

DEMONS 901

Chapter 901 A Failure of a Spar

Back to Kat.

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The group was about two hours of full speed running outside of the city. They'd grabbed enough food for a decent picnic and there was going to be some interesting entertainment. Xiang and Lily were situated high up in a sturdy tree near the clearing Yang and Kat had designated as their battle zone. Yang was warming up by pretending her club was a set of nun chucks. The fact she looked graceful with it somehow was very impressive.

Kat on the other hand was twirling her fans around trying to get her wrists in shape. She was also channelling a bit of demonic energy into the ground, causing ice to slowly form around her. Kat was using just a bit of energy, about half of what she passively regenerated, just to get it flowing around.

The day was nice and clear, something both contestants were pleased with, for more or less the same reason. Yang would have been very hampered by a spot of rainy weather so the clear skies were very nice. "Are you sure you want to do this?" asked Kat as she stood across the clearing eying Yang carefully.

"Yes I am. I need the practice Kat, and this is the best way to do it. I don't have to worry about killing you, and I trust you enough not to accidentally kill me. If we had suitably strong training weapons I'd suggest them but you work with what you have," yelled Yang in return.

Kat let out a long breath. Yang had approached Kat late yesterday with a request for a spar. It wasn't too much of an imposition as Lily didn't really know what to spend their third day off doing after spending the day walking around the city. There just wasn't all that much in the way of entertainment. Most buildings were practical in nature and the closest thing they found to 'entertainment' was a spot in one of the local parks where every table had a go board on it. Something they could very much just play at home.

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The auction was going to start early the next morning, but it was unclear when their group was going to participate. Apparently, they'd get a letter telling them at what time their item would be sold. How much else they wanted to see wasn't yet determined... so they had today to pass the time. Apparently, they'd be using battle to do it.

Kat was ready, her mind slowed as she watched Yang move. With Kat in full combat mode Yang just looked... so slow. It wasn't really her fault. Kat was firmly a Rank 2 demon while Yang was still just at the start of her cultivation journey. Kat just wasn't prepared for it to be such a stark difference. Yang launched herself forward and Kat eased up a bit on the slow down. There really was no point in keeping things quite so slow. It was beyond easy to see what Yang was doing in that state and this wasn't supposed to be a beatdown but a spar. Yang had even asked politely for it.

So Kat decided to do something a little stupid. Yang brought down her club using the momentum from the charge to try and deal some damage against Kat, who, for some reason looked to be blocking a large iron club with her two fans. The moment of impact, the ground was the loser, breaking under Kat yet

not really disrupting her footing. Kat's wrists were the next things to start complaining. Stronger and tougher Kat might have been, but her wrists were no match for Yang's... everything.

Whirling to the side, Kat tried to shove Yang over using the cultivator's momentum, but Yang's footwork was solid and she just let the club continue sideways before bringing it back around for a second attack. Kat had time to watch all of this and decide not to do something quite so silly again. Kat ripped her feet from the ground and stepped forward past Yang's club, letting it fall on her old location and slapped her right fan on the top of the club hoping to unbalance Yang more.

It was too much, Yang instantly felt herself tipping over and decided to cut her losses, by dropping the weapon instead. With her hands free they started to glow with a golden light as she turned to the side-stepping Kat and tried to slam a palm strike into Kat's seemingly exposed side. Kat considered moving but she was interested in just what damage the attack would be doing.

So it was to Kat's surprise when the attack landed and instead of burning, or being tanked, the energy instead travelled inside of her and started to bounce around, disrupting the flow of her blood and damaging her organs slightly. Kat's eyes widened even as she felt that same damage getting repaired almost as fast. It was a much more dangerous attack than it seemed. *I... I don't know why but I expected that to do so much less damage. Was I expecting heat? Yes I guess I was... but... is it the concept? Hmm...*

With Yang's hand so dutifully delivered to her, Kat stepped forward moving it into an arm lock, a poor one, and then using that as leverage to throw Yang over her head. Yang yet out a strangled protest because of the pain in her shoulder, and a second 'oof' when she hit one of the nearby trees. Yang didn't stay down long though, hitting the ground and running straight for Kat.

How do I make this useful for Yang? This is supposed to be a spar but I'm taking unnecessary hits and moving too quickly for her to keep up when I retaliate. I suppose I could try to match her speed... but honestly I'm just not that skilled. I need to speed my mind up drastically to match speeds and if I did that I'd know exactly what Yang was going to do for ages before the move completes. Hmm... I guess I'll just have to do my best.

Kat resumed her dropped fans and got ready for the charge. She kept them closed, not wanting to slice into Yang but once again tried to the sidestep. Yang was ready for it though and kicked off just the right moment to launch herself at Kat. Reflexively Kat's tail came around and wrapped itself around Yang's arm before pulling her off course. Kat continued past, and Yang could do nothing but be pulled along, wrecking her footing. Kat used this chance to perform a slow, but powerful back kick.

Yang hissed as she let herself drop to the floor, her hand still tied up in Kat's tail limiting her movement but it was enough to get out of the way of the kick. Now, down on the ground, Yang twisted and slammed her fingers into the soft part behind Kat's knee that was fairly exposed. Sadly for Yang, she missed by just a hair and impacted the bone instead, and Yang could feel it was her fingers giving way.

Things were pretty much over after that. Kat was able to retract her leg and then wrapped Yang up into an uncomfortable hug. "This was... not really what I was hoping for..." said Kat with an apologetic tone.

"Yeah well, it's not what I wanted either," grumbled Yang. "How do you not know how to spar properly?"

“Look it’s never really been a big issue and I don’t know how to teach you. I’ve normally fought things that are stronger than me, or I’m not too worried about breaking. I don’t know how to match your speed or strength without speeding my mind up drastically to do it all manually and that would just sort of defeat the point,” explained Kat.

Yang sighed, “I guess this means I’ll probably have to just spar with Xiang then for practice. Not ideal, but I can make it work. Seeing as you’re already here though can you watch us both fighting and make sure nobody gets seriously injured? We really don’t need that,”

Kat shrugged letting go of Yang as she stood up, letting Yang find her own feet, “Perhaps? It goes back to the fact I don’t know what you can both take without consequences. I’ll agree to try certainly but that’s the best I can really offer you,”

Yang groaned again as she flexed her wrist trying to make sure Kat hadn’t pulled anything. It seemed fine, just a bit sore... but it did prove how much stronger Kat was compared to her. Which... was a bit of a problem. Kat didn’t know how to train anyone else, and had never really tried. Her ability to teach those weaker, or even just spar, was hampered so much by the gulf in their strengths. Her regeneration just made it worse. She could trade hits like baseball cards, except Kat had a bunch of fakes she could just print off. Everyone else had to deal with the real thing.

“Look... thanks for coming out for a match... but we are never sparring again,” said Yang tersely.

Chapter 902 Auction House Special.

Kat and Lily were bored. There really just no other way to slice it. They’d been at the auction house since 9 in the morning and not even a full hour later they were already paying no attention to the items going up on sale. How this was stretched out to be a full even they had no idea. The pair were regretting the fact they followed along behind the two cultivators when they left the inn this morning.

See, Xiang and Yang were full of excitement. It seemed that auction houses were basically entertainment for people in this world. They were practically vibrating as the two left the inn this morning and the demonic pair found it really hard not to get caught up in the energy. This even continued when they arrived because apparently the snake was considered an interesting enough item to supply all four of them with a private viewing room.

That’s where things started to go downhill. Even saying it like that felt disingenuous because there really wasn’t anything for Kat and Lily to get excited about once they really thought about it. See, for some reason, perhaps Kat’s inexperience, all the prices were in dollars... but Kat had no idea how that translated either. Was it based on the price of bread? D.E.M.O.N.S estimation? How much Kat could trade with D.E.M.O.N.S for money back at home? Kat didn’t know, neither did Lily.

The items themselves didn’t help either. The first big ticket item was a sword that went for one hundred thousand, and the second was a leaf for five. Despite the fact a sword was worth less than a leaf, Xiang seemed to believe it was the SWORD auction house was making a killing on. “Complete junk. Overpriced garbage that better be going into some collectors vault. It looks lovely but just... useless,”

On the other hand, Yang was annoyed with herself for not having the equivalent of half a million dollars just to buy this ‘First Fallen Leaf of the two hundred-thousand-year-old Life Giver Tree’. Apparently half a mil was a steal for it... but to Kat and Lily... it was just a leaf. They had no concept of what the wealthy

would normally pay for something like that and no idea what you could really be expected to DO with it either. Honestly, Kat was pretty sure that the currency really just couldn't be compared properly between Earth and whatever this planet was called. Kat and Lily were guessing that it was lack of knowledge on their side.

Without a proper understanding of the currency, they would keep hearing it as the Earth equivalent, which was shaky and best and useless at worst. Even with the two of them putting their heads together they just didn't understand what any of the shit being sold did. Why was an old technique jade worth more than a recent one? Why was the fact nobody could unlock it properly considered an upside? Cultivators were clearly strange people.

The best guess Kat and Lily could come up with, was that cultivation hadn't really improved much over the years. Nobody was handing out knowledge about how to get strong fast, unless you were in a sect and ridiculously favoured. Even then, the fact you needed a sect at all was normally considered a bad thing. The true talents didn't need sects, sects needed them.

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This meant the value proposition for the older stuff was 'it's survived X number of years just fine so whoever invented it took enough care to keep it safe and working that long it must be valuable' or at least, that was the guess that Lily came up with. The leaf thing did start to make a bit more sense as the day went on. Cultivation aids in the form of pills became more common, and they were all quite pricy. Apparently, you could put a price on progress. And that price was like, 2 million for a minor talent increase.

That was two hours in, and Kat couldn't help but ask the cultivators about that one. According to Yang, "They are the best item you can buy as a talentless cultivator. It could save some of the weaker ones centuries, assuming they live that long,"

When asked why neither of them bothered with it, Xiang replied, "Well, first off that pill was specifically for water cultivators, so it's completely useless for the both of us. In fact, it's worse than useless and might poison us badly or ruin our cultivation. In addition to that, once you reach a certain level of talent, stuff like that doesn't do anything for you. A line both Yang and I sit across,"

Which really told Kat and Lily nothing. How talented were they both? Very apparently. How rare was it? Neither of them knew. They both said "Once in a generation" but considering the fact Kat was sitting in a room with two 'Once in a generation' talents it didn't seem to be a particularly accurate naming convention.

So with the auction becoming nothing more than background noise, Kat and Lily started to train. Kat, her ability to hold back, and Lily her speed and reaction time. They did it by playing the children's game, Pattycake. The one where you alternate clapping and hitting the other person's palm. Despite being a children's game, it was very useful for this sort of thing.

Lily needed to realise a bit more clearly that she wasn't human anymore. She shouldn't be limiting herself to her old human strength and speed subconsciously. Kat on the other hand needed a better idea of how her speed scaled up. She needed to understand there was a great number of steps between

'human speed' and 'full demonic power' as well as 'full demonic power with demonic energy added on top'.

It very quickly became apparent that Lily's eyes were able to keep up far beyond her body, even if that was due in part to just not being used to it at all. Neither of the two had noticed that Lily was able to follow all but Kat's fastest movements. Even if Lily couldn't speed her mind up to watch them properly, Kat noticed that her girlfriend's eyes darted around, following sources of movement even when Kat approached her max speed.

They were also able to quite quickly get past normal human speed, but barely any faster than that. They made progress of course but it was much slower going. Lily seemed to have a hard time believing she could move her hands properly when they were so fast, despite the fact that if Lily zoned out she could keep up for a bit before realising what was going on and working herself out of it, failing to land a clap a few times in a row and then starting over.

The cultivators weren't overly pleased with the endless clapping, but the room was soundproof and after dragging the pair out yesterday for that sparring session neither were too inclined to interrupt what was clearly a practice session to improve Lily's coordination.

On Kat's end of things she was... not really getting better at all. Her problem was that she really wasn't trying. The idea of hurting Lily was a constant worry so Kat just kept stopping the movement of her hands right before they met Lily's. This meant Kat wasn't so much controlling her strength as getting better at stopping in place with just a thought. Perhaps a useful skill for holding back, but it really wasn't the point.

The pair stopped for the complimentary lunch they were provided, that was actually quite nice. Thin slices of meat arrayed over the top of apple slices and drizzled with... well Kat didn't really know WHAT the source was, but it was a surprisingly pleasant combination. Kat never thought meat and apple would go well, but it was clearly something not native to Earth considering the meat itself was also a little sweet.

The second time their focus was broken, was late in the afternoon when their snake carcass went up for auction. It was apparently the afternoon's big ticket item. First they wheeled out a large pallet of snake skin. This was followed by two large jars of fluid with eyes floating in them, with another set containing two venom sacks the size of Kat's midsection. They were MUCH larger than the anyone had suspected.

The final part though... the thing that sold this as a series of items to go after was when they raised the curtain behind the auctioneer. Mounted on a large black wood frame was the snake's bones, mouth wide open and ready to chomp down on the announcer, who seemed unsurprised by the interruption.

The bidding was unexpectedly fierce. Kat wasn't sure what was so desirable about it, but some people were bidding for individual items, then someone would go for a much larger price for everything. Kat found it hard to keep up with it all, but apparently the auctioneer was able to do it flawlessly. A big hologram showed the price above each item, or a big one for everything, yet it changed so quickly Kat knew no normal human could keep up. *Getting really fancy for this one.*

Chapter 903 Interrupted Rest

“Ok... so can you explain to me why we spent basically the entire fortune we got from selling the carcass on those three pills? I wasn’t really paying attention,” asked Kat as they left the auction house, bounty in hand. The pills were in a lovely looking glass jar, but they were just simple black beads that didn’t benefit from the fancy rainbow coloured glass the jar was made from.

“Yes, we noticed,” bit out Yang.

Xiang sighed and answered before things could devolve. Even though Yang had been a bit nicer to Kat and Lily recently she was rather annoyed at having to listen to their clapping for about half a day. Yang would swear, if asked, that she could still hear it at this moment, despite the fact Lily was in Memphis form at the moment. “These are going to be our ticket to escaping pursuers,” said Xiang.

“Right... but there’s only three of them. How do they even work?” returned Kat.

“I can answer both of those with just one explanation. What they do is temporarily distort your cultivation. It’s a little painful but thankfully no permanent damage will be done. They just disrupt your Qi enough to keep it constantly fluctuating and making you nearly impossible to track without visual line of sight or using normal scent tracking. We can easily deal with both of those with cheaper materials. Does that answer your question?”

“I think so? I assume there’s one for you, Xuena, and Yang. It wouldn’t work for me and Lily because neither of us have Qi right? Suggested Kat.

Xiang nodded, “That’s exactly it,”

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Kat nodded as they continued walking back towards the inn. “Are we staying the night?”

“I... I think so?” said Xiang as he cast an unsure glance over at Yang.

“Yes, I think we are,” said Yang.

The inn was in sight soon and they all moved to their rooms. Yang and Xiang went to sleep easily, and Lily was happy to curl up on Kat after being so active during the day. Coordination lessons were rather tiring, both mentally and physically. That just left Kat... and she couldn’t help but feel like there was some reason to stay up. She slipped into meditation instead.

The water was rough, rougher than normal but nothing stood out as inherently strange. There was a large number of people moving around even though night had fallen. The auction was just finishing up and people were still heading home. There were also a few stalls selling snacks and drinks to these late-night wanderers. The problem for Kat, was with all this activity it was really quite difficult to isolate any single bit of movement. There was a constant stream or ripples being spread across her mental pond. Still, she couldn’t shake the feeling that something was wrong.

So Kat kept up her meditation, trying to sort them out and watching for anything suspicious. It wasn’t relaxing in the slightest, and Kat knew she’d be paying for it if she needed sleep every day. Luckily, the last few days were almost exclusively relaxing and even that spar with Yang wasn’t too demanding. Honestly playing patty cake with Lily was tougher, but Kat had just abused her increased mental speed so she didn’t need to worry too much.

When Kat saw a ripple explode into her view and then quickly run somewhere else, Kat's eyes shot open. She gently deposited Lily and followed them... right onto the roof. Where Yang was cultivating. Dammit. Kat wanted to stomp and complain. She'd been on edge all night. Finally found something weird and it was just YANG WAKING UP. Kat held it all in though. Yang was cultivating, and Kat knew enough to know you didn't interrupt people while they were doing so.

Kat hopped back downstairs through the window in her room and snatched up one of the pillows before walking into the closet and shutting it. Hoping that the noise wouldn't wake Lily this way. Then Kat screamed. "AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHH. WHY! I WAS SO SURE SOMETHING WAS WRONG. I WAITED FOR IT ALL NIGHT AND IT WAS JUST YANG!"

What Kit missed while she was relieving all the tension she'd built up over the night, was another figure, that had been watching their group flicker away as soon as she disappeared, surprised that Kat had noticed something was off at all. Still, Kat did miss it and simply flopped back onto the bed and bundled Lily up into her arms to calm down, believing she'd wasted a bunch of time on high alert.

Kat sunk deeply into her meditation, focusing only on roughly where Xiang was until she noticed the cultivator in question stirring. Kat got up at that point and went down to the lobby. Yang was actually the next one to arrive and took up a seat next to Kat, until Xiang stumbled his way downstairs. "Xiang have you topped up on supplies?" asked Yang.

Xiang glared, "I'm pretty sure that was your job, you know, considering you have the money,"

"Oh? But you're carrying the supplies aren't you?" asked Yang trying to get a rise out of the guy.

Xiang, unlike Kat, had just woken up from a wonderful sleep. They had a good way to grab Xuena and escape. The snake head had been sold. They weren't carrying around a tonne of money and likely to be robbed. He also knew one more little detail. He'd spotted Yang doing the shopping for the supplies she was trying to get him to admit to not purchasing, or insist he forgot but had bought knowing he was useless.

So, he just smiled and said, "Why would that matter? Sure I'm carrying the supplies but I know you were kind enough to buy things for everyone, even if it was my job. So thank you for that!" Xiang said with a bright, but predatory smile.

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Yang's eyes went wide and she looked at Xiang like he'd just grown a second head. Sure she wasn't all that careful about buying the supplies, and it WAS her job... she just didn't expect to be called out on it so clearly. Yang wasn't sure if she should have dressed more provocatively to distract Xiang, been a bit more direct when she suggested it was Xiang's responsibility... or perhaps there really was no way for Xiang to be mislead at the moment. Still, this did raise Yang's opinion of him. He still wasn't ideal boyfriend material, and it was a chance to indulge in a bit of his power by staying close... but the fact he managed to trip her up like that. Well...

Xiang couldn't help but lean back just a slight amount as instead of anger, or submission, or just... something normal as an answer to being caught out in a lie that was obviously an attempt to start an argument now he thought about it... instead... instead he was face to face with Yang's smile. If it could be said that his own was predatory just moments ago, Yang now wore the face of a predator that eats

other predators. Her eyes were shining and her teeth seemed to be sharper for some reason. Xiang couldn't help but think that while he won the battle here in this moment... he'd just set himself up to lose the war.

Kat looked on in confusion, until Lily, who for once Kat hadn't noticed getting up because it was during her panic, and then proceeded to just pretend she was asleep for a bit chimed in. [Yang apparently finds this quite appealing. I'm not sure if she's more attracted because he's shown a bit of intelligence, sneakiness or some other quality. Alternatively she might just like having her plans foiled. Not sure but... there's a good deal more lust in her gaze for Xiang now.]

Why can't I seem to tell? I mean I should know by now what lust is right? I can feel it in your thoughts. Then again... I don't know if I've ever properly recognised it by just looking at you. The mental connection really does let me cheat in that regard.

[Well that could exactly be it. It's not an emotion you experience. The fact you can only really get an inkling of it from me through the link might mean that your mind has associated it with just me and the link. I know you're away other people can feel lust and you're the odd one out... but maybe part of you disagrees with the idea? Thinks that more people are like you then what statistics would suggest?]

Perhaps... it's impossible to tell really. What I do want to know is... what does this mean for us? Is Yang going to start aggressively flirting with him?

[Um... huh... yeah I have no idea. I can only barely understand her thought process at all Kat. Sure I'm a bit closer to understanding then you because I have some context but like... pretty sure Yang isn't a normal example of a girl in love either.]

Fair.

Chapter 904 Being Right is a Bitch

As they started racing out of the city, Lily voiced her concerns. [Kat... are you ok? The other two might not have noticed but there's no way you could sneak it by me. Not only would I recognise the look on your face, the mental connection makes it nearly impossible.]

I... I am personally fine. I can't find anything wrong at all, which is part of the problem. I just have this niggling suspicion something isn't quite right despite it all. I stayed up meditating all night instead of sleeping, which would normally be fine but I was actively searching the whole time and I just feel a bit worn out.

[I'm not sure what to tell you Kat. I didn't have the same feeling until you shared your own worries]

Lily no!

[Lily yes! Kat. I'm going to listen to your instincts regardless of if you do or not. I trust you Kat. Maybe you're paranoid maybe you aren't... but I'm more inclined to believe you. Especially with my own lacking experience.]

It's not like I really have that much experience with this sort of thing! I'd have thought Xiang or Yang would know. They likely have more experience then both of us put together.

[But much weaker senses]

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Kat grumbled under her breath but Lily was right. Or at the very least, Lily was much more convincing than her own internal logic.

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That night while everyone else was sleeping Kat was once again meditating. This time though, she decided to be both more and less careful. It took a few stops and starts to keep it up, but Kat managed to keep a small flame lingering in her palm even as she sunk deeper into meditation. She needed the rest just in case... but if people were watching she hoped they weren't willing to risk it while she was obviously summoning up flames. When the morning came and nobody could be seen, Kat wondered if she was on to something or not. Lily was still firmly in her camp... but she didn't voice her suspicions.

Despite not voicing them, Yang noticed and summoned her club to rest in its holster on her back, and Xiang noticing that, paid some extra attention to the surroundings. When they made camp on the second night, there was a silent conversation over if they should post guards... but they couldn't really justify it. Not yet.

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They were running into the sun. It wasn't quite straight on but it was close enough as they made their way across country. It was looking to be another boring morning until something twinged in Kat's mind. The hand holding Lily pulled her in closer to her chest as Kat sped up tackling the two cultivators. With her left hand occupied, Kat used her tail instead, wrapping it around Xiang, while grabbing Yang with her other hand and throwing them both down into the ground. Kat following right after, though spreading her wings out over the group for that little bit of protection.

A moment later a large explosion was set off in front of them, the place they'd all have been standing if the group had continued running unabated. Kat acted first, obviously. She unwrapped Yang and then spun in circles before launching Lily up into the sky. It was the safest place Kat could think of for her girlfriend, especially because she didn't trust that Lily would be safe in her arms.

[Kat?] Lily's confused voice echoed over the link, much faster than it should have been, but Kat just responded with a quick. *Stay high!* Before trying to work out what was going on. Kat pulled on her wings and flapped them heavily to disperse the smoke clouds to reveal a large crater that didn't really surprise anyone after the noise.

Yang and Xiang were shakily getting up to their feet. Something Kat had misjudged, was the strength of the cultivators' eardrums. Kat's had healed quickly and not truly been pierced. Xiang and Yang were bleeding from both ears, and Lily only managed to avoid the same fate because her head was tucked into Kat's body where she was still resting before all of this went down.

So while the cultivators were up and mostly unharmed. They were not particularly balanced at the moment. What they did have, was combat experience. As one they unslung their weapons and put their backs up against each other while they watched out for attackers. They were soon rewarded for their patience by the sound of loud clapping.

Stepping out from behind one of the nearby trees was a man dressed in dark green with lighter green patches over himself. A strange sort of proto-camouflage. From the other side, three men in black walked out, while from the back two women, one in black, one in the weird camouflage stuff walked out. "You know? I'm actually a little impressed you managed to avoid that. Seeing as you might be a little tougher than expected... how about a chat?"

Um... Lily? Do we say yes?

[Obviously. Xiang and Yang need to recover a bit from the explosion.]

Oh. Right.

Kat waited a few seconds for one of the other two to say something... but they didn't say anything. The man had a full face mask and neither of the cultivators could hear anything just yet. Kat realised this with a quick glance when she noticed the blood around their ears. "I suppose we could hear you out," said Kat with confidence. She wasn't really all that worried. They didn't seem to have noticed Lily, or just couldn't get to her. As long as Lily was fine, Kat knew she could take these guys. Her instincts weren't complaining anymore so it was Kat thought it meant she'd noticed the watchers, not that they were all that dangerous in a fight.

"Good, Good," said the man standing all by himself. "See, those little pills you picked up? Well in the right hands it's easy to make the price of them back and then some. Of course, that's before somebody," Kat gets the feeling he's glaring at Yang, "gets into a bidding war and goes over the standard price by 25%. Now, that's still not an impossible margin to make up for, but if they kept going well..."

The man shrugs in a 'what can you do' sort of way. Though that was more of a guess, considering nobody could make out the details of his face. "So, I'd like to offer you all the chance to hand those over. Afterwards, we can just go our separate ways. A rather simple exchange yes?" *nOVELnext.Com*

Yeah but a rather shitty one. Let's see how he takes this.

"A simple but rather unbalanced one. You do realise we were the group that submitting the large snake head to the auction? It was a Rank 3 Spirit Beast. Are you sure you want to fight us?" asked Kat, more in a hope that the conversation would continue, than anything else.

Mask man scoffed. "Ah yes, I'm sure it was an intense fight with a snake that size. It's a shame I don't believe you killed it all by yourselves. While I can't properly make out your cultivation, your two friends are just Rank 1 themselves. Perhaps you'd like to reveal your real cultivation and maybe I'll think on my offer some more?"

How the heck do I answer that? Obviously I'm not a cultivator. Do I say Rank 2? I honestly doubt he'd believe I was a Rank 2 cultivator if we're trying to claim we took down the beast. Actually... that's probably the issue. You'd need a team of Rank 3's normally but I got to its weak point and I'm a demon.

[Yeah I'm not sure what answer you could give that would actually de-escalate the situation. You literally can't lie, so saying 'Rank 3' or 'Rank 4' is quite literally impossible. So that leaves us with Rank 2 as the only accurate ish, answer and that's really not all that helpful either. I... hmm... I'd like to say stall as best you can? But honestly I'm not sure how you'd go about that.]

With Lily not really having anything helpful to offer, Kat tried to go for enigmatic. She summoned a small bit of flame on her finger. The other masked people flinched but the leader held up a 'stop' hand. Kat let it grow, slowly of course, all the way to the size of her head. The area around them was starting to take a dip in temperature. "Simply telling you my cultivation is a bit boring, perhaps looking at this fire you can take a guess?"

Kat had no idea what they'd make of her demonic flame, but apparently it was making the grunts uncomfortable. They couldn't help but twitch and fidget while looking at the thing. Even the leader could feel that Kat's flame was extremely dangerous. His instincts telling him not to get it on him, regardless of what other damage he'd need to take. This combined with Kat's speed and instincts that let her avoid the explosion. Well. This wasn't shaping up to be the easy mark they'd planned for.

Chapter 905 Ron. Man of Mystery

While they'd certainly stumbled onto something more dangerous than three lucky cultivators. That didn't mean it was time to leave just yet. To say nothing of the risk they'd just get shanked in the back as soon as they started to leave. The underlings were clearly getting nervous. This wasn't what they'd signed up for. Sure, fighting had always been on the table... but Rank 3 fighting? That wasn't on the cards in their minds. If any of them had a say, the group would already be in full retreat. If they did that though... getting shanked as they ran would be the least of their worries. Boss was much scarier when mad.

Instead of anyone masked breaking the silence, the next person to speak was actually Yang. She was no idiot, but could tell that everyone was tense. She also saw the need to buy time... but she didn't have any understanding of what Kat had said earlier. So she simply... poked the leader a little bit. "You sure are thinking hard about your answer. Do you need to consult the voices in your head or is it just that difficult for you?"

The leader was a professional rogue though, and was able to see through Yang's attempt easily. "I like to consider my options properly. Yang." Stressing that he did indeed know who everyone was. "I suppose when you aren't listening properly" Yang managed, barely, to not react, "a long silence can seem strange. See, the thing is though... we do need those pills. It's just a question of how much I'm willing to pay for them."

The silence stretched on once again. The surprise had worn off. The shock had worn off. The question now was if it was time to cut losses... but in what ways? The attack could be abandoned completely. Retaliation was unlikely. No faces were shown and the leader didn't have a particularly distinct voice. Give up on just this engagement? It was possible to set up another trap... but probably not an explosion. No explosion meant unlikely to be fatal or at least maiming... so a fight was far too likely with that option.

One option, the leader didn't really like but was certainly possible, was a barter or trade. The pills were useful... but the 'enemy group' didn't seem willing to take that kind of loss. They'd need to offer up just as much coin if not more... and the truth of the matter was... being in a shadier profession meant you didn't carry a single coin more on you than necessary. Nothing close to the kind of money to actually pay to get those pills back. So the only other answer was... services.

“What does a group of enterprising cultivators like yourselves even need such an item? As an expert crook, you don’t look like one of us... so why the fixation on the pills? If you think they can help in the bedroom... well... you’ve bought the wrong type,”

Yang glared back, not willing to answer anything... sadly for her Xiang got his hearing back just in time to here the question, and had assumed the conversation had been growing much friendlier then it was in truth. So he actually answered, “We’ve got to free a friend from Lord Frosty Ass’ ice sect,”

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The leader let out a long whistle that was massively stifled by the mask. Still, it got the point across. “Holy shit the balls on you three... fuck that’s a job and a half. Hmm... and I’m guessing now is the best time? What with the sect leader taking his... what did you say? Frosty Ass? Yes strutting his Frosty Ass all over the continent looking for the cure to his sweet little boy. Yes I can see why you’d decide to do this now... and why you’d need those pills hmm...”

The leader considered his options. On the one hand, they still really wanted those pills... but on the other... if they were using it to save someone’s life... that was a far cry from a bit of casual theft. The leader had assumed it was a couple of amateur thieves using an overpriced tool for something shiny that wasn’t even all that valuable. Mask had assumed they’d either get caught even with the pills... or misuse them in some way that meant they’d get caught when their attacks don’t work right.

Going for a jail break though... they weren’t trying to prevent getting caught sneaking in... they were for making sure they weren’t caught running out. A very different proposition. Mask pulled on the fabric around his neck, letting it snap back against his skin as he tried to puzzle out the best way to go about things. This had just gotten even more complicated. So, break things down simply.

Selling them was completely out. Barter too. A proper thief, and Mr Mask did like to think he was a proper thief, knew that you didn’t leave behind good comrades. It was just bad business. Especially if you were using their death to pave the way to retirement. A retired thief needs all the friends he can handle. These three already knew what was in store for themselves. They’d see it done. Hell, or high water, or I in this case, blizzard, or flash freeze. It’d get done.

So obviously he needed some other way to use that little bit of information. They could... help perhaps? An exchange. The pills handed over in exchange for his team’s help in extracting the prisoner. Plausible... but much too likely to result in betrayal. He knew he wasn’t trustworthy enough and he didn’t really know the kid’s either. He also knew, that in a choice between their friend’s life and his? Well, the friend would win every time. Not a job you want to sign up for when your payment might need to be used in the heist.

So, no barter. No assistance. Those seemed to be the only two options... but of course. It’s all well and good to say ‘there’s no other option’ but Mask hadn’t managed to evade the law for over five decades by going for the obvious. There was... perhaps one more option. It was risky, not just for him but for them as well. It might not amount to much, if anything... but at the same time... it was very palatable for both groups, included minimal chances for betrayal... and if it worked? Damn if it worked the payout was almost certainly worth the loss of those pills.

"I've got an idea to float by you three... it's a little crazy, and perhaps you won't entirely trust it is a good one... but let me make you the offer and you all can give it a little think. I propose, we don't fight, instead... we travel together," Mr Mask could already see the shock on the three's faces but that didn't stop him. "Now. I'm not saying we make camp with each other, or that we'll too close here..."

"But if we all head towards the ice sect... we attack at the same time. You go for your friend, and my crew and I... we go for one of the medium security storage rooms. You might get blamed for the theft... you might not. If we get caught... well they'll still be plenty happy to chase us... might even give you three enough time to get away with your friend. If you guys muck up though... well that'll be all the better for us. Less cultivators to sneak past and much easier to book it in the other direction.

"It'll be a risk for both of us. Only getting better for the other party if we fuck up, and never worse for you guys. Can you trust us enough for that?" Mask man finished already confident he knew what the answer would be.

Xiang looked between Kat and Yang for a few seconds, "How does it sound to you?"

Yang grimaced but said, "He's right. It won't fuck up our plans... and it might be that little extra we need to get away when we make the big heist. It's... it's not ideal but... but I'm inclined to go with it. Though... just asking Kat... could you?" Yang dragged a quick line across her neck and then shot eyes at the group around them.

Kat rolled her own. *Well. Yes I COULD but they're giving us a good deal. I'm not terribly inclined to attack them when nobody got hurt and we're negotiating.* So Kat instead shot a 'are you serious look' back at Yang that she could interpret however she wanted.

Yang just nodded as if expecting the response. Maybe she was. "I think you've got yourselves a deal. Now if we could get a name?"

The masked man gave a short laugh. "Now girl, while I'm happy you're accepting our deal I'm not THAT happy about it. Still... working without a name is annoying so... just call me Ron for now."

Chapter 906 The First Night of Cooperation

Lily dropped down from the sky once a settlement was reached. Ron raised an eyebrow at the sight, but didn't say anything up the time. The new enlarged group proceeded to travel silently after that. To prevent either side from thinking the other was trying something underhanded, they stuck to running about ten metres to the side of each other. It was clear that Ron's group were all faster than Xiang and Yang, but the thieves didn't complain once. Kat was guessing that Ron already knew that bit of information and had allowed for that in the timeline of events.

Eventually, the sun had set and they started to set up camp. Ron was perhaps a bit surprised they stopped after only one day but once again, Xiang and Yang just weren't equipped to run full speed all day and then through the night as well. Especially if they were going to keep running as soon as they woke up. That's when Ron started to take a closer look at Kat. He didn't know anything about demon summoning, that information was purged from the continent fairly well with only a few random holdouts left behind that very few people knew how to use.

The fact Kat had a few extra appendages wasn't even all that strange. Nobody had seen it yet but Ron had two additional eyes, one on the back of each of his hands. They were kept shut most of the time, but they were excellent for looking around corners or keeping a better eye on the battle field. A set of wings and horns, a tail. These seemed like reasonable enough additions. He could tell from the way Kat moved the tail was helping her balance immensely. The wings were obvious, flight, or depending on her 'true Rank' perhaps just better air control. The horns he wasn't too sure about. If forced, he'd pick either 'side effect from the other appendages' or that it was able to help her more finely control qi.

Adding animal traits onto yourself was a much more commonly seen sight than a demon after all. That's how Ron got his extra eyes. Though in his case it was experimentation by his ex-master that was attempting to create a child that could see and process everything around them all at once even before they started cultivating. As horrific as that might sound, the man did die protecting Ron, so there were minimal, if any, hard feelings over the human experimentation.

Still, with Kat's existence as a demon unclear, he was struggling to figure out why she was helping the other two at all. It just seemed like a problem that should be beneath her. Ron's best guess was that the two cultivators had pledged themselves to Kat's service in exchange for help rescuing their friend. Ron could tell that Yang at least had high affinity for the light element. Perhaps a worthy apprentice?

While Ron was having these thoughts, quite a few others were on edge. Ron's underlings didn't really understand why they were taking such a risk, but none had the courage to question their leader. A foolish sentiment, as they were not so much weaker than Ron. It was one of the main reasons he'd selected them all. Sure he had defeat them in every sparing match, but that was just practice really.

Back at Kat's camp, things were just as tense. Yang and Xiang couldn't help but feel that despite accepting the deal they were still at risk of betrayal. Though they'd never admit it to anyone, only the fact that Kat had stopped them in time preventing that explosion from taking, if not their lives, at least their legs. The snake was one thing. It was a large animal, a spirit beast they knew not to go near in normal circumstances. They'd been caught unaware just running to their destination. Not by bandits. Cultivators. Cultivators that knew how to take them out.

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Lily was trying not to worry like Kat, who was able to remain exceptionally calm under the circumstances. The problem for Lily was that, without realising it, she'd gotten used to being able to smell everyone nearby. Kat's scent was familiar, Yang's was that of the early morning, with the slightest touch of burnt wood, and Xiang was always sweat and metal. These newcomers smelt like nothing. Oh, Lily was certain it was just some Qi technique to hide your scent from nearby animals, and she desperately wish that wasn't all it took to set her on the edge... but she was part feline now. The lack of scent was driving that part of her crazy. She wanted to just run over to them and hiss in their faces or scratch them a bit so the scent of blood would allow her to get SOMETHING from them.

"Kat will you keep a watch?" asked Xiang quietly.

"IF YOU FEEL LIKE YOU NEED ONE!" shouted Ron back, making it abundantly clear he could hear Xiang even from his camp two hundred metres away.

Xiang decided to put his newfound patience into practice and just turned to Kat, waiting for an answer. "If you want me to, it's no problem Xiang," said Kat. Once again, Ron couldn't help but feel that interaction was strange. He was missing something here and nobody was going to tell him, certainly not without prompting.

With that settled Yang pulled out some food for everyone, picking some of the fresh stuff not just to use it while they could but also to abuse the fact they were sort of upwind of the other campsite. Yang also picked up a few extra utensils for cooking over a fire. This meant it only took a few moments for the smell of cooked meat and spices to start wafting down towards the other campsite.

While Yang was trying to provoke a reaction, Kat was trying to test her meditation now she knew about the group. As she sunk into the waters Kat struggled to spot the ripples they were making even when she KNEW exactly where they were. It took her a painful five minutes to realise how they were doing it. The pond in her mind was a reflection of the real world. It was hard to find a place where it was completely still.

Here, it was very much not like that. The water was always flowing at least somewhat and the thieves made good use of that information. What they did, was instead of trying to obscure themselves and risk leaving a large smooth section of the pond with no ripples, or ripples themselves, Kat managed to see the ripples they did leave, just barely. They synced up with the world around them. Slight addition to waves, ripples flowing along with the current. The sounds of birds, and shifting positions. They even synced their breathing to each other and the rustling of the leaves.

Holy heck. The dedication to manage something like this... I mean... I know they have to be Rank 2, maybe Ron Rank 3... but for them to be able to just... blend in like this... it's exceptional. I don't want to think about how many hours of training something like this would require.

Pushing the details of what she'd uncovered to Lily, Kat prompted a second opinion. [Yes this is... something else. I suspect that it would need YEARS of training. The only other way would be if they had an item enchanted to help smooth things over? I doubt it'd be cheap though. The real question is... how well does it work with Qi tracking? I suspect the answer has to be not all that well otherwise Qi tracking wouldn't be such a big deal or everyone would learn this. Rendering it useless as someone figures out a work around.]

My guess is training. The fact they're all breathing together? Unless they do have some artifact for it I don't see how it could be anything but constant practice.

[Yup I agree.]

Kat and Lily were starting to get a sense of just how skilled these thieves were. It was actually a bit of a relief there hadn't been a fight in the end. Kat was confident she could walk away from it unharmed... but only because she trusted her regeneration to fix all the attacks she took during that very same fight. There was no way Xiang and Yang would've been able to get away easily. The only thing that made Kat question how strong they were, was that Lily pointed out if they were assassins or combatants, they wouldn't have bothered with the ambush.

Kat sunk back into her meditation. She would get what rest she could right now while everyone else was awake. She didn't trust herself to keep track of every single thief, and the chance one of them got past

her watch when relying on her meditation was a little too high. Something Kat also missed though... was a patch of bubbles in the centre. What it could mean... well. Kat didn't see it so she had no thoughts of speculation.

Chapter 907 Inner Conflict

The days ticked by with the tensions between the two groups slowly lowering. Xiang and Yang no longer went out of there way to by petty and... well the thieves under Ron didn't really change much. His subordinates seemed to calm down as the days went by, and nobody was complaining but they were... it felt so wrong to call thieves professionals... but they WERE.

On the job they made almost no noise, idle conversation was basically non-existent when they camped for the night. They followed what few orders Ron had for them without question and in a timely manner. Kat knew that many organisations would go to great lengths for such subordinates. Something to note though, was it certainly wasn't all fear.

During one of the quieter days, which really should have been a warning, a massive bird swooped down on the group, trying to take them out. Kat prepared herself, but it was a wasted effort. Ron threw a knife so quickly there was a small sonic boom, it sailed straight through the beast's eye and into the brain. Instead of a graceful dive and clean kill for it...

The bird smashed into two trees, the trees gave up first, splintering even as the bird continued into the ground and then dug a large trench with its beak. Wings bent and broken at odd angles. Kat couldn't help but be a little surprised. *Could I fight someone like that?*

[Yes... but... not while protecting anyone else. You're fast... very fast... but while you could avoid something small like that... you'd have to be pretty close move anyone else out of the way...]

Good thing we didn't have to fight these guys then...

[Yeah... I don't know what Rank that bird was? Is? Whatever I don't know how strong it is but that was a deadly throw. No hesitation. I guess if you can throw something that fast you don't need to worry too much about the air currents but... damn.]

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Yeah. Impressive but... that could have been us.

[Indeed. I... certainly don't feel quite as safe just hanging out in the air as I was a day ago... but with enough distance I would be able to dodge. Probably.]

I'd really rather you didn't ever feel the need to dodge THAT.

Kat tried not to show any unease at the... aggressive defence from Ron. It helped that a moment later the thieves started to expertly get to work plucking the bird and preparing it to be cooked. Ron gathered everyone around and put on a big cookout. For Ron it was a great way to reinforce two things. His strength, and his compassion. Perhaps not the best way to show compassion but he did share the spiced bird with everyone once it was done cooking.

This meant that after a week of travel together, when the thieves offered, or rather, Ron made the offer for them, to carry Kat's group during the night occasionally to speed things up... the offer was taken

mostly. Kat didn't need carrying, insisting she'd be fine, and there was no way Kat was giving the job of keeping Lily safe to anyone else. Still, Kat it turned out Kat could keep up without any troubles at all. Though it was a little disheartening for Xiang and Yang. They moved faster being carried.

Yang dealt with it by reminder herself that this was all for Xuena. A bit of a hit to her pride as a cultivator perhaps, but Yang had stood together with Xuena for longer then she'd been a cultivator. For a friend like that... well... a bit of damage to her pride was a cheap price. For Xiang though... it was a much deeper wound.

He was finding himself constantly in need of others and it was grating to him. He'd set out with vengeance in mind... and needed a demon to help him complete it. Xiang had insisted Kat barely counted as help. She was sworn to his service after all. What a joke. He just hadn't wanted to admit that his quest was foolish. That he needed someone else to do complete it for him.

The fact that he couldn't remember how things ended. That apparently there was some demon, that clearly wasn't Kat, that finished things up in the sect. The fact that said 'demon' was likely him... or something inside him... it was a bitter pill to swallow. How do you hold your head up when you don't even know your own mind? Things didn't get better from there.

Yang had saved him from the spiders. Reasonable, even expected. He was weak, bound, and poisoned. The worst part was what came after. Xuena was needed to heal him. More people. More strangers he was forced to work with because he was too weak to do it himself. It was one thing to rely on friends but... to cultivate is meant to be a lonely road. To cultivate is to grasp a chance to stand alone at the top. Xiang felt like the only reason he hadn't fallen off the damned mountain was because strangers ahead of him had tied their own climbing ropes around his waist. Preventing his fall.

Even his quest to get Xuena back. To repay the debt he'd taken on. Sure they'd never asked for this sort of payment... but Xiang knew it would be a heart demon had he not. He'd set out. To look for a way. To look for a chance. He found it too... in Kat. Again. Xiang was happy at the time, a nice force multiplayer, a familiar face. But not really a friend. So he tried, he tried to be as friendly as possible. He tried to make it so that he wasn't just some weakling clinging to the demon. He wasn't taking on more debt to clear those he already had. Like a drunken man gambling away his life savings. Getting a loan. And then doing it again.

Xiang bit back tears as he thought about the swamp after that. A disaster. If Kat wasn't there he'd be dead. Yang would be dead. Even if he had nine lives... he'd have lost them all. The snake, the poison on both himself and Yang. The understanding that they needed to ASK someone what to do. Then, the stupid insistence they sell the snake. It got them attacked by a band of high-class thieves.

Only by the grace of some twisted god and Kat's strength did they manage to get out of that one alive. He'd seen the bird after all. Dropped in a single throw. Xiang wasn't stupid. He tasted the bird as they ate. Felt the Qi from its flesh infusing him. That damned bird had been stronger than him. It wasn't even a contest. Ron simply reacted. A minor inconvenience, a bit of food for the night.

Now, now they couldn't even run. They were clearly taking too long for Ron's taste and now Xiang found himself to be dead weight. Sure he was passed around between the thieves, letting them stay fresh enough to make it through the night and then without sleep the next day... but Kat ran, she watched at

night when asked. Yang was at least doing some of the cooking. Am I even worthy of seeking to get stronger?

Xiang didn't know anymore. It was a weight that was threatening to crush him. To turn into a heart demon. To stifle his cultivation, possibly forever. Xiang wouldn't let it solidify. He couldn't let it solidify into a concrete belief... but the fact he was currently a bigger burden than a sack of rice wasn't helping matter. At least the rice could feed them in the future. At least the rice could be stored away during transit. At least the rice had a firm purpose.

What did it mean to be the strongest? Xiang was beginning to think he'd been an idiot for a long, long time. He wanted to punch mountains and sneeze rivers. He wanted a kick to be a new local landmark. He wanted to look down on everyone and know that he could take them all on. At once. These notions of strength were seeming sillier and sillier every minute.

Kat was strong. She didn't flaunt it though. Kat listened, she deferred. Kat used as little strength as it seemed possible for every situation. Sometimes that required a lot, normally a little strength of hers was overkill. Even when Kat actively tried to be intimidating she didn't really go for it. She didn't say 'I am a killer demon with demonic flames'. Kat had pulled out a TINY bit of fire, and simply asked. 'Do you know'?

It was as much a challenge as it was a question. Xiang DID know but he felt way too much of that knowing came from seeing Kat in action. He wasn't sure that just looking at the fire, he'd be powerful enough to tell what a threat it was. It made him think, that in addition to being an idiot... perhaps he was blind as well. In that moment though... his mind was thrown back in time.

An old gnarled woman. One eye missing and legs shrivelled up like prunes, rocking on a chair in one of the smaller, but nicest houses in town. A cultivator. She must have been, Xiang now knew. She'd laughed when he explained his dream to be strong. "Ha! A boy like you? It'll never happen. You are blind and stupid boy. Give up now, or hope that one day someone rips your eyes out. Perhaps then you can see,"

Xiang felt something change in that moment. He might still be an idiot. He might not truly realise what the future has in store for him... but perhaps... perhaps the fact that he can see now just how big the world truly is... he might not be quite so blind anymore.

Chapter 908 A Moment of Peace at the River

Waltzing right up to the Endless Rain of Immortal Ice sect, which was still a mouthful, would've been the height of foolishness. Not only was Xiang probably, and Yang definitely known quantities, Ron's crew were all dressed up in black. What the group did instead was situate themselves on the edge of a river that flowed down through the sect. Ron's crew now looked normal, like a family, though it was all a facade. A series of complex masks in actual fact. Kat watched them go on, and the new clothes appear... but it was still super weird. The face masks went over the completely blank ones.

Yang and Xiang were posing as one 'couple' with Ron and one of the female thieves looking eerily similar to a male, and aged up Yang respectively. The rest of the group had followed suit, matching Yang's appearance with slight variations. The only exception was one of the men, who looked like a wrinkled Xiang and had a walking stick.

Ron then pulled out a number of fishing poles and they arranged themselves at the riverbank under one of the larger trees that could cover basically everyone. Really, Kat was the one who stood out the most here but there was nothing to be done about that. Kat was striking even before the demonic features were taken into account. The fact that cultivators would be able to see her supernaturally perfect skin as just that. Supernaturally perfect, meant there really was no way to hide her, or pretend to be related at all with the masks they were using.

So they just didn't bother. They were close to the edge of Immortal Ice' territory yes but that territory was HUGE. Constant patrols just weren't feasible and they still looked normal enough. Especially from a distance. A family fishing in one of the more productive rivers was a normal sight. The fact they weren't on sect grounds only reinforced this notion. In fact, it was actually stranger to not see anyone else doing the same thing...

Nonetheless the group was together and it was time to double check everyone's plans. "So, we've arrived without trouble. It's probably best we split up here, maybe after spending a day or two planning, with a side of recon, but I do not think it is in either of our best interests to go deeper into enemy territory as two uncoordinated groups. Would you mind sharing how much you know about your friend's whereabouts? I will of course tell you what I know of their storage areas in exchange,"

Ron said this without turning his head, he made it look like he was completely focused on the rod in front of him. Waiting for the right moment to reel in whatever his catch would be. It was a superb level of acting that... really just couldn't be matched by the rest of the group. Except for that one pretending to be an old guy, but he just had to complain a bit every now and then, while pretending to fall asleep... or actually doing so? Kat wasn't entirely sure but that seemed like the thief that took the most turns carrying Xiang and Yang through the night.

"I... should we really be telling you that?" said Xiang after just a moment of hesitation. There just wasn't any point whispering the information. Ron had proved he could hear them plenty well from further away than a fake family gathering where they were all clustered together.

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"It's the cat isn't it?" offered Ron as an answer.

Xiang looked over at Kat as if to say, 'your call' which was of course where Lily was as well. So Xiang didn't exactly hide the answer at all. Kat and Lily were able to see that easily, and were entirely unsurprised. *No choice then I guess?*

[Not really. Do we want to admit I'm also a person?]

Up to you.

[I... I think that we should. I might not trust them all that much... but it would show them we were able to keep a secret, and that we are willing to share it at this point.]

Ok. Lily hopped off Kat's lap and Kat sped her mind up. Lily transformed of course, and Kat got to watch the split second of pure shock on Ron's face. His mouth dropped open, and his eyes went wide. Only for an instant though, if Kat hadn't been using her full speed to take it in, she'd have missed it.

Once it was gone, Kat let her perception return to normal as Lily said, "Indeed, I'll be infiltrating the base first to find our friend, and reporting back about where we need to go,"

Ron made a much more deliberate twitch in his mouth as he nodded, disguising it partially as a test on his line, "You managed to keep that one a secret well... very affectionate for a trained beast. I was so certain she was just a familiar. If you don't mind my asking, how were you able to deal with remaining in animal form the whole time?"

Lily shrugged, "To me it's just as comfortable as my humanoid one. It really isn't an issue and well... Kat IS my girlfriend. Sometimes I might feel a bit weird laying all over her in human form despite that but if I'm a cat... well... it's practically expected. I get her to carry me in her arms, sleep on her, get pets without it becoming indecent. Honestly, the main thing returning to humanoid has going for me at the moment is hands and the ability to speak to people. Oh, and kisses. Those too."

"I see... though another question, seeing as I am already being bold. Why can I not sense any Qi on either of you. Not even during Lily's? I believe you mentioned the young miss name was? Not even during Lily's transformation?" asked Ron.

Kat decided to grin at this. If they were already sharing well... compared to Lily... a being a demon was such a tiny secret in Kat's mind. Kat decided to let her eyes glow, and sent a decent helping of demonic energy. "Why Ron... surely you recognised that you've been cavorting with demons?"

Kat laughed at the shiver that ran down Ron's frame. She couldn't believe it. Lily the transforming half cat? That was fine. Robbing one of the largest sects in the continent? Perfectly fine. Demons though? Ron actually looked unsettled at the revelation. "T-that's why you wouldn't confirm your cultivation?"

Kat nodded, barely noticing that even as she returned her voice to normal wisps of flame still leaked out. "Indeed, neither Lily nor I have any cultivation because we operate on a completely different system after all. Demonic energy,"

"I... you... is it true demons cannot lie?" asked Ron curiously.

Kat nodded, "Yes but only in the specifics. I can easily leave things out, or use examples. For example, I could not honestly say that I think the sky is pink, yet I just said it in that sentence did I not? Because I was saying it was something I couldn't HONESTLY say. Which is true, I cannot honestly say that. However, if I were to say anything other than 'the sky is blue' on it's own then the words would catch in my throat,"

Ron nodded, "Yes... I see. I'm glad I did not choose to fight you. As clear as it is to me now that Xiang and Yang would be no issue to... take out, as it were..." Yang huffed but didn't deny it. "I'm not sure we could've dealt with you at all,"

Kat shrugged and gave an easy example. Lily groaned as Kat pulled out a fan and casually sliced a large gash in her arm, letting black blood drip onto the grass even as the wound healed rapidly in front of their eyes. "Probably not,"

"Now that's just cheating," said Ron.

“Yeah well, what’s important here,” said Lily, “Is that because I lack Qi just like Kat... I can walk or fly around the base with basically no restrictions. Sure people can spot me fine but I won’t try any special wards at all. Though unlike Kat I can lie. The sky is pink you see?”

Ron groaned but kept up his act as the fishing rod twitched as it caught something. He started to ‘struggle’ reeling in his catch for a while as he said, “Look... I don’t want no trouble here. We have an honest deal and I wasn’t thinking of reneging on it... just... I’d also like it if you could get out without making it clear you’re a demon. That sort of stigma... even if you’re clearly friendly... I’ve grown up on stories that say otherwise. Spread through the entire region... I... this has become much riskier for us. More likely to succeed as well... but riskier for the future. Let’s hope we’re all winners at the end of the day...”

Chapter 909 Mission Quite Possible

Lily’s Perspective (*Lily’s thoughts* [Kat’s thoughts])

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Lily bounded from rooftop to rooftop, leaning heavily into her instincts and thanking the clouds in the sky for making it a dark night. Her black fur coat and padded feet made it exceptionally easy to pass undetected as she went. The only real problem is that the ‘compound’ was more like three mountain towns of varying sizes that she’d need to search through. That was a big concern for them all actually, that Lily simply didn’t have time to cover all that much ground.

The closest and largest village was completely ruled out. It was low security and staffed with a bunch of people who had no cultivation at all. Lily simply flew straight over that one. Ron had informed them that the rarest thing you could find there was the food stores for two of the towns. That being said, those stores were guarded by actual cultivators. A full team of Rank 1’s sure, but they were really just there to watch out and raise the alarm. They wouldn’t stop Ron’s team, but they also didn’t have anything Ron’s team would ever want. Sure some of the food was high quality, but if that was their goal, there were better storage areas to hit.

Still, Lily found she didn’t really know what to look for now she was at the... ‘outer disciple compound’ or at least that’s what it was called. Apparently Xuena would need to be in more restricted areas if she was anywhere at all... but Ron hadn’t been all that helpful in explaining where they were, having never visited the town himself. Apparently they were near the instructors lodgings... which were where exactly? Nobody seemed to know, and Lily wasn’t sure what to look for either.

What do you think these instructor dorms actually look like?

[I don’t really know Lily.]

See, the problem is that there are what look like family homes, then there are... well still homes but clearly a step up from that... and then finally there are four big mansion-lite buildings. Except the not-mansions are all spread out around this damned city! I’m currently sitting atop what I think is the cultivation tower? I think they’ve concentrated the ice qi in the area here because even standing on top of it I can... sort of feel it? I’m not cold per say... but I have this thing in my head insisting I SHOULD be cold.

[Um... let me ask Ron....]

Lily continued to scan the place. It was quiet, and the patrols were fairly basic. It seems the sect was much too used to its power. The guards were patrolling yes, but she doubted there had been an attack in memory of what were basically kids with big sticks. Perhaps a little insulting... but they just paid no attention. One of them Lily was watching tripped over a crate that was left out... but it was sticking out into the road! They had lamps! It was perfectly visible!

What was worse, despite being surprised, he just... pulled himself back up, looked around a bit and spotted the box... then moved on. Didn't shove it out of the way, didn't draw weapons, didn't roll to try to get some distance. He just... didn't do anything. *Like... ok sure I know that's what I would've done a year ago but my world is so much safer and I've never BEEN ON GUARD DUTY.*

[Um... do I want to ask?]

No probably not.

[Right well... I asked Ron, and he said that the mansions are supposed to be the instructor areas but he didn't know there was three of them either. Which... he's actually really annoyed to hear now that you've mentioned it. Apparently the intel he got on this place seemed quite good, if a little cheap when he bought it. Now it seems the guy who sold it to him was obviously a plant. Or well, that's what he's telling me. He's sort of... ranting under his breath? He's trying not to be loud about it but he clearly isn't happy.]

I suppose that makes sense. So... does he have anything worth mentioning though?

[Sort of? Ron said it was just a guess, but if Xuena is being held here, it'd be in the residence containing the instructor, or instructors for Alchemy. She's too valuable as a researcher and crafter to just lock up somewhere else. Even if it might give her the tools to escape, she doesn't have the cultivation to actually get away properly.]

Is there a way to tell which one that is? They all look the same to me.

[Ron says go and smell them. It'll be obvious unless the inscription work is REAL good.]

Right... Lily hopped down from her perch, using her wings to soften the landing and then started dashing for the closest one. So what is everyone else up to now I'm gone?

[Well... Xiang and Yang are having trouble sitting still. Oh wait, let me back up. Ron brought out a bunch of hammocks for everyone. So we're all hanging lounging around in one each. We've got a massive fire going, that you can see for ages. Which is apparently the point, a bit of fish cooking still though they're mostly for snacks? You were there for the main meal of course.]

[Um... so yeah, Xiang and Yang are just... having difficulties. Apparently being this close and then told to wait instead of sneaking in with you... has not been a decision they're all that happy with. I don't know if they were happy with it before and just now it's started to bug them... or if they were just holding back earlier when we were planning. Now they're just... well to say they're laying down is wrong. They're sort of... jittering around in their own hammocks? It's really weird to look at.]

I wish I could have some of that extra fish. Thought Lily wistfully as she started to sniff the area around the first house. Definitely a failure. She could smell waaay more sweat than she was really comfortable thinking about. It was either the combat instructor or the blacksmith's house, but based on the lack of other forge related scents, she was voting combat instructor as she snuck away to the next area.

[Lily... you already ate a whole fish and it was larger than you.]

Look Kat, I don't pretend to know how my new body works and I've done a lot of exercise since then. I just feel like I deserve a bit of fish.

[I'll never deny you deserve whatever you want Lily. I'm just surprised you want MORE fish.]

While sweet Kat, I do not deserve everything, and please don't let me get away with something like that. As for wanting more fish? I think it has to be a feline thing, maybe also a combination of that and my recent activity. It's weird. I don't feel hungry, but I do want fish just because I heard about it. Not sure why that is...

Kat didn't really have any response to that as Lily reached the next mansion. This one... didn't actually smell like all that much to her nose. Sniffing again Lily thought she might just barely be able to make out the smell of old paper... but if so it was really faint even to her nose. *Hey Kat. I can't smell anything around this one. What does Ron think?*

Lily backed off and hopped onto the roof of one of the smaller nearby houses. Lily wasn't too worried about being caught, but no sense developing bad habits. [Right so... Ron thinks there's a good chance that's the Inscription Instructor's house. They probably gave themselves better protections, or maybe just some more specific stuff. If they went so far as to beef up their security though... might need to check that one as well if Xuena isn't in the last house.]

Yay. More work. Thought Lily with a huff that Kat could really only perceive as fondness. This was mostly due to the fact that, across the link, that was Lily's main emotion. It didn't really matter that the work was boring. Lily just had to sink into her instincts, and it was all second nature. Keeping to the shadows, making sure movement was obscured. Don't make too much noise in the pouncing. All simple stuff...

But Lily was USEFUL. Seeing Kat take down the snake was terrifying. Watching her negotiate with Ron wasn't as scary, but Lily still felt useless for it. The only time Lily felt she did anything on the trip was during the bear hunt but even then... Kat had to save her from HERSELF for crying out loud. It felt... not good per se to be doing something without Kat but... it felt good to be trusted. To be relied upon. Sure, she wished Kat was closer. That they weren't separated by a two hour flight, though probably less for Kat.

Now though... sneaking through the compound. This was all Lily. Kat was too large and completely untrained. Kat's instincts would tell her how to move in ways that attract attention. Ron, for as good as his team was... were still human and limited by that. Plus that had Qi which didn't help. To say nothing of Xiang and Yang... all the better.

Chapter 910 This is a Weird

Still Lily

Lily felt like she'd been slapped with something unpleasant. It was as if someone had distilled the essence of the forest, then the sea, into a pill. Ground that up into a fine powder before throwing it all into mud from a swamp and then hurling it at her face. It was just too much. Her brain was having trouble processing all the conflicted sense and it was causing havoc with just... well everything. It all just appeared suddenly as well. Lily had taken a few steps onto the yard and then the smell had just appeared.

Groaning, she managed to barely drag herself into the shadow of the nearby bushes and flopped down in the dirt as the scents continued to assault her nose. Her mind wasn't really in any better shape. It was struggling horribly to keep up with all the inputs. This was a nearly unprecedented occurrence. Lily's mind and soul were actually relatively weak when compared to her new body and they were really feeling it now.

Lily's improved brain and magical capacity had been completely offsetting this issue until now, but this sort of scent-based confusion was just not something humans ever had to deal with. Lily would eventually be able to just ignore or, if practiced, pick out the individual scents in this horrendous cocktail but she just wasn't anywhere close that this stage. It wasn't that the smell was potent, the swamp would have done her in that way. It was because this was an alchemist laboratory.

They took potent ingredients, turned them into even more potent ingredients, or simply changed them into a different set of potent ingredients and then finally into finished products. All of which left scents around and regularly tried to cling to things. The thing about alchemy, was that all the fancy ingredients, especially the fancy ones, were Qi infused by necessity and tended to embody one or more concepts. Those sorts of things didn't just go away. Even if they were weak, too weak to really do anything with they clung to things. The beakers, the tables, the floors. The clothes the alchemists wore. Mostly importantly they built up in the air.

Therein lied the problem of many an amateur alchemist. Ventilation. See, at first you just send it outside. Then the neighbours complain so you do nothing. Then they complain to the inscriptions' master who agrees and puts up scent containing wards. What those inscription masters don't know, is alchemy. So they just ward up the scent and leave it to stew in a box. The alchemist doesn't care, he or she is sending it all outside so it's fine right? Well the wards happen to be 3D. With a roof, or they're just spheres. So the smell builds up. The alchemist gets used to it of course, and everyone else has to deal with it. Lily was now having to deal with it.

.....

Kat was sort of freaking out on the other end of the link. Sure she could feel that Lily wasn't terrified or being tortured... but it certainly wasn't a pleasant experience. Unlike normal, where thoughts and emotions were able to flow freely down the link each way, it was a lot more like Lily's mind wasn't able to contain all her thoughts and they were awkwardly, and jaggedly, being shoved into Kat's mind. Now, the link wasn't really blocked. It had theoretically infinite space... but Kat couldn't really send back reassuring thoughts despite that because Lily's mind was certainly NOT up to dealing with any additional inputs no matter how nice they may be.

Which left Kat a little confused as to what she should... do with all this junk she seemed to be getting. If her mind was a library, and most things went on the shelves, the important things went onto glass displays, the annoying things were hidden in the back rooms and the day-to-day stuff that sort of blended together went to the stacks... well the new stuff from Lily was like someone had kicked down a wall and then hurled garbage in.

Kat... Kat didn't know what to do with... well any of it. Should she be packing it away somewhere? Trying to destroy it? Assuming that was possible of course. Was it better to try and make some sense of it and then slowly feed it back to Lily? Were these actually Lily's memories or just her mind overloading and producing the equivalent of error text? Even if it was the latter... was that still important? Kat just didn't know.

Looking at it all mentally was a lot like trying to determine if these large pieces of broken stained glass pieces were just off-cuts or if someone had dumped a wonderful piece of art after it had fallen apart. Kat decided maybe dealing with it, in this odd sort of imaginative way she was currently attempting was unproductive and ducked into meditation instead. That... well it simplified things but really didn't give any hints as to the correct way of going about things.

Kat's normal pond now had a river... or stream? In meditation space things could be a little weird and there wasn't anything else to compare the second water source to. It was starting to pour into Kat's own pool... but it all seemed to be just... water in the end. It was the same colour even. Sure it was rushing in and causing ripples but it seemed it posed no threat to Kat herself. Which, really wasn't the damned point.

Kat couldn't help but be rather annoyed with her meditation. Sure 'not a problem, keep trucking on Kat' was a nice thing to see. The water wasn't even changing the waterline in her main pool... but Kat really didn't care if it was causing problems for her mind so much as if it was causing problems for LILY'S mind. Kat didn't even know who to ask about this sort of thing.

So instead she had to just sit there and worry. There was nothing she could do. There wasn't even anything Kat could punch or properly direct her anger at. It was all just... smells. So Kat had to just let that irritation simmer inside her. Kat stayed in her meditation trying to get a handle on that and maybe find something she missed that would help Lily. Perhaps if she could track back the stream maybe? It seemed to come from nowhere but that obviously wasn't the case.

Kat pondered the possibility for about half a second before throwing that idea out the window completely. Sure it Kat could stop the flow. It wouldn't even be hard. It just WASN'T THE PROBLEM. It couldn't possibly help Lily. None of the 'water' was making its way back to Lily's end of things. So obviously that wouldn't help. Kat's mind and soul were much more robust, they could simply deal with the junk. Kat might not have cared, but in truth, it was just that. Junk. Her mind would remove it. Even with a perfect memory, these weren't even memories so much as failed attempts at identification. It was a lot closer to putting in a request for information and getting back gibberish than a true memory. So all the overflow reaching Kat just sort of ended.

On the outside though, a few people in the camp were giving Kat the side-eye. The air around her was getting colder, and every breath Kat took was accompanied by a small puff of flame. It was... fine... technically... for now at least. The main bonfire was still more than bright enough to offset the small

flashes of purple from Kat but only for so someone not paying all that much attention. They didn't want to interrupt her though in case something important was happening.

On Lily's end... things were slowly starting to make sense. Well, not 'make sense' so much as she could comprehend the possibility of thoughts more complex than 'Ugh' which was great. Lily could also sort of tell something was helping to relieve that pressure. She wasn't in anywhere close to a state that could even generously be called 'her right mind' so she just sort of shoved it all away towards that area. Kat would soon receive a flood of nonsense and Lily... well it actually worked.

When recounting this story later to Nira and the other doctors, the demons would be collectively stumped. That is NOT how the link is supposed to work at all. The stuff normally pushed down it is never removed, it's just a sharing of impressions. Also, while Kat and Lily's minds are connected. They should still be distinctly different entities. This sort of... offloading should have done nothing but potentially clog up Kat's own mind had it been weaker. Instead...

Lily was just fine. Well, no, it still smelled horrible and Lily felt like her mind had been through an industrial press but compared to just moments ago things were practically fantastic. The crazy pair didn't even think they'd done anything strange. Crazy ass demons that weren't always demons. Always breaking things.