happy to see me... but why? You don't seem to be working at the moment, so I'm not super impressed"

"Don't put on the tough guy act Stone" said Sue from the floor, "we found the big bad at the end of the tunnel and honestly, it sounds like a bit much for us. Didn't spend long looking but we know enough to know we'd be screwed without you, and gangbang still isn't one of my fetishes."

Stone narrowed his eyes and held a hand up in the stop position before jumping in the air. His form blurred for what was just a fraction of a second before he set himself back down. "Well damn. This is a problem and we really do need to deal with it now." Said Stone in a serious voice that set the girls slightly on edge

"Why?" asked Sue "I mean, sure we thought it best to deal with, but you look like we told you the mine profits were down three whole percent or that your wife decided not to make you lunch for the week because of a misunderstanding?"

Stone smiled for a second before grimacing again. "The issue is the Summoner type corrupted. I don't know what will happen if she were to lose herself completely to the demonic energy. If nothing kills her... the rats might go out of control and rampage. Killing her should still stop everything, but now that I've seen that big Crystal Rat I'm not sure we can sit on this for long.

"I'll need you all to help me. It isn't that I couldn't destroy everything in that room myself, it's that I can't destroy everything in that room without causing a cave in. With all the connected tunnels if things go real bad we could be experiencing a small earthquake and a big section of the mines would go with it because of the location.

"I need to spend most of my energy on stabilising the room and fighting the Crystal Rat and hopefully the Summoner. How will you three stack up to the rest of the room?" said Stone. His tone was still very serious and as the words were uttered the weight in the room seemed to increase.

\*Shit. I didn't even think about the structural integrity of the room. The Crystal Rat, if it's as strong as we think it is... it could bring this whole place down on us with no trouble. Heck I might be able to with a bit of effort so Stone will have to be very careful. At least we made the right call waiting. If Stone is scared... damn. I'm glad we didn't cause a cave in. Suffocation would get me eventually I know that.\*

"Why can't you just set the lot on fire?" asked Sue "The two firebugs here with me seemed to think it was a great idea, and the rats can keep most of the fire from spreading to the rocks."

Stone shakes his head vigorously. "NO!" shouted Stone causing Sue to flinch. "Sorry... I didn't mean to shout just... that glowing crystal is highly reactive to demonic energy. The same stuff the giant fuckin rat is made out of. It's a huge risk to use demonic fire at all in that room and I'll need to forbid it."

"What about the small rats?" asked Kamiko "While Kat can deal with them, they make the shield setup with Sue a massive issue. She can't keep it on me due to the risk of them triggering it with little bites."

Stone started drumming his fingers on his arms making a soft impact sound when they hit like tapping two rocks together. "Hmm... I can certainly kill the lot with other abilities when I first get in... but I'm not sure if I'll be able to after that.

"Just looking at the stupid Crystal bastard makes me think I'm going to have to hold it in place with my earth manipulation. Because it's crystal and not normal stone I'll need my hands IN it. The fact it's probably got at least some mind of its own is another complication. It'll be fighting me so I doubt I can do much else once the fight really starts.

"Any reinforcements you'll need to deal with. Honestly, depending on how hard it is to keep reinforcing the room and keeping the Crystal rat pinned I might not be able to spare the attention for the Summoner. I'll obviously try taking them out in the first volley, but I don't have a lot of hope in that. Probably get blocked by the Crystal rat or one of the ten."

\*Hmm. That's... manageable I suppose. Not being able to use demonic fire is a big reduction in firepower and I'm not really sure what else we have. If the rats are stupid... maybe I should get more than just half to try and attack me. I can take a bunch of damage from them. Not sure how I'd managed to gather more though. Five is probably enough to surround me completely. Even if they're a bit stupid, I doubt they'd stack ten or even eight around me. Best I can hope for is maybe six.\*

"What should I be doing?" asked Sue "I'll probably be in the back line with Kamiko just within sight but is there something better I could be doing? Can't let them have all the fun" despite Sue's wording though, her concern was easy to see. Nobody wanted to mention it thought.

Stone bit his lip causing a soft grinding sound to be emitted as he clearly thought the idea over. "Hmm... I really didn't bring anything better than the coat you're wearing for the cold. It's got no protection against blunt force, none at all, but just because of the materials it should be slash resistant for everything except the big one in that room. I don't think you should go further in honestly.

"Your hammer is nice, but you aren't going to be fast enough for the medium sized opponents, and if more of the little rats manage to attack in force, either from being summoned or if they can be recalled from the other tunnels it might still be a struggle even if you're by yourself. Perhaps you should whistle for help if you need it. That should be a good signal." Said Stone

"Isn't there anything better?" asked Sue

"Could you put Sue on the ceiling?" asked Kat. The group turned at one, the same question on their minds, 'what?' "Er... um... well I was just thinking with Stone's earth manipulation it might be safer to make a little alcove and put her there. Either have Stone throw her there, or I can fly her there before the fight really gets going. I don't think anything can fly and only the Crystal Rat could possibly reach the ceiling. Plus, Sue can glide down if things get that bad."

Stone nodded and said, "Very good catch Kat. That'll keep her much safer and prevent the need for you to worry about reinforcements coming for her. They might still be an issue for you two, but with Sue safely away I think things will be much simpler."

"Guess I'm playing the princess in the tower for this mission. Go forth my knights and slay me a killer rat. I shall surely gift you with suitable rewards for your services to my personhood" said Sue in a fake royal accent.

"Hmm... should Stone throw as all?" asked Kamiko

"What?" said Kat and Sue at the same time, the confusion forcing them to put it into words.

"Now, hold on" said Kamiko with a placating gesture, "I'm just saying that maybe it's a good way to set up. I'm sure Stone knows how to regulate his strength and if we're empowering ourselves we can take decently strong impacts with our legs. Throwing us at one of the Guard Rats could take two extra rats out of the fight at the start."

Stone smiled wide, revealing a full set of rocky looking teeth that were slightly paler than the stone of his body. His back was completely straight, and his hands were also twitching with anticipation. "That might just be crazy enough to work"

## **Chapter 520: Special Delivery!**

Despite everyone being on board and happy with the plan, they did step back and go over the details a few more times before they were completely happy with everything. This took another thirty minutes of working out the kinks and the murder of a quite a few more patrol rats. Stone took care of them with a simple wave of his hand, Sue almost commented, but just relaxed instead, getting herself in her best condition for the fight.

Once it was final time to launch, Stone started everyone off. Stone moved just slow enough for the others to keep up with him until reaching the edge of the tunnel. Then Stone snapped his hands up before throwing them both towards the ground. The rocks around them moved to his whim.

The ceiling came down in a wave, just like someone shaking out a towel. The wave of stone could be heard grinding against the ground alongside the sound of thousands of small bones cracking. The wave bulldozed its way through the room with a speed that was just barely within Kat's range of vision.

It travelled forward only to be stopped by a massive boom. The wave seemed to bow backwards and flow around something before retreating completely to reveal, to nobodies surprise, the Crystal Rat which had moved in front taking the full weight of the ceiling on its body and not so much as bending to meet the demand. It was completely unscathed and the Summoner turned to open her mouth in retaliation.

She didn't get time though. Stone picked up Kat and Kamiko and hurled them both full speed and feet first towards the biggest Guard Rats on either side before dashing forward himself far faster than either demon had been thrown. Stone's fist was about to make contact with Summoner when Crystal moved its tail to intercept.

The impact pushed out a large wave of air that Stone grimaced upon seeing and deftly raised a small wall of rocks nearby to stop preventing it from slowing down Kat and Kamiko during their flight. When he did that, he doubled down, pulling the rock, stone and metal in and cocooning Summoner in a dome before slamming his feet into the ground and wrapping his hands around Crystal locking the rat in place.

Stone's stance hardened at this point and his whole body changed to a darker colour and gained a slightly metallic sheen covering his entire body and even his eyes. His muscles tensed even though he didn't move an inch and Crystal froze completely.

At this point Kat and Kamiko were making their landing. It was too fast to properly manage and Kat was very thankful for Stone's accurate throws. Before she knew it, her feet had impacted with one of the Guard Rat's heads and she lost a chunk of energy to healing the slightly damaged muscles throughout her legs.

Kamiko arrived just a moment after, having been thrown with less speed, though it was still enough to take off another Guard Rat's head. She used her natural grace to bleed off the rest of the momentum with a backflip before landing on her feet and summoning her weapon. Weapon in hand she lashed out at the nearest Guard that was still recovering somewhat and scored a nasty gash across its hastily raised arm.

Kat used her wings instead of just her legs, not having the extra experience with footwork. They were more than up to the task though and Kat managed to pull herself backwards and land on her feet. The wings were quickly retracted after that to avoid giving the Guards a larger target than she needed to.

Kat let her focus leave Kamiko as the four Guards moved up to try and attack her. The ground nearby was mostly free of blood so nobody was at risk of slipping, and the Guards were fast, much faster than the previous ones. All four managed to surround Kat before she kicked her mind into its highest gear.

They moved as one perfectly oiled unit, though carrying out different tasks. Kat would designate them, Scratch, for the scratch over its eye, Patch, for the large patch of missing fur on its side, Chipped, for the large chunk missing from its ear and Chunk for a similar missing chunk from the final rat's tail.

Scratch and Patch tried to rake across Kat's body from the back and front, with Scratch swinging in from behind her left shoulder and trying to rake down her back. Patch was doing somewhat of the opposite

aiming instead from her front left moving up instead. This might mean that dodging right would get her out of this...

But Chipped and Chunk were moving in, both arms coming up in concert mostly to block Kat's movements, they still had there claws out of course, but they weren't putting any weight behind it yet so that they could more easily react to what Kat was doing.

\*Ok. Gotta think quick. They can move really fast, maybe as fast as me, but they don't seem to have the mental slowdown that I have. I can't dodge upwards because my wings will probably get caught by Scratch though... maybe up right? That could work.\*

Kat tensed her legs and started to bounce in the direction she'd planned out but Chunk moved its hands up and forward, liking a volleyball frontline blocker, fighting for control of the net. Blocking of space and making her plan much less feasible.

\*Ok shit. They can react to me; I can see Chunk moving its hands up. Shit. My body isn't fast enough even if my mind is.\*

At this point Kat had already been moving and it looked like she was going to have Chunk's claws rake down the side of her face as she moved up and past the Guard. Kat grit her teeth though, knowing that having the four surrounding her was much worse, and she'd already let that happen. Letting the momentum carry her, Chunk tried to jump up to push her back down towards the ground but her tail lashed out, managing to strike Chunk's chest digging in a moderate way and pushing the rat back.

Chunk still got its pound of flesh, slicing her ear clean in half, Kat winced and ignored the pain as she moved up and out of the trap the Guards had set for her. Still, with the limited space she hadn't been able to use her full strength or get any sort of runup. She'd used a weak jump with her legs barely bent just to get out in time.

Kat flared her wings and flapped hard so that she was sent into the air. The blood from her ear already stopping its flow as the appendage grew back. She looked down at the rats glaring up at her. The three were keeping themselves bellow her, watching closely but not making any rash moves.

When Chunk made contact with the ground, the rat did a little hop, letting more momentum bleed off as it was pushed backwards rather than risk damaging its feet. Kat made a note of that. Still, she didn't know where to go from there, the rats were staring at her, and they were waiting. Chunk took one more look at Kat once it'd stopped, before turning to where Kamiko was fighting her own set of Guards. As soon as it did so, Kat knew she couldn't just bait them from the air.

\*Shit. They're smart enough to switch targets. I need to give them something at the very least. Do I go back into the fray, locking up at least three, or should I shoot towards Chunk on an intercept course. I doubt I'd really be able to get any time with just the one rat before the others show up... but I guess its better then nothing.\*

Kat followed her advice, diving straight for Chunk, who almost seemed to grin as she approached. Kat lashed out with a kick to Chunk's head that was easily blocked... the follow up tail strike going around that leg was another matter. Chunk was hit hard on the side of his head and staggered, blood leaking from the wound.



Before Kat could celebrate though, another set of claws made itself known and used her somewhat stationary position to dig into her leg. The muscles tensing around it to prevent it from doing too much damage, but whichever rat it was pushed hard, forcing Kat to go with the momentum and be flung towards the ground to prevent further damage.

Kat let her good leg take the weight as she hit the ground, allowing the momentum to turn her around to face the group. Chunk was still stunned from the kick, not quite recovered in the short few moments it had taken for her to land. The other three were heading towards her, but because of how things played out, her left side was mostly free. That was good. That was the side that was undamaged.

\*Now how do I capitalise on this?\*