

## DEMONS 891

Chapter 891 Arriving on the Outskirts.

Kat was looking over the city. They'd finally arrived... and she couldn't stop the twitching in her eyes at the sight. You see, despite how close they are, they'd just woken up and walked maybe thirty minutes tops to get this view. Xiang had insisted they were close when he woke up early in the morning, before Yang even. He was correct in this of course, but had previously ignored Kat's questions about if it was worth it to continue later the previous evening, only to backtrack in the morning and put forward it all as his idea.

Now, it is true they weren't exactly close yet, it was just easily in view, but Kat was still very much annoyed with this turn of events. Granted, a lot of that annoyance was an insistence Lily also be awake for this view... which was just underwhelming and didn't help fix the annoyance Kat could feel infecting her mind. It was all just, mildly inconvenient. But when they all added up... Kat was not so happy a camper. Lily started to purr in Kat's ear and she felt so much of that building agitation drain out.  
\*Thanks.\*

Lily sent feelings of love and affection through the link as they looked out over the lake and the city nearby. Sure it was partially as they'd been told. A wonderful river spawned from dense water qi that could be felt by the cultivators apparently. It was a smooth, flat lake with spouts of water dotting the surface and had that been it, Kat was sure it would be an unforgettable sight. What ruined things was everything else.

The lake had more boats than a sporty ginger had freckles. They were everywhere, which the boats only increasing in size the further away from the city they got. Probably starting to live on them. Use the fact they were one of only a few in that section of the lake's fishing grounds. That's not to say the lake shore was any better. The city encircled the lake, not like a protector, but like a tangling vine strangling the life from something else much more wonderful.

It was clear the lake was shrinking. It might not have been happening in real time, but Kat could see a number of piers, both private and commercial, all at various lengths in the water... and with a keener eye still you could see that a few of the piers that had yet to be demolished were further back into the shoreline, not touching a drop of water. Without waves, it was clear to see that water would never return. Still, they seemed to need all those piers in various states of use, because the boats needed to be tied up somewhere.

There were other issues as well. The shoreline had a few very nice buildings right in the centre, and a clear effort had been made to keep that nice and pleasant looking... but as you got further from that nice centre more and more shacks held together with dirt and prayers could be seen. They covered nearly the entire lake's shore, with only a few open spaces further away from the city. Yet even directly opposite had a few more shacks, making use of just how 'remote' it was.

A lot of these shacks had large chunks of wood sticking into the ground in front of them as well. No prizes for guessing they were for tying off yet more boats. Kat also tried to ignore the people she could see dumping literal shit into the lake. They weren't even trying to hide it either. It was a big line of people on one of the largest piers just lining up with wagonload after wagonload of garbage and shit. \*I

don't know why I expected better from a place with magic... but apparently I did. They really aren't taking care of this place at all.\*

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[Kat... it seems like the poorer people are just as poor, if not more so than many places back on Earth. It... really isn't better back home if you know where to look.]

\*I know that... I mean... I really should know that but... I guess I'm not watching them do that sort of shit right in front of me. I mean... there are literally dumping wagons full of shit into the river!\*

[Kat, plenty of places dump sewage into the waterways back at home, or just the ocean. That's probably worse than just shit though for some reason I can tell you also saw garbage... which, neat that I know that, not very neat that it's happening. I... I just don't see much we could do about it Kat. Remember, one of the very few rules we have is we can't uplift people... and that still wouldn't fix the problem for decades probably.]

\*I just... maybe it's different at home because as shitty as it can be we have other lakes, other rivers. Other oceans... this... this looks like a once and a lifetime opportunity. A lake like this might never exist again and the fact that they're just... letting it go to waste isn't pleasant in the slightest.\*

[Ok Kat... don't take this the wrong way... and I'm certainly not saying I'm any better than you are in this... but we only have on Earth. It's precious, and unique and if we destroy it, not even completely just a little too far... then we're all dead, or in need of an entirely new planet. We will likely live to see the destruction of our natural world. It is no different to this lake, in fact, it's quite a lot worse from certain perspectives.]

Kat found that she didn't really know how to deal with that information. \*Oh... I... did you have a plan for that future?\*

[Yes Kat. I planned to leave. I think there's a good chance we'll wise up a bit as a species and slow our inevitable end long enough for everyone we're good friends with on Earth to either take the chance to transform like us and leave when we're ready, or die. It used to be one of the big existential problems I never knew how to solve... and now with the option available I'm not sure I want to try.]

\*I... why? Why just leave things like that?\*

[Kat... we'd have to go full magical demonic dictator to stop it I think. Even if tomorrow everyone just stopped polluting... as a species we'd find something else that's just as bad or worse without realising it. We've done similar things many times. Unless you want to rule the world, I don't see any way to avoid leaving. On top of that... when you consider how many worlds there are... humans on our Earth might die... but we are going to outlive the entire solar system. We'd just be leaving a bit earlier.]

\*I don't think I like thinking about this.\*

[I don't think anyone does. It's one of the reasons nothing gets done Kat. One of many, but still one of them.]

Kat just pursed her lips and stepped forward as Xiang and Yang started to move again. Xiang didn't seem to see anything wrong with the picture, but Kat could see Yang's narrowed eyes and clenched fists. It

wasn't clear what part, or parts she found objectionable... but after the conversation she'd just had with Lily, Kat didn't feel like finding out at all. It was things she didn't want to consider. Lily was a much better long term planner so... best leave it to her. That's what Kat would tell herself anyway.

When they got closer to the city, the group started to slow down, it was something Xiang did first and the rest followed suite. Kat suspected it was a courtesy thing. Nobody should be charging full speed into the city centre. It would lead to all sorts of problems. So with a more normal speed, Kat had the chance to ask, "So Xiang... what exactly is the plan here?"

Xiang licked his lips slightly as he thought that question over, "Well... we've got a few ways we can go about this. The first, and the most questionable would be to show up at the Lord or Lady's district and just... walk around. The buyer will be exceptionally arrogant, but revealing we're cultivators would let us make a sale then and there. Probably for a good deal of coin... that we don't really need... but a good deal of coin at least.

"Other than that... two options really. The first is finding the biggest merchant in the city and offering it to him. We'll be undercut massively but probably paid in things more relevant to us. Perhaps he might have a few old cultivation jades, or some ingredients. It really depends on what's in stock. If we're really lucky," Yang rolled her eyes at that and gestured grandly towards Xiang with a slight nod, "we could find some rare cultivation thing that the merchant doesn't recognise... but that's only if he's too dumb to wonder why we want that over other things.

"Then there is one more thing I'm interested in... probably the best option, at least I think... the Auction House.

#### Chapter 892 The Brave Guardsmen

Kat waited for the follow up. The whys and hows concerning the auction house and what made it the best choice... but after ten seconds it became clear she was going to have to ask. The affirmation from Lily just clinched it, "So... you said 'Auction House' like I should know what that means already... but why is it the best option by far?"

"Oh... right, I forgot you were a demon for a moment," said Xiang causing Kat to raise an eyebrow in question which Xiang didn't bother noticing. "You see, the auction houses around the continent are all mostly run by the same people. It's a small sect in terms of cultivators... but massive in terms of economic power. They are known as 'The Merchants of Gold Road' and they mostly deal in high level cultivator stuff. Nobody wants to mess with them because they can place heavy embargos on people who cross them.

"Anyway, the reason they make the Auction House -capital letters by the way- the best for us is that they'll take the item off our hands. Now some people might not like that, but we don't want to be carrying around a giant snake head anyway. They'll deal with the transport and safety while also adding it to the Auction House line up. Even with their cut it's still probably the best way to make money from this.

"The only issue is that we might be stuck here for a few days... certainly longer than I'd like considering it took us a while to get here... but... dammit at we're really committed at this point and maybe, if we're

lucky we can find the thing Xuena's family was supposed to give the ice ass sect... though I don't really remember what that was..." Xiang mumbled, trailing off.

Yang shook her head wondering at how Xiang could have forgotten such a thing already. She of course didn't need to rely on the notes taken in her notebook for Xuena. Of course not, that would make her a bad friend. Kat on the other hand sighed as she shook her head, not at the forgetfulness but the fact she was going to be here even longer. I dunno how much I'm getting paid for this... and maybe I should... but whatever it is. Isn't enough.

[Now don't so that Kat. I've managed to work out my magic to the point I can cast something at least. The fact that we're here isn't the best thing ever but at least we can still send messages to the people back at home. I mean really, what else would we be doing?]

\*I suppose... but I wan to give Sylvie a big hug, listen to the sounds of Callisto making breakfast and feel the infectious joy Vivian gives off. Just for a bit. It's not like we're getting no rest, and I'm sure in this town we'll have a place to stay while we wait... but a day to see everyone would be nice. Though... hmm... system? Is it possible to temporarily duck out of a mission?\*

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User Kat is informed that exceptions can be made, but does not qualify for any of these exceptions.

\*Welp. That wasn't very helpful at all.\*

[I'm not sure what else you really expected. It's certainly possible, but certainly not something D.E.M.O.N.S would want to become a regular thing. Especially when they are already so stingy with the messaging times. I imagine the breaks are probably exceptions for pregnant people, or maybe recently pregnant? Perhaps exceptions for the males as well?]

\*I don't like the fact that you're right... but you're probably right. Ugh... fine whatever. I guess I can look forward to having a big break when we're done with this mission though. I wonder if I'll just get a week off or longer?\*

[No idea] With Lily confirming Kat's own thoughts there wasn't much else to think on for the moment, as they were approaching the gate. It looked exceptionally superfluous. Not only was it completely ineffective against a cultivator, considering the wall was only about the height of a small house, it was also clearly a bit old. This wasn't proved by the weathering on the bricks, but by the fact that if you looked to the left where the water was, you could see a section of the wall just ended. There was a dinky little wooden fence, and there was also a guard watching from the top of the wall... but it was an easily exploited opening.

"Halt. State your business!" said one of the two guardsmen at the gate.

\*Really? What could it possibly be? Perhaps we're trying to get rid of the giant snake head?\* Despite Kat's inner snark, Xiang wanted to answer them properly. "We are travelling cultivators looking to offload the head of this slain beast. It is Rank 3, and killed by our own hands," Kat could suddenly feel a number of eyes on their party at those words. "Ideally, we will be dropping it off at the Auction House, but that is not our only option of course,"

The guard nodded in understanding, "I see. In that case are you prepared to pay the fee for entering our fine city?" \*I'm sorry what? There's a fee to get in?\*

Xiang's mouth twitched downward for a split second before his face returned to a more respectful looking one, "While we do have coin for such expenses good sir, can you inform me as to what we are being charged for?"

"Of course Master Cultivator," though the way the guardsmen said it made it feel a lot more like 'young brat' "you are attempting to sell your wares here in our glorious city and as such you must be taxed upon entering. With such a large beast, I'm sure you'll make quite a bit of coin,"

Xiang couldn't help it this time, his face set into a frown. "Yet I wish not to sell this piece, but auction it. You mean to say there is a tax on such things? On top of the charge the auction house takes of course?"

The guardsmen was starting to shift slightly, under Xiang's gaze. Clearly not very comfortable with all the follow up questions. \*Lily, any idea if this is a real tax? I mean... Xiang seems to be trying to find that out... and the guard doesn't look comfortable... but that's probably because he's just a guard right? And what we're carrying is a Rank 3 beast right?\*

[That seems to be what I'm reading between the lines. I'd guess that either it's a real tax but the guard doesn't think he could force the issue but will probably be punished for not getting the tax... or it could be the other way around. He stretched the tax to cover auction items when it really doesn't. Perhaps something that is a 'simple' mistake but if Xiang was an angry cultivator and he got caught... well the city wouldn't save him.]

"There is not, if you intend to go to the auction," Xiang glared harder as the guard backtracked, "but you insinuated you may not end up selling at the auction house and if that is the case, I'm afraid I would still need to collect taxes for the passage. There is also of course, a minor charge for entry on top of that, but nothing worth worrying about for cultivators such as yourselves,"

Xiang tapped his foot a few times as he thought over the statement. It seemed Lily was right, the guard was stretching for a little extra coin. Xiang was debating if he wanted to make a big deal here. It was exceptionally disrespectful, at least in his mind. So it seemed very justified... but at the same time... if he pushed it'd be a big deal. It just wasn't worth it. "I will commit to the Auction House in that case,"

"In that case, 3 silver will get you a year long pass into the city," said the guard.

Xiang threw the pieces at the guard, perhaps a little too hard as they put a noticeable dent in his armour. The guard didn't say anything and simply picked up the three, now slightly bent pieces from the ground. Xiang was certain there was a shorter term stay than a year, but he was done with this guard. Standing around much longer would probably lead him to doing something much worse to him.

The guard nodded shakily after he stood back up and went to grab something from the guard house just behind the wall. The sound of a stamp coming down three times echoed out before the guard returned and handed them over to the three of us. Kat glanced at Xiang who returned with a 'do you want to do something about this?' \*Lily?\*

[Eh, it's fine. I doubt they'll check them anyway.]

Kat nodded back at Xiang and started forward. As they walked past, the guard had one more thing to say, "Please stick to the main paths while carrying your... cargo. Any property damage you inflict on the city is your responsibility to pay back,"

Chapter 893 Work Work. Zug Zug. Dabu

Kat couldn't decide exactly how much she hated the smell in the city. See, with the fresh water so close by there was an undercurrent of a fresh spring breeze that occasionally tickled your nose. The problem was the rest of the time it smelt like something had died, and then used its stench to go on a killing spree and at to the numbers. It wasn't quite as bad as the swamp, but sometimes there was just a sparkle of hope your next breath wouldn't be so bad. The oscillation from hope to disappointment definitely made things worse then it otherwise would be... but the swamp was just that bad.

As for how it was walking down the streets... well it wasn't too bad. The main street at least was exceptionally large, enough space for three carriages pushed up against each other, and then more room for the footpaths. The few carriages they did pass meant Kat had to tilt the snake head a bit to avoid knocking them over... but it was manageable with a bit of care. It wouldn't do to have her fall over sideways from the weight.

Still, it wasn't too much of an issue, and they got to the Auction House with minimal issues. It was set in what Kat was pretty sure had to be the centre of the city. The area nearby opened up into this large town square with a fountain of pure water that must have been enchanted to help drive away the stench. There were a few trees growing in the grass patch that surrounded the water with little flowers popping up from the ground as well. It was a wonderful example of the city and if even half of the damned place was like this, Kat would considering it a wonderful vacation spot.

The Auction House itself was of course directly opposite the main road, blocking it and forcing the road to branch off in two other directions. It really spoke of the money and power required not to build roads, but to divert them. It was an imposing building that seemed to feel large. It looked as though it was looming, and even though it was only three stories, above ground at least, it felt easily doubly that if not more. The outside was a black wood lines with white stone. The doors were large, though not quite large enough for the head to get in, and the fittings were clearly gold.

"So... how are we going to do this?" asked Kat, "The doors aren't quite large enough so... what's the plan?"

Xiang answered easily, "I'll head in first, get them to acknowledge me, and then we'll probably be led to some place to evaluate the snake. Then hopefully they'll take it off our hands,"

Kat nodded and stepped backwards onto the grass. She wasn't quite off the road but it was good enough for now. Kat felt like putting the thing down for a bit, but decided it'd be too much of a hassle and likely quite damaging to do such a thing. With a nod from everyone Xiang moved away from the rest of the group and went inside. It wasn't overly busy in there. The Auction House had three people manning counters, and they were authorised to deal with most lower end items.

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Still, when Xiang started to describe what he had... it became a much bigger deal. It didn't take long for the receptionist to send out a call and head outside herself to take a look. Her head snapped back, as her eyes climbed all the way up to the top of the snake, "Yup. That's going to need a proper appraiser,"

With that established she didn't even wait around, simply heading back inside and returning to her post. Kat and the gang shared a look of 'so we just wait?' and with nothing else to do, they followed that thought. It took about ten minutes for the person they were waiting for to arrive. It was a tall woman, that despite her appearance screamed danger.

She had long ragged hair that resisted all kinds of taming. It was tangled together but tied back with a loose ribbon that mostly just kept it steady at her back. She was missing a leg from the knee down and was using what was clearly a club as a walking stick. Her clothing though, was off exceptional make. They'd found leather so supple it nearly looked like cloth, and had they gone to the effort of dying or painting it a bit, nobody would've been able to tell. The woman's pants were made with a similar leather except they had a metal plate bolted around her good ankle.

Her face was a mess of scars. The most noticeable one dragged from her temple, across one eye, and down to her chin. The eye itself looked... somewhat ok. With Kat's vision she could see it was also lightly scarred, but only lightly. It still held the gift of sight even though it was slightly slower than the eye that was completely hole. Another was that a large chunk had been removed from her nose and then patched over poorly.

The woman barely spared them all a glance. She looked over the snake for a few moments before nodding and making a gesture for them to follow. She took them down the left side street for a few steps before pulling up the sidewalk, which actually happened to be a trapdoor, extending out into the road. It was a steep incline, but clearly meant for carriages and had good clearance. The group followed carefully, Kat exceptionally so. Her feet were steady but the weight was making it hard to keep them.

It didn't take long for them to end up in a basement easily twice the size of the square above with a ceiling that would allow for the snake to be stood on its neck and still have room. They shuffled there way through a number of boxes that were on the edges until they reached another door, this one much larger, like those on an aircraft hangar. The woman didn't hesitate at all, she wrenched it open with her free hand and gestured them inside. As they took steps in the lights flicked on and in the centre was a large glass podium.

As the woman touched it, the podium shifted and churned until the glass set again. It was raised up a bit higher than Kat herself now with a dent in the middle that could perfectly fit the snake. It was easy to guess what needed to happen. Kat however, glanced worriedly at the fact it was glass.

Seeing Kat's worry, the woman spoke up, "That glass right there could take an attack from a Rank 3 cultivator going full out. Dropping a little thing like that snake you have on there won't even scratch it."

Sturdiness now assured Kat did just that, letting it slid from her arms onto the glass, wincing slightly at the slight screeching as the scales and glass rubbed against each other. "Hmm... good weight at least. Probably quite healthy when alive... who killed this beast?" asked the woman.

Xiang pointed to Kat, and Lily hopped onto the spare space on the glass to also point with a paw. The woman's eyes zeroed in on Lily in an instant. "That's not a cat... what is that?" The woman instantly noticed the shift in Kat's posture and watched as purple seeped into Kat's eyes. "Ah I see... she then?"

Lily hopped off the platform and transformed, "I'm Lily!"

"I see! Introductions finally. My name is Gertrude and I will be your appraiser today. I do not know if this would sound offensive, but you looked like a most curious creature, before you transformed of course. Quite a lot of power in that little frame... but the connection between you and your..." Gertrude looked at Kat and smirked, showing a good helping of teeth, even if two were missing. It was a sharp, pleased look, "owner."

Kat wanted to be angry but Lily burst out laughing even as she tried to hide the blush on her face and stepped behind Kat. "I have no regrets," insisted Lily from over Kat's shoulder,"

"Oh I'm sure she takes good care of you Lily," Gertrude practically purred out before straightening and looking over the others, "Now. The rest of you. Introduce yourselves!"

"My name is Kat,"

"Xiang"

"Yang"

Gertrude nodded and turned away back to her work. "Do any of you know the name of this beast?"

She didn't even glance back but nodded again once everyone had shaken their heads, "That does not surprise me, I do not recognise it either and it is in fact my job to recognise such. I suspect it is either a mutant of another similar snake species or perhaps a crossbreed? I'll have to investigate further. What plans do you have for this?"

"We were hoping to sell it," said Xiang.

"Yes and I'm hoping to retire without needing the Merchants guarding my gilded cage and going on about just how large my debt is. That's just a HOPE though. How do you plan to sell it? As is? Ingredients? Separately? Together? What about the location?" rattled off Gertrude.

Chapter 894 Eye See What You Mean

While Gertrude was rattling off her questions, Kat was fielding some of her own. \*Why did you laugh when Gertrude called me your owner? It's not particularly nice and she was clearly doing it on purpose. I almost thought she was provoking me until you started laughing. \*

[No that's not it at all. Don't you remember that talk with Vivian? She was... implying certain things about our relationship. Which of course, are somewhat true even if she was guessing the details were wrong. Still, I laughed because I don't find her all that incorrect. Despite the entirely non-sexual connotation I AM your familiar. If I wasn't as smart that would make you my owner, even if most people don't treat familiars that way.]



\*Oh no. You just had to remind me... I'd locked all that garbage securely away. I... well no I guess that makes sense. She looks pretty old, and the fact she could tell you weren't normal, and that we were connected probably means she's at least reasonably powerful. I wonder how many decades old she is?\*

[Probably best not to ask.]

While Kat and Lily were establishing that, Xiang was trying to figure out his answer, "I'd intended to simply sell it as is, and then let the customer decide what they want. If they choose to turn it into ingredients that's fine, or just use the skull and sell the rest. I don't really care if I'm honest,"

Gertrude nodded slowly as she ran a hand over one of the fangs the snake had, checking for the hole indicating it had a venom sack along the way. "While that isn't a bad idea per say... it will likely limit your potential profits. It's best to have a clear narrative for this sort of thing. So that the auctioneer on duty can hype things up. If you want to sell it as a skull, you can tell of its size, how long it took to kill, what finally brought it down, how difficult the fight was.

"If you want to go the other way and make use of it as ingredients, you should have it prepped for that beforehand. I can do that for a cut of course, but I get most of my cut from the sale of the thing in the first place, so what I really want is to make us both the most money. If the ingredients are prepped, the auctioneer can go the other way, and talk about just how much is here. The size and potency of the venom sacks for example, are not something I can really know just by looking at this."

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Xiang let out a short 'hmmm' before kicking at the floor a few times and letting out a sigh. "Right... well... what do you think would make us the most money? That's really all this is to me. A chance to make money,"

Gertrude moved her eyes over to Kat, knowing after the singling out earlier that she was the one responsible for the kill. "Is that what you desire as well?"

Kat shrugged, "Do you know what I am?"

"A demon," answered Gertrude

"Yup, exactly and for me this is just a thing I killed during my job. Sure maybe I could be a bit of a bitch about it and claim it as my kill but your money isn't really worth much to me... and I don't need any of the ingredients or whatever," said Kat.

Gertrude nodded, "Yes... I've met a few demons and most of them are much politer then the stories insinuate so your answer doesn't surprise me overly much. Still... in regards to the money... it's hard to say. The venom sacks and the eyes are probably where the real money is for this head. Not as much leather on it as the rest of the body I'm sure. Oh there will be some money in it, but better to sell the sacks as a pair, the eyes probably as two separate units and the skin as an earlier piece.

"That is if you are selling it piecemeal. Otherwise... I could clean up the back of this, maybe throw on some lacquer or vanish... just something to keep it from decaying. It's probably something to ask someone else but I can clean the back up nicely. Using it as a centrepiece... it's a formidable snake... but you're missing quite a lot of it and this head isn't the largest I've ever seen... how big was the rest?"

The party looked between each other before shrugging. It was Yang who offered, "Huge. It was probably about half the length from here to the gate in honestly,"

Gertrude let out a throaty chuckle, "Could you remember where you found the beast? Information on the rest of the carcass would also be valuable..."

Kat jumped in here, "I doubt it. It attacked us while we were travelling through the main road in that poisonous swamp down south. You'd have to be blind to miss it and there was a merchant caravan that needed to pass it as we left. I actually let them know, explicitly where it was, in exchange for some information about healing those two" Kat pointed at the cultivators, "who'd gone and got themselves poisoned."

"I see, I see. Certainly can't sell that... any merchant worth his salt would've made sure to get what they could from the thing. What merchant was it?" asked Gertrude.

"Ottis" answered Kat.

"Oh, yes well in that case the carcass is likely completely gone at this point. I haven't heard any news of it, so I'd guess as a favour to you his isn't broadcasting his supply till after you've sold your own spoils. Ottis is a good man like that, even if he is ruthless when it comes to contracts. Right vengeful too for people that try to screw him... but a valuable ally in the merchant world. Even if you just met the man once... hmmm..."

"Frankly I'm not sure what to tell you here. The scales are good, but being on the head I can see there isn't as much as you'd find elsewhere. That's because the snake needed to use its jaws, and of course the skull. I can see this snake stacked up spare scales. Not too many here on the head. So the money is really all in the eyes and venom... maybe a bit from the skeleton. Use that as a piece.

"Problem is... if it's from that swamp... this will be new territory frankly. The eyes are completely untested. They could be worth everything or nothing... but without others KNOWING that value, it'll be a hard sell. The venom though... that would be easy. We could probably get the bidding going nice and good for something with venom that lived in that hellscape. Likely very potent and many a poisoner would pay with heavy stones for it.

"I just can't say if it'd be more to go that way though. It likely all comes down to the price of the eyes. If they turn out to be worth something, and I'd need to take them out to test for that sort of thing without damaging them... then that's your best bet. Otherwise... it's a nice fancy mantle piece. I'll get the story from Kat while you think on it,"

While Gertrude gestured Kat over Xiang and Yang moved together. "There just isn't much of a way to know is there?" asked Xiang.

Yang frowned at his statement and looked over her shoulder back at the snake. "I mean... probably not? I'd hope that after all my time with Xuena I'd be a bit better at this... but it's not like the thing had fancy eye powers like lasers or petrification. So honestly I'd say it's a toss up as to how useful it is. Sometimes the strangest ingredients can be really powerful. That being said..."

"The thing that makes me hesitate so much is the age of the snake and just how large it was... I'd guess that Gertrude either gave us the clue intentionally... but chances are the snake was someone's familiar

once upon a time that survived their cultivator getting taken out, or maybe even merged slightly with them and later going mad. The amount of energy contained in those eyes... it should be quite a lot.

“The chance Xuena could turn them into a tincture that fixes someone’s eyesight or maybe even regrows eyes entirely considering how the snake can replace its scales is REALLY high. The issue isn’t if it’s likely or not, but what level of cultivator it works on, and what alternatives there are. If this could fix a Rank 3 cultivators’ eye... that... that’s the jackpot right there. Now I can’t say how likely that is... but it’s something to think about.”

Xiang grumbled under his breath. “I’m no good at this sort of thing. How big of a loss is it for us, monetary wise if it is something like that?”

“Look I don’t know ok? This sort of thing might be really rare, or it could be pretty common. The real clincher would be if some powerful Rank 2 cultivator in town is missing an eye and has a good healer on hand. The poison, as Gertrude said, can probably be sold for enough... actually maybe that’s what matters...”

“What do you mean?”

“Look... this was all for a bit of money right? Well we don’t need an exceptional breakthrough here. We want a bit of spare change to potentially upgrade our equipment, and just because we couldn’t stand to leave it behind. If the eyes are useless, we’ve still got the poison sacks and the bones right?”

“Right...”

#### Chapter 895 The Inn Argument

The group left the appraiser each feeling something quite different. Kat was glad to finally be rid of the thing. Despite not hurting to hold or being too heavy... it was unwieldy, slowed her down considerably and just wasn’t pleasant to hold. It was gone now, and if the cultivators decided they wanted money, they could find some other way to acquire it. Lily was pleased with herself. She might have been a bit embarrassed but she was awake and in Kat’s arms, and really, isn’t that what mattered?

Yang was feeling a bit bitter about the whole ordeal. Despite agreeing that the snake was too much money to just leave behind... she was really starting to understand just how much time it was taking from them. The auction involving the snake head wasn’t for another two days. Which was really quite lucky when she was informed the auction house normally only holds auctions once a month or on special occasions. Well, the bigger ones. Small auctions for niche but common items happened more regularly. Still... the time was adding up and there was a knot in her stomach as she thought about what Xuena might be doing. Granted, she was probably being either kept in poor accommodations or forced to make medicine. Xuena would treat the first like a holiday and the second like a mostly regular day... but it still didn’t sit right with Yang.

Xiang was the one who felt the most mixed feelings about the whole thing. It had seemed like a great idea, but road blocks continued to pop up. Perhaps if he’d known about just how bad the poison was, he’d have suggested they leave the whole snake behind. Perhaps if he knew they’d need to take it to the auction house. Perhaps if he knew how hard it would be for Kat to move offroad with it. Perhaps, perhaps perhaps. These things all PERHAPS could have helped in the past but they were committed now... and Xiang couldn’t bring himself to be all that pleased about how things had been turning out.

“So where are we saying?” asked Kat, dispersing the clouds that had started to gather around the cultivators.

“Just wherever is-” Xiang started to say before being cut off.

“Oh no you don’t Xiang. We’ll stay at the inn in this city run by a cultivator. There will be at least one, maybe two and we will choose one of those,” said Yang firmly.

“Why? We don’t need anything fancy?” asked Xiang confused.

.....

Yang gritted her teeth and looked over at Kat with a ‘this idiot’ look. \*Wait... does she just want nice beds? No... it looks like more than that...\* “You see Xiang,” \*Oh yeah. She’s gearing up for a bit of a verbal beat down. It’s more.\* “There are only two types of cultivators that room anywhere else. They are the desperate, and those that are hiding something. We are not desperate, and we aren’t hiding anything.”

Xiang raised a finger to point out he at least what hiding more than a few things, such as the fact he was instrumental in destroying a sect, seemed to have a weird form where he could take on much stronger cultivators but couldn’t control it. Yang just glared harder, “Nothing to hide,” she said through gritted teeth.

Xiang gulped, but apparently didn’t know what was good for him, “Yeah but are you saying we aren’t desperate?”

Yang hissed, “Look, it’s not a matter of if we are or not. We’ve been seen going into the auction house because we had to walk a giant snake head through the city. People are now aware of us. If the underbelly of the city doesn’t know already, they will before the end of the hour. If we stay at some random inn they’ll think we have something else worth taking. Maybe we couldn’t get a good price at the auction or maybe they aren’t smart enough to realise the Auction House keeps all items on their premises.

“I might not mind roughing it. My parents were pretty clear about that fact growing up. What I don’t want is to feel like I need a guard the whole night lest we be attacked. Even then we might still get attacked. Perhaps a rogue cultivator will go for it, deciding breaking a few nearby buildings down will be easy to pay off and a good price for what we have. Might even wait till after the auction when they know we have the money. It just isn’t worth it,”

“Why can’t Kat just guard us?” offered Xiang.

Kat felt her eye twitch. \*Ah there’s the Xiang I know. He was doing so much better then the first time I almost thought it was a fluke. Aw well.\*

[It’s ok Kat. We’ve traded Xiang as an ally for Yang as one and frankly, Yang is a lot prettier.] The echoing mental laughter coming from Lily did help soothe whatever few frayed nerves Kat had acquired. She was mostly playing it up for Lily, but the genuine announce was easily washed away.

“While I’m sure Kat would indeed be able to guard us, and might even do so with little prompting if asked properly,” Yang emphasised the last few words like she was trying to stab Xiang with them, “that’s only part of the issue. The fact that we’d need a guard would automatically make our sleep worse. The

idea we could be woken up at any moment, that we need to be ready to jump out of bed. We'd need to sleep with our weapons out and in reach, and maybe even day clothes on.

"And that's just the problems we'd have even if nobody shows up. Let's say someone does show up. I doubt they'd be bothering to rob us if they're strong enough to take out Kat, but say they're a cultivator? Kat will need to hit them decently hard or just hurl them away. That makes noise. We're already on a hair trigger and then all of a sudden we're all awake now because we were attacked. Even if it wasn't technically a problem, it becomes one. It's just best not to let it worry us. We have the money Xiang, and we'll be getting more,"

"It just seems like a waste. After roughing it for so many days. There are plenty of nice inns we could stay at that would cost us a fraction of what we're about to be charged," insisted Xiang.

"Xiang, we're not trying to pinch pennies here. I know you only got shitty long-lasting food because you didn't want to shell out for the good stuff. Which, I think was totally fair. Eating poorly cooked high Rank food just because it stays preserved IS a waste of money. I won't deny that in the slightest. But we are in a town, a rather nice town and we do not need to. Besides, we've eaten all the snake at this point," said Yang.

"The snake didn't even taste that good," grumbled Xiang.

"Gee, I wonder why? Perhaps it's because it was poorly cooked over a fire with a bit of salt on top?" suggested Yang.

"Look, I'm just saying if we're doing this for the money, why are we spending extra to stay in town," insisted Xiang.

"If you want to say it like that... I'm just insisting that we spend a bit of money to give everyone a good night sleep for once. The only one without any sleep issues at all has been Lily and that's because Kat makes the perfect bed for her," said Yang.

"Kat's been able to sleep just fine," said Xiang without looking at Kat to confirm this fact.

Yang glanced at Kat to find out for herself and Kat just shrugged. \*I don't know what you want me to say here, either of you. It was perfectly serviceable. It doesn't hurt me and I don't wake up with back or joint pain from the horrible positions. Despite that, a bed is a lot more comfortable. So yes, I can sleep 'just fine' but that's a lot like saying there's 'just a bit of salt' in the ocean.\*

[What I want to know is why we're bothering with this argument. We know that they both have some money on them, but I think Xiang has the supplies, and Yang has the main funds. So I think if she really wanted to she could just go ahead with this regardless of what Xiang wants.]

\*Certainly true... but what does she actually want here? Just to argue? To actually get Xiang onboard? I know she enjoys it somewhat but does she enjoy winning an argument or just trying to extend it? I know she said it was the arguing itself... but I mean...\*

[Hmm... I don't know. See... you're right she did say she just enjoyed arguing but she's making a lot of good points that should have shut this one down already. My guess is that she actually wants to win this one. Probably before the sun goes down.]

\*Lily it's not even lunchtime.\*

[I know what I said.]

Chapter 896 Filling Your Head with Lewd Images

"Three rooms," said Yang as she dropped some weird stones onto the table. They glowed slightly and nobody thought it was strange so they had to be a form of currency. Well, nobody thought the stones were strange. Xiang however...

"Hang on why are we getting three rooms?" asked Xiang.

"Oh? Want to stay in the same room so you can pretend it was an accident when you sneak a peak at me naked?" said Yang with a growl. However... Kat was watching more closely and saw that it was a smirk. [Ah. I see what she's doing here.]

\*What? Starting another argument?\*

[Yes? But also no. I've heard about this tactic. It's a suggestion for when you're interested in a rather dense boy. Even if interested might be a bit of a stretch here. You see... what Yang is doing is forcing Xiang to picture her naked. Look it's working!]

Lily was correct, Xiang had a very noticeable dusting of red on his cheeks and it wasn't hard to imagine what was going on, "Oh yeah?" said Xiang his voice shaking just a little, "Well why not two rooms? One for guys and one for girls? That means that al- both, both of you could stay in the same room," Xiang spared the slightest glance towards the receptionist.

Oh. I see... but... isn't she also accusing him of it at the moment? As if it's something she doesn't want? I don't quite understand the thought process... why would anyone try something like that?

.....

[Um...]

\*Lily... did you try this?\*

[Ok yes... but also sort of no?]

\*Explain please Lily.\*

The receptionist however was the perfect picture of poise. She didn't even twitch as Yang and Xiang argued back in forth. Her hands sat firmly against her outfit, one over the other and she didn't so much as glance at the pile of money on the table. She kept an eye on both the main door, and the main staircase while keeping a bit of attention on the two cultivators. She seemed remarkably unbothered by all this.

Yang looked over to the receptionist meaningfully, and then back to Xiang. "I don't want to know what Kat might feel like getting up to with her girlfriend if she shows up in our room," said Yang firmly. "but even without that. Then you'd have a room all to yourself? Why should you get the single room?"

"I feel like that's rather obvious here. Let's say..." Xiang tried to stop it but he glanced over at Kat and Lily, "Lily does show up. In that case I really shouldn't be in the room anyway and you're all girls. So it's different."

[Right so it was never me I used as an example... back at the beginning before I settled into completely avoiding sharing my crush... and maybe before it properly solidified into more than that... I did a few little things that were similar. You were always pretty fast in and out of the changing rooms. I know now that's because you don't see them as places to gossip, and just... changed and left. Still, I wanted to see if it was actually because you were gay.]

[So I brought it up a few times, mentioning that the bullies were still changing, and then when that didn't work, at the time I was hoping it was because they are horrible people and not that you were straight...]

"Indeed I suppose it is different, but remember Lily and Kat are together. Two girls. Would you really leave me alone to be outnumbered by the lesbians? Think of all the illicit things they could do to me in my sleep?" said Yang with fake horror.

Xiang went bright red from that one. "T-that... that is completely different."

"Oh? Is it because you might want to watch?" sneered Yang

"NO!" Yes. Probably. Xiang couldn't really control the fact the image was appealing until he banished it. Just because it was appealing for an instant didn't mean it was with even a second of extra thought. If Yang didn't kill him for something like that, Kat would ensure that nothing but ashes remained.

[Though in the end after I tested it with a more than a few guys in class and still got no reaction I figured you were either really good at hiding it, or you just weren't interested in anyone yet. I didn't guess you were asexual... which I guess was a bit of a blind spot for me. I mean... I feel kinda bad for not noticing my best friend and crush was asexual.]

\*Lily. I didn't even know there was a word for it at the time. Also, now you mention it I can remember your attempts at this. It took so long to jog my memory because you're right. You were... well maybe not subtle but I never thought there was anything strange about it till you brought it back up again. Which... huh. Should I be doing this to you? Talk about situations where you'll picture me naked.\*

[NO! Please don't. I do that enough already.]

\*...\*

[Oh. Oh no.]

In the real world Kat let out a slight laugh that she quickly silenced. It was just too funny. Both the fact Lily thought somehow Kat didn't already know, and the fact that she believed it was 'too much'. Honestly, Lily's thoughts tend to stay shockingly pure from Kat's perspective. Especially considering Lily is the one with lustful intentions.

Yang on the other hand, decided to use Kat's small laugh as a point against Xiang. "Ah, I suppose if Kat thinks it's such a silly idea you must have your own problems. Do you bat for your own team like Kat and Lily? That would make a lot of sense."

Kat of course, had no idea what the two were talking about and was paying no attention at all. So she didn't notice when Xiang glared at her and found her still trying to suppress the laughter. Xiang's had creaked back to lock eyes with Yang. "Really? You're saying I'm the one batting for the home team? Didn't you imply earlier that Kat and Lily would do all sorts of things to you? Kat may be scary sometimes but she's certainly no rapist, heck I don't even know if she would bother convincing a drunk to stop trying to stab her after missing the first few times. Perhaps you're the one with such proclivities?"

\*Oh Lily... you still haven't made any real headway involving limiting your thoughts. Especially not ones as powerful as your attraction to me. Did you think I didn't notice the occasional flashes of myself naked? Or with a towel on? Perhaps that one from two nights ago with me sprawled out over a rock and my kimono coming undone?\*

[Hisss... Kat why? Why do you do this?]

\*Because you're adorable and I love you that's why. It's so cute, and makes it really easy to know that you desire me. Even if I don't lust after you, I keep all of those pictures in mind for... future references.\*

[KAT! You should not be trying to play out my erotic fantasies. Now or in the future!]

\*Why not? You're my girlfriend after all.\* Lily couldn't find a good answer to that one.

Yang was very unflustered at the accusation. It was in fact, not a new one considering how much time she spent with Xuena ever since they were children. "Well, you know what they say? Girls are an awful curious lot. I've been friends with Xuena a looong, looong time you know? All the way through puberty. We did a little... experimenting you know..."

The experimenting Yang was talking about was nothing like she was implying. She meant real medical experiments usually involving creatures Yang caught and medicines Xuena made. They did have one brief kiss, just to find out what it was like... and they both knew they were firmly straight. Still. Xiang didn't know this, and now he had a whole new set of images to try and push away.

[AHA! I've got it! You shouldn't just be trying to cater to my sexual fantasies because this is a relationship and I should also be catering to yours!]

\*Lily...\*

[Oh... oh I'm an idiot aren't I?]

\*No you're very sweet, and normally correct. But no, I don't have any of my own for obvious reasons so I keep all of yours in a very pretty box I'll be making good use of in the future once we get that far.\*

[I feel as though I have been trapped somehow.]

\*No trap here, unless you count the fact you're bound to me for all eternity or at least as long as I live. You'll be smothered in love and hugs forever mwhahahahahah!\*

The receptionist continued to pretend that none of this was any concern to her and that she wasn't listening at all. She didn't even glance at the clock despite the fact she would be off shift sometime soon. Her replacement would show up... and probably wait for this argument to be over. Oh the hardships of customer service. So the receptionist continued to keep a small smile on her face, her head facing forward and her hands against her uniform. It was the polite thing to do after all.



## Chapter 897 Bag Mechanics

They got three rooms.

It wasn't even a surprise at this point. Kat was pretty sure that Yang would've been perfectly happy to share a room with the other two girls. Despite this, Xiang just couldn't come up with a good enough argument while dealing with all of his hormones. It was actually kind of sad towards the end. The receptionist lady could see it as well, if the slight upticks of her mouth said anything. See, Yang had been providing increasingly poor arguments up until the point she was just straight up wrong for the last two. Despite this, they were all said suggestively enough Xiang had figurative smoke spewing from his ears.

With the payment and room number settled the group was led upstairs by the receptionist to three rooms all situated next to each other. Xiang swiped the key from Yang's hand, opened the door and then slammed all in one swift motion. Face a flaming red the whole time. The receptionist just nodded at this and then left the group to it. Hoping to figure out why the person who was supposed to replace her for the next shift was missing.

Once she was gone, Yang then decided to give Kat and Lily an impromptu lesson in what everything cost and how to tell if you were being scanned. It was clearly designed with Kat's perfect memory in mind and was more of a list than a conversation. Yang went over everything from bread, to fancy meals to theatre shows before carefully pushing Kat and Lily out into the city for lunch. And dumping the local equivalent of ten thousand dollars into Kat's hands.

Yang vanished while Kat and Lily just stared incredulously into the bag. "I can't decide if Yang is good with money or not," said Kat.

Lily took a glance around and seeing nobody paying attention transformed and leaned into Kat. "Yeah... I really don't know either. She knew the price of basically everything and even how to tell if she was being scammed with a new item most of the time... but then handed us all this money. I... I don't even know how we'd spend it all..."

The pair continued to stare at the bag with some minor concern for another few minutes until Kat said. "You know... I don't think it's safe to carry all this money around..."

.....

"I think you're right... um... let me try something," Lily grabbed the bag and put it in the small one she'd brought. It didn't really fit, Yang had handed them a lot of coins but that was fine. Lily then handed the bags off to Kat and transformed. [Now put that on me] Kat shrugged and did as asked then Lily transformed again.

Now what Lily had been hoping would happen is the bag would vanish like her clothes and bag normally did when the transformation was the other way around. Apparently there was some limitations though because Lily transformed and the bag was tied around her feet. Lily frowned at this before sighing and putting it on again, transforming back. The bags vanished, as Lily suspected they would... but she wasn't all that pleased about it. [Guess I can't walk around on your arm... too much risk of getting pickpocketed otherwise]

With their gold secured Kat started wandering. The inn was easy to find again considering its size, extravagance and the fact it wasn't all that far from the auction house. Now the question was... where did they want to go? \*So what would you like to do Lily? This is the first proper date we're going on and we need a place for you to eat. Should we go somewhere fancy?\*

[Eh... we could but that's something we can do at home isn't it? I mean... I can hide my ears well enough with like a hat or something. What I'd really like to have is some local delicacies prepared by the locals. See what 'good food' for the more common people is here. I mean... is there anything we can get from the fancy places that would really stand out?]

\*Perhaps? I doubt we could get it here because it's a mana based dish, and you probably wouldn't be able to eat it yourself anyway... but I'm a big fan of a particular soup that tastes wonderful, if a bit watery and spreads this delightful warmth all across your body as you eat it. It's like a good soup warming you on a winter's day but so much more comforting and pleasant.

Sadly it's extremely hot and you would be physically incapable of trying it. Thyme had to warn people away from it and if you couldn't touch the spoon or the bowl you weren't allowed to even try it. Apparently it'd just kill you. Which... hmm now that I'm thinking about it... I'm not sure there is anything like that you could eat. Magic ice cream might be too cold for you... sorry.\*

[It's ok. It was an interesting idea at least. Maybe we'll spot some place that works with raw meat? I mean... this IS a fishing town after all. Cultivator Sushi doesn't sound like such a bad idea. In fact, considering I'm a cat now, it sounds like a really good one. I think I've decided what we're looking for.]

\*I don't know if they have rice around here. I've not seen anyone growing it... though I haven't really seen them growing wheat either and I know they have bread. So perhaps it's a meaningless point.\*

\*So... ignoring my previous thoughts, should we head towards the pier or the fancy places in town? I feel like the pier might be our best bet, certainly we'd find fish there but maybe not anyone skilled at serving it or just other ingredients in general. On the other hand, I have no idea how we'd be able to tell a sushi store from one that sells steaks in a fancy restaurant especially if they don't have anyone eating outside.\*

[Um... hmm... the waterfront does stink. So I'm a little torn. I think the easy answer to 'how find sushi' would be to follow my nose. It should be good precise enough for something like this. That being said... maybe we can find some nice grilled fish or something at the pier?]

\*Well we are here for a few days, so why not both? Start at the pier and then find some good stuff in the fancy area another time?\*

[Purrfect]

Kat wondered how intentional the mental purring was on Lily's part, but didn't want to ask. It was pretty adorable and if it wasn't intentional Kat didn't want to discourage it from appearing again. Still, they had a destination in mind and Kat knew it'd be very easy to find. So they headed straight for the dock area, taking side streets when they appeared and simply hopping over boxes if it became necessary. No sense pretending not to be a cultivator when you had wings and a tail, or when you knew your girlfriend would transform to eat with you.

It didn't take long at all from them to be right around the waterfront and it was a bit of a mess. People yelling and moving all over the place. A lot of people selling fish, usually older individuals who likely manned the stalls for their younger counterparts out on the lake. Still, there was a very noticeable lack of people selling cooked, or prepared fish in any way. The pair found this a bit odd truth be told. [I don't get it. These people clearly catch fish, and likely use it as a large part of their diet. Why isn't there anyone selling prepared fish?]

\*I'm not sure Lily. Maybe it's a zoning law thing? I don't really know how those work but that's the only reason I can think of really.\*

[I suppose it could be that. Zoning laws aren't usually so specific though. If you can sell things here, you can almost certainly sell prepared food... unless it's a health risk? They might be able to use that as justification... but they are still throwing refuse into the water so they probably aren't all that health conscious.]

\*Can you smell anything? Because I can't. Not really.\*

[No, my nose really isn't tuned for stuff like this. It's all just too much. I can't properly separate the scents. Not instinctively anyway. Finding one strong scent in the forest? That's fine. Figuring out cooked fish from the hundreds and hundreds of raw fish amongst such massive catches? Too difficult without any training... and something prepared but uncooked like Sushi? I think I'd have a better chance at killing the snake on my own.]

\*I guess we've got no choice but to keep looking then.\* So that's what Kat and Lily did. There were a few stalls that they thought might have met their criteria but it quickly became clear they were just butchers for larger fish. Some of them didn't even have their own catch. Just let others bring large fish to be diced properly. The duo could feel their mood souring. Though that might have just been the smell.

#### Chapter 898 Little bit of a Date

Kat and Lily were about ready to scream aloud in joy when they finally found a place selling food meant to be eaten right away. It wasn't what they were looking for, but after an hour of finding nothing but various stalls selling fish, crabs, other crab looking things and plants that grew in the area, just the fact they were selling food they could eat right away was enough to ignore the rest of the problems the stall had, and there were many.

The first and most obvious thing they noticed, and weren't all that happy with, was that the man selling things was using a few rickety bits of wood that looked like it was held more together with hope than wooden planks or nails. The other was that they were clearly just selling this stuff out of their house, though the house really wasn't in any better condition than the stall.

What drove them accept this though, was that the man was using two tables on top of the stall to keep things organised, and there was new food coming out of the house pretty regularly carried by a child that was likely no older than six. Flouting labour laws? On Earth certainly. Here... well there probably wasn't any. The man clearly doubled as a butcher with the second table. It was dripping with blood and had a bucket nearby filled with fish guts and off-cuts. It wasn't appealing at all to see the butcher working on that bucket when he lacked other things to do. He was turning it into mashed fish... that was then going onto the sandwiches.

Still, what he also did was cut the choice bits into small meaty cubes and laid them out onto a large clay plate. Kat and Lily were starting to realise that perhaps the reason nobody was selling street food was that they had no way to keep it sanitary in the slightest. The clay plates were stained with old blood splotches that failed to wash off. The sandwiches barely got by, mostly by being stacked on top of other sandwiches and writing off the bottom lot as a loss.

They nearly overlooked the store if it wasn't for those sandwiches though. A group of three fisherman walked up, slapped down some coin and walked off with nine of them. Fishing was hungry work after all, and being in the hot sun didn't help matters for normal mortals. After the two followed the crowd to the sandwiches, they saw the fish cubes and decided this was close enough.

"Could I get that entire platter of fish?" asked Kat.

The guy behind the counter didn't look too pleased about the question and said, "Fifty Dollars and it's yours,"

.....

Wait... why did he say fifty dollars? Why did it translate that way? Kat didn't let the surprise and confusion show on her face though, she just waited for Lily to transform before pulling out the money. The man jumped back when he watched Lily transform, and had a moment of realisation. Apparently Kat's appearance wasn't enough to flag her as a cultivator in his mind before.

He handed over the platter "Enjoy yourselves," before grabbing the money and rushing into the house. Kat and Lily didn't really plan to stick around so they headed off. Lily transformed back into a Memphis so their money was secure and Kat danced around all the pedestrians, trying to speed up as she went. It didn't take long to find an out of the way dock, they'd already been pretty far from the middle of the district, so they managed to find a pier with no boats, no garbage and clear water. They set up along the edge and Kat let her feet dip into the water, mentally thanking the fact this had to be a newer dock.

Lily transformed and placed the coin pouch in the middle so they could both watch it and then swiped a cube for herself. It was a bit salty, but her feline side loved it. The right amount of that fishy taste, very fresh and completely raw. She was grabbing a second before she'd even realised her hands were moving and chewing on them happily. They weren't really a good meal by themselves but Lily didn't feel like they'd wasted time anymore.

Kat grabbed a cube for herself and confirmed that yes, they were quite salty. She didn't have the instant appreciation either... but as she chewed on it more the flavour started to transform. Lily was tearing into them, but Kat slowly chewed and savoured the single piece she had.

It had an interesting squish to it, and had a lot more water in it than it should. It helped offset the extra salt surprisingly well once you got going and the fish tasted very fresh, tickling her tongue a bit. Now, it was still too salty even then, and there just wasn't any layers to the meal other than fish and salt with a weird bit of fresh water that kept things interesting... but that was it.

Now, that was no real criticism. Even though they probably overpaid, this was likely the best the family could make considering the price of spices in a place like this. Other ingredients would have been nice as well... but apparently this was a bread area, or at least it was for the poorer folks. The bread was probably where the man made most of his money despite them looking rather questionable. He used all

the less appealing cuts for them and it was a good, hearty meal for the fisherman that didn't make his own, or just needed something quick.

Now, this really wasn't a meal for Kat. However, it was very enjoyable to soak herself in the joy radiating from Lily as she put a second cube in her mouth. Lily was already on her fifth and Kat found she could almost taste it the way Lily was. It wasn't the same, just an echo of a thought... but Lily's own joy came along with it as well, making Kat a lot more pleased with the meal than perhaps it really deserved. So Kat spent a lot more time chewing, watching the lake, and basking in Lily's presence than she did enjoying the food.

Once the plate was cleaned up, mostly by Lily, she tucked herself into Kat's side. "Sorry for eating everything," whispered Lily softly as she too stared out at the lake.

Kat rubbed her thumb slowly across the back of Lily's hand, "It's no problem. I didn't get anywhere close to the same enjoyment you did from it and I need significantly less food. I don't really see it as an issue,"

"I know but I still feel a bit bad. It was a meal for US and I ate at least three quarters of it. Even if I did enjoy it more, I don't like that I ate some of your half as well, especially without even asking," grumbled Lily good naturedly. Feeling just how unconcerned Kat was about the food, and how pleased she was otherwise made it hard to be properly concerned about it.

"Yes I suppose, but if you'd asked me to divvy out shares I'd probably have given you two thirds without even thinking about it, then offering you more when you finished first. I really don't need food like I used to so it's no bother," said Kat.

"Yes but... that's another thing I sometimes worry about. I feel like a bit of a pig sometimes with how much I eat," said Lily, once again without the feelings backing it up. It was more to just grumble with Kat.

"Ah, well. Should've gone vampire. Then you would have been able to just drink blood. Hmm... could you have drunk my blood if you did that?" asked Kat.

Lily shook her head. "Not frequently no. Your blood has a good deal of demonic energy in it. Perhaps once a month at the most? Everything has a bit of resistance to pure demonic energy, and it's not all that pure when it's contained within your blood... but if I was using it as fuel for my body? Well then that starts to be a problem if it's my main source of fuel. It's one of the reasons I didn't bother.

"I'm not the biggest vampire fan in the world, but it is quite intimate to take blood from someone's neck. If I had to drink from someone else... well... yeah that wouldn't feel all that good. I'd also probably be panicking over our relationship if I didn't tell you the truth and then tried to drink like that. Yeah... really awkward."

Kat cringed at the image. "Yeah... depending on how sexual that is for vampires it could get really awkward really fast. I'd never be able to figure out what was causing you so much panic. Not sure if I'd try to confront you or awkwardly wonder why my best friend was avoiding me..."

"Good thing I didn't go for that option," said Lily with a smile and a purr as she pressed in closer to Kat.

Chapter 899 Inside

Kat and Lily wandered there way back towards the inn after watching the sun set. They couldn't really watch it set over the lake, it was the wrong angle for that, but they did get to watch. As they walked through the streets, Kat was literally projecting an air of tranquillity. It was leaking out of her and starting to affect the surroundings. Neither of the two girls was really paying attention as they made their way back to the inn but Kat's aura was apparently making use of this chance to influence as much as possible after being neglected for a while.

The radius of the effect was constantly fluctuating, like waves washing across the nearby lake the sphere expanded and contracted with little rhyme or reason but every person it brushed got a little seed of tranquillity embedded in their hearts. It wasn't malicious at all, and actually a rather advanced technique. If Kat knew and tried to replicate this feat later she'd fail.

The effect this had on all the nearby people was noticeable. The crowds drifted into more orderly lines; people seemed to make less noise as they stepped. Those in a rush started to slow down to a more sedate pace. Salesmen and women felt the desperate need for coin drop away, but their customers gained an appreciation and understanding for the wares on display so it changed very little in terms of sales volume.

When Kat and Lily got back to the inn, mostly just to make sure there were no other plans, Yang and Xiang absentmindedly flicked off an odd feeling of tranquillity. Xiang almost accepted it, as he was still having issues with flashes of Yang in compromising positions... along with others. Yang on the other hand didn't quite want to let go of her sense of impatience. It was starting to properly dawn on her that she had to just... sit here for a few days while waiting for the auction to happen. When they'd needed to rest, that was fine. When they needed to recover from the poison, that too was fine. Yet... she was now in a normal town waiting for an AUCTION of all things.

Yang stormed out of her room hoping to shake off the odd feeling only to run into Kat and change her plans. If Yang was more skilled, or Kat had actually intended for her aura to flare up like this, Yang might have realised the reason for the strange dichotomy her emotions had tried for a few seconds before instinctively rejecting the foreign influence. As established though, neither of these things were the case so Yang said. "Come, let's go sit down with Xiang for a bit,"

Kat and Lily shared a look and a shrug, falling in behind Yang who knocked pointedly on the door. Xiang got up languidly and pulled the door open with minimal surprise. He just let them in and they crowded around the table. Kat and Lily took in the room that likely looked like the rest in the hotel.

It was a simple affair. There was the entryway where shoes could be left aside, a bathroom on the left that contained a bath but no shower, and directly in front of them was a table. The table was short with large pillows lining the four sides, with no chairs. The last notable thing in the room, for there was a closet and windows, was the bed. It wasn't just a bed roll on the floor but it was only raised very slightly. A mattress with wooden framing that clearly sat on the floor.

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Seeing Xiang wasn't going to say anything, Yang turned to Lily and asked, "So how was your date?"

"Um... not that I wouldn't love to talk about my date, but I assumed there was something more pressing to talk about? Or well, I was assuming anyway," said Lily.

Yang shrugged, if she couldn't get rid of this impatient feeling then she could listen to Lily talk about her love life. It might get Xiang thinking. It probably wouldn't but some good gossip was just fine right now. Lily, still unsure how good an idea this was turned to Kat who also just shrugged. \*This is more your area than mine. I don't really care what you want to share, nor really understand why Yang would want to hear it.\*

Lily rolled her eyes playfully and gave Kat a kiss on the cheek, more for her own benefit than Kat's, something she was getting more comfortable with. Still, Lily hadn't really known why she expected anything else as an answer from Kat so really it was her own fault for asking a question, she knew the answer to. "It was good. The docks do stink but if you're right on the water it washes a large amount of it away..."

"It makes it really simple to guess why people keep dumping shit into it but they must not be able to properly see the long term consequences of doing something like that. A shame because the lake really is beautiful, especially if you ignore the boats. Kat and I relaxed there for a while, eating some fish. It was more for me than Kat, I enjoyed the fresh fish immensely even if Kat didn't really."

"It was a bit of a pain to find anything down there though. We were hoping for local delicacies and fresh fish was wonderful for me, but not really what we were looking for. Still, it was well worth the walk and being able to just sit together for a while was nice even if I used the chance to complain a bit,"

"Why were you going to the docks if you were looking for local delicacies?" asked Yang confused.

Lily tilted her head, shifting her ears to lean over a bit more for added effect. Kat snatched Lily and moved the smaller girl to her lap wrapped up in her tail. Lily purred for a moment then realised she'd been asked a question. Coughing slightly to dispel the blush creeping up her cheeks... ineffectively mind you, Lily answered. "Well... we were just sort of wondering what things people eat around here? You know? Kat and I can eat at fancy restaurants at home and sure we can do that later... but we wanted to see what was available,"

Yang shook her head, "Well nothing like that will be at the docks. What you're thinking of doesn't really exist. Sure this town gets tourists, but the markets are elsewhere. 'Local delicacies' that you might actually be interested in eating are a pale shadow of the real thing. Granted most people can't afford anything good so that isn't a caught themselves, so it's not like you'd want to have what they're actually eating."

"Wait... why is it like this?" asked Lily, confusion lacing her words.

Yang sighed, "Lily... it just isn't realistic. I don't know what it's like in your own dimension but here cultivators only go for fancy stuff and most of the common men and women eat whatever they can as long as it provides enough nutrients. Taste and style have nothing to do with it. It's all about basic needs for like 90% of the town. Why do you think so many of them live in shacks? It's because the lake seems to empower fish in such a way they multiply rapidly instead of getting stronger. *nOVeLnext.com*

"Yet, swarms of weak fish, no matter how vicious they might be in the water, are basically free food once they are caught and on land. They aren't even Rank 1 beasts so it's basically free food for so many of the poorest here. They spend what coin they can on a boat and then they can feed their families

forever. It's not a good life, but it is one both they and the rest of their families will survive without too much trouble,"

"Huh..." said Lily slowly before turning to Kat. "You know what? You're right Kat, it does suck to think about. It's also really weird to be on this side of the conversation. Is this how it feels?"

"Lily you share my emotions you know this is exactly how it feels," deadpanned Kat.

"Wait, wait wait," interrupted Yang, "You can feel each others emotions?"

Kat and Lily looked at each other for a few seconds before tilting their heads in sync, to display their joined confusion. "Did we never tell you about that?" said Kat.

"I could have sworn it came up at some point?" said Lily.

"I suppose it must have slipped our minds? Or perhaps it slipped Yang's mind?" added Kat.

"Yes but do we explain further or leave it as is? I don't see what's confusing about it?" tacked on Lily.

Yang glared as each sentence perfectly ran on from the other, swapping between the two effortlessly as if they were just the one person making a complete point. "Alright I get the point!"

#### Chapter 900 Through Eyes of Sunlight

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The sun as just moments away from peaking out over the horizon and her body jolted upright. Her internal clock, and her cultivation, ensured that when things were normal she would always be awake and alert to catch the first rays of sunlight. Something many people didn't know about her was that she actually liked to sleep in. Years of practice and cultivation had in some ways robbed her of that habit.

Now she woke alert. There was no grogginess or fogged mind. She was alert and ready. She could not luxuriate on the bed, allowing the softness of the pillows and the smooth sheets to lull her back to sleep. She was already on her feet by the time that niggling little betrayal of a thought whispered in her ears.

It wasn't all bad of course. Yang tried to go to bed early when she could, getting as much sleep as possible. Yet that wasn't the best part. As she stepped out of the window and launched herself onto the rooftop garden of the inn, she waited for the moment the sun's light hit here.

It was a rush every time. Perhaps that's what really broke her habit of sleeping in. The wonderful feeling of life and energy that filled her every time those first rays of sunlight hit her. It was such a shame she was not yet advanced enough in her cultivation to feel like this all the time. The later parts of the day not carrying the same renewing properties, the same meanings, and being all the weaker symbolically for it. Nor was she strong enough to treat the stars as distant, smaller suns. Focusing not on the quality from their main star, but from the quantity, the number of stars to take energy from. It was a high level technique, apparently, and one she desperately looked forward to one day.

For now though, those were hopes and dreams for the future and her cultivation required her to experience the NOW. Granted, Yang did not completely forsake her surroundings. As taboo as it would be to interrupt someone clearly cultivating idiots and enemies were depressingly common and happy to use this as a chance to cause someone else issues. Perhaps just a stray rock? Maybe a bit of timber? If



Yang was too deep into her meditation she knew a bit of rain could set her back days. She'd never forget that lesson.

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It was early on, when she'd just started cultivating and didn't have a proper sense of the outside world. She'd thrown herself as deeply into her cultivation as she could that day, like usual for the time, yet the first droplet of water. That single drop. The sky was not covered in rainclouds. The dew on the ground was being ignored. Yet the sky let a single drop fall upon her nose. It nearly crippled her.

That drop of water had disrupted her concentration and Yang hadn't yet made dragging Qi through her meridians into a skill so ingrained in her body it could perform the actions by itself. That disruption caused her to lose control of all that energy. It had exploded in her meridians causing considerable damage. Xuena and another senior healer had worked on her recovery. The senior insisted it was minor damage and not to worry. Yang would later learn that was very much not true.

Xuena would take her aside and explain that she was lied to, to ensure that no heart demon formed from this mistake. Xuena however, wanted to make it very clear that had Yang had even a hair less compatibility with her cultivation technique and sunlight in general, it would have crippled her forever burning out her ability to cultivate in such a way only expensive medicine really meant for cultivators much stronger than Yang was could solve.

That was how Yang learned that pushing yourself deeper and deeper into cultivation needed to be a gradual process, and that cultivating had to be a constant job. Your body needed to remember how to move the energy all by itself so that you need not fear if you were caught out. A hard lesson, and one she did not need to learn so young. Yang did however, feel she was better for this hardship.

Once Yang felt like she'd eked out all the meaningful gains she'd be getting from the morning sun she left the inn quietly and picked up a nice cupcake from the nearby baker. It was monstrously expensive for common people, but for a cultivator it wasn't much of a cost. Though, many would say that the cost was not in money but in reduced cultivation speed. \*And I think those people are idiots. Sure impurities are an issue and mundane food is full of them...

But frankly most cultivators wouldn't know good food if it turned around and tried to eat them instead. Always trying to squeeze as much refined Qi out of their food as they can. Letting cooks abuse the fact that for a cultivator, that rush of energy is pleasurable enough to offset the fact it's undercooked.

Sugar is great, and while I do need to make sure I'm not eating them by the cartload, a dash of sugar for a handful of happiness is such a good trade in my book. Idiots talk about 'stilling the mind' and 'becoming one with yourself on the path to immortality' but those idiots overlook just how much a bit of joy can settle you. Not that I think it's helping me this time. \*

And it wasn't really. Yang could feel that edge of impatience creeping in again and was thankful it had stayed quiet at least for her morning cultivation routine. It was not something that should EVER be rushed.

\*Still. What am I doing here? The money could be wonderful. The auction might have ingredients we need... but of course. What does it really matter in the end? Time is what is most valuable at the

moment. Xuena is fine... probably. Treating her poorly won't help. It's not like they need her to spill some incriminating information or betray her home. The frosty bastard could wipe it all out himself.

So why do I feel this need to rush? I bet that when we arrive, Xuena will be in a state of the art alchemy lab making pills all day at the behest of her captors. Groaning about how much it sucks to be locked up but loving every extra minute she can use high quality tools for once. Or is that just what I want to tell myself to feel better?\*

Yang didn't know. It was the fact she didn't know that was perhaps the true thing that plagued her. She could wish, and believe and hope all she wanted that the Lord Reverend Icy Dick was doing the smart thing. Using Xuena's talents as well as her status as a hostage. It was so much more useful long term. Xuena wouldn't chafe under her chains as much, he'd get high quality alchemical items. But nobody ever said high level cultivators needed to be smart.

\*Maybe I should go train? I haven't been able to fight anything while traveling for once. The bandits all ran away, the fish were dealt with by Kat. The SNAKE was dealt with by Kat. If she was just another cultivator I'd certainly be feeling a lot worse about this whole arrangement. Like I was being constantly challenged.

Maybe that would help me feel less like I was taking a vacation while Xuena suffers.\*

Yang mentally kicked herself for the line of thought but it was becoming such a sticky and pervasive one. So many things kept turning her mind back to the facts of life. Her best friend was not safe beside her and the only keeping her alive was a trump up cultivator with a hard on for ice attacks. Granted, Xuena was ice based as well but... no best not go there.

\*Yup. I do not want to consider that at ALL. At least the great Lord Ice-In-My-Ass' son isn't ice aligned. That's a small mercy, that might in truth be a much larger one than I want to contemplate.\*

Yang shook her head to clear it and absorbed a bit of extra sunlight to try and help combat her dark mood. It wasn't a real technique, just a bit of mental trickery at the moment... but Yang had hope that perhaps one day it would become something more than that. Perhaps a vain hope, but never let it be said that she was unambitious.

\*Ok. So I need practice. I need both actually for practice and to get away from these darker thoughts. Now where can I find a suitably strong opponent that won't leave me crippled? I don't want to need any more rest or healing until we get to Xuena.\*

A certain redhead Succubus popped into her mind and Yang couldn't help but gain a wry smile. \*Hmm... perhaps that's not so bad an idea at all...\*