

DEMONS 821

Chapter 821 Jara's Pitch

"How? No... what? No... how... how could she say that? I... I don't understand?" even ask Zuhra formed the words she found herself lacking understanding.

Kat gave a shrug, "I can explain it the simple way or the long way," offered Kat.

"I... I don't understand why there'd be a difference... or even how she'd think that I should give Apep a chance in the first place... I... I just don't get it..." said Zuhra.

"Well, the simple answer is that she doesn't want you to end up like her, but the long answer is of course more complex," said Kat easily.

"What? But... why not? She's the owner of a successful business, has more intuitive understanding of people than anyone else I've ever known, her business has nearly doubled in size since she took over from her father, she was able to raise a son by herself perfectly well just because she decided not to have a husband. She's one of the most well respected merchants in the city and the nearby countries. She might not have the largest merchant house but she is very well known. She's highly educated in matters of both literature and economics... why would I not want that?" asked Zuhra.

Jara looked to Kat with a 'yeah can you explain' face, so Kat sighed and brought forth the memory of Belle and answered, with a sombre tone. "Belle doesn't want you to become her because she's a shell of a person," Kat started to mark of things on her fingers, "she lives in her office. She doesn't go on trips as often as she used to, she hasn't visited her house in over a year, she eats spare products instead of proper meals, she works by a single lantern in her office, the business continues to exist mostly because of her former success and none of her current action, she can't let go of a vendetta despite having virtually no evidence, and she has no idea what she'll do when she accomplishes it anyway,"

"I... I... I didn't think things had gotten so bad..." said Zuhra softly.

.....

Kat gave a shrug, "I don't know what to tell you Zuhra. Belle still has her mind, her body hasn't completely fallen apart and despite her bad habits she's still better of than most... but she really is running on fumes in many ways. She doesn't have that spark of life you see in most people's eyes anymore. It feels like she runs on spite and the occasional flashback to better times. She can fake being alright pretty well and maybe some of the ideas I suggested to her will help but... frankly she's not doing well..."

"I hadn't noticed..." said Zuhra as she folded in on herself somewhat. "I should have been there to help her..."

Jara sighed, "I think that's part of the point Zuhra. She doesn't want you to turn out like her so I imagine she was intentionally putting up a good front whenever you had the chance to see her. I'm also not sure she wants the kind of help you're talking about. As bitter and angry as she seems from Kat's explanation... and as much as she doesn't want you to become her... I get the sense she's... well not content but perhaps... unwilling to move past it? Accepting of it as her fate?" suggested Jara.

"But it shouldn't be! She's so successful... she's done so much for her company... so much for so many small villages... she might play it off as 'good business sense' but most of the other traders still don't bother... I just can't understand it..." said Zuhra.

"Consider this then," said Jara, "you're younger than her, just as well educated and currently working for one of the ten guardians. You're also in a position to if not marry, at least become close to the heir to a second. I think that's just as impressive if not more so considering you're younger age... you could have a bright future you know?" Zuhra just gave a saddened shrug, "Well, seeing as you've calmed down now, even if it is perhaps a tad too far, what are your real thoughts about Apep?"

Zuhra sunk further into the chair as she finally decided to give the question it's proper weight. What were her thoughts on Apep? The answer was still unclear. She hadn't ever looked at him that way... or anyone at all since Gaston. A lot of things just... sort of happened in the background to her since his death. Nothing in particular stood out and without Jara forcing her to take breaks regularly Zuhra would be hard pressed to know how long it'd been or what day it was.

"I... I don't really know?" offered Zuhra as her answer eventually. Seeing Jara's unimpressed look directed at her from the side she tried to continue... "I mean... he's cute... but more like a little boy I guess? Maybe that's unfair but... Gaston was... he was impressive always. He had muscles that looked strong enough to break wood with just a flex. He had martial training he... he was... no... he felt POWERFUL. He had a sort of presence that drew you to him..."

"It actually surprised me to find out I was someone he had a crush on... he was always showing off, flashing his teeth that I swear he had to polish instead of clean... he was more of an unreachable figure you know? I appreciated him, at the start, like one would appreciate a statue. Impressive from a distance, nice detailing up close, but ultimately not something to strive for. It is a statue at the end of the day..."

"Except apparently not. No apparently he was very real and interested in me... and I just... I don't really know how I could love someone else like that. Could replace him... I mean... Apep... Apep is so many things that Gaston wasn't... and... I suppose I really don't like the idea of replacing Gaston at all in my heart..."

Jara gave a small smile, "Nobody is asking you to forget him... but maybe this is good? Allow Gaston to be that larger than life figure. The one who swept you off your feet with muscles the size of boulders and a smile that outshines the sun. A wondrous magical encounter you can always remember..."

"But perhaps you can also find a place in your heart for Apep. He is loyal, and while not as strong physically he's smarter than he gives himself credit for a much stronger politically. Where Gaston would probably show off at a party to prove himself worthy of you time and time again, Apep would be happy to stand by your side. I'm sure they'd both offer you everything in the world if they could... but Gaston is not Apep and maybe it's better that way. Instead of staying alone or finding a knock-off Gaston... why not look to Apep for a different kind of romance?" suggested Jara.

Kat turned her full attention to Zuhra. Jara had probably given the best pitch possibly, certainly better than anything believed she could think of. Lily was of a similar opinion. It was a great way of framing this development to Zuhra. It was a chance for Zuhra to move on without truly moving on. Perhaps she

would in the future, perhaps not but it looked to be an excellent place to start, “I... I’m sorry but I just don’t know if that’s a good idea...” said Zuhra.

And it fell flat.

“Surely it’s worth giving him a chance though?” asked Jara carefully to make sure it didn’t sound like she was begging.

“Jara... this... you’re not talking about a new flavour of tea or I guess in your case testing out a new crossbreed of plants. Jara this... and please understand this time I mean you no ill will... but I don’t think you CAN understand. This... it’s a delicate matter and... sure maybe Apep is different enough... but I don’t want to just casually date him. Not only is giving him unfounded hope cruel I don’t want to even date someone I don’t at least have a small crush on. I just... I’m not sure I can see it going anywhere. I... I’m not saying no just yet... because I’ll admit that like Belle was worried about... I didn’t really see much of a future for me anywhere really... but I can’t see this working out yet...

“Hmm...” Zuhra turned to Kat and Lily. “What about you? What would you both do?”

Kat winced and glanced at Lily before deciding to go first, “You’re asking a hard question Zuhra. I’m asexual like Jara and I... well honestly I probably would just... not? I mean if Lily died NOW I’d end up like Belle no question about it... well that’s not true we bound ourselves together so it would literally kill me not figuratively. I... I don’t really know how to answer you Zuhra. The situation isn’t really all that similar and we’ve taken steps to avoid something like it... even if they were accidental.

Chapter 822 Not Quite Shared Pain

Zuhra turned her focus to Lily, staring. Lily frowned at the attention but Zuhra didn’t let up, “What?” asked Lily, “Kat said it all. We’ve taken accidental steps to avoid something like that ever happening, what else do you want me to say?”

Zuhra narrowed her eyes, “Kat specified that SHE was asexual, implying pretty strongly that you aren’t. I want to know what you would do? In the even something happened to Kat before you got to this point,”

Lily sighed, “It’s hard to say Zuhra... I don’t really like to think about it. Either I’d move on, meaning that Kat wasn’t the only person for me, or I wouldn’t and I’d be miserable for the rest of my existence. It’s not exactly pleasant to contemplate Zuhra.”

“Well how do you think I feel?” asked Zuhra a little hotly, “I LIVE that situation. My old fiancé is dead and my... friend, my friend is trying to force me together with her other friend. I don’t exactly find any of this to be pleasant you know?”

“Hey I’m not trying to force anything here,” cut in Jara. “I think Apep could be good for you and he has a massive crush on you. I’m not trying to strongarm you here but you have a nice, apparently attractive man of high standing interested in you, despite the fact you’re miserable and had a previous love,”

“Gee thanks for the winning endorsement, Jara,” grumbled Zuhra without any heat.

Jara shrugged unrepentantly, “You’re pretty sure but that doesn’t mean you’re a joy to be around. Might be different for other people, but your obsessive need to clean is just barely tolerable because it’s your job Zuhra. It worries me. As I said... I’m not trying to force anything... but I do think it’d be good for

you and if not Apep I might still force you to date someone at some point if you continue to be a miserable maid,”

.....

Zuhra huffed, “I believe you’re trying to refocus the issue on me. I asked Lily a question and I’d like a proper answer to it,” said Zuhra dragging the subject of the conversation back to Lily, who winced in response to the attention again. Her tail found its way to Kat’s and wrapped around it for a bit of peace of mind.

“Look... ok... I might not have a proper answer for you... but how about this? I tell you about MY first love?” offered Lily.

“Wait Kat isn’t your first love?” asked Zuhra shocked.

Lily nodded, “Yes, now do you want me to explain it or not?”

Zuhra made a go ahead gesture so Lily sucked in a deep breath. “Fine. Ok... so there was this girl called Stella...”

(This is the same story Lily told during her confession. If you need a refresher it starts at 552)

Lily went on to explain her friendship with Stella growing up and the issues it caused her later in life. How it forced her to move towns. This time though, after she finished the story, she returned to focus on those moments right after her first failed confession. It hadn’t been particularly relevant at the time she told Kat, but it seemed like something Zuhra might need to hear.

“To back up somewhat Zuhra... the time right after Stella started to vilify me so that the entire school knew what had happened... the only good spot about it is that I never once considered killing myself,” Lily’s words were sharp. Her slitted eyes boring into Zuhra’s. “I thought of it exactly once and dismissed it not a second later.

“It was actually the first time I’d laughed in nearly a month at that point. I couldn’t stop. It was just so silly to me in that moment. I was slowing wasting away, I wasn’t taking care of myself at all. Barely leaving my room even for food and sustenance. I laughed because... as miserable as I was... the idea that it could ever be worth just ending it was so funny to me.

“You see... to me... that would be giving not just my heart but my entire life and future to Stella. Someone who’d just rejected and tried to destroy me despite being my friend for as long as I could remember. I laughed because she wasn’t worth my love. It was probably the moment I stopped my downward spiral. I wouldn’t say I got better after that... not until I met Kat and she started helping me out...

“But it made me remember to live. To live for myself. To find an alternative to being miserable. I’d been pushed to my breaking point but I wasn’t the one who broke in the end. Now. This is quite different. Gaston didn’t leave you intentionally... but perhaps he should have been more careful. Accident or not, Gaston died and he left you here to suffer in his absence. Perhaps use that as encouragement to find something new? Something all of your own?”

Jara was looking off to the side at this point. She wasn't crying of course. If anyone said otherwise she'd throw her notebook at them. Kat had at some point during the story moved Lily to her lap and was surrounding her the best she could. Trying not to allow Lily to remain fixated on such a dark point in her lap. Zuhra though...

Zuhra had a rather pinched expression. She didn't like Lily's comparisons at all. Didn't like the things she was implying... but to berate her after revealing such a deep wound from her past... Zuhra couldn't really bring herself to do it. It did make her realise she was perhaps being a bit harsh to the pair in front of her. Sure they were hired by Apep, but that didn't mean they were without compassion. It wasn't forgiveness for investigating her past. But it was perhaps... a bit of empathy.

"I... I don't... Thank you for sharing that Lily... I didn't quite realise... I mean... I agree it isn't the same but... but I suppose there is still hope for me. Though... contrary to Jara's suggestions you seem to have chosen someone rather similarly in looks to your first love," said Zuhra shakily.

Lily shrugged and said, "What can I say? I know what I like. Apparently I have a thing for red hair but what I really like is nice shapely legs," Zuhra blushed at Lily's admission, "what are you looking like that for? It's nothing indecent, and even if it was. I am happy with my choices. I have no shame in admitting what I find attractive about Kat. If I can't even talk about what I enjoy, how could I ever get the courage to take things further?" Of course in truth it was Kat that mostly helped push those boundaries despite her insistence on Lily setting the pace. While Kat would leave big decisions like that to Lily, Kat wasn't terribly fond of how embarrassed and guilty Lily felt looking at her.

"What do you mean exactly?" asked Zuhra confused.

Lily sighed exaggeratedly as if Zuhra had asked a very stupid question, "Zuhra... sure Gaston may have been attractive but WHAT about him was? What specifically called to you the most? Take Kat and Stella for example. They both have red hair, and at first glance you might say that's why I was attracted to them...

"But I disagree. What I like is actually their legs. Stella was rather sporty and kept herself active, but Kat instead was busy with helping out at the town orphanage and she walked to school every day. It's a slightly different appearance but just as pleasant. What I'm trying to do is find out if Apep is attractive to you at all!

"I mean, we heard from Belle that Gaston found your neckline particularly attractive. Personally I don't see it. I can't see much of your legs, so that's out for me but you have nice hair that you clearly still take care of and your winning feature is truly your eyes. They're like real jewels which, is actually a little strange at first glance, but on the second it's breathtaking,"

Zuhra bit her lips and thought on Lily's words only to find... she didn't really have an answer. Gaston was conventionally attractive. He was very closely aligned to the masculine ideal in many ways. Strong noticeable muscles, gleaming teeth, hair on the slightly longer side but well taken care of. Abs you could break rocks on. Not that Zuhra would admit to knowing that fact easily. Through it all though... Zuhra frowned as she tried to find 'the thing' she truly found attractive about Gaston. The easy answer 'everything' kept popping up but after Lily's speech it felt... hollow.

"I... I find that now that I am confronted with it... I can't find an answer for you. I... it is hard to imagine that I never considered it but... it seems to be the truth... I can't answer any more specifically than 'everything' or 'he was exceptionally handsome' and... and that hurts actually. To not be able to name anything as he apparently could and you do for your own love..." grumbled Zuhra.

Chapter 823 Let Us Think About... Something Else

The silence stretched on once again. With both Kat and Jara being asexual they couldn't really contribute to the issue, and as it was one Lily caused... she didn't have a good solution either. It's not like she could say that it didn't matter after explaining why and how it did. [I feel like I might have made a mistake somehow... I mean... Zuhra does not seem to be handling this well...]

Lily was right. Zuhra's hands were twitching in place and occasionally reaching into her pockets before Zuhra would pull them back out again as if burned. After this happened a few times it was clear she was trying to resist the urge to go and clean things. *It's not your fault Lily. You were trying to help. I didn't expect her to take it so hard though... do you think it's because time has dulled her memory of Gaston or that she never had a specific thing to point to in the first place?*

[I'm not sure. Part of me says that if Gaston was really as spectacular as Zuhra seems to think then there might not be something she could point to... but then another part of me points out that I've never seen anyone better looking than you and that I can still point to your legs being my favourite feature. I'm not sure if I'm helped by the fact that I had a crush before you or if I'm just more aware of my fetishes.]

Well what do you think is more likely?

[I don't know, I'm a gay woman Kat. I can't really understand what a straight girl finds attractive in guys. I mean sure, I've heard things. But some of the are contradictory. Like that time the girls nearly got into a civil war at school over Wain when he sprouted a beard over the weekend. The girls in school split themselves in half and started a war over if he looked better with or without the beard. Heck I even got dragged into it and... well I said I didn't really care at first but I was forced to pick a side... and I went with no beard. I mean... I don't like beards for obvious reasons but I mean... you know?]

No I think I lost your point somewhere along the way.

[Wait. Now that I think about it... how did you avoid getting caught up in that nonsense?]

.....

Hmm... I think... oh who was it... I think it might have been Paige? I can't find the specific memory without wasting a bunch of time but now you've brought it up... I'm pretty sure Paige asked 'Do you think Wain looks better with or without a beard' and my response was 'Who's Wain?' and she looked at me with the most confused face ever. Then described him in detail and I responded with, 'Right so he has a beard now?' and Paige threw up her hands in defeat.

[Ugh. Why didn't I go for that route!]

Because you kept better track of who's who at school? I couldn't really be bothered because I have to remember enough names back at the orphanage. I didn't need to go to school and remember more names.

[Hmm... I guess that's a better excuse than I could come up with. Back to Zuhra though... I just don't have enough experience to say how normal her attitude is. I mean... surely she's not completely vanilla right?]

I'm not sure if the fact she can't point to something specific means she's vanilla. I mean, Sue can't really point to anything specific either and if she's vanilla... Lily could feel Kat's shivers while being hugged, and joined in with the uncomfortable mental image.

[You know... speaking of Sue. I wonder if she'd have any good advice for this situation? Would it be worth sending her a message?]

I'm not sure... I mean... maybe? I wouldn't get a response anytime soon so it'd only be applicable if we're still here to answer tomorrow or maybe late tonight. I'm also not certain Sue would be able to help. Her first answer would probably be 'just get Apep to fuck her and see how that turns out' if we're being honest with each other... but she might have a follow up answer that's actually useful. The problem would be getting her to send both in the same message.

[Yeah... that does sound like something Sue would say. 'It's just a bit of sex. You have to make sure you're both compatible' or something like that. We'd probably have to exchange a few messages to get a proper answer and I'm also unsure if we'd have the time for that. How likely do you think it is that we'll be able to stay and help with this Gaston issue?]

I'm not sure... it really does seem like something I should be paid for even if I don't feel the need... I think as long as we keep it within 24 hours, we'll be completely fine... but any more than that and we might be pushing it.

[Could we message Nira for advice? She probably has some experience with this sort of thing considering her age. Surely she's seen at least one death of an acquaintance set to be married right?]

I mean maybe? I'm not sure how long she went on Contracts for and considering she's a healer it's quite likely that she was in charge of making sure the person in question DIDN'T die. So it still might not be something she knows how to deal with. That's not even going over the fact that she'd probably have the same joke answers as Sue.

[Wait what?]

Wait did I not tell you about that? Nira is a massive tease and likes to embarrass her family members. Considering we are two of Kamiko's only two friends she'd probably treat us like part of the family and give that kind of answer.

[I don't like the fact that even having not met her outside of a professional setting I can still imagine her doing that. What about... Tristan? No... what was his name? Kamiko's dad?]

Trigrath is his name... and while he might give us answers... he probably wouldn't give us one that we'd like. He's obsessed with his family and I imagine he'd agree with Zuhra that being miserable for the rest of his... much longer life... would still be preferable to cheating on the spirit of his dead wife. The fact that Nira can heal basically anything would only reinforce that idea in his head. So... yeah... don't think he'd be much help with this.

[Your friends are weird Kat...]

Kat rolled her eyes, hidden as they were behind Lily's ears. *Lily, most of them are your friends as well, some of them aren't really friends so much as family of friends and finally... as my once best friend what does that say about you?*

[Kat. I had a crush on you for nearly two years before I finally said anything and instead of doing the normal thing of dating for a while I went straight for marriage essentially. I also became a magical cat-girl. I don't think I count as normal either.]

Hmm... what about Sylvie?

[Kat... as adorable as she is... she's way too smart. Pretty sure she also counts as weird. And don't even try to argue for Vivian and Callisto! How either of them manage to look somewhat normal for extended periods of time I'll never know. Well... actually I don't think Callisto even tries.]

Yeah... I don't think Callisto bothers with it either... I think she just sort of wears it well? If that makes sense?

[Yeah. She does manage to make that outfit feel oddly natural despite the fact it shouldn't really be for cleaning at all. Way too much white on it. I mean look at Zuhra. The only white on her outfit is the pocket but that might be a safety thing?]

No idea.

[Yeah same.]

Should we try to start up the conversation with everyone else again?

[Maybe? I'm not really sure where we should start. I seem to have caused more issues than I solved, Zuhra is trying not to have a breakdown and start cleaning, Jara... I'm not sure what she's doing... and you're trying to comfort me even though I'm fine. Probably just leave restarting things up to Jara.]

Kat didn't really care about getting found out. *I have the right to spoil you all I want as your girlfriend. You might not NEED the comfort but maybe I do? It's not exactly nice hearing about you getting hurt you know? Even if I already heard the story once before it isn't much easier to listen to the second time.*

[Oh. Sorry]

Lily. What did I say about apologising when you don't need to? You were trying to help Zuhra. It's a wonderful reason to share that story. Even if I'm not fond of it, it's part of your history and I'm not going to complain when you share it with people. Especially not when you have such a good reason to.

Lily didn't say anything else. She just snuggled further into Kat's embrace.

Chapter 824 Cluedo

"Ok. Fine. Seeing as nobody else is talking," Jara's quick glance between Kat and Lily as well as the emphasis on the word 'talking' left no room to doubt what she meant, "perhaps we should go over the other major topic? Gaston's alleged murder and Belle's crusade against the Lord of the 8th over it? Can I actually get the full details of that?"

Kat nodded, "Well, Belle believes the chances are pretty high that Gaston is the 8th's bastard son. He was one of the few people she slept with around the time it was confirmed she was pregnant. She suspects that after he remarried he might have been cleaning up loose ends with regards to his bastard children. Alternatively... she thinks he might have tried to invite the 8th to his wedding with Zuhra,"

Zuhra burst out into laughter and the rest of the room turned to face her. She tried to stop and explain what was so funny but every time she got a moment of air and tried to work out what she was going to say she ended up devolving back into a fit of laughter. It was pretty clear that something in Kat's statement wasn't right, but what... well... that would have to wait till Zuhra got a handle on herself.

When she finally did, albeit with the occasional chuckle still in her answers, she said, "Gaston. Gaston wouldn't do something that stupid. I... I mean... I know his mother had a bit of a skewed perspective on him but... but that's just silly. He's no idiot. Risking such a confrontation over a wedding invitation. Oh... oh his mother would think something like that.

"But..." Zuhra's mood quickly plummeted... "but he did always have a bit of an inflated sense of... hmm I hesitate to call it justice.... hmm. He liked to enforce rules, or just things he perceived as wrong. Either worked fine... but he didn't really know the best way to go about that sort of thing. I still remember hearing the story of how he told off a bunch of other kids for loitering one day. I wasn't there for it but Maren told me the story a few times and it was hilarious.

"What worries me... is that while I can't see him risking himself to invite his potentially real father to our wedding... I can imagine him confronting the 8th, father or not, if he found out about the fact the 8th was causing troubles for the orphanage..." Zuhra let out a sigh, "I didn't tell him. I think anyway... but I wouldn't be surprised if I left enough clues behind that he could take that information to someone who did know and either pretend to be in on it or just use his personality to find out. I doubt it was the matron..."

"It wasn't" added Kat, "I'm sure Theresa would have mentioned something about it if it was. She didn't think anything odd was involved in Gaston's death. Even if she said it was a tragedy she thought it was a sadly common event. Not anything malicious,"

.....

Zuhra nodded, "Yeah that sounds like the old woman. Did you know she doesn't actually get paid anymore?" Kat nodded, "Huh... I'm a little surprised she told you that. She doesn't like to wave that particular flag for no reason. I only know because she mentioned she couldn't pay me for my time when I helped out at the orphanage,"

"Wait hold up, the orphanage director of the 8th district doesn't get paid AT ALL?!" hissed Jara. "How does nobody know of this?"

Zuhra waved her hand up and down in a 'sort of' gesture. She glanced at Kat who motioned back towards Zuhra. "Ok I guess I'll explain it. The 8th deigned to reduce the orphanage's funding a few times and eventually replaced almost all of it with a land allotment further into the city. The orphanage has to grow its own food, and surplus to pay its workers now. Theresa technically gets paid but all of it gets donated straight back to the orphanage. It happens automatically now as well, so I don't think she's even seen her pay bag in a few years at this point," *nOveLnext.com*

Jara out a groan as she messaged the bridge of her nose. "What the heck is going on in the 8th district. Murders, extortion, it sounds like adultery as well. I imagine there's at least some forgery going on as well, maybe even supported by the 8th. Dammit. This shit is exactly why I don't want to go into politics when I get older!"

"Why?" asked Zuhra.

Jara turned her unimpressed glare to Zuhra. "Well, propriety dictates that I can't just set the investigators on the 8th. It's both a politeness thing and a bit of a social check and balance to ensure I can't just cause trouble for no reason. The fact that this issue is at over a year old really doesn't help things either. I'd need to hire my own private investigators that can't really be tracked back to me... but after so long I'd probably not be able to do anything about it...

"I also have to pretend that I know none of this when I meet the 8th. I have to act like all of the accusations against them are completely unconfirmed even when I have some trusted advisors who think he's guilty, I think he might be guilty, all while just... doing nothing. I certainly can't tell my parents because they'd probably let him know. Because that's the polite thing to do. 'Yeah I know you're a scumbag who takes money from children, murders young men and women and probably promotes corruption across your district but because we can't prove anything we need to look into it. That ok mate?'" grumbled Jara.

"Oh..." said Zuhra.

"Oh indeed," hissed back Jara.

"Sorry... I just... ok yeah... I apologise again for my earlier comments about trading places with you. I don't think I could deal with this sort of thing carefully at all... I'd probably send in a bunch of guards or just an assassin. Wait... do you have assassins?" mumbled Zuhra.

Jara shrugged and said, "It's fine I forgive you. I do understand why those checks are there. I could potentially ruin a completely innocent person just by investigating them thoroughly enough. Either by taking the time to keep them from doing business until they run out of money or just telling the guards not to be careful and let them break things to search for 'hidden documents' or 'contraband materials' and what not.

"So it's a sort of reasonable precaution... doesn't make me any happy about it. As for assassin, officially no. Unofficially... probably not? That's the sort of thing I doubt my parents will tell me about until I'm officially the Lady of the house and honestly it'd surprise me more if my mother didn't know how to contact some assassins quickly. I do suspect they aren't in the city, or at least don't have a major presence in the city. No successful assassination attempts have been made on The Ten after all. Other people... not quite so lucky..."

"Do you think the 8th hired a proper assassin for Gaston?" asked Kat.

Jara frowned at the question and thought it over. "Hmm... that's... that's actually an interesting question. I mean... to set it up so cleanly I think he would have had to... but the potential response time makes me wonder. I imagine unless it was just removing bastards the 8th would have needed time to call them in and Gaston would have been able to spread whatever damaging lies or truths he had before

that... yet nobody he was close to seems to know any of the specifics. Hmm... Zuhra was he acting strange at all before he died?"

Zuhra couldn't help but wince. "I... I don't really know? I mean... I wish I did... but I was very... um... how do I explain it... floaty? Gaston and I were getting married and that happiness was keeping me... rather inattentive. My mind was alight with all sorts of wonderful scenarios revolving around our wedding and... well frankly I wouldn't have noticed anything strange if Gaston had walked into my room with just a tie on,"

Jara raised an eyebrow, "Surely you would have noticed something strange about that,"

Zuhra blushed deeply, "Um... yes... something. Something indeed..." Zuhra let out a light cough, "I mean... perhaps that was a bad example. The point is though... any little details that I might have noticed at a normal time were certainly ignored. I was experiencing the best few weeks of my life. My love had just proposed to me... I didn't really have a lot of room in my head for anything other than overly sweet thoughts and plans for my future. If he was acting a bit off... well... Gaston was always rather good at keeping things a secret. Keeping one more, even a large one, while I was so distracted..."

Chapter 825 A Great Mystery? Perhaps Not?

Jara sucked in her lips for a few moments before sighing. "Hearing that... honestly, I don't have much hope that this can be solved. Without proper investigators this would be tough enough but with the time that's passed I'm not sure that even they could figure anything out. I also know that Lord 8th isn't so stupid as to keep incriminating documents around... I'm not really seeing a lot of options for us..."

"Is there no magic that could help us?" asked Lily.

Jara shook her head, "Magic isn't something that can solve every problem with sufficient application of mana. It can do fantastic things... but only in the right circumstances. I think the only magic that could even theoretically help us solve this would be time magic, which I'm not even certain exists. That's not to mention the rarity of the artifact the mage would need to channel their power through. I just don't see it as possible, let alone likely..."

Hmm. That's an interesting thing to note. We KNOW that time magic exists. Thyme can use it pretty liberally. I wonder if that's a quirk of this dimension or if Thyme is even more bullshit than they already seem.

[Probably a bit of both. I can't imagine how rare time magic is but you'd also need a tonne of mana to use it. I suspect Thyme is actually quite lucky to be a dryad. Considering the size and age of the tree Thyme must have at their base, they probably have a ridiculous amount of mana. It's almost certainly what lets them mess around with space and time the way they do]

"So chances are we can't actually help?" asked Lily.

Jara nodded, "Indeed. If it really was an assassin like Belle thinks then they've had plenty of time to cover their tracks. That and the crime scene was an actively used warehouse. The idea that some small piece of evidence was left behind to help crack the case at this point is ridiculous. Like say... say you found a scrap of black cloth. Sure it could be the assassin's... but it could also be one of the tens or

hundreds of workers that use the place regularly. If Belle deals in black cloth it would be even worse because it could just be scraps from that.

.....

"And I mean, the chance of finding something even more obscure or relevant is basically non-existent. Say you find a cut in the wall that must be a weapon of some kind? What about the corner of a box? Or the edge of a wagon? Heck it's possible that a particularly sharp belt buckle could have scoured a mark into the walls. What do you think Zuhra? Have you been helping Belle with this much?"

Zuhra let out an exhausted sigh, "No. No I haven't. I... well I didn't realise it was such a big deal for Belle... but I mostly just humoured her when I occasionally visited and tried not to think about it the rest of the time. I... I mean... how else am I supposed to take it? At the beginning I just thought it was an accident. I tragedy yes, but... but growing up at the orphanage I was quite aware of death. So many parents and even siblings lost to one accident or another. Very rarely was there an intentional act of malice...

"So... so when Gaston died it broke my heart, and I can't say I've recovered from it. This conversation... I don't know if it's helped or not in the long run but it has made me confront a few things. We'll see how it turns out in the future... but... but as sad as it was I UNDERSTOOD it. It didn't help me get over it at all, but I didn't need someone to blame either. The world can be cruel sometimes and to me... for a while... that's all it was.

"Then Belle brought me into her conspiracy. It's... it's very easy to believe her when she gets passionate and there's nothing she's more passionate about than finding answers about the death of her son... especially after she lost one of her parents in such a similar way... but... but I don't actually know how likely it is to be true. I... I don't doubt it's possible. Yet... yet sometimes I feel like Belle is just looking for someone to blame.

"And maybe I'm partially at fault for helping her along that road. She was already in deep when I was brought in... or well... maybe she tried to tell me earlier and I wasn't in any shape to actually listen so nothing got remembered. I just don't... I don't really know what the chances of her being correct are.

"It's hard to say though. It's hard to say she's wrong... especially when it's one of the few things keeping her afloat. And I mean.. she might be right. Who am I to tell her how to grieve? It's not like I'm really doing any better than she is. At least she has a goal for the future. Even if she's wrong, and she finds proof of that, she'd have found proof. I... all I'm really willing to do on my own initiative is cry about it or keep my mind so busy that I don't think of it,"

I'm not exactly fond of where this conversation is going.

[Why not?]

Well... I mean... I guess I had all these plans of sticking around and solving the mystery you know? We called it during the meeting with Theresa that there was more to Gaston's death and then all of a sudden there WAS. But... what seems to be going around now is that even if that's true there's no way to find it. I... I wish I did have a power for this sort of thing. Maybe if my eyes were better I could see the truth of things or something but... I really don't see what we can do.

[Don't beat yourself up over it Kat. If the Contract was to find out about Gaston we wouldn't have been the ones who were summoned. I'm sure there is a demon ability for it... and I mean... if I was better at paper magic maybe I could have found out something. Like... maybe there's a spell to draw out something that happened in the past. Maybe combined with shadow magic? Have the paper be the medium and the shadow magic draw out the 'shadow' of the event? I'm still nowhere near that powerful... but... maybe in the future?]

Yeah maybe. I'm just... not sure if I should use a beacon this time. I think I only have one, or maybe two... and... and as sad as it is I don't think anything horrible will happen if we can't be contacted normally. Leaves a bit of a bad taste in my mouth though.

[I agree with the bad taste thing... but I'm not sure we could do anything in a timely manner. We'd be better off just suggesting to Belle she summon a demon with the skills for it. I'm not sure how expensive it'd be... and I'm guessing the answer is EXCEPTIONALLY but if she's determined... maybe it'd get her out of her slump? She'd be forced to make a lot of money rather than holing up in her room and remaining depressed.]

Well, it's a nice thought at least.

"Well Zuhra perhaps you can focus a little less on cleaning one of these days. Properly make some time for yourself?" suggested Jara.

Zuhra shrugged, "I doubt I'll ever get rid of the habit now. At this point... even if I was to cheer myself up I'm not sure I could ever avoid the incessant cleaning."

"Well, what are you going to do once you marry Apep? You'll have your own maid for that?" asked Jara jokingly.

Zuhra winced, "You're really not convincing me that taking Apep's crush seriously is a good idea. That sounds hellish. The idea that I wouldn't be allowed to clean anything is not one that appeals to me in the slightest..."

Jara shrugged, "You'd be the Lady of the house you can order them as you like within reason. You could make it so they never clean your wing of the house, or whatever rooms you like to go into. You could probably even have someone whose job it is to find the places in the compound that need the most cleaning and direct you to them," said Jara with a giggle.

"That sounds like a terribly strange job. I can't even think of how I'd find someone for that position..." mumbled Zuhra.

"Ah, you just assign one of the current maids or butlers to it. They should already know what needs the most cleaning and considering you, for some bizarre reason, don't even have preferences for the nicer places around the house... I'm sure you'd always be able to find work. Apep probably wouldn't let you work through the night though," said Jara.

Chapter 826 Jara's 'Valiant' Sacrifice

The new silence was much less uncomfortable... but it felt a lot more final. For Zuhra, it had been an emotional ride and she wasn't really ready to confront anything else. She'd used up most of her energy just trying not to break down during the latter half of the conversation. Jara on the other hand was

better but she didn't want to push. She was familiar enough with Zuhra to see that she was one step away from trying to rub a hole in the nearby table.

Kat and Lily... they were mostly at a loss. With Jara's statements on how unlikely it was they could find any answers they weren't sure where to go from here. The path to answers seemed to be blocked off. There was Marem of course, but the chance that she knew something was quite low. On top of that, Zuhra had made her stance rather clear for the moment. Well, that and they both doubted Zuhra would tell them how to visit Marem.

So what do we do now?

[I don't know Kat. I mean... we have answers for Apep now. Not answers we're happy with... but we have answers...]

I suppose we do... but that would likely just start the countdown for us to leave. I refuse to believe there wouldn't be a system in place for that.

[I'm not sure there's much of a choice Kat. There doesn't seem to be anything we can do...]

So we just give up?

.....

[Kat, we made this our problem even when we didn't have to. I don't think it's within our skillset. Besides, you could argue we're not giving up just directing them to someone else who CAN solve the problem. Isn't that a solution in and of itself?]

I guess it is. Kat turned to Zuhra and said, "Something we should have mentioned before... is that we're certain a demon could give you the answers you want in regards to what happened to Gaston. It's not something I or Lily can do... but we're certain that some demon would have an ability specifically for it. The cost might be a problem... but... well... it might be worth suggesting to Belle,"

Zuhra nodded slowly and asked, "Why would another demon be able to do it when you can't?"

"Abilities. We all have different ones. I probably shouldn't go into the specifics but demons are always summoned based on if they can do the job or not... so if Belle did a summoning specifically for finding out what happened to Gaston..." Kat paused.

"She'd be guaranteed a demon that could help right?" Kat nodded at Zuhra's question, "Hmm... I... I don't know how I feel about that..."

Lily shrugged in Kat's lap, "We both think it's a good idea. It gives Belle a real path to closure and the money or goods she'll need to summon up a demon should encourage her to go back to operating at peak efficiency. It won't be so easy to just summon up a demon... but if she knows it'll get her answers... it might give her a bit of motivation for other things again. I'm not totally sure she thinks she'll ever get an answer despite everything so... maybe..."

"Why didn't you suggest this before?" asked Zuhra.

Kat winced, "Do you want the most honest answer?"

"I think I deserve that considering all the snooping you've done into me," said Zuhra.

"What about I'll give you the answer if you tell us where Marem lives?" offered Kat.

"No. Tell me the most honest answer and I'll pass it on to Belle without making it seem like you were withholding such an important answer from her," countered Zuhra. Jara flinched slightly in the background at the acidic tone Zuhra used but decided not to intervene. She knew enough about Kat and Lily to know they would have told Zuhra for nothing. So it wasn't a major loss to be denied.

Still, Kat couldn't help but sigh. If they did get to visit Marem that was another thing they could use to put off going to see Apep... but apparently it wasn't to be. "The most honest answer comes in two parts. The first, is that we weren't thinking about it. It was only a bit before when we came up with the idea... even if it is rather obvious in hindsight. As for the rest... well...

"Maybe it was a bit arrogant but Lily and I thought we could DO something about it. Thought we could help. We weren't thinking of ways to solve the issue, we were thinking of ways we could help Belle solve the issue. If that distinction makes sense?" Kat saw two nods, "Yes well... it seems we were being a little self-centred. Two years and we thought we could find some miracle answer... but it's just not in our skillset," admitted Kat.

Zuhra just nodded and didn't say anything else. Jara however, chimed in, "I think it's somewhat understandable. It's rare to realise the best choice is to ask someone else when you think you have a chance to complete the task yourself. I had that issue beaten out of me," she saw a trio of shocked faces, "not literally! Gee. My parents are bad but they aren't THAT bad. No. I was forced to watch someone else complete the work in less than half the time. Consistently. Till I got the message.

"What was it they said... 'It's not wrong to try to do something yourself, but it is wrong to ignore the benefits of asking for other people to do it instead. You have only so many hours in a day. If you want, we will support you in learning to be better, but only in a few things. You just don't have the time for more.' It was perhaps the most supportive my parents ever were. It was back when I hadn't really made my distaste for the role of Lady quite as clear.

"They thought it was just something I was going to grow out of when I got older still. A child's whining instead of a young woman who knew that she did not wish her life to be papers and politics. Still. It is what it is,"

Kat sighed, "I guess we should go report to Apep now... what should we tell him?"

"Tell him I'm not interested," said Zuhra... at the same time as Jara said, "Tell him to try harder!"

Jara and Zuhra exchanged heated glares. "I am not interested in him Jara," said Zuhra, "There is no reason to get his hopes up for something that will likely never happen,"

Jara shook her head and retorted, "Nope. You've made more progress towards happiness in this one conversation than you have wasting away cleaning everything in sight for two years. If I thought you needed such a direct push I would have done this earlier. You're actually talking back to me! It's wonderful. I didn't notice how little personality you were using before,"

“Before I didn’t NEED to contradict you. Your ideas were perfectly valid and you didn’t stop me cleaning all that often. Not to mention you weren’t setting me up with your friend at the time! Something I still do not appreciate!” growled Zuhra.

Jara stood her ground, “No. I think you DO appreciate it. Anger is better than the weird despondence you normally have. I think Kat should tell him to pursue you aggressively, to mend your broken heart with over the top romantic gestures. Chipping away at the walls you’ve built around yourself!”

“Gaston wasn’t an over the top romantic! I don’t need large gestures to know he cares! That’d just be embarrassing for everyone!” hissed Zuhra.

Jara nodded, “Right. I’ll get him started on subtle gestures of affection. Stuff like poetry and maybe the language of flowers? You like cleaning so perhaps having him show his efforts by learning to neatly arrange flowers will stoke the fires of your heart. Yes. Indeed. Thank you for the advice!” cheered Jara.

“That wasn’t advice!” growled Zuhra, glaring heavily at Jara who was just grinning back. “I do not need poetry or flowers!”

“Ah, but need and want are different things. I noticed you said NEED and nothing about what you want,” said Jara.

“No, I don’t WANT that either,” retorted Zuhra.

“It’s too late to deny it now. Your heart is on display. Sweet, small gestures all the way! Maybe have Apep brush up on his singing. He used to be really good at it... I’m not sure if he kept up the practice for it or not... hmm...” said Jara proudly, trailing off at the end.

“Wait he can sing?” asked Zuhra reflexively before realising her error. “Wait I mean...”

“Ah, so singing is a big deal?” acknowledged Jara. “Ok Kat, report back to Apep that he needs to brush up his singing!”

“NO!” said Zuhra firmly.

Jara hopped up and said, “QUICK RUN! I’ll hold her off,” with a cheeky grin. Kat glanced at Lily until Zuhra popped up off the chair. She wasn’t free for long though as Jara tackled her back into it just as fast.

Lily transformed into her Memphis form as Kat started to leave, while the demon said, “You know I’m strong enough to lift everyone in the room and the chairs, right?”

“Yeah, but where’s the fun in that?” shouted Jara over Zuhra’s “I WILL GET YOU FOR THIS!” as Kat left the room. The suppressed laughter from both of them undercutting the seriousness of Zuhra’s replay majorly. Well. Assuming she wasn’t just ticklish.

Chapter 827 Mission Probable

Kat made a rather lackadaisical ‘escape’ from Jara’s house. The guards still on rotation recognising her easily and letting her past. It didn’t take long to be in the skies once again and heading towards Apep’s house. Things, it seemed, were winding down in a particularly unsatisfying way. Apep seemed to have at

least some chance with Zuhra but not for some time. It'd take dedicated effort on his part mostly geared towards dragging the unwilling maid out of her depression completely.

That's not even getting started onto the fact that Gaston's death would have to remain a mystery, for now certainly, and likely for some time afterwards. Kat didn't think it was likely that any demon below Rank 3 would have an ability to see that far back unless it was very specific, and that specificity would cause the price to rise all the same.

Lily was currently dozing in Kat's arms. Knowing that she'd need to sneak the pair in soon Lily decided it was best to be as alert as possible when the time came. Kat didn't mind. It was a bit quiet without the gentle background noise of Lily's thoughts, and the fact she was high enough the general hubbub of the city below was also muted. That was probably the worst part.

Alone with her thoughts and no truly positive ones to focus on besides Lily... but Kat didn't want to direct her thoughts that way too much in case she woke her sleeping girlfriend. Perhaps an unfounded risk, but not one that had been tested properly. Kat knew directing her thoughts towards Lily could wake her more swiftly if it was already in the process of happening, but not how it affected Lily's deep sleep.

So she flew silently, the only noise accompanying her was the sound of the wind whistling around her wings. Soon enough Apep's house came into view, so Kat found a good cloud to hover above and proceeded to wake up Lily. That took a little bit of work to do gently, but she had practice now and Lily was expecting it. A short time later and Lily was gliding down while Kat was standing once again, in a copy of her room.

Lily managed to quickly find her way through the guards. They didn't look up... at all really. Likely relying on protections around the compound that her demonic energy messed with. When she found Apep's room... there was a slight issue though. [Um Kat... we've got a problem. Apep seems to be writing something but the real problem is the butler watching over him]

It was as Lily said. Apep was sitting at his desk with two piles of paper, one covered in writing, and another empty. The empty pile was significantly easier and did not bode well for Apep's wrist. A closer examination revealed the forms had 'I will not sneak into the wine cellar for fun' written out multiple times. The butler watching over Apep didn't seem to be hovering at all. They were there more for motivation and to prevent him slacking off completely.

.....

[It seems Apep got caught using the wine to summon us. His parents just think he broke some. I'm not sure what that means for us though. How do we talk to him with someone else in the room?]

"Not sure..." said Kat 'aloud', "I'm tempted to say we can just wait for him. Can you like sneak under the bed or something without being spotted?"

Lily glanced at the butler again. He was leaning against the wall focused roughly on Apep but it was clear he was pretty zoned out. [Maybe... it depends how good the butlers peripheral vision is. Sneaking under the bed probably won't be too hard... and I don't want to just stay out on the roof forever. Not only is it still heating up under the sun but the walls aren't that much lower than the roof. We'll be spotted if anyone cares to look.]

“Well, I can’t see what you’re seeing. We still haven’t figured out if there’s a trick to that... so it’s up to you. Personally, I think your best bet is just to go for it and then not move. Worst case scenario you can pretend to be a somewhat normal cat and Apep can pretend to know you. Well, actual worst case scenario we just come clean to Apep’s parents but that’s more a worst case for Apep than us. I’m sure we’d be fine,” said Kat.

Lily nodded, not that Kat could tell, but the feeling of approval from the link was enough for them both. Lily carefully watched the butler in question for a few moments and was blessed with the perfect chance. The butler sneezed rather heavily and in that moment Lily moved, dashing down from the high window sill to the bed and quickly under the covers. The butler did glance over at the bed, having seen something in the corner of his eyes...

But quickly turned back to Apep. He had just sneezed, it was probably just a mistake from how the sneeze rapidly changed his view. His assumption was wrong of course, but he was no trained guard. Simply one of the few butlers that worked there. His usual job was as quartermaster for the household. Tracking supplies that weren’t food. That was the domain of the head chef, and he didn’t want to get caught up in that mess. When things were sorted and tracked, he usually just did some light cleaning, but for the moment he was assigned to be Apep’s watcher.

On Lily’s end things were actually pretty good. Apep’s bed was regularly cleaned and laundered and that included the underside of it. There was hardly any dust and no stray articles of clothing or extra reading materials to be found. The only downside was the space wasn’t quite large enough for Kat to fit underneath as well. The extra width she gained from her wings just a tad too much. It was already a bit of a squeeze for normal humans after all, and was usually cleaned by simply moving the frame to the side and back. So the pair did their best to relax.

Some time later, Lily’s ears half listening still picked up some words from the butler, “I believe that is enough for now young master. I will return with lunch shortly. Do you wish to eat here or will you take dinner in the dining room? The Lord and Lady are not in at the moment,”

Lily could hear Apep running his fingers on the desk for a few moments before saying, “I think I’ll just eat here,”

“Of course sir,” said the butler and a moment later the door was opened and closed. Apep let out a long sigh and could be heard standing up. Lily took this chance to poke her head out from under the bed. Apep was glancing lazily around the room when his eyes widened at the sight.

“Lily?” asked Apep softly.

Lily nodded.

“Ok um... you’ll have to be quick. Parem will be back soon with food and you probably don’t want to get caught,” said Apep shakily.

Lily hopped out from the bed and poked at Kat mentally. In a burst of smoke Kat appeared next to Lily, who used the cover of the mist to transform herself. They stood across from Apep, slightly strained smiles on their faces. “So, what did you find out?” asked Apep.

Kat glanced at Lily and sighed. "Well... we found out a few things. Also... we did end up letting Zuhra know earlier today at the behest of Jara."

Apep winced and his face pulled into a frown, "Was that really necessary?"

Kat shrugged, "Maybe? Who knows?" Apep just shook his head and made a 'continue' gesture, "Right... well. Her first love was a man named Gaston. He's dead now. Possibly an accident possibly a hit by the Lord of the 8th"

"That's just great," grumbled Apep under his breath.

Kat continued on, ignoring Apep's outburst. "It's quite clear the Zuhra hasn't really moved on. On top of that she uses her work as an excuse not to confront her feelings. Jara thinks Zuhra is probably depressed,"

"That's... about what I thought but not great to hear... so... knowing that... what are my chances? What should I be doing? Do I have to give up?" asked Apep worriedly.

"Zuhra advised you just give up..." Apep winced at Kat's words, "...but on the other hand Jara thinks she needs the help. She managed to poke Zuhra a bit and get her to accidentally admit that she prefers understated gestures of affection and has a fondness for singing. Jara is of the opinion that you DO have a chance but you need to understand Zuhra is really not in a great place mentally.

"She thinks that... with time and persistence things could work out. The issue would be making sure, first and foremost, to help Zuhra with her issues and then building from there. Also... don't try to directly compete with Gaston. He was many things that you are not, and we think that leveraging that would be for the best,"

Apep nodded and opened his mouth only to wince and say, "Ok, I'd like a bit more but Parem will be back soon. Do you think you can hide again?"

Chapter 828 The Finer Points

Safely back under the bed, it didn't take long for the sound of the door opening to fill the room. It seemed Apep was right in his worry that Parem would be back soon. After waiting a few moments though... she didn't hear it open a second time. Lily strained her ears until she could hear the sound of two people breathing in the room and felt like clicking her tongue. Something she only narrowly resisted the urge to do.

[Seems like Apep is getting watched really closely. Even though he's eating the butler is still watching in the corner. We might have a chance to talk when the butler leaves with the dirty dishes... but honestly chances are that he turns up again. We'll probably have to wait a while...]

"Well, it is what it is. Do you think you'll be find with me hiding inside our connection?" asked Kat.

[Well we needed to test this out anyway. I think I'll be fine... but I might also fall asleep. I'm not sure if that's something we want or not though. It could be good for testing purposes... even if this isn't really the best place to test things like that.]

"I think it's best to let whatever happens happen. If you fall asleep that's fine. We'll deal with any issues that arise because of it. I don't think it'll be a problem. I mean, that is how this ability is supposed to work," said Kat.

Lily couldn't think of any argument against Kat's points so she decided to curl up and relax. With Kat's acceptance of the situation and the likelihood of Parem the butler sticking around Lily quickly found herself drifting off to sleep. The transition to sleep was smooth and clean for Lily. Not so much for Kat.

The entire room shuddered, as if there was a minor earthquake going on. Kat was laying on the bed at the time and wouldn't have fallen even if she was standing... but it was certainly unnerving. The shudders continued for a few minutes before dying down... only for Kat to feel like she was zapped with electricity. Her body shuddering under the sensations before the world seemed to skip to beats. Everything froze where it was. Even Kat and her outfit. The slight swishing of her sleeves completely halted despite what gravity would normally force.

.....

Then all of a sudden Kat was back in the room. The only thing was that now she was under the covers and Lily had wrapped herself around Kat as best she could. *Well. This is odd.* A few moments passed. *Hang on... is that rude to think? I mean... maybe? It was an odd occurrence though. Lily just sort of... beside me now. I wasn't under the covers either. Wait. Is Lily sleeping inside her dream? I feel like that's not allowed or something.*

"Hey Lily?" asked Kat.

"Yes?" answered Lily without moving.

"Can you let go of me?" asked Kat.

"Nope. Don't want to. This is my dream and I think it's very rude for you to ask. It's actually a little surprising..." mumbled Lily.

Oh dear. Does... does she think this is a real dream? "Lily... do you think this is a normal dream?" asked Kat.

"Huh? What sort of a silly question is that? I'm not dreaming!" responded Lily.

The blatant contradiction worries me a bit... 'This is my dream and you're behaving strange' to 'This isn't a dream don't be silly'. So... what should I do?" "Lily. I used my dream powers. I'm the real Kat," said Kat clearly.

Lily just shuffled herself further into Kat's side. "Of course. You're also real comfy,"

Kat let out a puff of air and wrapped her tail around Lily before pulling them both up off the bed.

"Mrhgmhff" mumbled Lily as she tried not to resist.

"Lily focus please," said Kat.

"Don't wanna," whined Lily, "You is comfy"

Kat thought about it for a few seconds before deciding... Lily was right. She flopped back down onto the bed and wrapped Lily up with her arms. "Yeah. Yeah it is comfy," mumbled Kat as she pulled Lily up so that her head rested on Lily's ears.

—

It was much later when Lily awoke with a start to someone calling her name. It took a few seconds to focus and remember what was going on before she pulled herself out from underneath the bed. The sun had already gone down and all the light was coming from various fixtures on the walls. [Kat time to go again]

Kat let out a groan inside Lily's mind as she sat up in the bed. The act of Lily waking had not woken her... and there were quite a few questions she wanted to ask. Mostly 'How much do you remember' and 'Was I influenced by your dreams' but now wasn't the time. Kat let herself coalesce beside Lily once again and glanced over at Apep in pyjamas.

She almost wished she didn't. He wasn't wearing a shirt this time and his pants were only just to the knees. Then again, Kat was mostly thankful that they weren't so thin as to be see-through. Apep actually had a better figure than first thought. He had the slightest hint of muscle and a tiny bundle of hair on his chest. Still awkward to look at though.

"Right..." said Kat. "What did you want to ask?"

"You... um... rushed a bit before... I mean... can you give me the full story?" asked Apep.

Kat sighed and nodded, "So... this is how things went down after we left..." Kat went on to detail the adventures had by herself and Lily. Apep keeping silent throughout. When the tale was done Apep stayed silent for about a minute afterwards.

"I... I can see how everything happened but... but... hmmm" Apep struggled with an answer. Kat had even relayed the entire conversation with Jara and Zuhra so he'd heard what was said. He didn't have the visual feedback to go with it... but he'd still heard Zuhra's multiple claims of not being interested with a great deal of context. "Do... do you both think I have a chance?"

Kat and Lily looked to each other. "I think I'll have a different answer to Kat... so she can go first," said Lily.

Kat raised an eyebrow but nodded, "Right... I guess if I'm going first... I'll say that you have no chance right now. Perhaps not for a few more months at least. Even if Zuhra did start to think positively of you and gained a crush... I feel like she'd be too stubborn to admit it, both to herself and to you. So I think pressing the issue wouldn't be a great idea.

"After that all... I can't really say. I think it's likely she will be able to fall in love again. Despite everything she's young and she can recover. I just don't know if YOU would be able to reach her. I don't know enough about romance to say honestly. I wouldn't recommend getting your hopes up,"

Apep winced but didn't say anything, he just turned to Lily. "I on the other hand think you have a pretty good chance. The fact that you've made your intentions known already is a big step in the right direction, at least I think so. I agree that now isn't the time but unlike Kat I think... I think you should start to do little things.

“Try and get yourself to be comfortable around her. Make little offerings. Small things that are arguably not romantic but with context of your crush certainly are. I said it before. Bringing her some sweets she likes, maybe helping her clean... if that would be considered a positive. Double check that one actually. Talk to her more. Just... get her comfortable around you but unless she brings it up I’d say don’t mention getting together. At least for a while. If... if you’re willing I’d say give it a full year,”

“That’s... that’s quite a while...” said Apep.

Lily nodded, “Yeah it’ll be slow. What I’m hoping is that your little gestures of affection can slowly bring her out of her depression. If you can manage just acting normally around her that’ll be a big step for you. For her... I’m hoping that she’ll be comfortable enough that you can keep getting closer. Don’t aim for like a big kiss or anything...

“But little things. Maybe a few hugs. Sit together more often. Start to share your hobbies... but I think you should also, in secret, write a song for her that you can sing. I want that to be either confirmation of your feelings or the final nail in the coffin,”

“Elaborate please?” asked Apep excitedly.

“I think after enough time, once Zuhra has recovered herself you should give her a few chances to make a move on you, but the song is for dumb questions like ‘are you still interested in me’. You break out into song after that. Really hammer it home that you are in fact very much still interested. Otherwise, if things move a bit better than that and you get like a peck on the cheek or something...

“Then I think you use that song as a big moment. Perhaps the ending to your first proper date or maybe for her birthday. That’s what I’d do. Well... no it isn’t I’m a bit of a coward but it’s what I’d WANT to do,” finished Lily.

Chapter 829 A Moonlight Flight

“I see. I thank you both for all the advice,” said Apep with a strange sense of finality. After his words the silence stretched on for a little bit until he tilted his head and asked, “Um... so I guess this is goodbye then? I sort of assumed you’d just vanish once your job was done?”

Is that what we want to do? Just... go?

[Probably? I mean... probably.]

Right. How about we leave Apep here and talk about it outside?

 “More or less yes. I get some control over when exactly I leave but yes,” said Kat.

“Well... by I guess?” said Apep somewhat awkwardly.

Kat wanted to frown but held it in. She’d thought that there was a bit of friendliness between herself and Apep at this point but apparently he either wanted or expected them to just leave straight away. So, despite that particular fact being a bit annoy... she didn’t dissuade him, “Indeed. Goodbye Apep. Perhaps we will meet again,” said Kat before bursting into smoke.

Lily transformed back and quickly left threw the window, letting darkening sky hide her black form as she headed for a nearby area. It wasn’t that close, as she’d climbed rather high and then glided down

steadily once at height, but it didn't take all that long either. Kat and Lily were silent for the journey. Not really knowing what to say, and thinking it best to properly speak face to face for this.

.....

Eventually Lily found herself touching down on the edge of the forested section at the top of the mountain. It made for a nicer place to have this conversation than an alleyway. Kat quickly found the nearest tree to lean on and Lily pouted, wanting to sprawl herself across Kat but it didn't seem appropriate. "So..." started Kat without finishing.

"So," said Lily with a smile.

Kat sighed at the response. "I... I guess I don't really know what to do now. I guess we head off... but it doesn't feel great,"

"Perhaps not Kat... and maybe this is just because I have a bit of a skewed perspective only being around for two of these... but perhaps it really is best we leave. We've provided a long term solution for Belle that should improve things for her in the short term. We've helped Jara recognise just how not-ok Zuhra has been. We helped Zuhra realise that same thing and gave her the knowledge that she still has people interested in her for herself,

"For Apep we gave him a chance. We found out everything we could about Gaston, probably more than he wanted. As well as a good deal of information about Zuhra's past and gave what I consider to be good advice for his future. Considering the pressure from his parents it might not go so smoothly, but that's something we never got a lot of details on and with Jara's help shouldn't be too bad. Honestly Kat it looks like a job well done from where I'm sitting," explained Lily.

Kat waved a hand in circles, "I guess but I feel sort of... listless, or despondent. I feel like we didn't make all that much progress. I mean... when you lay it out it seems like we did do quite a bit... but it doesn't quite FEEL like it. Hmm..." Kat's mind went through the last few days and then paused on an idea, "Say... Lily you want to fly around and have a bit of a date?"

Lily gave a shaky smile, "Despite arguing that we did in fact do things... I agree with you it doesn't FEEL great and... I mean... I don't know. I do WANT to go on a date and flying around with you, just for the fun of it... sounds quite nice but... I also don't know that the mood is the best right now,"

"Perhaps that's why we should do this?" suggested Kat, "Maybe we can make this our high moment to end on. There's no tournament to win or damsel to be saved... but I can finish off my night with some lovely company and a good view,"

Lily nodded, her mood already starting to take a turn for the better, "You know what? I think you're right Kat. That does sound lovely. I'd ask you to lead the way... but flying behind you would probably be distracting for me. So I'll take the lead," finished Lily with a grin.

Kat nodded and they both took to the skies. Lily in Memphis form with Kat right behind her. As they rose up. The city looked wonderful like this. The sharp lines of the aqueduct contrasted with the smoother lines of the buildings. Thousands of little off ramps for the water, travelling to nearly every house and garden. A smattering of lights. Not like a modern city, but candles were common enough it seemed and the obvious march of guard platoons, lamp in front and lamp behind on raised poles lighting the way.

It was a very different look to the one shown during the day. It looked like a sea of stars, much like the night sky. Pinpricks of light mixed in amongst islands that were in fact houses, with the strange edging of the aqueduct to give it a truly unique look. The pair could already feel their mood improving further. It was a peaceful night by all appearances, and it helped ease the worries they had been feeling.

Eventually, Kat opted for a bit of conversation. Divorced from recent events of course. *So what is your new plan for the future? No university any time soon I imagine.* Thought Kat over the link. She was genuinely curious as to what Lily had thought up... though she didn't expect any concrete answers just yet.

[That's really the question isn't it?] Thought Lily as she flapped her wings slowly in front of Kat just to maintain their current height, taking a slightly winding path through the air. [I haven't thought on it too much... but what I have thought about obviously involves joining you on Contracts. I think that makes a lot of other potential options a bit more of an issue. Hard to keep a steady schedule when you aren't always in the same dimension]

Lily mentally sighed, [Not that that's even the real issue. No, I want to go on Contracts, mostly just to be more deeply involved in magic and give me ideas for where I can take my craft... but I don't really know how I can convince my parents to allow me to do this. Sure it's somewhat forced on them... but I can't see pointing that fact out will do me any favours. I think I'll try and ease them into things by showing myself off... and then making the excuse that I need to stay near you. It's true enough... even if two adjacent houses is in fact more than close enough to not cause issues.]

I see. That means you have no plans at all to do anything more normal now?

Lily gave a mental shrug, [Research has always been my passion and the chance to research real magic is too tempting to pass up Kat. I... I can't see myself doing anything else anymore. As much as I hope it won't come to it... I'd easily chose to alienate my parents for the chance to explore magic more. Oh and... despite the fact I might want to keep my paper magic book on me... it's best you keep it. I don't want my parents restricting my access to it. I wouldn't listen anyway but if they managed to successfully hide it somewhere, which I imagine they could with a bit of work, I would be most displeased.]

[What about you Kat? What are your glorious plans going forward and for when you get bored of Contracts? Or just to do in your off time?]

I think I'll get more into practicing with my fire and fans. I haven't really incorporated my fire into my fighting style. Not properly anyway. It's mostly just very basic stuff. Punch enemy with flaming fists or throw all the fire at the problem.

On the other hand with my fans, I have a fan style and a surprising amount of real world experience thanks to Mai... but it still isn't that much. I need to keep up with my Katas properly so that the movements become ingrained. Currently I abuse the fact I can move faster than most people and think even faster than that with my demonic energy. I'm not actually that good, I'm just good enough that I can abuse my speed and strength to seem much better than I am in truth.

[Well that's all well and good... but it's not much of a hobby is it?]

Kat shrugged, physically and mentally. *I don't really know what else to say Lily. I'll probably use some time to go visit the orphanage, check on Gramps and make sure the kids he put in charge after me

haven't burnt the place down. Cooking might be something to look into... but Callisto is happy to do that and I don't exactly eat much anymore. Maybe looking into the demon form of enchanting? Could be interesting but I don't know where I'd start with that...*

Chapter 830 Home but not Quite Free

Kat and Lily had a great time flying around and discussing whatever came to mind. It was nearly midnight by the time they finished up. They returned home in much better spirits, and as the time of day was basically the same, they quickly found their way to Kat's comfortable bed and slept. Kat was up early, but decided to stay in bed cuddling with Lily till she was awoken by the smell of breakfast being cooked.

Lily had slept in her Memphis form despite the bed being large enough. It seemed that Lily wasn't quite ready to sleep together when they were both humanoid despite it happening once already. Now the option of sleeping in a slightly more innocent way was available Lily was taking it and running. With a more sensitive nose, and the fact she hadn't eaten anything since breakfast yesterday Lily was perfectly happy to answer the call downstairs.

Callisto had somehow worked out everyone was home and prepared enough food. It was a rather impressive feast actually. She had a number of plates laid out on the table with one filled with bacon, another poached eggs, a third with scrambled, a fourth plate for pancakes and a final plate filled with apple slices. It was a bit much actually. There would certainly be leftovers.

After everyone sat down and said their greetings Lily couldn't help but dig into the bacon and eggs. She found that even in her human form her tastes had changed. It wasn't that she couldn't eat other things, but her body did seem to crave protein in ways it hadn't before. The grease on the bacon didn't even bother her as it once did. It still wasn't ideal in her mind, but it wasn't a problem. Kat on the other hand was picking at a pancake and a few slices of apple.

Once everyone was settled in though, Vivian fixed Lily with a hard stare and said, "Now, I'm sure you want to go over your recent adventure... but I'm afraid you need to go visit your parents first,"

"Um..." Lily looked to Kat for support before glancing back at Vivian, "Not that I'm against your suggestion... and I was planning to see them... but why?"

Vivian frowned at the question, "Lily, it's nearly been a month since your parents have seen you. Perhaps it doesn't seem so bad to you because you were unconscious for much of it and then off on adventures but they are somewhat concerned. To the point they came and asked ME for further information.

.....

"Well, in truth I wasn't here at the time. Callisto was, but she directed them to me because god forbid she actually have to deal with someone's parents. So I came home from work, somewhat tired to find your parents questioning me about where you had gone. Now perhaps, I could have told them the truth, but as I said, I was tired. My client was an ass quite frankly and just pulled out on their contract so now I need to get legal involved because the work is basically done and they're trying to get out of paying...

“So when they asked me why you hadn’t visited, I told them that you were still under monitoring. Technically true, but I implied they were monitoring you at the demon hospital or whatever it is technically called. Which, while it did stop them worrying AT ME it didn’t seem to dispel their worries at all. I did leave them with a ‘so far it was all normal and good on your end’ to help soothe them but this is as far as I go.

“You need to speak with them regardless of your misgivings. I understand that you’ll surely have some and I don’t like to be the cranky parent, or I guess in-law in this case, but I will not be covering for you a second time if you aren’t here. If you ARE then I don’t want whatever issues come about to be here at my house. This is a family issue, and while arguments could be made that you’re already family because I adopted Kat...

“This is not a combined family problem, this is a Furos family problem. If you choose to let them believe the white lie I told them, that’s fine. If you tell them it was to get them off my back that’s fine to. It WAS to get them off my back. I do not mind. I’ll even let you take Kat if you want... but you will deal with it today and it will be dealt with before we speak of your most recent adventures. Understood?”

“Yes Vivian,” said Lily automatically before going back to her plate, now more playing with her food than truly consuming anything just to have something to do with her hands. [Vivian is scary when she’s angry. She’s not even that angry but... intense maybe. I wasn’t ready for it...]

I think it’s the contrast. Both to how she normally is and how most people are when they’re angry. I think in truth she’s probably just trying to be serious about this. I’m not sure that’s she’s truly angry... but more that she can empathise with their, apparently quite clear worry and that means she wants to ensure you sort this whole thing out. Though... do you want me to come with?

[That’s something I’m not quite sure of. I do want you there... but what I most want is to spend the maximum amount of time with you. I’m not sure if you being there would help or hinder with that. Having you around would show that you’re around and clearly supporting me. I’m just not sure if my parents WANT to know you support me so much. Sure we sort of dealt with my mother’s whole... thing with you and my dad promised it wouldn’t be an issue with him anymore... but talk is cheap frankly and...]

[Well I suppose the best way to put it is that I’ve gone through a rather drastic change in a short amount of time. I think my parents were still coming to terms with the fact I’m dating you and now I’ll show up as a Kat girl. Magic will be most definitely real and I just can’t work out how much they’ll freak out about that. I really wish I could do a spell or two already. That would help so much... but I can’t and we’ll need to leave soon if we want to catch my dad before he goes to work.]

Ok. What’s the plan then? Do we just go with the misdirection or tell the truth?

[I don’t know. I’d really like to just... let that lie continue... but I don’t know what’s better for my long term prospects. Admit that I went on adventures and that I was fine but Vivian sort of lied about it and I went without getting permission... or pretending that I was in the hospital for weeks under watch and only just now got out. Both seem equally annoying to admit to.]

Probably best to go with the truth. Not just because it's arguably the right thing to do but also because I can't lie remember? If I can't find a way to word things so they don't sound strange they might catch on anyway.

[Woops. I overlooked that. Probably should have planned around that particular limitation. I guess... full disclosure then? Well maybe not about quite how permanently connected we are. Perhaps... phrasing it as 'I could choose who to connect to but now I need to stay near you while it stabilises' or something. Focus on that I got to pick and that staying so close is more a limited time thing.]

I suppose it's true enough that I can say it directly. Hopefully they don't press too hard. Is there anything else to keep in mind?

[Hmm... just the one main thing I think... and that's to let me do most of the talking. Even if a questions directed somewhat vaguely towards you... best not answer I think. Stella was always the talkative one between the two of us unless I was rambling... so for something like this, trying to weasel our way out of trouble, it's best not to invoke any imagery reminiscent of that if we can help it. Answer in my head even. I'll just pass that on. Of course if they do specifically call you out don't back down if you've done nothing wrong. We're trying to play this... softly but if I have to draw a thick line in the sand instead... I'll live with that.]

Well. Even if I'm not talking do know that I'm here for you. If not speaking is what's best I'll say nary a word. These are your parents and I'll follow your lead, wherever that will take us.

Lily couldn't help but grin even as she mentally chastised Kat. [This isn't some dangerous quest. We're just talking with my parents.]

Ah but the stakes are higher than any quest.