

## DEMONS 861

### Chapter 861 Avoiding Poison Tends to Be a Good Idea

Yang wasn't particularly polite when it came to waking Xiang up. Kat was planning to wait till he was awake to get moving once again... but Yang had other ideas. With a heavy kick to Xiang's side Yang said, "Get up and cultivate we need to move!" of course, it was yelled, but at this point that was just normal for Yang.

The kick was actually pretty spectacular. The angle was sensational. Xiang skipped four times across the top of the water before he hit Kat's raft, stopping his progress. Kat couldn't help the part of her that wondered about how many bounces Xiang would have managed if he hadn't been stopped in place. Xiang gave out an exaggerated groan as he pulled himself into a sitting position and looked around.

"CULTIVATE YOU DUMBASS. IF THE POISON GETS TO YOU I'LL BRING YOU BACK JUST TO KILL YOU AGAIN!" Yang 'kindly' informed Xiang once he was clearly awake. She had to make sure he got the message.

Xiang waved her off and started to cultivate as requested. His face instantly screwed up as he realised just how right Yang was. The toxin was abundant and invasive. It just got everywhere and slowly wore down the cultivator. He was also pretty sure that it'd take him weeks to clean his body out properly. A rather major problem. It seems regardless of how speedy the trek through this swamp was, he found the real reason most people get around. Sure, the wildlife looked scary but it really was the poison that'd kill you in the end. Without his cultivation he was certain that he'd already be dead.

Unlike Yang who got rid of the poison by throwing it up... Xiang's cultivation allowed him to remove the offending poison from the... other direction. Was it more efficient? Who knew. Xiang would argue yes. On the other hand. Yang would argue her method was vastly superior. Kat would say they're both idiots and neither process seemed pleasant. Kat might not have been looking at Xiang during the... removal process... but Kat could still hear and it did not sound pleasant.

While Xiang was busy with that Kat went about fixing her outfit up and moving the sleeping Lily back to her arms. It didn't take super speed to get that done. This meant that she'd finished when Xiang gave the all-clear and Kat turned to see Xiang had moved back onto her raft and happened to be beckoning them over. Kat and Yang made their way over and he asked, "Kat, is there any way you can speed up our exit from this damned place?"

Kat frowned and considered the question. "Perhaps? I'm not sure how much faster I can run then you both while limited by the sludge this place uses as water,"

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"Can't you fly?" cut in Yang.

Kat shook her head, "Well, yes but no. I can fly myself, and Lily no trouble at all but adding both of you... it's just too much weight. I could probably carry one person while flying? But otherwise I'd just have to jump with style and glide down,"

Xiang tapped his sword as he thought it over. Yang noticed the sound and realised she didn't have her club on her, so she looked around frantically for a few moments until spotting it and crawling over to grab the weapon in question.

"But you can carry us right?" asked Xiang again.

Kat shrugged. "I suppose so. Assuming you don't mind how uncomfortable it will be. I'd have to hold you by the collar or something if I'm carrying both of you. Or maybe... hmm no..." \*Can't have them stacked on my back because of my wings. I mean... maybe? No... it'd be rather uncomfortable.\* "... yeah I can't see any way other than holding you by your clothes in each hand but then you'd have your faces awful close to the toxic sludge..."

Xiang grimaced and tapped the sword a few more times before looking down at the icy platform. "Hey... what about using this platform? Could you pick it up and have us stand on top? It'd keep us away from the poison pretty well..."

Kat looked over her icy platform. It might have looked fine to Xiang and Yang but she could see that it had already shrunk quite significantly just since she'd stopped providing it with a small amount of power to keep it cool. Kat chewed her lip for a few moment as she considered it. "Keeping it together might be hard... I... hmm..."

"I just don't know if it could stay together when I run with it. Right now it's just in the water and already it's melted a good deal. It also doesn't have to deal with collapsing under its own weight. Hmm... I'd also probably need to use a bit of demonic energy to make sure my hands don't destroy because of my grip... and maybe to carry it? I'm not sure how heavy frozen poison is... hmm..."

"I think... the answer is a solid maybe. The two big issues I see with this are that I might need to take breaks to ensure the ice doesn't collapse slowing us down somewhat overall. The second is that... even if I'm able to carry this all without issue the extra weight is going to make me sink deeper into the mud then you both. Instead of just needing to push aside water as I walk I might need to brush aside 10cm or more of mud. That's going to really slow me down,"

Xiang clicked his tongue in dismay. He was all onboard to try and test out the idea at the very least. If Kat needed a few breaks, and it wasn't too much slower it'd probably be worth it just to avoid the extra poison... but if Kat was sinking deeper into the mud... well that was another matter. It could potentially be even worse if the water level rose again near the edges. The question of how worth it the idea was turned out to be a difficult one.

"What about..." Xiang started, "No... but... hmm..." Xiang tapped his sword rapidly, "Perhaps...? It... hmmm. Kat perhaps it might be still worth it? Just to get us out of the worst of the muck? If the water gets too deep or you need to rest more than once we can just hop off the platform and get back to running ourselves. If you don't mind too much..."

Kat nodded slowly, "It sounds... while not necessarily the most pleasing of ideas... at least passable..." \*I wish I had Lily to workshop this. Maybe find a good reason to say no... but I mean I don't want them to be sick or dying. Really the issue is I'd need to hand Lily over to Yang or Xiang because I don't want her so close to the poison while I run and I can't really use me hands. Then again that's another point. If we

get out of this damned swamp faster she's probably at much less of a risk. I guess I'll just have to trust that they know if anything happens to Lily I would be beyond furious.\*

"I'd certainly have to shrink the ice block a bit... the weight isn't an issue for me but it is for the mud... and on top of that it'd probably take too much demonic energy to keep it together if I leave it at the current size... it can be done though. If you are willing to wait the ten or so minutes it'd take... and... hmm... I'm not sure how bumpy the ride would be? I might need to make chairs or something for both of you just to make sure you don't fall off and that'd really add to the time..."

Xiang cut in, "Kat. Look... we all want to get out of this place as fast as possible so just... make something quick and dirty that will work and we'll worry about the problems it presents later. Yang and I will be happy enough just to be out of the fetid waters and if you're willing to carry us we really shouldn't be complaining,"

Yang looked very much about to complain in response to Xiang's statement but a quick glare from Xiang silenced those complaints. Yang still glared back of course but she didn't seem to be willing to override Xiang on this issue. As much as it did grate on her that she wouldn't be allowed to complain, or should simply be thankful... well... the idea of being forced to run through the mud again was not a fond one and she was willing to let Kat deal with that whole issue if she was offering to take it up.

Kat, seeing there was an agreement sighed and got started on the small ice platform. She needed to make it large enough for two people... the question was did she need to make proper chairs? Maybe just some handholds? Would they be at risk of her fire going for them if their hands were in the ice? Would chairs be good enough? If only she had a few straps to tie them down or something.

#### Chapter 862 I C E Taxi

\*Lily. Lily wake up!\* Kat repeated as she worked on the ice boat. Kat felt she was making good progress. She didn't need to spend much concentration on shaping it and with the sludge already semi-solid Kat didn't foresee any issues with fragility. Finally, the message seemed to get through as Lily stirred in her arms. Lily was a bit groggy from being woken but managed to quickly sort her mind into working order.

[Kat? Is everything alright? What did you need me for?]

\*Everything is... fine... ish. It turns out the poison is worse than we thought, or at least more pervasive. Xiang and Yang aren't doing so well and it was determined the safest thing would be to make an ice raft and have me carry it. I'll need both hands though, for stability if nothing else. So... you'll probably need to either sit in someone else's arms, or I can make a hollow for you... but with the bouncing that probably wouldn't be comfortable.\*

[Um... I think we can trust them enough to hold onto me for a while. I'm not made of glass and you'll be right nearby. I probably won't be able to sleep, or at least, not comfortably, but that's something I can deal with. I... I don't want to be the source of any major problems. We can work it out. Though... is there no way to stick with you?]

\*No I'm afraid there isn't. I'll be running too fast for you to sit on my shoulder or against my chest. I'll need both hands... and while my tail MIGHT be able to hold you somewhere against me... I naturally use it to balance when running and considering how unstable the mud here is the risk that everyone would go flying if I didn't have my tail to help balance is too high for my liking.\*

[Ugh. Understandable. I'll... hmm... who would be better to hold me? I was going to say 'I'll stick with Xiang' because he's the more rational of the two... but at the same time... I wonder if Yang would get pissy about it. Hmm... hmm... guess I'll start with Xiang and be willing to move if Yang complains.]

\*Actually... you might be able to hold on yourself? You could transform?\*

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[Not with your speed I don't think. We haven't really tested my new strength and this really doesn't seem like a good time for it. I don't know how poison resistant I am but if Xiang and Yang are having issues I wouldn't be surprised if it affects me as well. Better just not to risk it. I'll stick with the original plan.]

\*Sounds good.\* With that settled, Lily wriggled out of Kat's hands and flew over to Xiang. He glanced awkwardly between Lily and Kat, hoping that somebody would fill him in on things. When that didn't happen, he awkwardly held his arms out and Lily dropped down. She wriggled around a bit before yawning and settling back down to sleep.

\*Lily?\*

[Yes?]

\*Are you really just trying to get back to sleep?\*

[Eh... might as well get what sleep I can. Sure I trust him to hold me while he's just sitting here but while we're moving even if I trust him not to drop me I don't want to bet that it'll be comfortable.]

\*You do realise I'm like... maybe a minute away from finishing?\*

[Wait really?] That was when Lily cracked open an eye and looked at the ice chunk Kat was making. She hadn't exactly been paying attention to Kat's progress and had assumed she was woken up towards the start of the construction, not towards the end. That didn't stop her attempting to nap though. [Huh. Well. I guess it is. Still going to try for some sleep.]

Kat just gave a small smile and made the finishing touches to the platform. It wasn't anything particularly amazing. It was about two wide but she hadn't bothered to smooth out the corners or anything so it was a rounded square-ish thing that wasn't consistent in its dimensions. Still, there was enough space for two people easily and the handholds and footholds Kat had added should make the journey... if not pleasant... at least acceptable.

Kat blew one final gust of demonic fire over the whole thing, directing the demonic energy to really dig in deeply. Checking her reserves, she found she'd used a measly ten percent to complete the raft. Well, probably considering she was able to regenerate that energy quite quickly, but the high percentage meant she didn't feel the need to wait for her energy to top out at all. "Ok. Raft is done. Do you want to hop on before I lift it?"

Yang scoffed, "We can make a two metre jump with our eyes closed,"

Which wasn't really an answer of if they wanted to hop on before she lifted it or not. Sure it was a brag, and a statement that it was possible. But it was ICE they were trying to land on. Still, with a glance at Xiang who just sort of nodded carefully, Kat shrugged and started to lift the chunk up. Kat had to break

two handholds in the ice due to the thickness, but it gave way easily under her strength. Kat was able to lift it and then shift her hold, digging into the underside.

Kat ignored the drips of bog muck that was dropping down around her and occasionally ON her. It wasn't terribly pleasant but it was over quickly. Kat shifted her feet a little bit to find stable footing before turning to the group and nodding. Yang didn't waste any time, hopping up in one quick leap. This turned out to be a mistake.

Now, Kat obviously couldn't see through the ice. It was a blackish purple colour that didn't let any light through. She did have working ears though, and the sound of someone landing and then slipping and falling to their ass wasn't something Kat could mistake. Xiang, seeing this turned his gaze down to Lily. "Would like to fly up yourself in case I fall?"

Lily nodded, taking to the air at the same time Yang cursed out, "Why the fuck is this so slippery?" Now. There was an obvious answer to this question. That answer was that she was **STANDING ON ICE**. Even with Kat taking efforts to keep it frozen, ice didn't exactly have a lot of friction. The fact that the top was oddly shaped and slightly bubbly, as it was frozen water in... slight motion... meant that landing on something completely flat was a pipe dream.

Despite this Xiang managed just fine. He hopped up, and either by superior luck or skill, landed on his two feet and was able to remain standing without any issues. Yang growled at his success but didn't say anything as he bent down and grasped the hand and foot holds. Lily frowned at the lack of limbs to reside in and pondered. Xiang noticed this and shifted so that he had an arm free. Lily took this as the invitation it was. Yang huffed but got into position as well. "We're ready!" shouted Xiang.

"Understood," said Kat as she started to move. First, she freed her feet from the mud and tried to get up to speed. This was hindered by how deeply she sunk in as soon as she put another foot down. Kat frowned at this and started to pump demonic energy into her limbs in preparation.

Kat sucked in a deep breath. One, two, three, four. Four breaths. She was ready. Kat lifted her foot slightly, just enough to get it out of the mud and sent a large burst of demonic fire from the soles of her feet. Once she had solid purchase, Kat sent as much energy as she could into her legs, and then a bit more allowing it to blast out of her feet as she took off.

Kat's blast off was significantly hampered by the terrain, but she managed to get to around a normal humans sprint in just two steps. The water churned around her and started to build up. Two more steps and the mud was already acting mostly like a solid. She was kicking down heavily on it and even though it compressed, she didn't sink. She didn't stay still long enough for that.

Five steps later and Kat was already getting into a bit of a rhythm. Kat's speed was increasing rapidly and despite how hard it was, she continued. It felt like every step she broke through another layer of solid concrete. The water had so much drag. The fact it was so solid and thick with toxins didn't help matters in the slightest. If it was just a little thicker Kat might have been able to run on top of it. Still. Kat had enough determination for this. One foot in front of the other.

## Chapter 863 Running Around at the Speed of Swamp

Kat wasn't sure if she was making good time or not. The scenery was rather samey and when that is added together with the continual increase in the viscosity of the sludge she had to walk through... well

it just made things very hard to put into perspective. It was only just recently Kat felt she'd passed 'the centre' or as close as they were going to get. She could feel the muck getting easier to run through with every step. Or that's what Kat was telling herself anyway.

She was using her tail and wings a lot more than she'd imagined as well. They helped in a surprisingly large number of ways when she was running through what couldn't really be called 'water' unless you were really stretching it. Her wings and tail both provided a good deal of balance, and her tail was able to slap against the poison to give her a further boost with every step, while her wings helped mitigate some of the weight she was carrying and sink a bit less.

Up top things were... well not great but they were getting by for now. Xiang was really struggling with only the one arm and Yang wasn't doing much better. Xiang had taken to just laying on the same side his free arm was while dealing with the awkward position of his feet. Yang on the other hand was trying to sit up somewhat and paying the price for it. Her wrists were starting to really hurt from knocking into the ice frequently and her ankles weren't much better. Lily... Lily was doing the best out of the group of riders but she wasn't able to sleep and her neck was a bit sore from tilting her head. She needed to ensure Xiang didn't get impaled after all.

Kat's reserves were... not doing the best. She'd been running for about an hour and they were reaching about fifty percent. She'd burned a lot of extra energy right at the start, so she probably had another full hour of running, if not more on account of it now finally starting to get easier again but... it still wasn't particularly good efficiency. Then again, she was using her demonic energy to boost her body and keep the damned ice raft together while carrying it around. Perhaps she deserved a bit more credit considering she didn't believe she was any slower than the cultivators even while carrying them both and dealing with worse terrain. Still. It wasn't the time or place to complain, so she just kept running.

It was half an hour after that though... that she noticed something in the corner of her eye. Which considering her peripheral vision meant something was moving behind her. Kat took in the relatively straight line of sticks ahead of her and the fact it was free of debris and turned around to look for the movement but she couldn't see anything. A quick review of her memories proved otherwise though.

\*Hmm...\* "We might have incoming!" shouted Kat over the rushing air.

"What do you mean?!" shouted Xiang in response.

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"Well I saw something. Not sure what it was, it blended in too well for me to know for sure... I'm just not sure what you may or may not want to do about it..." said Kat.

Xiang frowned and looked down at Lily who returned his gaze, not really sure what he was searching for in her face. Yang didn't look too happy at the news and asked, "Well can't you just blast it with your fire again?"

Kat shrugged, paused and realised she'd manage to shrug while carrying so much weight, and shrugged again, pretending not to hear the hissing coming from Yang at the abrupt rise and fall of the ice not quite in sync with her footfalls. Still, all Kat could offer as an answer was, "Maybe?"

After a few moments of silence Yang said, "Maybe? That's it? Why the heck is this suddenly a maybe? Didn't you manage to take out all of those fish before with just a bit of fire?"

"Yes I did but there's quite a few problems with repeating that feat. The first, and most important is that I'm using a good deal of concentration to keep this ice from melting. I can, at best, shoot vaguely in the direction of whatever is chasing us. The problem with that is despite my vision I almost missed it. I'd need to let it get close... and as good as my demonic fire is... it'd probably get in some death throws..."

"On top of that... I'm down to about 35% of my energy. It's probably enough to take the thing out... but I'll need to rest shortly afterwards and I don't think we'd want to be in close proximity when whatever else starts to smell the dead meat. Of course on the other hand, I don't really know how safe it is for y-"

Kat jumped with all of her might. She wasn't quite sure why she did, but her instincts were screaming at her. Maybe she noticed the ripples in the water, maybe it was just a gut feeling. Whatever it was, Kat praised it for the help. With the extra weight and the unstable ground Kat didn't get very high, barely past her double her height. It was just barely enough.

A massive snake, jaws open wide enough to swallow her whole. It was the same blackish purple as the muck with scales so tightly packed it made a tin of sardines look roomy. It's eyes glowed a bright green and it had fangs larger than Kat's leg. Only her well timed jump stopped her from being crunched by the thing. Kat wasn't sure how deadly it was just yet... but she was leaning towards very.

The beast was massive, this meant that despite its exceptional speed, something that easily eclipsed Kat's on the unfavourable terrain, it just seemed to keep going. It was like a bullet train, whizzing past but remaining in view because of its length. Even as Kat jumped over it, the rest of the snake continued to flow through the spot Kat had been like some kind of endless meat waterfall. Not a pretty thing to imagine, but Kat didn't really find the situation pleasant either.

It felt like time resumed the moment her feet hit the water and it took a fair bit of effort on her tail's behalf to prevent her tripping as she stumbled through the mud. It wasn't the nicest footing and she hadn't properly planned for a landing, let alone one into unstable mud carrying an unbalanced chunk of ice and two people and a Memphis. Kat just barely had enough extra concentration to let out a jet of fire springing from her tail directed mostly towards the snake.

Kat couldn't help but glance back towards the snake to see the results and was immensely disappointed. The snake seemed to have the ability to control water, or more accurately, the poisonous muck they were wading through. Her fire simply froze the floating bits of poison. As Kat wasn't consciously controlling it, the fire didn't try to get through to the snake. \*SHIT.\* Kat's mental complain was reinforced by Xiang's next words. "THAT'S A RANK 3 SPIRIT BEAST!"

Now. Kat knew she wasn't necessarily outclassed by something like that snake. In a straight fight, she was pretty confident in her ability to come out on top. The problem was, this could not be considered a straight fight. Not only did the beast have the terrain advantage, it didn't have to protect three weaker party members. Kat was all but certain Xiang and Yang could do nothing against it, and Lily hadn't even managed her first spell yet!

The easy answer of just blasting away at it with demonic energy wasn't available, and her reserves were down by another two percent from that blast. So, just a bit more than 30% of her demonic energy

reserves, a snake that was probably a couple of tonnes above her weight class, three people to protect and a heck of a lot of poison around. Part of Kat wanted to just hurl the ice and riders as far away as possible. Sadly, Kat doubted she could throw it far enough considering the snake was able to out-speed her in the water. It managed to negate two of her largest advantages rather well.

The first was of course her flight. That was decidedly not an option here. The danger didn't suddenly allow her the ability to carry more than one person in flight, and she wasn't going to just leave someone for dead, no matter how annoying or angry they may be. Her second biggest advantage was her demonic fire. A nice 'kill it with fire' option that worked shockingly well against many many things. Sadly, this beast seemed to be smart enough to avoid it, and powerful enough to call up a shield. It didn't need to dodge if it could throw water in the way.

\*How the heck am I getting out of this one...\*

#### Chapter 864 Snake In a Swamp

"What do I do? What do I do?! WHAT DO I DO?! Has anyone got any good ideas because I'm freaking out a little bit and I've got nothing!" shouted Kat as she ran. Kat tried to keep a good mental picture of where the fucking snake was but it was able to move without leaving any traces of its passing. Kat could guess it was a technique born from its ability to manipulate water and Kat REALLY WASN'T A FAN.

[Kat. You need to calm down. I understand this is bad, and the fact I'm in danger is what's probably causing you to freak out a bit. Just remember, if things get really bad I can fly away. Now, I know you aren't so callous as to leave Xiang and Yang for dead, so I'll stay where I am at the moment but if they help you fight I'll stay in the air. You might need to come back and find me because I'm not even close to as fast as you are, but I'll be safe I promise.]

"Why can't you just kill it with fire? That worked wonderfully every other time!" shouted Yang.

"It can control water or poison and throw it in the way! I doubt I can actually get any fire onto the damned snake!" returned Kat.

"It's got water control?!" shouted Xiang. "Shit. It must be a really old Rank 3 beast then. Shit. Kat. Spirit beasts tend to focus on the physical side of things. A Rank 3 would normally need at least 3 Rank 3 cultivators or a Rank 4 cultivators to take down. This one... this one probably needs a lot more than that... I think we should just run!"

"Gee. I didn't think of that. Let me just increase my speed all the way to maximum... OH WAIT. I'm already running as fast as I can! Snake or not I can't go faster and I'm burning energy as we speak! Sure I can probably, hopefully, dodge it for a while but I've got half an hour of energy left tops," explained Kat.

Xiang cursed under his breath, and while the wind did a good job of muffling it, Kat had exceptional hearing. Despite this, it does not bear repeating the long string of curses. They were unique, and creative and much too vulgar to be repeated. Lily was terribly embarrassed and almost jumped from Xiang's arms just on principle. Still, eventually he raised a good point. "Is there any way to scare it off? Yang and I won't be much more than dead weight. We just wouldn't be strong enough to break through its scales,"

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“Speak for yourself!” hissed Yang.

“Oh? You think you can break those scales?” asked Xiang.

“Well... well no... but it was rude to just answer for me!” grumbled Yang.

Xiang just rolled his eyes. It really wasn't the time for this sort of thing. He went to say something else but his jaw was slammed shut by Kat's sudden movement. The snake came at Kat, this time straight on. Another leap over the head was in order, something Kat managed with a slight grunt and another burst of demonic energy. Landing was a lot harder though.

Kat saw her feet coming up on the back of the thing. It was certainly wide enough for Kat to stand on it easily, but she noticed the water rising up on either side of it and flared her wings forcing her to the side as she did so. The iceberg tilted and Xiang and Yang had to hold on as they came dangerously close to being thrown off. Kat managed to arc her back to the side and limit the issues for them partway through her jump.

Kat landed and fixed her posture, as well as the position of the iceberg. The snake continued charging through where she was and the water rushed over the top of it where Kat was just standing. Watching it closely though, Kat came to a pleasant realisation. Its zone of control was abysmal. It had great control of any water near it... but that control didn't seem to extend far past the surface of its skin at all. Kat found that knowledge extremely welcoming.

“Do either of you have any fancy cultivator tricks?!” yelled Kat.

“Not for something like this!” returned Xiang.

“Hmm... maybe if I get it in the eyes...” ‘said’ Yang. “Kat! Call out the direction the snake will come from next time and I'll blast it!”

“Sure!” Kat answered, not having any better plans at the moment. Currently they were just running down the clock. Sadly, they were the ones on the clock and not the snake. It meant that a plan to deal with it, either by defeating it – unlikely apparently – or by somehow managing to get it to run away.

A few seconds past as Kat waited for the snake to launch another attack. She didn't quite know how she was noticing it, perhaps through sound or maybe feeling the vibrations? Whatever it was, Kat just let herself focus. “LEFT!” was the shout that left her mouth before she realised she was even speaking. Kat jumped once again as the snake burst from the water, this time though, it was ready for Kat.

As she sailed in the air, the snake coiled in on itself and slithered upwards, contorting itself to have a chance to nip at Kat. The jaws snapped down in the same instant Kat's legs bent at the knee. It was a close thing, and Kat was able to feel one of her shoes being ripped off by the snake as she fell. Luckily, the snake wasn't immune to its own momentum. While it had been able to redirect it for a bit, the rest of its body was catching up and forced it to move on. Kat quickly resummoned her outfit, focusing just on her shoe and was very pleased to see that it just flickered back into place and the rest of her attire didn't change at all.

\*Well that's something to look into later. Wait. What happened to Yang's laser?\* Of course, Yang was on the right side of the raft. She couldn't exactly get a shot on the snake, especially not its eyes, from

where she was sitting if it was coming from that direction. Lily pointed this fact out to Kat after hearing her thoughts. \*Oh. Oh right... my bad.\*

Kat continued running and waited for the snake to return. This time, it took about five minutes for the snake to catch up. Kat was rather thankful for that. It seemed that if it wanted to keep its speed the snake had to stick to basic charges with maybe some water manipulation thrown in. Anything fancy would drastically cut into its speed. "BACK!"

Kat jumped up, snatching her tail out of the way and angling herself to the side once again as the snake barrelled through the space she was once again. Kat was a little surprised to note it didn't even bother to open its mouth this time. Kat wasn't sure what that meant, but a basic guess was 'not good'. What was nice, is that Yang was able to blast it with her eye laser. Bad news. It didn't do anything. She was slow on the draw and the lasers hit the beast's scales doing what appeared to be no damage.

Two more attempts were made by Yang to blast the snake but the fundamental problem was the speed difference. It took Kat longer to say where the snake was coming from then it did for the snake to attack. That wasn't even including the time it took for Yang to turn, ready the attack, aim it, and release. It was just too great a delay. Things were happening in seconds if that, and taking a full one to speak the words just didn't lend itself to speedy combat.

\*Dammit. Go through the poison swamp they said. It'll be faster they said. Yeah? Well fast as this might be. It won't matter much if we DIE! Thanks a lot for the insistence on the 'faster' route Yang!\*

[To be fair Kat. We didn't exactly argue hard for the other option. I mean, to put this decision on Yang is a little unfair.] Lily was mostly arguing for the sake of arguing, and hoping it would calm Kat down somewhat. It was still true of course, but when you're being chased by a giant man-eating snake, reasonable wasn't really what anyone was after.

Kat cursed as she dodged the snake another time. Once again, it didn't even bother to open its mouth and she decided to punish it a bit for that. Kat used her wings to fall a bit faster and kicked the thing in the side as she fell. Kat was very surprised when she heard a crunch, and it wasn't the scales. Kat stumbled slightly as she hit the ground and felt her toe mending itself. \*WHAT THE HECK! How tough is this bastard's scales!\*

#### Chapter 865 Running in the 90's

Kat continued to run as she tried to come up with a plan. Apparently kicking the damned thing wouldn't work, it's scales were tougher than Kat's feet apparently. \*Wait... I managed to KICK it. That means I can make contact with the thing... can I just pump fire out of my feet in that instant they make contact?\*

Kat felt Lily's approval down the link. "Guys I've got a plan! It might not be a great one, but I think I can get some of my demonic fire onto it!"

Xiang and Yang both shouted variations of 'go for it' and Kat got ready for another strike. When it did, Kat leapt out of the way, reflexively, only to be surprised. The snake had come from directly behind and Kat jumped off to the side this time, trying to avoid needing to twist and bend and stabilise the ice chunk she was holding. Less risk of throwing everyone off that way.

Kat cursed mentally as she realised the problem with that plan. Snakes were rather flexible and turning its head about ninety degrees to the side wasn't hard. Additionally, with a jaw longer than Kat was tall, it was simple to turn and try to bite Kat. Seeing the head whipping around Kat's eyes went wide and her mind slowed. Well shit.

Kat looked at the giant maw and tried to figure out how to avoid dying horribly. \*Within my power my ass. How the heck am I supposed to get out of this one? Hmm... I could burst into flames? Maybe... but while the snake's mouth is large enough to swallow me whole, it isn't quite enough to swallow me, and the ice chunk so I'd probably end up dropping those three... so not an option.\*

\*Hmm... still... If I did set myself on fire... would it avoid my attack again? I'm not sure how deadly it thinks my flames are. Did it throw water in the way just as part of a reflex that triggers against any attacks? Or did it know my fire was actually deadly to it? Is that something I can risk lives on? No. No it really isn't. Need more data. Hngh... Is there any other way to avoid getting eaten?\*

Kat glanced at the mouth one more time... and a crazy idea came to her. \*Damn. I'd love to say 'that's so crazy it just might work' but to be entirely truthful I give it maybe... 50% odds? Something like that? Hmm... is that more or less risk than going for the fire play? I mean... I guess I could do both?\*

.....

Kat settled on that. Split the difference and go with both ideas. She didn't really have any extra time anyway, even with everything extremely slow the snake was still quite fast. So, Kat set her plan in motion. Flapping her wings heavily Kat moved forward a few more centimetres, lining herself up with the giant fangs of the snake. Kat summoned up her demonic fire and braced herself.

Kat felt the impact on her side. The snake had kept turning right into her body, and she was smacked away like an unruly fly. Kat could feel her entire left side burning from the impact. It was spread out enough that her bones survived by all the flesh on her left side was bruised. Kat had made sure to keep her wings from the impact so that she could use them to stabilise herself in the air and prevent falling over. She could feel those muscles in her back screaming in protest against the treatment but she just sent over more demonic energy, hoping it would speed up the recovery.

Kat managed to only stumble slightly when she hit the water and managed to use her tail to right herself and start running in less than two seconds. The snake hissed at her as its head dove back under the water. Kat ran towards its tail, not really expecting to catch it, as that was the safest way back to the path. The snake didn't seem to mind, no attempt to incircle her was made as Kat sprinted diagonally to get back to the sticks that marked the way. Her speed was a touch slower than before, and her bruises were healing slowly because of the constant movement agitating them but she didn't feel like there was any other choice. Kat was just thankful she was still somewhat in the air and the snake didn't smack into the ice. Kat doubted she'd have been able to hold it together under that sort of assault.

Up above on said ice chunk, Yang and Xiang were not having a great time. Xiang needed to hook his feet in awkwardly and was pretty sure his ankle had been sprained. It might have just been a bruise, but he didn't think so. It wasn't pleasant, but he was hardly going to complain. It was quite clear Kat was doing all she could. Yang was in a similar position. She'd given up trying to stay somewhat standing and had laid herself flat on the ice now. Her knees were shaking, and bruised from the sharp movement causing

them to impact the ice. Yang was holding in her anger. Though, the fact that most of it was directed not outward, but inward towards herself wasn't making it easy to bear.

While Kat was recovering her footing and allowing her regeneration to get to work, the snake was dealing with Kat's demonic fire. It was using an extremely efficient method for something of its strength. The snake had opened its mouth and raked the tooth through as much poison as it could get its fangs on. With just a bit of effort the snake managed to dilute the flames by spreading them amongst thousands of litres of poison. The tooth itself was slightly weaker and covered in a thin layer of ice... but saying it was 'weaker' was like saying a car going at 99 instead of 100 km/h was 'slower'. True yes, but only in the most technical of manners.

Once the flames were dealt with the snake made another beeline for Kat who was not pleased with how much energy she'd needed to use in that defence for apparently so little. When she looked back, the snake was already missing and presumably fine. Kat had lost around 5% of her reserves in that attack, and really it was only so little because the rest of it had been filled in by her connection with Lily. That extra demonic energy was literally a life saver at the moment and Kat couldn't be more grateful. Still. She needed to be careful next attack.

The moments following that decision were tense. Every second the snake didn't attack was another second that sent Kat's nerves on edge. She knew the snake was fast, exceptionally so for its size. It could catch up to her quickly and attack within moments. It was waiting. Kat didn't know what for, and she wasn't liking it. As the seconds stretched to minutes, it did nothing to calm her nerves. Something told her the snake wasn't giving up just yet. Kat could only hope the reason for the delay was that it was wary now. Being injured. That was the hope. That was what Kat prayed would be the answer. She didn't know though, the snake was as silent in its movement as ever and Kat could see no traces of its passing.

At the ten-minute mark Kat couldn't help but frown. She was down to twenty percent energy. Kat didn't like just how much she had left. If the snake had some way of knowing it was wearing her down, she had a real problem on her hands. Part of her wanted to call out, to get advice from those above her if it would be best to stop. To regain some of her constantly dwindling energy.

But that was just another issue. The snake... just how intelligent was it? Could it understand language? If it was smart enough to but just didn't know one... would it understand her through the translation? Kat didn't know and neither did Lily. Kat knew it was at least partially based on intention, but did that mean she could intend different messages for different people? Perhaps with practice but Kat was almost certain that wasn't something she was capable of.

\*Lily I don't really know what to do here. I'm pretty close to running on fumes and when I get to around the ten percent range I'm pretty sure I'll be at risk of just collapsing until my energy recharges a bit. I'd only need like... maybe ten minutes tops of no activity but... I don't think we'd ever get that. Should I try and rest? Or do I need to keep running?\*

[I... I don't know Kat. I wish I had the answer for you... but I just don't know. How tenacious are these Rank 3 spirit beasts? Is it going to chase us forever because we're now 'prey' or is there a good chance it's given up? Are we safe already and we just don't know it?]

\*No... I can... I can almost feel its eyes on me. We're not out of the woods yet. I just don't know if we need to risk a stop or not. We're really cutting things close.\*

#### Chapter 866 Solid Snake

Five more minutes later, still no snake. Kat makes the call. "I need to rest a bit, get my demonic energy regenerating. I'll be keeping an eye out but it's getting risky to continue,"

Kat slows down, letting her wings flare out as she passed next to a tree. It was brittle like all the rest but it was just the right height for what she had planned. Kat pumped one last burst of demonic fire into the ice before setting it down carefully across the trees branches. She doesn't let go completely, keeping her hands raised, but it takes most of the weight off. Kat lets the demonic energy circling her body slow, and takes a deep breath. Ready for anything.

She frowns a moment later, when her energy regeneration starts. It's slow. Unbearably slow. \*Why? What's restricting me here? I'm resting as much as I can...\* The obvious answer Kat was missing was the poison. It didn't really have a chance to dig in and start effecting her, being almost instantly destroyed by her impressive regeneration. The problem though, was that even if she wasn't doing much, her regeneration was constantly working preventing her demonic energy from recharging faster.

Kat grit her teeth as she gained a single percent of demonic energy after a minute of rest. She could still feel the snake, it was clearly waiting for her to relax and she wasn't going to give it such an easy opening. The problem of course, was that with only a percent a minute she was likely to need over an hour of rest and that just wasn't in the cards. The snake hadn't shown itself for fifteen minutes, which frankly was fourteen minutes more than she was comfortable with really.

Seven minutes, seven precious percentage points of energy (and hopefully a bit more than that on Lily's end) later, Kat heard a sound she couldn't quite identify. It was a soft roaring that seemed to be building in intensity. A few moments passed as Kat tried to identify the sound. She looked around for anything that might clue her in... but it was when she finally turned her face back to the direction they were travelling she saw it. The blasted snake had been busy.

Apparently just because it was keeping an eye on Kat didn't mean it was simply waiting for a chance to attack. It had been working on something to cause Kat an issue. It had run around, gathering water behind it and muffling the sound of the movement. All to be unleashed in one giant attack. A wave of blackish poison continued to rise up and out of the swamp and it was heading straight for Kat's position. \*Well fuck. How am I supposed to deal with that?\*

As it climbed higher and higher Kat's fears were confirmed. She slowed her mind in that moment as she tried to plan. The wave was already impossible to jump over. At least, without better footing and less weight being carried. \*Ok. This is officially not good. Well, it wasn't good before this, but things are really not looking good. Ok... ok... what can I do? Hmmm... could I run around? Hmm... no... it looks like it's too wide... hmm... maybe run and then jump over? Though the wave still seems to be gaining height at the edges... hmm... a risk... and I'd have to start running NOW before we get confirmation... not ideal...\*

.....

Kat wanted to bite her lips in annoyance but didn't drop her slowed time for it. \*I'm burning energy just thinking about it. Is there no way to jump over? No... not with the ice chunk... is there another way I could get the ice chunk over? I could... throw it? Maybe? Would that work? Kat started to go over the idea in her head. She'd need to attempt a discus throw, spinning in place and using that to give herself extra height. Bit dangerous for the passengers... but I'm not sure I have any other choice.\*

\*I... I think that would work. Especially if I freeze myself a small platform to stand on, ensuring I have adequate footing for this... I think... I think I have to try.\* "You guys better hold on because a massive wave is coming and I have only one crazy idea to get out of it," said Kat even as she was already working on her platform. It took but a moment... and a rather large chunk of her recently regenerated energy. Kat really wasn't pleased with that fact but needs must. It just meant she needed to avoid doing this in the future.

Kat firmed up her footing and started to spin. She let her hands work their way out to the edge before all she was holding the ice by was a reinforced chunk at the edge. She could see Yang and Xiang panicking as they tried desperately to hold on as much as they could. Kat continued to spin, speeding up with each rotation until the wave was upon them. Kat spun around once more and then let the ice fly, aiming more upwards than sideways but really doing her best with what she had.

It spun around like a top, nearly throwing its occupants off to the side. Lily had to dig her claws into Xiang's outfit to remain in place and he just winced and said nothing at the treatment. Kat followed behind them with a jump, trying to catch up to the flying ice chunk and bring it down safely. The snake was nowhere in sight... but the wave was dissipating fast. Kat was certain the only reason it could retain its integrity in such a shallow bit of water was the snake's interference. Now that it had clearly moved on, the wave fell.

The ice chunk reached the peak of its jump, holding there in place for a few moments until it started falling and met Kat's waiting hands. She flared her wings and tried to reduce their falling speed. Kat was somewhat successful. She did reduce the speed greatly... but considering how fast they'd been moving before it was still not a pleasant ride. It didn't take long for the whole ensemble to crash into the water once again. Kat freaked out when her mind screamed at her immediately. The snake was waiting.

Kat threw herself up as the snake charged in from behind. Apparently, it didn't have enough time to do anything fancy, it simply raced towards Kat as fast as possible. She managed to just barely crest over the tip of its outstretched mouth by tucking her feet in as far as she could. As soon as the head passed, Kat acted. She brought her foot down lightly on the scales, not looking to break any more bones. Kat let her demonic energy explode, releasing as much of it as she could in those few short moments before letting herself fall to the side and watching the rest of the snake barrel past.

What Kat didn't expect was that the snake would turn around and come in for a second attack. It was so slow compared to the previous one she dodged it easily. The follow up though... that was a different story. As Kat sailed easily over the thing, she spotted the patch of scales that she'd set on fire. They were shivering and chitting like a thousand insects. Kat experienced a moment of confusion when they exploded outwards flying towards Kat and all.

She didn't have any time to react properly as they slammed into her and the ice chunk above. The fire at least kept it together even as the cracks formed... but the scales that got Kat were another think

entirely. Several tore their way through her wings with barely any resistance and while most did miss her, the rest sliced into her skin, digging in painfully. Kat winced, and wished she had a free hand to rip the cursed things out even as the fire seemed to peter out instead of attacking her.

Kat landed heavily without the full aid of her wings, and the pain in her legs caused her to stumble. It didn't stop Kat from running but it was a near thing. She could feel the scales shifting alongside her muscles as she ran, doing more damage because she refused to stop. The problem was, the snake was right there beside her and Kat wasn't willing to bet it would be willing to let her stop and rest to fix the issue. Her regeneration was working after all. That was all she could bank on.

It was slow going. Kat didn't know if it was because the scales were magical in some way, or if it was just the number of them... or maybe it was how deep they were embedded. Still, Kat felt her body slowly healing and rejecting the foreign substances. If it could just go a bit faster she'd be thrilled. Then again, Kat finally find an issue with her regeneration. It prioritised fixing things as it removed them from her body, or so it seemed. The scales would be pushed out a little as the muscles healed... only to move while she ran, damaging the muscles more and setting back progress.

#### Chapter 867 The Belly of the Beast

\*I don't think this is sustainable.\* Kat grimaced as she continued to run. Her energy was draining much faster now. Her regeneration was constantly operating and she was trying to keep maximum speed. \*I'm going to need to do something drastic. I don't know if I can-\* Kat's thoughts were interrupted by another charge of the snake. Kat could feel her muscles groaning in protest as she made the jump.

The only thing preventing it from being worse was that her wings had healed over. Luckily, if such a thing could be called lucky, her wings were thin and the scales had enough force to punch straight through them. It meant they healed first and Kat had full use of them again.

Which was great... but it really wasn't enough. \*Dammit. The scales are too tough to punch or kick. They can be FUCKING LAUNCHED OFF. And frankly... I don't really know how else to attack the damned thing. It's pretty obvious-\*

Kat made another jump to dodge the snake. It was really trying to press its advantage at the moment. Kat couldn't help but frown as she dodged. It might have looked clean, but she could tell the sharp movement had caused yet more damage to regenerate. Her reserves had fallen to around 15% and still falling fast. \*Dammit. I need some way to deal with this thing. Where is it weak? Eyes? Nose? ...no... yes? Maybe? Mouth?\*

[Kat... I don't like where you're going with this...]

\*Sorry Lily... but I have a crazy idea and it might be the only way.\* "Get ready guys. I'm going to throw the ice chunk again!" announced Kat.

"You crazy bitch! I nearly fell off the first time!" shouted Yang but it Kat noted it wasn't exactly a call for her not to do it. Kat simply grimaced and let herself decelerate slowly. Kat tried not to make it obvious... but she had no idea how good she was at the attempt. The snake made two more passes in this time and Kat dodged each one without too much trouble. Her energy was going down further... but she was nearly ready.

.....

Just as Kat reached a normal walking pace she got ready. She started to turn her upper body and hoped she'd timed it right. The spike in panic she felt a moment later confirmed she had. Kat spun and launched the ice away at the same moment the snake leapt out of the water and straight at her. Kat gave a small hop and balled herself up letting the snakes wide jaws swallow her whole.

See the thing about snakes. Is that they have no gag reflex. They swallow prey whole. So when Kat flew into its mouth the snake didn't really think twice about it. Kat had 'clearly' ran out of energy and was giving up as weak prey should. Right? Well... the snake was in for a bit of a surprise.

Once Kat felt her momentum slowing she reached out to the fleshy walls and dug her nails in halting her progress. The juices here weren't exactly pleasant feeling but Kat was quite pleased to note that her skin was resistant enough to the stomach acid of the thing. Kat didn't think she had any special resistance to acid, and she was right. It was more a matter of the snakes venom and all the poison about usually taking care of the dissolving process. Sure the snake helped that a long a bit... but normally it had a long, long time to deal with food. Sometimes months.

Kat wasn't going to give it that time. She was about to release all her demonic energy straight away but checked her reserves. She was going to collapse as soon as this was over. Kat grimaced and quickly set about ripping away the scales. She winced every time one came out because the edges were barbed. Apparently the snake really wanted to make sure its prey was dead. Still. Kat knew she'd recover so she wasted no time taking them out. Another, final look at her reserves marked them at 11%. It'd have to be enough.

Kat took in a deep breath and then let her demonic energy explode. It didn't really seem to want to leave her. She was already so low and it needed to be coaxed, but once ordered the demonic energy was ready to act. Fire exploded out of Kat and started to race down the inside the of thing.

Kat collapsed from the effort, falling down into the liquid that lined the place. Kat didn't even have enough energy to keep her eyes open as the snake started to thrash. Left and right, up and down, Kat was thrown all around with no regard for her safety. Luckily for Kat, the walls were quite soft and the death throws of the snake weren't really direct at her.

[KAT?!]

\*Ah. That's Lily freaking out.\* Kat hadn't exactly taken the time to explain her idea and once Kat had thrown the ice away she'd needed to act quickly. It had only been a few seconds all in total, and Lily had needed to deal with landing first before looking around and noticing the absence of Kat.

[Yes. Yes it IS ME and I'm FREAKING OUT KAT. WHAT THE HECK DID YOU DO?!]

\*Ah I just got swallowed a little bit so I could burn it from the inside out.\*

[I'm sorry you what!?!]

\*Eh it's not really a big deal.\* Thought Kat in Lily's direction as she slammed into another wall. It turned out, when your body didn't really have the energy to move and was just flopping around without tensing up... these things didn't really hurt. Kat was also surprised at just how flexible she was. Sure she'd done



some basic human style stretches to get a sense of things... but it was another thing entirely when Kat realised her back was able to bend like that. The flexibility of a Succubus is really something.

The snake continued thrashing for a few more moments before it stopped moving and Kat fell into the juices at the bottom of the snake. She still couldn't move, and while the acid still wasn't really a problem for her... the fact that she was face down in it was. Rather hard to breathe without air after all.

\*Body? Can you flip me over please? I get that you're in power saving mode or whatever but if I'm not breathing that's wasting demonic energy where I really don't need to.\* Despite Kat's complaints her body didn't seem to be doing anything to move her out of the liquid. Kat was really wondering why that was exactly. Her tail could fend off attackers by itself. She'd seen it happen. So why was this outside of its ability?

[You're not breathing?!] Screeched Lily's mental voice across the link. Kat really wanted to sigh at that.

\*Lily it's not that bad. I'm just face down in some... liquids... and I can't breathe because of it. I'm honestly more surprised it didn't freeze over. Actually... yeah hang on why didn't this freeze over?\* Kat was missing the obvious answer that it had frozen over but she'd crashed into it multiple times breaking up the forming ice crystals. Furthermore, it was being constantly replenished. The walls had frozen over as well. Kat just hadn't noticed in her tumble.

[Hang on... let me convince the other two to come help. Shouldn't take long... I might just have to threaten them a bit...]

\*Lily. I'll be fine. Hopefully I'll be able to move again in a minute or so and then I can get out of the water and then out of the snake. It's not a big deal, I can hold my breath a minute easy. Humans do it all the time.\*

[I'm still not happy about this. Kat you were EATEN. How are you so calm?!]

\*Well Lily... firstly. It was my idea. Secondly... it's honestly not too bad in here. I mean, it stinks, and the water stings a little bit but I can't really see the fleshy walls anymore and really it's a lot like a cave at that point. It's not like it took a bit out of me.\*

[Right... my girlfriend is crazy. I mean... I guess I knew that before but... fine whatever. I'll leave it to you. I just want the record to show that I am NOT happy about this. You are SO lucky that gunk slides off of you otherwise I'd insist you shower before I give you anymore hugs and that could be days out.]

\*Lily. You and I both know you'd crack first.\*

Lily huffed mentally. [Ok yes you're probably right. But we don't live in that world we live in this one and I WANT MY HUGS. You nearly died Kat. Forgive me for being a little freaked out.]

\*I'm fine!\*

[Kat. You're in the stomach of a giant snake and currently at risk of drowning because you used all of your energy and can't move anymore. If that isn't at least somewhat close to death then I don't really know what you'd count as close]

\*Getting stabbed in the heart? Twice?\*

[Kat. I don't wanna hear it.]

## Chapter 868 Sweet Swamp Air

As soon as Kat regained her full range of movement she sat up and breathed in deeply. It was not a pleasant experience. The air was damp, dank, and all around rather horrible. Now she was inside an animal so it was rather understandable, but that didn't make the slightest bit more pleasant in her mind. The second thing Kat decided was that she wanted out of this damned snake as quickly as possible. The problem with that, is after being tossed around so much Kat didn't know which way was which. The mouth was likely closer and certainly less disgusting... but if Kat didn't know which way that was, it would just be a guess.

\*Hey Lily how close is the snake to you guys?\*

[Um... pretty close? I think it tried to go after us once it had you... but it started thrashing when it was still a while out and the waves from that knocked us further away. That being said... I can still see the snake pretty well from here. In fact, it's mostly out of the water and huge so I can see it perfectly fine.]

\*Wait... how is it out of the water when it's dead?\*

[I think it had to have some earth manipulation powers, or at the very least mud manipulation powers. Maybe by moving the water in the mud and everything else with it. The whole snake is like... a bit less than half in the water?]

\*Right well... any idea which way the exit will be for me?\*

[No? I mean... hmm... that would be a useful thing to know... hmm... hang on...] Lily started to focus on the link between herself and Kat... and managed to find that she did in fact know which direction Kat was in... vaguely. [Right... well... I do know roughly which direction you're in... but that doesn't really help because I still don't know which way you're facing]

.....

Bother. With that, Kat started to look around for clues... but there really wasn't anything to indicate which way she'd need to head for the exit. After staring at the walls for twenty seconds Kat decided she was wasting time and summoned her demonic fans. Kat then tried to slice into the wall. The muscle lining was nothing before her blades... and the rest of the muscles weren't much better. They were quite tightly packed but taking them one at a time allowed Kat to get into a good rhythm.

Eventually though, Kat's luck would run out. She heard her fans clink against something hard. Cutting away a bit of the surrounding area revealed that she'd ended up finding where the snake stored its scales. Or at least, the spare ones. \*Odd. You know... I kinda just expected the snake to be using magic or a bit of directed regeneration but... well...\* Kat could see stacks of scales lined up to be moved into position. They were spread out a bit and stacked twenty high with muscles surrounded them presumably to push them into the correct spot.

The one nice thing about this find was that the scales were ever so slightly tear drop shaped. This gave Kat everything she needed to know where the exit would be. Kat backed out of the hole she'd cut in the wall and then started to run. Well it was more of an awkward jog really. The snake was big yes, and

while it's mouth was large enough to swallow Kat whole, the rest of the body was not so large. Kat had to stay crouched over quite awkwardly, especially with her horns.

Now, you might think, 'Kat, you're strong, why not just let your horns cut through some stuff? Why worry?' the answer to that was Kat didn't find the blood that inevitably fell on her in such instances pleasant. It might just slide off, but it wasn't nice to have on for any length of time at all. Still, Kat wasn't all that far down the snake's gullet so it didn't take too long for Kat to reach the mouth. With a small application of demonic energy Kat managed to wrench open the snake's clenched door and step out into the wonderful 'fresh' swamp air. It might have been pretty bad compared to proper fresh air, but compared the snake? Well Kat was certainly thinking her haste was worth it.

Kat stumbled out of the snakes mouth and into the water. Kat was able to spot the ice chunk for where she was and started to wade over, keeping to her unassisted speed. Kat wanted to get back to 100% energy as quickly as possible, well second to getting to Lily in a timely manner of course.

When Kat made it over, she found Xiang and Yang sprawled out on the ice. Xiang was off the side, coughing up more gunk, while Yang was bandaging some cuts she'd taken during the ride. Part of the ice chunk had cracked and left more than a few sharp edges. They normally wouldn't require such careful attention but with all the poison around Yang wasn't taking any chances. Xuena wasn't best friends with a fool after all. Basic medic training was something she beat into Yang during their long friendship and it was paying dividends here.

Xiang was a bit better off, or perhaps it was just that his skin was naturally tougher. Well, I guess it depended on your definition of better. It seemed that in the landing he'd somehow managed to swallow some of the swamp muck. It was why he was still hanging over the edge. Xiang was trying to get as much of the poison out as possible. Lily was doing fine. She was just resting on the ice, which, while a little wet now, wasn't so bad. The cold wasn't effecting her at least, unlike the other two that were mostly just trying to ignore it.

Once Kat was just a few steps away from the chunk, Lily dashed across the ice and glided towards Kat's arms. A few millimetres away Lily transformed and Kat had to step forward a bit and lift up the foolish girl to prevent her from touching the poison. Lily pouted as she was held up by the armpits like an unruly child. "Really? I just wanted a hug..." said Lily softly.

Kat just raised an eyebrow, "And I just don't want you to be poisoned," Lily sighed and transformed while Kat was still grabbing her. Kat picked up the falling Memphis without much issue and sighed. Lily just snuggled into Kat's arms not really saying anything more. She knew Kat was being quite reasonable and she'd not really been paying attention to the poison at all.

With Lily in hand, Kat hopped up onto the ice chunk and gave it a quick pulse of demonic energy before she relaxed on the ice, letting herself calm down. "So... what now?" asked Kat.

Xiang wiped his mouth and sat up, "Well... that's a bit of a question isn't it. That snake... it's well out of our, and by our I mean Yang and I's, weight class. That being said. It's dead now, and we've got its corpse here... it's worth so much money... maybe even enough to trade to Xuena if the scales can be turned into good enough armour. Now, some of that is the fact it's Rank 3 but a lot is just how large the damned thing was. Which of course... is the issue.

“We just don’t have any way to transport it. Our rings are nowhere near large enough to handle something like this... and I have no idea what we should do about it. This is like... like leaving a massive chest full of gold to rot in a swamp because you can’t carry it. The wealth is RIGHT THERE... but I really don’t know how we’d carry it out of the swamp let alone to Sect Master Ice Prick,” explained Xiang.

Yang snorted at the ‘prestigious title’ that the sect master received from Xiang but otherwise nodded along with the explanation. Kat of course looked at the snake and pondered that question herself. It was big yes... and undoubtedly heavy... but probably not quite outside of her strength range. If they went that direction though... Kat knew she’d be dragging it. Probably for days, at a pace around that of a normal human. “Well, what are our options?” asked Kat.

Xiang scratched at his chin for a few moment before saying, “Hmm... not a lot of ideal ones... but certainly more than a few suboptimal ones. The first thing is of course to take the best parts. The fangs, the poison sacs, maybe the eyes as well and a handful of scales just because we do have some space in our rings.

“The other option is that we split the party. Someone, or I guess two someone’s stay here and guard the corpse. It’s a Rank 3 beast. It’s not going to decay for a month or so even without treatment... but I’m not entirely certain that Yang and I could safely leave the swamp by ourselves and we certainly couldn’t keep a corpse this size safe 24/7 until harvesters come.

“The final option I see is spending the time to cut off the entire head as is, and try to sell that. It’ll have most of the good parts, a good bit of scales, but more likely some noble would love to have it preserved for a wall or something. If we’re really lucky their might even be a bounty on it... but that’s wishful thinking.”

#### Chapter 869 The Logistics of Transport and Arguments Therein

A bit of time had passed. Kat had recovered completely and even had time to make a back rest so that she could lean against it. Lily was happily sprawled out over Kat in her human form and was currently allowing her instincts mostly free rein. She was rubbing as much of her scent on Kat as possible. Lily didn’t really notice the exact nature of what she was doing, but it helped calm her down after seeing Kat get eaten and she just wasn’t in the mood to fight herself over it. Kat kept up slow circles on Lily’s back throughout the entire process as well, so that was nice.

The problem... well the problem was Xiang and Yang. They were arguing and hadn’t taken a break from it since Kat had gotten back. “I’m telling you, we should have had larger storage rings!” hissed Yang.

“Well it’s not like we had money to buy bigger ones. Besides, we didn’t need anything larger, as I said the last three times.. Our current storage is enough for all of our supplies twice over. It is completely unreasonable to expect that we’d need more. Most worthwhile treasures are much smaller in size. It’s not like I could have known,” insisted Xiang.

“But you’re the one with the map!” growled Yang. “You should have known what we were likely to encounter!”

“Ok, before I address the whole map thing... this was not a ‘likely’ encounter. That snake probably eats a massive amount of food, even if it is a snake. I don’t imagine the environment could support many of them. This is probably the only one in the area, especially of this size. Maybe it has a mate, or some

young at most but this one has to be a few hundred, maybe even a few thousand years old. They don't just grow on trees Yang. If I thought we had a chance of finding something like this we wouldn't need to rush out by ourselves. We could just bring the clan along and then use a communication crystal to message the Icey Ass sect and try to trade!

"Then on to the map thing. I might be holding the map but might I remind you it's YOUR family's map? So really, if anything you should be responsible for the lack of details. It's not like this thing comes with a full report on the local wildlife?" returned Xiang.

"Well you could have asked! We're not so far away from home that the area is a mystery! I bet my parents would know, and if they don't, the quartermaster probably would!" snapped Yang.

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Xiang sighed exaggeratedly which only seemed to annoy Yang more. She looked about ready to throw her club at him when Xiang actually gave an answer, "Need I remind you that together, we agreed it just wasn't worth it? We want plausible deniability for your family and Xuena's? We left one vague note that will hint towards what we're doing and that's it. We agreed to that. So why now is it my responsibility to ask questions we agreed not to?"

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"So what? We're just going to leave it all here? It's enough to feed a family for a decade!" whined Yang.

"Yang. A rank 2 spirit beast is enough to feed a family for a decade, let alone this monster of a Rank 3," said Xiang.

"That's not the point!" complained Yang. "What about a raft? Can we dig up enough trees and stuff to put something together? I'm sure we're strong enough to cut down some trees with our hands."

"Yang. A normal person without any cultivation could do the same here. The trees are brittle messes that haven't properly adapted to the poisonous waters yet. They would be worse than useless and building a raft would be a waste of time. That's not even getting into the chance at further poisoning while we were working," insisted Xiang.

Yang kicked at the 'ground' annoyed only to hear a chunk of ice chip off. She looked down at her feet and came to a realisation. Her eyes lit up, literally for a fraction of a second, "We can make an ice raft! Kat can freeze a big ice raft and we can push that out!" exclaimed Yang.

Xiang glanced over to Kat, who had been keeping one ear on the conversation voiced her opinion. "Nope, sadly I can't. The snake is just too large. I don't really have the energy to keep it frozen consistently. I'd need to spend at least half my energy, probably more, making the ice bed for it and then more for the upkeep. That's not even taking into account the energy I'd need to push it. For as much as having a raft would make it easier, having a few extra tonnes of weight in ice wouldn't help and the snake isn't light either. Well, now that I think of it, that's all just assuming I could get the snake to float on the ice. The water level isn't exactly high,"

"At least I'm coming up with ideas instead of just getting frisky with my girlfriend," huffed Yang.

Lily's head whipped over to glare at Yang, cheeks red and a pout on her face. Kat just gave Lily's head a quick pat before saying, "I can listen and hug my girlfriend thank you very much. Additionally, it's pretty clear we're going to have to leave it in the end. It's just too large. As much as it seems to hurt you, there just isn't any way to take it with us."

"Look demon. I don't think you can comprehend just how much money this is. The idea of just leaving it is ridiculous. Heck, if the scales turn out to be good enough you could probably equip an elite platoon with it, a few transcriptions to link them together and help them all return to ideal form and you have a nearly invincible army. Sure it might take a few extra steps... but I know entire sects that would bankrupt themselves for this sort of thing!" extoled Yang.

Kat looked over the snake again. It looked a lot less impressive when it wasn't moving. Sure it was large, and the black scales were nice looking but it just looked like an oversized snake laying their in the muck. The idea that sects, whole sects would bankrupt themselves for this just seemed silly to Kat. "If you say so," said Kat aloud.

\*Really though... I don't know what she thinks we can do about this. Either we can take it with us or we can't and based on what Xiang's told us. We can't. At this point really all we're doing is wasting time, unless this break is also for recovering from the fight, which could be true enough certainly. I just... I guess I don't have a proper concept of what this is worth but at the same time... if we can't take it, who cares what it's worth?\*

[Perhaps it's different for us Kat, not being from here. Sure we know in an intellectual way that it must be worth a fortune but from a purely sociological perspective we haven't been here long enough to understand. A giant snake is worth basically nothing on Earth, well, maybe it's skeleton might be worth something to a museum but that's not my point. On Earth, no random animal carcass would be worth anything more than a thousand dollars. Our currency system is a lot... flatter I suppose.]

\*I guess. Just... is this arguing really going to help? We established early on that there's no good way to go about this. I think in the end we'll maybe get the head. In fact, if we can cut through the scales fine what I think is most likely to happen is we cut off the head and I carry that along with everyone else using it as a platform instead of the ice.\*

[Huh... that actually sounds like a pretty good idea Kat. Why not suggest it?]

\*And get properly in the middle of that shitshow?\* While Lily and Kat had been communicating mentally the argument with Xiang and Yang had restarted. The demonic aligned pair weren't really paying attention anymore. \*No thank you. The last thing I want to do is get into an argument at this point. I'm perfectly content with my cuddles thank you very much.\*

[I suppose I can agree with that... the question is though... just how much time are they willing to spend on this? For all the talk about trying to get to Xuena fast we sure have had a lot of stuff to side track us and it hasn't even been that many days yet. If we keep this up... a month here might not be out of the question.]

\*Ugh. I really don't look forward to dealing with those two for a month. Even if Xiang has improved quite a lot, Yang really does make up for his improving attitude and then some. Hmm... I wonder if Yang would've been happy if we could move the snake? Or is that just wishful thinking?\*

[Wishful thinking for sure.]

#### Chapter 870 For these Four. There is Only One Way To Skin a Snake

The argument between Xiang and Yang continued for quite some time before it ended. It didn't end with a real consensus or slowly wind down. No the only reason it stopped at all was Yang, and perhaps Xiang as well, found something else to be annoyed about. See, the argument had been going on for half an hour when Kat and Lily decided they really wanted no part in it. Sure there ears were good enough that they'd need to put quite a distance between them and the cultivators, but any distance was a nice drop in volume for the lounging pair.

Kat carefully used her fans to cut their small seat off from the rest of the ice chunk, which had already started to melt, then started to float away. Now, with no real currents Kat was forced to use her tail as a bit of a rudder. Kat kept the speed down, wouldn't do to be noticed after all. They managed to get a fair bit away before they were noticed, and even then it wasn't actually them that was noticed first.

See, Kat was floating away, and of course, she was no longer in contact with the main chunk of ice, or providing it with energy demonic energy to keep it frozen. Kat did pump in a good 50% of her reserves into it before they floated away, but apparently that was only good for an hour or so. Horribly inefficient to throw it all away at once. Though really, with Lily's reserves Kat used closer to 25% of her real total.

Anyway, the point was that while the ice remained frozen for quite a while, it didn't remain frozen forever without Kat's assistance. Eventually, while it hadn't melted completely, it had lost a lot of its stability. So when Yang shifted, massive club and all, to a different position to further her argument the whole thing tipped over. Neither of the cultivators were happy about it.

So off they went on another argument, after 'convincing' Kat to come back and reform the platform. Apparently the chill was one thing but the poison was another. So Kat just shrugged, ignoring the fact that they could have used the snake as a place to have their arguments and not be reliant on her for their platform. But what did Kat no? Nothing apparently if all the arguing going on said anything.

Kat just let it all wash over her. She just couldn't work up the energy or frame of mind to care. They'd already spent over an hour yelling and screaming at each other for something neither of them could control all while Yang tried to ignore the reality of the situation and Xiang, eventually, started questioning Yang's intelligence and breeding instead of just letting the argument wind down.

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So now that they were both yelling at Kat, Yang for the damage done to her appearance mostly, and Xiang for the potential risk the poison posed... well Kat just didn't care. She simply reacted with different changes in her facial expression every time one of them finished the sentence. She wasn't even paying enough attention to know how applicable those changes were. It was mostly just a trick to make them think she was paying them at least some attention.

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Lily had, after making sure it was ok with Kat, returned to sleep. It was a bit hard with all the yelling but she was part cat, so it was possible after all. Kat was thinking she had the right idea not longer after Lily had taken leave of her conscious. \*How much time are they willing to waste here? No wait. Don't ask that... especially not out loud. That'll just set off another argument. Probably.\*

Kat wasn't willing to test her theory. Even as the sun made its way across the sky and it was looking increasingly likely that they'd be staying at least one extra day in the swamp. Almost certainly slower than the bypass now. Granted, the snake was a nice prize so the delay wasn't completely unreasonable. The issue was of course, the fact that most the money would be from the fact that it was large and the scales were sturdy. Just the head, while likely worth quite a lot, would be at most 20% of the total value. At absolute most. Probably closer to 10 or 5%.

Eventually, Kat asked if they could get started on the head and decide what to do with the rest of it after. It was mostly just a throw away thought but Xiang and Yang jumped on the idea like starving hyenas. So they got to work. It... wasn't pretty. See, the scales were quite hard, but with some effort you could dig under them into the muscles. Of course, you had to be aware of the extra backup scales underneath that... but if you were careful it wasn't too bad.

Lily was having a great time. Napping on the snake's nose. Everyone else. Not so much. See, Kat was the only one who could really do anything. Yang's weapon didn't lend itself to cutting or slashing, so she spent most of her time trying to pry up the edges of the scales for Kat. The cuts Yang accumulated doing such a thing were quite frequent until Yang just ripped off her, admittedly dirty, sleeve and used it as a set of makeshift gloves.

For Kat... it was hard work. She had to carefully cut the muscle, and only the muscle. Dragging the edges of her fans around the extra scales, which weren't always where they should be, especially if you assumed even space. It was also taking forever. Kat wasn't really paying attention to the time, but it took large amount of it, and effort, as well as a bit of demonic energy to dig deeper into the snake's muscles.

Xiang... well... he was probably the worst off. He had insisted he could help Kat. That he was capable of cutting through the snake without issue. He was wrong. His sword wasn't up to the task. He managed to dig into the snake and make a very noticeable chip in the blade. Xiang's face when he saw the missing bits of metal heralded horrible things for the snake if it was still alive.

Regardless of Xiang's rage, the fact of the matter was that his sword wasn't good enough. Kat ended up handing over her second fan temporarily so he might help out. Kat had taken to using just the one with two hands. It was more efficient then only paying half her attention to both hands. Sadly... Xiang wasn't really strong enough even with a better weapon. Kat's fans weren't really meant for this kind of prolonged slicing. They were made up of multiple individual pieces of metal that folded and unfolded. The edges were sharp yes, but it wasn't one continuous edge.

Xiang found himself... rather useless in the long term. It took him an age of sawing away at the muscle to make any progress at all and really only kept up with the work because he didn't want to be the 'only' person not working. Kat wasn't quite sure what to make of that statement when he said it. On the one hand, she was quite glad they didn't force Lily to help. She wasn't strong enough for this type of work and likely wouldn't be able to help... but on the other hand... it seemed like in Xiang's frustration he'd overlooked Lily completely and Kat really wasn't sure how to feel about that part.

The spine wasn't an issue. Kat wasn't sure if it would be or not, but it turned out that the ligaments that held the thing together weren't really up to standard. A swift cut was all that Kat needed to separate the two pieces of spine she was working with. It was the final task before the snake's head was separated



from the rest of it. Kat let out a long breath of air as she stretched to work out the non-existent kinks in her body. Sure she didn't really have any, but her mind told her she SHOULD and stretching felt nice so really who was to complain.

It was very late in the afternoon at this point. The sun was most of the way down and Kat couldn't help but sigh. "I guess we're camping here for the night?"

Xiang scowled at the question but nodded. "Yes... if the snake can provide us with a... nice enough place to rest. Not cold like the ice and not as likely to give us splinters like the trees,"

"You got splinters from that? I thought you were tougher!" sneered Yang.

Xiang glared her down. "No of course not, but the risk is there and I don't exactly enjoy having bits of wood sticking into me," Xiang bit down on the 'unlike the one that seemed to be stuck up your ass' he wanted to add.