

DEMONS 801

Chapter 801 Meeting with the Matron Part

Lily couldn't help but let out a sharp hiss as she heard the details. Theresa nodded along, "Yes it wasn't a good time. Her back has recovered remarkably well and the mental scars have... largely been moved past I think... but it took a long time for her to be able to move comfortably. I had to rub ointment on her back every night for... oh it might have been a year or more..."

Theresa let out a long sigh. "It was hard for her to connect with the other children when she came. Not being able to play really didn't help and the fact she couldn't really assist with the chores only made things worse. It did get better eventually but well... it was a rough start for Zuhra. Once she got better though...

"Instead of playing with the children she'd follow me around. It was adorable to see her following me around. She'd even try to help with whatever I was doing... usually to minimal success. Really it was only thanks to another girl, her name is Marem, that she started to hang out with the other children. Marem was... I think she was ten or eleven at the time? She also lost her family to fire, though with significantly less injury to herself. They bonded quite well. In fact I think Zuhra still visits her from time to time.

"Marem's married now, to a lovely man who works as a calculator. Very smart and I've heard they are quite happy together. If there's anything else you need to know about Zuhra you should probably ask Marem. Though... I can't remember exactly where she's moved to... I know I was told on one of her visits back here... but... for the life of me I can't quite remember the address. Perhaps it will come to me."

"Anyway. That was how Zuhra came to us and how she gained friends. I suppose... the next big moment is something you probably know about if you know anything about her... but... well... no I suppose I can put it off for a bit. Pick a topic that isn't quite so depressing. Hmm... do you know about the other building? Where we house the older individuals?" Seeing a set of nods Theresa continued, "Right well... I lightly encourage the children to look into jobs at twelve, more heavily encourage it at thirteen and by fourteen I really push for them to find apprenticeships or odd jobs of their own.

"It... it's not the best system I admit, but we're running into budget cuts but I'm sure you don't want to hear me rant about those-"

"Actually I DO in fact want to hear about those!" announced Lily.

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Theresa paused and turned her full attention towards Lily. "Well, they aren't really relevant but... well with that sort of enthusiasm I can't decline. The truth is, starting with my predecessors predecessor the orphanage has been hit with budget cuts somewhat regularly. Now a lot of them are somewhat disguised, but that's simply what they are.

"The first was when the Lord of the 8th 'reassigned' one of the workers here to help elsewhere. That might have been fine but... when the person was reassigned, the pay for that position was dropped from the donations because 'they aren't working at the orphanage anymore' which was a bit annoying but that's fine. We could make do by having the older children step up a bit more.

“Then following on from that was another large cut. It was for that secondary house, the older kids. We used to have one full time worker for it and one part time worker, as well as money for some of the kids to do extra work around it like cooking and cleaning. That was all cut because ‘times were a bit tough this year’ and we had no choice but to go along with it.

“The next year though, the baron said ‘the children are doing such a wonderful job with it themselves I don’t really need to help anymore’ and that was another large cut. That was all and all...about a third of our funding. We had a big meeting with the older kids, the orphanage staff and the previous matron and discussed what to do going forward. The older kids volunteered to work for themselves to help with the younger kids and we agreed.

“Then in my tenure, once again, the Lord came, but this time he had ‘a deal’ and it was ‘well money is a bit of an issue but we can give you a field to do with as you wish in exchange’ and my oh my I was angry. Still, I grit my teeth and tried to sweet talk him into retracting the idea but we were pretty much pressured into it.

“So now I don’t really operate an orphanage. I run a small farm AND an orphanage where I pay my workers by selling the extra food we manage to grow. Sadly, we don’t actually pay them particularly good rates and I worry that it won’t be viable long term... but at least the children won’t starve.”

“That’s... not ideal...” said Kat slowly.

“Isn’t there anything you can do?” asked Lily.

Theresa shrugged, “Honestly the current hope is that whoever takes over the 8th next will offer us a better deal. The 8th of the 10th has always taken care of orphans and prided themselves on that care. The fact the current Lord doesn’t share that pride... well it’s an issue but things would have to get really quite bad for any of the other Numbers to step in. Frankly if it got to that point... I don’t know what would happen or if they’d be able to react fast enough.

“The Numbers won’t want to step on any toes until there are children starving to death and frankly I’d rather it be my own death that comes before I let it get that bad. I’m currently looking for options to alleviate the issue but frankly there’s not much time for me to be looking into it. The biggest asset we have is the farm land, which I managed to get signed over to my name and then my title, not the orphanage so the bastard can’t take it away, but frankly you can grow just about anything in this city. So we don’t really have much of a benefit there...”

Wait... is that way Zuhra is working for Jara? To try and help the orphanage? Maybe come up with a good crop for them to sell? I feel like that’s something Jara would have mentioned if she knew... Kat bit her lip and nodded. “Thank you for telling me. I can make sure that information gets back to the 3rd and the 6th if you want?” offered Kat.

Theresa took a large bite of her sandwich and chewed on both it and the question for a few moments. “I suppose it couldn’t hurt. I don’t expect much, or rather, I expect they already know in at least some capacity. Perhaps not the details... but enough to know the orphanage is struggling a bit. Perhaps the 8th is blaming it on me but I wouldn’t count on it...”

“Anyway... how did we get here? Ah yes. Zuhra. See, Zuhra was always quite good at her chores. When it was time to move into the other building, Zuhra asked if she could work here for money. As you know

from my rant, we did not, and still don't have the money for extra staff. Still, even when I explained this to her, Zuhra insisted and I caved. She has the most expressive emerald eyes and I just couldn't deny her request.

"So she started working here for the orphanage. She mostly filled in more background roles. She did interact with the kids sometimes but it wasn't what she preferred. She'd go through and make the beds, wipe down the tables, things like that. I on the other hand would do what I can for her. I actually planned to skim a bit off my own pay for to give to her... when I remembered that I don't get paid anymore."

Kat and Lily's eyes went wide, but Theresa waved them off, "Oh don't look so shocked. I did say we weren't having the best time of things. Technically speaking I do get paid, because if I wasn't we'd be breaking a few laws even if I am the boss, but I then go on to donate all my money back into the orphanage. It's been completely automatic for a long time so it sort of slipped my mind at the time.

"So instead I offered her lessons. I taught her how to sew, and how to cook more advanced things than the standard we try to make sure all the kids know. I taught her how to butcher a cow and tan leather. I asked Marem and her husband for a favour and Marem taught her to read and write while her husband taught her numbers. It was the best I could do for the work, but the others in the older kid's building didn't mind because she did all the cooking for dinner and breakfast.

"Which I guess leads us to the final thing. Her fiancé."

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"Which I guess leads us to the final thing. Her fiancé," said Theresa. Kat and Lily couldn't help but straighten up slightly. "Yes, I suppose you would know about that. It's one of those things that you'd hear whenever Zuhra is mentioned. I can tell you what I know, which is more than most, but likely not as much as Marem. Zuhra was quite secretive about him for some reason,"

"Still, I bet I can give you something new. His name was Gaston. He was about a year older than her... perhaps. As I said, Zuhra's exact age is a little uncertain so perhaps it was more perhaps less but officially it was about a year. He was the son of Bell, who runs 'Long River Road Traders' it's a medium sized merchant house,"

I'm sorry he's the what? I was honestly on board with the whole secret heir to the 8th of the 10.

[Yeah me too. I mean... I don't necessarily want to rule it out yet. We didn't hear who his father was right?]

I feel like that might just be wishful thinking but we can ask at some point.

"I don't really have any dealings with them myself. I did consider it, what with the farm, but, once again, we don't have any particular specialties and a trading company of that size surely already deals in produce of some kind. It's simply how things work here in this city, well if you have business outside of it that is. Some of the wealthiest merchants just work for one of the Ten and keep themselves to the city but not everyone can be like that. Especially when nepotism is a big issue.

"Still, while I can't tell you much about Gaston, I can tell you about his relationship with Zuhra. I don't know the precise day they started getting together but I do know they met through Marem's husband.

He... oh what was his name? I know it... I'm sure I know it... S... Stan? Stalone? Set? Nope it's not coming to me. I'll have to just call him Mr S because I'm pretty sure his name starts with an S.

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"He was just an apprentice in the Calculator's Guild which is not actually a guild, but it was founded before the current Guild system and was able to be grandfathered in. Anyway, Mr S always had a way with numbers. He just... saw the world differently to most people. Still does I suppose. Anyway, he was making his way up the ladder and he was assigned to the LRRT as his first big assignment.

"That's where he met Gaston. Gaston... well as I said I don't know too much about him but apparently Mr S, who was already good friends with Marem, perhaps a bit more. Marem was actually much better at hiding her relationship than Zuhra. Zuhra would pretend nothing at all happened but Marem pretended S was a just a friend for quite some time. She'd visit other friends and was always able to keep her stories consistent.

"Anyway, for some reason Mr S thought Gaston and Zuhra would be great together and he was certainly right. They got along really well from what little I got from Zuhra at the start. He was 'her bestest friend' and when I asked if that meant he was a better friend than Marem, she said he was her 'bestest male friend then like Mr S is for Marem' which is actually what clued me into Marem's activities. She'd just been playing him off as a normal friend amongst a half dozen.

"Still, Zuhra was a bit young at the time... I think she was ten or eleven? So I'm not entirely sure if she knew exactly what she was implying at the time. I think he did though. Shortly after that Zuhra would get little gifts. Not super frequently and they didn't ramp up in quality all that fast. The first thing she got... hmm... I think it was a necklace. I never saw the picture inside but it was a locket so I can guess. Though maybe the picture changed later.

"After that, gifts would normally be given on major holidays. Discovery Day," Theresa paused as she saw the confused looks on the girl's faces, "Discovery Day is our largest holiday. It's supposedly the day our ancestors discovered the water fountain that our city surrounds. Personally, I'm of the opinion that it was an event created later on, perhaps with the correct date. Perhaps not. We also have birthdays of course, and Last Day of Winter which is more of an import. It's a very old tradition from other regions celebrating the end of winter and the survival of the individuals.

"Except winters have never been particularly harsh here and with the fountain we can not only stock sufficient food for ourselves, we can keep growing through winter. So it's never been an issue... but we also have a bunch of food spare at the end of winter and it ended up becoming one of our largest festivals. Anyway. Zuhra would get a gift usually on one of these three holidays. A new outfit, nothing too high quality at the start, a hat for the sun, perhaps some nice sturdy shoes. Things like that.

"Zuhra always thought she was subtle about it, but for like a month after each gift she'd always get a rather goofy look on her face. I don't really know how so many others missed it. I think the happiest I ever saw her was the day she got the ring. It was after Discovery Day and she was just so happy. I think that was the day all the others figured out as well. The ring wasn't overly fancy, as there was no reason to risk attracting thieves, but it was a magic artifact. Something we have very, very few of still.

“Once attuned to two people, for they were a matching pair, they would indicate the direction the other half was in. So of course... it was a terrible day when... when it happened. I was actually in the room with her at the time. We were folding clothes one afternoon and sorting them out. Just... in the middle of one of her folds she stopped moving completely and let what she was working on fall.

“She had... such a look of horror in her eyes as her hand moved mechanically down to her ring. I’m not really sure what she was thinking. I imagine part of it is that she hoped it had broken. As much as she might not have wished to believe Gaston would pick out a faulty gift... but it was much better than the alternative. Sadly... later that day Gaston’s mother delivered the news personally.

Theresa sighed, her odd condition seemingly dissipating to make her seem much, much older. The weight of a woman who looked after many children, and had seen a terrible end to one that was, while not her own, close enough for the weight to be stifling. “I remember the next few days with an... an odd sort of detached horror. Zuhra stopped speaking, she simply went around doing any job she could. First she did all the washing, then she cleaned every room. Then once that was all done she turned to other things.

“She spent a day fixing up all the faulty wooden boards. I don’t even know when she learned how or where she got the supplies, but that took her another few days because she didn’t really know what she was doing. Then she got a bunch of cloth scraps and repaired a lot of the clothes deemed ‘too damaged to be worth fixing’ for some reason. Well, no it was to keep herself busy.

“The day after that I wanted to confront her... I found her in the food storage. Just... resorting it all. I couldn’t do it the first time. When I came back later that day to find she’d clearly finished once only to start again... well I asked her if she was ok and she just looked at me and tried to answer... but no sound came out. So I did what I could. I helped her finish cleaning out the storeroom.

“Good thing I did because the moment she left that room she collapsed. I had to have someone look at her. Turns out she hadn’t been eating, she was dehydrated and she probably had some minor damage in her bones were her knees slammed into the ground. She was supposed to be given orders to rest but...

“She woke up at some point in the night and started working again. Had to get a bit of help from some old friends to knock her out and then tie her to the bed. Not with anything too restricting, but certainly enough to stop her working for just a bit. Well, then the crying started.”

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“And well... that’s mostly the end of it I suppose. It wasn’t long after that Zuhra decided to get a job and move out of the orphanage completely. She was perhaps a bit young to do so... but I certainly understood why. Always a workaholic that one... actually... how is she? I only hear what she tells me so it’d be great to have a second opinion,”

Kat glanced at Lily and thought. Um... how do you want to deal with this? It’s not like we really know her.

[Let me take the lead. I have a... vague idea of what we can say and while it might be stretching the truth a bit it won’t be completely false. I’m just not sure if you’d be able to say everything. Best not to risk it.]

Theresa raised a slight eyebrow at the unsee interplay but didn't say anything until Lily spoke, "Truthfully Ms, we don't have much to do with Zuhra. We know of her, of course, but we were hired because we don't know her on a personal level. It's hard to let your impression of a person change the outcome of an investigation if you don't actually know them,"

[See Kat. Mostly true. Sure we're actually from another dimension entirely and 'work for' is a bit of a generous way of saying we were summoned... but honestly the fact nobody has really called either of us out about our non-human appearance despite only humans being around is a great victory.]

I'm not entirely sure I feel comfortable misleading the orphanage matron like this. It's a bit like lying to your parents about you. Well... maybe not that exactly because I doubt your mother would have believed me about anything a month ago, but that's sort of what this feels like. You know. Don't take candy from babies, to lie to grandparents that sort of thing.

[Kat it's... probably fine. I mean, nothing I'm saying is blatantly false. I haven't finished either!] Lily let out a like cough, "Sorry I was just going over what I do know of her mentally. As I said it's not too much... but... she's still a workaholic, perhaps a worse one now than before. She had to be told not to work through the night and is basically forced to take a day off a week. Just yesterday she attempted to keep working despite that fact and it apparently required some effort to get her out of the manor."

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Theresa shook her head with a sigh, "Oh how little that surprises me. I've spoke with Zuhra and she even insisted she was doing better and working less. While it seems she was telling the truth, it's only just barely the truth. Perhaps I need to invite her around for tea more often or speak with Marem. Actually, would you mind bringing it up with her if you go and visit?"

Lily nodded, "That sounds fine. I promise to bring it up. I think it's likely we'll go and see her... well if we can figure out where she lives,"

"Sorry," said Theresa.

"No, you've been most helpful there's nothing to apologise for. Is there anything else you think we might need to know?" asked Lily.

"No, nothing comes to mind. Not about Zuhra at least..." said Theresa.

Lily narrowed her eyes, "Well... what about some more about the 8th of the 10th? Anything interesting happening on that front? Perhaps around the time of Gaston's death?"

Theresa gave Lily a strange look. "Certainly not, the only thing that happened even close to that time was the death of the 8th's first wife... but that was a good two and a half, maybe three months before Gaston passed away so I don't really see how they could be related,"

Lily tried to hide her interest as she asked, "Who is the current heir of the 8th?"

"You don't know?" asked Theresa confused.

"We don't have much to do with the city usually. I did mention that we don't really know Zuhra, we also don't really know anyone else with too specific a detail," added Lily slightly nervously. It was the best answer she could think to give, and wasn't quite prepared for the question.

“Hmmm” Theresa mumbled as she shifted, “Well, I suppose... it’s just a little strange. Well... the current Heir is the young master, Kirby I think his name is. He was born just last year. You see, the Lord had... or I suppose more accurately the first Lady had issues conceiving. They were never able to have children, and that put a bit of a strain on their relationship,”

“Do you think he had her killed?” Kat couldn’t help but ask.

Theresa took a bite of her sandwich, chewing slowly in an attempt not to answer the question. Seconds ticked by in the attic as Theresa continued not to answer. Finally, after three minutes she admitted, “I don’t know. Truthfully... it is hard to say. Part of me wants to say that of course he would stoop that low. That he would remove any issues in his path. Considering what he’s been doing to the orphanage funding it wouldn’t surprise me...

“But at the same time murder, and that of your own wife, is a big step up. I’m certainly not willing to accuse anyone of that, least of someone from one of the 10. It’s not really my place to say,” Theresa took another bite but her next words came quicker, “Still... I never heard their relationship was that bad. I heard many good things about them when they were both younger. Married for love I believe. His first wife was a commoner...

“So it isn’t as if he married another noble for political gain. I don’t remember what her family did... I think they might have been cobblers? It doesn’t truly matter. The point I’m hoping to make is that he decided to marry her. Nobody forced his hand, and he didn’t have eyes for anyone else in his younger years.

“Could that have possibly soured over time... who is to say really? He did pick up a second wife mighty quickly... but he’s getting old. If he does wish for an heir he can’t necessarily wait for a second true love to find its way into his life. Then again... I don’t know how close he is with this new lady of his. She was pregnant quite soon after they married and then cared for excessively once it was confirmed.

“I heard plenty of rumours about that. Twenty guards on her at all times, a team of three doctors living constantly in the mansion. A full ten servants just to make sure she was comfortable. He truly spared no expense for her,” Theresa rolled her eyes, “Our taxes at work,”

“Do... do you pay tax?” asked Kat confused.

“No of course not, I don’t make any money remember?” said Theresa. “I certainly can’t be taxed on my income of nothing. Though... I’m not entirely sure if the other members of the staff get taxed or not. I haven’t looked at the code changes in quite some time.”

Do you know if government workers get taxed on Earth? I feel like the answer is probably yes... but isn’t that a bit confusing?

[I’m pretty sure they do. It’s treated like any other job. Perhaps they can opt to get the tax taken out automatically but as far as I’m aware they get taxed in the same way as everyone else.]

“Is there anything else about the lord? Or Zuhra? Or Gaston?” asked Kat.

Theresa tapped a finger against her desk. “I don’t believe so. The Lord of the 8th hasn’t made any additional changes to the orphanage since the field. I believe there was some talk about limiting the number of hours any one person can work in a week... but that wouldn’t really change things here.

Everyone except myself is paid for their time so if things needed to be shuffled around we could. The only reason we couldn't pay Zuhra is because I wasn't willing to send any of the other workers away so she could take their place."

Lily frowned at that, "Is there no way to get the orphanage some funds?"

Theresa shrugged, "Not that I'm comfortable with no. Certainly there is potential for unsavoury means to make us money but I'd rather stay away from all that. Too much trouble in so many ways..."

"What about couriers?" asked Kat.

"Pardon?" asked Theresa confused.

"Well... what about starting or perhaps partnering with a courier business? I don't think the kids, at least the older ones, would mind running around the city delivering stuff. It'd give them a way to stay active and perhaps make a bit of money. If you wanted to really stretch it you could have some of the younger children work on wrapping for a bit as either a punishment or a way to teach them patience,"

"Hmm... might be worth looking into..." muttered Theresa.

Chapter 804 Orphanage Aftermath

With that suggestion it was time for Kat and Lily to leave. They'd gotten a few leads, some interesting information, and hopefully provided a bit of hope for the future of the orphanage. Finding a place to sit was a little less convenient though. After walking around a bit it became clear the streets nearby were all quite densely packed, with only private gardens and the occasional bench. Flying around was of course an option, but Kat wasn't too sure it would be for the best. The nearest park they knew of was some distance away.

In the end, they managed to find a decent enough rest stop out of the way. It was a small little hideaway carved into the support pillars for the aqueduct. The only reason they spotted it was actually that Lily was currently riding around on Kat's head. The increased height let her spot an odd patch of stonework that turned out to be a door. The slight layer of dust implied disuse, but the furniture was nice leather and hadn't gone bad at all. A deep breath (and maybe a few flaps from a pair of wings) Kat managed to blow away a good portion of the dust on two of the chairs. Lily kept her mouth closed but her nose was tickled horribly from the experience.

When it was over, Lily transformed back and sneezed. "Ne-" Lily was interrupted by another sneeze "never again. I-" a third sneeze "DAMMIT. I don't even think I still have dirt in my nose because I transformed but I can still-" fourth sneeze "STILL ALMOST FEEL IT."

Kat slumped down in a chair, "Sorry..."

Lily glanced at the second chair Kat had 'cleaned' for her and decided there was a better spot. She hopped into Kat's arms and buried herself in Kat's shoulders. Kat couldn't help but laugh. "You've gotten rather clingy since your transformation... or maybe just since we started dating,"

"If we didn't have our connection I might be tempted to apologise... but I can feel just how happy this makes you as well Kat, so I'm not even going to bother," retorted Lily.

Kat grinned not particularly bothered about being found out. Kat let her tail quickly wrap around Lily, pulling her girlfriend in even closer. "Of course I don't mind. Hugs are great and even though temperatures rarely bother me I just feel so nice and warm when I get to hold you like this. I don't really know why. Maybe it's because I know you're safe like this?"

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Lily couldn't help the purr that rose up in her throat as she rubbed her face on Kat. She knew it didn't really do much in human form but this instinct was there. In the end, the pair used this a chance to relax. They were both planning to speak about what they'd learned... but after all the heavy details a break sounded really good to them, so the pair dozed.

It was about an hour later that they decided it was time to discuss things. It wasn't too late in the day just yet and they had the afternoon to potentially follow up on some leads, or maybe speak with Apep. So now it was time to go over everything. Sensing the shift in Kat's mood Lily groaned playfully and transformed back into her Memphis form to curl up fully but Kat just laughed and said, "Come on Lily, you know we have to talk about it."

Lily quickly shifted back to her human form and sighed, "Can't we just ignore things a little longer? I wasn't really thinking about it before but like... we're investigating a real person who died Kat. I'm not really sure we thought this whole thing through. I mean... I do still want to help Apep, and I want him to find love... but I feel kinda scummy going behind Zuhra's back and investigating what happened to Gaston now. We still don't know much about him but his death hit Zuhra hard... I feel like..."

"I feel like there isn't much of a chance we get through everything without bringing it all up to Zuhra herself. Either because we need to question her, or more likely we find something that she really should know. I... I don't know how to feel about that honestly. It's all becoming a lot more real..."

Kat help but shrug, "While I agree that it's sad... frankly Zuhra isn't doing herself any favours. Based on her workaholic tendencies and the fact she's still overworks herself. I'm hoping this will be a way for her to close this harsh chapter of her life. Even if things don't work out between her and Apep... I have a feeling that we might find something about Gaston's death.

"Then there is the fact that we had nothing to do with his death. I feel sorry for Zuhra but I do not morn Gaston. I did not know him. I never knew him, and I never will know him. Maybe it's because I grew up in the orphanage... but hearing about the death of a loved one of someone I know isn't rare for me. It happens, or perhaps, happened, with shocking regularity.

"It's also not like Gaston died a day, or even a week ago. It's been years Lily. Perhaps we will be digging into old wounds, but for Zuhra at least they clearly haven't healed. Maybe this will be the push she needs. I'm no expert in love but Apep clearly likes Zuhra. Even if things don't work out in the end, I think it's better for us to try. In the worst case scenario Apep has his heart broken, but that's something that would happen without us. In the best case though, Zuhra and Apep both come out of this much happier people.

"I just... I can't see this ending horribly for anyone we actually like. I'm a little suspicious about the timing of the Lady of the 8th death. Even if it wasn't that close I feel like it needs to be looked into

further. And look... even if it doesn't have anything to do with Gaston, maybe we uncover something else,"

Lily couldn't help but dislike the fact she found Kat's argument compelling. It made a lot of sense, too much sense and she could already feel her emotional side coming around to the fact that this wasn't a bad thing. Despite that though... part of her was still clinging to the idea that they were poking at things best left to rest. Almost like grave robbing. They were digging into the old love Zuhra once had purely for someone else's benefit. Even if it worked out for Zuhra, she didn't ask for this. She might not want this. All they are going on is Apep, and their belief that he is a good person.

"I still feel... very on the fence about it I suppose. I... I just don't really know what the right thing to do is here but I feel like... whatever the correct answer is we aren't doing it. I mean... I just find myself trying to work out what I'd want in Zuhra's position and I can't say I'd be terribly impressed with what Apep's doing..." said Lily.

Kat sighed and ran a hand carefully through Lily's hair. "Well, we know it's now impossible for us to have this issue Lily. We are together forever and nothing can change that. I... I can't really say what I'd want. I don't know that I can properly understand. I mean... if anything happened to you now I'd go on a bit of a rampage. It's just..."

"I'm also trying to work out how I'd feel in Gaston's position, assuming he's watching over us. I mean... souls are real but does he know? Or do souls get reincarnated quickly? Whatever the case I... I think I'd want you to be happy. While I'm around, I don't know I could really be happy with you choosing anyone else, especially not after I started becoming more aware of my thoughts. Yet at the same time..."

"I'd have supported you if you DID chose someone else. Perhaps grudgingly perhaps not. I'd certainly watch them to make sure they never hurt you... but I think I'd prefer you were happy. I don't think Gaston would want her to morn him all the way till old age. While it's truly tragic, Zuhra isn't much older than us. She has so much of her life left and being depressed for the rest of it cannot be a good thing,"

Lily clicked her tongue. "I... I can see your argument. Instead of looking at it from Zuhra's perspective, look at it from Gaston's and use our own feelings on the matter... but it's not like we KNOW anything about Gaston yet. He might have been super possessive, we just don't really know..."

Kat grinned, "Well in that case isn't it our duty to find out more? We've got two leads to follow up on and both of them should know more about Gaston. Perhaps you want to go to the trading company first? Try and talk with Gaston's mother?"

Chapter 805 Destination, Destination, Destination

Lily shook her head, "Actually we have four destinations. Of course we can try to find the new two places, but we might also be better served speaking to Jara or Apep about things... personally I'd like to see what Jara has to say. Find out how much we should look into Gaston's death. Apep... well we might work for him but I don't really trust him to think it all through in regards to Zuhra. That and well... Jara just seems to have her shit together. I feel like she'll actually know the best course of action... and maybe even where Maren and the Trading Company are. I just don't know if we want to risk Zuhra seeing us," explained Lily.

Kat let out a puff of air across Lily's ears making them twitch for a little bit before settling down, "I see your point. I'm not really sure we have enough evidence to suggest that Gaston and the 8th are connected but... at the same time Zuhra is... if not a friend of Jara's a good subordinate and a marriage candidate for Apep. It might be worth looking into if there is even the slightest chance of it being true.

"So I'm not opposed to looking into things... but yeah having Jara's blessing would be nice. But we have time. I'm just thinking that if we can find out a bit more first it might be for the best. Then again... even if we can find the trading company I'm not sure they'll just see us immediately. As for Maren's house... we might have to go to Jara or even Zuhra herself for that one,"

Lily groaned, "Ugh... why couldn't this be easy. Still, I think we can both agree to strike off Apep from our next destination. Maybe we can visit him at night and give him a status update but I doubt he'll be able to help us much. Between Maren, Jara and Long River Road Traders I think we can also eliminate Maren's house. We just don't know where she lives."

Kat nodded, "Yeah. So it's between LRRT and Jara... what do you think the chances are we can find out where LRRT's headquarters is?"

Lily shrugged, "Well... I think they have to have a base somewhere around this area right? How else would Zuhra be able to meet up with Gaston regularly?"

Kat nodded, "Good point. So shall we make that our next destination?"

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"I think so," confirmed Lily with a nod.

With that decided it was time to get back to work... though neither Kat nor Lily particularly felt like getting up at the moment. Five more minutes, they agreed in sync. It was nice to let themselves relax. Despite that though... they'd already taken an hour break early before they spoke about anything and wasting too much extra time was probably a bad idea. So a short time later, Kat, with Lily in hand, hopped down onto the road.

They walked around a little until they found a moderately well dressed individual, "Excuse me do you know where I can find the Long River Road Traders' headquarters?"

The man turned and looked over Kat for a few moments before shrugging, "I don't rightly know that company... but if I had to guess," he turned to the left, away from the 8th's compound, "about five streets over that way is the start of the 8th's merchant district. I can't guarantee the place you're looking for is there, but if it's anywhere near the 8th, that's the place,"

"Thank you sir," said Kat with a slight inclination of her head before she marched down the streets. Kat needed to walk forward for some time before a left turn came up. It seemed to be a main thoroughfare. Wagons were being pulled by teams of two or four people, women with baskets walked along the edges, a few kids could be seen hanging around and the occasional person sprinting with a messenger bag could be witnessed making deliveries.

Kat was tempted to take to the air and just fly... but without actually knowing where she was going there wasn't much point. So she walked along the sidewalk, keeping her wings in close and trying not to let her tail sway too far to the side. The street was crowded enough already and causing further

congestion wouldn't be ideal. Kat was constantly finding herself turning and twisting to make good progress on the road. It was mostly instinctual once she'd decided to avoid things but there were a few looks thrown her way during particularly close calls with her tail or wings.

It's not like I can restrict myself any more than this. My wings are folded and my tail is doing its best. I might not have it wrapped around my stomach, but I know from experience that just makes things worse, especially if I'm trying to be quite specific about not running into anyone!

[I'm so glad I decided to let you carry me. I was mostly just feeling too lazy to walk. Plus, when I don't have to worry about being heavy or you getting tired from physical exercise it really is an easy decision to make. Then this mess shows up. All the side streets were so quiet. Is there some rule about not using them or something? This is madness]

Whatever the case, things didn't get better until all of a sudden they did. Instead of a side street, another main street intersected with the duo's current path. It was just as wide and looked particularly busy. They even had a person in a bright white shirt... well a shirt that had once been bright white, directing the traffic as best they could. They were followed... for the most part... but many people tried their luck sneaking across after their time was 'up' and judging by the looks of annoyance but lack of action, it was probably better to just let it go, rather than spending the time necessary to detain the trouble makers, subsequently holding things up further.

When Kat and Lily got to the other side it was immediately clear they were in the merchant district. The size of the road doubled, the footpaths added perhaps another third and all of the buildings were less buildings and more small compounds. They also had their own somewhat large aqueduct runoffs providing water. Some split further, a little bit to a few areas, while others directed the entire flow to one warehouse.

Kat looked around, most people in this area seemed busy, half jogging to get to their destination faster, or holding the weight of a cart up with their fellows. She didn't want to interrupt anyone in too much of a hurry. Eventually, Kat managed to spot a small child sitting on one of the many fences while snacking on a biscuit. Kat continued with the flow of people for a few more steps before kicking off the ground sharply. It was no trouble to jump something so minor as a fence that was really more to stop casual observers and mark territory than real security. Kat's feet landed gracefully and she quickly sat down beside the child. "Excuse me, do you know where I can find Long River Road Traders?"

The kid looked a little surprised at being asked, but they just pointed further down the road to one particular compound. It was easy to see now, with the fence painted with blue and dusty yellow stripes. Probably a stylised depiction of the river road. *Well now I kinda feel like an idiot.* "Thank you!"

Kat hopped down, back in the mess of people and instantly realised why she didn't spot her destination before. It's because she could barely see anything properly. Even if she was taller than most women, that didn't stop men being taller than her, or carts being stacked high enough to block her view completely, or in the case of many, seeing over the baskets placed atop many a head. *I now feel like less of an idiot.*

[Well I wasn't going to say anything the first time because I felt you weren't all that serious... but now I'm looking at this it's kind of a mess. I guess they just expect everyone to know where they are going?]

I'm honestly not sure... I can't imagine it was by design. Even if you know roughly where you are going you still need a bit of direction. That was when Kat realised her new problem. They'd manage to reach their destination. Sort of. The Long River Road Traders' place was right next to them. On the other side of the road. Kat quickly hopped back onto the fence and glared at the street. *It wouldn't be hard to jump... but I don't know if I want that kind of attention...*

[While I think your worry is valid... I'd be more concerned with people looking up my kimono if I was you]

Bah. It's just a second or two of underwear Lily. That's not even taking into account how poor the angle will be for most of them. Especially if I wait for a cart to pass by and jump over that.

Chapter 806 LRRT

Kat kicked off the fence, aiming for the same spot on the other side. She was a little too forceful and could hear the groaning of the metal that must have been somewhere in the fences structure. Wincing as she landed softly Kat couldn't help but think. *Right. Note to self. Demonic strength is fine, and you can use it in a lot of ways but while you can spread the stress out across a wider area and help mitigate how much force you are applying that way... weak points might still have issues.*

Still. There wasn't anything to do about that now. Kat hopped down from the fence and melded back into the crowd, following the fence around until she found an open gate. Following the path for a bit couldn't help but take a look around. The building next to her seemed to be a warehouse, not an office, and the building directly in front of her was clearly a resting spot for carts. Shrugging at the layout Kat continued further in.

Once she got to the open courtyard it was easy to spot the main building. It was right next to the cart stop and stood slightly higher than the warehouses. Kat paused in front of the sliding door to whisper, "Lily, do you want to transform back for this?"

Lily leapt down from Kat's arms, answering the question with her actions... and a few words, "Yeah I think so. I'm not sure they'd be all that happy with you bringing a pet along and while it might be nice to look around we really aren't here to investigate Gaston's mother. I feel like that's pushing things a bit too far away from our original goal. If they are actually some horrible smuggling company I don't want to know,"

Kat nodded, opening the door and stepping inside. The floor wasn't particularly clean, dirt tracked back and forth along the wooden flooring over years had discoloured despite the cleaning. The chairs on the left side of the room were the same. Marked with various stains that might have been cleaned regularly, but they were clearly dirtied more often.

Behind the counter stood a young man, likely out of his teens. He was a bit on the shorter side, standing half a head shorter than Lily, with a slight baby face. The main argument against him being young of age, was his impressive beard. It wasn't quite up to dwarvish standards, but it wasn't something that could be grown in a hurry. It was carefully braided at the front, leaving the back and sides free. "Greetings. What can the Long River Road Traders do for you today," the man's voice was on the softer side, but he clearly had practice projecting his voice. He was easily understood.

"We'd like to speak with the owner for something... somewhat sensitive in nature. Would that be possible?" asked Kat.

The man looked at her carefully for a few seconds, letting the silence stretch before he checked some paper that was hiding somewhat out of sight from where Kat was standing, a few steps back. "While she is indeed in at the moment, you'll have to wait. She is quite busy at the moment," was the response.

Kat nodded, even as she felt her eye twitching somewhat. Must be a bit dustier in here than I thought. "That's fine. We can wait," said Kat as she walked over to the chair. Kat glared at it a little bit before sitting down. They weren't really that bad once you were on them. It was mostly the appearance that looked like they'd seen better days. Lily glanced at the young man who was now walking into the back. She glanced at the door he just entered, the chair next to Kat, and then Kat herself, warring with the 'polite' thing to do and what she wanted.

Kat just rolled her eyes and patted her legs lightly, settling the deal for Lily. She curled up in Kat's arms and relaxed, yawning immediately after she got settled. "Woops..." mumbled Lily.

"It's fine. Get some rest if you need it," said Kat.

"We just took a break though! It's been like... a twenty minute walk at absolute maximum!" retorted Lily.

Kat just shrugged and Lily's retort. She might have been in her human form at the moment but she'd spent a good deal of time in the morning as a cat. Perhaps it was just instincts, or perhaps she needed more sleep. Kat didn't really care and it wasn't like they were doing anything. "I can just wake you up," said Kat.

Lily pouted again but couldn't quite resist the call of the dream. It was a good thing she did though, as while the receptionist returned shortly, they didn't say anything in response. Kat had to sit there just waiting to be called for over an hour. The whole time she was tempted to rest herself or duck into meditation but held herself back. She wasn't quite willing to leave herself so open after being made wait for someone who was only apparently busy.

Oh there was some traffic. A worker would come in, sign a few things and then leave, that happened every ten or so minutes like clockwork. They were all handled directly by the receptionist though. Not a single one was required to walk past the desk, and the receptionist never left again. Not to pass notes. Not to have a break or anything else for that matter. He just sat behind his desk and based on the sounds Kat could hear of scratching on paper, filled out a few more forms.

Eventually, after an unknown length of time, 1 hour, twenty-three minutes and twelve seconds, but really nobody was counting. Certainly not Kat. The receptionist got up again and headed through the door. Kat rolled her eyes at the empty room. This time she didn't have to wait long because the man came back and said "You can go up. Boss' room is up two flights of stairs and the only door on that floor. You can't miss it,"

Kat nodded and pinched Lily's cheeks, pulling them in various directions. It was adorable, but not all that effective at waking her up. Taking a new approach, Kat waited for the receptionist to get back to work and kissed Lily full on the lips. It only took a few moments for Lily to start responded. As soon as she did

though Kat pulled back. Lily pouted, still half asleep and cracked her eyes open to look at Kat questioningly.

Kat just grinned back and waited for Lily's brain to catch up. It took a few seconds, and Kat took great enjoyment watching Lily's expressions change as her brain started to catch onto what was going on, ending with Lily leaping up onto her feet and blushing bright red, looking in the complete opposite direction of the receptionist. "Come on," said Kat as she stood and walked past Lily, putting a little extra sway into her walk as she did so.

Lily turned at the sound of Kat's voice only to get hit by the full weight of her lust. Kat had just ended their kiss early and now this? Lily thought it was mightily unfair. That didn't stop her blush deepening, or the slight glance she directed to the receptionist, thankfully not paying them any attention.

Kat was already at the door though and Lily hadn't moved from that spot. Lily's eyes widened as the door started closing behind and dashed after her. The back room was rather musty. Filled with shelves, containing rows and rows of paper bound together with twine. It seemed to start over on the left and continue to the right, going from front to back. Some of the shelves over on the other side of the room didn't have anything on them yet. Of course, it was also clear, that it was just a matter of time.

Kat started the trek to the first floor and wasn't terribly surprised to find it blocked off. On the landing there was only a door with a large deadbolt on it and another flight of stairs leading up. Kat just shrugged at it. Whatever was in that room wasn't any of her business. On the second flight of stairs though, things were a little more interesting.

There was a 'short' hallway with the door in question not too far along. The reason that hallway was short though... well that turned out to be a bit of a surprise. The floor had caved in by the looks of things and there was now a tarp nailed to the walls to cover the gap. *That's... well... I don't really know what that is.*

[Unprofessional?]

Yeah lets go with that.

Chapter 807 Viva La Vida

Tired.

That was the feeling that screamed out at Kat from every corner of this room. Despite being on the edge of the building, there was no natural sunlight coming into this room. There were thick, heavy curtains drawn over the window allowing only the barest hints of natural light in. The room was mostly lit by a single lamp sitting on the desk belonging to Gaston's mother. It wasn't doing her any favours either.

Before getting to that though, the rest of the room was in a rather sorry state. The only place without dust on it was a clear path to the desk, one that must have been tread every day, and the desk itself. Though the lack of dust really only indicated that these things were in regular use, not that they were kept clean. The chairs pressed up against the wall, presumably for meetings in this room, were not exempt from this. All bar one had a good deal of built up dust from misuse.

The walls were completely free of embellishments, and the desk was stacked only with paper, a few quills, and a pile of string for binding stacks together. A few shards of glass could be seen pressed up

against the edge of the desk, blackened with old dried ink. Kat wondered if they were still around because they were so out of the way, or if nothing would change if the pieces had landed somewhere else. The paper bin to the side was filled with scraps, though Kat wondered who was to thank for that. Chances were, it wasn't due to the lady in front of her.

Her hair was brown, but it seemed weathered and uncared for more like bark than chocolate. Streaks of grey were already visible in a few places and even if it was done up in a nice bun, it spoke more of practice and repetition than true care for her appearance. Her outfit consisted of a coat that was missing its sleeves and tight leather pants that were probably cutting off at least some circulation. Her arms showed she was once a strong woman, old disused muscles still vaguely noticeable under a layer of fat.

Her face was weathered with a decent amount of tanning. Her wrinkles were minor though, mostly framing her mouth, and went along well with her scowl. She had bags under her eyes and the question of how well she'd slept in the last few years was obvious at just a glance. Still. One thing remained. Her eyes were hazel. Containing flecks of green and brown and they raked over Kat and Lily both. As if she was taking in every single detail she could see, as well as a few she couldn't, all at once. "Well? You wanted to see me?"

You know Lily. I'm no longer sure this is a good idea...

.....

[I'm having similar thoughts. I can't decide if we've walked in on a grieving mother or a hungry lion and I am equally uncomfortable with either of those answers.]

Well we're already here what do you- Kat's transmission of thoughts were interrupted by a loud clicking of the woman's fingers. "I do believe it is only polite to include all parties in a conversation, don't you think? Now. What are two demons, or a demon and whatever she is," Gaston's mother gestured at Lily, "doing trying to speak with me?"

"Um... why did you think we were talking?" asked Kat. Lily cringed at the question. Even if Kat was smart enough not to just admit it by accident, the way she said was more than clue enough. If Gaston's mother hadn't already.

"I do believe you are ignoring my question. Still, I'll give you an answer... but I expect some of my own. The answer is that I HAVE EYES. You pair clearly zone out when you use whatever telepathy you have and if I couldn't spot something like that my trading house would have gone under a long time ago. Now. My name is Belle. I am asking one final time before I kick you out. Why are you here?" Belle paused for a moment before pointing at Kat with a quill, "And I want her to answer,"

Kat glanced over to Lily with a 'what the fuck do I do' look on her face as she desperately tried not to mentally transmit the question. Another light click forced Kat's focus back to Belle, who was just staring back with a raised eyebrow. So Kat panicked a bit. Her eyes flashed purple and everything slowed. Kat also quickly closed her connection with Lily, both to not overwhelm her and to make things less obvious.

*Ok. Um... what the fuck. I wish I could talk this out. In fact, I bet I'm already pushing things. What the heck do I even give as an answer? The truth? I don't even really know what the truth is. We are here for Zuhra and Apep sure but I won't deny I really want to find out what happened to Gaston and that curiosity is driving me. But like... what do I admit to? What would she WANT me to admit to?

All of it? None of it? Do I want to provide our official documents? That might sound like a good idea but I agree with Lily's hungry lion analogy and feel like I'm going to get my head bit off if I give her a wrong answer. I mean. I don't really know how she'd feel about me saying 'yeah we've been hired by a guy that wants to seduce your dead son's fiancé so we need to know how he died'. Pretty sure that's... not a good idea.

Did Apep no he died? I don't have time to go fishing for that memory to check. Dammit. If he didn't know, or only suspected it'd be so much easier. I could also say we're here because Jara asked us to be but I'm really not sure what the expected scope of this investigation was. Maybe I'll just go for minimal detail? Mention we're looking into Zuhra, and of course found out. We were talking to the Matron and you were nearby so we thought we'd ask? I mean... it might be a little cold but it's probably a better option then the others.*

Kat let time resume all at once and suppressed the slight feeling of nausea it caused to go from her fastest mental speed back to normal all at once. Apparently that sort of thing was better done gradually. Kat also didn't miss Belle opening her mouth so Kat went first, "We've been looking into Zuhra and found out about Gaston at the orphanage nearby. She didn't know much about him or what happened though... so we came to talk to you about it..." the words came out a little quickly, perhaps she hadn't quite returned to normal speed.

But Belle was experienced with people. With listening. With the details. She could hear it just fine, "That's not all though? Correct?"

Kat gulped and went to answer, only to wince at the realisation that was already an answer. Belle took the chance to sigh and say, "I'm not terribly surprised. Don't think I missed that little mental trick either. Not sure how much time it gave you to think things over but I DID notice. You're lucky I'm pretty sure the cat one can't talk to you like that or I'd already be throwing you out. I might be willing to talk. But I'd like to ask a few more questions of my own. Think you can handle that?"

Kat didn't really have anything else to do other than nod, and once she did, Lily followed suit. "So, my first question is are you both demons? Following on from that, if the answer is no, what is the other one? Oh and what are your names? I might not be exactly pleased with this, but I might as well give you that much respect."

Kat glanced at Lily only to be interrupted by Belle again, "I believe I was clear. I'd like YOU to answer those questions. I'm well aware you can't lie, unlike her potentially,"

"Um... I am a demon yes, and no Lily isn't a demon. She's a Memphis beast person. Oh right. That's her name. Lily, and I'm Kat," explained Kat awkwardly.

"Who summoned you?" asked Belle.

Kat glanced at Lily and back to Belle, "I'm not entirely sure I should tell you that. I mean... yes we'd like to talk but that seems... well it seems like it'd be creating trouble to answer the question,"

Belle shrugged, "I fine myself not particularly caring of if it causes any trouble or not. I promised to talk in exchange for questions of my own being answered. So, I need to know. Who summoned you? I'd ask why as well, but I doubt you'd tell me. Even if I'm pretty sure I can work that one out by myself,"

Chapter 808 It Was a Murder Most Foul!

Lily I don't know what to say- Belle's clicking interrupted once again. "I'm feeling left out again,"

Kat frowned and couldn't help glaring back, "Well I'm sorry that our mental communication isn't like a telephone. Any thoughts I 'mentally vocalise' I suppose is the best way to put it... well any of them just get sent back and forth. It's not so easy for the both of us to just turn it off," *No it's only easy for me.*

Belle shrugged and gave a look screaming 'I do not see how that is my problem answer the question' straight back at Kat. Lily sighed and said, "I think we might as well say it Kat. I wouldn't be surprised if she could somehow figure it all out anyway given enough time. It's also not like we need this to stay hidden long. Even if we weren't leaving the dimension afterwards, I don't think you-know-who would care,"

Belle nodded along, perhaps pleased with the fact Lily had said it all out loud, or maybe agreeing with the idea that she could figure it all out herself. Either way, Kat couldn't help but feel a bit weary about it all. They went here because it was nearby and convenient. It sure as hell wasn't feeling very convenient right now, "Can I at least ask you not to spread it around immediately?"

Belle just shrugged, "I make no promises. I'm hardly going to shout it from the rooftops, but really I can do whatever I feel like with the information and you know it,"

Don't have to be an ass about it. If we weren't here to ask about your dead son I might even be a little angry with the attitude. Belle clicked, "Yeah I know. I was just insulting you in my head," Belle's mouth actually twitched upwards slightly. Kat nearly stopped what she was about to say just to marvel at the odd sight, but didn't want to ruin the moment, "We were hired by Apep, heir of the 3rd"

Belle opened the corner of her mouth to let out a puff of air without losing her scowl, "So, I guess little Apep is after Zuhra as a bedwarmer then? Trying to dig up some dirt about what happened to my son to make sure she ain't so attached? Anyone with eyes has noticed that Jara, his best friend and heir of the 6th is either gay or asexual without the slightest interest in him other than platonic despite what her dear parents think. Not sure if he'll actually get both if he tries, but he might as well right?"

.....

Kat winced, "That's... that's only sort of true..."

"Oh do enlighten me. I said I wasn't going to ask for it but if you're just going to TELL me well..." cheered Belle, her scowl showing a bit more teeth. Perhaps she's forgotten how to smile?

Kat glared back, "Yes I'm going to tell you because your version makes Apep out to be a much worse person than you're implying. Apep wants to marry Zuhra and JUST Zuhra. The problem is, he doesn't really want to let his parents find out that little fact before he knows if he has a chance with her. He seems to really want to treat her right. As for Jara... well... he isn't necessarily opposed to it. He does still find her attractive but he's perfectly aware of her lack of interest in him. It'd be... convenient for them both, even if it wasn't what they want,"

"Oh that's a much prettier version than I was trying to paint!" growled Belle. "How certain are you of that version of things?"

Kat glanced at Lily and shrugged, "Do you mind if I...?" started Lily. Belle gave the 'go on then' "Right well... as someone who once had a massive crush on a certain someone," Belle rolled her eyes as if everything in Lily's body posture didn't scream 'Kat is my safety blanket stop scary me' earlier, "and it was quite easy to tell how nervous he was about the whole thing. He didn't even really think through the summoning nor did he want a Succubus specifically. It just so happens that MINE is asexual and comes with help because of our bond. Part of his concern was not upsetting Jara either, and we've already spoken with her,"

Lily winced when she realised she'd said more than she meant to. Giving in to the feeling, she hid herself partially behind Kat causing Belle to let out a pained wheezing that probably should have been laughter, "Well aren't you just adorable? If either of you had a poker face worth a damn..."

"Fuck it," growled Belle, "I guess I can chat with you despite me mixed feelings," Kat and Lily gave matching looks of disbelief, "Look, most of those feelings might still be depression, loneliness, anger and the like but it's not like I don't feel for the girl. Gaston didn't exactly rub her in my face but he... he was my son and they were on the edge of getting married. So it's not like I have no attachment to the girl.

"If Apep really loves her... well... I'm not saying I'm pleased to here about my son possibly being replaced in her heart, but if anyone could compete at least it was someone willing to go to this sort of ridiculous lengths to make sure nothing was a inconvenience for her. Yeah... I may not be pleased but... but she was almost a daughter to me and I'm not quite enough of a cold bitch to deny her another chance at love. Just to be absolutely clear though. Apep has no intention of marrying them both right?"

Kat shook her head, "Um... no not-. I mean, he has no plans to marry them at the same time. He has two plans, one where he marries Jara and one where he marries Zuhra and is much more interested in going for Zuhra. I think marrying Jara is actually more for her sake. At least in his mind,"

Belle nodded, "Yeah I can see it. I feel a little bad for the girl sometimes when I've seen her in business meetings. Her parents don't help with shit until they want to cause a seen for the lass. Old enough to manage half a dozen businesses but god forbid she decide she doesn't want to marry anyone. Then suddenly she's 'still young'. Fucking hypocrites."

Belle took in a deep breath, probably about to go on a minor rant before pausing, "One moment. You mentioned official documents. Are they from Jara or Apep?"

Well we're already in basically full disclosure mode so what the heck, "Jara gave them to us," said Kat.

"Ah so she approves of Zuhra and Apep being together as well... that's certainly a major endorsement. For me... well... with two of the heirs looking into this perhaps something might come up. You see... one of the reasons I... well I suppose the best thing to call me is 'an old bitch' is because despite what the city guard said during the investigation, I don't think my son died in a minor accident. I think he was murdered. Perhaps by the 8th" said Belle.

Kat and Lily shared a glance and Lily said, "While we sort of thought so... the matron seemed rather convinced it didn't have anything to do with the 8th..."

"Oh I can see why she'd think that. 'Hundreds of deaths a week' the guards say 'thousands of accidents' or 'it's a tragedy but not uncommon' and perhaps they'd be right in most circumstances. The difference

though, is that Gaston died by having a pile of crates fall down on him,” Belle growled out, “reasonable perhaps. Excepts there’s two problems with that.

“The first is that my mother died to falling crates and my father never recovered from it. He basically drunk himself to death. Gaston was a little boy at the time, and the company was mostly mine by that point so it wasn’t a major issue for Gaston, or for the business... but I remembered. I didn’t forget. I make sure that every single one of my crates will never fall.

“Might be a bit of an exaggeration, but I try. Which brings me to the second reason, I have nets on the walls that I force my company to make use of, binding the crates to the wall. I’ve fired people for forgetting them more than once. Even if workers complain ‘it’s just busywork’ or ‘it doesn’t really help’ I find that it DOES help. Even just making the workers think for an extra second about that awkward stack or whatever it is.

“I’m not ashamed to admit I have always been a bit obsessive about those nets since my mother died. I checked them at least once a week here, and I doubled checked them whenever I was elsewhere on business. They were regularly replaced and not a single one has ever failed on me. Until all of a sudden they took the life of my son,”

Chapter 809 The Reason Why

Kat swallowed, “Um... that does certainly seem suspicious but... um... is there any other reasons?”

Belle gave a harsh shrug and a grunt before saying, “I suppose it depends on how you look at it. See, when I was younger I... indulged a bit. I had no interest in marrying. The company was MINE and I wasn’t exactly keen to share it. Then... well... I got to thinking about what would happen to it once I was gone. So... I decided to be a bit less... careful during my encounters.

“A particularly memorable encounter, and one that I attribute to Gaston’s conception was with the current Lord of the 8th. He was clearly interested and my looks were much better in my youth... and before my... issues with the world started. So, I bedded him for a better price on some goods he was offering. I don’t regret it. It was the right call at the time, and I love the son I’m certain resulted from it...

“But of course... that means that Gaston was the bastard for the Lord of the 8th. So... when he’s finally free of his baron wife... well... I think any bastards had to go. Personally, I do wonder how long he knew about Gaston. It isn’t exactly hard to notice. They look quite similar, especially, or so I’m told, if you knew the Lord back when he was younger. He’s filled out a bit now and lost the muscle.

“The other reason I suspect foul play is I was looking into the possibility of Gaston having Innate Strength magic. I can’t be sure of it. He’s always been quite strong for his age, but a lot of that can be attributed being a merchant’s son and being able to more easily afford protein for his diet along with his desire to work out. I’d had suspicions for quite a while but finding an artifact compatible with strength magic is nearly impossible, hiring a tutor is like wishing for the moon, and even just paying for the TEST to confirm my guess was much to expensive.

“I mean. What would I do with the knowledge exactly? Inform my son that despite having a rare magical affinity he would never be able to use it because finding such an obscure artifact could bankrupt small kingdoms and I’m just a merchant? Still. He was getting older. Noticing things and I... well I did acquire

one of those tests anyway. It was intending as my wedding present for the two... well. Doesn't matter now,"

Belle sighed, shoulder drooping. "The thing is. Those points are just guesses. Unlike the first two. I mean, I know how my parents died, and I know how unlikely it is those crates were left unsecured... but I don't know how much Gaston's strength really helped him. Nor can I truly confirm he was the Lord's son. Sure I think that, and I didn't really sleep with anyone else around the right time but I did sleep with a couple of men the month before, and a few after the Lord. Though in the case of afterwards all but one of those encounters were after I'd missed my monthly so..."

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Belle shrugged, "Really if it wasn't him based on resemblance, timing and a mother's gut instincts then I'm not going to cry about it. I'm pretty sure I wasn't the only one to think my son and the Lord were related and even if it isn't true well... if enough people believe it. Enough for it to potentially cause a succession issue... well... that's all that's required. It was a bit of a scandal anyway. We celebrate marriage so strongly that it had to be. So I had a lot more eyes on me than most.

"Did get a lot of people interested in me after I started showing though. Apparently all the perverts came out of the woodwork. Still, I'm not begrudging them that. I was horny, and a couple of them even gave me some nice gifts to sell. Easily made back the money I lost taking time off for the birth,"

What do you think? Belle started clicking again. "Ok really? I feel like I should be able to have this conversation with Lily. You dropped a lot of compelling evidence that your son was murdered and I feel like it should be discussed,"

"And it can be discussed with me if you're going to do it here, especially if it leads to you asking more questions. You think I've shared this information with many people? I've kept it all damned quiet. I certainly don't want to get taken out as well. I might not have any plans for what I'm going to do with my company once I pass, but I ain't passing anytime soon!" declared Belle.

Kat felt a minor amount of anger burn at the statement. "I'm sorry... 'no plans'? Belle... I get that your upset about your son, and I don't begrudge you that... but you live a few streets away from a rather large orphanage. A building full of kids that would love to have a parent again. And you mean to tell me you have NO plans for what to do with it?"

Belle didn't back down, "What's it to you? You're not in line to inherit. And you certainly didn't grow up in that orphanage. Did you forget I know you're a demon or something?"

Kat felt her face twitching at the dismissal. She wasn't truly angry but let a bit of her demonic energy seep into her vocal cords anyway. "I may not have grown up in THIS orphanage but I did still grow up in ONE. I never needed a parent, I had Gramps, my orphanage director and the equivalent to the matron but that doesn't mean much considering nine out of ten kids I looked after while I was there DID want a family. Even if it's just you by yourself, it'd be a dream come true for many of them. That's not even taking into account that the Lord has been screwing them over for a while now,"

Belle growled at Kat's response but leant back into her chair, calming herself. Scowl stayed on though. "Fine. Maybe if I can get a bit of closure for myself about Gaston I'll look into it. I'll even pretend I'm not listening to whatever you want to talk about with your girlfriend,"

Lily glared at Belle. She was still standing behind Kat though so it really didn't look all that threatening. Belle just ignored it, looking up at the ceiling, intentionally ignoring whatever the pair were doing. Seeing Lily in a one-sided staring contest Kat sighed and said, "Right well... what do you think Lily?"

Lily pouted at Kat but couldn't stop herself from responding for long, "I... I don't really know. I mean... it certainly sounds compelling. My concern is a lot more on the side of 'how would we ever prove it' I mean... this isn't exactly a NEW crime Kat. This is one that's years old. Even if Belle is right, which it sounds like she probably is, we don't have any good way to prove that. Neither of us have like... time powers or truth compulsion as part of our powerset. Maybe if I knew anything about paper magic I could make like a magic contract or something to compel truth? I dunno. I haven't really learnt paper magic yet. What do you think?"

"I'm also not entirely sure what to do with this sort of information. I mean... Apep will probably want to help just to help Zuhra, and Jara's the same... but they then have to convince their parents to re-open a two year old investigation against the Lord of the 8th. That... that can't be a good idea politically speaking," said Kat. Belle scoffed in the background but didn't turn away from the ceiling.

"Would you dream powers work?" asked Lily ignoring the angry old woman in the room.

Kat shrugged, "I don't even understand them properly. Besides, that's not something we could use as evidence either. All it would be good for is making us MORE certain but I mean... Belle isn't ever going to not be convinced at this point. I'm also pretty sure I agree with her, and you do as well. So we don't need convincing... so who would it be for? Anybody who really needed a push in our direction wouldn't be convinced just because I said I saw something in his head,"

Lily bit her lip and looked over to Belle, "Well Belle... do YOU have any ideas? Because honestly... we don't,"

Belle shifted in her chair to face forward again, scowl still on her face. "Do you really think if I had any idea how to prove that bastard killed my son I wouldn't already be hounding his ass?"

"Well... no but you have been at this longer then the thirty minutes we've had," responded Lily a lot snarkier then intended.

Belle sighed, "The issue is I'm really not sure how much work it'd take to set up an accident like that. I can't really look into it to actively either because then people start asking ME questions. I... I can't even remember if they simply left off the nets or cut through them... I think... I think they made them looked frayed but... I was a complete mess when the investigation was happening so my memory isn't the best for it..."

Chapter 810 Nobody Kicks Like Gaston

That sombre not lingered in the air for a while as silence took over the conversation. Kat knew she'd poked a bit of a sore spot for Belle but it was immensely annoying to hear of someone without an plan for an heir, not desire to marry, yet with an orphanage practically in spitting distance. Belle could choose one of the older children if she didn't want to raise another child completely, or pick one of the new babes if she did. It wasn't a hard concept to grasp. Insensitive to point out perhaps, but not hard to grasp.

So, as both a way to get more information and an olive branch towards Belle, Kat asked, "What can you tell us about Gaston? We may want to hear about Zuhra as well, but Gaston was your son and you haven't really shared any happy memories about him or what he was like. Would you be interested?"

Belle drew herself back up to full height in her chair, "Yes. Yes I think I will. I even have an easy place to start. Before he was born. Gaston was always kicking me after he'd developed enough. When he started to get really bad with his kicks I had to tap around my own stomach to give him targets otherwise he would always kick towards my insides. Not pleasant I tell you.

"It didn't stop when he was out either. Always and forever fidgeting. If you picked him up he'd wiggle and whine until he was allowed back onto the ground... but he also seemed to know if you were paying him attention. So, on the one hand he didn't like to be held, but he absolutely HATED to be left alone. If I left the room for just a moment. Perhaps to go to the bathroom or even just to grab a glass of water he would scream like the demons from hell were coming for him specifically... wait... is that considered offensive?"

Kat shrugged, "I don't really know? I mean, I'm not even sure if Hell is a real place. Sure we have our own dimension but it isn't called hell as far as I know. Maybe there's a city called hell? I really have no idea,"

Belle nodded, "Yes... it's always odd. Lots of bad rumours about demons but if you talk to people who've actually met them... well those stories tend to be a lot more mundane. A bit like contractors, just without so much hassle. Heck, I'd be employing demons myself if the cost of getting the information wasn't so high. Especially with rumours that summoning you lot is even worse," Kat gave a sheepish nod. "Yeah, thought so.

"Anyway... as I was saying. Couldn't leave him alone for a moment. I did try employing a nanny for him so that I could get back to work but that apparently wasn't acceptable either. This was... about six months after he was born, I think? Oh, the trouble he caused the first time. Apparently, it took about an hour to realise I wasn't coming back for even longer and he just went off. I could hear it from the other end of the street when I finally returned home.

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"So he started to come into work with me. It was really the only thing that could be done. My trusty second in command, may he rest in peace, couldn't handle everything by himself and I'd only really budgeted for 2 months recovery after the birth. Taking a full six months was pushing things and the company was standing to lose a lot of money so I had to come back," explained Belle.

"Um... just to but in," said Lil carefully, "but um... what are the chances your second in command was also murdered?"

Belle let out a long breath, "Unlikely. I mean, possible certainly but... unlikely, not worth the effort. He was a tough old man, worked with my grandfather actually, back when the company was much smaller. He worked shoulder to shoulder with my father the entire time he worked, and finally helped me when I took over. He passed in his sleep peacefully. I think he was... hmm... he never liked to talk about his age but he was at the very least ninety. While it was still sad when he left us... he lived a full life. He'd

worked hard for years and years. He was more a grandfather to me than my actual grandfather but he was killed by bandits so I don't hold that against grandpa."

"Sorry for bringing it up," said Lily.

Belle waved Lily's concern off, "He was always a cheerful old man. Would've dunked a bucket of water over me head if he found out I was moping. It made things a lot easier. Anyway. You keep distracting me. Gaston. He was already crawling around my office six months in. Well, he was crawling a bit before that really but he didn't seem so... energetic at home. Here I was forever stopping him from biting into loose sheets of paper, old quills. Anything he could get his hands on really. If he had teeth at the time I'm sure there'd be bite marks on my desk.

"As Gaston got older I started to read to him. I only had two books, the first was the ancient spring, and the second was, 'learning colours' and he did not care for either of them. Oh, little Gaston loved to hear me speak or sing, he'd clap and giggle for near any words out of my mouth, but the second I got out a book he'd bat it away until I closed it up. I'm not really sure what he was thinking. Maybe that I was paying more attention to the book than I was to him?"

"Oh and that reminds me. His sleep schedule. Oh it was awful. He'd get tired just after feeding of course, but he was go-go-go any other time. Including the middle of the night after... I want to say after he reached five months. Even when it was dark as pitch he still wanted to be up and running around. He'd rattle the bars on his crib and cry if I didn't let him sit either on my larger bed to run around, or the floor. Heaven forbid I try to sleep while it was happening.

"Ugh. I had to have my own midday naps just to keep going. I also couldn't follow along with any of the bigger or more important caravans myself because the road is no place for a baby and Gaston certainly wasn't going to let me out of his site for months at a time. Really it was a tough time for the company. I thought, previously, that it could run somewhat well without my direct interference... but no. Apparently I was both taking on too much work and limiting it in some ways.

"Too many fools under me didn't know how to negotiate or read market conditions. They'd get bullied into taking worse deals all the time because they had no spine. That was fine when I was heading up that particular caravan but now I wasn't it was causing all sorts of issues. It also showed me the same problem with many of the other caravans out of here. I thought it was normal back then, as I always picked the more expensive cargo with better margins for myself. I needed to stretch that as far as I could...

"But I found out the regular food conveyors were a hairs breadth from COSTING us money. So I had to completely retrain my staff. Fired a few of them too. Fucking useless morons. Couldn't even stand up to me when I ordered them to do it. How would they have ever survived when an important mayor started leaning on them? They wouldn't that's how. Fold like a house of fucking cards they would.

"I think the only reason we were still going was because I made some cutthroat deals when I took over the company. I'd always lead the first caravan on any new routes. Apparently I cast a long shadow... but not one that's long enough."

"But once again... I'm getting side tracked. I suppose it's just nice to boast about these things. Still, Gaston actually got easier to manage as he got older... for a while at least. He started to become

obsessed with the caravan guards, he thought they were so cool. So I asked a few of them to humour him and give him a bit of training. He was too young for anything serious, but Gaston 'trained' hard anyway. It finally gave me the chance to have time for myself. I mean, he couldn't complain about me not being around if he's past out now can he?

"I suppose that's really the second stage of Gaston's development. Running around following the guards instead of me. Perhaps, if I was more motherly I might have been more upset about that but I was already struggling with the issues I mentioned before. This gave me a very welcome chance to do some work by myself.