

DEMONS 781

Chapter 781 Last Outfit

Still Lily's perspective

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Apep continued his jog, for if anyone asked it was a jog. He was not running, or panicked, he was... swiftly jogging to his room. When he reached the door, he threw it open, wincing a little as it hit the nearby wall before bouncing back. Not that Kat or Lily were paying attention but Apep had a rather extravagant room. Large open windows near the top of the room to help circulate the air. Directly underneath those windows was a bed large enough to fill Lily's bedroom by itself, with thin curtains that could be drawn over them. Off to the side was a large writing desk

They were made of a fine silk like material... that was completely see-through, so it wasn't entirely clear what the point of them WAS. Perhaps it was style thing, as surely there were enchantments to deal with bugs. Off to the side near the door was a large writing desk with gold edging. Next to it was a moderately sized bookshelf that seemed to contain books necessary for doing homework.

There was a small planter box against the opposite wall that framed a door to somewhere else. It was currently blocked off by a curtain rather than a door. Perhaps if either of the two girls were paying attention, they could take a look and find out more details but they were both rather occupied at the moment as Apep dropped Lily into one of the beanbags that littered the floor and hopped onto the only proper chair in his room, the one at his desk. Apep grabbed a pen, or rather his equivalent of one, an intricate gold wrapped wooden device that looked somewhat like a fountain pen but with a modern tip.

Back in Lily's head Kat was returning to the closet once more. *Come on Kat. You've had your fun.* "Nope," said Kat, "I'm making the best use of my time. Still, I'll compromise. I'll just pick one more outfit and stick to that for a while ok?"

Lily's face scrunched up back in the real world... but she knew quite well this was probably as much as Kat was willing to concede. *Fine. Whatever. Just... try not to make it too distracting. I'll need to fly out of here and that takes some focus.* Kat just smiled and slipped into the closet, shutting the door softly behind her.

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Kat already knew what she was choosing for the last outfit. If Kat was being totally fair, it only barely counted as an outfit on technicality. Still, Kat at least thought it was rather on theme. Kat opened the door and started to dance out, making sure to stick to the theme.

What she'd chosen was a rather extravagant belly dancer's outfit. She had a golden chocker and necklace combo that drew attention to her breasts quite well. Her hair was done up with a similarly styled gold clasp as well because her hair had about doubled in length for this. On her hands were five gold bangles each, three smaller ones and two larger ones that rattled around during the steps. On her feet were strap sandals and a stack of bangles that clinked slightly as she moved, though they were all of the smaller variety.

For the main 'outfit' Kat had a tight upper piece in red just like her hair that kept her chest firmly in place for the movements. It showed off her stomach well, stopping just barely beneath her breasts and splitting into three red arrows of cloth that bounced as Kat moved. Her 'collar' if it could be called that looked to be made of brown leather and rested across the top of her chest, stretching over her arms though not covering the shoulders at all.

Her bottoms consisted of a skirt in the same style as the collar, leather arrows now with complimentary gold medallions hanging between the gaps. The rest of her 'pants' was really just two long strips of cloth. They barely hid her more private areas and did nothing to cover her legs at all, swaying considerable amounts as Kat moved. The back cloth seemed to follow Kat's tail as it traced patterns around her back, while her wings were had to phase through the cloth.

Wait... Kat you know how to dance?

"No, of course not," said Kat, still very much dancing.

Then how ARE you dancing?

Kat froze mid motion, "That Lily... is a good question that I don't think we should dwell on!" said Kat before returning to the dance.

Ok no. That's enough. I'm almost certain you'd have no idea WHAT that dance is from, and even if I was willing to believe you do I am somewhat worried about the fact that you can perform it so cleanly.

"Fine. Look, it's not that big of a deal..." said Kat though the overwhelming feeling of disapproval caused her continued, "fine. It's simple. I'm currently in your mind and sitting... basically inside of the link we share. I am also at least partially integrated in that link, as well as it connected us. It means I can get a much better idea of your mind from here.

"It also means I can sort of... hmm... what's the best way to describe this..." to Lily's annoyance Kat continued to dance. It was VERY distracting and she knew Kat well enough to know she wasn't even trying to be that distracting. Lily of course found an outfit practically designed to show off someone's hips and legs, alongside their stomach quite the distraction. "I guess I'll have to use a computer as an example.

"Normally, our minds are like separate computers. We send status updates to each other, but those are just basic things. Just big text documents basically. Now however, we're a lot more like two programs running on the same computer and I can... well I'm sort of running my program inside of yours. So I can ask the 'upper' program, your mind, for details and get an answer back. So... if I go 'what should I do while wearing this outfit' your mind tells me what the correct dance for it is. I still don't know how to dance, I just know how to listen to your mind. This is... a bit more like memory playback then true dance,"

Is that safe?

"Probably? I mean the worst thing that could happen is I become either more like you, or more to your liking and I don't consider either of those a negative. Still, I don't think it's likely. Your thoughts, even when I'm acting on them, still feel quite separate so it's fine," insisted Kat.

Before Lily could chew them out further Apep strode over with a letter. It had a wax seal on it and was done up in a fancy envelope. "Ok, so this is a letter I've written to Jara. It should explain the basics but I mean... it was a bit of a rush job. I don't mind too much if you answer other questions of hers... I guess just... use your discretion,"

Lily nodded and went to grab the letter only to realise, she of course had paws. Hmm let me just. Lily hopped off the bed and transformed back into her human self. She instantly felt the pressure on her mind redouble. Apparently being in Memphis form helped with that. Lily quickly grabbed the letter and looked over her body before grimacing and tucking it into her shirt. It was already starting to fall when she swapped back to her Memphis form, letter disappearing with her clothes.

Apep opened his mouth to ask something when Lily fixed him with her feline gaze and he froze. She slowly shook her head at him and he nodded. *Good. That was embarrassing and I don't want to talk about.* Apep slowly schooled his feature and coughed into his hand. "Um right... so... my windows don't really shut, or well I don't ever shut them. So if you just memorise where my room is you should be able to get back here without issue. Jara's place should be easy to find... but I don't really know how to explain where her room is.

"What you should probably do is just look out for her in the garden. It'll be pretty obvious considering she's the only teenager in the compound other than Zuhra. Um... hmm... wait did I never describe Jara either? She's got the same skin tone as I do, long black hair that she likes to keep in a ponytail, blue eyes that trend closer to grey and she likes to wear blues and purples. Can't miss her,"

Lily nodded and started to flap her wings, finding the motion easier and more instinctual than last time she'd tried. She easily managed to make it to the windows and after that there was nothing to stop her. She kept climbing until she was high over the city.

Chapter 782 Lily's Look Over the City

Still Lily's perspective

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Well, it was more accurate to say she was high above MOST of the city. Something Apep had neglected to mention, perhaps because he found it self evident, was the entire city was built around the largest mountain Lily had ever seen. The edge of the main city seemed to be each of the compounds. The sheer cliff face of the mountain making it hard to build anything higher. They clearly made an exception for the grand aqueducts though.

Ten absolutely monstrous aqueducts seemed to explode out from near the top of the mountain. Each one wider than a house and heading straight downwards, taking no twists or turns until they were out of city. Because that was another thing. Not only was Lily still climbing to the level of the summit, the city itself was too large for her eyes to see the edges of it. Only the sheer size of the aqueducts made them possible to follow at all.

Each of them also had smaller branching aqueducts, taking water down to houses or estates nearby, seemingly draining nothing from the main rivers of water the aqueduct highways provided. Considering what Apep said, it was entirely possible that was actually the case. She wasn't sure exactly how the water managed to multiply like this, or how they managed to keep things so warm. In Apep's home, it

was simple to think they were in a nice tropical region at around ground level. As she flew higher and higher though, Lily was starting to think they were close to the peak of a mountain rivalling Everest and yet she was starting to feel the strain on her wings before any sort of chill.

And while the cold resistance might be from connecting to Kat, the extra effort required to climb higher seemed to be the same issue even non-magical birds face. Because apparently having magical demonic wings that were able to lift a small cat without hollow bones were still subject to air pressure. *Not quite sure how that makes sense but whatever...*

Lily continued to climb as she looked out over the city, and really, she didn't think 'city' was all that accurate of a name. Apep's compound and the surrounding buildings could easily be a town onto themselves. The whole city was likely larger than some countries decent sized countries back home.

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Looking out of the city, another confusing fact wormed its way into Lily's mind. *Wait a minute... the aqueducts. They're all made out of STONE. Where the heck are they getting this stone?* Lily glanced down at the mountain. The mountain that didn't appear to be missing the millions, perhaps billions, of tonnes of stone required to build just one aqueduct. *It's not just the aqueducts either. It's also the houses. All of Apep's buildings are stone as well. Why is it all stone?*

"Well, I can't really see what you're talking about... but I imagine magic is the answer. Stone is probably one of the best building materials if it can be reinforced with magic, or empowered. It might not hold many enchantments, or even most well, but I imagine a skilled Earth Mage could create sturdy stone buildings without trouble, and the strongest Earth Mages probably did the aqueducts," answered Kat.

I... I think we might be out of a league here. Or maybe not? I mean... I guess it depends if they're still around but Kat... you can't see this. The amount of stone... the amount of power... I guess this is what you feel when you meet powerful demons but... I don't even know how to conceptualise that kind of power.

"I mean... once again... I can't really see what you're talking about but that makes sense. It reminds me a bit of the moment I saw Stone in action. It's one thing to hear 'Rank 6' or whatever and another thing to see someone, even a lower Rank, control waves of Stone while fighting off a giant rat. It's the kind of power that makes you wonder about a lot of things," said Kat who had moved over to the copy of her bed and laid down. Not in a particularly enticing way. Well, it was enticing, but that was incidental.

Yeah I guess so. Actually... do you want to leave my head for now? Lily couldn't help the fact as the city got less and less interesting to her mind, more of it was focusing on Kat. Not a good idea when you were flying.

"I certainly could... but I worry about how long it'd take me to reform enough to fly. I imagine it's pretty windy... and I'm not sure how my fog form interacts with the wind at all. I could just blow away unable to reform. Then, even if I can stay together long enough, I'd have to avoid falling out of the sky while only partially reformed. Then finally... how good would the guards' eyesight be?"

You just want to stay in my head to keep messing with me...

“Nope!” said Kat before pausing. “Wait... how was I able to say that. The sky is purple. Huh... interesting... apparently I can lie if I’m in your head. Not entirely sure if that’s just because you aren’t in here with me... I’m trying to remember if it was something I could do or not in Minor’s... certainly it’s strange,”

Lily pointedly ignored the fact Kat admitted to lying about why she wanted to stick around and decided to focus on the fact that she was at least somewhat correct to worry about what could happen if she left. Angling herself to the left, Lily started heading towards the next compound. She hoped it would be compound four, but if not, they could just turn around. Sadly, the angle wasn’t quite right just yet to see what number they had on the roof.

It was ten minutes of constant flying later that Lily was starting to rethink this course of action. She was flagging, and they hadn’t even been able to see if they were heading the right direction yet. *Kat... I don’t think I’m capable of flying for too long. Apparently ten minutes at whatever altitude this is, is actually approaching my limit. I might be able to make twenty but after that I’ll be completely done for... well maybe the rest of the day.*

“That’s not good at all. Can you spot anywhere to land? I’ll just have to be a little sneaky taking off and then get really high up. Well if I CAN get that high. It’ll be no problem carrying you around and I don’t really get tired with standard physical exercise. Honestly it’ll probably be a lot faster...”

Then why didn’t you suggest it earlier?

“The guards are still a concern, plus I can’t really see how fast we’re moving inside here. It’s just a room. I can sort of get the feeling YOU think we’re moving slowly but I don’t know what you’re comparing yourself too or if the city is just larger than it looks. If you’re tired though we can switch,” offered Kat.

Lily grumbled a bit as she glanced around. There plenty of buildings, or more importantly, rooftops she could land on. The larger buildings all had curved dome tops, but the smaller ones had plenty of flat enough spaces. They were quite obvious though. Yellowish white stone didn’t really hide rooftop trespassers. There also wasn’t really a park or anything of that nature too close by. Everyone seemed to just build near to the aqueducts and have their own gardens. Apparently magical water encouraged people to grow their own food. Go figure. The closest thing to a park was a large house that had their own garden that took up twice the land their house did.

Lily bit down on her bottom lip as she cast her eyes about. There was a few hiding places of course, but they were all at least another five minutes out. She could make it certainly, but she didn’t WANT to fly for another five minutes. She was tired and wanted to glide down somewhere close by and let Kat switch. She was also somewhat concerned with Kat’s attitude while inside her head, further reinforcing the idea of finding somewhere close by.

Eventually, in the corner of her eye, she managed to spot what looked to be a storefront down one of the alleyways. That wasn’t unique in and of itself, there were a few of them, mostly coffeeshops if the customers standing outside drinking were any indication, but this one seemed to be closed, and a bit rundown if the ripped awning was any indication. *Good enough.*

Lily let herself fall into a dive and beelined straight for the alley in question, letting her speed mask her odd shape. While powerful individuals did have better eyes, most tended to need to concentrate to

really make use of the boosted capacity. A swooping, winged figure, heading for an alley was probably just a bird trying to catch a rat or something. Ignorable. She hoped.

Chapter 783 Kat's Look Over the City

Kat's perspective resumes

Lily stumbled as she hit the stone pavement, she'd taken her dive a bit too far and didn't pull up in time. Lily winced as she got back on her feet, flexing her wings and trying to ignore the burning sensation the slight stretching was accompanied by. Glancing off to the side, Lily noticed that one of the windows for the rundown shop had been destroyed. Part of her wanted to fly inside to make sure they weren't seen. A quick glance around though... and she couldn't see anyone nearby.

Lily's ears flicked as she tried to find people nearby but found once again it was relatively quiet. She could hear distant sounds of course, but nothing was close by. Lily decided that was good enough. [Kat you can hop out now].

The moment Lily said that, Kat started to pull herself out of Lily's mind. Purple smoke exploded from Lily's head and quickly reformed into a full-sized Succubus. As soon as the last dregs of smoke disappeared Lily collapsed. Her mind rapidly filling with the feeling of cotton. "Lily you alright?" asked Kat worriedly as she scooped up her friend.

[Not... not to sure...] Lily's mental voice was slurred and slightly incoherent. Kat was able to make out the words largely on feel and not because they came through as proper words. "Can you tell me what's wrong?"

[Nopedy nope... I... hmm... I think... I think your ability was trying to make me sleep the whole time you were in my head... but... but you didn't want me to sleep so I didn't and now it be hitting me all at once? Maybe? Or maybe I'm just tired...]

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"It's ok Lily, you can rest now, I'll finish getting us to Jara," whispered Kat softly as she held Lily to her chest. The fact Lily relaxed noticeably was a good sign to Kat. She stood there in the alleyway for a few minutes just carefully petting Lily as she slept before Kat glanced up at the sky. *Now, how exactly do I want to carry Lily while I'm flying.*

She's fine where she is... but I don't want her to get cold. I could just... tighten my sash a bit and drop her down the front of my kimono. It's probably hold, be nice and warm... but I feel like Lily would really freak out if I did that. Hmm... yeah I teased her a bit much already let's not take things too far even if they would be convenient.

With a sigh Kat jumped into the sky and started to push her wings to the limit, climbing as high as she could in the shortest amount of time. As Kat ascended, she looked around at the very empty skyline.

You know... where are the other things you'd see in the sky?

A quick glance around revealed that there were a few birds... but they were quite few and far between. They also didn't really seem to have any interest in landing anywhere near the mountain despite the trees near the top, or even the large numbers of humans that they could steal food off of. *Surely this can't be normal... I wonder why the sky is so empty.*

I'd have expected that with a magical mountain as powerful as this one that there would be at least a few strong magicians around... but I don't see any evidence of them. Oh sure the aqueducts are impressive and I can see why Lily was impressed by them... but this city has been around a really long time. They could have worked on them over centuries.

Kat pondered this as she levelled out and started to fly towards the next compound. She could just barely make out what she thought was the numbers. This particular compound seemed to have 4 stamped into the stonework. It also seemed to be quite different to Apep's compound.

Whereas Apep's family seemed to prefer open compounds with separate buildings for a few functions to keep it as a somewhat self-sufficient home this one seemed a lot more like an industrial compound, or perhaps a bit older technology wise than that idea. There was just the one garden area right in the centre with a number of tables and chairs that felt more like a concession than anything else. The main house was set right into the mountain and looked to have been carved out of the stone instead of pieced together.

The rest of the buildings all looked to be warehouses. The only thing it was really missing was the smokestacks and she would say they were going full industry. As it stood though... Kat wasn't entirely sure why the compound was the way it was. Part of her wanted to investigate... but she had a job. Perhaps asking Apep would work.

Kat levelled out and sped up, instantly surpassing Lily's old top speed and continuing on. Kat let her wings carry her as she zoned out somewhat. She wasn't even sure how long it took to fly past the 5th compound. It looked a lot like Apep's from the air. Slightly different placement of buildings, mostly the same style. Though Kat hadn't really seen much of Apep's buildings and couldn't make that comparison so she just admired the few gardens and nice stonework as she continued to fly.

The sun was high in the sky when Kat made it to Jara's compound. She was not quite prepared for what she saw. Kat was already regretting the fact she had no better information on where to find Jara. Apep had said 'in the garden' but looking down at the compound for the 6th of the 10 Kat was not pleased with such an answer.

About two-thirds of the compound had been converted into a giant green house. It was all enclosed by a glass dome made up of interlocking hexagonal segments and seemingly no support structure. A moderately sized aqueduct ran across the top as well, so apparently the glass could support that weight. The water from the aqueduct rained down on various sections of the glass dome. Kat couldn't see the splits from this angle all to well but she could make out at least three environments.

She'll be in the garden he said. Can't miss her he said. Well. That might be true if she didn't have an entire GOD DAMNED RAIN FOREST AS HER GARDEN. Kat nearly froze up when she felt Lily shifting after her mental yell and Kat reigned in her anger. Apep was right. She probably was in the garden, she just really wished he'd been more specific. *Perhaps one part of the dome is 'the garden' instead of 'the forest' or something. Dammit. How am I supposed to find here. And how am I supposed to get in without getting spotted? I can hitch another ride with Lily... but if there are doors, as there should be, she won't be able to open them...*

Kat grumbled internally as she continued her path to be directly over the dome. Scanning around she noticed that unlike Apep's compound there were no obvious guards watching the edges. Instead, there

were four guards she could see at the entrance to the greenhouse, two at the gate, and a number of people she was pretty sure were groundskeepers. Kat also noticed that there was a house inside the greenhouse. It was somewhat small compared to the other compound houses, but might be large enough to be the main home. The area in front of the greenhouse did have a building, but it looked more like a barracks than a fancy home.

Kat settled into a slow circle around the area, and preened at the fact nobody was even bothering to look up. It made it so much easier to just watch everything and look for an opening. It took her at least half an hour of waiting for such an opening to come into view. Off to the side of the glass dome was a squat brick building. A gardener was heading along the path towards it. Letting her gaze rest on the figure, she watched as she entered the door and returned a short time later. This time with a wheelbarrow full of what Kat was guessing to be fertiliser. The gardener was able to walk straight into the glass dome, no checks required. *Well. I suppose it's a classic for a reason. I think I'm going to have to wake Lily up and then have us, and by us, I mean her, sneak onto one of them to get into the dome. Hmm... should I try and find Jara first though?*

Kat looked into the domes and grimaced. The light made it somewhat hard to look through the glass and quite a lot of the sections had various plants blocking the view even further. Hmm... Kat looked down at Lily who was sleeping peacefully in her arms. *Guess I can wait around for a while. Let Lily have some rest.*

Chapter 784 Sneaking in the Classic Way

Kat put herself into a bit of a holding pattern. Now that they had a way in she could relax. Well, she could also try to sneak in but she wasn't quite willing to wake Lily up just yet. So Kat just gazed out at the city, trying to figure out what was strange about it. Well other than the magic water. *But I just can't see it. I mean, what am I missing?*

Kat spent ten minutes thinking about that question till she finally found her answer. *Magic. A city this size and age should have more obvious magic around. There also doesn't seem to be anything other than humans... which is another interesting thing. Surely a city this size would have some evidence of both...*

Kat pushed some demonic energy into her eyes and started to comb the streets. It wasn't hard to see people going about their days but it only reinforced Kat's idea that something strange was going on. She managed to spot a schoolhouse, which was nice, and she could spot what she thought were laboratories for investigating plants. But she couldn't see a single sign of casual magic use at all.

*Surely if you had magic you'd use it for things right? Like... so many of these people are just carrying around normal grocery bags. Nobodies like... floating them or something. Kat continued to look around. She even found a group of people, a whole ten of them, starting a fire in the backyard with a flint and steel.

Ok that's gotta be weird. Aren't the basic elements common as affinities? Surely someone should be using wind or earth, water or I don't know FIRE? It doesn't make sense. I mean... there ARE mages. Apep said they had a paper mage somewhere in the city... but like... what's going on here? Am I missing something super obvious?*

Kat continued to look even as her vision started to burn through more and more energy as she cast her gaze further afield only to find no evidence at all of proper magic. *I've got no idea what could be causing this. I can't think of this as anything other than a fantasy setting and mages clearly exist... so what the heck is going on here? I keep asking, but it bears repeating.*

*Though that does lead to an interesting question... how strong is the strongest mage compared to me? I'm not seeing anyone casting magic, so the pool of mages must be pretty low, and the chance that one of them is actually a good mage seems even lower than normal. Just... so many people and not a single mage. They might only have one or two particularly strong mages a generation and this city is MASSIVE. Still... there's clearly some magic. I'm looking at you 'Mr Endless Fountain'.

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Unless... could that be why? Could it be sucking up all the magic in the air? It's possible perhaps... but I don't think that's quite how magic is supposed to work. Still... might be the trade off. These people are all drinking the magic water. Might only work properly on plants or something and causes issues in people. I mean... possible? Hmmm...*

Kat continued to float around and turn those thoughts over in her mind. The visible lack of magic was very much at odds with the massive aqueducts, the glass dome she was flying around and the magical water fountain itself. So there was magic. That was not in question. Why the magic seemed to be limited. She didn't know. Still, it was an interesting enough puzzle to distract herself for another hour.

Eventually though, despite her heart's wishes, it was time to wake Lily up. "Lily wake up," Kat murmured directly behind Lily's ears. The Memphis twitched and buried herself deeper into Kat's arm in response. Kat moved her hand up and started tickling Lily behind the ears. "Come on, time to do some more sneaking,"

Apparently that still wasn't quite enough. Lily might have better ears now but Kat was so far into the 'Is safe' zone that Lily's mind couldn't register anything Kat did as a reason to wake up. This was further proved when Kat started poking Lily's ears with her finger. Bending them over and pushing them flat against Lily's head. Only for Lily to continue sleeping. This was completely fine. She was in Kat's arms. She was safe.

Kat of course was starting to have issues with this. *How am I supposed to wake her up? I don't want to do anything particularly bad to her...* Kat frowned intently at her girlfriend. *What right does she have to look so adorable when sleeping anyway. I feel like I'll be the bad guy if I wake her up. I mean... I guess I can just keep flying around here for however long it takes... but I don't know that I want to waste that much time...*

Kat firmed her resolve again and started a new series of test. She tickled Lily under the chin. Nothing. Blew air into her ear. Nothing. Wrapped a finger around her tail. Nothing. Poked the underside of her wings. Nothing. Booped her on the nose. Still nothing. Kat was starting to run out of things that should wake a normal person that weren't actually all that annoying or intense on the wake up.

Kat then carefully bit down on Lily's ear. A short mew followed by purring was not the expected answer. *God dammit Lily.* Kat sighed and started her backup plan. Fire. Kat pulled her demonic energy into

some flames and let them drift closer to Lily... to no effect. She let it get closer and still nothing. Hesitantly, she let it touch the edge of Lily's wing and... still nothing.

Kat glanced at the fire and then carefully let it cover Lily's entire form. The cat in question didn't even stir. She just purred slightly louder. *Ok FINE. Apparently I am incapable of waking my girlfriend up. You happy world? I accept it. I'm a massive softy and I only get worse when it involves Lily. I cannot bring myself to wake her up so now I'm going to sit up here. In the sky. Doing NOTHING until she wakes up.*

Kat half expected that to work. For her mental yelling to wake Lily up, summon some divine retribution, or just have some lucky coincidence happen that moved the plot along. No such luck though, so she did what she threatened to do. Set herself back into a holding pattern and decided to use her immense eyesight... to count the number of pets she could find.

The answer ended up being forty seven, but Kat felt like that was almost cheating because of the one house with twenty rabbits all to itself. Lily was starting to stir though, and Kat gently nudged her attention down the link. Certainly not enough to actually wake Lily, but enough for Lily's subconscious to know her attention was needed and desired.

Eventually Lily did actually come to. [Oh... um... good... morning? Afternoon? Whatever it is...]

Hello Lily. It's... well I'm not quite sure if it's past lunch yet or not. Doesn't matter though. I found the gardens for the 6th of the 10. Turns out they're a giant greenhouse with guards out the front. We need to sneak in and the best way seems to be in a wheelbarrow when one of the servants is transporting fertiliser. I'm a bit big to hide in a wheelbarrow so I was waiting for you to get up.

[Is there really no other way in?]

* There is. In my flying I managed to spot two more side entrances. Sadly, they also have guards and even less foot traffic. The only way I can see us getting in reliably is the wheelbarrow trick. They don't seem to have any animals actually in the greenhouse. Well no, pretty sure I've seen some insects but that's about it.*

[So back into my head?]

Yup.

Lily let out what had to be a sigh and started to wiggle her way out of Kat's grasp. Kat flared her wings and brought herself to a stop, letting Lily escape and spread her own wings. Kat could instantly see how much trouble Lily was having. Apparently Kat had chosen to hover at a higher elevation and Lily was barely keeping herself afloat. Quickly, Kat went fog form and was interested to note the wind didn't affect her, or at least, it didn't SEEM to be doing anything.

Outside Lily dove for the shed in question. It wasn't hard to spot and with the link it was simple to confirm with Kat. Lily had no trouble diving down, and remember to ease up on the landing as well. Sneaking inside wasn't even hard. The door was propped open and there was two wheelbarrows already stacked. Apparently this wasn't a common way of entry. Lily hopped up and squeezed herself in between the sacks of fertiliser and tried to block out the smell. [My poor nose...]

Chapter 785 A Treck Through the Fields

A short time later the wheelbarrow stopped and Lily could hear it as the gardener grabbed on of the bags of fertiliser. She waited, listening to the environment for a few moments until she heard a soft thump off to the side. Taking that as the place they were depositing it, she waited a few moments for a second bag to be grabbed, waited a moment more, and leapt from her hiding place before getting a quick look at things.

She was currently next to what looked to be a cornfield, a small one considering she could see the edges on the left and right, but it was a good hiding place. So she dashed off into the stalks, letting her soft paws do much of the work of keeping her silent. The slight brushes against the corn easily chalked up to the wind. She was small and easily able to make use of such a thing.

Back in her mind, Kat was messing around. She was now in what could be best described as 'sexy librarian'. She had a pair of fake square shaped glasses that didn't so much sit on her face as perch on her nose in the perfect way to make it seem she was constantly looking down at people. Her pencil skirt ended halfway down her thighs that were covered by black stockings. Her top was a close cut grey suite with no tie.

Lily wasn't actually paying what Kat was doing all that much. She managed to change her 'internal view' and shifted it so that it was 'behind' the wall. All she could see was a wall with a door on it and was considering it mental energy well spent. Now she could hide away when Kat was teasing her as she was currently doing.

Kat was looking for something similar. As this was Lily's mind she had much less direct control. Kat was attempting to figure out if there was a way to see through Lily's eyes while she was inside her girlfriend's mind. Her first test involved staring really hard at a wall and praying. As dumb as the idea might sound on paper, it was the mental world. Simply believing a thing would happen usually got you closer to making it happen in truth. For a given value of truth inside someone else's head.

The next attempt at seeing through Lily's eyes were the books laying around. Many of them were from Lily's memories and they certainly gave some perspective at least. Sadly that wasn't quite good enough either. These books all had a purpose already and they didn't seem terribly keen to change. *Hmm... If I could find a blank book then I might be able to get this to work...*

And thus the quest for a blank book started. It involved checking everywhere twice, the closet an extra four times, the underside of the bed an extra three, and opening and closing the door to the abyss enough times for Lily to question what was going on. Something Kat was happy to reveal. [I'll see what I can do when I'm not sneaking around...]

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Back with Lily she was making her way around and really wishing she felt safe flying. She'd gone through a cornfield, a cabbage patch, two fields for tomatoes, one for normal sizes and one for cherry tomatoes as well as the carrot patch and what seemed to be rose fruit. How or why they managed to get roses to bear fruit Lily didn't know, but that was the best descriptor of them. They were trees that looked like giant roses and instead of thorns they had eggplant like growths in the corresponding colour that looked like they had rose petals carved into them. Pretty? Yes very. Thorny? Also very. Lily didn't imagine picking them was safe at all.

The issue Lily currently had was that she was clearly in the farming section and she didn't know how to leave. None of the fields could really be called fields. They were at best planter boxes with delusions of grandeur. Lily was really wondering what the point was. It wasn't really enough food to feed anyone let alone a noble household. It seemed a bit inefficient to her.

Of course, Lily wasn't taking into account just how ridiculous the magical water was. She was looking at no more than a week's worth of crop growth. Each small patch was enough to feed all of the 6th of the 10's household and still have some left at the end of the day. The fertiliser wasn't even strictly necessary. It helped certainly, but the water was enough to produce 'good' crops all by itself with minimal working of the ground as long as you weren't drowning the plants. The fertiliser just helped them get closer to 'the best' food in the city.

That's what they used this greenhouse for. It was attempting to find the best balance of fertiliser to fountain water. It didn't really matter if the crops were the best of their species because the 6th of the 10 had always been involved in feeding the masses. They were the old researchers and quartermasters back when the place was just a camp, and then a small village. Now it was much larger they still had people clambering for information about all kinds of crops.

Some, like the potato, didn't really get better with fertiliser. The water from the spring contributed everything they needed and more. What fertilising did for them, was make them larger and more numerous, but no better tasting. Others like the rose trees didn't grow at all without at least some spring water. It didn't matter how much fertiliser or what kind; the water was necessary. Yet, it only truly needed a few drops. It wouldn't grow well without spring water in large quantities, but it could survive on a teardrop's worth a day as long as it was given other water alongside the fertiliser.

Still, Lily didn't know any of this. To her it was an annoying maze of crops that didn't have an obvious exit. She also hadn't really been paying attention when the wheelbarrow was moving so didn't know what direction the 6th's house was in. If she did, she'd head that way... but she did not and currently flying was still considered too big a risk.

She did keep her ear out for gardeners though as she dashed from patch to patch, making sure not to damage any of the plants. They were clearly checked over regularly and scratch marks were the last thing she wanted them to find on their plants. Her feet were leaving pawprints in the soft dirt though so she was taking care to step as close to the plants as she dared, hoping the shadows would distract any gardeners. There wasn't really much she could do about that issue unless she wanted to fly, but she could hear at least three workers from where she was, and one of them was bound to have her in view if she just took off.

For Kat's part. She was now laying on the bed and staring up at the ceiling. It was both an attempt to see outside and a way for her to try and calm down and think of more options. The first is that looking up and out was a tried and true method, at least according to Kat's mental gymnastics. Many people had ideas that going upwards would lead to an escape. From caves, from troubles, from whatever was chasing them. So, the idea that looking up at the ceiling would reveal the real world wasn't all that far-fetched. It wasn't working but it was a reasonable guess.

*Hmm. So no paper... the ceiling isn't working. None of the walls revealed anything hidden. The clothes in the closet, while fun, are not a window to the outside. Hmm... if only there was like a TV in here or

something. Hmm... maybe if I can convince Lily to add a TV or a laptop to this room I might be able to use that...

The real question is how hard is it to change this room with conscious effort. Lily clearly isn't trying to keep it this shape. It just looks like my room. Which sure, is quite telling when you considering it's MY room and not HER room back at her house. If it wasn't for the books I'd be real worried that this is what's in Lily's mind. Of course, there could be an element of the fact that while this is Lily's mind, it's where I sit in Lily's mind.

Which would mean that finding me in my room that happens to be in Lily's heart really does make sense. I just wish I knew which way it went. Well, that and if putting a computer, or just a computer screen in my room would help. Aw well. Better not distract her while she's sneaking around.*

Chapter 786 Meeting Jara

Lily quickly transformed back into her humanoid form just long enough to open the door before changing back and letting it close behind her. It had taken longer than Lily liked to find how to get to the house, but not as long as she feared it might. The fact she couldn't fly probably made things easier as it wasn't anywhere near as draining.

Lily was looking around for evidence of Jara when she heard the crunch of gravel behind her. Lily froze up for a moment, evidently a mistake, because she found a hand around her neck a moment later. Letting herself get picked up by her scruff she found herself face to face with a girl, or perhaps more accurately a young woman that was probably Jara.

She had long blacked hair that had been done up in a braid and then further wound around itself to keep it up and out of the way. She had long hemp overalls reaching up her all the way to her arms. That didn't stop her wearing heavy duty gloves, though the one that should've been on the hand that reached for Lily was tucked under an arm.

Large brown eyes met slitted amber. "Now, despite how cute you look little cat, I don't think you're supposed to be here,"

Lily struggled slightly in Jara's grip, not wanting to do so too forcefully. Just enough to get away and transform. "I'm afraid I can't keep you around. Wait... did you understand what I was saying?" Lily stopped and nodded, "In that case you really shouldn't be here then," Lily hissed in response, "Well it's just the rules. I don't really know how an animal as smart as you clearly are got passed the wards but I'll have to take you out now. If you're good I might not even tell the guards,"

Lily raised a paw and slowly extended her claws. Jara gave an amused smirk back, "What you think you can hurt me with those? I mean look at me!" Jara was correct. She was wearing thick gardening clothes, Lily's small claws were not likely to cut through, at least not fully. Lily nodded but raised a second paw and repeated the motion before motioning her head towards the ground.

"Well... that's interesting... you seem smart enough to be possessed... but that definitely shouldn't work with the wards... so you're not trained, not possessed... what are you exactly?" asked Jara not really expecting an answer. [Kat get ready to come out. I found Jara. Or more accurately Jara found me. I'm probably going to transform, hand the letter over and transform back. I'll give you the signal] Lily motioned to the ground once again.

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Jara pursed her olive lips as she thought. "Ok little cat. Here's the deal. I have a panic button in my pocket, and no I'm not telling you which one," she was lying it was actually holding her braid together, "but I'll let you down as long as you explain things. Deal?"

Lily nodded and Jara let the cat fall. Not terribly concerned about the small drop. Lily righted herself and took a few careful steps away, making sure it didn't seem like she was running away. [Now Kat.] Lily transformed as the pink smoke covered the area. Lily quickly pulled the note out of her shirt and threw it towards Jara before transforming back into her Memphis form just as Kat become completely solid. Lily waited one more moment and jumped into Kat's arms.

"Oh dear," said Jara with a sigh. "Well, who is it that paid a demon to kidnap me?"

"Actually, Apep summoned a demon, hoping for a knowledge demon, to help with his romantic issues," answered Kat as she stroked Lily's fur.

"Imma kill him," hissed Jara. "I cannot believe that idiot. I leave him alone for a day and this is what happened? May he drown in the sacred waters for his incompetence," Jara turned and kicked the nearby tree with a force that rattled it. Considering the large size of the tree, it was quite impressive for what the pair had thought was a baseline human.

Then in a blink, as if there was never a problem Jara suddenly righted herself and gained a regal air to her. "Well, in that case. I am Jara, heir of the 6th of the 10 and I request further detailings regarding the bargain struck between you and Apep so that I may act in the appropriate capacity as his long time friend,"

Kat rolled her eyes. *Even I didn't miss that she said 'act appropriately' not that she'd help us at all.* "The note is there for a reason," answered Kat.

Jara scoffed, "It is certainly not beyond a demons capabilities to force him to write such a thing, either through various charms, force or even just seducing him normally,"

Lily hissed in Kat's arms, attempting to move around so that she could leap at Jara and just... claw her a little bit. [Come on. Let me at her. I didn't claw her when she grabbed me. Maybe I can rectify that] Venom leaking from Lily's thoughts, "Apparently you can't control your cat. Bit surprising? Resisting your control?" asked Jara 'innocently'

Kat let out a long sigh as she pulled Lily closer to her chest. *On the one hand, I like the justified suspicion. I might know demons aren't something to be scared of, and Lily might be happy to stand by and Kamiko is adorable... but demons like that DO exist. On the other hand. The temptation to let Lily claw Jara's eyes out is surprisingly strong.*

"Well Jara, considering WHO you're calling 'the cat' is in fact my girlfriend I don't really think I need to control her at all. Only the fact that she's apparently much less ok with your insults than I am means that I have to stop her from trying to claw at you for them," said Kat.

"Really? Surely you can do better than a cat?" said Jara dismissively.

Instantly Jara knew she'd pushed to far when it felt like the air in the room was made of cotton. Never before had Kat's comforting aura become hostile in any way but Jara managed to push and reveal a little bit of insight. Being wrapped up in a blanket was soothing, being surrounded by pillows was soothing. Being wrapped in tight blankets while being smothered by a pillow not so much. Kat's eyes burned with purple fire and she took a single, large step forward, looking down on Jara with her extra height, making the human feel as if she was half her height.

"Apparently you've chosen to piss us both of. While I am willing to stop Lily from acting against insults to MY person, she is not capable of stopping ME from acting on insults against HER. So would you like to retract your previous statement? I will ask once," boomed Kat, making full use of her demonic energy to distort her voice beyond recognition.

Jara gulped and took a step back, "Um... sure... she is a very... um... adorable cat thing... I um..."

Kat stepped back reigning in her aura and the terrified look Jara was giving her. *Where did that come from. I've never been so protective of Lily before... then again, I was much weaker, trapped in school with teachers that may or may not have listened to me, constantly trying to avoid giving Gramps issues, and of course she wasn't my girlfriend. Hmm... might need to remember to tone that back... maybe.*

"She can transform. She just currently lacks appropriate attire. We were called somewhat unexpectedly," said Kat keeping her voice even, "Now. We are here because it seemed like the best course of action," Kat let out a long breath the fire in her eyes extinguishing though the purple colour and the glow remained, "I was even wanting to discuss exactly how you thought of Apep, see if you really didn't have an interest in him or not considering my own feelings about my girlfriend despite my asexuality. As it stands though... I'm not entirely sure I can bring myself to CARE anymore..."

Then again... Kat reigned her temper back even further. *If I lost the chance at Lily due to someone else's meddling I would likely carry such a grudge. Letting someone who loved her have chance is one thing. Having a third party push her into someone else's arms would be another.*

Suddenly Kat was distracted by the lust coming from Lily. She sent her own confusion back down the link. [What? It's stupid but seeing you ready to defend me from... a pretty tame insult all things consider is really hot Kat. It's one thing to believe you love me, another to feel it... but it's another thing entirely for someone else to essentially call you out on it and respond. It shows a depth of love... and possessiveness that is VERY attractive to me.]

Jara glanced over Kat once more, trying to measure just how calm the demon was before frowning and performing a light bow. "I am sorry for... acting offensively... it was... not well thought out or even particularly heartfelt... I was... treating you like I would treat Apep's more... fanatic suitors... trying to get under your skin and show your true colours... I just... didn't expect to have opened the floodgates..."

Chapter 787 Marry Apep? Eh, It's Complicated

Jara shook her head, "Never mind. Just... follow me I suppose. We can head to my private garden, nobody will just come through my area and nobody will be looking for me for quite some time,"

Kat fell in step behind Jara as they cut through the bushes and undergrowth. Jara was fairly careful with some of the more delicate plants but others she just strode straight through. One odd bush she even

stepped on. The fact it popped back up as soon as she stepped off only making it weirder. "So... where is Zuhra?"

"Elsewhere. Why? Is it important?" asked Jara.

Kat rolled her eyes at the dismissive tone. Apparently learning the one big red button and how to avoid it she was trying to play coy again. Kat was in half a mind to scare the girl before thinking back to Apep. They were the same age, and while Jara certainly seemed more mature and in control, there was a decent chance she was just putting on a brave face. "While her location itself isn't really important how long she'll be gone IS. We're trying to avoid her for the moment in case you'd forgotten,"

Jara opened her mouth to speak, though Kat couldn't see it. That was the only reason she was able to shut it afterwards and not look like a fool. She let her gaze drop to the letter she was holding. The temptation to open it as she walked was strong but instead, she slipped a hand into her overalls and placed it in one of the many hidden pockets it had on the inside. The cleaner ones of course, "Currently Zuhra is taking her afternoon off.

"I was meant to be with my tutor today. Normally when I have a full day inside with the tutors Zuhra gets time off because the other maids can attend me if truly necessary, and normally it is not. However, said did not turn up at the assign time. When a guard went to check they were in bed passed out with a fever. With such little notice we could not call up a replacement either.

"Zuhra protested getting a day off in light of this, as she'd stuck around a few extra hours this morning, only for me to brush her off. I suppose it is good I did so. She deserves the break and it's clear you do not wish to meet her yet. As to when she'll return... I cannot be certain. She will certainly be back for the dinner bell. The question is just if she'll turn up before that, and if she does turn up early, if she'll attempt to resume her duties.

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"I think the second is more likely honestly. She's a bit of a workaholic and always doing extra that she does not need to. As my personal maid it is mostly her job to stand behind me, occasionally fetch things, and look pretty while doing it. Instead she is regularly cleaning whatever room I am occupying and even prepared lunch some times when I do not wish to sit down for a full meal. Normally she's back early on her break days and comes to find me before four... but she did leave late today because of the missing tutor. So if she'll still be back by then is truly anyone's guess,"

Hmm... a little annoying I suppose. Still that gives us plenty of time to spend with Jara alone before we're forced to head off. While it might not be ideal, it is hardly a poor state of affair. "I see. Well, now that we've established we have some time, we can discuss how you feel about Apep. I already mentioned my own asexuality, so this hits somewhat close to home. I know I would likely inflict considerable damage on a meddling third party if it involved Lily's love life. Maybe break a few legs,"

Jara bit back with, "I don't really see how that is an appropriate reaction,"

Kat shrugged as she saw... ANOTHER GREENHOUSE. Because apparently going two layers deep wasn't considered good enough, "Look Jara. When you've been stabbed through the heart and gotten up a couple minutes later after your body just sort of... deals with that... you start to get a wonky perspective on appropriate response and reasonable harm. If someone broke my legs I'd be up in less than a minute.

With strong enough healers I'd also consider it fine because they might only be out of commission a day or two,"

Jara frowned, "We don't have many healers so skilled. Certainly not any so skilled and actively on call. It would be quite an expensive to heal such an injury,"

Once again Kat shrugged. Just because she had a reasonable excuse for excessive force didn't mean she absolutely required it. She'd probably avoid it back on Earth more due to issues with the law and not wanting the government involved in her life than any real reluctance to break bones in Lily's defence. [Kat. Don't take it too far...]

"Right well now I feel like you're avoiding the question," and Kat was changing the subject but who was really keeping track, "how do you feel about Apep?"

Jara sighed as she pushed the door to her personal greenhouse open. It was the only one that was actually green. Blocking quite a bit of the light coming in from outside. The inside had artificial lighting, likely tightly controlled, but there was a few seats off to the side near a control panel. They weren't in the best condition, stuck inside a hot, for some creatures, damp environment for extended periods of time.

Kat took one of the chairs for herself while Jara sat down at the console. "It's complicated I suppose. Do you want the long version or the short version?"

"Long version please. We've got time. Hopefully," said Kat.

"Right well... I do need to get this off my chest I suppose... and... hmm... as long as I have your word you will not share it with anyone else from this dimension. Except Apep, but only tell him if you feel it is truly necessary. Most of this shouldn't really matter to him," requested Jara.

"That's fine. I promise not to speak of whatever it is you're about to say to others from this dimension," answered Kat easily.

"Right... well. I suppose the first thing that won't really be a surprise to Zuhra at least is that I don't particularly WANT to head my family. I'd much rather spend my time as a researcher. Unfortunately, I'm my parents only child. I have a few cousins that could technically take the role, but realistically my parents would never go for it. Now, I don't want to sound ungrateful. I've read plenty of stories of princesses wishing for more than an arranged marriage..."

"But I understand duty. I understand that I was quite fortunate growing up and, in the event I do not in fact inherit the house, I will continue to have my family's support. I have had a good life and I understand the idea of paying that back. If I must I will take up the mantel as Lady of the family and do my utmost to keep it prospering.

"The issue then is... I'd be expected to have a child. Even if I later hand the reigns over to a cousin, assuming my parents don't block it after their abdication, it would be a massive scandal to have not even tried for a child of my own. This is where things start to get complicated. I am asexual, as you know, and I have no interest in romance at all. Give me a greenhouse at the edge of the city and lifetimes supply of funds and I could die a happy old lady when my times comes.

“The problem then, of course, is that I’d be expected to have a child, and if I have a child, I am expected to have a spouse, even if that spouse is the same gender as I am. Truth be told, if I am forced to go through with becoming the lady of my house I would like to marry Apep. I know him. I trust him. I would bear him two children, one for my line and one for his, and while it wouldn’t be... pleasant to lay with him it would be something I could stomach. It would not disgust me overly much, and my parents would certainly be happy. So would his...”

“If we did marry I would not begrudge him any whores or mistresses he may desire, as long as they know their children shall not inherit. I would be willing to live separately from him if he truly desired after we had children, though I dislike the idea. I do believe children require two parents to grow properly. Yet in truth. Had I complete freedom for my choices. I would not marry Apep. For I do not want to. It is merely one of my better options on the path my parents wish for me,”

Chapter 788 Venting

I can see how those two are friends now. Basically the same answer to the question really. ‘I mean in an ideal world no. But in this world maybe?’ is what they both basically said. “In that case, what do you WANT to have happen here with Zuhra? Your help would be nice, but frankly whatever happens after we give our report to Apep isn’t really our business. We’re happy to work with you even if you have other plans after we leave...” offered Kat.

Jara huffed, “Yeah I guess I can see where you’re coming from. It’s not even a bad deal, especially if I’m on this side of things. As for what I want to happen... well... my parents like to threaten me with having a younger sibling if I don’t marry and have kids, preferably with Apep. I keep encouraging them to go along with the damned idea.”

Jara brushed away a strand of loose hair and continued, “I don’t know why exactly I don’t have siblings. Maybe they only wanted one, too much effort perhaps? Maybe it’s a medical thing? Perhaps they’re just really unlucky? Maybe they don’t take me seriously when I say ‘Go ahead, if you fuck enough that I don’t need my own sex life I’ll be beyond grateful’ which perhaps isn’t the most tactful phrasing but I feel like it gets the point across,”

Kat narrowed her eyes, “Is... is that really an appropriate way to... motivate? I suppose? A child?”

Jara shrugged, “I don’t know about appropriate but it is not necessarily uncommon. ‘If you won’t be a proper heir we can make another’ isn’t all that different from saying ‘I can fire you and hire someone better’ of course the issue I think my parents might have is that I’m quite a good candidate if it wasn’t for my asexuality and unwillingness to do the job. My educational scores are beyond reproach and by far the top of my generation.

“I wish I was able to compare myself against other great minds from the past, but education changes somewhat rapidly as new things are discovered. Certainly at least once a generation. So it isn’t truly comparable after a certain point. I also apparently have a head for business. Did you know the smaller crop sections were my idea? Focus on small lots of consistently grown crops specifically to sell to high end merchants and other numbers of the Ten. It makes us so much money and that was all me.

“I think my parents are scared that I got all the intelligence and any future children wouldn’t be quite as bright. Which is nonsense. If anything the other children they have should be at least close to my level...”

then again it's not like my father is a genius really. Good head for business, and my mother loves him, but no genius. My mother... well she's just lazy really. If she had half my work ethic we'd be by far the richest of the Ten!"

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"Really?" asked Kat.

Jara waved the point away, "Sort of? I mean we would be... but it's easy to make money when you already have money. My family has suffered no major tragedies since its founding and we never had too many children in each generation. It's just sort of piled up. Even though we do try to keep much of it in the economy of the city we've gotten quite good at things and it continues to pile up. I mean, why do you think we were able to afford the glass? That's the only major expense my family has had to shell out for in a long time. Though it wasn't exactly a recent purchase..."

"What are the other families spending their money on?" asked 'Lily' who was unwilling to actually turn back to ask the question.

"Bit of this bit of that," said Jara, "It really is a slow drain mixed with the occasional fool. The other's need to spend more money on guards, more money on food. The occasional heir that has a gambling problem. They always do recover of course. It's quite hard for one major incident to end things, and the portion of taxes we receive helps stop us ever becoming completely destitute. My family has just been consistent in making small bits of money... and if you keep doing it since the city was founded it adds up over the generations. Mum just happens to be exceptional. If she tried, I don't know that anyone could stop her. Instead... she's content to laze about and occasionally paint. But Fountain forbid she actually SELL any of her work,"

Jara was breathing slightly heavily through her nose. She was clearly trying to retain her composure and failing slightly. Kat did want to ask about Zuhra... but it felt better to keep Jara on her own problems for the moment. Apparently, the botanist needed this. "Is there anything else you'd like to bring up?"

Jara's eyes narrowed, quickly catching on to what Kat was offering... but she couldn't really think of a reason to refuse. "The gardeners probably. They piss me off sometimes. They treat me like I'm still five and don't know how to mix fertiliser properly. Just a week ago I was telling one of the junior gardeners off for skipping out on the compost in his mix but I was told 'Look, I trained for this job, I know what I'm doing young miss,' which. NO clearly you don't because you can't even follow simple instructions.

"Fool didn't even HAVE compost anywhere nearby. No wonder he forgot it. Also, just because you trained a bit after you finished schooling doesn't mean you can tell the heiress who has LIVED BREATHED AND CRIED SAP FOR NEARLY TWO DECADES SHE DOESN'T KNOW WHAT SHE'S DOING!" Kat flinched back when Jara screamed out the last part of her sentence.

"I mean really!" Jara's voice dropped back down but continued to climb, "Why do people assume I know nothing at all of the family business? Let alone the ones that WORK HERE and SEE ME participating FREQUENTLY in the maintenance of the gardens. I'm not standing on the balcony in fine silks shouting 'why don't you understand peasants?' NO! I have the worst looking nails in the nobility because I cut them down. I have more stained shirts than I have nice ball gowns. I have enough overalls to dress the ENTIRE WORKFORCE TWICE if they'd fit anyone above fifteen!

"I get it. Some of the Ten have a bit of a reputation. Not all of them take part in the main business. They just know how to manage. My own mother has probably never chipped a nail or had to desperately scrub dirt from under her fingers hours before an important party. I get that. BUT if I walk up to you. Sweaty, covered in dirt, and basically in gardener uniform telling you YOU'RE WRONG. FUCKING LISTEN!"

"Is it really so beyond their comprehension that I might, if not be correct, at least worth listening to? It's not even that uncommon. Granted, those are the gardeners that don't generally stay employed and get kicked out with a half hearted reference but we employ a hundred gardeners at least. We still go through them quite regularly! I can scarcely go a month without someone ignoring my advice for no good reason. It wasn't even that much worse when I was a child.

"It was a bit sure, but it was much kinder on me because I understood. I was a child back then. I might have been a smart child, but I'll never forget what ol' Mister Philip's said to me when I tried correcting him. I was only four at the time and it stuck with me. 'Girl. I know you mean well, and you have a buncha fancy ideas. It don't matter. It ain't my place to come up with ideas. I just keep the garden from falling apart as per ya parents instructions with my own little tricks. If ya can find something practical, let them know first and then tell me. Cause if they told me to dig a 3 foot deep hole when it really needs to be five? I might tell 'em, but if they insist it needs to be 3 feet deep. Then it needs to be 3 feet deep.

"Granted it still took me a while to understand what he meant but now I only correct people on things I know are wrong. Things I know they should have been told about or just little mistakes. Like another time, about two months back. One of the female gardeners was trying to plant cabbages in the eggplant patch. They don't have the same fertiliser mix or take in the same amount of water. I warned her, and she didn't listen to me. I almost wish the cost of the seeds came out of her pay cheque when her boss found out. Almost wish I'd told her the day it happened, but while I do like correcting people. I do not want a reputation as a snitch. Much harder to deal with and remove,"

Chapter 789 Zuhra's Midnight Strolls

Jara let out a long breath as she seemed to collapse back into the chair, energy bleeding out of her. Kat just watched it happen. The burning anger and indignation replaced by the look of a woman who was tired from holding the weight of the world. Kat was a little surprised at that, but reading between the lines it wasn't so ridiculous. If Jara's mother was as lazy as mentioned it was likely Jara was doing her research, learning how to run things, and running a number of things her mother couldn't be bothered with. Add onto that the constant threat of marriage and dealing with idiots in general and apparently the poor girl really needed to vent.

"I shouldn't have done that," whispered Jara. The words slowly falling from her mouth slowly, as if they were edging towards a cliff face without knowing about the water at the bottom.

"It's fine, I don't mind," said Kat easily. It was true too. She'd dealt with much worse tantrums from younger kids.

"No no. I mean... no I shouldn't have done that. I am not criticising you just myself. I'm trusting you quite a lot. Sure, I know that demons can't lie and you said you're from Apep... but it is much easier to pretend to be a demon than it is for a demon to pretend not to be," Kat opened her mouth to retort but

Jara just lolled her head back and waved Kat off, “Oh I don’t think you’re pretending. I think I’m good enough at reading people for that...”

“But it’s not like I tested anything to ensure your demonic heritage. There’re quite a few ways I could go about it. Trying to use an artifact that generates illusions on you, finding out what colour your blood is. I could have actually checked this letter from Apep. Maybe it talks about what he did to summon you. I might be able to determine if someone was faking the summoning that way. It was just... reckless of me to dump all that on you.

“Apparently I needed to complain more than I thought. I do wonder when I got so wound up? I don’t really go to my parents with these kinds of issues anymore because I don’t want them to dismiss me as just having a tantrum. When it suits them they still like to treat me as if I’m not doing half of their work. Apparently I don’t complain to Apep like I used to. I’m not sure I like that particular fact... so I suppose I’m now invested in getting Zuhra and Apep together so that things can settle down again and my parents can stop pushing me...”

Jara sighed and rolled herself forward. Her eyes gaining back some of their light but her posture still hunched over and her head not quite so tall. “With that resolution made. What do you want to know?”

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Um... “I suppose whatever you can tell us? I mean... the first thing would probably be if Apep has a chance at all? Like... is she a lesbian? Is there anything major she wouldn’t like about Apep? Stuff like that,”

Jara nodded at the questions and said, “Well... I do know she’s at least bisexual. It’s not really come up and I suspect she’s straight but, well, I don’t want there to be anything unclear right now so I’m telling you exactly what I know. As for big issues... well... the reason she started working here is because her fiancé, who was male, died.

“I personally have never really pressed on the details. It continues to be a bit of a sore spot for her. It’s also probably the biggest issue that Apep will have to overcome,” said Jara firmly.

Kat tilted her head to the side, “I don’t get it. If he’s dead what’s the problem? I mean, I’m assuming Zuhra isn’t still grieving right?”

Jara looked at Kat like she was an idiot and Lily’s own annoyance could be felt through the link. Before Kat could ask what Lily’s problem was Lily chimed in, [Kat. That’s not what makes it complicated. Depending on how close they were and what caused his death she might consider herself effectively widowed. I... I could always tell myself that I’d move on from you if you didn’t return my feelings and I moved on but... I don’t really know what I would have done if you’d died.]

[When the love of your life dies... it’s not just that they’re dead. It’s that you found the person you thought of as ‘the one’ and now they’re gone. It introduces a lot of questions. She may want to stay faithful, she might believe that her fiancé would be mad at her choosing someone else. She might see it as betraying the love they had together or something. It’s actually rather complex]

“Kat?” asked Jara curiously once she saw Kat’s eyes come back into focus.

“Oh... um sorry. Lily was just explaining why I was being an idiot. I guess... I guess I can't really picture it properly. I mean, my parents are dead and I don't miss them. I never knew them and I never felt like I needed a parent to replace them,”

“Huh,” said Jara, “Well you've got that in common with Zuhra. She's an orphan as well apparently. Grew up in the orphanage run by the 8th. Still, it can certainly be rough on someone when they lose their love. I mean what...” Jara trailed off and glanced between Lily and Kat not sure if she was willing to voice the question.

Kat still answered though, “Assuming I had no way to prevent it we'd both die regardless. We have a magical bond and it really isn't meant to be broken. I know that Lily wouldn't survive my death. Her current body requires constant connection to a demon. On my end, even if my body survived I'm not sure my mind and brain could deal with the backlash generated,” Kat shrugged, “It really isn't an issue for us.”

Jara nodded, “Well that's one way to be secure in your relationship I suppose. I don't really understand the desire to connect to someone so completely that we'd take each other out... but if that's what you like I guess. Back to Zuhra though... I'm not really sure how hard that will be. She obviously sprinted into the job to deal with the sadness.

“I mentioned she was a workaholic, right? Well I meant it quite literally. It's what she does when she is stressed. When we first had her employed she was up at all hours cleaning, or sharpening knives, prepping food for the chefs. Literally anything to keep her hands moving. We didn't notice that she wasn't sleeping more than twice a week for a little bit. She was good enough with make-up that she could hide the signs.

“Apparently she quite literally cleaned until she passed out. Then she'd get up a few hours later and keep going. The only reason we found out was that one of the other maids was up getting a drink and they caught her in the act. While she has gotten better since then... we do have another maid assigned to making sure she's sleeping... and two knight guardsmen that check randomly after that to make sure she STAYS asleep...

“So that's... I guess something Apep should know? Apep might already... it's not a particularly big secret. It's also something he'll have to deal with... but that's all for later... hmm... is surprisingly hard to think of stuff about Zuhra that might be an issue now I think about it. There's pretty much just that big black mark in the form of her fiancé and that's it. Maybe finding out what happened to him?”

“You think I should?” asked Kat

“Eh... I can't really think of anything else to go for. I mean, I could tell you her favourite foods, what she likes to wear on her days off. That sort of thing, but none of that really matters for your purposes. You just need to know if Apep has a chance and... well I don't know that one myself. If I did I would have just told him he's got a good chance or no chance or whatever. Heck I WISH I knew how she felt about him. Then I could have dealt with this whole thing ages ago.

“Frankly... I think chasing down information about her fiancé is your best bet. You'll probably find out a lot about Zuhra along the way. Maybe other dealbreakers, maybe old friends of hers. Actually hmm... I wonder if I can write up permission for you to investigate. Make it a bit more official. As a maid under

my families employee she consented to a background check... I could maybe... hmm... yes I think I'll see if I can do something up for you. If you find yourself in hot water with the city guard for asking questions. Just know it doesn't give you anything more than permission to ask. Nobody HAS to answer so browbeating them won't work,"

Chapter 790 Jara's Room

"Well, follow me," said Jara as she got up and walked past the demonic pair. Said pair simply nodded and followed along behind them. Jara led them around to the front of the house and past the guards. Kat gave them a quick glance but the guards didn't say anything so Kat didn't either. The inside of the house was interesting. It had a number of carved plants both as part of the walls and on stands, but nothing seemed to be truly alive once they were inside.

That was until Jara led them all the way to the back and into her room. It was a large area with a massive dome roof painted to look like you were standing inside the trunk of a tree and looking up. It was mostly leaves and flowers with a few fruits that had budded, bits and pieces of the 'sky' poking through with even a dash of white for the clouds. In the centre of the room was the only living plant they'd seen in the house.

The tree was perhaps most accurately described as 'modestly sized'. It stood at about half again Jara's height, or a bit over a head tall than Kat when you included her horns. It was very neatly trimmed so that it was a perfect circle with lovely blue flowers adorning it. The branches were all evenly spaced and the trunk was completely straight. It was clear quite a lot of work went into the tree itself.

Off to the side Jara was rustling through her desk looking for the correct papers and a stamp. Apparently she found them because a few moments later she had them out and signed. "Ok, I've got three writs for you here. The first one," Jara handed it over. It was folded over but what Kat assumed to be Jara's sigil, which was an ornate six made of roses spread out over the back, "is to say we've asked you to look into something. It's not quite permission, more a 'you aren't suspicious' type thing.

"A warning though," Jara's voice hardened, turning serious, "it also has what exactly you're looking into so if the guards question you and you can't explain how it's connected to Zuhra you'll still be in trouble. Don't mess this up because I can also be in trouble," Jara then handed over the second paper, and Kat knew she had to change her opinion. The previous sigil was likely that of her families. THIS was her personal one. It was a magnifying glass in the shape of a six with the handle curled around and a rose in the middle of the lens to create a gap, "this is my personal sigil saying that you're not just looking into it on behalf of my family, but ME.

"The difference is somewhat irrelevant in most circumstances but by further implicating myself it gives your words more weight. It lets people know that I have authorized this directly and when you speak using it, you speak with my voice. Now, technically I'm just the heir, if I was the Lady of the 6th it would be a legal document. Without that, it's just a fancy piece of paper in truth, but practically it's nearly as good as one from my parents. I am the heir apparent with no contenders and I am very much expected to take my place as Lady whenever my parents wish to step back. Most are not privy to the fact I do not wish for the position, so it looks extremely secure. Competent heir, support of both parents, no siblings,"

Jara then took out the final piece of paper. This one had a wax stamp on it with Jara's sigil, the magnifying glass and rose 6, "Finally this one is used internally. If you show it to our house's guards they'll let you in or out. It's more like a permission slip than anything else but you won't have to worry about my family's guards at all with it,"

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Kat grabbed the last paper and frowned. I really need to get on that backpack. I don't really have any great place to keep these... Still, Kat was able to tuck them into her sash. It was tight enough to probably not be a problem but it wasn't ideal. "Hmm... hopefully these stay put..."

"I'm afraid I don't really have anything that would be appropriate..." said Jara slowly as she thought over her options, "Is there anything else I might be able to help you with? Feel free to ask, the worst I can do is say no after all,"

Lily struggled a bit in Kat's grip and was quickly let down. She raced behind Kat and resumed her human form. "If you've got any clothes that can fit me that'd be great. If not it's fine, I don't mind staying as a cat... but clothes would nice..."

Jara glanced at Lily who was very much hiding. Jara made a shooing motion towards Kat who glanced at Lily and moved off to the side. Lily pouted up at her girlfriend, with an exaggerated betrayed look. "Lily, not only are we all women, Jara is asexual. You're also wearing a shirt and everything is completely covered. It's fine,"

Lily sighed and stepped to the side further so that the bit of cover she was being given by Kat's wing wasn't covering any of her. Jara looked the other girl up and down, comparing the two. Lily was a bit smaller... everywhere. She was less well endowed, slightly shorter, with thinner legs, that were certainly less muscled. Working in the gardens all the time would help with that. "Hmm... I think... if I still have some of my old clothes, they'll fit perfectly..." mumbled Jara as she walked over to a nearby door and stepped through.

Kat and Lily stood there for a while before Jara popped her head back out, "Lily I've grabbed what I think will fit. Do you want to come in here and change with me or shall I let you change out there? I'm not quite willing to just leave you alone in my cupboard but considering you're dating Kat you might want to keep yourself hidden,"

Lily blushed and glanced at Kat who shrugged. *It's not like I haven't seen you naked before.*

[IT'S DIFFERENT!]

I'm not totally sure I agree. It's not like I had a sexual awakening or we grew up together and now I suddenly find you attractive. You've always been super cute, and nothing about that fact has changed.

Lily's entire face went bright red and she looked down at the floor. Jara stifled a giggle at the look and pretended to turn her view to the ceiling as she wondered what Kat had likely said through their bond. [Sure it might not be different for YOU but it is different for ME. Now I'm not being judged by my incredibly nice best friend, I am potentially being judged by my smoking hot succubus girlfriend. You're lucky I don't think I look like a troll or something compared to you. The fact I have no body issues with you as a best friend might be a minor miracle!]

Kat rolled her eyes and stepped closer to Lily. Lily watched Kat warily for a few seconds before Kat's hand struck out on top of Lily's head right between her ears. Lily was about to ask what was going on when Kat started to scratch behind them and move in. Lily couldn't help it she melted on the spot. Kat followed her down to the floor as Lily bonelessly laid herself out on warm tiles that made up Jara's floor purring all the way. "See adorable. Not only have you improved your looks, you were adorable before, and are now exceptionally adorable. There is nothing to worry about,"

If Lily was in her right mind she'd probably be more embarrassed. As it stood though, she was completely lost to the feeling of Kat's hand. It was so very relaxing. She couldn't remember what the problem was at all. It took Jara a few moments of this to realise it was ending anytime soon. "Is that... is that normal?"

Kat shrugged, "Maybe? Do you have beastkin here?"

"No...?" said Jara

"Right well... her race has the ability to swap between humanoid and a specific animal form. Lily's happens to be a Memphis, which is a kind of feline. This isn't necessarily normal because unlike most she wasn't born this way. A magical ritual," *and a demonic machine* "helped her no longer be human. It does however mean that her instincts are a bit more obvious sometimes. I also doubt this would work if it was someone else,"

"I'm sorry but I have to ask... why wouldn't it work for others?" said Jara hiding her smile behind her gloved hand.

"It's partially a safety thing," said Kat as Lily's tail managed to snake its way around her arm, "this is basically telling Lily that she's quite safe. The fact that I'm doing it reinforces that in her mind, and the fact that it's true helps,"

"Ok... now I want to know why you thought it was a good idea?" asked Jara

"She was talking trash about her appearance and needed to be punished for that. I'll accept nobody dismissing her looks. Not even herself!" announced Kat.

Jara couldn't help nodding. It did make sense after all.