

DEMONS 311

Chapter 311: Dodging the Question

Kat learnt two things when she finally left the bed at Sylvie's urging. The first, was that they had a bathtub in the house. The second was that Kat did not feel comfortable using, or sharing said bath.

She had known it was a bad idea when Sylvie asked her. Kat, even with her improved memory, couldn't remember a time when she had showered with anyone, and the orphanage didn't exactly have a bath. When she tried to decline Sylvie's offer though, the girl had just pouted at her, and the rest was history. Kat had just sighed, and agreed after finding her phone to send a message off to Lily.

This led Kat to then spend ten uncomfortable minutes trying to wash herself in a bathtub clearly not designed for people with wings while trying to convince Sylvie to actually wash herself instead of just messing around. It was disturbing, because Kat couldn't remember the last time Sylvie had acted so childish and was wondering what the strange change in behaviour was about.

Nonetheless, Kat got through it and was now eating breakfast with everyone. Well, 'eating breakfast' wasn't entirely accurate. Callisto and Sylvie were eating, and Kat was picking at the food absentmindedly, but Vivian of all people was face down on the table snoring. Callisto and Sylvie were just ignoring this and eating peacefully.

It took five minutes for Kat to decide they must have been messing with her, and went to confront them about it, however before any sound could leave her mouth, Sylvie and Callisto both put their fingers against their lips signalling her to be quiet in perfect sync. Kat just raised an eyebrow and went back to the food.

What the heck is going on here today? The only one acting normally is Callisto and even that is debatably because a lot of the time I don't see her eating.

Another five minutes passed, before Vivian sat up and just started eating like nothing was wrong. Kat gave a quick glance at Callisto begging with her eyes for an explanation but none was forthcoming.

Kat waited patiently for everyone to finish eating, and then went over to the lounge. Vivian joined her shortly and said "Sorry about that, I've been a little busy recently"

"Ah... that's ok... are you sure you're alright though?" asked Kat

"Of course" said Vivian beaming at Kat. Her smiling face was in contrast to her messy pyjamas and hair, but it still seemed genuine.

Yeah... let's just. Turning her head to look over the couch, Kat said "Hey Callisto, is Vivian ACTUALLY ok?"

Callisto paused on the dish she was cleaning. Sylvie, who was sitting on the bench nearby, looked at Callisto as well, waiting for the answer. "Hmmm, well... I suppose I can say she is fine? But also not really. She's managed to destroy her sleep schedule after picking up an extra project to keep her busy when she was worried about you. She's finished both the extra and original one now, but she's still in overwork mode"

Kat turned to glare at Vivian, but the blonde just smiled back at her "I really am fine Kat. I used to do this all the time when I was first starting out. Really, it's no problem, and I didn't pick it up only because I was worried about you, but because I owed the client a favour. I'll just sleep at slightly odd hours for a few days, nothing to worry about" said Vivian trying to be reassuring.

Kat pursed her lips and sunk back into thought. *Dammit. Even if that's true, and Vivian wasn't just worrying about me... I'm not sure I want to share what happened on my last contract... it's more than a little brutal and I don't want her worrying even more for me. That might be the worst outcome.*

Deciding to at least show her support, Kat stood up and grabbed Vivian off the armchair she had settled in and pulled her into a hug before sitting back down on the couch. Kat was happily abusing her much taller frame and longer arms to give her adoptive mother a hug like this.

Sylvie, seeing what Kat was doing, gave Callisto a smile and jumped up on the couch as well, before slipping into Vivian's lap and snuggling into her. "I'm fine guys really, and Kat, isn't this a bit heavy for you? You should be careful you know"

Kat heard the concern in Vivian's voice like a stab to the heart. The worry she was already emanating for Kat even in her position wasn't pleasant feeling. *Dammit Vivian. You were asleep on the table not five minutes ago, shouldn't I be asking you that? And besides, I'm supposed to be a powerful demon. If I can't abuse my super strength to hug multiple people without losing circulation in my legs, then what good am I?*

"Oh? Really? Well Vivian I'll have you know I'm perfectly fine" said Kat, and just to prove her point she stood up, Vivian in a princess carry now, with Sylvie settled on top, and pushed some energy into her wings. *This is going to hurt, but I need to reassure them.*

As Kat started flapping, she hovered slightly with the two in her arms gaping. "See, I'm fine. I can easily lift both of you with my wings, a little bit of weight on my legs is nothing" said Kat quickly stopping and sitting back down so that they wouldn't have a chance to notice the building pain. Kat was lucky the pain was indeed nothing... compared to having your energy channels ripping themselves apart.

As Kat sat there, keeping Vivian and Sylvie tied down, a thought crossed her mind. When she had been thrown around during her fight with Xiao, she had dropped her fans along the way. She wasn't pleased by this realisation but made sure to keep the frown from her face in case anyone else picked up on it.

Kat then felt another pang of guilt realising that she was more upset about a missing hunk of metal than the fact that people died while she was away. *Hey system? I doubt it but do I have any way to get those back? They seemed like a nice set of fans.*

User Kat will find them on User Kat's person.

What?

User Kat will find them on User Kat's person.

I know that dammit... but... Kat carefully dropped her left hand to her obi and checked for the fans that shouldn't be there. Except... they were? *Ok please explain this system.*

User Kat's chosen weapon is considered to be part of User Kat's Demonic Attire and were transported out of the dimension alongside Kat.

What? I thought I couldn't change my attire?

User Kat cannot at this Rank, however User Kat can add things to User Kat's Demonic Attire if they meet certain criteria.

Well that would have been nice to know before I started freaking out about lost fans. "Are you alright Kat?" asked Vivian snapping Kat out of her thoughts.

"Ah yeah I am" said Kat

Vivian and Sylvie turned to face Kat as best they could and pouted at her in sync. "Are you sure?" asked Vivian.

Dammit... that's cheating, but at least I have an answer. "Ah yeah, I was just upset about realising I'd lost my weapon in the last summoning before I realised I still have them, see" said Kat before pulling the fans from her sash and showing them off.

This however, did not assuage the pair on her lap. They looked just as concerned if not more so. It was Sylvie who spoke this time, with Vivian holding the pout at full power. "Kaaat, why did you nearly lose your weapon?"

Kat had to use her full control. Not to gulp at the question. "Well, it's a little complicated. It's nothing to worry about though really. I just thought I dropped them"

"Kat" said Vivian with a sigh, making sure to flick her eyes at Sylvie to attract Kat's attention to Sylvie who was pouting with full force and supporting what Vivian was saying. "You were in the hospital. YOU. Kat, Callisto told us how good your regeneration is, and we confirmed it with D.E.M.O.N.S estimation. Anything that could cause YOU of all people had to pretty serious"

Kat gave a pinched smile, trying and failing to make it look genuine. "Really, it wasn't so bad, it was just a little problem. My regeneration is so good that they don't pull my out when I take light damage. So I had to be watched in the hospital for a few days afterwards and now I'm completely fine"

"Kat" said Vivian, voice going sharp. "I know you literally cannot lie to me. But stop lying to me. We were provided proper details when you ended up in the hospital, explaining what the injury was and that you were very much unconscious for a few days before waking up. I'm not mad that it happened, but I am a little annoyed you tried to avoid telling me about it"

Kat tightened the hug she had on the pair. "Sorry" mumbled Kat into Vivian's back.

Chapter 312: Lily Joins the Cuddle Pile

It was shortly after this that Kat heard the door unlocking and watched Lily walk into the room. Her brown hair seemed even messier than normal, and despite the sunny weather was wearing a sweater and long pants. Her eyes had massive bags under them that extended so far down you could see them around her large glasses. Despite this though, she had a bright smile on her face, and was walking as fast as she could without actually jogging inside.

Lily threw herself happily into the pile, and snuggling into Kat's side, draping her second arm around the other too. "You're finally back" said Lily, with an almost blinding amount of cheer.

Kat felt the sting of guilt once again. She was the ONLY one who wasn't enjoying her return. Everyone was so clearly happy to have her back, and all she could do was worry about what they would think of her. "Glad to be back Lily" said Kat

A part of Kat wondered when she had become so shallow, but another, louder part, pointed out that she wasn't shallow, she was trying to figure out what to do about watching people DIE, which was certainly no simple matter. Combining that with the worry that the only reason she didn't feel bad might be because she isn't human anymore, and it gave Kat plenty to worry about.

The main clash as well, is that even if the only reason I don't feel bad about their deaths is because I'm a demon... I still don't regret it. I'd take it as a more than fair trade, in fact I might even want to argue it's better this way. I certainly wasn't responsible for their deaths; I mean I didn't kill them and they were attacking me... but Xiao's death is a little harder to justify than the bandits. He was just defending his home even if he was awful before that.

The group sitting around Kat seemed to notice her introspection and hugged her tighter, letting her calm down. Kat was willing to let go of the matter for now at least, and focus on other things. Kat returned the hugs she was receiving and then started to explain the things Kara had taught her. Callisto was writing down the information as Kat spoke and the others were listening intently, if silently. It was a bit awkward for them to join properly and face Kat to speak when they wanted to ask questions.

Going through everything Kara said took them to lunchtime, which had them finally disentangle themselves. Kat was so wrapped up in the story, she didn't notice Callisto getting lunch. Of course, that was actually because Callisto got lunch earlier knowing that everyone would likely spend the morning talking, but Kat was so used to Callisto pulling off crazy things without notice she just assumed she hadn't been paying enough attention.

Once they finished eating, Kat briefly touched on the punishment she didn't really know about yet, and managed to convince the others to leave worrying about it for later. They still had plenty of time together for now, and there really wasn't much information they had available.

Finally, once Kat had explained that, the others were about to ask about the end of her journeys with Xiang, but Kat deflected saying "We've heard so much from me already though. You guys have had a project of your own, haven't you?" said Kat looking pointedly at Lily.

Now, if Lily's face was already brightly lit with a rare full smile, and glittering eyes, now she was practically blinding. She radiated happiness and pride at being addressed by Kat over the list of races they had to choose from. Sylvie and Callisto shared a quick glance, but didn't interrupt when they saw just how happy Lily was.

"Well, I mean it wasn't really all that much" Kat held her gaze steady on Lily and raised an eyebrow very deliberately. Kat knew Lily very well, and considering that even with her own memory she could hardly make anything from the list, it had to be a lot of work. "Ok, fine maybe it was a bit of work

"But, but" said Lily holding up a hand "It's been so much fun. I mean sure I've lost a lot of sleep, but I just can't stop. This is the most interesting thing I've ever worked on Kat. It tells me so much about the wider

multiverse and all this information is for ME. I don't think I've ever had the chance to research something so close to my own heart really.

"I mean, Kat, I don't know how I can ever repay you for even offering me something like this." Kat tried to butt in but Lily didn't stop "No Kat. I've been struggling to find something, anything that I might want to do and you gave me MAGICAL RESEARCH Kat. Even just the list of races is probably the nicest thing any has done for me and you are offering me MAGIC POWERS Kat"

Kat once again tried to interrupt, but for once, Lily wasn't willing to back down from her stance. "Look, I know you want to say it's no big deal Kat, and you know what, every other time you've said that to me after helping me in some major way, I've let you say it, and hell, maybe after this it would even make it TRUE that those things weren't a big deal. But Kat this is the BIGGEST DEAL, and it's almost certainly the biggest deal it could ever be. I don't know that anything could even be better, and if there is something, I certainly can't even conceive it. Ok?"

Kat swallowed and stared back at Lily. She was still blindingly happy, but there was steel in her eyes as well. She was putting her foot down here. *I... I just... Lily... I mean, I got those from something that wasn't even that hard... I mean... it didn't even take me a day Lily, I've earned less from those times I was gone nearly a week.*

Kat opened her mouth the smallest fraction but Lily just shook her head and glared back. Biting her lip, Kat let herself react. *Fine Lily. I won't fight you on this one.* "Good? Good" said Lily nodding. "Now that we've established that, we can go over some noteworthy things I've found.

"The first, is that there are two main categories of race change. I mean, the system has others, but really, I see two maybe three. The first, is making me MORE something else and LESS human. Adding something to me that will take over most of my human DNA or transforming it somehow.

"This is almost always for other humanoid races, and I'd be more like a half human half whatever. I'm not sure how to class, Vampire and Dhampir in this system because apparently I have the option to end up as both, and a number of different types of either.

"The main reason those are confusing is because you can turn a human into a Vampire, but a Dhampir is a half vampire, half something else that was born from one vampire parents. Not all kinds of vampire can do this, and sadly, the system won't give me the option to mix and match that way, or at least not with dhampir's and just one token.

"That's the other thing actually. There are a lot of half races that I just won't be able to choose. Not everything can mix but a lot of them can, so say... there are, half elves for example. I'd only be able to pick half elf, half human, and not... half elf half dwarf or something.

"Now, the way D.E.M.O.N.S talks about these and how they are done, half might not be the best word for it, and I'd get more from the magical side than my human side, but it would at least let me say I'm human for certain things. I... I'm not quite clear on why that would be a benefit, but basically it would make me as... Elfish as I could be while still being at least partially human.

"Not sure where the tipping point is, and I know that some races can be mixed a couple times, but I can't choose those myself. That took me a lot longer to figure out than I care to admit, because the list was

just all the possible options, not all the possible options for ME specifically. I may have lost some sleep fixing that up"

Lily was talking much faster than normal, and while Kat hardly noticed because she was able to keep up with the words, Vivian had a slightly strained smile as she tried to keep up with the 'rampaging girl' "Right so, the second type, which... is a lot weirder in some cases when I asked for the specifics, involve becoming something else completely. I'd say it's like you become a demon but it isn't really. It's more like... more like destroying my current body, and keeping my mind around. Not quite sure how that works, or what age I'd be, but it's a thing I can do."

Chapter 313: Cho tomatte

"Ok I think I have to stop you there" said Vivian

Lily pouted but didn't protest. "I know you're quite proud of these options, and I know you want to look into them but for now, can we discuss the ones you've already gone over. I do have some concerns"

"I only have a few more though..." said Lily

Vivian gave a soft smirk and looked Lily in the eyes, waiting for the girl to crack first. "Ok fine. Those four ARE the main ones that I was considering. There are a bunch of others that are interesting to hear about though, even if they aren't really suitable for me"

Vivian gave Lily a kind smile. "True, but while everyone's here how about we just go over the ones you've already listed, and maybe just... skim the others lightly pointing out the main problems with them ok?"

Lily bit her lip and looked a little pained but nodded. "Yeah that's ok. Sorry, I guess I got carried away"

"Don't worry about its Lily" said Sylvie with a cheeky smile on her face, "I'm sure Kat would be happy to hear the rest"

"Ah I wouldn't want to bother her, if I've already started to ramble" said Lily

"Why? We always do this though?" said Kat "I'm perfectly happy to listen to you talk"

Lily looked away and coughed quietly into her hand. "Right well... umm, anyway. So, those four are the main ones because of Kat's lifespan. Once she mentioned that I made it a deciding factor. There are a few others that can compete for different reason or are just interesting, but it's harder to get a comparable lifespan from them.

"The system did seem to imply that there were ways around that for basically any of them, but those four get it by default for the most part" said Lily

"Hmm even slimes? I confess I didn't help with that section" said Callisto

"Ah, yeah, apparently they don't really age the same way well... anything does? The only thing important about them is their core which in a Queen Slime is a gem-like structure. They just don't age because of that, or well, they can't die of old age"

Callisto nodded "Right, and Dragons live forever, Kitsune are the same I'd assume, and Vampires are frozen in time right?"

Lily waved her hand from side to side "Well, you are mostly correct but the Kitsune at one tail have a somewhat short life, however once they get to three tails, they have plenty of time. Technically their lifespan isn't quite as good as a dragon by default, but with just a bit of consistent effort they gain massive amounts of lifespan with each tail."

Callisto nodded "Right I guess that makes sense. Is that really all the long-lived races though?"

Lily shrugged "I mean... sometimes? Elves for example, live quite a while for no effort at all... but trying to increase that limit is apparently even harder than a human, which is supposed to be one of the hardest already. There is also races like dryads that are actually a tree. They live for quite a while, but the human body they have is just a projection.

"That means if I wanted to help Kat out, I'd have to move my TREE form. That alongside the fact that there isn't any mana for me to use on Earth here, it would be quite the hassle" said Lily

Sylvie's eyes narrowed "Is there enough mana for the other races you were looking at? Slime seems the most questionable, and Kitsune perhaps as well"

Lily shook her head "Nope, Slimes are fine. They can break pretty much anything down and convert it into mana even if they're drawn to large concentrations of it. Kitsune as well, they only need mana occasionally. Vampires are completely fine, it's actually if I chose Dragon where I might have an issue"

"To grow up physically they require a tonne of mana and protein... so... that might be an issue. At the very least, it's not a constant draw, and I don't know exactly how much but if Kat's system says it's A LOT it must be a massive amount"

Callisto nodded "I do suppose that makes sense. I'm surprised that Slimes can generate mana from essentially nothing"

"Um... well, I wouldn't say nothing, and I'm not completely sure... but I think they are kind of like mana nuclear reactors. Um, I mean... they are MUCH safer than that, and can't go critical, but yeah... I think they like... generate something that makes more mana, and then they can keep going as long as they have something to keep burning?" said Lily

"Hmmm" mumbled Callisto. Sylvie chimed in with "If you became a powerful enough Slime would you start releasing mana?"

Everyone in the room froze. "That... that's a good question and a potential problem" said Lily

I hope this doesn't spoil their fun but... System can you confirm that won't be an issue?

User Kat's home dimension will ensure that any Mana produced is kept contained within the Entity that produces it. The only exception to this is if the Entity is powerful enough to push back that Dimensional Force. User Kat is not strong enough to do that, and can only reject it slightly because of the nature of Demonic Energy. Mana has no chance to bypass it without Extreme levels of power.

Everyone else in the room turned to Kat with dull eyes except Lily. "Thank you so much Kat. I should have thought about that really. I'm sure I would have been panicking for ages worrying about that. Good to know that slime is still on the table I suppose"

"Hmm, well that was actually an interesting consideration... Lily I'm overruling Vivian here, what other interesting races did you come across" asked Callisto.

"Err, um" Lily looked to Vivian for approval, and she just shrugged in response "Um well, I mean... there was the Tarasque as an option but... it apparently can't use magic at all and devours planets though. Not sure why that was even on the list of things..."

"Um, there were Brakenzharek... they are... basically living black holes? Which... sure is cool, but they have an average lifespan of like... a week? With the oldest living a grand total of one month... they apparently are born from dying stars instead of black holes, but the energy inside them just escalates until they die and turn into a black hole for real..."

"Um... there is a bunch of elementals? But apparently if I chose any of them I'd go a little crazy for a long time... like... they aren't much better than animals... or maybe... like basic AI? It takes forever for them to get thoughts and because they don't even have brains I'd have nothing to anchor my mind onto until that body generated enough magic to simulate one" said Lily

"Wait... what about slimes? They don't have a brain" said Kat "Or... I hope they don't that would look really creepy..."

Lily giggled at Kat's response "No... well... yes, I mean..." in between giggles. Lily decided to wait till she calmed down a little before speaking again. "Ok... whoo, right sorry for laughing Kat but I couldn't get the idea of a brain bouncing around the countryside out of my head. Um... so they do have a brain, it's their core. Just because it isn't... huh does it count as organic if their brain is a fancy crystal instead of more biological cells?"

"Huh... now that you bring it up though... what about Dryads? Do they technically have a brain considering they are just a giant tree? I wonder... does their avatar have a brain? I'd think not because it's just a projection to make them seem more human... but... I guess depending on how thorough it is they'd make one...?"

"But if it isn't actually doing anything is it really a brain...? Then again... octopi have brains at the ends of their tentacles... or at least they have large nerve clusters that can be argued to be brains which are just large clusters of nerves..."

"But if we consider it that way... trees don't really have nerves and neither do crystals..." Kat smiled as Lily started to get lost in the question. Vivian sighed, realising that everyone else was actually happy to hear Lily talk around in circles.

Vivian smiled to herself and wondered if maybe she was just tired still, and decided that must be it, before putting Sylvie onto Kat's lap, walking over to the last free chair, and falling asleep as soon as she sat down.

Sylvie and Callisto shared a glance at Vivian and just shrugged before going back to Lily's example. She was now debating if artificial intelligences had brains because multiple electrical cables running between

server banks would operate like nerves... and if the server banks themselves housed the mind... and well isn't that a cluster?

Chapter 314: Callisto's Hideout 2 Electric Boogaloo

In the end, nothing further productive was discussed that afternoon before Lily left. Vivian managed to catch up on some much needed sleep, and Sylvie and Callisto joined Lily in puzzling over the increasingly complex and bizarre situations Kat proposed to them. They started discussing things like the nature of existence and if a brain made with magic counted as a real brain, along with, if a brain had legs, does it also have a brain or is it just the brain?

All in all. It was a good time if a little weird. Callisto did offer to cook dinner for Lily, but she insisted on returning home. Callisto managed to extract a promise that she would return tomorrow because apparently Vivian did actually have something to tell everyone. Once Lily had left, Sylvie decided that Vivian had the right idea and curled up next to her.

Callisto, seeing this nodded, and grabbed Kat lightly on the arm, and pulled her to her feet, before indicating she should follow. Kat was confused, but followed Callisto out of the room. She didn't notice Sylvie's eyes were slightly open, nor the nod she gave towards Kat's retreating back before settling in for a proper nap.

Once upstairs, Callisto entered her room and Kat followed carefully. Inside it was much the same as the first time she had seen it, though much cleaner. Where once paper was strewn everywhere now paper was only strewn mostly everywhere, with a clear pathway towards each of the three desks. Kat was directed to the chair that sat in front of the desk with carved quills on it, before Callisto reached over to the chair from the largest desk with all sorts of nonsense carved into it and pulled it over.

Callisto then proceeded to sit there and look at Kat, clearly waiting for her to speak first. With how clear that look was, Kat didn't feel the need to drag it out, and just asked "What?" after five seconds of staring.

"Perhaps you would like to tell me 'what' instead? That is why we are here" said Callisto

Kat frowned "I really don't know 'what' you mean Callisto. I followed you here. I don't see how this suddenly means I have something to tell you?"

Callisto leaned back further in her chair, arms folded in her lap legs stretched out. "Now Kat, I can point out to you the information I am requesting, but it is not truly me who desires to know this information but you that desires to share it without repercussion. I am providing this opportunity for you. It does not seem to be the kind of information that I would overly desire, but it I would guess that it is important that you provide me with it"

What? Is... what? I'm confused... why would I want to tell Callisto anything? No that's wrong, I'm happy to talk with everyone but... that's such a weird way of phrasing it all...

Clearly, Kat's confusion must have shown on her face, because Callisto spoke up again before long. "Kat, I'm more than aware that you did not discuss the events of the final few days during your last contract with the others. Indeed, you held your end of the bargain and sent them messages as requested except for the time you were indisposed and, in this hospital, and yet...

"You happily regaled us with tales from that time, explaining the intricacies of demonic society, or at least, this corner of it. Why, you even provided running commentary during the start of your journey, and while I didn't witness the exact wording personally, I did hear about it and the difference is so stark that it can only mean you are avoiding the topic.

"Adding this onto the fact that nobody asked, and you always steered the conversation away, implies that you are physically capable of speaking about it. If you were perhaps under contract not to, I believe you'd have just told us. Thus, I have come to the conclusion that you must have seen or done something that you are unable to fully process.

"I'm thus giving you the chance to speak about it. You should be well aware of my more clinical take on human interaction, and, while I had my misgivings when you joined this household, and I like to say I trust Vivian's judge of character, you have done nothing but perform exemplary while here on Earth, even going so far as to share the specifics of abilities, which, too, is further evidence of my theory"

Kat sucked in a deep breath. Callisto sounded so sure of herself. It was clear that while she was saying 'theory' and 'guess' there was no uncertainty in her tone. She was simply leaving Kat the option to get out of sharing the information if she so desired. Kat let the silence stretch on for a few minutes, as she contemplated what to do.

*This is perfect isn't it? I mean, who better to tell... but... what's that old saying, 'a secret for two is soon a secret for nobody'... but isn't there that other one about it being a secret between two but never three, or something like that... can't quite remember that one...

Then again, I certainly remember the old 'a burden shared is a burden halved' which would imply I should tell her... and I mean, I do want to tell everyone. I don't want them to think ill of me... but I think it's worse trying to lie to them... well, as much as a demon CAN lie to anyone.*

"I... look, I..." Kat started but stopped, unable to find the words. Callisto, seeing the attempt being made, simply relaxed herself further, keeping her eyes on Kat, unwavering in their intensity. "Look I... when I was away... this time, someone died..."

Callisto nodded slightly but didn't say anything, it was clear Kat had more to say. "That is to say... well, yes someone did die but... well, there might have been two? I mean... the second one was fairly clear but I wasn't exactly in the right headspace to tell, and I... well, I thought my memory was close to perfect but... well apparently if I'm delirious, in pain, and focused on other things... it's a bit lacking and..."

"Look, I'm still sort of dodging the issue. Let's... let's just focus on the first one. So... um... there were these bandits..."

Callisto listened as Kat, in fits and spurts, tried to explain to her everything about the bandit raid. She didn't glorify her actions, nor did she cover up the aggressive nature of the bandits. She told it as truthfully as she could, relying on her memory to get her through, the specifics, by simply reciting actions and making none of her own comments.

Callisto nodded along, until the story finished with Kat describing how and why the leader died. "So... I think I understand your issue. The man attacked you first, and then continued to attack after being defeated which led to his own demise, and you regret not being able to save him?"

Kat shook her head "No actually... or I mean not really... I... I think I could have saved him... or well, I know I had a chance to save him at the very least and even though I didn't I just... don't really care?"

"I mean... I feel worse when I think about how you all will react than I actually do about the fact that some guy is dead... and well, sure he was a bandit, but even the other person who is probably dead I just... don't care for? Like... it doesn't really matter?"

"And I mean... I know I'm having suddenly lost the ability to care or something, because despite being in horrible shape, which yes I will get into later, I got up and protected two children but... I just... isn't death supposed to bother you? Isn't some great evil or something?"

Callisto shrugged. "Well, I will first say that I do not think less of you for the choice you made. I also do not think less of you for your inaction. I do wish I knew more details about this second individual, but I suppose we can address this separately.

"In terms of what I think you should feel... well that is hard. Seeing a man die before your eyes is one thing, and seeing them die before your eyes knowing you could have stopped it had you tried is another... and yet I have no idea what either of these things are like really. I have had family members pass on, and I did not grieve for their passing, not like others. I suspect this is simply a product of how I am.

"And yet, I doubt this gives you comfort, to know that the least sane of the household would condone your actions. Yet, I can tell you this, Vivian would likely wrap you into a hug and tell you it's alright and that you have done no wrong..."

"Though I suspect, that isn't what you want to hear is it Kat?" said Callisto.

Chapter 315: I Would Rather Die

Kat bit her lip. "Honestly, Callisto, I think I'd hate that. Vivian simply telling me it's alright. I think I'd worry forever that she thought worse of me for it but would never say"

Callisto gave a soft laugh, which she swiftly covered with a gloved hand. "You clearly haven't known Vivian as long as I have. I believe I told you about our shared history yes? The woodworking incident and the... other one. You should know Vivian is not afraid at all to simply speak her mind. She would not tell a true friend something she did not believe... she might be a bit soft on them, but at least she would not lie"

Kat shrugged. "I mean... it's one thing to 'know' it, and another to KNOW it, you know?"

Callisto sighed "Your horrible method of phrasing the options aside, I do at least understand the spirit of what you have said and agree with it. Still, knowing that I do not condemn you for your actions, and knowing Vivian likely will not, what part still gives you concern?"

Kat bit her lip again. "Well, I think I explained right? That the part that worries me is that I simply didn't care. Like... say you ripped a piece of paper, and be aware this is a bad analogy, I just can't think of a better one.

"Say you ripped a piece of paper. Well, you don't really care about that right? Then say... you ripped one of Vivian's papers. There isn't even anything on it, hasn't been used, completely fresh paper... but the

fact that it's Vivian's means that it still bothers you. For me, I don't care at all that he died. I can't even find a shred of care for it... but I do care what you all think about the fact that I don't care, like you'd worry about Vivian's thoughts on the paper, even knowing it was silly."

Callisto narrowed her eyes as Kat spoke, eventually nodding before saying. "Yes... I suppose I do see what you mean. I am afraid that I am unable to help you with this one. I think I see the difference you are trying to make though. It isn't that you are comfortable with the decision, or even proud or distraught over it... you simply view it as a thing that happened like getting new groceries, or finding out Vivian didn't clean out the fridge"

"Wait Vivian cleans the fridge?" asked Kat in shock.

Callisto rapidly shook her head "God no, not anymore she doesn't. I mean, she did once upon a time, but... well, I say she 'cleaned' it in the past, but that was more like, she insisted that she help in some way in the kitchen and I gave her a job I thought even she couldn't screw up... well, I was wrong. Now I clean that too, and I'm much happier for it."

Kat opened her mouth to reply and then shut it. *I feel as though we've gone off topic but... that's fine maybe? I mean, it proves that Callisto really isn't that hung up on it... maybe I should go ahead and talk about the rest of the stuff. I'd say I care a bit more about that one than the bandit so here goes...*

"So... there's more to this I guess. Um, right so, shortly after we left the bandits we found the place we were looking for... did I mention that I had to help Xiang get revenge? Yes? No?... No? Ok, well, that's what we were doing..."

Kat went on to explain to Vivian why she was at the Unchained Flaming Sect's compound, or a branch compound anyway, and what Xiang planned to do, as well as the steps she took and what ended up happening. She tried to give as much detail as she could on the happenings from after Xiang had stabbed her the first time and she re awoke. She managed to capture the broad strokes, but a lot of the details were missing, though Callisto could tell Kat had tried to cover everything she could.

"Hmmm, well that is certainly more quanderous than the bandits. There are many ways to look at the events that transpired there, and many more ways to determine if what you did was right. I suppose the simplest way would be to simply accept you were on a job, and that you did said job... passably.

"Not to say you made a mistake, killing children is unacceptable. While those who took up arms against you and Xiang should have been prepared for combat, children are not, but caring about them wasn't in your job description."

Kat blanched at the idea that anyone would think just letting the children get hurt was a good thing.

"Now Kat, I can see the face you are making. Do not look aghast at me. Many people simply divorce themselves from the morality of things once they are ordered. Take the humble soldier fighting for his country

"He did much the same as you, or perhaps, did even less. He killed many people, and endured horrible conditions, simply because that was his duty. A soldier does not question when their commander tells them to shoot. They fire instantly and then reload the barrel no matter what.

"Do you mean to say that any soldier is not a good person? Or perhaps, a better question is... do you think the soldiers in World War 1 or 2 were doing the wrong thing?"

Kat gulped. *How the heck did we get here? I just... well ok fine I guess deciding if you did the right thing is pretty complicated, so maybe this is relevant.* "I guess... it depends on what side of the war you are on?" guessed Kat

Callisto however, shook her head "That is a weak mindset Kat. Or at least, not a properly thought out one. Every soldier in those wars, or more accurately, most soldiers in those wars was fighting for the betterment of their country. Their home. You may think yourself more of a mercenary, but Xiang had a goal, a belief, that he was protecting his home."

Huh... I didn't really think about that did I? I mean I kind of did... but more in the 'He's doing this for his home' then 'He believes he is making the world better' and sure I did use that argument that I was basically filling in for a police force in a way but... hmmm.

"I guess he was but... I didn't have to accept helping him... and he went way off the deep end at the end there... but even then, I dunno if I should have killed Xiang or not. Sure Xiang did him in at the end, but I'm the one who fought him until Xiang got up and rampaged, I'm at least partially responsible for that.

"And really, he was just defending his home at the time. It isn't like I found him attacking children" said Kat

Callisto shrugged "Though that is something his group did? Right? Or at least allegedly so?"

"Um... I don't think Xiang was clear on that... he wasn't attacked, but... he seemed to imply most everyone else was..." said Kat

Callisto shrugged and said "Well, I suppose it doesn't really matter. I stand by the idea that you have done know wrong. Especially considering you feared the backlash from the debt you still have... which I guess you are taking on anyway, but that's fine you did not know this would happen"

"Yeah but... is that right?" asked Kat

Callisto shrugged "Well. I cannot know the truth of your heart and convince you of your path but I can tell you two things. Firstly, for almost all of human history, and most humans today, they have never been ashamed to do things to assure their survival. You feared the consequences of not accepting the contract, and at the very least, it wasn't something completely abhorrent, so I think you chose the easiest path to survival.

"The other thing I can tell, is that at some point, you need to decide on a code. Decide on every line you will not cross. Not just 'These are things I don't want to do' but, 'I would rather die than do this' type things. For example... hmm, this might be a bit gruesome in some ways, but if Vivian was about to be killed, perhaps stabbed, I would take that hit before I allowed her to die, every time.

"One of my 'I would rather die' is, 'I would rather die than allow permanent harm to befall Vivian'. Now, please don't misunderstand, I have no death wish, and I say permanent harm, but I suppose I more mean serious injury, for I am not so suicidal or stupid to believe that my death would not cause Vivian permanent harm in a different way

"However, should I deem some harm, more deadly, or more permanent I will not hesitate. I may not have a death wish, but I do have my lines. That is one of them."

Kat gulped as she looked at Callisto. She spoke about dying in Vivian's stead like she would the fact that the sun would rise tomorrow. It was simply a fact of Callisto's life. And yet, when she spoke of her knowledge that her own death would lead to a different kind of harm, there was a steel in her eyes that said she likely would never even let it get close to that kind of choice.

Chapter 316: Of Course You Realise This Means... No War?

"Right, now that I've covered that do you still have any concerns Kat? I'm happy to keep going over things if you really need to, as I am aware talking simply helps people... however I doubt that you count among that number and I believe you can do well considering the question I presented to you in your own time" said Callisto straightening herself up on her chair.

"Um, not really... but, I mean there is still the question of what faction I should join? We didn't really go into that and it is something I'm thinking about but I'm happy enough to talk about that with everyone so I don't think we need to go over that now...?" said Kat more or less asking if Callisto wanted to go over things.

Callisto shrugged "No that's fine. Though, I will ask, even if you have come to an understanding with myself in regards to your lack of empathy for the dead who have wronged you, or perhaps just the dead in general, let me ask you this... can you tell the others? That was the whole point of this discussion I believe. Ensuring that you would be able to tell Vivian and Lily and Sylvie"

"Wait wait wait" said Kat throwing her hands up "I never said anything about telling Sylvie"

Callisto's eyes narrowed as she leaned forward in her chair, and said. "Now Kat, I hope you aren't treating Sylvie like a naive child"

"No...?" asked Kat, clearly questioning it herself.

Callisto sighed but held her gaze. "Look Kat, I understand that you've looked after Sylvie for a long time as both an elder sister figure and perhaps also a motherly one in some contexts... but she isn't so fragile or stupid as you are making it out to be"

Kat shook her head vigorously "I certainly don't think Sylvie is stupid. And, not to put Lily down or anything, but really, the only person close to her in sheer intelligence is probably you, with Lily following closely behind and then me and Vivian a while behind you three"

Callisto nodded but frowned "If you can see that why do you still wish to hide this from her? It's not like she won't be able to figure it out with a bit of effort on her part"

"Well, sure Callisto, that's true... but I'm not certain it's appropriate to share something like that with anyone Sylvie's age, regardless of how smart she is. Just because she's smart doesn't mean I don't want to protect her for a little longer." Said Kat

"She isn't so young to need that much protection" said Callisto "When I was her age, I was reading medical textbooks for fun. It's not like I was unaware of the meaning of death"

Kat's gaze hardened as she focused on Callisto "That may be so, and I'm sure that she could do the same if she wanted. But she is NINE Callisto. I don't want her to start to think that someone dying is no big deal, especially here on Earth.

"I can maybe excuse my own actions considering that world still features bandits roaming the countryside but, that sort of thing just doesn't translate well to more modern reality." Said Kat

Callisto shrugged "Sylvie is smart enough to know the difference between fantasy and reality"

"I AM A DEMON" shouted Kat energy coating her voice and making it boom throughout the room. "What fantasy? I HAVE NO IDEA WHAT THE DIFFERENCE IS ANYMORE! I have to treat it all as real Callisto. ALL of it. I haven't read a tonne of books, and most of it was just stories from Lily but I LIVE IT now. How can you expect Sylvie to treat them as just stories when I can SHOOT FIRE OUT OF MY HANDS!"

To punctuate her words, flames did indeed erupt from her hands, sending gouts of flames almost to the ceiling. As the flames continued to burn the chair arms near Kat started to get a light coating of frost as did the ceiling around near the tips of the fire.

Callisto just sat there calmly. Leaning back in her chair once more as she watched the fire burn down. Kat taking longer, slower breaths to calm herself and retract the flames as she tried to relax into the chair once again but now, she was tense, almost ready to strike out, though she knew she'd never really attack Callisto.

Minutes passed as the two stared at each other, and Kat made it clear that she was willing to hold her silence for this one. Callisto started to absently fiddle with her fingers, after the first minute, but they continued to sit in silence long after.

Kat turned her thoughts inward. Wondering if she was right to snap at Callisto. The conclusion she quickly reached though, was that yes, she was. Kat could clearly tell that in this at least, Callisto wasn't taking her seriously. She genuinely saw no problem with telling Sylvie about the more gruesome parts of her adventure.

Kat was confident she had proved to Callisto the problem though. That when magic suddenly walks into the house, how much of fiction is truly fake. She'd met Fey, and Elves, and wizards, and a crazy talking tree called Thyme. She'd fought giant birds and death worms, been betrayed for a prize, which she wasn't mad about, but it was rather storybook-esque in her mind.

Finally, Callisto spoke up. "I suppose I can at least comprehend where you are coming from. I don't believe you would be making the correct decision if you hid this information from Sylvie but I admit this situation is more complex than I gave it credit for. However, I ask you this, what are you going to do when you take Sylvie with you in the future?"

Kat barred her teeth. "I'll tell her long before I take her along with me. I don't plan on taking her for some time yet though. Not only is that reckless but it's just irresponsible. It's not quite as bad as taking a child to a warzone, but it's somewhat close. I can regenerate from horrible wounds. Nobody else here can."

Callisto scoffed. "I'm willing to bet that you take her to visit Minor before a year passes."

Kat winced "That's different though. I know those guys, and Enuke can protect her even if I'm not around"

Callisto shrugged "Maybe that's true, but do you want to let Sylvie visit a world like that without really knowing how bad things could get or what that sort of world is really like. Because individuals can get so much stronger by simply bettering themselves, they don't take the time to raise up society quite as much"

Kat bit her lip, while tilting her head and said. "Wait is that what's happened? I just assumed that I was further back in their history? I mean, surely not every dimension was created at the same time right?"

Callisto paused, freezing almost completely except for the soft falls of her breathing. "Huh. I had never considered that. It's certainly quite possible, especially if individuals live for greatly extended lifetimes... hmm, that certainly bears thinking about. I hadn't even considered the possibility, and that is rather unlike me. Thank you for that Kat"

Kat jerked back; a bit shell-shocked that so soon after she had basically threatened Callisto she was already being thanked for a relative mundane idea. *I... I don't quite follow what happened? Is she not even mad that I yelled at her before?*

"I see you do not understand" said Callisto. Kat flinched but nodded. "I can see it on your face, and I would hazard to guess that you are confused as to how I can change my attitude towards you so quickly?"

Kat nodded and gestured for Callisto to continue. "Well, it is quite simple Kat. You were right. Once I had taken this fact into consideration, I am easily able to let go of any linger resentment. Thus when we continued, even if you were still heated, I was not.

"This allows me to be completely and truly thankful for your idea that we might be jumping into worlds that are younger or older than our own. Do you understand?" asked Callisto.

"I understand" said Kat. *But I also feel like I really want to leave now. Things got a bit heated, and... maybe I need time to think about this some more. I... I don't think Sylvie SHOULD know, but... I also don't want to lie to her either...

I think it would be better for Sylvie personally if I didn't tell her, but worse for my own health, constantly worrying about what she might think of me... and yet, Callisto says she deserves to know? Hmm... maybe I should just ask her in a roundabout way?*

"Thank you for this chat Callisto. I'll take my leave" said Kat standing up. Callisto merely nodded deeply and allowed Kat to walk out of the room.

Chapter 317: On The Road Again

Not much else happened that day. Kat went to bed, and Sylvie followed behind. Kat didn't really sleep that night. She wasn't tired and had way too much to think about. She sunk into a very slight meditative state while sitting up and hugging Sylvie who was more than happy to use Kat as a pillow instead, and Kat was able to abuse her demonic muscles to remain in place without twitching or feeling uncomfortable.

Her mind focused around the more immediate problems. Putting the question of what she was willing to die for on the back burner in favour of focusing on the question of if she wanted or even should tell Sylvie, and could never find a better solution than just asking the girl herself.

Kat decided, that while it was all well and good for herself and Callisto to argue over what was best for Sylvie, it was undeniable that the girl was smart to an absurd degree. And so, Kat could find no better solution than to trust in that intelligence and allow the person who knew the little girl the best to provide the answer. This was of course Sylvie herself.

There was some consideration, to go and ask Gramps for advice. She hadn't spoken to him in a long time. But Kat could already picture his response in her head, which would be to simply shrug his shoulders and repeat questions back at Kat until she answered them herself. She decided it might still be worth visiting when she had time, however, she wouldn't waste her visit asking questions she could answer herself.

In the morning, once everyone had woken up, and Kat had avoided bathing with Sylvie by insisting on a shower instead, which Sylvie had joined anyway, Kat was eating breakfast when Vivian spoke up. "So, I was meaning to tell you all yesterday that Chekov has finished those desks for Lily and Sylvie. I was thinking of grabbing a trailer from a friend's house and picking them up. I'm not sure if we can take both in one trip, depends on what he's done, but we should get around to it soon. Either today while I'm off work or sometime soon"

Kat shrugged. "I'm good to go whenever. I'll just go and get my phone and text... my phone won't be charged will it?"

Sylvie shrugged from nearby. "Sorry Kat, I should have charged it for you"

Vivian laughed as Kat frowned and said "It's not your responsibility Sylvie it's mine. Don't worry about it, I guess... Vivian can you ask her?"

Vivian smiled "Sure thing."

Reaching into her pocket, Vivian pulled out a phone and sent a message off to Lily before putting it away. "Good that means she is getting some sleep"

Kat grimaced knowing what Vivian meant. The only reason Lily would be awake as early as their group would be if she hadn't gone to sleep at all. The fact Lily wasn't jumping to answer straight away likely meant that she had taken the advice from yesterday and gotten some sleep.

"Do you think she will say yes?" asked Kat taking a bite of whatever the square yellow thing she was eating was. It tasted of eggs and spices but she didn't recognise it. Still, it tasting quite nice like Callisto's other cooking so she wasn't concerned.

Vivian nodded "Well, I think so? Hers has been done for a while and I mentioned that once you get back, we should get around to it. She may have forgotten after getting lost in researching what race she wants to become, but yeah, hers has been ready since that time you went to help out Minor, it was... I think it was the day after you left? Or maybe the day after that"

"Oh" said Kat looking down at her plate. *She's been waiting for me for quite a while to pick it up. So long that Chekov was able to make a whole second desk... woops... I guess I have been busy straight

from one thing to another, I finished up with the Tournament, then I was only back for a few days before the emergency beacon and then straight into Xiang's summons after that... Oh plus however long I was in the hospital for...*

"Do we need to do anything else while we are in the city? Or are we just going to head to Chekov's place and then head back?" asked Kat

Vivian shrugged. "I'm not sure. I mean, I don't need to do anything, and I don't think Sylvie does..." Vivian glanced at the youngest of the group who shook her head in response. "but if Lily does have anything else, she might want to pick up we can do that as well."

"Are you not coming Callisto?" asked Kat looking over, and seeing that Callisto was already cleaning up.

"I'm afraid not Kat. For once it is actually I that is somewhat behind on work. I was helping out with some design improvements for a kitchen appliance and they rejected my first draft. I had assumed that they would just accept it as is, and was very surprised they asked for revisions... then I was rather annoyed when they asked for the second draft to be done on the same deadline, which is tomorrow.

"I will not be working with this company again if I can help it, but they are offering a lot of money for the work, and the fee for pulling out of the contract is higher than I feel comfortable paying. I could afford it yes, but, while I might complain on principal, it is not beyond my abilities" said Callisto

Kat stared open mouthed at Callisto. "You have a job?"

"Yes?" said Callisto while tilting her head "Of course I have a job"

"What... what do you do exactly?" asked Kat

"Oh, this and that really. A design refinement is my main source of income, alongside writing technical manuals for more complex machinery. I also dabble in writing my own short stories and a few other projects. I like to keep myself busy. Arguably, I invent as well, but nothing I've made has ever generated a profit in that area" said Callisto.

Kat just nodded lamely and took another bite of her breakfast, still trying to process the fact that Callisto does actually do things other than simply clean Vivian's house and be mysterious all the time.

It was another two hours before they heard back from Lily, who apologised for getting back to us so late. Vivian had already left around an hour ago to grab the trailer for the journey, after deciding that the chance Lily said no to the trip was rather low, and was willing to deal with asking for it again if needs be.

They all piled into the car once Lily arrived, sitting in the standard arrangement, Sylvie on Kat's lap in the backseat with Lily and Vivian in the front. Once they made it out onto the highway, and everyone was settled in, Kat decided to finally broach the topic she'd been holding back.

"So... I don't know if you guys noticed, but I was avoiding talking about some of the stuff that happened while I was summoned" said Kat. Lily hid her laughter behind her hand, knowing well ahead of time this was the case. Vivian's reaction was hidden, but the slight shaking of her shoulders made it seem like it was a similar reaction to Lily's. Sylvie just sighed quietly.

Kat of course, even with her hearing dulled from being on Earth, could hear everyone's reactions well enough. With a long sigh she continued "Right, of course, I should have known better. I mean, I guess I'm not surprised but I did put some effort into hiding it..."

"Anyway, I... well I talked to Callisto about it" Kat saw the others wince slightly at that "and while we agreed on some things and not others it got me to think more about what I should do. In the end, I decided... mostly for Sylvie's sake, that it would be just best to ask you all if you wanted to hear it."

"It... it isn't pretty, and honestly it's... well I won't be going into graphic descriptions or anything but it's still quite... impactful? Gruesome? I'm not sure really but... while I don't think I did anything bad per se, you might all think less of me because of what ended up happening. So, I just thought... I'd trust in your own judgement when it comes to if you want to hear the full story or not" said Kat.

"Of course," said the other three, almost in perfect sync. In the case of Sylvie and Vivian it actually WAS in perfect sync, and even with Kat's advanced hearing she couldn't tell if they started apart at all. It was almost as if they practiced... and now that she realised they all knew she was avoiding the topic, there was a chance that they did in fact practice, or at least, Sylvie and Vivian probably did.

Chapter 318: Going Places That we Have in Fact Been

Kat took in a deep breath before she began speaking and then headed straight into it. "Right... so, um... well I guess there is at least two parts to this? So if I'm going to be explaining it all to you... um... how would you like me to go about it? I mean, I can try and start in chronological order, just go through the events as they happened while I was back with Xiang..."

"Or alternatively I could look at the two major, and maybe one minor event in separate chunks, allowing for commentary in between all of them. They are different enough that you might want to ask my questions about them immediately and we might be able to have a more interesting discussion that way..."

"Of course, I could also try and go over it in... well I suppose I should say the more... morally sound choices and then head towards the things that are more grey. I mean... not to say that I regret any of them... I think I made great choices, why..." At this point it was more than clear that Kat was simply speaking to avoid actually conversing about the topic in question. She was abusing her demonic energy to allow herself to keep speaking without the need to stop in and take a deep breath.

This made it so that none of the others could really jump into Kat's tirade without simply being talked over. Lily and Vivian shared a look with each other in the front of the car, as they wondered what to do about this issue.

Sylvie of course, decided to take matters in her own little hands with gusto. She grabbed onto Kat's tail, pulled it up to her mouth, and bit down. Hard. It wasn't painful to Kat, and with her demonically enhanced strength and regeneration as well as the location of the 'attack' meant that it wasn't painful or damaging in any way. But it was a shock.

Kat's endless stream of words faltered as she spluttered and tried to get her head back together just as Sylvie removed the appendage from her mouth and then hugged it against herself. Once Sylvie determined Kat to be sufficient coherent, she said, "Do you wanna actually talk now Kat?"

Kat paused, and hung her head down in shame. *It's... it's not like I was... ok yes I was trying to just ramble to avoid the topic. Forgive me dammit I'm nervous.* Of course, then her gaze raised just a fraction so that she could see Sylvie hugging her tail, and another spike of guilt stabbed its way into her heart. *I suppose they do deserve to know.*

Kat sighed. "Right, I'll do this properly then. I'd like to start with the bandits. Here's what happened..."

Kat gave the full details once again, only cleaning the language of the bandits up a slight amount for Sylvie's sake. It was a wasted endeavour really, because even with Kat trying to sanitise it a bit, Sylvie could recognise and infer plenty from how Kat changed things and the look on her face. Lily and Vivian were old enough and smart enough to figure it out as well, and while nobody said anything, it was clear to everyone that they were on the same page, somewhat to Kat's disappointment.

"There was nothing you could have done Kat" said Vivian as she drove. Clearly saddened by the information, but not overly so.

Kat winced. "Well, that's just it, I think I really could have done something. I was low on energy sure but I wasn't exactly THAT low"

Sylvie snuggled into Kat when she heard that to show her support, but it was Lily who spoke up, "No, I think Vivian is right. If they attacked you first, were defeated, and then struck out at you once again, there really isn't anything you could do. Maybe not in the more literal sense, but they clearly left you with no choice"

Kat sighed. "Yeah, I get that, and that doesn't really bother me it's just... well that actually. The fact that it doesn't really bother me at all? I... I was more, and I guess still am, more worried about what you all think of me now"

Sylvie, saddened by the fact that it was impossible to further snuggle into Kat due to her previous actions, attempted to do so anyway, while strengthening her hold on the demon. Vivian's gaze softened a bit at that and said. "Kat, it really is fine. I won't say that I'll love you no matter what, but as your mother I will say that this much is fine. We aren't going to hate you as something like this."

Kat felt... strange about the reply. Sure Vivian had said similar enough things before but... she just felt a lot closer to an older sister than anything else, her and Callisto as a sort of odd pair of elder sisters if anything. Still, the words were comforting... they weren't simply a platitude where Vivian said Kat could do ANYTHING, but that also caused her concern. Where was the limit? And did she even want to know the answer to that.

Lily, took a very different approach. "Do you think it's because you're a demon? I mean, I know that if I chose vampire, I'd be likely to feel similar, or maybe even less concern. I mean... I don't think that's a problem, it's fine if that's what happened but I mean... maybe?" said Lily stammering slightly at the end, seemingly unsure if she wanted to make the point.

Kat let out a long sigh at Lily's words. *Yeah, that's one of the things I worry about.* "I'm not sure Lily. I did consider it as well... but I'm really not sure I like hearing that any more. It... it sorta feels like I'm just trying to make it someone else's problem you know? Not that I'm say... blaming the system? But it feels like shifting the blame really."

"But what if there is no blame you need to shift?" said Sylvie, her soft voice cutting through the conversation like a knife. The words were softly spoken, and Kat could only tell the others in the car actually heard Sylvie speak because of the obvious flinching they both did.

Kat let her mind churn around the idea and considered it for what it was. A good question. *Indeed Sylvie. What if there is no blame? I... I hadn't considered that. I was so busy trying to figure out what everyone might think of me... no I was assuming they WOULD think less of me and maybe I was just trying to find some justification.*

Kat hugged Sylvie closer with a smile. "I think Sylvie's right... for the most part. I'm afraid I should go over the rest now, and mention why it's so much more complicated. Is breaking into a criminal's home wrong? What if you do and they defend themselves? Well, here's what happened..."

Kat spoke of her few thoughts leading up the assault on the compound and the events inside. Kat decided that she couldn't sneak much past her rather observant friends, and made sure that all she did was gloss over exactly how much pain she was in, instead phrasing it as more general confusion while trying to imply some numbness.

Of course, on hearing the fact that Kat was stabbed through the chest repeatedly, and came so close to death multiple times, the rest of the car's inhabitants put on big frowns. They didn't interrupt at all, and even after Kat finished her story nobody seemed to know what to say, until Vivian spoke up.

"Well, firstly, I can say you did the right thing with Xiang at the end. You had no way of knowing what he was going to do at this point, but it's clear that he was about to do something unforgivable, maybe even in his own eyes if he wasn't in control, and you stopped him. I agree that it's unclear if you should think of him as dead, but I agree that the answer is probably not." Said Vivian... diplomatically. It was clear that she wasn't happy with the events, but Kat was unsure where the ire was directed.

"Well I think you did the best you could" said Lily jumping in. "The sort of things that you might be made to do as punishment, even if you mentioned earlier that Kara said it wasn't that bad. I think you did what you could during the whole thing. You stopped Xiang when you needed to, and you attacked those flaming sect guys when you did as well.

"They clearly weren't good people, and I think they can probably heal up right? I mean, you said Xiang recovered from his injuries decently fast, and that Xiao dude completely fixed himself quite a few times in a row so... even though what you did seems excessive really the worst thing you did was probably bringing Xiang along at all... but he might have been possessed somewhere along the way so maybe that's what you should blame it on?"

Author's Note

So I decided to clarify some things. Despite what is said, not everyone really understands what it's like to see someone die, and be even partially responsible. Callisto knows, and doesn't care, but Vivian and Sylvie don't fully understand. Lily, does understand well enough, but she's more than willing to overlook flaws in Kat's character if she doesn't consider them serious.

Chapter 319: Where Blame Lies

Kat pondered over Lily's question. The idea of just pushing the responsibility of onto whatever possessed Xiang was a tempting thing. *But I can't just do that. It's not like I think they? It? Whatever you count a possessed person as? Anyway, it just... isn't quite the point. Tempting, and perhaps a good method of dealing with everything and having the bonus of being true as well...

But it just isn't the point. I want to deal with the parts that are my fault, and the fact that it doesn't seem to be bothering me. Then again... even if we ignore the fact that Xiang got possessed, he did summon me to that world. I could have been somewhere else having a good time, but instead no, I'm contracted to go revenge seeking. Hmm... but I feel like that robs me of a bit too much agency.

A gun isn't responsible for killing someone when the trigger is pulled, but the assassin should be... I think. Sure, whoever hired them should be responsible as well, but I think that it doesn't make the assassin completely free of guilt. So... is that what I am? It's still not quite right though is it... because I did TRY not to get anyone killed.

Especially in the compound. I can be glad that I tried my hardest there... and really do I feel bad about the injuries I caused them? Kat considered that, and realised it was a very easy no. She felt no guilt for the damage inflicted onto them. She didn't feel bad for being ok with the injuries either. Unlike the deaths, this just seemed too inconsequential. A bit of bruising and maybe broken bones.

I might be a little skewed in that perspective because I can walk off getting stabbed in the heart twice after some nice bed rest in the hospital but I suppose that's how it is isn't it? Everything is altered by our own experi-*

"Kat you alright?" asked Vivian. "You seem to be going through a few facial expressions there"

"Eyes on the road" said Lily with a joking tone that had a hint of seriousness to it.

"It's fine, I just took a glance in the review mirror" said Vivian with a smile, looking pointedly into that same mirror again and into Kat's own eyes.

Kat sighed with a smile on her face. "Yeah I'm good. I was just thinking about what Lily said. I don't think... well I can't say that I agree fully. I have some of my own agency even if a contract is restricting me. Especially because I can say no after all. Now, granted it was somewhat forced this time but that isn't the main point..."

"I was also thinking on if I was bothered by the injuries I caused. Outside of the people who died, I hurt a bunch of humans... and I just don't feel bad about that, and unlike the deaths I think that is perfectly ok. I mean... maybe that makes me a bad person but..."

"Everyone was able to fight against me. Sure, I outclassed them a tonne, but they were all at least prepared for a fight. Not a single one of them asked what I was doing fighting them, or seemed surprised that they were in a battle at all. Not even when we attacked that compound did that stuff happen, they just rocked up and we fought..."

"I don't want to say it was simple, but it kinda was. I wouldn't just attack anyone here because they aren't looking for a fight or even expecting it but... so far the only places I've been they kind of have. Well, I'm probably just extrapolating... I didn't even fight when I visited Minor, but it sounds about as deadly as Xiang's world..."

"Anyway, I'm getting of track. I guess I'm saying that, I've found at least some parts of what happened with Xiang that I can move past easily" said Kat

"Obviously" said Lily "There's a bunch of really cool scenes in books I've read that are something like that. Which is, if you seek to take the life of another then you must be prepared to lose your life in turn. Now, it isn't quite the same for you Kat, but you DON'T target anyone's life. You just go for injuries, and accept that you will get hurt. I mean, did you even hesitate for a second once Xiang started to go all murder hobo?"

"Murder Hobo?" asked Kat

"It's a dnd term" said Sylvie "Describes a character that has little to no character development or likeable traits and treats every encounter with anything that moves a combat encounter and kills them. It's also somewhat common in video games"

Kat raised an eyebrow and looked down at the girl in her lap. "When did you pick that up? There isn't exactly a lot of ways at the orphanage."

"Books and internet forums accessed from the school library" said Sylvie innocently.

Kat decided not to push, and just be thankful she wasn't looking for anything stranger than that... right? Shaking her head to clear it of the image of Sylvie looking for satanic rituals to remove someone's voice forcibly, Kat let herself relax.

After the group travelled in silence for a bit longer Kat spoke up. "Hey Sylvie what exactly have you been doing while I was away?"

"I helped Lily a bit with her big project and I spent some time doing things with Callisto. Vivian also tried to watch a movie with me but she fell asleep before it got past the first ten minutes so I'm not sure if that one counts. Oh, and Callisto got me books. Not sure from where but they disappear when I finish with them and more appear. I think she's getting them from a library but the town one is really small and I think at least some of the books aren't from there" said Sylvie softly.

Vivian chuckled from the front. "Ah yeah... I'm really sorry about that Sylvie. I did want to spend some more time with you..."

"It's ok Vivian, I got to snuggle with you while watching a movie after all. It would have been better if you were awake to watch Atlantis with me but having you around is more than good enough" said Sylvie in response.

"Naaw, you're too sweet to me Sylvie. Adopting you and Kat was the best decision I ever made" Vivian said with a beaming smile.

Kat's cheeks heated up slightly. She tried to push down the blush but continued to feel it linger. "Ah... sorry to be a bother" said Kat without thinking.

Vivian glared into the mirror "No talking down to yourself Kat. You are very easy to take care of and wonderful to have around. Don't you go trying to undersell yourself. Why, even Callisto is fond of you now, and I don't think that's ever happened"

"She gets along well with Lily and Sylvie though" said Kat

Vivian smiled wider "Yes but... in at least some small way they are both... 'her people' so to speak. You on the other hand, are not, and she normally just can't get along with or even find common ground with people like you and me"

Eh? Kat's confusion was written on her face but nobody comment as she tried to examine her thoughts. *I don't understand? Well, I can understand how Callisto, Lily, and Sylvie get along of course... but... I feel like I have some kinship with her as well. Not to give myself too much praise but... I'm rather industrious. I helped out around the orphanage all the time, and I'd damn well do it at home if Callisto didn't clean everything as if the slightest build-up of dust was going to cause the end of the world.

Then again. It's not like Vivian isn't industrious either. She gets her work done well, takes on numerous big projects... but she also loves her work... maybe that's the difference? No that can't be right because Callisto also has a... well maybe not a real job, but she can earn her own money somehow.*

Kat decided she couldn't find the answer she was looking for and it was best to just ask. "I don't quite follow Vivian. I mean... I think we both have at least some things in common with Callisto"

Vivian shrugged "Well sure, everyone has at least some common ground, but let me ask everyone this. Say you had free time for an afternoon but you weren't able to meet anyone. What would you do?"

"Um... probably go for a walk or clean? Maybe if there were some nice clouds, I'd find a quiet place to watch them instead?" said Kat

"Books" said Lily without hesitation.

Sylvie giggled "Books" giggled some more and repeated "Books" once more.

Vivian nodded "I'd probably do some sketches. Callisto of course, would probably do some inventing, or..."

"Read books" said Sylvie and Lily mostly in sync.

Author's note

TFW you go back to when Chekov was first introduced to double check what he looks like and you find out you didn't give him a description.

Chapter 320: Chekov is BACK

When Kat and the rest of the group arrived at Chekov's workshop, Kat was half expecting to have someone else fly out of the door like the first time they arrived. She was half right, but also very wrong. The door did in fact open as they pulled up, but what walked out was a very elderly couple with a matching set of walking canes.

They waved at the group before heading over to their own car and eventually driving off. *Huh, who would have thought that Chekov also sells things to normal people.* Of course, Kat didn't recognise that the pair of canes doubled as nunchucks for the old man and a bo staff for the old woman...

Vivian led the way up to the warehouse's door and knocked despite it still being open. "Come in!" was shouted from inside the facility. Following Vivian's lead further, Kat found herself mesmerised as she watched Chekov work.

His hair was cut very short, and was mostly just a light dusting of hair that had grown out. What was there, was a jet black with the odd fleck of blond... though that might have been the wood dust. There was plenty covering the entirety of Chekov. Even the short hair of his had managed to gather up their own trove of woodchips to bargain with.

He wore a thick leather jacket with slight nicks across its surface, and woodchips stuck to all of the folds. The jacket itself was mostly brown with no additional adornments... unless you count the woodchips of course. There was tape around the edges of the long sleeves, keeping it flat against his wrists and out of the range of the projects he worked on.

His pants were thick denim with even more wood chips that hid mostly around the pockets. There was a large cut in the side of the right leg that seemed to have frayed the outer layer but had not quite gotten to Chekov's skin. Finally, his boots were old thick leather, and Kat suspected they were steel capped. They actually had the least woodchips on them somehow despite standing in a pile of them.

Chekov's eyes couldn't be seen properly due to his dark safety glasses that covered most of his face. They were in a blocky style that gave maximum coverage around the eyes and nose. Further assisting him was a large scarf that had been wrapped around his lower face instead of his neck, which was protected by the high collar on his jacket.

Currently Chekov appeared to be using a belt sander on what Kat had to assume was a new copy of the canes that the old couple were using. He was smoothing down a branch into a thin rod with a number of other tools on a shelf off to the side. Vivian made sure to keep everyone standing far enough away that flying debris would not likely be a problem, but Kat decided to help a little more.

Taking confident steps forward, she spread her wings out, blocking the sightlines of the others, and standing in front of Sylvie just in case any major pieces came flying her way. Luckily, nothing dangerous happened over the next few minutes as Chekov finished his sanding. Once done he put away the sander, and lifted his glasses up off his face.

"Ay good to see ya" said Chekov "I was wondering when you would come and collect. I still have not done the tall one's desk but I managed the other two. I was starting to think you forget"

Vivian smiled as Kat lowered her wings allowing the others to see Chekov properly. "No of course we wouldn't. You know me better than that Chekov. I just wanted everyone to be here when we picked them up"

Chekov shrugged, woodchips falling from his shoulders as he did. "Ya sure. You know that the finished ones have hidden compartments yes? I'm not sure their owners want them all known"

"I'm fine with it" said Sylvie instantly "They can know about them"

Chekov smiled "Ai, little one I suppose if that is what you want. Normally I'd refuse the watchers on one so young, but you know what you wish for. What about you glasses? Want me to reveal the secrets to all?"

"Um... I mean... yes?" said Lily

Chekov laughed and said "Girl, if you think that convinced me you are very wrong. I can see it in your eyes that you didn't really, but still, why say it then?"

Lily looked downwards, not meeting Chekov's eyes as she said. "I... I think I want them to know... or maybe not all of them... but most I think"

Chekov smiled and threw his arms out to the sides, sending more woodchips cascading down. "How about this, I show you a few of the more obvious ones, as well as the hardest to figure out and leave the rest for you to find on your own with whomever you might want?"

Lily's eyes lit up at the suggestion. "Yes, yes please actually. Um... I'd really like that thanks"

Chekov nodded "Of course. Well then, right this way everyone"

Chekov took off, though instead of heading deeper in, he instead headed out towards the front door. Leading them back out into the parking lot, Chekov took a hard left turn, and headed to a warehouse that bordered the carpark. Walking along its edge, Chekov completely ignored it until they reached another much smaller road. Once across, they came face to face with yet another warehouse, this time, Chekov opened it slowly, pulling on the large bar door style metal doors.

Kat seeing this, came to help, pulling on the right side with minimal effort. "Thank you. Now, I can see it in your eyes, you all be wonderin why we changed warehouses? Well... let's just say I made my money before I got moved, and now I own a good chunk of the warehouses around here and ALL of the land"

Kat swallowed and tried not to think of the sheer amount of money it must have cost to buy so much. They were certainly outside of city limits, but at the same time, still part of said city. It was unclear how much Chekov considered 'all' of the land, but it could be the nearby streets or the entire warehouse district. Kat wasn't sure which was more likely.

When the door was opened, Kat looked inside and saw rows of cubicles breaking up the warehouse. From what she could see, each contained at least one wooden contraption of some kind. From the front of the warehouse she could see a clock on her left, and a bookshelf next to that. On the right, she could see four doors in one cubicle, forcing her to dismiss the idea it was one object for each, and a second clock in the other.

The air was noticeably dry, even for Kat as she took her first steps in. Once they had all entered, Chekov turned and said, "Mind shuttin the doors?"

Kat nodded, and moved to shut them both. Once the heavy, for normal humans, doors shut, Kat could practically feel the air drying out around her. It was a weird sensation. It wasn't hot, and her skin was still smooth as she ran her hands along her arms, but there was a dryness to everything that almost seemed to cling to her.

"Don't mind the air. I keep it controlled to make sure the wood don't get all mouldy. Each cubicle has a little cup o' water to stop them drying out completely, but I keep the air itself extremely dry. Of course, they all have finish on them so they be at minimal risk but well... I can afford it" said Chekov as he stood, brushing off wood chips as he walked now.

"Um, why the cubicles?" asked Kat

"Well... it just seemed right you see? Somebody suggested I keep customer's order sealed inside a box and stacked in here... but that felt so wrong for me da? Instead, I keep them both together, and separate

like this. You may look as you work, and yet there is a place for you?" said Chekov, now free from most of his wood shavings.

"Oooh, I do I do" said Vivian pretending to be a kid in class with her hand up.

Chekov just scoffed at her reply and said "Yeah but you be cheating da? Callisto had to give you da answer the first time around. How do you feel taking your roommate's work?"

Vivian just stuck her tongue out towards Chekov's back and smiled. "It makes sense actually" said Lily "These pieces are all important to you. You take great care when... I'm not sure giving them away is the right phrase but perhaps... allowing them to leave? Eh, anyway, it's a compromise to keep things organised, but still open" said Lily

Chekov nodded seriously "Da"