

DEMONS 851

Chapter 851 A Yang Discussion

"So what do you even do anyway?" asked Yang as they rounded a corner. The traps might have been disabled by Xiang on his way in but they had no back exit so it was a matter of retracing their steps. They'd just come from a large room filled with destroyed golems.

It looked like Yang and Xiang had needed to fight an army of the dammed things. Stone weaponry and body parts coated the floor. In fact, had the floor been anything other than stone itself, there would have been more stone than floor in the room. Alas, as they were such similar materials it just looked like someone had broken up the floor at a distance. With the sharp edges and discarded weapons there was some thought that needed to be put into making their way across. This let the group catch up to Yang. Well, 'the group' was Kat and Xiang with Lily riding on Kat's shoulders.

"I don't quite follow," said Kat.

"Well, I get that Xiang thinks you can help us, and even if I'm not sure I agree... it does pay to be aware of everyone's abilities. So I'm asking, what is it you do?" said Yang.

"Are you also going to share?" asked Kat.

"No? Why would I give away that sort of information to people I don't like?" asked Yang, with seemingly genuine confusion.

Kat and Lily shared a glance before they both turned to Xiang as one. He held his hand up in a 'don't look at me' gesture as he tried to distance himself from that poor idea. "Ok. You say that... but... well I'm not sure why you'd admit that if you wanted us to share information? I mean... sure information for information... or even just agreeing with the idea we should all know what everyone on the team can do... but why would you instantly decide to go against your own idea? In fact... why announce it?"

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"Because you shouldn't lie to team members?" said Yang, with some hesitation.

Ok... surely she's not this stupid right? I mean... no I don't actually know what I mean. I can't decide if she's an idiot or not? She seems to play up the aggressive angle... but sometimes she does stuff like this... does she just not know when enough is enough? Or were we wrong assuming she might actually have more going on?

[I'm not sure. I mean... if we just took her as an idiot we'd probably still share what we can do and just accept she's too stupid to be reasoned with. It's a bad look... but hmm. I wonder if it's a way to make people underestimate her? Forcing us to reveal more about ourselves by seeing how we react to being irritated?]

I really don't know. I don't want to overthink this... but something just isn't right with her. Unless it's something to do with the world instead of Yang specifically... I mean... Xiang was super arrogant last time I talked to him. He's not so bad now... but I don't know how long that will last...

[I'm not sure either. Question is... should we explain what we can do? Or well, just you because apparently she hasn't noticed I'm around. Surely she can't be that deaf though... she was able to get

through that spider den. I refuse to believe she hasn't noticed me. Hmm... maybe just tell her your basic abilities? Demonic fire and the stuff your body can naturally do. Strength, speed, flight. Not True Sight or the dream mist.]

Sounds good. Though... should I poke at her a bit? Maybe say 'I'm a better version of you'? She's got to have decent strength for that club but I'm sure I'm stronger... and she had those eye lasers but my fire is better. Probably not worth trying to annoy her that much though...

[Yeah no... regardless of if it's a ruse or not she'll take the chance to whine and whine and it's just not worth it.]

"Well Yang. I can punch hard, move fast, and freeze everything using my demonic energy. Oh and I can fly," said Kat trying to sound flippant.

"So you're just the dumb muscle then?" huffed Yang.

"Says the one with the iron club as a weapon," retorted Lily.

"I'll have you know it takes a great deal of finesse to properly handle a club of this size and weight. Knowing how to control your momentum and make use of a radically different centre of mass especially as it changes, is quite difficult. Xiang may have fancy sword techniques but he can't really compete with me in purely martial might," insisted Yang.

Kat looked over to Xiang for confirmation but he actually nodded. "Yang is bragging a bit but... I'd say she is better with her weapon than I am. Her techniques outside of it are kind of basic though and lacking in effective damage,"

"My eye lasers can be brought up to high power," retorted Yang.

"Yes and it blinds you temporarily which makes it a horrible move in combat," quipped Xiang.

"I just haven't perfected the technique yet. A bit of fine tuning is all I need to turn it into a truly deadly attack!" insisted Yang.

"Yang... let's face it. Your club is at least twenty times deadlier and you'll never finish that laser eye technique. You only bothered to refine it that far because Xuena kept telling you to get a ranged option in your kit. The fact you can actually hurt someone with it is already a miracle. You just don't have the talent for that sort of thing," said Xiang with some sadness.

Yang huffed, "No. I can get it. I have rare affinity with Sunlight. My comprehension of the element is considered to be exceptional. I can figure out a few basic techniques!"

"Perhaps Yang, perhaps but unlike more common elements you don't have someone to teach you or even a jade slip to learn from. You don't want to put the time in either," returned Xiang.

Yang refused to answer that one and the group lapsed back into silence. *Now I'm confused. Do we thank Xiang? He pretty much just told us that her only real abilities outside of maybe a technique just for use with her club... is the eye thing we saw. He even told us her weakness. I... he can't be that stupid right? And Yang confirmed it! Are we being messed with? Or... is Xiang also being messed with?*

[Honestly Kat... at this point I don't really know.]

But why?

[Hmmm... not saying this is the case... but... wild conspiracy theory. Xuena used the ingredient for something else weeks ago and they needed a way to get out of being punished. Xiang got roped in when Yang found him, abusing the fact he feels indebted to them to help free Xuena from her just punishment for wasting the ingredient, or maybe using it to advance Yang's cultivation. It is a SUNLIGHT moth after all.]

No way...

[Eh, I don't really believe it. Too much risk frankly. Though... if Yang is the one playing Xiang... I wonder who it was that told him that cocoon was used. Yang or Xuena. I think I'd be very interested in that little bit of information]

Urgh... I don't want this to be complicated again. Last time it was the stuff with Gaston... and while I'm glad we did what we could for Belle... I really don't want this to be anything... Extra. I don't want to imagine Yang as some master manipulator. Though... does it really matter? It's not like we're exactly friendly with Xiang... and I assumed we're getting paid. D.E.M.O.N.S I am getting paid right?

User Kat will receive payment upon completion of Contract.

Ok good.

[Does the money even matter? I mean... I agree it would be weird and probably annoying if there's some conspiracy going on. Does it matter though? Money or otherwise?]

"Well what about you Xiang? Any interesting techniques?" asked Kat.

Xiang shook his head with a sigh. "No not really. I spent most of the time between our meetings cultivating, refining my old techniques and of course recovering from my time with the spiders. Perhaps in time I'll find something interesting... but I'm stuck with the basics for now. Though... I did manage to create a basic sword wave, which is progress."

"Well it's not like you've been cultivating long," said Yang. "You've made really good progress all things considered."

Oh shit. Yang said a nice thing. Quick run and hide the world is going to end!

Despite Kat's 'surprise' the world did not end. All that happened was Xiang gave a light shrug at the praise. While some people, especially those from large cultivator families did start cultivating much earlier it wasn't all that beneficial. True cultivation could only start after puberty. Issues arose otherwise unless you abused a truly prohibitive amount of resources.

Chapter 852 A Slow Night

It wasn't long before they made it to the entrance room. It was actually pretty nice if you ignored all the mould. Apparently, despite all the traps, this was actually a publicly accessible building at some point. There were two couches that were mouldy with a massive hole in one of them from where a chunk of the ceiling had fallen down. The carpets were more dirt than whatever fabric made them up before. There were a few wooden chairs that seemed to have survived mostly due to the fact good varnish was

used on them. Two were destroyed from other parts of the ceiling but there was still three more intact if more than a little dusty.

As soon as they arrived, Xiang pointed out the fact it was getting late and they should rest... only for Yang to start another argument about wasting time and 'it not being that dark'. Truth be told it was, by Kat's estimate, about six o'clock in the evening and from their somewhat underground area was no longer visible. Yang didn't seem to care about that though.

The argument was very familiar, leaving Kat and Lily to claim one of the wooden chairs. It was dusted off with a good gust of Kat's wings as well as ripping off some of her outfit and using it as a rag before she resummoned it fully repaired. Lily curled up on Kat's lap in her Memphis form and quickly fell asleep.

At some point in the argument, Kat wasn't really paying attention to it, Xiang managed to move close enough to one of the chairs and took a sight, ignoring the dust and debris on it. Yang barely reacted to the change and just kept yelling. Xiang nodded, a slow, bobbing movement that clearly had more to do with the fact he was trying not to fall asleep than anything Yang was actually saying at this point.

Eventually, Kat noticed the young man in question had fallen asleep. Yang didn't even seem to notice. She simply continued to chastise everything from Kat's hair colour to Xiang's parents occupations and furthermore onto his ancestors poor choice in mates. Kat was tuning most of it out. She didn't really care. Maybe it would have been nice to know how to insult someone so thoroughly... but it really did get old after the first ten minutes, let alone however long it took in actuality.

And when Yang finally decided to end the argument it was because she basically just collapsed. Yang gave out a large yawn, and then curled up on Xiang's lap, draping herself over him and get comfortable rather quickly. Kat raised a surprised eyebrow at the scene and didn't really know what to make of it. Xiang didn't really seem like a masochist... maybe Yang was into sadism and degradation?

Curse Evaline for giving me this knowledge! I thought I buried all that shit deep in my mind. Apparently some of it slipped through. Better hide it away again before Lily wakes up. I wouldn't want to re-traumatise her after she recovered so well. Still... it might be true. I can't see any other reason to keep yelling at Xiang... AFTER HE FELL ASLEEP... unless she's getting something out of it. Probably sexual. I mean... nobody could be that into arguing otherwise, right? Especially if it's not a debate.

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Kat's questions would go unanswered as the world transitioned into night. Kat wanted to get some sleep or try meditating for a bit but she really wasn't feeling it. Yang's yelling was as excessive as it was weird. It didn't necessarily make her have second thoughts about the contract... saving someone was something she felt quite willing to do after all. It was just... she was pondering if perhaps going off and dealing with it all herself.

She wouldn't of course. Not only did she not really get a description of Xuena, she didn't know where the ice sect was, or the nearest settlement to ask for directions either. It'd be a large waste of time, time the others could use to get ahead of her and potentially ruin the rescue plan. Especially with Yang's attitude.

So she was stuck. Stuck with Xiang who was at least behaving much better, and Yang who... seemed to make her personal mission finding anything and everything possible to be mad at. Yang needed a god damned hobby. At some point Kat switched from pondering to once again training her fire.

It was going well. She could now control it smoothly up to five metres away. Not much perhaps but considering before her plan had to be 'throw it at the enemy and hope' the fact she could now influence it at all once it left her hands was a blessing. The soft purple light also provided her a chance to look around the room from her chair... but there wasn't really anything else worth mentioning.

Lily woke up for a little bit, just past midnight at Kat's best guess. Lily made some attempts at spell casting but didn't manage anything once again. Her circle was looking much more solid though. Kat was certain she was close. Still the practice was tiring and Lily found herself going back to sleep.

So with practice Kat passed the rest of the early morning. When the barest hint of sun poked through the ceiling and Yang shot up like she'd been poked with a needle. She carefully slunk off Xiang careful not to wake him... only to freeze when she noticed Kat watching her. Kat gave a polite wave and Yang pulled herself up her full height and got ready for a rant... only to glance sideways at Xiang, still asleep.

Yang's face screwed up like she'd just had a lemon before she glanced between Kat and Xiang a few times before making the 'I'm watching you gesture' with two fingers flicking from her eyes to Kat. Kat just gave her a shrug in return, careful not to wake Lily at all.

Yang walked out the door and sat, cultivating in the morning sun. She was absorbing the first rays of dawn. Well, that's what she'd say if asked. Really they were in a fairly mountainous area that was quite rocky. The hidden door was also set into a rock formation. Really Yang was getting like... the thousandth ray of the morning at best, probably later if you asked an expert. It didn't matter all that much, for it was within some the first rays to hit that particular spot, and cultivation was partially symbolism and belief.

That didn't mean it was only that though. The sunlight attuned Qi Yang was taking in was very real. It was quite pure as well... though very lacking in terms of density and substance. It was like sticking a straw into a fog bank and trying to drink. It would take you an age just to get a cup's worth.

Still, that was the essence of cultivation. Slow, steady progress over years, building up a solid foundation in hopes that it would eventually propel you to immortality. Yang's technique wasn't even a bad one. Taking in Qi attuned to her element was something that would strengthen you in the end... but it was so very slow. It was no wonder she complimented Xiang on his progress. Everyone was able to breeze past her if she remained committed to this style of cultivation without some kind of lucky break.

Speaking of Xiang, it was him that woke next. Not really a surprise to Kat, but the fact he was up not an hour later was. Apparently they were a crew of early risers. When Xiang noticed Kat, he startled a little in the chair before his memories of yesterday became clearer and he remember exactly what happened. He looked around a bit and seemed confused until Kat pointed out the door, indicating where the missing Yang had gone.

Xiang sighed and made his way over to Kat, speaking softly. "Are you ready to leave? We can wait for Lily of course but we are in something of a rush."

"It's no problem," said Kat, "I can carry Lily and she'll probably remain asleep regardless of what sort of speed I move at. I'm perfectly ready to head out now if you want."

Xiang pursed his lips and glanced at the door. "Hmm... I want to leave yes... but probably safest to let Yang finish cultivating. You do not want interrupt a cultivator during their cultivation rituals. It can cause major damage to their foundation if you aren't careful... and... even if I didn't cause that sort of damage to Yang... you can imagine how she'd be..."

Kat winced and nodded. Xiang nodded along and added, "Yes... well... seeing as you agree... I'll just do a bit of light cultivating myself, nothing I can't be interrupted from. Just until Yang is finished. Then we can head off and stop somewhere for lunch. We didn't eat anything for dinner yesterday and that's fine for now but if we're running at full speed... well..."

Chapter 853 Arguments Over Lunch

As agreed upon the group left once Yang had finished her morning routine. They stepped out onto the mountains and started to make their way over rocky terrain. Kat quickly decided it was better to just fly. She was able to glide down in a fairly straight line while those ground bound cultivators had to bother with climbing up and down the rocky surfaces or making risky jumps to keep up their speed.

This was perfectly fine for the first two hours, but Yang happened to look back, just to check that Kat was still around and noticed the demon in question flying instead of running. "Hey what the heck?" shouted Yang. Luckily for Kat, she was far enough away the instinctive yelling of Yang sounded almost normal. Almost.

"What do you mean?" asked Kat making sure to project her voice.

"Why the heck are you flying? Too good to walk on the ground like us mortals?" grumbled Yang. Despite the complaints though she didn't actually stop moving. Kat was willing to give some reluctant credit for that. Yang might have been annoyed, and she was calling Kat out for it, unlike Xiang who had glanced back more regularly and said nothing. Still it wasn't technically getting in the way of the mission.

"It's just simpler," explained Kat. "Up here I can just turn my mind off and follow you both automatically. I don't have to worry about footing or changing speed drastically to keep up or slow down if our chosen paths are a bit too different time wise. We're all travelling quite fast but this isn't my maximum speed. So... choosing between needing to pay attention to my footwork constantly or just keeping an eye on you both and following along... well the choice is easy,"

Yang huffed at that and didn't say anything else. It was clear she wasn't exactly happy with Kat's answer but apparently she wasn't willing to waste her breath complaining while running. Probably for the best. Slowing down to catch her breath would be a notable delay and despite Yang's desire to complain apparently she wasn't willing to waste time. Well, not now that they've started.

Time passed after that without any issue. Lily didn't even bother waking up for the conversation. In fact, Lily didn't react until they stopped on a particularly large rock for lunch. Xiang pulled out some dried fruits, hard bread, and a bit of jerky. Lily woke up after smelling the food and popped into her human form to take a bite.

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Yang just stood there shell-shocked as she stared at Lily. It took a good thirty seconds for her brain to reboot before she jumped backwards club outstretched, "WHO THE HECK IS THIS?"

"I'm Lily, Kat's girlfriend. I've been in my Memphis form for a while but I transformed yesterday. You just didn't really pay any attention when it happened. Completely ignored me," said Lily trying to play up the offence. Perhaps it would knock Yang down a peg or two.

It was a false hope. "Why in the name of cultivation does she get to bring her girlfriend along on this journey? This is a serious rescue mission and we can't have team members that don't even announce their presence!"

Lily listened carefully and was ready with an easy counter, "Ah, but you see I'm exactly what you need. My abilities make me fairly good at stealth. Most people don't look twice at a small animal, even if I do look a little unusual."

"That's all well and good but if we can't rely on you for combat when things go bad what's the point of a stealth expert?" asked Yang, simply assuming Lily couldn't fight because it wasn't mentioned. She was right in that guess, but it was still rude to assume.

"Not getting into a fight in the first place?" said Lily confused. "Are you saying you want to fight your way to Xuena, giving the enemy a chance to take her as a more active hostage? Or perhaps just kill her so we can't free her? The best way to get her out will be stealth and planning. Barging in will do no one any good."

"Well is there anything else you can do?" asked Yang.

Lily sighed, "While I don't think I NEED to do anything else I am currently trying to practice my paper magic."

"You're a paper cultivator?" asked Yang confused. She was so confused she actually lowered her voice for once.

"No, I'm a paper mage. It's a bit different," said Lily.

Yang frowned heavily at the correction, "But magic isn't real. It's just little tricks or cultivators pretending to be someone from the stories. Magic isn't real!" insisted Yang.

Wait. So even in a world with cultivation some people believe magic isn't real? Is this more or less silly then it not existing on Earth?

[I guess it depends. On the one hand, they have what's nearly magic and technically isn't. So I guess it depends on what they mean by magic. The fact that we know Mana and Qi are different things is pretty strange in a universal sense. I think. Anyway... my point is. They have proof Qi exists and we have fairly conclusive proof neither exist. So I'd say it's probably about as reasonable in both cases.]

"Mana isn't really something your world produces. Other worlds do though and it's the higher energy type I use. Did you think demons all used Qi?" asked Lily.

"Well of course they use Qi! It's what empowers every cultivator!" said Yang firmly.

Lily sighed, "That's what I'm saying. You are cultivators because you have Qi. I'm a mage because I use mana and Kat's a demon and so she uses demonic energy," explained Lily.

"So what? I can become a demon just by using demonic energy?" asked Yang.

“No.” said Lily firmly. “No you cannot. I was careful to say that you are a cultivator and I am a mage BECAUSE we use those energy types but it’s the other way around with demons. They are demons, and as such the type of higher energy they use is different.”

“Well why can’t I cultivate with demonic energy? Is that what makes them so powerful?” asked Yang with a huff.

Kat and Lily rapidly shook their heads. “It’s a horrible idea to cultivate with demonic energy,” said Lily.

Kat picked up straight after and added, “It’ll warp you horribly and then you’ll die a short time later. Your mind doesn’t really survive the transition and your body only continues on for a little bit afterwards anyway. It’s exceptionally poisoned power. Do NOT attempt it.”

“Hmph. What would you know? You’re a demon and I bet you just want to keep that sort of power to yourself,” said Yang.

Kat sighed. “Ok Yang, even if that was true, which it isn’t. Demonic energy isn’t exactly easy to get your hands on in most dimensions. Furthermore I actually HAVE seen what happens when non-demons cultivate demonic energy. I saw a mage corrupted by it who started spawning a horde of demonic rats. She was disgusting and insane. I would not recommend.”

“Why should I believe you?” questioned Yang.

“I literally can’t lie,” said Kat.

“Oh really? Why not say something false?” asked Yang.

Kat rolled her eyes and Lily hopped in. “She literally can’t. It’s a demon thing not a ‘I don’t lie’ thing. It is physically impossible for Kat to say something she believes to be false.”

Yang was about to argue, but Xiang stepped in and said, “Lily’s correct. Demons are incapable of lying. They can still trick you in other ways, and many of them are excellent at it. However, there isn’t really a way to dismiss the whole ‘your mind and body don’t survive the transition’. I don’t really see how else that can be interpreted,”

[Well... considering if we want to get technical. When I gained demonic energy I lost my body, and my body lost my mind. So an argument could be made.]

Lily. Don’t give them ideas. Let them think you were always a cat-girl. It’s so much easier and less likely to give them severe trust issues.

[Oh I know. It’s just funny to think about.]

Kat pursed her lips but didn’t say anything else mentally. Lily probably wasn’t planning on telling anyone, not after it was pointed out anyway. Lily did however like to share her thoughts, especially when she found interesting ones. Very appropriate to share with your best friend. Less so to share in the middle of class with whoever happens to be seated nearby.

Yang of course just huffed and turned away, swiping a large portion of the dried fruit and not looking at anyway as she ate. Kat let Lily and Xiang eat their fill before taking her own portion. It consisted of a single strip of meat as well as a few slices worth of bread. She didn’t really mind. The food wasn’t

necessary right this moment, she could deal with not eating... but considering they were certainly going to be on the road for some time Kat thought it was worth eating when she could.

Chapter 854 An Argument Over Directions

It was the next day and they'd managed to come across a road. Well. Perhaps calling it a road was overly generous. It was at best a small path used by hunters or animals that used this pathway regularly. There was only an assumption that it would meet back up with the major road, but for now it was enough to spark another argument. The first real conversation between all four of them since lunch yesterday.

"I think it's time we decide what we're going to do," said Xiang. "With this path here, we can follow it back to the road. After that... well rather than stopping we should decide now if we want to go through the swamp, either using the path or going straight through."

"Well what's faster? We should obviously we should pick that one. There's no sense in wasting time while Xuena's imprisoned," said Yang.

Xiang sighed. "Ok, even if we assume Xuena is suffering and not in a nice room she's forced to remain in... I don't know what's faster and based on the fact you had to suggest 'the fastest one' instead of mentioning which path actually was the fastest... I don't think you know either. *novelnext.com*

"We can assume it can't be the bypass road. The path through the swamp likely wouldn't still be on the map if it was. Especially considering this map is something I picked up after I was healed and the swamp is practically ancient. If both paths are still standing there must be a reason.

"Then of course there's simply trudging straight through the swamp. Honestly... based on the angle we would only just barely be missing the pathway through it... but maybe that's a good thing? The path might be that way for a reason,"

Yang frowned and glanced over to Kat. "Well, what do you think?"

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"Why would I know?" asked Kat, confused look on her face and a similar look on the Memphis in her arms.

"I don't know? Maybe you have some experience with swamps?" offered Yang as a possible answer. Of course, still at her annoyingly loud volume.

"Even if I did," said Kat slowly, "I can't exactly see the swamp in question. I mean, what do we actually know about it? How deep is the water most of the time? How deadly is the water? The wildlife? Is there any mating seasons we need to be aware of? I can't really offer any advice just from the brief description I already have. I mean. It's called 'The Bog of Ten Thousand Poisons' but how many of those poisons are likely to be an issue for us?"

Xiang bit his lip and checked over the map again. "Hmm... the map doesn't say... not that I really expected it to... hmm... hmm... I'm not too worried... I haven't heard any rumours of it being particularly deadly so I imagine for cultivators it isn't a true issue... then again... Ten Thousand is a lot... maybe we should play it safe and go around..."

“No.” said Yang firmly. The rest of the group turned to her and continued, “If it’s not a problem for cultivators like us we should rush through it. We’ve spent ages beside this small path debating it. I say we keep heading through the brush until we find the swamp, and then continue. If we find the bog’s pathway we can continue on that and if we don’t it’s fine,”

Xiang frowned and turned to Kat, giving the slightest of shrugs as if to say ‘it’s probably not worth it’. Kat wasn’t entirely sure she agreed with him but well... she could fly. That made her infinitely less likely to need to deal with whatever nonsense was thrown at them. “Sure...” said Kat.

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One more day had passed and it was smooth travelling for most of it. They stopped for meals twice, another lunch and a breakfast due to a desire to avoid eating in the middle of a swamp. That was something that didn’t prompt an argument for once. Full agreement on behalf of all parties.

It was good timing too because it wasn’t long since breakfast that they approached the swamp. It wasn’t quite visible yet but the smell. The smell hit Kat and Lily like a brick wall. They were downwind, which certainly didn’t help matters, but without even a hint of the swamp in vision that were potentially still hours out from it. Lily let out a harsh retching noise and moved from her position in Kat’s arms facing forward to burying her face as deeply as she could in Kat’s breasts. She didn’t even have any lewd thoughts about it. The smell was just that bad.

Kat was rather regretting her enhanced sense of smell. It wasn’t even one of her exceptionally enhanced senses. Still, it was better and Kat decided that it wasn’t a good thing at all. The fact she didn’t have anything to throw up might have helped but that was a minor conciliation at best.

Xiang and Yang weren’t really doing any better. Cultivators also had enhanced senses and it was entirely possible their sense of smell was actually better than Kat. Even if it wasn’t. The fact they had a sense of smell at all was a considerable negative at the moment. “Maybe we should go around?” asked Xiang, repressing a gag at the need to open his mouth. He’d covered his entire face with his arm and sleeves.

Yang went to answer, only for a gust of wind to pick up and slam the smell right into her. She quickly dashed to the side of the road, retching a few times before wiping her mouth. She clearly thought for a few seconds, before saying, “No. This is the faster way. I’m sure of it. We shouldn’t be wasting time,”

Despite saying that, she looked like it was causing her physical pain to say them in the first place. Her entire body seemed to scream in disgust and a blind person could tell she didn’t have any interest in trying to brave the swamp. Kat and Xiang shared a look between each other and weren’t really sure how to take it. Lily was mewling into Kat’s chest in complaint.

“Are... are you sure Yang?” asked Xiang shakily, “I think we know why the bypass exists now and... and even if it’s a bit of a long way around it might be worth it?” Xiang was practically pleading in the offer.

“No Xiang. We already discussed this. We’re going through the bog!” insisted Yang.

Lily... should I just pick up Yang and carry her down the road? I mean... I don’t know that I want to deal with this smell long. It smells like... I... I don’t even have the words for whatever this is. I thought this was the bog of poison not the sceptic tank bog.

[Urgh... human noses eventually adapt to all kinds of smell to prevent getting overwhelmed. That would imply we'll get used to it... well... if we were still human. I think it works that way with other animals but... magic bullshit might prevent it and I don't think this will be a pleasant trip regardless.]

Do you think if I fly up high enough we can avoid the smell?

Lily thought for a moment. [No Kat. No I don't. Or at least not without some other problem like it being too high to see the others, or high enough for vicious flying beasts to find us or whatever it will be.]

Xiang glared at Yang and looked about ready to argue before he glanced at her weapon and decided it wasn't really worth it. He looked into his supply ring and pulled out a bandage strip. He ripped off a large section and wrapped it around his nose and mouth. Yang opened her mouth to ask for one but Xiang sprinted off before she got the chance. Yang's eyes flashed dangerously before charging off after Xiang to catch up. Kat started running herself but kept back a bit. No reason to get hit by the debris caused by the cultivator pair's running.

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It took about two hours to reach the start of the bog. Kat was actually about to call out a warning... but she was too slow. Or at least. That's what she'd tell anyone who asked. Xiang was just about to be caught by Yang too. See, the reason Kat knew they'd reached the edge was that the path curved off to the side directly up ahead. Well that and the fact the 'ground' was slowly bobbing up and down.

The cultivators weren't prepared at all. Xiang put one heavy step down on the 'ground' and the floating debris easily gave way. A massive splash exploded around him as he ploughed forward straight into the dirty water. Yang wasn't far behind him. She saw the massive wave and tried to stop in place but she was too close. The wave slapped into her and a moment later she slipped and fell into the swamp as well. Truly a tragedy.

Chapter 855 Pride Comes After a Fall as Well

Xiang surfaced quickly and dragged himself to shore before shaking himself like a dog and trying to get as much water off his clothing and face as possible. After a few moments he stepped away from the spot he'd been dripping and flopped onto the ground. As he moved though, the water started to bubble and churn. A golden light could be seen from the surface and the water was starting to hiss.

Yang exploded out of the water, clawing at the ground and creating deep gouges in the muddy dirt as she wrenched herself out of the water. Unlike Xiang who looked thoroughly soaked but not too bad otherwise. Yang looked... well... let's just say she wasn't winning any awards at that moment.

Xiang wore the drenched hair look well even as lay on the ground facing the sky. Eyes closed of course. Yang was not so lucky. Apparently Xiang's reflexes were a step better in all ways. Once Yang made it to the shore she coughed out a large amount of water and stomped on the ground as she started to shakily stand up.

Her hair looked like it had been run through a few trees. She had sticks, leaves and a good deal of mud all stuck to her hair. It also had started to frizz up rather badly and was sticking out at odd angles despite being soaking wet. Her golden hair looked... a lot less gold at the moment.

Her outfit, which was once a nice white, was now brown in most places and green in a few others. It was also torn in two places, one just next to her waist and the other was a slit up the edge of her sleeve. Unlike Xiang who still had his eyes closed, Yang wasn't quite so lucky. Her eyes were glowing bright yellow at the moment but when that light faded it would reveal two red bloodshot corneas. Regardless. Yang was not happy.

A few more coughs came out of her mouth before the words did, "WHAT THE FUCK XIANG!"

Xiang's mouth twitched a few times before he carefully wiped it with his hand, getting rid of most of the dirty water. Without opening his eyes he said, "What exactly are you criticising me for?"

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"You were leading the way! Why the heck did I end up drenched?!" yelled Yang before she got caught in another round of coughing. It didn't sound great, very watery. A few moments later yet more water dribbled out of Yang's mouth and proved that particularly thought rather well. Nobody really liked seeing or hearing that proof but it was there.

"Hang on Yang. Normally I'm willing to put up with your criticism. It's not always entirely fair... but normally I can understand where you might find a problem with my actions. Sometimes your points are even quite good. So please know that I say this not out of irritation, or a dislike of you personally but...

"What the fuck are you smoking? Did that swamp water already get into your brain? In case you didn't notice I'm also drenched and not a single bit happier about it then you are! The floating algae looked remarkably like grass and I wasn't exactly paying attention. Now, maybe that is my fault... but I'm not responsible for you in this scenario. I also didn't have any intentions of falling in, or drenching you. Maybe if it was just the splash from my entry that hit you I might be a little more understanding but you fell in face first as well!"

Now. Xiang might have been correct in his statements. He was not truly at fault and he was potentially just as put out as Yang. Sadly, Yang didn't quite take it that way. Not only did Xiang managed to avoid a lot of the roots and the messier parts of the swamp, getting out significantly cleaner looking, though the fact he was wearing leathers helped prevent the mud from really showing. Yang took her fall very hard in a number of ways.

Kat could see Yang's fae was actually a bit red. Slapping a wave of water and then the bogs surface one after another at full speed was not ideal. Xiang was in a similar position but he flipped over further before entering the water and the 'damage' was in his hairline, much less visible. Yang's eyes were of course red from the water she got in them, not closing them quickly enough. And her mouth wasn't any better. She'd swallowed a good deal of water and could still taste it.

So regardless of how little Xiang could be found at fault by a reasonable person... Yang wasn't a reasonable person at the best of times. And a Yang with burning eyes, mud in her mouth, ruined clothes and completely soaked from head to toe... well that was not a Yang that would be anything close to reasonable.

Before Xiang could even react properly her mace slammed straight down on his ribs and unlike last time where she held back and was mostly going for distance, this time the spikes were out. Kat heard a loud thump followed by the sound of tearing leather as Yang pulled her club back.

Xiang's chest piece now had a large cut in it from where it had been impaled by one of the club's spikes that had been at the best angle to do the damage. Xiang was wheezing at this point and Yang was actually pulling back FOR ANOTHER SWING.

Kat dove to the ground and caught the mace as it was coming down. It wasn't hard to hold around the spikes, they were large and fairly spread out so Kat just needed to fit her fingers around a few and tilt her hand a bit awkwardly. There was a light thud as Kat took the weight onto her hand even as she winced at her mistake. She'd continued to hold Lily in her arms. Sure Lily wasn't likely to want to leave, especially not with the smell, but Kat realised she'd just taken Lily INTO combat which was not ideal. Even if this was just a minor brawl between allies.

"What are you stopping me for bitch? He deserves a good beating for what he did!" hissed Yang.

"No he doesn't" said Kat slowly, "You should calm down. This wasn't really Xiang's fault and you're taking things too far. A little hit is one thing but you managed to get through Xiang's armour and probably bruised a few ribs. You're lucky I didn't hear a cracking sound,"

"Fuck luck. It's all skill. I knew exactly how hard I was hitting him now GET OUT OF THE WAY or I'll show YOU CALM!" growled Yang.

Kat couldn't help but feel Yang was doing a good job of reminding her of a particularly rabid dog. No that was unkind. To the dog. Yang's eyes weren't helping her seem less crazy either. Though her attitude was of course the main problem. "Yang. There is no need for this," insisted Kat.

Yang didn't like that so she wrenched the club back and tried to swing it at Kat. Kat was a little annoyed she didn't have a good enough grip on the thing to prevent Yang from doing this, but she the top was much too large to wrap her hand around so really this should have been expected. Kat watched as Yang wound up and debated what to do in her slowed time. Jumping over it would be funny, but likely live Xiang exposed. Blocking it with a hand again was fine... but Yang might try to twist it or something.

Deciding not to risk it Kat stepped forward right into Yang and shoved her backwards ruining her stance. Yang didn't let up on the swing but Kat just raised her forearm up and met the club lower down to avoid the spikes. Hitting Kat was a lot like hitting a wall at that moment and it all reverberated back down to Yang's hand, causing her to flinch. That was just enough for Kat to elbow the weapon out of her hands and then follow up by kneeing her down into the ground.

Yang screeched at the indignity but Kat was pressing firmly on her chest and with a bit of extra pressure the air could be knocked out of her and Yang knew it. Didn't stop the screeching sadly so Kat made good on the threat. Yang wheezed at it and then tried to roll out from under Kat's knees but she was pinned.

Kat just sighed and said, "Ok. Yang. I'm going to hold you here like this until you calm down,"

Yang tried to spit in Kat's face. Emphasis on tried. It didn't have any power behind it and the angle was awful so it just fell back towards Yang's face. She managed to twist out of the way but the spit landed back on her own cheek. "Well that was just rude," mumbled Kat. Loud enough for Yang to hear of course.

Chapter 856 Questions of Leadership and Punishment

Yang tried and failed to get off the ground a few more times but her strength was nothing compared to Kat's and she couldn't exactly get much leverage to offset that particular issue. Well, that wasn't entirely true. With a bit of effort Yang could use all four of her limbs at once in an attempt to get out from under Kat's knee. She wasn't thinking particularly clearly though and the anger was clouding her judgement.

Kat heard the waterlogged steps of Xiang as his boots squished and squashed against the ground as he made his way over. Xiang had pulled his hair off the side and had only cracked one eye open. When he got next to Kat, he said, "Yang. Kat is going to let you up in a moment," I am? "and I want you to stand up. S L O W L Y and then meditate to try and get that poison out of your system. You will feel much less angry afterwards," Wait hang on...

Kat glanced at Xiang who gave her a nod before she turned to Yang who still looked pretty angry. Kat raised an eyebrow and Yang grimaced but gave her a nod in return. Kat carefully lifted her weight off of Yang's chest and stepped backwards. Yang glared at Kat as she stood up before grabbing her weapon once again. Kat pretended not to be watching her in slowed time as Yang slammed it down into the ground creating a small dent and stomping off away from the group. Presumably to meditate.

Yang started to jog eventually, giving up on her excessive stomping, and managed to get a decent way away from the group before sitting down and letting her breathing slow. Kat glanced over at Xiang after this had happened and stage whispered "Ok what are the chances the water is actually poisoned and that it enhances aggression"

Xiang put on an old wise master voice and said, "Ah but what is the true poison? Some mildly irritating plants or the infectious nature of anger itself? One is temporary and easily healed while the other can weigh you down for a lifetime damaging every interaction you have with others,"

"Right... ok... let's say I agree with that. Is the water poisoned or not? I need to know how careful I should be especially with Lily. I can probably deal with any poison that doesn't instantly kill me with my regeneration but that isn't the case for Lily," explained Kat.

Xiang looked out at the water, seeing the algae blooms as well as the grass and shrubs growing on the edge of the swamp. "Truthfully... I think if there is a poison in the water this far out it's not a strong one. It's clearly something that can be easily shaken off... but I imagine it'll get worse the deeper we go. That tends to be how these kinds of environments operate. The path doesn't go through the centre of the bog... but it does get much closer. Hopefully it's not a major issue..."

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"Sure. I can accept that... except for the fact I see no path!" said Kat as she gestured grandly towards the swamp.

Xiang pulled out the map, luckily he was using a small special ring and the map was perfectly dry, to check. Xiang frowned as he saw they should be in the right spot, assuming at least they were on the path depicting by the map. Xiang gazed out at the bog for a few moments as he looked for a path of some kind but there really wasn't anything overly obvious. Certainly no pontoons or brick roads. He took a few steps to the side as he continued to look only to freeze when he noticed it. "I think I found the path. Come stand over here and follow where I'm pointing. You have to see it to understand."

Kat shrugged and moved over to stand behind Xiang, following his arms... and then it all clicked. He was right. You did have to see it. From this angle you could see a clear marking of wooden sticks. They didn't look too out of place from the side but when you were standing in the right area you noticed that they lined up perfectly with each other. It was an exceptionally clear marking once you knew what to look for. "I see. So we follow those?"

"I think we should," said Xiang. "We've already managed to get to it... so at least for the swamp we should stick to the marked path. I imagine it's safer and I hope that it's faster..."

"Well... if that's what you want. I'm not the one who needs to wade through the water..." said Kat before walking away.

Xiang looked back at Kat as she made her way over to a small tree that was really more of a bush with delusions of grandeur. Whatever it was before, now it was making an acceptable backrest as Kat breathed out a soft sigh as she tried to catch up with everything that just happened.

I don't really know if I should be mad at Yang or not. I can at least understand her anger this time... even if it was poorly directed. The fact that she went straight to attacking Xiang though... and with real force... I don't know how to feel about that. Was I too easy on her? She's not some unruly child for me to discipline... but you know... maybe she wasn't punished as a child.

[I feel like that's getting into territory best left alone. Best not try and guess at an angry woman's childhood. Probably best just to leave it alone. As to if you did the right thing or if you should be mad. Hmm... well I'd say some annoyance is certainly warranted. Maybe it's not so bad in a world with special healing but we have no healers and wasting medical supplies is a terrible idea.]

[In addition to that. Yang is constantly angry, and this is a reasonable line in the sand to draw. Saying that she can yell and scream all she wants, perhaps even some light physical violence. But Xiang was only saved from having a deep cut in his chest and maybe some broken ribs as well by his leather armour. As it stands, she damaged, permanently I think, Xiang's equipment.]

[If that becomes a consistent thing on our journey, we'll need to make detours for more supplies and equipment. I don't think it's that far fetched either considering how long we'll be needing to travel together. I'm just not sure how much we should confront her about it. Which I guess leads to if you were too soft on her.]

[Honestly... hard to say. We aren't her parents or relatives. One could argue we don't have any real authority to punish her... except we are currently working in a team to free someone from unlawful confinement. Hmm... is it unlawful? Maybe not but the point was pretty clear I think.]

[Perhaps what we need to do is establish who is in charge of this mission. Xiang seems to sort of be at this point mostly because he has the map. If he properly claims that role, we can say it isn't our place to punish her. That it's Xiang's job and all we can do is recommend he take some sort of action.]

[Though the counter to that is Xiang might be too soft on her considering she saved his life... or that the power difference between the two isn't sufficient to allow Yang to be punished, especially not in any physical way. Not if Xiang's the one doing the punishing. I don't think that should be OUR job either, not if we aren't in charge because that would just create problems but...]

[I'd say it's hard, just like you already think. Yang's behaviour isn't really acceptable. This was a pretty unique situation, dirt and water and her eyes look horrible now. She's probably going to be in a decent amount of pain for a while just while her body deals with it all. Even if it's not poison it's still dirty water that was in her eyes and throat.]

[Maybe we can consider that punishment enough? I don't think things will be pleasant for her right at this moment. Though... that might sound like an excuse to just avoid punishment. Hmmm... leadership. I don't know how we'd designate a leader. Yang would never accept us, and might not accept anyone other than herself. It'd probably become another major fight. Does that mean we have to let it go? Maybe... keep it in mind for the future... but maybe we do have to leave things as they are.]

I guess so. Thanks for the thoughts Lily they really helped.

[I was just ranting for a bit Kat. I didn't say anything that insightful.]

Perhaps... but I trust your judgement more than my own in this case. I'm too used to dealing with people younger than me that WOULD deserve some form of punishment if they did something like this.

[Oh Yang certainly deserves some punishment. It's just not necessarily ours to give, and potentially better to leave it alone.]

True. "Very true," whispered Kat softly.

Chapter 857 Bog Encounters of the Third Kind

Yang walked back over to the group and gave Xiang a slight nod. It wasn't really an apology, but it was somewhat an acknowledgment of what had happened. Xiang appeared to accept it. Yang's eyes flashed slightly before she breathed in deeply and didn't say anything. Kat thought that was a pretty big step for Yang, and made the decision not to punish her a more appealing one certainly.

Yang had returned in a new outfit. It looked much like her old ruined one but this one was more of a light green with dark blue highlights. It looked quite nice in Kat's untrained opinion and in Lily's, it hid too much of Yang's figure. Something the water had shown was quite nice what with her outfit clinging to her.

Thing is, Xiang had to frown a moment later and was unable to hide the slight wince at the thought that had crossed his mind. Kat couldn't help raising her own eyebrow in a question that was soon answered by Xiang. "While I'm glad you have clean clothes... the path through the bog... is... well... those sticks."

Yang's head snapped to the side as she quickly saw what Xiang was talking about. Her hands clenched and relaxed a few times as her eyes burned with golden light. Kat's respect for the angry cultivator went up several notches when instead of lashing out she breathed in carefully once again and ignored the creaking of her teeth to nod. Very slowly.

Yang turned around, this time not stomping... though she did unleash a half-power kick at a bush nearby setting it on fire with her gold coated foot. Yang continued to walk away before ducking behind a bush that hid her lower half. Xiang looked away, but Kat continued to watch, until she saw Yang changing clothes and Kat turned away as well.

It didn't take long for Yang to change and return. Kat and Xiang had just waited in silence. Once Yang was back the cultivators made a silent agreement and stepped forward into the bog together. It was hard to miss the fact that Yang's eye flared again, or that as the pair started to pick up speed there were the occasional bubbles from where Yang would glare heatedly at the water.

Kat and Lily flew along above them at a must reduced pace, and Kat wondered how true it was this was faster then taking the bypass. Without the ability to fly Yang and Xiang had their speed halved at least. Following the sticks quickly revealed areas where the water wasn't quite as deep but even ankle height water was a massive drain on their top speed as the waves cascading from their movements.

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Air resistance was one thing, one thing that they were normally able to disregard for the most part. That same ability didn't seem to extend to water. They also weren't fast enough, nor knew a technique, that would let them just run on the top of the water. So it was slow going as they moved. In the end, Kat made it her job to take a more active role it looking for threats. Not that they'd seen any so far.

The bugs weren't very brave but there was ten of thousands of the little buggers and those were just the ones Kat could see running away from the wake the cultivators were leaving. They looked, mostly, like normal mosquitoes though how comparable they were to the bugs on Earth wasn't something Kat was interested in testing. There were a few other bugs as well, but nothing stood out as truly spectacular unless you count that one beetle that had pincers larger then the rest of its body. Not the best adaption, especially not when it was taken out by the passing wave. A silent prayer for the evolutionary endpoint it was.

The fish were similar in attitude. Or at least, that's what it seemed. The water wasn't exactly clear and there was some plants that were more like massive collections of interconnected roots with a bit of green stuck to their tops. It made it hard to really see anything other than the ripples from fleeing fish. Presumably anyway. The best place to see fish was actually the occasional one small fish that would leap from the wake back into the water after it got caught up.

The rest of the vegetation wasn't anything impressive either. There were a few mangroves situated on little mud hills and had their own little bush gardens. As well as the root clumps mentioned earlier. There was the occasional flower floating along the rive but Kat didn't recognise the types.

It was all fairly mundane for the first few hours of travel. As they got deeper though... the landscape started to change. Those clumps of roots slowly disappeared and in their place were these clouds of purple algae. Seemed innocuous but Xiang was giving them a wide berth, indicating their potential deadliness. At least, that was Kat assumption. The mangroves slowly changed their colours. The bark got darker and the leaves started to turn into a bright fluorescent pink.

That wasn't too bad but the water was also darkening like the bark. It wasn't fast, and the cultivators didn't really notice it happening but hour by hour it was clear they were travelling towards the centre of the swamp. Oh sure they weren't close yet, it'd take perhaps a full day of travel for that... but for someone on watch it was very visible and somewhat disconcerting. The image of frogs boiling alive slowly came to mind. Not one Kat enjoyed.

The first signs of real danger was when Kat spotted a particularly large fin off to the side. Kat kept an eye on the thing but it didn't seem to want to approach. That was fine of course, Kat didn't particularly want to go down and fight in the bog if she didn't have to. The problem. Was that it had friends.

Twenty minutes later Kat noticed that there was three more of the things approaching. Two from the back and one from the front left. The fact they were clearly gaining on Xiang and Yang seemed to imply they were now being chased... and the creatures were faster. "We've got incoming!" Yelled Kat.

Xiang glanced up at Kat and frowned while Yang just huffed and hefted her club swinging it around a few times and trying to get the feel of using it while running through water. "Where?" yelled Xiang.

Kat "Two from behind and one from the front!" returned Kat.

Xiang frowned again, "Can you just blast the ones in the back with demonic energy? Get rid of them? That might scare off the one in front. I'm not too worried about them but I don't want to waste time fighting them off,"

"Bah, we could've taken them," grumbled Yang but she didn't say anything against the plan or stop running so Kat just gave verbal confirmation she was going to attack and let herself drift behind.

It took only a few seconds for the fins to catch up and Kat waited for them to be directly below her before letting a torrent of fire explode from her feet. The water instantly frosted over but the fins started thrashing, breaking it just as fast, letting Kat get a good look at the things.

They looked like some unholy chimera of an crocodile, a lion fish and a puffer fish. The things had one large fin that was connected by a fine membrane looking more like separate stalks because the lining was clear. They had a massive tail and jaws like an alligator... but the weirdest part were their cheeks. They were swelled up like balloons and Kat suspected they were used to spit poison at things.

They didn't stand a chance against the demonic energy. Just a few seconds later and they were completely unmoving. In fact the only thing moving in the nearby area was the demonic fire which continued to expand, freezing the water as it went and clearly dealing a good portion of death. Kat flapped in place, shocked. Her ideas regarding just how strong her demonic fire was had been a little skewed.

Sure it took out most things, but in Kat's mind it usually took some time. These fish had no such chance. They were killed without any recourse. Their bodies frozen solid in less then ten seconds. They had no way to resist the damage done to them and no fancy techniques to live longer. Just a quick application of demonic fire and then they were gone.

Huh. Well. Guess that's done...

[Indeed. That was quite effective. You should probably open with demonic fire more often]

Kat winced but nodded along with Lily's suggestion before turning and starting to fly after the two cultivators. She also took a long towards roughly where the third specimen was only to find the large fin hightailing it out of there. Apparently hearing the death throws of it's brethren was enough for it to run.

Chapter 858 A Tree Approached

Time passed and Kat had to fend off a few more of the weird croc-fish things. They came to investigate on a fairly regular schedule of about once every fifteen minutes. Sometimes they'd come in groups of three or more, other times a lone one would investigate and run off without prompting.

For the larger groups it was always up to Kat to scare them off. It wasn't the most pleasant of jobs, and Kat was honestly rather thankful that Lily had her face buried at the moment, preventing her girlfriend from watching the death throws of the beasts. After the third attempted attack Kat started to mix things up. Just launching fire from her feet was easy and rather routine at that point.

Kat had now tried a variety of different delivery methods for her demonic flames but it really wasn't much of an issue. With her recent practice, throwing large amounts of demonic fire in a straight line, even if it was a bit of a distance away, was exceptionally easy. Still, Kat tried to have fun with it. Blowing out a long stream from between her lips, finger guns. Using her tail to launch 'laser beams' that were really just short bursts of demonic fire in a thin line.

As the day wore on and the sun started to set... Kat was really starting to wonder about the biodiversity of this place. The only thing that she really saw was those croc-fish and not much else. Some short glimpses of other things perhaps, but really the only thing that attacked her were the croc-fish.

Perhaps it was simply that they were the only things aggressive enough so far to go on the attack?

What do you think Lily? Are they the only things that can survive in the mess or are they just the only thing that thinks they could take us out?

[I think it has to be the latter right? We've seen little fishes and the vegetation isn't quite so similar to each other. I think those... 'croc-fish' as you call them just happen to be aggressive pack hunters or something. Which is weird. Based on your description of them I'm not sure where they got the pack instincts from. Nothing it LOOKS like travels in packs. I think...]

Kat gave a mental shrug. She was no expert in exotic species. It was entirely unclear just how natural the things were. Did they live here before whatever massively poisoned the area? Had the area been poisonous so long that it was now just naturally poisonous? These were all questions that Kat was happy to ponder with Lily. However, without access to any books or experts to question they could really only engage in idle speculation.

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As the sun was starting to set, the water was starting to darken much more rapidly than the sun would suggest. It was taking on a consistency much closer to drenched mud than water and the colour... it had turned into a mix of black and purple with a slight sheen. The smell wasn't any worse thankfully but Kat was starting to wonder just how smart it was to travel through this bog after all. It did not look pleasant and the only thing stopping Kat from mentioning that fact was that the path seemed to have been built up more here.

Yang and Xiang were able to increase their speed as the water now only came up to the sides of their feet at best. They had shoes on so it was still a good few centimetres, but they were able to use the more solid footing and lowered water levels to increase their speed a bit. Kat still had no issues keeping up of course, even with the trips to dispose of the unwelcome wildlife.

The sun set completely some time later, and there was an unspoken agreement between everyone to just keep going. There was no argument, no words. The group simply kept moving. Nobody felt the need to ask for a break. Kat knew she could fly all night like this and Lily was already asleep. So it was really just down to the cultivators and they weren't giving Kat any signs they wanted to stop. There wasn't even a subtle nod. They just kept running.

Now, Kat was fine with that. She could see at night and the moon and stars were perfectly adequate light sources. She could somewhat rest her mind as they flew and it was very tempting, especially without Lily to chat with about nothing in her mind. Kat was completely willing to continue till sunrise, or they made their way out of the swamp. Whatever was faster.

That was until she noticed Yang and Xiang starting to drift. They were tilting just a bit to the left and were straying further and further away from the marking sticks. Kat called out to them both who snapped their heads up and redirected themselves. There were no words of thanks, but Kat didn't really expect them from Yang at this point. From Xiang... well... it was about 50/50.

Kat redirected them both a few more times. Sometimes it was just one or the other drifting. Sometimes both. Sometimes to the left, sometimes to the right. Kat wasn't as keen about running through the night anymore. She was debating the merits of forcing them to rest for a few minutes when the matter was practically forced out of her hands.

Xiang was drifting again, and Yang right behind him. That wasn't anything new at this point. What was new, was the fact they were heading straight for a tree. Kat wasn't really that worried, mostly because she was only half paying attention at the time. Part of Kat's mind was like 'hey that's a tree' and another small part was like 'nah they aren't that dumb' and while that part was true... Yang was quite tired, the lack of the sun really drained her energy, a side effect of her cultivation technique. She was barely hanging on to her wakeful state as it was and simply followed behind Xiang at this point. Focused on his back, and nothing further so she didn't register the tree at all.

Xiang was no better. He'd had a rough few days even before he met Kat. They'd been looking for something, praying for a demonic summoning circle. Kat didn't really see just how much they'd pushed themselves to find the place. Then they proceeded to run with no rest for their bodies. Xiang was just recently recovered as well. While the damage had been healed, he was still behind where he should be muscle and cultivation wise due to the poison and damage. It was taking a toll.

So his eyes weren't even open when he smacked into the tree. It wasn't a particularly fair contest. Xiang was a cultivator, and while he was half asleep he was still moving at a decent clip. The tree on the other hand was old and poisoned. It was weak and brittle and didn't put up any sort of a fight. It shattered under Xiang's 'headbutt'. It was only just tough enough to wake Xiang somewhat causing him to stop in place.

This was the real issue, in truth. Yang wasn't prepared for the stop and rammed into Xiang. Without being prepared for the impact Xiang couldn't withstand the blow. He fell forward clipping his side on the tree and falling face first into the mud and water. Yang wasn't much better. She tripped over Xiang and fell forward as well, impacting heavily onto Xiang's back, forcing him further into the mud.

Really, Kat was just glad they hit the tree at a bit of an angle and didn't land on what remained. Being impaled seemed like an awful way to go, and scratches would quickly become infected in a place like

this. Kat swooped down to help, but Xiang was quickly standing. Yang reacted as well, hopping up shakily but avoiding being completely drenched a second time.

When Xiang stood, his eyes were firmly shut. He had mud splattered all over his face and he clearly wanted to say something but the risk of getting mud in his mouth was too great. He started to take scoops of the mud and hurl into the water. Trying to downplay his irritation. Yang was properly returning to the present, though still quite tired during all of this. Kat winced as Xiang scooped up some 'water' if it could still be called that, and used it to clean his face off. It took a bit of effort but once he was done, Xiang just turned to the sticks and made to keep moving.

"STOP" hissed Kat firmly.

Xiang paused midstep and turned. "What?"

"This is too much," said Kat. "You're both dead on your feet. You need to take a moment and rest. I don't care where, and I don't care how but it just isn't safe for you, either of you, to keep going,"

Chapter 859 You're Not You When You're Tired

Yang whirled around and pointed... well... not towards Kat. It was clear she was trying, but her mind just wasn't up for it right now. She was pointing over Xiang's head in almost the exact opposite direction to Kat. "Nopedy nope nope. I'm not tired, I need... need... ummu... hmm... SHNOW. I gotta find the snow! No wait that's not right... wait... Snowy? Sister? Yes! Blood sister find! TRECK! THE MOON SHALL NOT DEFEAT ME"

Yeah... she's completely out of it. I don't know how she's managed to stay on her feet so long. Honestly the fact she hasn't just toppled over it probably worth celebrating. It was quite clear Yang was out of it almost completely at this point. Xiang sighed, or maybe it was a yawn, hard to tell really, but after whatever it was Xiang tried to argue towards continuing their journey. "See, we can keep going. No problem at all. Defeated that tree in a single strike I did. Yup. No problems I see here,"

Of course, that wasn't particularly convincing. No person in their right mind would say they 'defeated a tree' when they in fact ran face first into it. Perhaps if the tree could fight back at all Kat would have been more willing to overlook that answer. Maybe even if there were a few vines that dropped down or something. "Xiang. You are both clearly tired and speaking nonsense. It is time for you both to sleep,"

"You cannot take me alive!" shouted Xiang at the same time as Yang said, "I will not go quietly into the sleep!"

Kat slapped a hand over her face. *I wish Lily was awake enough to help me with this. I mean... how do I convince two cultivators that they can sleep? Clearly they aren't in their right minds... and maybe a little poisoned. Hmm... yeah I didn't consider that at first... but what if they were stumbling around because of poison instead of just lack of sleep? That... could be bad either way.*

Xiang and Yang were standing back-to-back, weapons drawn and pointed off towards nothing. They were both waving their weapons around wildly. Perhaps in their current state they thought it was threatening or something. Kat couldn't help but sigh again. *I really don't want to fight you guys. Especially when you're not really doing anything wrong. Let's see if I can make this as simple as possible. Translation power don't stop me now.*

“Danger. Everywhere. You both. Mind. Unstable. Lack of Sleep. Need sleep. Please sleep,” said Kat very slowly hoping it would get through to the pair.

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Sadly for Kat they didn't hear her. Both managed to fall forward slightly as they fell asleep part of the way through Kat's explanation. When they stumbled forward, tripping slightly on the mud from their shifting centre of mass it woke them up enough to straighten up. Sadly. That was also a bad idea. They were standing back-to-back when they fell and straightening up completely meant their heads smacked into each other.

Now, since they were already rather wound up and completely out of it. Both took each took this as an attack against their person instead of remembering where they were and the likelihood of it being an accident. They whipped around in perfect sync and club clashed against sword. Xiang's sword would have lost in normal circumstances... these were not normal circumstances. What instead happened was the vibrations travelled down the pair's wrists causing them both to drop their weapons then just... stare confused and their respective hands instead of picking up their downed weapons.

Kat shook her head and carefully made her way off to the side while the two sleep deprived idiots continued to stare at their hands as if the world had just turned grey. Kat mentally praised her Succubus skin as she pulled the weapons out of the muck. She also thanked her luck that it wasn't so deep. It did take a bit of shifting to make sure Lily's nose was still buried and she wasn't moved too much but it wasn't impossible.

Once Kat had both weapons she situated herself between the confused pair and said, “Now. I have your weapons, and you need sleep. I will return them in the morning if you both rest,”

Kat was not prepared for the dual yell of “Thief!” and “RAPE!”

Yang and Kat turned in sync, to Xiang, confusion written across their faces as they just stared. Xiang noticed the attention, something of a surprise actually, and asked. “What? Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Shang... are you ok?” asked Yang.

Kat decided that needed translating for the sleep deprived teen, “Xiang, are you ok?”

Xiang frowned and glanced at Kat's hand, “No... no I... I'm missing something... what was it again?”

Kat felt her eyes twitching. *Must. Resist. Urge. Must not attack idiots. Do not smack them on the back of the head. This is not a cartoon. That causes concussions. Do not intentionally cause concussions in your allies even if it would get them to something approximating sleep.* “You both need rest. Sleep. I can't think of a third word for it... but you NEED it,” said Kat firmly.

Xiang seemed to actually register this for a second. He frowned a bit, and looked up to the sky. Nodded. And then let himself fall back down. Kat glared at her hands, one with a sword and one with a club, preventing her from quickly stopping Xiang's fall. She could throw them perhaps but that wasn't safe either. She didn't want to just drop them in case Yang or Xiang fell on them in their daze. Kat decided to just curse internally as Xiang collapsed into the mud.

He didn't even seem to mind though. He was on his side, and wriggled around a bit before starting to gather mud. Kat watched in an almost horrid fascination as he pulled in enough to get above the water level and use as a sort of makeshift pillow. Xiang laid his head down with a loud splat. A few moments passed where Kat was almost willing to just leave things before Xiang breathed in through his nose.

See, the mud was VERY soft and while it was piled high enough to leave then water it hadn't been compacted in the slightest. So when the full weight of Xiang's head had smacked into it... a huge chunk of it just collapsed along with him letting his head sink deeply into the mound. He was apparently cognisant enough to know not to breath in through his mouth. His nose was almost in the clear... but 'almost' only matter with horseshoes and hand grenades.

Xiang spluttered and moved up, trying both to breath in and breath out as he scratched at his face to try and remove the mud. Of course his hands had MORE MUD on them. Kat decided enough was enough. She stabbed the club into the mud head first and the sword hilt first before she shifted her outfit. She unwrapped her sash and then moved it up so that it sort of held Lily against her chest. It wasn't the most secure thing and too much movement would ruin it but Kat knew she needed both hands.

"Xiang, calm down. I'll deal with this," said Kat carefully. As Xiang started to panic. Kat frowned and decided to use an old trick she'd been neglecting. Calm exploded out from her in a wave and smacked into Yang and Xiang. She hadn't quite meant for it to be that powerful or that large an area.

Yang dropped instantly and Kat had to move to catch her. Xiang fell as well, so her tail whipped out and let his midsection bend around it. He wasn't that heavy for her tail so it was fine. Kat carefully manoeuvred Yang so that she was leaning up against the tree and mostly out of the water. It didn't look comfortable, but Yang's risk of drowning was much lower than Xiang's was currently so she called it a win.

Kat grimaced at the water as she scooped it up and splashed it over Xiang's face. The mud was clinging somewhat but she was able to pick most of it off. Part of her mind screamed at her to just use some demonic fire to freeze it all solid then crack the ice a bit. It'd slide off. Surely? Kat ignored that voice of course. Mostly because she wasn't confident enough in her ability to mark Xiang as 'not a target'. She hadn't tested just how fondly she had to think of a person to avoid freezing them solid.

This meant it was a long process. The mud didn't like to stick to Kat's hands so she was forever shifting it around and leaving bits and pieces behind. So, more water was applied. Xiang would sometimes breath during this and splutter afterwards so it wasn't ideal. Yet he slept. He was just that tired. It took Kat a good half an hour of solid, careful work for Xiang to be mostly mud free.

Kat called it good and leaned him against the base of the broken tree near Yang. *Hopefully this is good enough...

Chapter 860 Is Purple a Creative Colour?

Once Xiang and Yang were definitively asleep, Kat started to ponder how to watch over everyone. Floating in place was fine sure, but it wasn't even midnight yet and Kat knew she'd have a bunch of time to kill waiting for everyone else to wake up. Part of her wanted to sleep to pass the time quickly but it this area was terribly unsafe. It just wasn't practical. Most of the wildlife here wasn't deadly for their bites or claws, but for the poison. Something that could be much more insidious.

So to pass the time Kat started to make an ice block raft to sit on. By pumping demonic energy into the water Kat could freeze it down to the mud... and then further still freezing even that. With a constant supply of demonic energy Kat was pretty sure the platform could be made quite stable.

Sadly, that plan had to be delayed a bit. The cultivators started to shiver as the ice built up. Kat mentally berated herself for the issue and quickly checked Lily over... however the Memphis seemed to be completely fine. Kat wasn't sure if that was their connection helping improve her resistance to the chill, or if the species was naturally resist to cold. *Hmm... probably the link. Most demons are fire and heat based so having Memphis immune to cold instead of heat is probably a bad idea.*

With that established Kat broke up her ice platform and flew a little bit away making sure she was upwind. It wasn't a major concern, but hopefully the wind would keep the cold from flowing on the cultivators. Once that was established it actually wasn't all that hard to create a nice big ice platform. It actually took a deceptively small amount of demonic energy. Kat was starting to realise her flames were VERY cold.

It was just a matter of time. The flames themselves were fairly self-contained. They liked to spread to things but didn't really change the temperature much outside of that small area. That is, unless Kat was focusing on it. Kat found she could sort of... disperse the flames into much smaller embers without much energy and watch as they quickly froze the water and mud nearby. *Hmm... I wonder if this works so well because it's just water and nothing living, or if all the things I attacked were massively overkilled. Hmm...*

Kat just shrugged and got to work on her platform. After it was nice and square, something that took a bit of effort actually, breaking off the extra edges and flattening them out, Kat started to work on more complicated things. She found out that if she set her demonic fire into a shape and then dribbled water over it, the water would freeze in place. Now, the first chair she made this way practically disintegrated the moment Kat touched it, but this was a learning process.

What Kat didn't really account for was the fact that the ice didn't weight all that much while it was loosely distributed over her fire. It built up fairly quickly and was actually a lot closer to light snow than proper ice. When Kat sat down it just shifted to accommodate her ass instead of keeping its shape and holding her up. The only thing the demonic fire really changed was that it did help keep the snow 'in place' so to speak.

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It didn't like to flow outside of the demonic fire once it was frozen there. It would still obey gravity and fall to the bottom if it could, but it was a lot like the demonic fire provided a thin support structure to help the snow stay in place. It was a lot like pouring snow into a glass and then expecting it to stay stable when you throw a rock at the side.

In the end though, the moon was still high in the sky and Kat didn't exactly have anything better to do. Kat restarted her chair making efforts, this time going layer by layer and making sure to compact everything down before moving up. It took her nearly two hours of slowly scooping water. Part of the way through she did switch from hands to a 'glass' made out of ice she'd made. The hardest part was actually trying to keep it together while also not just freezing the content. It was more of a bowl in the

end, and the edges did start freezing over, but with some delicate demonic energy control and a lot of patience it worked.

Kat slumped down into her chair and relaxed. It wasn't really all that comfortable. It had next to no give because of how compact it had been made and what little bits weren't compact were a lot like little grains of sand. It wasn't the worse place Kat had ever taken a break though. So it was declared 'good enough' in her mind.

Kat cast another glance out at the surroundings. There wasn't really much wildlife from what she could see. Of course, that meant nothing when it was clear most of the inhabitants preferred to stay under the water. Xiang and Yang looked fine. They were a bit far away, but not too far certainly.

Kat did notice the weapons though and sighed. She got up from her chair and took them both back to her raft. Sure it was made of frozen swamp water, but the frozen part was important. The weapons didn't need to be buried to stay in place and weren't corroding or something. *Not sure if these have special metals or not... but probably best to take care of them.* anyway. Kat carefully froze off what muck stubbornly clung to the weapons until she was satisfied with the changes. There was still some dirt in the leather pommel of the sword, but there wasn't much Kat could do about that.

When the sun eventually peaked over the horizon, Kat saw Yang jerk in place. Quickly getting up off her chair, Kat rushed over to see Yang wasn't entirely well. Yang let out a long hacking cough before wheezing a few more times and trying to bring her legs in to sit cross-legged only to fall over. Kat was close enough to stop that by resting her tail against Yang's side and holding her up.

Yang's eyes snapped to Kat and they flashed gold for a moment before Yang breathed in a shuddering breath and holding her chest tightly. "Yang are you alright?" asked Kat softly. Yang growled for about half a second before hissing again and looking away from Kat. Taking a second look, Kat could see that Yang was a lot paler than normal and her hands seemed to be shaking.

"Fine," snapped Yang before drawing in another hissing breath, calming her down. "Hmmm. I may not be quite so fine. I'll need to meditate... but I do not wish to do so in this muck..."

"Um... I sort of made a raft because I was bored? Would that work?" offered Kat as she motioned over to the ice raft in question.

Yang met Kat's eyes and for a moment Kat thought she was about to be kissed. She was looked at with nearly the same intensity Lily liked to use sometimes. It was only there for a moment though, as Yang stood up, with some help though she'd deny it. Yang stumbled her way through the mud and onto Kat's ice raft. Wincing slightly at the chill but clearly deciding it was worth it. She finished the climb and sat breathing in deeply and trying to absorb the sunlight as best she could.

Kat watched as Yang breathed in slowly and carefully for a few minutes. She didn't look great, but it was getting better. Though there was nothing to be done about the clothes. They were completely trashed and would likely need to be replaced. That didn't seem to be bothering Yang at the moment though. Her hair seemed to glow, and her face regained a good deal of its colour.

Then, just as she seemed to be finishing up, Yang sprinted for the edge and retched. A dark black tar like substance spewed forth from her mouth. Kat screwed her face up at the noises and tried to block them out somewhat. "Um... Yang are you ok?" asked Kat softly as she floated over.

Yang shook her head. "No. I didn't manage to get all of it out either... we weren't prepared for this... and that might be my fault. While as cultivators we can cleanse this somewhat... there's just so much poison everywhere. I don't know if you notice but I'm almost certain it's in the air as well as the water and just... everything here. I get why forced us to sleep... but we can't stay here long,"

That was some scary news. Almost as scary as Yang being completely reasonable. Both of those things did not bode well at all. Nor did the fact that with a glance, Kat could see that Xiang wasn't awake yet.
Oh dear. Hopefully we can leave this cursed place before it causes issues. I really hope Lily doesn't suffer for this...