

DEMONS 871

Chapter 871 The Taste of Success.

Kat twisted away as she heard the sound of a wild animal attacking nearby. When the sound continued, Kat opened her eyes and glanced down at the source of the sound. Lily's stomach. Kat frowned at that.

Hmm... guess we need to get some food for you off the cultivators. Unless you want to try giant snake? Lily mewed and put her paws over her face in embarrassment.

[Ugh. I can't believe that happened. It was bad enough I woke up before you... but to know that's what woke you up... I'll never live this down...] complained Lily mentally. Kat just laughed softly and gave Lily a few quick scratches. Nothing too much, she didn't want Lily to turn into goo just yet. They were having a serious conversation after all. Kat checked the sky with a quick glance and found moon was in the process of setting and the sun would be up soon. Not quite yet though, apparently.

Hmm. Well, I'm a little more serious about the snake thing now I'm thinking about it. I'm just not sure what the chance the meat is poisonous is... I mean... this whole place is full of poison... but at the same time it's so large it probably doesn't need to be poisonous. Then again... I'm not sure if it has any venom either. Xiang seemed to assume it would... but there's no proof of venom sacks.

[Well, you could check the teeth for holes in them if you really wanted to know. That being said... hmm... how safe do you think the meat is? In Memphis form I'm really not put off by the idea of eating raw meat... so if it's safe to have... well... free food. Fresh too. Probably. We did leave it all day... and overnight... hmm... this is sounding like a bad idea the more I think of it.]

Do you know if you have the same demonic energy furnace I have for food? If you do there's no way the poison would survive that... just not sure if it's built into Memphis. Hmm... I'm leaning towards yes though. Nira said you could eat whatever you want... just not sure if 'giant maybe poisonous snake' counts as 'anything'.

[Depends how often she works with Gluttony demons I'd guess. Anything for them and anything for a normal ergh... normal sentient? Normal sentient, I guess. It's quite different. I suppose... it might be worth testing out. Let me smell it first?]

Kat shrugged and got up from her position on the snakes back. It's spine was wide enough for a person to lay down flat with a tiny bit of wiggle room. Kat was just glad she didn't move much in her sleep. Though she was doubly glad that despite the fact Lily did move in her sleep, Kat herself worked as a sufficiently large 'bed' to move around on.

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Kat hopped down into the water and looked at the cut they'd made between the snake's head and the rest of it. Kat glanced down at Lily who looked back up. After a few moments of silent conversation Kat moved Lily right up to the meat and let the time pass. [Nope. I can't smell anything other than this shitty water. Can you slice off a bit for me?]

Nodding Kat moved Lily to the top of her head and pulled out her fans. A little bit of sawing later and Kat had a... well it was a small piece relative to both herself and the snake... but it was about the size of Lily's face. *Do you want me to cut this up more?*

[No don't worry about it.] Kat nodded at that and moved the piece up to Lily who took a careful lick before purring and chomping down on the rest. Kat let the meat be pulled from her fingers and listened to it quickly being devoured. [Yeah this is really good. Doesn't taste poisoned. It's actually a lot better than I'd think snake would be. I dunno if it has anything to do with how powerful it was... but this is really nice. Maybe try some?]

I really don't think I want raw meat Lily... despite her mental protest Kat got to work slicing off another piece for herself. Kat took a careful bite before spitting it out. Nope. Nope nope nope. I will have my meat cooked from now on thank you very much. I might be capable of eating it due to my demonic metabolism but it does NOT taste anything close to good.

[Oh well. More for me I guess.]

Lily. It's a GIANT FUCKING SNAKE. The thing is the size of a train carriages and all. This thing could feed you... heck probably for a year or more. It's more likely to rot before you'd eat it all. What is the 'more for me' nonsense?

Lily mentally shrugged. [It just seemed like the thing to say.]

Right... well... sorry for snapping at you. I'm just a bit tired of this swamp, and all the arguing. Honestly I'm a bit on edge. The fact that the poison might be affecting you isn't helping either. Now, do you want me to cut off some more for you to eat?

[Hmm... not now. That one piece was quite filling. Maybe if we aren't putting the head in one of those storage rings we'll ask if Xiang would mind putting in some of this meat for me. It's much better than the garbage you guys have to eat.]

Sure thing... hmm... Lily I have... it's probably a bad idea... but... well... I'm going to try it. Kat sliced off another piece of meat, having thrown away the previous slice, and set her hand on fire. After the meat was sufficiently frozen Kat tried to take a bit out of it. Her ingenuity was not rewarded. Kat spat the meat into the water a second time and threw the rest away. *It was a bad idea Lily. Remind me not to experiment. I'm clearly bad at coming up with ideas.*

[Kat it was one bad idea. Plus, your fire very clearly freezes things. If you want to try making food with it, perhaps try ice cream? Another option could be chocolate maybe? Melt it and then use demonic fire to form it into something nice? Yoghurt as well perhaps? Though I don't have the slightest clue how to make that.]

Kat gave a shrug and the pair separated to try and practice more with their abilities. Lily was still trying to summon some paper, even just temporary mana constructs. The smell however, made it very hard to concentrate. What she didn't know, was that the strong concentration of poison energy was also hampering her progress. Still, she was giving it her best try. Kat on the other hand was practicing more with her demonic fire sculpting.

It wasn't really all that useful for combat, but Kat found it helped her calm down. She was trying to make a little ice Lily. Not the plant, the girlfriend. Though, after spending 30 minutes on her project... Kat was starting to realise she'd chosen something a bit too complex for a starting project. Probably should've started with the flower. With a slight nudge, Kat let the ice sculpture fall into the water, and pretend not

to feel a slight pang of sadness despite it looking, at best, like a blob with icicles for legs and thump prints for eyes.

Yang was the next to wake, and Kat could already tell that they'd need to get a move on today. Yang groaned as she sat up, looked around and then flopped back down. Sunlight still seemed to converge on her position, but it was sluggish, and almost looked dim. Yang was in no state to be cultivating but she also NEEDED to. Even if it wasn't to improve her foundation, just to help clear out some of the poison. It was building up further and Yang was struggling to keep her thoughts in their necessary configuration for cultivation.

When Xiang got up, he seemed better at first. He stood up and made his way to the snakes head for some flatter ground and started to run through some sword katas. It all looked fine for a bit until Xiang's hands started to shake even when going through the easier positions. Xiang had proved, again and again that he was capable of lifting his sword without much effort. So to see him struggle, and shake as he tried carefully to complete his exercises... well it wasn't a pleasant thing to witness.

At this point Kat had finished her ice sculpture and flew up to her girlfriend, "Here, a lily for my Lily," said Kat with a smile she was somewhat forcing. The issues with Xiang and Yang were starting to worry her. Or more accurately, the chance the same poison would catch up to Lily.

Lily actually swapped back to her human form to grab the ice lily and put it in her hair by winding a few strands around it to hold it in place. Probably not the best way to do it, but it worked. Kat got a quick kiss on her cheeks for her efforts.

Chapter 872 A Balanced Decision

"Hey Xiang," called Kat, trying to get the cultivators attention now he was sitting down instead of trying to practice. Xiang turned to look over at Kat, and seeing she had his attention, "I was wondering if it'd be fine to grab a chunk of snake meat to store for Lily to eat? I'm not sure how long it'd keep but for her at least it's much better then the supplies we've been using,"

Xiang nodded, "Sure that's actually a great idea. Spirit beasts don't rot all that fast, and at Rank 3 we'll be able to store it even in non-ideal conditions for a few weeks before it becomes a problem... honestly the bigger issue is cooking it..."

Kat nodded and asked, "So... if you don't mind my asking... how do those rings work? Like... how much can we fit in them? Like the snake head? Is that something I'm carrying or you're storing? How fresh does food stay in them? Is it limited by weight or the size of things?"

Xiang took in Kat's question and let out a long puff of air, "Ok... that's a bit to work through but..." Xiang glanced over at Yang who was still cultivating by the looks of things, "we seem to have time. I'll start with the first question because it's the easiest. From a certain perspective. I don't know. I never study storage ring creation, it's a field that a lot of cultivators who want safety and money go into. Everyone wants a storage ring, and nobody wants to piss of the guild that makes them. Still, it's a balance. The guild doesn't interfere much..."

"They mostly just keep themselves and their interests safe. They also sell to whoever asks as long as you have the money. I've heard it's not a closely guarded secret... but the guild can make them quite cheaply, by the hundreds of thousands depending on the space inside, and it's very safe for crafters.

Anyway... what these rings do... is they open a small whole in the space between worlds and then designate a 'safe' area for your items.

"Now, this leads us onto how long food lasts. The space in between dimensions doesn't really have temperature as a concept, but things still like to equalise. So... whatever your storing tends to either heat up or cool down to about... 15 degrees Celsius. Nobody really knows why that temperature.

"The problem with storing food, at least in the lower quality rings without any fancier features, is that when you store something you also get all the air around it. So while the pocket dimension itself might not have air or whatever causes food to rot, the food you put in their did. Still, it does slow things down a bit compared to just leaving it in the open. It's a lot closer to a carefully wrapped wax package compared to a cupboard.

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"Um... next question was... 'how much can you fit in them' and really the answer is 'how much do you want to spend?' the ring I have is mostly for supplies and a bit of treasure without much room for anything else. Mine was passed down to me... and I don't know that I was ever told exactly how much it can fit... it's more of a feeling when I activate the ring. If it was new I'd know, but mine currently isn't.

"Um... following on from that. It's a bit of both, size and weight. It's more size than weight so folding up camping supplies really saves on space. Weight does still play a bit of a role... however unless you're specifically collecting the heaviest things you can find you'll never have a problem. It's something like... 100kg per 1cm² I think. Which is way more than you'd use if you're not going out of your way.

"Now... as for the snake head... I think it's a bit too large to fit into my ring. Yang's might be large enough... but she'd have to take everything out and even then it'd be close... I'm not sure I'd be able to fit everything she has in her ring anyway... can you try lifting it first? If it's something you can lift it might be best just to carry it,"

I really doubt that but sure I can try. Kat bent over and tried to lift the snake, simply by bending down and grabbing it from the bottom. Kat heaved it up most of the way, arms outstretched and snake resting in front of her. Kat felt her feet leaving the ground and before she could correct herself she found the snake head crashing down into the water as she hung sideways from her arms. "Woops. Just um... give me one more attempt..." said Kat.

I wonder if whatever magic I normally use to help lift heavy things doesn't work on spirit beasts? Or if I'm heavy then I look and it's just now got the best of me? Maybe I have a weight limit? I mean... I can definitely lift it... it's just a question of how easily I can walk with it and if I can get it into a good spot. Because apparently leverage is still a problem. Best lift this properly then. I've been very lazy about it since my strength got better... maybe it'll help.

Kat shifted her stance and dug her feet into the mud properly to hopefully anchor herself a bit more. She bent her knees and reached out for the snake, pulling it in close and lifting it up. Kat could feel herself starting to pitch forward again so she leaned right back and slammed her tail into the mud to try and help get more leverage. With a heave she shifted it the snake from the awkward place it was stuck on top of her chest all the way above her head, before quickly shifting her hands until she was roughly in

the centre of mass. She could feel herself sinking deeper into the mud as she held it, and her arms starting to shake.

Pumping more demonic energy into them Kat felt her arms stabilize and she tried to take a step forward, the head started to drag her forward before she got the rest of her body caught up and Kat frowned. *Hmm... I can lift it... and I can move it... but it'll be hard to run with. Probably. Would it be easier at speed? Possibly... but I'm also not sure that it matters.* "Give me a sec," said Kat as she started to try and jog around in a circle to get a feel for the thing.

It was nearly impossible. Her tail was nowhere near enough to provide the proper balance it normally would. The ground was unstable and muddy, meaning she had to constantly watch her centre of mass and account for the fact she was sinking pretty far into it now. Still, step by step, lap by lap, Kat was getting the hang of things. It was fairly finicky work and took a great deal of shifting her hands around to keep it all working... but it was possible. Sure things wobbled a good deal, but it was working. The only issue was that Kat knew she was even slower than the fully loaded ice block. With everyone added on as additional weight... well... Kat wasn't sure what her top speed would be.

Kat let out a long breath and hefted the snake head back down to the ground and shook her head to clear it. She wandered back over to Xiang and gave a basic rundown, 'possible but not the best' and Xiang frowned at the news. Not anything unexpected mind, he'd watched Kat's attempts at balancing the thing.

"Hmmm... I don't know that we want to be stuck here in the swamp any longer than needed... but at the same time," Xiang glanced at Yang who was sitting up now, "I want to try and get Yang to empty her storage ring out even less... so... let's not start another argument. Can you do it?"

Kat licked her lips, running her tongue along her teeth as she thought through the question. *Probably. I mean, I'm certainly capable of it and if this was the biggest predator we should be fine. I can't pull off the 'throw them away like a discus' trick a second time if we're using something as heavy as the snake... so things might get a bit more deadly... at the same time... It's manageable. Then again... letting everyone stay on top of the snake probably isn't safe. I'll be waving it around too much to keep balanced... hmm...*

Kat's eyes got a slightly evil glint in them as she nodded and said, "I can manage. It won't be ideal, but it's certainly possible. Only thing to be aware of is that I'll need you to sit in the snake's mouth so I don't drop you if I step oddly and need to rebalance,"

Xiang winced but nodded, "I guess I'll go let Yang know..."

Chapter 873 Leaving the Swamp Behind

Kat ran. Kat ran until the night had long since fallen, but on the insistence of the cultivators she didn't stop until they reached the edge of the swamp. Though, let's back up a bit. Yang wasn't pleased with the new mode of transportation and made this very clear. A good deal of yelling, even as she entered into the snake's mouth from the open neck she continued to complain.

While she was doing this, Xiang had already stepped in and was starting to work out a little trick that would turn this ride from horrendous, into comfortable, much more so than the ice and it turned out to be good enough for him to get some sleep. See, Xiang realised that by sliding his legs under the tongue

and pressing himself into the walls he would move with the snake head and limit the amount of bouncing around Yang was experiencing. Every step, most of the movement Xiang might have felt was absorbed either by the walls of the snake's mouth or its tongue.

Yang however stubbornly insisted against Xiang's rather brilliant idea for quite some time. Where Xiang and Lily were able to relax and go with the motions, Yang was constantly thrown about. Kat needed to tilt the snake head around quite a bit, and only the fact that Kat rarely needed to tilt it backwards alongside the fact the mouth was closed prevented Yang from falling off. She was slammed into the walls, floor, teeth, Xiang once or twice. Really, the only thing that finally convinced Yang she was being stubborn was a particularly sharp series of jerks that, had her reflexes been worse, would have resulted in her impalement on the snakes teeth. Yang sat under the tongue after that, though she took it even further, using it more like a blanket.

Xiang didn't have that option because Lily was not keen to be smothered by the entire tongue so he had to put up with just sitting for the rest of the journey. Still, based on the fact they were all able to sleep it clearly wasn't too bad for them. For Kat... well for Kat it was a different story.

For Kat the run was much harder and she was required to take quite a few breaks. Sinking into the mud an extra few centimetres made it exponentially more difficult to run. It meant she was deeper in the water as well which didn't help things either. The fact that the head wasn't completely symmetrical and that her footing couldn't be guaranteed Kat was constantly having to use her entire body to keep from falling over. Where normally her tail would be used to keep her steady at speed, now Kat had to use everything. She was certain that if she didn't have regeneration her muscles would have been burning, especially the ones she never usually used.

Kat took frequent breaks as well. Never letting her energy drop below thirty percent again. Sure perhaps it was playing things a little too safe, but after Kat worked out a good system for dropping and raising the snake head by sort of letting it dig sideways into the mud with careful positioning... well it only took her a few minutes of rest to get all her demonic energy back.

Despite that though, Kat found she was feeling tired. Mentally speaking the day had been a challenge. The constant need to keep from falling over, on top of her constant watch for other marine predators. Speaking of those... Kat was annoyed to find that lugging around the giant snake head didn't reduce the number of encounters, but increased them. Kat wasn't sure why that was, perhaps they could smell the thing was dead, or they thought it was a younger one that needed to be killed before it grew.

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Whatever the case, Kat needed to freeze a whole bunch of the weird croc-fish things, a few other more normal looking fish that might have been piranhas, a few oversized bugs and a half dead monkey that might have just wanted a lift out of the swamp. To keep herself entertained, Kat practiced shooting fire from her eyeballs like lasers. It felt much weirder than using her other body parts and wasn't something she'd be doing in combat without a good deal of thought... but it was kinda funny. To literally burn things to death by glaring at them.

Kat was quite thankful that as the sun set the attacks got less frequent. Even as the world darkened, Kat continued running. There was a short argument about it, but the whole 'deadly poison we don't want anything to do with' was a really good argument. Yang was luckily asleep for it, and Lily stayed out of it

for the most part. So Kat and Xiang argued for a little bit during one of Kat's later breaks about stopping completely. Normally, Kat would say she didn't mind. She didn't need as much sleep as everyone else...

But at the same time everyone else had been able to rest for basically the entire day. She didn't want to hold it against them but as it got later and later, Kat could actually start to feel a little bit of pain in her limbs. Part of her mind was pretty sure that it was all in her head. That her regeneration made it so she wouldn't get muscle fatigue. The rest... the rest was too tired to think about it properly. Regardless of the truth though, Kat was still running, but how long she could continue with that was unclear. She'd had her hands above her head for well over twelve hours at this point with only small breaks to offset that.

When Kat finally found the edge of the swamp, she hardly believe her eyes. It was hard, flat ground. Away from the poison, and it even had a few trees that looked like they could withstand a decent storm instead of the brittle rejects inhabiting the swamp. Kat couldn't really help it as she set the snake head down hard, practically throwing it off to the side and collapsing into the dirt. The water streaked off her legs and into the dirt muddying it a bit, but she was too tired to care.

Xiang stumbled out of the snake, took a look around before kicking the ground a few times just to make sure it was all real. He took in a deep breath, hoping for clean air for the first time in days... and was sorely disappointed. He was still much too close to the poisonous cesspool Kat had barely stumbled out of and it wasn't any more pleasant than the inside of the snake.

Actually... Xiang paused at that thought, before sniffing himself, wincing and then wandering back inside and sniffing the snake before nodding like he'd just understood something particularly obtuse and settling back in against the wall of the snake, using it as a soft and warm bed. Sure it was a bit wet, but he'd been soaked through by snake juices for the whole day while resting. It wasn't so hard to do it again.

Lily had a different plan. When Xiang turned back in to the snake she hopped from his arms and wondered over to Kat. Lily cheekily gave Kat's cheek a few pokes with a claw to no physical reaction. Though her heart warmed at the burst of joy Kat experienced just from knowing Lily was in close proximity. Really, there was no other choice. Lily hopped up on Kat's back and curled up into a little ball, deciding that regardless of anything else, it was a good end to the day when she was able to sleep with Kat.

Yang couldn't be bothered getting up at all. Unlike Xiang, she fought against Xiang's great idea for quite some time... and then couldn't manage to fall asleep afterwards. Her eyes were bloodshot and she was starving. Honestly, Yang was a few moments away from tacking a bite out of the inside of the snake. The only thing that stopped her was the fact that she was too tired to bother with chewing it. Had she been a bit more awake, Yang would have done something stupid. Not a surprise perhaps, but Yang would be very thankful in the morning when she woke up that her tired mind simply gave up on the idea.

So there everyone was. Exhausted, hungry, and very much sick of the swamp full of poison. There would likely be new problems tomorrow, like where they might want to take the snake head, or how fast they wanted to travel, as it was not yet proven if Kat could run at the same speed as the cultivators while carrying the head. Who were they going to sell it to? Assuming they did want to sell it, could they hand it

over before it started to rot? These were all questions for tomorrow though. For now, they'd survived the swamp. Let's just hope the poison wouldn't cause too many problems going forward.

Chapter 874 Like a Deadly Pimple

Kat groaned and spat out the dirt that had accumulated in her mouth over the night. *Ugh gross. I guess I should have taken the time not to just flop face down in the dirt... and I guess that as nice as it is that nothing really sticks to my skin... apparently swallowing dirt has nothing to do with that. Who would have thought?*

Kat mentally grumbled as she got ready to sit up only to notice the slight shifting of something on her back. *Oh right Lily. Well... guess I'm just stuck here then...*

Kat then proceeded to think about that statement for an extra five minutes and realised all the ridiculous things Lily had managed to sleep through, the times Kat had struggled to wake Lily for something important. Never mind I'm being an idiot. Kat reached up with her tail and pressed it gently against Lily back. Kat then carefully flipped herself over, making sure to push Lily along with her tail as she did so until Kat was about halfway flipped over. Then she made a grab for Lily and flopped onto her back. Then immediately regretted her choices.

Kat could feel her wings resting uncomfortably against the hard dirt that didn't want to yield without a sufficient application of force. So now instead of having her breasts crushed and dirt in her mouth, she had her wings digging into her back and her tail, apparently mostly muscle, keeping a good deal of her lower half off the ground. *I'm really not sure this was an improvement at all. I wish I'd bothered to lean against the snake or something. Hmm...*

Kat glanced around and noticed that it was actually past morning. She wasn't using her night vision at all, it was just straight up day time... and despite that Kat was still the only one awake. So she sat up carefully and made her way to the snake head before leaning against it and starting to relax. Sure her wings were still digging into her back a bit, but this was much more comfortable and the snake had a little bit of give. Probably to help absorb shocks when it was alive.

Kat watched as the sun continued to make its way across the sky for about an hour, before checking to see and confirming that everyone was still asleep. With that confirmation Kat sunk into meditation. It was something she'd been neglecting in favour of getting real sleep more recently. It was good for keeping at least some awareness of the outside world and might also be helpful for combat and controlling her demonic energy. Whatever the case, she'd slept enough already so it was something to do.

Yang was the next to wake up, and Kat opened her eyes as she heard Yang stumble out of the snake head, looked up at the sun and hiss before running back inside. That could not be good news. *Did... did Yang of all people just run from the sun? Should... should I go deal with whatever that was? Hmm... I'm going to go with no.* Kat closed her eyes again. She didn't know anything about poison, or anything about this world. So really, she was just making sure that she wasn't wasting anyone's time.

More time passed and it was actually Lily who woke up next, only to find out that Kat was meditating, Xiang was asleep and Yang was either asleep or hiding from the sun. Part of her wanted to continue practicing... but after her previous attempts in the swamp she wasn't overly keen to keep trying to attempt her first spell when so close to the swamp. Perhaps when she could no longer smell it. [Hmm...

Xiang and Yang might carry the stench for days or weeks though... so maybe just limit it to smelling the main body of the gunk.]

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Regardless, Lily went back to sleep and because she didn't really move, or send any loud thoughts towards Kat, it didn't interrupt the demon's meditation at all. This just meant that time continued to pass until about lunch time when Xiang shot up and stumbled away from everyone. Xiang pulled out his sword and gave it a few swings before cursing his shaking hands and sitting himself down next to Kat. He wasn't too close, just barely in touching distance if they both stretched out their arms.

Good thing too, because when Xiang pulled up his knees, Kat saw dark purple lines on his legs. She could make them out in the gaps between his clothes. "Hey Xiang... um... you alright?" asked Kat.

"Not really, I feel like shit, my hands can't stop shaking and I can barely lift my weapon like a chump. I tried to do a bit of cultivation but the stabbing pain I felt through my dantain told me it might not be the best idea. I think... I think if push comes to shove I could ignore all of that and fight... but I'm not sure I'd be in a good way even if I won afterwards... so... no I'm not alright," said Xiang with a fair deal of exasperation.

"Right... um... I don't want to alarm you but the reason I asked... is... well... your legs seem to have purple lines under the skin and I'm a bit concerned," said Kat haltingly.

Xiang's eyes went wide and he nearly ripped his clothes in an effort to reveal his legs as quickly as possible. There, he could see the purple lines Kat was talking about. They started about a hand and a half down from his knees. There was a thick purple line there, and below it looked like some purple liquid had dripped down afterwards, leaving trails of purple something that ended in thicker drops that seemed to have a fair bit of swelling around them.

Xiang carefully poked one with a finger, trying to see if it hurt at all... but it instantly popped spraying purple gunk all over his finger and stinging as the 'fresh' layers of skin were exposed to the end. Xiang quickly pushed his finger through the dirt in an effort to remove the gunk... except when he pulled up a completely dry finger he found the end of it had been stained purple. A lighter purple, but it certainly was not a healthy look. "FUCK!"

Yang poked her head out of the back of the snake, at this exclamation, "WHAT?!" she yelled. Xiang glared at her and made some very emphatic gestures to the freshly dripping purple gunk on his leg and the purple lines in general. On both legs. Yang instantly checks her own legs for something similar and winces as she spots her own series of purple lines, much like Xiang. "Fuck."

Oh great... Kat quickly poked Lily's cheeks to get a reaction. She got one. Sadly, or perhaps not, that reaction was a deep purr. Apparently Lily was enjoying the attention. Kat sighed and shook Lily somewhat violently until the cat woke up.

[What?]

"Lily I need you to transform so that I can check your feet properly, Xiang and Yang are definitely poisoned now and I want to make sure you're fine," said Kat.

Lily hopped off Kat and transformed then showed off her perfectly pristine leg. Not a mark on it. "Looks like I'm fine... but I wasn't the one wading through the poison. Nor was I the one that surely got it in my wounds after I got stabbed with scales, so what about you?" said Lily pointedly.

Kat sighed and pulled her kimono up revealing a similar set of perfectly fine legs. Lily nodded at this, clearly expecting it and then sat down, flattening herself against Kat as she turned to Xiang and Yang who were not having fun. "So what do we do?"

Xiang quickly pulled the map out of storage and looked over it. It didn't take long for him to voice his thoughts, "Ok... there's a small village... really more of trading post I think... it's... hmm... I want to safe half a day's travel... but with the poison... hng... might be closer to a full day unless Kat can run us there quickly in the snake head... but... hmm... not sure that's safe either... it probably swallows a good deal of poison... and it's spit might not be healthy for us either... hmm... and I don't know I want to drape the tongue over me again. The jolting around might pop more of these poison bubbles spreading it further... hng..."

"At the same time though..." Xiang looked to Yang for a brief moment before continuing, "I'm not entirely sure that outpost will have any healers, or knowledge to deal with things... and it's a bit out of the way. If we kept running... there's another much larger town about two or three days away at our normal pace. It'd certainly have a healer... but... hmm... the outpost is here just to rest after leaving the swamp... not sure where would be best to go..."

Chapter 875: Spreading Poison and Stubborn Will

"I think we should go to the nearby outpost first," said Yang, her voice shaking slightly. "Even if they can't help... if they can at least identify what's wrong with us... I think that sort of information is invaluable... oh I wish Xuena was here... she'd know exactly how to fix us..."

Xiang nodded, "I'm fine with that. It really isn't too far out of the way even in the worst case. Kat is that good with you? Er... you two?" Xiang corrected his wording when he saw Kat raise a pointed eyebrow and tilt her head slightly further towards Lily.

Kat nodded of course. This seemed to be quite serious and if the cultivators thought the best place to get themselves looked at was the nearest settlement, Kat was willing to go along with it. Lily was in agreement as well, though for her, it was partially an interesting in seeing what the diagnosis would be. Lily assumed that if there was a doctor or just a knowledgeable local at the way station, then she would be able to listen in. Her magic wasn't really working out just yet, perhaps taking in medical information would be a good way to assist.

With everyone on the same page, Xiang put away the map and brought out some food for everyone. Lily was the only one who didn't have rations, even Kat partook in some, feeling slightly hungry for perhaps the first time since her transformation. Apparently intense combat combined with days fighting off poison was enough for even Kat to start to feel some semblance of hunger. Lily enjoyed her strips of snake meat immensely. Still quite pleased with the taste despite the time that had passed. Everyone else... well... it wasn't a good meal.

Kat had the best reaction. Simply eating the biscuits and jerky without complaint. It wasn't a great meal, but Kat didn't have any issues with it either. The cultivators though... they were not so lucky. Whether it

was the side effects from the poison, or just the fact they were unwell and could still smell the swamp, Xiang and Yang found it quite hard to keep the food down. Xiang was retching for about half a minute after every bite, but managed to keep it all down. Yang didn't even manage that. The biscuits seemed to get stuck in her throat and she was forced to cough them up. If not for the jerky, Yang would have needed to go without food.

After the disastrous lunch for half the party, everyone wanted to just get away. The saying 'My kingdom for a sandwich' seemed remarkably apt for the sick half of the group. So everyone got ready to move. Lily insisted on staying with Kat and ended up squished into Kat's boobs with some help of Kat's sash. Kat was pleasantly surprised to find she could summon a second copy after a bit of effort. It took a chunk of her demonic energy, but it WORKED. Which though surprising was quite welcome.

Xiang and Yang on the other hand wanted to run. They were sick of being dead weight for Kat to lug around. 'Efficiency' or 'safety' or perhaps 'understandable in this situation' were not ideas compatible with the cultivator mindset. Not dying from poison was one thing, but their pride wouldn't allow Kat to carry them across a bit of standard road as long as they could stand in some manner.

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So off they trot. Before long though Kat had to move off to the side of the road. Apparently whatever demonic tricks help reduce the impact of her strength doesn't work properly when she's carrying perhaps a tonne of snake head. This meant that every step of Kat's caused a small crater in the ground, cracking the dry dirt. Later, the more normal dirt would simply be compacted but the results were clear. With Kat unwilling to damage the road, she moved off after not even five minutes.

The rest of the journey continued with Kat finding nothing wrong with how Lily was being 'carried' Lily enjoying the situation immensely, though it was really dawning on her just how much her lust and sexual thoughts seemed to dim in her Memphis form. Probably didn't have the right hormones for it. On the other side of things, Xiang and Yang were not having a good time at all.

The sun seemed to have doubled in strength, and despite Yang's affinity for solar energy and her cultivation technique revolving around it on top of that... Yang was actually worse off. For the first time since her childhood the sun seemed like something other than a wonderful source of light and power. It beat down on her like an oven, making her feel like she was being cooked from the inside, instead of the usual energising light that felt like downing an energy drink. The contrast what elevated the irritation for Yang. Even if, in truth, her cultivation gave her some extra protection unlike Xiang... she just wasn't used to the idea.

So she was the one who collapsed first, after only forty-five minutes of running. Perhaps this might not seem too strange for the average human, but Yang was a cultivator, the idea she couldn't handle a bit of running was ridiculous. Xiang wasn't doing too much better, but with a bit more experience dealing with hot sun he knew to keep drinking water as he ran and was able to stubbornly remain on his feet.

Kat stopped with only a slight issue. Momentum was a much bigger problem when you had a snake head to carry after all. Kat had to slow down carefully and do a slow loop to make sure she didn't end up too far away. Kat felt it was slightly lucky she wasn't running at full speed at the moment. She was limited by the two cultivators so testing just how much speed she could get while on solid ground would have to wait... or perhaps...? "Xiang? Is she alright?" asked Kat.

Xiang was standing next to Yang where she'd collapsed. Yang had been moving at speed so when she felt, she'd rolled a few times before stopping face up on the road. Yang was sweating profusely and her eyes were open but unseeing. Instead of being bloodshot, it was more accurate to say they were poisonshot. Her eyes carried thin lines of purple and Kat couldn't help but bite her lips. When Xiang saw the same thing he whipped his head around to Kat, "What do my eyes look like?" he asked as he pulled down his eyelid.

Kat was no eye doctor, so she couldn't really say much. Despite that, it was quite easy to see the same thin purple lines, though they were much fainter on Xiang. "You've got them as well... though... maybe about a third of the thickness and paler by a good deal," said Kat.

Xiang muttered a few curses under his breath, "Eternal hells. That can't be good. I do not want to think about what this might be doing to our eyes... hopefully it's mostly cosmetic..." Xiang didn't believe it, and neither did Kat. Lily mewled softly hoping it would provide some comfort. Xiang just sighed and jumped up into the snake head dropping Yang off under the tongue before jumping down.

"Um..." Kat said, pausing to think carefully about her next words. She'd already seen how stubborn the pair could be. "Is it really a good idea to leave Yang there by herself? Maybe you should watch her?" Now, what Kat really meant was 'why the fuck aren't you resting as well Yang just passed out!' but Kat was sure that phrasing it in that way would just have Xiang brushing her off.

To her credit, Xiang stopped and thought about the idea for a while. She could see him turning it over in his head a few times. The easy out, the chance for rest. The perfect excuse for simply riding the rest of the way with Kat. It was all there. He bit his lip as his pride warred against his desire for rest. Kat's heart dropped as she saw him shake his head. "No thank you. We know that the tongue will prevent Yang from moving much. She'll be safe up there without me,"

Kat tried not to let the disappointment show as she asked for confirmation in an attempt to tip the scales, "Are you sure? While the motion might not be an issue if the inside of the mouth is poisonous it might cause more issues for Yang. Perhaps watching to make sure she doesn't get worse would be good?"

Kat wasn't the least bit surprised when Xiang shook his head again, "I don't know anything about medicine. She'll be no better off with my watching. Even if she turned purple," a brief flash of Sue went through Kat's mind and she tried not to let the amusing image of a purple Yang staring confused at a very purple Sue tempt her into laughing at Xiang. "I wouldn't be able to do anything. I'm better off here on the ground,"

Kat sighed and nodded. It was time to get back to running. At least with mostly solid footing she didn't need to be hyperattentive anymore.

Chapter 876: The Lonely Outpost and the Fat Merchant

The further they got from the swamp the faster life seemed to come back to the land. Grass starting to show up in patches and then in a great big carpet. Trees went from brittle, sickly looking things to short but wide trees with branches reaching far and wide to collect as much sun as possible. Sure it was no great forest, but things looked healthy. Much healthier than Xiang at any rate.

Yang woke up after about an hour of rest, but the only reason Kat knew that was because she heard the sharp gasp of Yang upon returning to the world of the waking. Yang made no move to reveal herself or leave the snake head. Apparently while stubbornly trudging on was fine, once you'd fallen already you were fine to keep quiet and rest. Kat just wished Xiang would either collapse or just accept a bit of help already.

As the day wore on, Xiang's condition worsened. His speed dropped steadily over time, and Kat wasn't even sure he noticed. He also started to sway, left and right, left and right. Kat had to stop him running into a tree once and a bush twice. Her continued glares and subtle suggestions for breaks were completely ignored by Xiang. Kat huffed and wanted to mutter, 'boys' under her breath but apparently it was 'cultivators' instead. "Fuckin morons..." whispered Kat.

When the sun set, Kat made a few not so subtle suggestions that perhaps it was a good idea to set up somewhere and rest. Xiang of course, was in no mood for this suggestion and claimed he would not stop until they reached the outpost. Kat just sighed and kept walking, knowing that unless she wanted to fight him, there was no other way to go about this.

Luckily, as without the sun Xiang seemed to spring back to life. He wasn't in the best condition, still swaying slightly and nowhere near top speed... but he stopped sweating like he was being slow roasted and his breathing became a lot more steady. Still, his eyes had more purple in them, and a few of the poison drops had popped where they rubbed against things, his other leg, his boots, that one bush. Kat really wasn't sure if that was good or not. Sure less poison was inside Xiang, or at least less under his skin... but now there was a good deal more on top of it.

Eventually, sometimes around 11pm, Kat was able to see a few lights. There was a single light on the top of a lookout, another bunch of lights attached to a caravan, and a final squat brick building with a few lights on the front. They were still a ways off, but Kat could make them out quite easily considering the dearth of other lights in the vicinity. Kat once again, subtly nudged Xiang about resting, this time with the excuse they might get there fast. Xiang looked so very tempted... but he kept running.

Really he was lucky, if Yang had still been awake, she would have jumped out of the snake, bashed him over the head with her club and then dragged them both back up to the snake head. But she wasn't awake, and none of that happened of course. It ended up taking them a further 4 hours of travel to reach the outpost.

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And that's all it was, a small outpost. There was a large amount of fenced off area nearby, it was just weak fencing, a couple of posts tied together with a long rope with a few bells attached to it. It was more of an early warning signal than a deterrent. Currently there was only one merchant caravan. It was made up of three wagons a few horses and who knew how many people. There were four tents, so at least four people, but perhaps more.

The squat building was more interesting, but the lights were only on the outside, Kat doubted the owner was actually awake to talk to them. Based on what she could see through the window it looked like a somewhat cramped bar.

Now the watch tower... well... that looked as good as abandoned. It was small, barely a tower with a roof at the top. The ladder was missing two rungs and the rest looked to be rotted out. There was a gap in the floor and Kat was pretty sure the last time somebody had been up there was when it was being built. Still, it was nice to be here. Kat could finally convince Xiang to rest.

She turned to say as much when she found him face first in the dirt, a single step inside the fence line. Kat sighed and moved the snake head off to the side, before carrying Xiang over and dropping him inside. It wouldn't do for him to be woken by the sun. Kat took a good look around once again before leaning against the outside of the snake, and closed her eyes, falling into meditation. She didn't want to go to sleep. This time, it was pragmatism that called her to meditate.

With other people so close by she wanted to make sure to be on guard. A bit of meditation meant that she'd see the ripples in her mind should anyone actually come close. It gave her both rest, and the ability to watch out for threats. The best of both worlds really and she was quite happy to make use of it. Lily purred softly once Kat sat down, and dug herself deeper into Kat's chest so that only her back and tail could be seen. Kat chuckled at the sight, her heart filled with warmth as she closed her eyes.

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Kat's vigilance was rewarded because shortly after the sun came up she could feel someone approaching them. Kat stopped her meditation and opened her ears. It seemed to be someone walking normally towards them. They were trying to hide their approach. *Hmm... seems we've got a curious customer.* Kat opened her eyes and slowly stood up.

In front of her was a somewhat portly looking man. Not overly so, and Kat wouldn't count him out of a fight despite his large stomach. His arms were equally large but where his stomach looked to be largely fat, his arms were largely muscle and looked like they could snap tree trunks. His robes were purple lined with gold, a little gaudy but he seemed to be able to sell the look. His boots were well worn though, and while his robes were pristine, his boots told Kat he got around.

"Oh, sorry I didn't mean to wake you... I was just coming over to have a look at this remarkable specimen, if you don't mind lass?" said the man with a deep calming voice.

"It's no issue, just know that my companions are... unwell and using the inside of the mouth as a bit of a resting point. It seems they didn't take to the swamp," said Kat.

The man nodded, "Yes yes, nasty business that. If I didn't have the equipment for it because of a somewhat recent business acquisition I wouldn't bother with it myself. Barely worth the risk really. Fast it might be, but deadly as well... was it your party that slew the beast?"

Hmm... do I want to tell him that it was basically just me? No... probably best not to admit that sort of thing. "Yes well... had to use some unconventional tactics... we weren't really looking for a fight with it. We're on a bit of a time crunch and wanted to make our way there as fast as possible. This damned thing attacked us along the way... and well..." Kat finished with a shrug.

The merchant nodded and carefully ran his fingers along the snake's scales. He tapped them a few times before nodding. "Hmm... hopefully this isn't rude of me to ask... but why carry the head around? What happened to the rest of the body?"

Hmm... do I want to tell him there's a lot of money's worth of snake carcass just in the swamp? Yes. Yes I think I do. It's pretty visible from the main 'road' if you're following the sticks. It's not like we can hide it. "We couldn't carry it. No space for it in our dimensional storage so we took what we could and left the rest. It's pretty much on the main road, assuming nothing has eaten it,"

The man's eyes went as wide as dinner plates. "Marvellous... would you mind terribly if I was to... acquire the remainder?"

"No go ahead, assuming it's still there," said Kat.

"Hmm... when did you slay the beast?" asked the merchant.

"Um... let's see... spent yesterday traveling, the day before that getting out of the swamp... and it was killed fairly early in the morning the day before that... so... depending on how you count it 2 or 3 days?" offered Kat.

"Hmmm... hmm... I'll have to think of something to offer you for this information. Even if the carcass isn't intact when I get there... hmm... how big was it would you say?" asked the man.

Kat just shrugged. *I don't know if they know what a train is... hmm... could I measure it in boats? No... no I don't know what the standard boat size is...* "Quite large..." Kat looked over at the caravans, "easily larger than your entire conveyance end to end,"

The man nodded understandingly. "Yes... I'll need to think of something... hmm..."

Chapter 877: Local Guide: Medical Edition

Kat watched as the merchant strode away, and that really was what it was. A stride. She wasn't sure she'd ever seen someone try to show off that much swagger. He was leaned back slightly, arms bent slightly at the side and he took big, clearly Qi-assisted steps as he ate up ground without breaking a sweat. It didn't even take him 10 seconds to cross the whole compound back to his camp. Something no normal human could achieve even at a sprint.

He strode up to one of the tents and slapped the outside, Kat couldn't really see what happened next but she could hear two people arguing. She tried not to listen to the particulars... but by the time the merchant came striding back over, with a clearly uncomfortable man beside him that had to jog to keep up with the merchant's strides.

When the merchant reached Kat, he waited for the other man to catch up before slapping to heavy hands on the other man's shoulders and said, "This here is my local guide. Second time I've hired him, and it was well worth the money. I'm pretty sure he can at least diagnose your friends!"

The guide in question rolled his shoulders to escape the merchant's grip, not that Kat felt he really could have escaped without the merchant allowing it, "And I've been telling you I'm no doctor. I ain't able to give a medical diagnosis. Oh, and the name's Palo,"

The merchant laughed, "Ah, it seems I've been an impolite guess overheard at your campgrounds. I am Otiss, of Otiss Import and Exports. Otiss, the Third in fact, named after my father and great grandfather. Apparently great grandfather wasn't quite willing to start a trend yet... hmm... anyway!"

“Ignore young Palo here. He’s quite knowledgeable about all the things you can find in the swamp and I’m sure despite his lacking medical credentials that if there’s someone who knows more about the swamp than him why... hmm... I’ll eat my hat!” exclaimed Otiss.

Kat bit the inside of her lip and attempted not to comment on the fact Otiss did not in fact wear a hat. Still, she turned her gaze towards Palo and raised a questioning eyebrow. He just shrugged back and looked awkwardly up at the sky. *Well that’s reassuring. Still... I guess I can wake them for this... or maybe...* “Do you want me to wake my companions? Or should I just describe the symptoms?”

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Palo shrugged again, “I guess you can just go over the symptoms first? No need to make a fuss about this whole thing. If it’s as easy to identify as Otiss seems to think... well... I can probably say a few words. I ain’t no doctor though so don’t expect miracle cures!”

Kat nodded and started to explain the systems, the purple lines on their legs, the fact the poison collected into bubble, the sensitivity to sunlight, even for a sun cultivator, Otiss and Palo shared a glance at the fact Kat revealed what kind of cultivator her companions were, not knowing that was terribly impolite. Still, she was going through their medical issues and finished up with the purple lines in the eyes.

Palo nodded after the end of the explanation, “Has to be Bog Rot. Can’t be anything else,”

“I’m sorry but... Bog Rot?” asked Kat confused.

“What you want some fancy name? I ain’t studied disease for twenty years and how to cure them all. I bet with a couple of years, a lot of procrastinating and enough paperwork to drown a man you could get some fancy sounding name like ‘Condensed Poison of the Ancient Swamp’ ignoring the fact the swamp isn’t ancient and it probably didn’t condense so much as congeal... but what do I know, I’m just a guide,” said Palo with steel in his voice.

“Um... sorry I didn’t mean to offend... I was just asking for further clarification...” said Kat carefully. She really wasn’t trying to touch any nerves. Kat really just wanted to know what was wrong with her two... well they weren’t really friends. Clients? Sure let’s go with clients.

Palo just shrugged at Kat’s attempt at a piece offering. Kat’s eyes twitched at that response and the desire to hit him with a blast of calm was strong but she reigned it in. “Right well... so you seriously went into the bog without any idea what bog rot is?” asked Palo. Kat of course nodded, they did in fact do that. “Right well... that means nobody was wearing protection?” Kat shook her head. Palo let out a long sigh filled with suffering. “Idiots,” mumbled Palo.

Kat just raised an eyebrow so he continued, “Look... are you also suffering from those symptoms?”

“Nope I’m fine,” said Kat.

“That shouldn’t be possible...” mumbled Palo.

To stop him from asking questions, Kat summed her fan and made three deep cuts in her arm. He jumped back with a yelp in surprise, so much so that he didn’t really notice her blood was black when

she wiped it away to reveal clean skin. Otiss though he'd glanced away from the snake when Palo yelped, and his eyes light up with understanding as he watched the blood drip onto the ground.

"Right... bullshit regeneration then... ok so... Bog Rot is both one of the easiest and hardest things to deal with in that swamp. Despite the smell, it's purely a contact based poison. If you never touch it, you won't have to deal with it. Now, there is regularly weaker poisons just in the air, but the worst stuff is all contact based. What normal, sane people do, is wear some overalls designed for dealing with liquids. Normally treated leather from some water Qi resistant monster if you really want the good stuff.

"Problem is, you lot, like idiots, walked through it, presumably for a few days. So now you have to deal with the harder part. The recovery. There really isn't anything that can cure it to the best of my knowledge you'll just have to let it run its course. I do recommend popping as many of those poison capsules as you can though and washing away the stuff that comes out. It'll hurt like a bitch... and it might scar something nasty but it's safer by far then just leaving it in there.

"Now... as for the symptoms. So what's going to happen is what's already happened. Loss of appetite, sensitivity to light, shakes, and in a day or two they won't be able to feel their legs. That's fine, nothing to worry about yet. Then... the worst part comes. They'll go blind and their legs will pretty much explode..." Kat winced, "Yeah it's slightly better then it sounds... but honestly it ain't good.

"What will happen is that the poison will burst out from the legs and try to splatter as many other people as it can. It's probably a remnant from when the poison was first made. Lot weaker now, but still pretty deadly. Now, once the poison bursts out of their legs you need to wash them down thoroughly. With salt probably if you have some. Yes, it'll hurt like the fires of hell, but the maker of the poison was a sick fuck like that.

"Then there eyes will start spewing poison. Not as bad, just lay them flat head off the edge and let it all run out. I've heard that it used to blow up your eyes from my dad but it don't anymore. Still hurts pretty bad, but not crippling. Anyone, once those two steps are over you just have to wait. They'll either live, or die from the blood and water loss. Oh right, get some water into them. Just fucking get it in their. As much as you can once the leg thing happens."

Oh dear... this... this is very much not an ideal situation to be in. "Right... um... thank you for your advice... *and scaring the heck out of me. Apparently magical poisons are no joke. I mean what the heck is this. Exploding legs! Otiss doesn't seem to be too surprised so this must be normal. Or at least, normal enough not to be questioned but seriously... who does that. And salt? I literally have to rub salt into the wound? Hmm... might ask about that.*

"Um... how important is the salt part? I'm... only really acquaintances with the two who are poisoned and I doubt they'd trust me to literally rub salt in their wounds," said Kat.

Palo shrugged, "I dunno. My Pa insisted we do it when it happened to him, slipped and fell into the muck cause he wasn't careful. Horrible to watch but he did survive... even if this throat needed a lot of healing afterwards. Still, by that point they won't be able to move their legs at all so they won't really have a choice even if they remain conscious."

"Right... um... how did your father know?" asked Kat.

"Well that there is a story... not sure we have time... hmm... Otiss?"

Chapter 878 It Was Like This You See

Otiss glanced back at the tents on the other side of the compound, noting the distinctive lack of movement from the other members of the caravan, "You can stay here telling stories if you want, I apparently need to wake the others up... perhaps get started on a bit of food for everyone as well... you're free to tell whatever stories you want, just be ready for the breakfast bell," after he finished speaking Otiss once again strode off, not even waiting for a response.

Palo didn't look pleased as he stared at the departing figure. Apparently he was hoping for some convenient excuse not to keep speaking with Kat. Well to bad for him. Hearing stories was a great way to pass the time, and she was sure that Lily would love to hear about basically anything new. Still, when Palo turned back to look at Kat, he caved under her pleading gaze. Well, that or maybe she was leaning over a bit too much. Not that Kat noticed either way.

So Palo sighed and started up his story, "I'm not really sure there's much to tell. You see, my grandmother on my father's side was part of the sect that was on the land the swamp now sits. She wasn't particularly high up, and she was terribly poisoned by the event. She survived, but with her cultivation crippled so she settled down nearby and had my father.

"When she passed... well I was pretty young at the time but it signalled a shift in my dad's attitude. Grandma was a major bread winner for the family. Even with her cultivation pretty much destroyed the improvements she'd made to her body was more than enough to make her the best 'mortal' hunter or labourer. They'd call her in for the bigger jobs that they'd normally have to hire a cultivator for. She got a good cut of that money... and really the thing most people don't understand is that even for a Rank 1 cultivator mortal money has basically no use.

"Still, to her it did and that made her well sought after. Until one day all the poison must have caught up to her. It was all very sudden. One day she was fine, hunting Rank 1 spirit beasts all by herself, and the next she could barely get out of bed. It didn't even take 3 full days for her to pass.

"Now... I don't really know what was said between her and my dad. Maybe she encouraged him, maybe she told him not to bother... but to get money Dad decided he wanted to scrounge around the swamp, looking for relics. The real jackpots were old storage rings, if they survived. Those tended to have quite a few things in them and even if they were just cultivator robes, if they had some inscriptions on them that's enough to feed the family for a year and then some.

"So that's what Dad did, still does sometimes though not frequently anymore. I would say... we lived well. Compared to the other mortals we had some of the best lives... but it just doesn't compare to a cultivator and sometimes that burns me. Still, it's never worth actually keeping anything around. Cultivators would here about it and come for us. Much better to be known for selling relics. It stops most of them from just killing you and taking your stuff. You might find more cool things alive after all, and if we're selling them... well they have a chance to get it themselves... and if they fail... well... that's someone else to kill that ain't me.

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"As for Dad... see... he had an accident. He was excellent at stealth. It just isn't worth fighting most of the beasties here. Either they weren't worth much or he wasn't even close to strong enough before the

accident. He ended up getting surprised by one of the quillcrops. Dad didn't notice one was sleeping in a little hollow near his work area. So it burst out of the water right at him and the only way to dodge in time was to plunge himself straight into the poison...

"That's where I got my first hands on experience dealing with it. Sadly... Dad can't really walk properly anymore. A cultivator can deal with having so many holes in their legs... but a mortal like me and Dad... well... he uses a cane now and the scars have mostly all healed... but apparently the pain persists, and while we might be able to pay for treatment... Dad says he's gettin old and says 'medicine is a tool for the young, the old shall endure for as long as necessary' and I mean..."

"I of course don't like to hear my dad talking about himself like that... anyway what I should really warn you about is-" Palo paused as they both heard a ringing sound coming from Otiss' camp. Palo turned to look over it and then back to Kat with a smirk. "I'm afraid I need to go. He does pay me so his requests come first, I'm sure you understand,"

Kat pinched her lips together so she wasn't frowning and gave Palo a curt nod. *Little shit. If you didn't want to tell me anything, just say so. Stop trying to use Otiss as an excuse to get out of it. It's quite clear you didn't want to talk to me but I DID want to know and I thought I asked politely enough. Whatever.* "Of course I understand," *I was able to say that? I suppose I do understand just not in the way he wanted...* "have a good," said Kat with a large smile. Maybe a little bit of purple fire leaking out as well.

Palo noted that wisp of fire, and his highly tuned instincts from constantly entering dangerous terrain and watching for threats informed him he may have just made a terrible mistake. That little wisp of flame seemed poised to do something horrible to him. Burn him alive most likely, was what he thought. So he booked it. Kat just continued to smile and wave slightly as he ran away. Kat gave a huff at the camp once Palo had mingled in with the other figures and sat back down against the snake. Closing her eyes she started to meditate until someone else woke.

Perhaps no longer surprisingly it was Lily who woke up next. Even if, upon waking and realising her rather lewd position, she attempted to pretend otherwise. Kat of course could feel the potent mixture of what had to be lust, something easily identified as love, and just as easily, shame and embarrassment. Still, Lily seemed to approve of the situation if anything so Kat let the ruse continue even if Lily's emotions were a bit like a foghorn in her ear. Nearly deafening in their power.

And so time passed, the convey moved off, Kat relaxed, Lily pretended to still be sleeping and not immensely enjoying the feeling of being sandwiched by Kat's boobs... until Kat heard a groaning, then a slap, and then two people awkwardly exiting the back of the snake. Xiang was glaring at Yang who was... well honestly it was hard to say what she was trying to look like. Her face was completely red and her eyes were still had purple lines all through them making her look crazy if anything. "Hey guys!" said Kat, "So... good news and bad news... Good news, found out what you've been poisoned with... bad news... well... let me explain..."

Kat quickly went over what she'd learned about the swamp rot and as soon as she finished Yang made her opinion known, "You will NOT be rubbing salt in my wounds I don't care how much deadlier it might potentially be to me, I refuse to consent to that sort of treatment! What sort of poison requires salt to help neutralise it!"

"I believe I pointed out it was a particularly sadistic cultivator with a penchant for torturing his enemies," said Kat pointedly, "Also... from what I've heard it isn't a matter of consent at that point, you'll barely be coherent enough to have a say in the matter,"

Yang clearly wanted to just point out that it was a load of nonsense... but she grew up with two cultivators for parents, "Well I have a say in the matter right now. I'm not saying if you CAN or CAN NOT. I am saying you WILL NOT or there WILL BE consequences," said Yang angrily, if quite clearly.

Kat shrugged, "Look, nowhere in my contract does it state I need to keep you alive, either of you. I'm not going to be an ass about this, but if you die, it is on YOUR head. I'll help where I can, but if you really don't want me to rub salt in your wounds, and YES I know how it sounds, then I simply won't. I have better things to do than listening to you screaming in pain and crying tears of poison. If this is how you want to do it, you'll get no further complaints from me!"

Chapter 879 Poisonous Options

Xiang looked between the two glaring women and decided he really didn't want to deal with that. On the other hand, there were some things that needed to be dealt with less they be lead to a potentially fatal incident with the poison. Yang might want salt rubbed in her wounds, an understandable if perhaps naive viewpoint. However it seemed to Xiang they were both forgetting about the fact they needed large amounts of water to wash it all away. So Xiang decided to err on the side of pragmatism.

"Ok you two, that's enough," said Xiang forcefully but quietly, just enough that if they really wanted to, ignoring him was on the table, but he was certainly heard. Apparently it was enough though because they both turned towards him with questions in their eyes, "Kat, I understand that Yang is refusing what might be life saving treatment. I'm glad you seem to accept that she can make that choice,

"Yang," the word hung in the air for a few moments, "I understand that you don't want additional, and possibly needless pain inflicted upon you. I'm not even going to say that the additional chance to survive is worth the pay you would likely experience because of the salt. It is not my choice to make, it is yours, and I'm going to respect that. What I do want you to know is that I will be using what little salt stores we have on myself, or perhaps more accurately I'll be asking Kat to do it. For me, no amount of pain is too much for a chance to continue to live.

"I do not say this as a criticism, mainly an observation, but I'd like to point out that you are a cultivator. Pain is in our nature and the path to immortality is long and thorny. It will not be a painless path and the vast majority of people fall short in some way. It is only the truly rare individual that can reach the apex and a sacrifice of a short few moments of time against the chance to reach the top... no matter how small... well... I see that as a very easy gamble for someone already walking on the cultivation path,"

Yang looked rather stunned. Like she'd been slapped in the face with a fish despite no sea food being in sight. Both insulting, confusing, embarrassing and just generally absurd. Despite this, Xiang's words did seem to resonate with Yang and she pointedly took her gaze elsewhere. Xiang wasn't wrong. She didn't want to admit it, and perhaps she simply wouldn't... but the truth of his words rung throughout her sole and they would not live.

Xiang either didn't notice, or didn't want to apply quite so much pressure to Yang's mindset at the moment. Well, that or perhaps it was even less altruistic. They only had so much salt after all. "Now,

with that being said we have a choice to make... and Kat seeing as you have repeatedly stated you do not mind, or do not care about our directional choices... and this one seems to disproportionately affect Yang and I, I can just assume you'll leave things up to us yes?"

"Barring anything particularly noteworthy yes, I don't really see why I'd need to or want to contradict you, but I suppose to answer with complete honesty I should mention the odd chance I do correct you," said Kat trying to be overly verbose, speaking with soft words and glaring at Yang.

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Xiang just nodded, apparently ignoring that as well. "Now, the way I see it we have two choices, well we have three but that one isn't really a great idea. That's to follow the road towards Xuena, but the poison needs dealing with and just following the road will get us nowhere because as I see it, the biggest issue we currently have is finding enough water to wash our potential wounds.

"I see two ways to go about that, we can either cut across wild territory and try to head for a small mountain, that's really more of a hill with delusions of grandeur. According to this map there is a river that springs forth there and just based on its height it has to be an underground spring. That would give us essentially an endless supply of water, it's right on the way towards Xuena, but that's all we'll have there water.

"The other option we have, is to follow the road and turn left instead of right, away from Xuena and towards the largest town, that's really more of a small city in the area. It certainly has well or some other water source for the population, but we may not be able to acquire enough of it to continually wash down two people. We may need to reuse the same few buckets of water, which is likely a bad idea for our health, yours especially Yang if you want avoid the salt.

"The benefit though, is that we can almost certainly find an apothecary with experience in this sort of poisoning. Not that I don't trust Palo but he had nothing better to offer than to try and live through it. We are cultivators though, and while we don't have a lot of funds, we have some, perhaps enough for something that could heal us. As cultivators we can accept more toxic pills in the name of healing and we have more money than mortals,

"Then again... if this poison really was made by a sadist... it was perhaps never intended to be lethal, simply as painful and inconvenient as possible, they could have instead focused on making it basically incurable outside simply enduring the effects. It's not even that unlikely based on what Kat has said about it." Xiang paused for a moment to consider what was just said, "Right... yeah... in fact I think the more important question is if it retained that property after turning into the bog. I think the answer is probably yes knowing my luck... but maybe not..."

Xiang shrugged and let the silence hang for a few moments after that. He didn't really know how to continue so he waited for questions or comments and found he wasn't really receiving any. Apparently what he'd said was clear enough... but he really did what Yang to comment. That was sort of the whole point of asking, and trying to get Kat to O.K. whatever decision they made. It made it clear to Yang these were decisions she could make.

He really had no interest in getting into argument with her, not when his vision was already starting to blur somewhat. If they really started going at it, the chances they collapsed before the argument was

done happened to be MUCH too high for his liking. So his 'options' were placed squarely on Yang's shoulder. No argument then, right? Except apparently Yang didn't want to say anything.

So with a suppressed sigh, Xiang asked, "So what do you think Yang? I'm not really happy about what's going to happen, and I don't really see one idea as being much better than the others, but what do you think?"

Well that was the question wasn't it? Yang didn't really know what to think. Screaming herself hoarse in a city full of people to hear her wailing was exceptionally low down on her priority list. The idea of trying to wash poison of her legs with poisoned water was even further down, so really that should rule out the city already... but on the other hand sleeping on the ground and camping by a water source until her legs burst open into poison sores didn't sound fund either.

She'd have to recover afterwards as well, even if with a cultivators physique that could be reduced a significant amount she'd still need to spend days practically glued to the dirt or stone she'd collapsed on after passing out. That wasn't even to mention the chance for a healer. She loved Xuena and knew that girl could work miracles...

But even for miracle workers... some things just weren't possible without using ingredients you needed another few miracles to find. Yang wasn't exactly feeling blessed right now, and miracles seemed to be in short supply. She'd gotten poisoned just from walking through a swamp for crying out loud. Not ideal. Not ideal at all.

So Yang let out a long hiss, like a kettle once it had reached a boil. "I'm really not happy about this either Xiang... these options both sound terrible. What I would like is Xuena here to diagnose me... but I can't get that. So... so tell me how out of the way this water source is?"

"Not far at all. I won't say it's a perfect diagonal towards Xuena... but we're still quite a long way away, and really if we headed for that way in any case we'd be faster circling the mountain and passing the stream anyway... I think..." answered Xiang.

Yang nodded, "The water then, we'll go to the water,"

Chapter 880 The Sylvie Interlude

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Hello, good morning, good evening and whatever other epithet you like to use as your greetings at this time. I am writing a letter, or would you call it a diary? I suppose I cannot know what you would choose to label this as, considering I am currently writing this alone in my room. Truthfully, I find this a strange exercise. I do not understand why anyone would find it interesting to spend time listening to my ramblings about my day-to-day activities.

Despite this, I do know that hearing of others' experiences can be very insightful and interesting enough just for the change it brings. With this in mind I will endeavour to make this as entertaining as I can for everyone reading right now. I do not really know where else to start but in the morning.

The first thing I do every morning is check messages from Kat. I have long since realised that the system Kat refers to as D.E.M.O.N.S despite being rather tightly bound to what may be programming has something more to it. I always receive my messages first thing in the morning. If I check them during a

night time toilet break they will not be there, and if I check them during the day I will see nothing. Yet, I always have a message waiting for me when I wake without fail.

To say it is merely the product of chance would be erroneous. Despite many attempts to question it on just how random these dailies truly are, it will always insist they are in fact random with no set time to arrive. I am sure that this is at least partially true. It likely has the same limitations as Kat and other demons do. Unable to lie... yet I question how much it is able to mislead quite frequently.

I suppose it does not really matter. I was attempting to show you a glimpse into my world and mind and yet now I am already talking about the inner workings of an eldritch system I cannot hope to comprehend any time soon. Still, it is one of my pastimes, to wonder about things I cannot know. Truly there is so much space to explore between the things we know. Even if they are not likely to be true, at least most of them are not.

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Let's get back to the letter. Once I have read them, my next job is working out what actually happened by using what I know of Kat, and what has been relayed to me. Take for example this recent letter...

Hello Sylvie, I've just had a bit of a big day today. I had to fight off a giant snake but I killed it in the end. Lily is fine, she got to stay safe with Xiang and Yang while I took it down. It's size is impressive and it had a few neat abilities that made the fight interesting. Currently, there is some debate about what to do with the corpse. Apparently it is quite valuable. Lily and I don't really care that much, and are mostly just letting it play out.

The first thing I should say is that Kat really needs a class in letter writing. She has given me sparse details that barely cover a fraction of her day. While I am sure that nothing else truly important happened, she barely described the fight with any detail. Simply that it was 'interesting' whatever she might mean by that. I do wish she'd provide more information, but I suppose the fact she sends out multiple notes to many people who are not just me means that it is unreasonable to expect something verbose...

However I also know that these letters can be written purely using the mind. I could produce a letter of such a length in less than a minute using the system and while I do not wish to demand attention from Kat I do believe, loyal sister that I am, I deserve more than a minute of her time each day. Especially when she is away. Part of me wishes to come along on journeys like Lily has managed to. Truly it surprises me that such a thing was possible. It makes me wonder how hard I would need to push and what leverage I would need for a similar arrangement. It does not look appealing to me right at this moment. The damage it would do to my social circle would take a long time to repair and while adventuring with Kat sounds great in theory I know what she does not say. Most of the time anyway.

Which I suppose leads us back to the letter. I am taking a rather round about approach to this am I not? I find that writing things down really slows down my thought process. To actually put it all to paper just takes so much time. I do understand the use of notes, short, sharp things that get the point across and jog a memory in the future. I also understand the use of essays. A concise way to sum up a large body of words that will likely never be read properly and end up mostly useless. Letters also made sense, once upon a time. Though once again I am getting distracted.

Looking over Kat's letter, the first thing that pops out to me is that Lily was safe with Xiang and Yang. This implies a great deal of things to me. Knowing, from past correspondence that Xiang and Yang are both cultivators and serious combatants in their own right, if not at all up to Kat's standards, the fact they were both watching over Lily implies certain things. The first is that Xiang and Yang did not participate in the fight, likely because they were not strong enough. The second was that Kat did not trust herself to keep Lily safe during that same fight.

Which gives me some concern of course. Kat does not refer to merely passing skirmishes as fights. Just the day before this letter I received word of her killing a number of strange beasts she did not deign to describe properly, yet it was not a fight against them no, it was 'dealing with' them. This tells me that Kat was likely at considerable risk fighting this creature. I do wonder why, it is so hard to worry appropriately when you have no details. Was it difficult to kill for its size and toughness? Was it fast and able to dodge her strikes? Did she reign down fire and ice upon it to no effect?

Kat doesn't even say how the snake was ended. Perhaps not something that is always included by quite regularly Kat will speak on that. Thus, I can likely conclude it was killed in a particularly gruesome or dangerous way. Perhaps both. Based on its size and the fact Kat tries not to focus on the snake much at all, and that nothing else happened that day, no mention of traveling further... well I suspect it was at great personal danger Kat ended the thing.

Now, I do take some solace that Kat is fine. I know from the first time she met Xiang that if she were in real danger she would not remain in that world long. Yet at the same time... it was when she was last with Xiang that such a thing occurred. I know not how dangerous this world is when you compare it to others, so perhaps it is not truly so different. Of course, I can't really know can I? I have only experienced this one earth, and Kat dulls her reports down to what is suitable for a child my age.

Perhaps that is not entirely true. Kat treats me not just as a child, but someone with considerable intelligence. I recognise and appreciate that but she does so try to shelter me from the world. For some reason I do not, and never have found it stifling. I do not know if this is because I know she cares for me as if we are truly sisters, as I do for her. Or if it is more to do with the fact that she tells me enough. That I usually know of the details she will not speak on, or can at least interpret them to be close enough to the real answer.

I do not know. Perhaps I can never truly know. These things are the experiences that make me myself after all, and as much as I may try, may puzzle things out... I can always be surprised by other people. Not with regularity, but enough to know I am not right all the time. I do not really know what to make of that thought. Is it because I can never truly know everything about a person? Is it because they are a person, with unique thoughts and feelings? If I knew every thought, every feeling, every single thing... could I predict their future? Well of course not. I know all that about myself, and yet I still surprise myself. Though, it does seem I have gotten quite far from the 'Sylvie tells you about her day' concept I started with. A shame, this really is a good representation of my day, if perhaps in a much slower, more drawn out form.