

DEMONS 811

Chapter 811 Throws Knives Like Gaston

"Pretty soon Gaston hit two and now he wanted to be a swordsman. Before that, he didn't really have a clear idea of what the guards did, he just thought they looked cool. Now, he wanted to be a cool swordsman more specifically, Still. I did know that training too much so young could cause him issues so I did my best to encourage the guardsmen 'training' him to make it all seem like tougher training than it was,

"The best idea me and the boys came up with was pretty funny in the end. We'd give him a stick and tell him to hold it with his arm out straight for as long as he could. Which was basically nothing at all, so he spent more time glaring at the stick than lifting it. It did however keep him focused. We'd tease him about not being able to do it with a stick when the men could use a metal sword. He'd puff his cheeks up and glare at me when I said it. Made it very hard not to laugh.

"That kept him occupied all the way up till he was five. Oh sometimes we'd have to mix things around a bit but for the most part he would spend time messing around with his sword till he got tired, then come bother me till he recovered, rinse and repeat. Gaston was... perhaps easily amused is the wrong descriptor... but he did truly enjoy the things that made him happy. I don't want to say he was a simple boy...

"I got him started on basic maths at three, my parents taught me with a rhyme that I past on to him and he took to it like a duck to water... he just didn't enjoy it. He used his proficiency at maths to avoid doing it for any longer than necessary. It did make me somewhat worried for the future of the company... but I know quite well that a women can run it just as well obviously. So I was hoping he'd marry a smart girl and I could train her instead.

"Oh I'm sure Gaston would have taken my place one day if necessary. I know this from how he behaved later in life. All about responsibility he was. I don't think he'd enjoy it for a moment. Books and numbers were simply never his cup of tea. I actually had great hopes for Zuhra once upon a time... but we can get to those later on in my story.

"Once he hit five, Gaston managed to work out something was wrong. He actually confronted my right on his birthday about it. Saying he didn't want presents, he wanted to know why I wasn't letting him train properly. I told him I could explain it, or I could let a few people who knew better than me explain it in my stead. Greedy little boy he was said he wanted BOTH explanations.

"So I told him, then set him loose on three other people. The first was the guard captain. Not really a captain and completely retired. He's still in charge of my guardsmen's training, development and deployment. He makes sure all caravans have an appropriate level of force and people are only paired with those they can work with. I can't keep track of the interpersonal relationships between everyone. So I give the caravan a combat score and he matches that.

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"After Gaston was done with the captain I sent him to the healer. She is a lovely lady around my age that forever insists that she is not a mage, has no healing affinity and does not, and never has had, a healing artifact. Personally I think she's a lying liar who lies... but she just uses the excuse 'we can grow basically

any rare plant here that isn't fire attributed, I can make very potent poultices and potions' but frankly she is a bit TOO good. That and I sometimes wonder if she's really my age or just able to heal herself back in years.

"It doesn't really matter though. She doesn't charge as much as she should, gives us great service and I'm not going to piss off the powerful healer that wants to pretend to be an above average medic. After her, I sent him to the final individual. I actually had to pull some strings for it but I got him a meeting with the guard captain in charge of the defence of the 5th compound. I don't know the woman personally, but she's well regarded in the city as one of the best fighters and I thought it would be good enough,"

Belle paused to open a drawer and pull out a glass and a pitcher of clear liquid. The slight burning sensation on her nostrils informed Kat it wasn't water, "Want a glass of water?" asked Belle. Kat felt her eye twitch at that. Staring back with a frown on her face, Kat wasn't really sure what to make of the question.

Is she... does she not realise that's clearly vodka... or perhaps something stronger? Does she actually think that's water? Or is she offering us water and it's somewhere else? Kat and Lily shook their heads and then watched Belle down the glass in a single motion. *That... that cannot be healthy.*

"Sorry I was a bit parched," said Belle innocently. Not even a slight reddening on her face. If Kat didn't have enhanced senses it would have all looked perfectly normal. Yup, just a large glass of perfectly normal water.

Should I say something? And yes Lily I am asking,

[Well...] Belle clicked her fingers. "Just because I took a nice water break doesn't mean I don't want to be included in the conversation anymore," *IT'S NOT WATER* "but I guess you might have wanted to take the chance to chat a bit between yourselves. It's a lot to take in and that was only the first five years of Gaston's life.

"Up till he was six... he was honestly a bit lost," said Belle wistfully, "it was actually a bit after his six birthday it changed but for basically the whole year... he just didn't know what to do with himself. He really enjoyed training, even if it wasn't doing much. It seemed he just enjoyed the feeling of working his muscles.

"So he was looking for something else to do. He tried throwing himself into his numbers, and learnt to read at a basic level. He tried really hard to get into it... but I could tell he wasn't ever pleased with the time he spent on it. Another thing he tried was archery. If he couldn't get stronger, he thought he could be more accurate. Then he snapped the bow string, scouring a deep cut in his arm, and gave up on that. He tried a few other things to little to no success.

"Finally, a couple months after his birthday he settled down a bit with things because he managed to discover the joys of knife throwing. I was not impressed at the time because he actually me for a set of throwing knives to practice with. Sadly for me, even practice knives need to be of a certain quality to embed themselves in the target. His birthday had past and all of a sudden he was asking for something so expensive...

"I remember the conversation so well. Part of me really wanted to just cave in and buy them. My Gaston never asked for all that much. He was grateful for what he had and he really respected all the time my employees gave him. Truthfully that was the biggest expenditure. A lot of the time he spent with them was paid time. Plenty of them continued to play with Gaston after hours or on their days off and never asked for more payment... but they were still paid for a lot of it and I never begrudged them that.

"So I used it as a chance to properly introduce him to money. I explained to him how much they cost and worked out how many meals he could eat with that money. Gaston was always a big eater see, and while he wasn't a big foodie, he did indulge in a lot of it. Still... a set was something ridiculous like two years' worth of meals I think. So I asked him to do some work. Just basic stuff, cleaning up around the place you know?

"He put his all into the work. He scrubbed the floors once a day, dusted all the counter tops every second, organised the paperwork for everyone else throughout the day when it was left unattended. He put so much effort into the month of work I asked from him... I went a little overboard and brought a rather nice set of knives for him. Certainly better than I was planning for. It was so worth it to see his smile... even if he was missing a tooth at the time," Kat's eyebrow raised but Belle waved it off, "it was just a baby tooth but it was one of his front teeth and very memorable,"

Chapter 812 Has as Many Spare Knives in his Clothes as Gaston

"The throwing knives kept his attention well. He was growing up and capable of focusing on more than one thing at a time, but every morning and as the sun came up, and every afternoon as it went down he practiced. Didn't even mind the glare, apparently it was even better practice because he had to learn to hit the targets by feel.

"Personally, I'm not sure it was all that useful considering the fact his targets never moved. Oh he made the most of it. Setting up a bunch of circular targets, hemp bags with a mix of wood blocks and straw. He had to replace them fairly regularly when they got cut up too much... but just by changing where he was standing in the yard it was enough to get a wide variety of angles. Just... he knew the area too well. I suspect had he ever been in a real fight with them... well... I suspect I do know how it turned out.

"Talking about this reminded me that Gaston always used to carry around a few spare knives. One in the back of his boot, one hidden in each of the soles, and a final one rather obviously hanging from his belt. Dammit. I wish I could remember if he still had that knife on him when he died... if it was missing for any reason that would have been an excellent bit of evidence..." Belle slammed a fist down on the table. Hard. The part of the table under her fist was now ripe with cracks. Probably just the varnish, but impressive nonetheless.

Gaston might not be the only one with a magical affinity... "Um... this might be horrible to ask but... what happened to his clothes? The ones he was wearing?" asked Kat.

Belle paused. "Hmm... I may have kept them now that you brought it up... hmm... might have to actually go home for once..."

"Wait... do you not go home?" asked Lily.

Belle shook her head, "No... I sleep here in the office," Belle paused to shove her chair to the side. Kat took a step forward and hopped onto her toes to see a mattress behind the desk. The sheets were at least neat and orderly with no real sign of being used recently.

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"Belle... why do you sleep here?!" hissed Kat.

Belle sighed, her shoulders heaving with the motion as if it was taking extra effort just to admit, "I don't go to my house anymore. I couldn't stand the memories. Eventually... eventually I thought it would get better but it didn't really. I mean, this isn't even my original office. I had to move to get away from them. Even though... though it's similar enough it still causes me problems.

"After a year of not going back... I started to rent out the space. My house is decently large... so I just packed up my most valuable things into one of the spare bedrooms, sealed that up alongside Gaston's room and let my receptionist and his husband rent it. They make a good team. Stevon, the receptionist helps keep everything organised and me informed, while Grom, his husband is one of the guards. He's actually one of the many that trained Gaston..."

Belle's eyes glazed over as she lost herself to memories nobody else could see. It was... odd talking to Belle. She was able to become so much more alive talking about Gaston and his life. The joy in her eyes as she talked about his accomplishments when he was younger... but this moment showed it was just as easy to fall the other way. The reminders that her son, however good, is no longer here. That there will be no more moments of joy. No new sources of pride.

For Lily, this was particularly hard hitting. She hadn't had the easiest life herself but she was in the unique position of being too young to remember when one set of grandparents passed away, along with some other great aunts and uncles, and have those be the only ones gone. Sufficient time had not yet passed for her to lose anyone truly close to her to death. She had of course, seen some of the sadness in her parents, but nothing like this.

For Kat, it was more interesting. She was able to see the other side of things. She'd seen many tears from children who had lost their parents, heck she'd regularly have to comfort those kids. It was normally big gestures. Refusing to eat anything at all. Crying. Throwing tantrums. This was the first time Kat had really seen a mother without her child. It was a softer, deeper anguish. Children were young. They were adaptable. With a new family they could recover, it was something Kat had seen time and time again. It was something she sort of understood, having chosen Gramps as her family. She could see in Belle's eyes that Gaston was gone, and nothing could ever replace him.

Her earlier suggestion to find a child to adopt seemed a lot more callous now. Belle felt like a steam train that has been out a fuel and only continues to move because it's on a downhill slope. In this case, the idea that Gaston's death wasn't an accident. Kat wasn't sure what would happen when the tracks even out. The answer, whatever it was, found. Her suggestion might have been callous... but it was also perhaps even more necessary then she'd thought earlier as well.

The silence stretched for a while longer. The lamplight flickering, drawing the eyes of the Memphis and Succubus as the only source of movement in the room. The desire to interrupt Belle. To bring her back

to the future warring with the understanding that she needed time. Sadly, she needed all the time in the world and then some.

So after five minutes, Kat cleared her throat carefully and Belle's eyes snapped back to the present, glowing like the forgotten embers hidden in piles of ash. Burning so brightly compared to their surroundings, but so close to fading... or starting a new fire with their remains. A few more moments pass and Belle sucked in a deep breath. "Sorry. I was lost for a time it seems. That... it's more common then I'd like, but less common then perhaps it should be. Still... thank you for interrupting me. It does not do to dwell on broken dreams and a past long gone,"

Kat bowed her head slightly, "Well I'm sorry for being so callous in how I recommended adoption. I stand by the idea, and I think it might bring new life into your life. Something I can tell you desperately need... but... but I also understand that you took my words in extremely good faith. That I was harsh and rude. I've seen many children without parents, desperately wishing for new ones... I... I don't think I've ever really seen a parent like yourself,"

Belle waved Kat off, "It's... it's acceptable. I accept your apology. Much better then the tripe I usually get for much graver offences. I... I can... perhaps not understand but... acknowledge... your position. I'm sure you have seen a number of children looking for a home, and I was sitting there, orphanage practically in sight of my building, wondering what I'll do for a successor. I... I still agree with what I said then. I'll need to think on it. Perhaps... more seriously then I'd intended before,"

"Perhaps," said Kat with a nod and a weak smile.

Belle let out a long breath, preparing herself to continue speaking "Where was I... I guess I was following on from his sixth birthday... well nothing major happened until his eighth. That's when I started to introduce him a bit more to the business. Nothing too serious of course, just letting him know a bit about each of our routes. Trying to explain why we take what supplies where. How to tell what things were really worth. Why we bother with the route at all. Things like that.

"Hmm... take 'smalltown' as an example. We stop by there not because it's a worthwhile trip but because it's only about an hour off the main road to riverside. Yes, I know, the names aren't amazing but they were both small villages and one has been for quite some time. Anyway... riverside we can trade a lot of our stock for good fish to bring back here. Even if its dried fish sells for a good deal here. They don't like the water much so despite having so much of it we can't really farm them properly.

"Another example is Lougetown. It's not actually a town anymore, it's a city. We make our way out there because they produce some of the finest spun glass that I know of. So we load up with as much food as we can and head out. Technically we don't actually make money in Lougetown. The trip is too long for that, but we make money bringing the glass back because the margins on proper Lougetown glass are quite good when you sell here. Does that all make sense?"

Chapter 813 No Child In Town Half as Manly

"Yes that makes sense," said Kat. She might not be an economics expert but she did finish with high marks in high-school mathematics. So she had a good idea about why things operated the way they did. Opportunity cost was a noteworthy thing, one especially important in a world that still used caravans to transport goods.

Belle nodded, "Good. Gaston seemed to catch on quickly as well but I could always see his eyes glazing over a bit. I'm not sure anything super relevant to his upbringing happened until he was ten... I do regret some things, and when he was ten he pretended to go on patrol with some of the guards. He came across some orphanage kids playing and well..."

Belle let out a pained sigh, quite different to her usual sighs that sounded as if there was nothing left in the world worth living for this sounding at lot more like she'd just kicked her toe on the door. "Well... I never realised just how few children he'd been around. See... a lot of the company workers are from my father's time, or my grandfather's time. The new ones were too young for their own children and too old to play with Gaston.

"Sometimes I worry that he was ten the first time he saw another child. I don't think it was quite that bad... but it certainly wasn't much better. He accused the whole group of loitering," admitted Belle with a slightly pained groan. Kat and Lily felt it best to just... let that slide. "I don't know what he was thinking. I know I was thinking that I'm probably a terrible parent but it's not like I'd noticed the problem.

"He was never sad long as a child. Always entertained. Always having fun. Just... not childish fun. I feel rather ashamed of that fact. I also don't blame the guard escorting him for bursting out into laughter. It diffused the tension so much but my poor Gaston had no idea why he was be laughed at. I think that might be the first time I truly had to console him. It... it's a little funny looking back on it," Belle's small smile might have looked truthful but the pain in her eyes made it a lot less clear.

"He came back, and was trying not to cry. Why, he was a big boy of course, and shouldn't be crying. He didn't really succeed and let him cry it all out and then started to explain what the problem was. Hoo boy did I not come prepared to explain child politics and politics between children and adults," Belle paused seeing the confused look on her guests' faces. "I'm serious. What else would you call it?

"Gaston didn't understand that while that's technically true we don't even enforce loitering laws on most adults. Plus, they weren't really loitering they were playing which is specifically called out in the extended document as permissible as long as they aren't just playing in the middle of the road. I'm also not sure why Gaston thought it was a good idea, or his job to point out. I said he was playing at being in patrol, which is true, but he was just with the caravan guards. If they don't have any powers to arrest someone he most certainly doesn't.

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"It also took me a bit of time to work out why he thought it was a good idea in the first place and oh the answer he gave me. He said 'they shouldn't be breaking the rules' which... oh my poor heart. Not only were they not breaking the laws, it's not his job to enforce them. So I had to then ask why he didn't let the guards do anything, and why he thought it was his job. Gaston didn't have an answer for me.

"So I made him go back the next day and apologise. It worked. Thankfully. It was a nice girl called Maren who accepted his apology for the group and helped integrate him with the rest of the kids. After that it was a lot less work and a lot more play. He still practiced in the mornings, and eventually started to work out, but most of his time was spent playing.

"And eventually, when he hit puberty, it hit him like a cart on a hill. He shot up instantly, his muscles went from well defined to shirt ripping when he flexed. His voice dropped so much I thought a giant was talking to me. It was a deep base that most men would be envious of. He also fell for Zuhra not long after. He was so incredibly awkward and... well I probably didn't help that much.

"I teased him about it relentlessly as soon as I figured it out. Zuhra also developed somewhat quickly but nowhere near as extreme. I sounded her out a little bit of course. Asked some of the other workers, maybe a few of the kids they played with. Nothing serious of course. Everyone agreed she was smart, and I could see she was pretty. I mean I have eyes. She was still more 'cute' at the time then sexy but I could tell she would grow up to break hearts..."

Belle sucked in a deep breath, "I guess it was my son who broke her heart in the end. She really is a wonderful child. When things were getting more serious I found out she was educated to a shockingly high standard for an orphanage raised girl. She had a work ethic that would put veterans to shame and her eyes have always been her best feature. Well, Gaston would disagree with you but he always had a strange fascination with necks and collarbones. Not sure where that came about or how he tells the difference but frankly. Could have been worse."

"So... how was their relationship?" asked Lily.

Belle gave a slight chuckle at the question before answering, "Oh as I said he was kind of hopeless. He kept trying to attract her attention but she didn't pick up on his intentions for at least a year. I had to sit him down and grill him to find out he'd just never made his intentions clear. I mean... I wasn't expecting him to just ask her to marry him or invite her home for a round of sex but he hadn't even expressed interest in courting her. He was still toeing the line of good friends,

"So I slapped him around a bit, and he let because I'm his mother," Kat very specifically did not look at the cracks in the desk. Yes. It was just because Belle was his mother and not because she could probably still lay him out, "and told him to approach her tomorrow and make things COMPLETELY clear. I said if he didn't I'd disown him. I was lying of course, but I'd never looked more serious.

"So you bet your ass he confessed. Came home smiling like a loon. I asked if she said yes, knowing the answer of course, and he nodded, bobbing his head up and down like one of those duck things you put in water glasses. Looked like a fool he did. So I asked, if he kissed her, and he sputtered and said no. A blind man wouldn't have believed that answer. And because I can see in colour the fact his lips were swollen and bruised was readily apparent. Idiot boy. Thinking he could lie to his mother looking like that."

Belle shook her head, a much brighter but still small smile on her face. "I got the story out of Zuhra later, but apparently she didn't think Gaston was all that interested in her. In fact, she thought he was gay," Belle's grin grew wider. "Apparently, he was always hanging out with the boys. Fighting and sometimes wrestling. I don't think she ever told him but all his attempts to impress her, show of his strength... Zuhra just thought he was trying to get... closer... with the boys in the group. Oh, I can just imagine my Gaston's face if he ever heard that particular bit of information. He would have been mortified,"

The light in Belle's eyes rapidly dimmed. "I... I guess there's really only one thing left. The intent to marriage... and Gaston's death. It... they happened so close to each other. I... I didn't think anything was wrong. I mean... how could it be? Gaston was happy, his love had agreed to marry him. He was a bit

busy around the time... running to and fro and trying to get a bunch of things done. He was keeping some secrets from me for sure...

"But I just assumed he was looking into wedding plans... that he was trying to ensure everything was perfect without his old mother interfering. Now... now I wonder. I told him about his father. I think it was when he was nine or eight? He asked why he didn't have one, and I explained that technically he did. He never seemed bothered by it... but considering he was getting married soon..."

"I wonder if he didn't sneak into the 8th's compound to invite him to the wedding and saw something he shouldn't have. That's pure speculation on my part. It just... it seems like something he'd do,"

Chapter 814 A Place to Stay... again.

Once again there was silence. It was happening a lot this conversation. It might have been very understandable but that didn't make it any less noticeable. There were a few questions Lily and Kat could ask, the story had not caught up to the present day after all. That being said... plenty had already been discussed and many more things were easy to puzzle out. Belle broke down for a while, then she started to collect evidence, what little there was.

Well. Do you think we did the right thing?

[I'm not really sure there is a 'right thing' to have done here. Belle... it's probably best Belle had a chance to really talk about it. She doesn't seem to have much family and there's only so much that her employees can do. They work for her after all. Maybe this will be for the best? I mean... I don't feel like we did the WRONG thing at least...]

A soft laugh came from Belle, "Already back to leaving me out huh?"

"Sorry," said Kat quickly, "it didn't feel right to disturb the silence... but... well I don't know about Lily but I felt the need to fill it with something. The compromise was speaking just between us,"

Belle gave a firm nod, "I appreciate the thought. I'm a little surprised you were able to say it Kat. The truth... it's nice to know I'm not being lied to. I have experience in that sort of thing, it's my job... but at the same time... it takes so much effort sometimes. Effort I don't really feel like using more and more often these days. I find myself having to lean a little too hard on my old reputation to make sure I still get decent deals,"

Belle let out another long sigh, "What will you both be doing now?"

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Kat and Lily shared a look and then glanced at Belle who said, "Yes, I won't call you out for talking amongst yourselves this time. I think you deserve that much at this point," Belle's thoughtful words sounded nice, but were quite quickly undercut by the fact she reached into her drawer and poured herself another glass of 'water' to drink.

Kat rolled her eyes and sighed. [Yeah... that can't be good for her Kat. I almost feel like we should say something but I mean... what do we say? You have a drinking problem?]

Probably best to just leave it. What do you think we should do though? Where are we heading after this? Hard to tell how much time has passed but I imagine the sun will be going down soon. Do you want to go find a park? Apep's? There was also that hideout in the aqueduct?

[I think... maybe the aqueduct? I don't really know. I feel like it might be time to get Apep and Jara involved... probably Jara first. We still need to meet Marem, she even came up again in Belle's story so we have to make sure we get on that at some point... but I wonder if this has gotten large enough that we should bring Zuhra in a bit? Maybe just ask her? Or ask Jara to sound her out?]

Should we ask Belle for advice? She probably knows Zuhra well. We can ask what she suggests. She didn't seem immediately hostile to the idea of Zuhra finding someone else. In fact, she seemed pretty reasonable about it, even slightly encouraging.

[True. She does seem willing to help. She clearly knows Zuhra well enough to wish for her happiness... or, more likely... at least I think so... she doesn't want to see Zuhra become her in the future.]

What do you mean?

[A forty year old alcoholic with nothing to live for. Or however old Belle actually is.]

You think she looks forty?

[Kat. Just based on the fact she had Gaston means she's at least twenty. Then add on a few more years as reasonable because she didn't have Gaston when she was born. So I'd easily add at least fifteen years, probably another few after that because while she said she was a bit wild, she didn't immediately have Gaston till a bit later on. So I suspect she was around twenty. She might not be forty, could be thirty-eight or forty-two or something. Forty is just a nice number that seems close enough]

Ok yeah that makes sense. I do wonder how long people here tend to live. The magic seems... well I don't know if you can call an infinite water source weak, but certainly less integrated into the average person. In the world we go to for Tournaments everyone seemed at least a little magical. I'm sure that effects aging. With everyone being a human though... hard to say. Especially if they eat magically grown food all their life. Is that a positive thing or a negative?

"You two haven't gotten distracted haven't you?" asked Belle suddenly. Kat and Lily jumped at the question before nodding, knowing they were very much caught. "Did you at least figure out what your current plan is?"

Kat shrugged, "We'll probably want to find somewhere to sleep for the night. Either by visiting Apep and hiding out in his room after we chat with him or maybe go camp in that hidden spot in the aqueduct. It's a bit of a toss up really. We aren't supposed to involve Zuhra too much... but we feel like we need to visit Marem and get her thoughts as well... but we don't know where she lives. So if Jara can't tell us..." Kat shrugged again when she finished speaking.

"While I can't help you with Marem's address... do you not have anywhere to stay?" asked Belle.

"Um... no?" said Kat carefully.

Belle let out a long sigh, "I can't believe you don't have any money for accommodation or a place to stay. Isn't that the most basics of hiring?"

Kat glanced over at Lily and couldn't help shrugging again, "I don't know... It's never really been an issue before. It didn't really bother me either. The idea of just camping out... well until Lily started getting dragged along with me. It's been... fine for now,"

Belle's gaze narrowed, "And why did you think that was anywhere near acceptable as an idea?"

Kat wilted slightly and said, "Well I can regenerate from nearly any injury, the fact I survived being stabbed in the heart helps support that fact... I also don't get effected by the changes in temperature. I was lucky enough to be immune to basically all heat and cold. I haven't gotten sick yet but I have a completely different biology to a human so most diseases shouldn't be transferrable and because I'm a Succubus dirt doesn't really stick to me... so I thought it'd be fine..."

"Young people I swear..." grumbled Belle. "If you don't have any better ideas, I'll allow you to stay here. I can provide you with food water and a roof over your heads. There's no spare bed but the chairs or the floor are available to you whichever is more comfortable,"

"Lily?" asked Kat.

"Why is it up to me? I can transform into a cat and I'm quite comfortable using you as a place to sleep. You're the one that has to sit on whatever it is we chose. It's up to you," said Lily.

Kat frowned, "I can sleep anywhere Lily. I'm just making sure we can stay where you are most comfortable."

"Kat. I already said it, I'm comfortable wherever. You are comfortable. I'm quite happy, nay, ecstatic to use the fact we have no beds as an excuse to curl up on top of you. So please pick wherever you'll feel best," retorted Lily.

Kat opened her mouth to refute Lily's points when Belle slammed her hand on the table, palm down so that there was no cracks this time just a loud noise. "You pair are hopeless. I can't believe I was worried the demon and her companion. You're just kids aren't you?"

Kat and Lily share a glance. Kat goes to answer, winces slightly before accepting it as the best comparison, "From the sounds of things... Gaston was older than us..."

Belle threw her hands up into the air, "I don't get paid enough for this..."

"Belle... you aren't being paid for this. At all. You are the one offering us a place to stay..." pointed out Lily.

Belle just nodded, "See. Not getting paid enough. Come on then. Let's get down to the storeroom and pick up some food. I can show you the employee quick shower if you want as well. No hot water but we've got plenty of it cold. So take as long as you can stand,"

Belle pulled herself to her feet without issue before grabbing the empty glass and heading for the door. Kat and Lily let her walk passed before falling in line. *You know. When we came here... never did I think we'd end up getting invited to stay the night.*

Chapter 815 Singing in the Shower

The group, lead by Belle headed downstairs and it was noticeably quieter for the two with enhanced hearing. The constant background noise had drifted off. When they got back to the reception desk Belle said, "Stevon, I see you're still working despite the fact everyone else is finished for the day. You can go home on time you know,"

Stevon just shrugged and easily answered, "Ah but if I got home first I'd be the one that has to cook dinner and I can't be havin that," It was clear from the small smile on Belle's face this was a very expected answer at this point. Still, Stevon started to put away the various papers strewn across the desk.

The gang left before Stevon was completely finished and Belle headed straight for the shower. It was in between two warehouses and somewhat strange to look at. Belle stopped beneath a chain and said, "For water you've just got to pull this," before pulling on the chain.

What it did was raise part of the wall near one of the corners of the aqueduct. The water then rushed straight into a raised board that served as the 'back' of the shower. For the most part the water fell down into the shower area after that but really no area around the contraption was saved from the waterfall. If they had anything other than an infinite source of water Kat would have said something about how horrible it was in regards to efficiency but... well... wasting a bit of infinite water is literally insignificant.

"That's an... interesting setup..." said Kat with a wince, doing her best not to lie about it.

Belle gave a sharp barking laugh, "It's a horrible setup that was done by my father over thirty years ago just to have a place to wash a bit. I sometimes can't believe he got away with it because even modifying the aqueduct slightly like this requires a tonne of permits he most certainly did not acquire. I think it was because he had a mate in charge of inspections who just signed off on it after the fact to avoid the extra work,"

"Was your father routinely irresponsible?" asked Lily before she could think better of it.

.....

Belle turned to Lily with a raised eyebrow. Her stare bored into the younger girl as they locked gazes. Lily was of course the first one to break, looking away from that piercing stare. Kat was just about to move into that line of sight but Belle burst out laughing instead. "Yup! It runs in the family!"

Lily's head whipped back around, mouth opened wide and confused look on her face... for a few seconds that is. She remembered that Belle had a child out of wedlock partially on a whim and with the lord of the area. On top of that Gaston was apparently quite likely to have attempted inviting said father to his wedding. [You know what. Kat. I don't want to know.]

Belle held up a single hand, two fingers together ready to click and a grin showing a few teeth. "Nope. No conversations here no sir-ee" said Lily quickly wave her hands in front, "I was just thinking I do NOT want to know whatever nonsense your family got up to,"

"Well my mother decided it was a good idea to build a small raft and ride it down the aqueduct. She managed to get to the end before she was caught actually. The only reason she was caught at all is because it's guarded decently well," said Belle.

Lily let out a groan but couldn't resist asking another, though safer question, "Um... why is the end guarded?"

Belle shrugged, "I don't rightly know. It's not like the water can go much further. If the water spills out onto the ground it seems to stop after just a bit. It needs a certain speed to it to keep its propagation properties. It's why nobody accidentally floods their gardens. The aqueducts have been redone a few times over the lifespan of the city and eventually the end up pretty much at ground level. They empty out into pitifully small fountains... small fountains with a guard presence,"

"I still don't see why they're guarded," pointed out Lily.

"Look I don't honestly know Lily," said Belle flatly.

"Oh," mumbled Lily. Belle just nodded.

Belle didn't let the awkward silence linger though, "Welp follow me and we can grab some food,"

This time Belle shuffled them through the compound to one of the warehouses. They entered through a smaller door towards the back rather than bothering to reopen the large doors at the front for moving product. Inside was boxes and boxes stacked all the way to the ceiling. They were pushed up against the walls with nets covering them all, as Belle had said.

Belle led them off to the back where there was two boxes just on the ground and pulled them both open. The first was filled with an assortment of vegetables, while the second was split in half. The first half had smoked meat of some kind. Looked a little like pork from the roundness but the fact it had talons instead of hooves killed that idea. The second half was filled with crackers.

Nearby there was a 'table' made out of a crate lid resting on a pile of broken wagon wheels and there was a single chair that had seen better days. It was torn, ripped, had multiple stains and looked like it was ready to fall to pieces if the wind ever got back there. The only thing that looked somewhat high quality was the water jug that sat on the floor and seemed to be a large but well cleaned barrel, vanished so much it had a mirror shine. "Feel free to help yourselves," said Belle.

She didn't even wait for an answer before grabbing a few things from the boxes. The pair were actually a little surprised the first thing she grabbed was a table cloth. It looked clean, but perhaps not. This was followed by two wooden plates. Belle filled the first one with a number of greens before adding a couple of crackers and then pulling a dagger out of her sleeve and slicing off a bit of the meat and sitting down.

Kat just shrugged at that and grabbed the second plate, picked a few somewhat familiar looking vegetables, a single cracker because really they looked drier than the dessert, and used her tail to hold the end of the animal's leg, a hand to steady it, and the nails of her other hand to carved off a chunk before placing it on the plate to dice properly. Kat's nails weren't particularly long, but with the application of a bit of demonic energy they were able to glide easily through the meat. Kat just had to be a bit careful.

Lily was still looking dubiously at the food while Belle was half done, and Kat was taking to trying things out. The crackers were terrible. Nothing good could be said about them. Belle was eating them alongside her own pieces of meat, but it was clearly just to add a bit of carbohydrates into things, or stretch the meal. Speaking of the meat. It had a rather pungent taste of smoke. It was like the animal

died of smoke inhalation before then being smoked before smoking it again using sauce made of smoke. Kat felt like sticking her head in a campfire would be less smoky.

Really what saved the meal were the vegetables. Whatever they were. They were all quite juicy, many also had a nice crunch, and the flavour of each piece was nice and fresh but didn't linger overly long. "I'd stick to the vegetables, with maybe a bit of meat on the side," advised Kat from where she was standing.

Lily glanced over at Belle who seemed to be fairly happy with the meal. Noticing the attention Belle paused and said, "If you're not used to it Kat's probably right. The meat is a bit of an acquired taste. Once you get used to the smoke it has a lot of nice undertones and it keeps extremely well. That will last me a few weeks easily and I don't have to worry about keeping off the mould,"

Lily frowned, debating internally over the truth of that. "Kat pass me a piece of the meat," she said as she transformed. Kat raised an intrigued eyebrow but handed it off to Lily as she sat on the surprisingly clean floor in this section. Lily bit down on the meat and frowned. It was probably quite different as a Memphis. She couldn't really get all of the smoke the others did. It just wasn't part of her natural pallet. Instead, she got to enjoy a very gamey but flavourful piece of meat. Kat gained a small smile, feeling the appreciation across their bond even as she rolled her eyes.

Of course you'd figure out some work around.

Belle of course was just staring at the strange woman who could apparently turn into a cat. It might have been said earlier... but to see it...

Chapter 816 When you can't Decide. Procrastinate!

After the meal, Belle quickly encouraged them to turn in. It wasn't entirely through words, but because she had a shower and then invited the girls back to her office. When they arrived, Belle turned off the light and flopped down on her own mattress. Didn't even give them time to choose a chair. Luckily they both have exceptional night vision so just a slight application of demonic fire for light was more than enough to look around. Once the pair was settled, mental conversation was considered... but dismissed. Despite how unlikely it would be, Kat and Lily couldn't shake the idea that Belle would start clicking her fingers again to interrupt them even while she slept.

The next morning Belle was up first. Kat and Lily awoke to the sound of her opening the door and heading out. Kat followed quickly with Lily staying tucked into her arms and heading back to sleep. Belle was much quieter come morning. She simply went about her duties and let Kat follow along. For breakfast, she went to another warehouse and grabbed a big wheel of cheese that was already missing a few slices. With that, she headed back to the table and ate cheese, crackers, and a bit of the smoky meat.

Lily accepted a few chunks of meat while Kat took their share of crackers. They might have been super dry and hard but Kat had enough strength in her jaws to deal with the latter and didn't mind the first. After the food was eaten Belle said, "If you need anything else from me you can find me in my office. I'll leave a note for Stevon," and left.

The pair watched Belle leave, not really sure what to say. They'd thanked her for letting them stay earlier... but as to what else they could have said... well they just didn't know. What was likely to happen with Gaston was rather up in the air and neither were keen to make promises they couldn't keep.

Now that Belle was gone, Kat took the chair that was now free and ignored the fact it didn't fit her wings all that well. "Right. Well... what's the plan Lily?"

Lily glanced at the chair Kat had chosen and made the decision to just stick to her Memphis form. [I don't know. We've pretty much done everything that we've asked now. 'Gender and Status' wasn't hard. Jara was pretty sure it was a guy and he was dead. We got confirmation of that from the orphanage. As for chances. We know that she's still hurting because she hasn't stopped her workaholic tendencies but everyone who knows her like Belle and Theresa seem to think she won't help herself.]

[That's not even getting into the fact we've already provided him with advice. I worry that we might have already done everything required of us and more. Sure we could see Apep and give him that information but what happens if we do? Will we get sent away immediately?]

.....

*I don't know and it's like I said before I don't know that I want to ask either in case D.E.M.O.N.S thinks we're getting funny ideas. I never really thought about what would happen if we keep helping beyond what we've been paid for. Sure that sort of happened with Thyme and the Tournament stuff but the first time around it was more a 'do what you want' and I WANTED to try properly. I wasn't doing anything else.

This though. We specifically agreed to 'Gender, status, Apep's chances, and a bit of further advice'. Depending on how you count things we might be able to stick around to try and give further advice all the way up till the moment he just asks her out... but then what? Do we just leave? We could theoretically wrap things up today in just a few hours...

But I'm interested in seeing if we can solve everything with Gaston. I'm interested in talking to Marem just to see what she has to say about the whole thing. If we could go there right now I definitely would. I just wish Zuhra either had more friends we could get a hold of or I thought it was likely that Jara knows where Marem lives. I doubt it though.*

[Yeah I doubt it too. If Jara knew anything about her we'd have heard about her when we visited the first time. At best she might know that Zuhra has a friend in some section of the city but I'm not sure how helpful that will be. We'd probably have a better chance to finding Marem's husband but nobody told us his damned name. So we'd have to go to his workplace, cause a bunch of issues asking around for which of them were married to Marem, and then convince them to bring us to meet her after confronting him at work. Not only is that rude, we don't have any way to pay for his time or services. Something that he might ask for.]

Ugh. I didn't think about the payment issue. I'd be pretty annoyed if we managed to find his office, find out who he is, and then be told that he can't help us during work hours so we'll have to wait or pay him. Actually... don't they move around though? For work and what not? They're a bit like accountants so I can't imagine they actually do much work in their own office. Too easy to lose secrets that way or have things copied down without permission. So if we went that route we'd just be running around town for ages.

[You make a compelling and rather annoying point. We basically have to either admit things to Zuhra and then look for Marem, or we just go to Apep. Did... hmm... we didn't Contractually agree to not tell Zuhra right?]

No we didn't. Let me just... hmm... no I think it was just us agreeing that going straight to Zuhra might not be the best idea. Nothing really preventing us from talking to her now. Which... hmm. Might be best to go to Jara, explain that we think it's fine to just talk to Zuhra, or if Zuhra's around 'the person in question' about the whole thing and explain where we are. I mean. It would certainly tell us what Apep's chances were wouldn't it?

[Yeah but Zuhra can lie even to herself. I wouldn't put it past her to say she wasn't interested or that Apep could find someone better, or whatever else she wants to say just to keep being miserable. Though... hmm... I wonder if she has OCD?]

I don't see how that matters here.

[I think it would let us make an important distinction. Does she feel compelled to clean things, or is it just that when she's stressed the thing she defaults to is cleaning. I would bet a week's worth of hugs that she's depressed. What I want to know is if her depression makes her OCD worse requiring her to clean everything constantly... or if she defaults to cleaning because coming from an orphanage has given her the impression that everything can always be more clean, or that cleaning is a job nobody else likes so it's always available or something.]

I'm still not entirely sure why that matters Lily...

[Gah. Ok. I think that it would help us determine how much and what sort of help she needs. If she has OCD, then Apep needs to be aware of that and act accordingly. If she doesn't, and isn't getting any better by herself, Apep probably needs to be a bit more... I don't want to say aggressive with his affections... perhaps more affirming? Make it routinely known that she's loved, that it's still possible for someone to love her that sort of thing.]

Do you think that's likely to be an issue? Surely she's aware that she's still attractive right? I mean... she is attractive right?

[I feel like that has to be a trick question...]

Nope. I swear. Completely serious. Though I at least understand why it could be construed as a trap, I can still feel your emotions. So feel free to answer honestly.

[Yeah... still feels like a trap to answer that but yes she is attractive. Not really to my taste but if I didn't have anyone I liked and she asked me out I'd have agreed to see how things worked pretty readily. Top marks for her eyes as well. I'd probably say they're her best feature.]

Better than mine?

Asked Kat with genuine curiosity.

Lily internally sighed. [Dammit. I almost wish I couldn't feel how genuine that question is. No, your eyes are better to me but I am immensely biased. I'd probably choose basically all of your features over someone else's because they're yours Kat. I bet if I got Sue to strip naked in front of Apep and asked him who the most attractive women he'd ever seen was he'd still say Zuhra. Well, after he picked his jaw up off the floor.]

Chapter 817 Air Overthink

A bit of silent contemplation later and the girls decided to leave. They decided to head towards Jara's compound. Regardless of their final destination they still needed to fly somewhat nearby and even with Kat's speed that was going to take a while. On the ground it was harder to tell but the mountain was HUGE and the distances between the compound were not small. It would take someone at normal walking speed about half a day to get between two adjacent compounds. *NOVELnext.com*

As they were flying though. Kat came to a decision. *I think we should visit Jara. If I'm entirely honest I already feel like we should tell Zuhra despite Apep's wishes. I think it's best if we go to Jara and get the most comprehensive second opinion we can get. I believe she wants the best for both of them so she should be fairly unbiased about things. Then we can... well we can take things from there.*

[Why do you think it's so imperative we tell Zuhra? I'm not saying we shouldn't talk to Jara first but... well... I can see why Apep would keep it all hidden.]

True but I'm starting to feel like Apep should be taking this journey with Zuhra. Not have us take it behind her back. I mean... we didn't just jump straight into a relationship. Despite your crush, if we weren't friends I doubt it would have really gone anywhere. I couldn't have just said 'well she's pretty so I don't mind dating her' I had to get to the point where I care more about your happiness than my own.

Kat could already feel the slight discomfort Lily was trying to hide. *Don't even think about it Lily. You can feel my own feelings on the matter. I'm VERY happy with this arrangement and I don't even want you to pretend you don't also have the same thoughts. You've proven quite a few times that you think MY feelings are more important than you own. This seems to just be how it works. So do not take my admission of that fact as a problem.*

[Sorry. I just... I still worry even with the link. I mean... it would have been nice if you were sexually attracted to me... I mean. I have no problems with how things turned out but... but I can't help but worry I'm getting more out of this than you are sometimes...]

Lily. We've been over this before. But just so that we're clear. "I would suffer through truly horrible scenarios to keep you happy. It is not a hardship in the slightest to be dating you and I love you. Even if not the way I think a girlfriend should," said Kat allowed to make sure her truth curse was in full effect.

Having you happy and by my side is something that makes ME happy.

.....

*And I just think... that for Apep and Zuhra to really see if this will work out... well I feel like we should be bringing them both in on these adventures. Apep should be the one meeting figures from Zuhra's past. Learning more about her. I feel like maybe if they both went through it all together they'd be closer and it might even help Zuhra with some closure. To... perhaps not quite put these people behind her...

But by introducing Apep she could be telling her friends and family that she's moved on. A lie perhaps, but one that could become true in time. Acting out the part of someone with something to live for long enough... and maybe she'll start to live for herself once again. I wonder if they have psychologists though... I'm going to assume not because Jara's not so poor a boss to watch Zuhra as she is and not help... unless she offered and got turned down.*

Things were silent across their mental connection for a while after Kat finished. She could feel Lily's roiling emotions but didn't interrupt. Lily was trying to deal with both being inordinately pleased by Kat's words and uncomfortable with how much she perceived she was getting from Kat. Perhaps Kat could have made the argument she was getting just as much, if not more, from Lily... but Kat also knew Lily would simply deny it. Apparently, a lifelong companion willing to help with your job doesn't count as 'enough' for whatever arbitrary reason.

[Yeah that makes sense. I guess I can see why you'd want to bring Zuhra in... and when you put it that way... I guess that is a big part of a relationship. Learning about each other... even if we seem to be stuck on the same conversation...] thought Lily as she suppressed her own internal issues for the moment.

Kat rolled her eyes. A gesture which could probably be shown through the connection, but for the moment, Kat was glad Lily couldn't see. After that comment there was mostly silence. With them both on the same page, and Lily trying to battle her own feelings, there really wasn't much to talk about. Kat, for her part, thought Lily should be dealing with those feelings of inadequacy and unequal treatment. Lily wasn't really thinking about the silence. She was trying to reconcile her divergent thoughts.

If Kat approved of things as they were, then was it really her place to feel guilty about anything? Kat was happy. Lily was happy... most of the time. Really it was a win-win situation. If Kat's words were true, as she KNEW they had to be, Kat could not be in a better situation. Lily didn't have the benefit of her own truth curse to confirm it but years of repressed feelings all pointed to these recent week and a bit being the best of her life. She had magic, an awesome girlfriend, and she hadn't been socially destroyed by her best friend for a second time.

The issue of course, was with just how well things had gone. She felt almost like an imposter. As if such good things weren't meant to happen to her. There should be an issue. There should be some crack in the facade preventing it from being an idyllic wonderland. Well... the inconvenient truth is she'd found that crack. It was her own inability to believe she deserved the rewards she'd been giving. The picture wasn't broken. She was. A harsh view perhaps, but one Lily couldn't keep from resonating strongly within her.

By the time the pair arrived at the front gate Lily wasn't really any better off. Realising the source of her problem didn't really solve it. If anything it made things a little worse to realise she was the source of her own discontent in what should be an perfect moment in her life. Flying was nice and all but apparently it gave her too much time to think about dumb things. Still, she was at Jara's now and she could put on a mostly true smile and walk in. The guards were the same two they saw last time, so a quick show of the papers and they were in.

Kat noticed Lily's issues, but waited. They walked around to the outer greenhouse doors and showed their papers once again. This time it took slightly longer, the guards not recognising them on site. It was no trouble though and they continued inside. Kat watching and listening carefully. Once they were out of sight of the guards, Kat stopped Lily in place with her tail, leading her to pitch forward slightly.

Kat of course, swooped in to catch Lily and then pulled her in for a kiss. This one was not gentle. Kat used her superior strength, even in such a small part of her body, to force her tongue into Lily's mouth. Letting it roam around and press Lily's own down around and to the side. Lily could barely breathe. Her

mind struggling to hold back the rush of joy and lust. Lily lost track of time, unable to properly think throughout the event.

Kat pulled back eventually, knowing that Lily did need to breathe at some point. Lily just stood there dazed for a few moments, wide smile splitting her face. Kat then started to carefully lead Lily along the path with her tail, as Lily wasn't quite grounded enough to walk by herself. Kat couldn't help but lick her lips while watching Lily, which of course didn't help Lily's attempts at clawing her way back to sanity.

Why didn't I do that while we were flying around? Well she was in her Memphis form but I probably could have just pet her behind the ears or something. Why find reasonable arguments and slowly allow Lily to realise that I love her when I can just kiss her like that. So much less work... and so much more satisfying. What a way to get rid of her nasty doubts. I'll need to make sure I make extensive use of this technique in the future.

And well. If Kat was beaming her own bright smile, one that said there was nothing greater in the world? Well. Lily wasn't quite coherent enough to notice. So it could be a secret of her own a little longer.

Chapter 818 NO. NO SADNESS FOR YOU

The next checkpoint, the one at the door was also easily passed by showing Jara's documents. However, they were immediately intercepted by a butler. "I'm afraid the young miss is currently in a meeting with the Lord and Lady of the house. Is the matter time sensitive at all?"

"No, we can wait," said Kat.

The butler nodded as if this was the expected answer, which, truth be told, it was. To interrupt a meeting was one thing. To interrupt a meeting between the three main figures of the household was another. Something would have to be truly wrong for Kat to insist on meeting now, "I see. In that case please follow me to the glass parlour,"

Kat nodded and fell in behind the butler, guiding Lily along with her tail. The butler politely ignoring the fact that Lily was still completely out of it. *Probably best Jara can't meet us right now anyway. If she was, Lily would be half out of it for the start of the conversation and while her reaction would be adorable, I'm not sure Lily would be pleased with me after the fact.*

Kat's idle thoughts carried her to the 'glass parlour' which was a small mostly circular room made from glass. The glass separated the room and the plants you could see just outside. There was a waterfall and a small stream that came after it, alongside various plants. The room was well lit, with the glass not limiting the light of the sun much at all. There was a small table made of stone with four chairs around it. Two more chairs that were more like half-size couches lined the walls.

The butler gestured towards the room and Kat took one of the larger chairs so that she could keep Lily next to her. The butler, seeing this left for just a moment, keeping the door open, and came back with a small table leaving it in front of Kat. "I will be back with refreshments in a moment," said the butler.

Before Kat could register what she'd just been told the butler had already left and shut the door behind him. Kat glanced at the table, and then back at the door. *Well... free food I guess? I mean... we just ate but... it's fine. I mean, I'm not going to get fat. Lily probably won't either... actually maybe we should ask about that next check-up...*

.....

Eventually the butler came back in. He had a bowl of fruit and a teapot on a tray. He quickly served out two cups before leaving the room again. Kat glanced at Lily who still had a dopey smile on her face and was leaning into Kat's shoulder. *Nope she's still out of it.* Kat grabbed the teacup nearest to her and tried a sip.

Kat swirled it around in her mouth before swallowing. Then she took another sip, this time taking in as air well before finally she downed the cup in one gulp and said, "I still have no idea what tea is supposed to taste like," additionally. To her senses it wasn't even hot. With a barely enhanced sense of taste and no experience with tea it was basically just slightly bitter lukewarm water to her. Hmm. I still don't understand. Thought Kat with a shrug as she waited for Lily to come back to her senses.

That turned out to be five minutes later when Lily leaned further over into Kat and starting to sniff at her neck. That was the moment Lily froze, realising what she was doing and leaned backwards quickly. The couch not being quite large enough for that swift motion meant that Lily was quickly falling over the backrest...

Except Kat hadn't loosened her tail's hold on Lily at all. So she just reeled her girlfriend back in until she was pressed against Kat's side once again. "Welcome back Lily," said Kat with a grin.

Lily's face went bright red as the vague memories of the last few minutes returned to her. "Wha... wait... um... you... but... where... no... why... wait... um... haaa?"

"Take your time," said Kat taking another sip of tea. Mostly for the amusing picture it painted in her mind rather than any true enjoyment of the taste. She might get there one day. Probably with hotter tea.

Lily visibly tried to recompose herself by attempting to work her way through the memories. Only to get stuck on the first one, Kat's kiss again, and promptly crashed a second time. Her dopey smile appeared again and she started to sway slightly with her tail flowing the opposite way as a counterbalance.

It was adorable to watch and if Jara wasn't liable to walk in at any moment Kat might have just let the scene play out. Sadly, her judgement was better than that so she sighed and said, "We're now in Jara's house. She'll be here at some point, maybe soon,"

That sobered Lily up... mostly. Her face was now a bit red but she was completely coherent at least.

"Kat... what... why did you kiss me before? I mean... what were you thinking! We're meeting Jara soon why would you do that! It wasn't a small kiss either... I could hardly think straight!" 'complained' Lily.

Kat took another sip of tea as if she was contemplated the answer, projecting all her amusement directly down the link so that Lily could feel that she was being teased even before Kat answered. "Well, your smile was painfully fake before. Jara, someone born into a political family, would spot it a mile away," said Kat.

Lily pouted while Kat's amusement just grew. Both of those statements were factual if misleading. Lily's fake smile was actually pretty good, it was just the fact that Kat could tell it was fake that was the problem. With their connection it wasn't hard to figure out and seeing Lily putting up a front was painful

to Kat. On the other hand, Jara could spot Lily's smile easily. Kat didn't say anything about spotting it meaning that she'd worked out it was fake.

Lily huffed and turned around pretending to ignore Kat. Sadly for her, Kat was already having too much fun with this to let it end. So Kat leaned over onto Lily's shoulder, letting her head rest there. It was a little uncomfortable to lean out of the way so her horns were hitting Lily, but it was worth it to breathe into Lily's ear and say, "Oh? Have I upset you? I'm happy to make it up to you. Any. Way. You. Want."

Lily tried and failed to suppress a pleasant shiver that went all the way down her body. She wanted to ignore Kat, the awful tease. She was sitting in someone else's house, it was clear neither of them were really aiming for anything to happen... but Kat had to push her buttons like this. Lily was mostly annoyed at herself though for the simple reason... that she wasn't annoyed at all. This wasn't something she wanted right at this moment but she loved it. Then Kat gave her ear a slight nip and Lily couldn't help but make a rather indecent sound.

Lily jolted upright, knocking Kat's horns slightly in the process, luckily not getting hurt, as she slapped both hands over her mouth and looked at Kat scandalized. Kat apparently had no shame because she just smiled back, two full rows of teeth and joy alight in her eyes. They were just ever so slightly starting to tint purple and with her own improved eyesight Lily could tell they were starting to glow a little bit as well.

Lily couldn't help her breath quickening at the sight. Kat had proved so many of her worries useless with just a little bit of... concentrated effort. Lily wasn't entirely pleased that she fought so hard against those thoughts and failed to reconcile them while Kat's small actions were able to overwhelm them completely. "Why are you doing this?" asked Lily with a pout, even as she did return to Kat's side.

Kat projected her feelings through the link though instead of just shoving them all down Kat tried to keep them sharp and separate to help Lily understand. The joy of teasing her, the sadness from seeing Lily upset, the protectiveness that always burned in her heart when she felt of Lily and many more. "I don't like seeing you sad Lily. Sometimes I do think it's best you work through it on your own but that doesn't mean I enjoy letting that happen. You were sad, and the time I gave you didn't seem to be helping, so I gave you something to keep your lovely mind occupied with,"

Lily melted under the onslaught of honest compliments, sliding bonelessly onto Kat's lap where the demon could start to run her fingers through Lily's hair. "You can't just say stuff like that Kat. I'm not sure my heart can take it," moaned Lily into Kat's stomach.

"Too bad. It's all true and your mine now. I'm not letting you stay mopey any longer than I need to," said Kat happily. And if it meant she had to keep an ear out for Jara's arrival so that Lily wouldn't die of embarrassment... well that too was a worthwhile sacrifice.

Chapter 819 Welcome to my Parlour said the Demon to the Maid

It was a good ten minute later when Kat's straining ears picked up the sound of approaching footsteps. She grabbed Lily up off her lap and placed her back in an upright position. Lily opened her mouth to complain about the change, only to blush when she realised what it meant. She quickly grabbed her cup of tea, cold by this point, and chugged the whole thing just to distract herself enough to suppress her blush. It... it was barely successful.

Zuhra opened the door and Jara stepped through, taking a quick glance at them both before reaching to the satchel she had on her side, digging around in it for a few moments before saying, "Zuhra can you grab me a fresh notebook for this? I don't seem to have one on me,"

Zuhra bowed and said, "Of course mistress," before turning and leaving the room. It was unclear if she had a good poker face or if she truly didn't see anything strange about the request to leave Jara alone so soon after entering the room. Perhaps it was because this was Jara's house, and she was in no danger here?

Jara waited a few moments for Zuhra to well and truly be gone, something Kat did listen out for. Twenty seconds had passed and as soon as the time was up Jara whipped her head back around and said, "What are you both doing here? It's not so easy to keep Zuhra busy. She might like busywork but she does know her main job is to follow me around. The fact she left so easily isn't a surprise but it won't work again!"

Kat wanted to drag things out a bit, maybe explain properly... but if they were limited on time there was only one answer. "We've just found out about Gaston's death and at this point we feel like Zuhra should really be involved. We're talking about letting her in on the whole thing. Well that and we want to figure out some things before our contract is technically complete. We want your opinion on letting her know,"

Jara groaned, "Of course it's something like this dammit. Ok... I want to give my tentative approval for telling her. I don't necessarily like doing all this behind her back either and if you think it's time to speak up... that's fine. The issue is... no I think Apep would forgive basically anything as long as it was for Zuhra benefit. Hmm... on top of that... with you telling Zuhra on his behalf the family doesn't have to get involved yet... ok. I like this plan,"

You know. I was expecting this to be a bit harder. Maybe explain how we're betraying Apep's trust or something but... I guess it's nice to know she agrees with us. "Right so... how do we want to break this to her?" asked Kat.

.....

"Hmm," Jara hummed. "Good question,"

"Well we probably shouldn't lead with 'we were just talking to Belle,'" seeing Jara's confusion Kat explained, "Belle is Gaston's mother and Gaston is her old fiancé,"

"Yes. Do NOT lead with that. Probably just... start from the beginning. It'll still be a lot but..." Jara paused when Kat held up a hand. She could already hear Zuhra coming back. Jara nodded, quickly grabbing a chair for herself and setting it up when Zuhra stepped in. "Sit down Zuhra,"

Zuhra paused with the book in hand. She looked around slowly at the group with a frown, seemingly understanding now that the book was just an excuse to get her out of the room for a moment. "Of course, mistress," said Zuhra her voice showing only the barest signs of strain. "How can I help you,"

The other three in the room all looked at each other, as if trying to figure out how to start... until Jara and Lily settled their eyes onto Kat' with a nod. *Ah gee thanks for volunteering me guys.* Lily could still feel Kat's amusement so just quirked the corner of her mouth up slightly. With an exaggerated sigh Kat

turned to Zuhra and said, "Hello Zuhra, my name is Kat and the person beside me is my girlfriend Lily. We were hired for a specific job, and now we are... broadening the scope of it I suppose,"

Zuhra looked confused and hesitant but Kat continued, "Now, it in part involves you... and I'm currently trying to determine how best to say it. A bit of further delaying but useful information is that I am a demon. This, amongst other things, means that I am incapable of lying. So know that everything I tell you is the truth, because it HAS to be," Zuhra nodded, "Ok. Good. Now... the thing I suppose is on your mind..."

"What is all this about. Well, the core of it is that Lily and I were hired to look into you-" Kat was cut off by Zuhra hopping up from her chair and pulling a knife out of her front pocket and pointing it towards Kat. "Put that away. It's not like you can hurt me with it. We mean you no harm,"

"No harm she says," spat Zuhra, "You just said you were hired to look into me! I'd ask what set you off but frankly I don't feel like incriminating myself for something else,"

"Do you really think Jara would be here with us if we were looking into something bad?" asked Kat. Zuhra glanced over at her employer who waved back with a bright smile on her face, completely ignoring the tense atmosphere, Zuhra took one more step back but didn't lower the knife.

"Ok are you willing to here us out now?" asked Kat. Zuhra gave a hesitant nod in response, "Good. In that case the reason you're looking into you is because Apep-"

Despite agreeing to here Kat out Zuhra apparently couldn't hold her tongue, "APEP! I can't believe he'd do something like that. I thought we were at least friends, but NO apparently I can't even have that,"

Kat just stared back at Zuhra. "Jara... is she... is she intentionally trying to take this the wrong way?"

Jara sighed, "I don't really know why Zuhra is reacting so badly to this..."

"DON'T talk about me like I'm not here! I can hear you both perfectly well!" growled Zuhra.

"Apparently not because you aren't really listening," snapped Lily, "You're just making assumptions based on half of a conversation. We aren't your enemies Zuhra. We are trying to bring you into this gently but you're apparently trying to be difficult"

Zuhra took in a deep breath and then glanced over at the tea set. Kat and Lily gave matching nods and Zuhra pulled a mug from her pocket and poured herself a glass and sipped on it for a few moments. "Ok I'm calm,"

"Right..." said Kat uncertainly, "So, Apep has a crush on you and wanted some information. What he tried to do was summon a demon to answer his questions but that failed and he got me and Lily instead. His goal, was to find out if he had any chance with you. He knew you had a fiancé before, and didn't want to pressure you by asking and having his family find out. They're apparently very invested in finding him a wife.

"That's on top of the fact Jara's family is also interested in pairing her with Apep because they don't think she'd bother to find a husband otherwise. They seem to really want kids. So Apep wanted to find out if he had a chance before mentioning it. In the end, that didn't work out and Lily and I started to check your background a bit..."

"Which... would have been fine if you just broke up with your fiancé but we now know about Gaston and the fact that he's dead... and it just sort of felt wrong to keep going," Zuhra sucked in a deep breath and took another drink.

"I'm not interested," said Zuhra.

Jara growled, "Zuhra, you're my friend as well as my maid and that is frankly, ridiculous. I've seen you get along really well with Apep so far and I already know that you aren't a lesbian or asexual like myself, so why not give it a chance,"

"He thought it was appropriate to investigate my personal life! I don't know about you but I feel pretty pressured by that!" snarled Zuhra.

"It wasn't his intent though," pointed out Lily, "he wasn't even sure if you were going to be married to a guy or not. If it was a woman he would have... well I'm not quite sure what but he didn't want to ruin what small friendship you have,"

"Well he's doing a pretty good job of it you know. He could have just asked me!" said Zuhra.

"Yeah right," said Jara, "I didn't even know the guy's NAME Zuhra and you think you'd have told Apep? You're dreaming!"

Chapter 820 I Reject Your Reality and Substitute My Own

"Well it's not like I was going to tell my boss all the sordid details of my dead fiancé am I? That's hardly appropriate workplace conversation!" hissed Zuhra.

"Workplace conversation?" asked Jara flabbergasted. "Workplace conversation! Jara you've seen me naked. You've seen me literally covered in horse shit. You have seen me cry and scream and yell just to deal with all my pent up emotions. Don't you DARE tell me any of that is appropriate as a 'workplace conversation'. Zuhra. YOU WORK IN MY HOUSE. You are someone who is at least a friend and maybe a sister. You WERE TOLD THIS WHEN YOU SIGNED THE CONTRACT TO WORK HERE. Don't you try and weasel your way through this by saying it wasn't 'workplace appropriate'!"

Zuhra flinched at Jara's raised voice. As Jara continued to glare she put away her knife and grabbed a chair to properly converse. "You may have a bit of a point," admitted Zuhra. Jara raised an eyebrow as if saying 'just a bit' but Zuhra held her ground this time. "Yes. A bit. I still find it to be a major breach of privacy. You had no right,"

Jara glared back, somewhat annoyed at Zuhra's attitude now and said, "Technically speaking, the papers I gave Kat that lets her investigate are all perfectly valid. Not only do I have a full and complete right to investigate everything in your background, technically speaking Apep does as well. He wants to elevate you to an important position in his household. Granted it's not actually employment he wants to marry you... but he does have the right to investigate your background for it.

"I even went light on things, just giving Kat permission to find information and ask questions. Nothing about forcing any of them to answer. So despite how rude it may or may not be all Kat did was ask a few questions. Really, she could have probably done it without the permission notes. So no Zuhra. Despite what you think we had ever right,"

Zuhra sniffed as if she'd smelt something rank. "Sure, but if we ARE friends like you said isn't it a bit invasive?"

Jara shrugged, "If you want to make that argument... I've been around you for two years and I don't know the name of the woman who raised you in the orphanage. I don't know who your fiancé was. I've only heard of your friend Marem, and I'm pretty sure you didn't mean to even give me that much.

.....

"But sure. Let's pretend that is all normal. Let's pretend that I've never been bothered by the fact you know nearly everything about my own life but I know nothing about yours... YOU ARE MISERABLE ZUHRA-" shouted Jara.

"I am not!" cut in Zuhra.

"YOU ARE!" said Jara firmly. "You take a break only because it's contractually mandated. You had to be FORCED TO SLEEP. You clean everything in reach even when it's been done once or twice already because you can't sit still. Just talking vaguely about your past makes you wince. Zuhra. If Kat hadn't provided me an opportunity to look into things the way she did... I honestly would have done it by myself at some point.

"I'd have given you three years I think. Three years to get over everything in your past and move forward. Three years to get yourself situated. That's probably more time than I should have been willing to give you but it's not like you're a sobbing wreck all the time. You can still work, you still smile. But... now I have to wonder... have I ever really seen you smile? Has it always been fake?"

Zuhra winced at the scathing criticism of her lifestyle. "I... I'm fine. This is my real smile," said Zuhra as she righted herself back to her more standard mannerisms.

Jara sighed, "Honey... I don't know what's sadder. The fact that I thought that smile was at all natural or the fact you still seem to believe it yourself. Clearly I have failed as your mistress if things were this bad," Jara finished speaking and shook her head slowly.

Well... this has become... a whole thing really hasn't it?

[I don't even know if this is still about us going behind her back at this point. I'm pretty sure she's just using this as a chance to vent and I think Jara might be letting her. She almost seems to be intentionally riling Zuhra up at this point. Jara's nowhere near as... uncomposed as last time she broke down. This feels a lot more staged. Well, at least of Jara's end...]

"Well what do YOU know? You've never lost anybody that close to you. I had to grow up without parents, the love of my life is DEAD and his mother thinks he was MURDERED. What sort of struggles do you have?" hissed Zuhra.

"Really?" asked Jara, "You really wish to go down that road? Perhaps I should ask how you would feel being forced to fit into a mould that was never for you. I've been groomed my entire life to lead the family when I could not care less. I was forced to learn politics and intrigue and as the future Lady of the 6th I am expected to have my own children to carry on the name,

“But let’s focus on that for a moment shall we,” Jara raised her voice just a notch, a cold anger, a wound long since scarred over but one that still I T C H E S. “I have no interest in sex. I have NEGATIVE interest in sex. I’d love nothing more than to live in the woods and study plants for the rest of my life but I have to find someone to marry that I can never love and let them fuck me at least once. Pretty sure, in civilised culture you could see that as rape. So do you really want to play the ‘what do you know’ card on me?”

Zuhra slammed her hand into the chair, “I’d trade places with you in a heartbeat,”

“And I could never be in your place because I do not, and can never, love someone the way you did Gaston!” hissed Jara, “But guess what? Unlike you, I do not bemoan the issues that I have. I came up with plans and solutions. I made contingencies. I owned up to my responsibilities and I am ready to lead the family as is expected of me. It will not fill me with joy but it IS my duty and I will fulfill it.”

“What grand responsibility do I have?” asked Zuhra.

Jara smiled, a big wide smile like the cat that got the canary. “Ah Zuhra. You have a responsibility to the matron who raised you, your friends, me, probably Gaston and his mother... but most importantly. You have a responsibility to yourself to stop trying to work yourself to death when people who care for you aren’t looking over your shoulder,”

“How would you know what Gaston would want? Or Belle? I can maybe believe that Theresa would want better for me considering all the trouble she went through to teach me and Marem has been saying things like that for years at this point. Why is this different?” asked Zuhra.

Jara went to say something but Kat decided it was time to remind Zuhra there was more than two people in the room, “Because Belle approves of Apep,”

Silence completely overtook the room. Jara was still smiling but she was respecting the silence. Lily was shrinking away so that she was half behind Kat. The conversation was a bit much and she was enjoying watching the argument play out. Kat had her chin thrust forward and a stern look on her face. She wasn’t willing to leave the slightest doubt that her words were the truth. And Zuhra... Zuhra truly didn’t know what to say.

She might not have visited Belle much since the incident but that didn’t mean she was unaware of how things had turned at. She knew about Belle’s secret crusade against the 8th, she knew about the fact Belle never left her office unless it was to go with a caravan and even that was rare these days. She knew that Belle ate whatever excess product was lying around instead of real meals. She knew that Belle had chosen a hill to die on, and was very happy to run herself into the ground up there. So what was this?

“Wha?” Zuhra couldn’t even form the full word. Her brain was trying and failing to comprehend the words that had just came out of Kat’s mouth. She was told earlier in the conversation that Kat couldn’t lie but it HAD TO BE. It HAD TO BE A LIE. Zuhra’s mind was brought to a screeching halt. The gears that turned to keep her thoughts running flying off the sprockets as a cascade of errors tried to resolve themselves. Belle. The woman on a crusade for her son... had approved of moving on?!