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# THIRD LOOP:

THE  
NAMELESS  
PRINCESS  
AND THE  
CRUEL  
EMPEROR

2





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ANGELINA  
XIN LEI  
Princess of Jinlong, under-  
going her third time loop

"LOVE YOU,  
LINA!"

"LOVE YOU  
TOO, RYUHO!"

RYUHO RUO  
(HUMAN FORM)  
Prince of Nanran

FEILONG  
XIN LEI  
Angelina's father and  
the emperor of Jinlong













"I AM POLARIS  
PRINCESS ANGELINA!  
BY ORDER OF THE  
HOLY GARUDA, I WILL  
RELAY HER WORDS  
TO YOU!"





❀ KALAVINKA ❀

Young Goddess of the  
Heavenly Sovereign Temple

"PLEASE WELCOME  
THE HIGH PRIESTESS  
KALAVINKA!"





# Chapter 1: Angelina's New Life

**"LINA!"** Ryuho called. "Lina, Liiina!"

An orange tiger with a jingling ball in his mouth ran towards a girl with light pink hair.

The young girl's name was Angelina Xin Lei. She'd turned four years old this spring. The depths of her azure eyes sparkled with a rainbow luster, and her light pink hair was as buoyant as cotton candy. A mark resembling three red flower petals was on the small, soft palm of her right hand. The three almond-shaped markings fanned out in a pattern called the Tianshi's Protective Seal.

"What's wrong, Ryuho?" Angelina asked.

The orange tiger's name was Ryuho Ruo. As a Flame Tiger cub, he was a sacred beast of Nanran. Furthermore, he was Angelina's divine guardian beast.

"Look what I got!" Ryuho exclaimed. "And you're the only one with my permission to borrow it! Watch—it jingles and bounces on the ground!"

Ryuho dropped the ball in front of Angelina. It was extravagant and darned with gold thread. Ryuho actually just wanted to play with Angelina despite offering to let her *borrow* it.

"Thanks!" Angelina responded. "Should we play outside?"

"Yeah!"

Angelina picked up the ball and headed out into the garden. When she threw it to the ground with all her might, it jingled pleasantly and bounced high. Thus, she and Ryuho chased after the ball. Each time it bounced, both cried out in delight.

Beneath the sunlight, the pair played and shouted. The sight of them rolling around like two frolicking kittens invigorated the palace servants.

"Let's play catch, Ryuho!" Angelina cried.

“Okay!”

Ryuhō summoned his strength, and the divine Flame Tiger transformed into a lively, seven-year-old boy. He was three years Angelina’s senior. He had tanned skin, and his red hair was reminiscent of flames. His powerful eyes were crimson and gold. Upon closer inspection, however, tiger ears sprouted from his head. Likewise, a striped tail grew from his lower back.

Ryuhō had inherited strong Flame Tiger blood. Though he often assumed the form of this legendary beast, he was a Nanranese prince. Nanran was a southern vassal nation of the Jinlong Empire. Lately, Ryuhō had been practicing maintaining a human form.

Angelina and Ryuhō continued playing catch. Because Angelina was still small, she couldn’t throw very well. On the other hand, Ryuhō was a magnificent catcher. Without a sound, he leapt around as lithely as a cat. He was wild and beautiful enough to enchant onlookers. Angelina loved watching Ryuhō, who bounded to and fro like a dancer. His movements were carefree and energetic. Yet, most of all, he appeared to be having fun.

*He’s like the sun,* Angelina thought.

Looking at Ryuhō practically blinded her.

“Lina!” a stern voice called out.

Startled, Angelina turned towards the speaker. Emperor Feilong Xin Lei of Jinlong struck a daunting pose while holding a large, wooden box. His long, silver hair flowed down the left side of his face like a waterfall, hiding his horribly scarred ear. The cool glow of his icy blue eyes conjured the image of glaciers. Though he was a man of picturesque beauty when silent, he was also fierce and cruel by nature.

Yet, as of late, he’d become an abnormally doting father. Though it had always been a tradition for royalty not to raise their children, he’d begun teaching Angelina magic himself. For a short while, Angelina’s mother had personally raised her older brother, Kyril. Alas, this had only lasted until her death. Afterward, their family dynamic had reverted to tradition, and not even Kyril had learned magic from the emperor. As such, everyone knew just how special Feilong’s change of heart had been.

Now, Angelina and Kyril were receiving instruction together. Since this was also abnormal, everyone could glimpse the depth of the emperor's love for his children.

"What's wrong, Fodder?" Angelina asked.

Feilong broke out into a dopey grin. "Stop playing with that *cat* and come to me."

In response to his commanding tone, Angelina turned away from him. As the Jinlongian princess, the Golden Dragon and the other Four Divinities loved her as well. She had even been named the Polaris Princess—the one who heard the voice of the gods.

Angelina had been killed and reborn multiple times. Presently, she was experiencing her third loop. In other words, her fourth life. Until now, Emperor Feilong had never acknowledged her as his daughter. He'd never even given her a name, forcing her to live three lives of misfortune.

Yet now, Angelina had received the favor of the supposedly cruel and inhuman emperor. Usually, a prince or princess wouldn't be recognized as royalty until their fifth birthday. However, as evidence of Feilong's favor, she'd been allowed to introduce herself with the imperial last name—Xin Lei. That signified her as being in line for the throne.

Since Feilong had caused Angelina's misfortune in her previous lives, she treated him somewhat coldly. Though she didn't hate him, she couldn't completely forgive him either. Also, children with histories of neglect tended to put others on the spot to test their love. Angelina was no different.

"Let's play, Ryuho," she said.

Ryuho nuzzled the bottom of his chin against Angelina, showing off to Feilong. After rubbing his scent over her entire body, he squeezed her in both arms. "Sounds good. Love you, Lina!"

Giddy, Angelina nuzzled her cheek against Ryuho's. "Love you too!"

When Feilong glared daggers at Ryuho, the latter snorted.

"Lina," Feilong said. "I brought something far more interesting than Ryuho.



Come have a look at it.”

As Angelina remained coldly unresponsive, Feilong grew flustered. He wanted to dote on his daughter but didn’t know how to express his love.

“Look at this, Lina,” he insisted. “It’s interesting, isn’t it?”

Feilong took out a wooden puppet from the box he’d brought. The puppet resembled a fierce deity with fangs and a horn. It also had a pale body and wore a terrifying expression. Even so, the cruel emperor held up this wooden doll with a straight face.

“Eek!” Angelina squealed.

Shocked, she dropped the ball, which rolled over to Feilong’s feet. Ryuho’s tail puffed out in fright. Without thinking, the two children embraced each other.

“Incredible, isn’t it? This national treasure was on display at a museum,” the emperor explained proudly, oblivious to Angelina’s fear.

*...That doll looks like a fiend, she thought.*

People from the nation of Anda were called fiends. Fangs and horns were their most distinctive features. In her previous lives, Andan soldiers had killed Angelina. Whenever she recalled those memories, such excruciating pain pierced her body that she could hardly breathe.

Angelina clung to Ryuho even tighter. Likewise, he embraced her head even more fiercely, doing his best not to look at the wooden puppet.

“Feilong, you idiot!” Ryuho shouted in a threatening, catlike hiss. “Lina’s obviously scared!”

In response, Feilong shoved the doll back into the box. “I’m sorry, Lina. I didn’t expect this to scare you.”

Angelina could ride on the backs of a Flame Tiger and the enormous Golden Dragon without batting an eyelash, so Feilong hadn’t expected a wooden puppet to scare her. While the elaborately crafted doll *did* look frightening, he’d expected its comical movements to delight the children.

Noticing Feilong’s dejection, Angelina smiled weakly, unsure what to do. “Fodder,” she said. “No more scary stuff, okay?”

“Of course,” he replied. “I won’t scare you again.”

“Oh, and don’t turn national treasures into toys! Stuff in museums belongs to everyone, right?” she said.

“Yes, I should have known better.”

Angelina pointed to the ball at Feilong’s feet. “Okay then, can you throw the ball at the sky?”

Feilong picked up the ball and pitched it into the air. It soared so high that Angelina expected the sun to swallow it whole.

“...Seriously?” Ryuho asked.

“You’re amazing, Fodder...” Angelina said.

After looking at each other in astonishment, Angelina and Ryuho turned their gazes skyward again. When the ball began falling, they dashed in different directions to catch it first.

“Oh!” Angelina cried. “It’s falling in your direction, Ryuho!”

“No worries!” the boy called back. “I’ll catch it!”

Ryuho circled to the falling ball, jumped lithely into the air, and caught it. As he landed, the ball jingled. “Here you go, Lina!” he exclaimed, handing it to her.

Unable to help herself, Angelina jumped up and down. “That was so cool, Ryuho!”

Ryuho rubbed his finger under his nose happily.

Though Feilong wore a dissatisfied expression, Angelina shoved the ball back into his hands. “Will you throw it again, Fodder?”

In response to her pestering, Feilong grinned dopily. The emperor, once known as cruel and inhuman, was nowhere to be found.



**THE** sweet scent of evergreen magnolias drifted in through the window. At the same time, the late spring sunlight produced a slight feeling of lethargy. In one room of the North Star Sanctuary, a pink-haired girl and a red-haired boy stood with their backs perfectly straight. They were studying etiquette.

Angelina saluted with her right fist over her chest, covering it with her left hand.

“Blood of the imperial line, thou cometh from above the lightning bolts of the rainclouds,” Angelina recited. “Thou doth possess the scale of the Golden Dragon. May the blessings of Heaven be upon ye, Crown Prince Kyril—young dragon of Jinlong.”

While standing next to Angelina, Ryuho imitated her by placing his right hand over his left fist. His hands were the opposite of Angelina’s because men and women performed the salute differently.

“B-Blood of the imperial line, *chow summit* from above the lightning bolts of the rain clouds...” Ryuho trailed off.

When he looked at Angelina with a confused expression, she laughed and replied, “It’s *thou cometh*, not *chow summit*.”

“Thou cometh?!” Ryuho cried out, ruffling his red hair with both hands. As he did so, tiger ears sprouted from his head. “What the hell does that even mean?!”

“Your ears are popping out,” Angelina noted.

Ryuho immediately tried to shove them back down.

Junshi Lang—a principled-looking man with purple hair—was their private tutor. Upon seeing the two children lose their concentration, his lips tugged into a bemused smile. As the prime minister’s grandson, he was also Crown Prince Kyril’s private tutor.

“*Thou cometh* means *you come*,” Junshi explained.

“Ah, I don’t get it!” Ryuho shouted. “I don’t get it at all! We don’t speak in stupid riddles where I’m from!” A striped tail shot out from his small lower back. It swung back and forth, indicating his mounting irritation.

“Ryuho,” Junshi said. “If you want to participate in Jinlongian ceremonies as a Nanranese prince, you need to learn this greeting.”

In response to Junshi’s gentle admonishment, Ryuho glared at him. “Why do I have to participate as a Nanranese prince? Being a divine guardian beast is way cooler! You jerk!”

After whopping his tail against the ground, Ryuho transformed into a beautiful tiger with orange fur. Angelina squealed with delight, leapt towards him, and buried herself in his fluffiness. She loved his round, fluffy ears, which moved following his emotions. Just looking at them soothed her heart. Even better, he also let her touch them without complaint. While petting his soft, warm, and springy ears, Angelina let out a sigh of contentment.

After giving Angelina's cheek a big, wet lick, Ryuho looked up at Junshi with a smug grin. "See! Lina prefers me like this, too!"

Angelina pressed her cheek against Ryuho's, rubbing back and forth. "So long as you're Ryuho, I don't mind which form you take!"

"I'm saying this to help you, Ryuho," Junshi said, "not to be mean."

"I haven't even decided if I'm going to be a prince yet!" Ryuho shouted. "It's pointless! I don't get it!"

Ryuho would have to decide by adulthood whether he wanted to be a Nanranese prince or a Flame Tiger. If he chose to become a tiger, he would obtain the long lifespan, powerful body, and abundant magic of a holy beast. If he chose to become a prince, he would eventually become king of Nanran. He would not only gain charisma but also a stronger body and magic than the average person. Ryuho could make this decision for himself, but according to legend, those who chose to become Flame Tigers as adults could never return to being human.

Junshi sighed softly. *Ryuho's still a child*, he thought. *He doesn't understand that if he becomes a tiger, he won't be able to marry Angelina. If he chooses to live as her divine guardian beast, he'll have to watch over her even after she's married to someone else. That sounds quite painful, doesn't it...?*

Nevertheless, Junshi was dealing with a seven-year-old boy and a four-year-old girl. No matter how well they got along, they probably didn't have romantic feelings for each other yet. When Junshi considered Ryuho's future, building a foundation for him to become a prince would be for the best. Even so, using marriage as a pretext to convince him would be premature.

All that said, Angelina was the sole princess. Her marriage would involve the entire empire. Though Junshi hoped for her desires to be honored, the situation

and public sentiment might not allow that. Furthermore, the cruel Emperor Feilong loved his daughter fiercely. Based on his current behavior, he was likely to behead anyone who brought up marriage in his presence.

As a chill ran down the back of Junshi's neck, his hand went to his collar. Unaware of his fear, Angelina and Ryuho rolled around like playful kittens.

"Well then," Junshi said. "Since the two of you have lost your concentration, let's end the lesson here for today."

"Sounds great!" Ryuho responded enthusiastically.

"And don't forget to deliver the sweets to the Celestial Axe Tower later."

"Okay!" Angelina and Ryuho responded in unison.



**MAGNOLIA** evergreen flower petals drifted atop the waterways of the Purple Forbidden Palace. Their sweet scent heralded the approach of summer as an orange tiger trotted down the road with a pink-haired girl on his back. The pair were Angelina and Ryuho. Per their daily routine, they were heading to the emperor's office in the Celestial Axe Tower to deliver sweets.

The tower had been busy as of late. With Kyril approaching twelve, his Crown Prince Ascension Ceremony would take place soon. Before Angelina was recognized as a princess, Kyril had been the only person in line for the throne. Since Feilong had no intention of taking another wife, everyone had expected Kyril to become the next emperor.

However, with Angelina now in line for the throne, some people had grown anxious about Kyril's accession. After all, Feilong's fierce love for his daughter was clear to everyone. Various foreign countries had already brought marriage proposals to Angelina, anticipating her possibly becoming empress.

"How utterly vexing," Feilong said. "Angelina as empress?! Of course, I'm willing to install her as the crown princess if she desires. Still, considering the current state of our government, Kyril is suited to becoming the next emperor. Don't even get me started on these countries proposing marriage to Angelina. It's preposterous!"

Feilong wanted to cede the throne to Kyril as soon as possible so he could spend more time with Angelina. Since that would require stabilizing Kyril's position, Feilong wanted to avoid causing political conflicts at any cost.

To facilitate his early retirement, Feilong decided to conduct the ascension ceremony. By doing so, people domestically and abroad would recognize Kyril as the official crown prince. Hopefully, that would silence the reprobates seeking a political marriage with Angelina.

And so, Kyril's ten-day ascension ceremony would take place during the end of the seventh month, which coincided with his birthday. Preparations were reaching their final stages. During his reign, Feilong abolished many of the empire's illogical ceremonies. As such, the details of the ascension ceremony had been reconsidered as well.

"So many aspects of this ceremony are pointless," Feilong said. "Let's retain what rituals will inform people domestically and abroad of Kyril's ascension. Everything unnecessary can be abolished."

Prime Minister Tomi spoke up to pacify the emperor. "As one who aided in your ascension, allow me to speak frankly. The people view you as a usurper, Your Majesty."

"I'm well aware of that. What of it?"

"Moreover, the late empress wasn't a citizen of Jinlong."

When Feilong clucked his tongue, Tomi pressed on. "The Jinlongian emperor receives the people's support because he is a descendant of our divine creator—the Heavenly Sovereign."

According to legend, the Heavenly Sovereign had sent his son to rule the surface because he mourned the turmoil on Earth. Thus, the line of emperors needed to remain unbroken.

"For this reason, we must demonstrate that Prince Kyril is a descendant of the Heavenly Sovereign," Tomi said. "The people won't accept an emperor our lord creator hasn't recognized. This ascension ceremony must succeed at any cost."

"You mean to say that *all* the rituals are necessary?" Feilong asked.

Tomi nodded. “The Heavenly Sovereign Temple worships our lord creator—the very source of our imperial line. When a member of royalty undergoes a ceremony conducted by the temple, they are recognized as a descendant of our lord creator for the first time.”

In reality, the temple had no authority to name an emperor. They could simply confirm what had already been decided and conduct a ceremony. However, if a ruler never underwent an enthronement ceremony, they wouldn’t be recorded in history as an actual emperor, regardless of whether they stole the imperial seal.

Despite Feilong’s displeasure, he found Tomi’s words convincing. With Kyril’s ascension ceremony approaching, daoshi from the temple had begun visiting Feilong’s office. The monks were in charge of the ceremony, after all. Since the inception of Jinlong, the emperor had managed governmental and military affairs. Meanwhile, the temple had managed religious affairs.

“The ascension ceremony will require the tributary dance of the Vinka priestesses,” Tomi said. “Please order their pilgrimage, Your Majesty.”

Vinkas were young girls who received oracles from the Heavenly Sovereign Temple’s gods. They comforted people by singing alongside divine birds called Garudas. While living in mausoleums, they also divined the future through Garudas, sang and danced at festivals, and purified the mortal world.

Five-year-old girls who wished to become priestesses were chosen as Vinkas by divination. The girl most adept at handling Garudas would become the Kalavinka—the high priestess.

At the dawn of the empire, the first Kalavinka had ridden on the back of a Garuda and helped bring order to the nation through heavenly song. According to legend, anyhow. Modern Garudas weren’t large enough for a person to ride upon. As a result, these stories were considered exaggerated myths.

In any case, the tributary song and dance of the beautiful Vinkas was popular with the masses. Without them, there would be no Heavenly Sovereign Temple.

Even among the Vinkas, the Kalavinka was treated uniquely as a living goddess. Firstly, she lived on Mt. Jinlong. A holy site of the Heavenly Sovereign Temple, mystery shrouded the mountain, and men were forbidden from



entering it.

Secondly, the Kalavinka's injuries and illnesses were perceived as ill omens for the empire's future. If not for national events, normal citizens would never be able to bear witness to her. Should the emperor order her pilgrimage, it would be the single opportunity for most people to see her. Both the temple and the people anxiously awaited her arrival. After all, there had been no pilgrimages to the palace during the mourning period following the empress's death.

"Pilgrimage?" Feilong repeated.

"Yes," Tomi replied. "The Kalavinka, four Vinka, and many daoshi from Mt. Jinlong will visit the palace. As for the cost and required security for such a pilgrimage—"

Tomi revealed the exorbitant cost and the many elaborate, meaningless rituals involved in the pilgrimage. Feilong couldn't suppress his irritation.

"That won't be necessary," he curtly rejected the proposal.

Tomi wore a calm expression while hiding his true feelings. "But Your Majesty," he said, still attempting to mediate the matter. "It is customary for the temple to host the Kalavinka's tributary song and dance during the Crown Prince Ascension Ceremony."

"It sounds wasteful. From here on out, I deem it unnecessary."

"I object," the temple elder interjected, voicing his opinion despite his fear. "The Kalavinka's song blesses the empire. This pilgrimage is part of our tradition and culture. It is not wasteful."

Feilong regarded the elder impassively. "What does the Kalavinka's dance produce? Will it alleviate hunger? Or will it simply waste national funds and produce nothing?"

Flustered, the elder turned his gaze to Tomi.

"The mausoleums visited by Vinkas are maintained by national funds," Tomi said. "This produces employment. Furthermore, the deeply faithful give donations and offerings. As a show of mercy, the Heavenly Sovereign Temple distributes those gifts to the poor."

“Then why don’t we give the funds for the pilgrimage directly to the poor?” Feilong asked. “It would produce the same result, no?”

*Shall I take this opportunity to stamp out the temple?* he wondered, drumming his nails against his desk. *Their involvement in every little ritual is vexing, regardless of whether it’s only a formality. These monks might as well be parasites.*

Feilong was a beautiful man. Consequently, he looked as terrifying as an ogre when displeased.

Tomi stifled a sigh at the emperor’s stubbornness. A dreadful atmosphere fell over the office, and the civil officials felt they might die from fright.

Despite his royal birth, Feilong’s childhood had been unhappy. He’d spent every waking moment studying and training in martial arts, hardly ever experiencing cultural art. Because of this, he didn’t understand its value.

As a usurper, Feilong hadn’t experienced a Crown Prince Ascension Ceremony. Instead, he’d only undergone an enthronement ceremony. Neither of these facts led to any inconveniences. Ascension ceremonies aside, he considered pilgrimages and festivals unnecessary.

Feilong’s beloved daughter Angelina appeared in his mind. *I’d rather spend my excess money and time on her.*

Until last year, Feilong had abandoned Angelina, not acknowledging her as his daughter. Now, he loved her fiercely as the sole princess. Even so, his past sins were so grave that he struggled to close the rift between them. Despite Feilong’s desperation to win Angelina’s trust at any cost, he’d also led an unhappy childhood. Thus, he didn’t know how to love a child, and his misguided displays of affection often caused trouble for those around him. The other day, Angelina had even chided him for trying to give her a national treasure as a toy.

Prime Minister Tomi wondered how he might convince Feilong. *Despite the lack of any clear benefits, this pilgrimage isn’t without value,* he thought. *The people enjoy festival songs and dances. Yet even if I told His Majesty that, he probably wouldn’t understand, as he’s never known the excitement of festivals himself. Perhaps I should come back with indisputable numbers and try again.*

As Tomi mulled over this idea, the office door opened. Ryuho trotted into the room with Angelina on his back. “Fodder!” she cried out cheerfully.

“Lina!” Feilong called back, grinning from ear to ear.

“Polaris Princess!”

“Princess Angelina!”

While the daoshi looked at her pleadingly, the final and most pathetic cry came from a civil official on the verge of tears.

Angelina stiffened with surprise. *Is Father causing trouble for everyone again?* she wondered. *You could cut the tension in here with a knife.*

Once in front of Feilong, Angelina climbed off Ryuho and placed her basket on the emperor’s lap. “What’s wrong, Fodder?” she asked, cocking her head. “It’s time for shweets.”

“It’s nothing,” Feilong replied. As his expression softened, he placed the basket on his desk and scooped up Angelina. “Still, it’s that time already?”

“Yep. Why don’t you take a li’l break?” At this, Angelina took out a confection from the basket. “Open wide, Fodder.”

Today’s sweets were *mahua*—fried dough that resembled braided ropes. To lighten the uneasy atmosphere, Angelina fed her father one of the confections. Since the dough was harder than it appeared, he had to chew it for quite some time. Silently, he raised his hand, and the civil officials formed a line in front of his desk.

It had become the snack time custom. After Feilong ate his confection, everyone else in the office would line up to receive their portion from Angelina. No one decided it officially, yet before long, it had become a tradition. An adorable young girl distributing sweets dispelled the tense atmosphere in the office. As such, everyone who received their portion began to relax.

Tears welled in the temple elder’s eyes as he took his piece of mahua. “How blessed am I to receive a confection from the Polaris Princess’s hand...? I should enshrine this in the mausoleum.”

“If you don’t eat it now, it’s gonna spoil,” Angelina said.

In response to her quip, the temple elder laughed. The sight of him retreating with the mahua held above his head was comical.

Finally, Prime Minister Tomi took his portion. “Do you like watching dances, Princess Angelina?” he asked.

“Sure do!” she replied.

Occasionally, itinerant entertainers would visit the palace to perform songs and dances. Whenever Angelina heard of their arrival, she would go watch them with Ryuho. However, she’d never been to a theater since she was too young.

A sudden thought occurred to Angelina. “Are you talking about the Kalavinka?”

“You know about the Kalavinka?” Tomi asked, his eyes widening.

“I’ve been studying for Big Brudder’s ascension ceremony. If the Kalavinka visits, I need to visit her, right? Since I’m in charge of the inner court, I was a li’l curious about the visitors.”

Feilong silently patted Angelina’s head. He still hadn’t finished chewing his rather tough mahua.

As the sole princess, Angelina held the highest authority over the inner court—also known as the Canopy of the Emperor. Normally, a young princess wouldn’t take charge of the inner court. However, the previous chief lady-in-waiting had been punished and exiled for abusing Angelina. Since then, authority had been delegated to Angelina in both name and substance. That had been a powerful display of Feilong’s will, for he’d vowed never to make the same mistake again.

“You’ve been quite diligent in your studies,” Tomi said.

“Yeah, ’cause Marfa doesn’t know much about Jinlongian rituals, y’know?” Angelina responded. “Mion was worried about the inner court, so she’s been sending me letters.”

Mion was Tomi’s niece. As the former chief lady-in-waiting, she’d abused Angelina. Personality aside, she was extremely capable. She also knew more

about the inner court than anyone else. Despite everything, Angelina held Mion's brilliance in high regard. Though Mion had been branded a criminal and forbidden from participating in politics, Angelina still exchanged personal letters with her.

"Mion..." Tomi mumbled, unsure how to respond. The crimes of his niece couldn't be easily forgiven, after all.

Angelina scrambled to change the conversation. "Is the Kalavinka coming here, Fodder?"

Feilong swallowed his mahua and smiled. "Do you want to see her?"

"Yeah, 'cause I've never seen a proper dance before! And the new chief lady can arrange all the difficult stuff, right?"

Angelina's sincere and innocent smile pierced Feilong's heart like an arrow. Despite being a princess, Angelina had been treated as nonexistent until last year, as Feilong had forbidden her from appearing where he might have seen her. Accordingly, she'd never attended a public event and knew nothing of festivals. Feilong had been the cause of Angelina's every misfortune. Being fully aware of this, he was desperate to make up for his past wrongdoings.

"If you wish to see the Kalavinka, I'll summon her here," Feilong said.

In response to this most magnificent flip-flop, the temple elder stared at Feilong, utterly lost for words.

"Is there some sort of problem?" Feilong glared at the elder.

At once, the elder bowed before the emperor. "Not at all, Your Majesty."

Tomi breathed a sigh of relief and nodded respectfully to Angelina. "In that case, the Kalavinka shall perform her tributary dance, as is our nation's custom."

*Huh? Angelina thought. I don't know what just happened, but does this mean the problem's solved?*

As the princess tilted her head with a look of surprise, someone in the office muttered, "So cute."

Angelina finished eating her steamed bread while sitting on Feilong's lap. The

head chef had made it for her, fearing that mahua would be too hard. When Feilong wiped crumbs of bread from the corners of her mouth with his hand, she smiled, slightly embarrassed.

“Thanks, Fodder,” she said.

“Of course,” he answered.

Angelina smiled at everyone in the office. “Setting up everything for Big Brudder’s ceremony will be hard, but I’m looking forward to it. Good luck, everybody.”

With that, Angelina bowed her head, pink hair fluttering.

All at once, the exhausted bureaucrats regained their motivation. No matter how unreasonable Feilong’s demands were, they would work themselves to the bone if it meant pleasing Angelina.

## Chapter 2: Angelina and the Crown Prince Ascension Ceremony

**AS** Kyril's ascension ceremony drew nearer, the North Star Palace grew busy. Today, Angelina and her family were having a meeting about what they would wear during the ten-day ceremony. Angelina, Ryuho, Feilong, and Kyril gathered in Angelina's wardrobe room. In a little while, everyone would have their precise measurements taken so their clothes could be made to order.

"This is silkworm thread harvested from Mt. Jinlong," the seamstress said.

Unable to help herself, Angelina cried out in delight. The bundle of white silk thread glowed with magic as if it contained the light of many stars. Fabrics mixed with silkworm thread amplified the magic already contained within the material. Thus, such fabrics were also highly valued as amulets.

Fabrics woven solely from silkworm thread were expensive. Even among the royal family, only the emperor was allowed to wear such garments. However, fabrics mixing silkworm and normal threads were available on the market as high-end goods. As the ratio of silkworm thread decreased, the price became increasingly reasonable.

Despite her lack of knowledge about fabrics, even Angelina could tell how special these threads were. "So pretty..." she mumbled.

As Angelina's eyes sparkled, the seamstress holding the silkworm thread smiled. She was a former Vinka who lived on Mt. Jinlong and harvested silkworm thread. Mt. Jinlong was a sacred site, but it also produced special silks.

"These threads come from the cocoons of silkworms that only live on Mt. Jinlong," the seamstress explained. "Their diet consists solely of starlight grass flowers, which only grow there. Not only will it keep you cool in summer and warm in winter, but it also contains natural magic. Furthermore, these threads are extremely flexible and can be richly dyed." At this, the seamstress showed Angelina a bundle of golden threads. "These threads have been dyed using



Golden Dragon Tree fruit. We're using them to embroider the Golden Dragon onto the ceremonial ochre fabric."

The beauty of the golden thread coaxed a sigh from Angelina.

"How are the fabrics I requested faring?" Feilong asked.

The emperor hardly ever appeared on these occasions, as he had no interest in his clothes. He only spoke up when Angelina's garments were being tailored.

The seamstress brought out a length of fabric dyed in brilliant orange. "This is what Princess Angelina will wear for the ceremony." When the seamstress moved the fabric, it shone iridescently based on the lighting. "The fabric glows like this because the warp and the weft were woven using different colors."

"Wow, that's amazing!" Angelina cried.

"Obviously, silkworm threads were used for both," the seamstress continued. "Former Vinkas residing in the Starlight Mausoleum on Mt. Jinlong sang celebratory songs while weaving this fabric. Usually, only the emperor may wear such a garment per Jinlongian tradition."

The seamstress beamed at Angelina, whose eyes widened. "Huh...? Does that mean...?"

"His Majesty loves you very much, Princess Angelina."

"This is Lina's first official event," Feilong said with an aloof expression. "I couldn't allow for anything less."

While Angelina was at a loss for words, Kyril and Ryuho regarded Feilong with exasperation.

"Don't give me that look." Feilong grinned at Kyril. "Ochre fabrics have been prepared for you as well."

The seamstress unfolded a brilliant orange fabric reminiscent of the morning sun. Only the crown prince was allowed to wear this forbidden color. Of course, the fabric was pure silkworm thread.

Feilong nodded. "Since you and I will be wearing different shades of ochre, I also chose a matching color for Lina."

“How would you like the garments tailored?” the seamstress asked.

“Kyril’s robes should be based upon traditional court etiquette. However, Lina’s outfit should be a Yulan dress. She’s used to such garments, and they’re easy to move around in. How does that sound, Lina?”

Angelina wasn’t sure how to respond. Indeed, ceremonial robes were heavy and difficult for a small girl to move in. She would be grateful to wear a Yulan dress. Even so, the Crown Prince Ascension Ceremony had strict rules concerning clothes, ranging from color to embroidery. Nobles familiar with court etiquette might laugh at her for wearing a foreign dress.

Moreover, no precedent existed for a child younger than five to participate in an official ceremony. Regardless, Feilong had insisted upon Angelina’s attendance. Despite being four, she possessed the Inverted Scale, which proved her right to succession. As such, Feilong wanted to establish her position as a princess. As repentance for abandoning Angelina, he’d vowed to treat her the same as Kyril.

“It’s okay if I don’t wear ceremonial clothes?” Angelina asked. “No one’ll laugh at me?”

“No one will laugh at you,” Feilong assured her.

“But won’t people be mad if I break the rules?”

“If you’re that worried, I can always change the ceremony’s rules.”

In response to his casual declaration, Angelina looked to her brother for help, who smiled and nodded.

*All right! Give Father a good chiding, Big Bro!* Angelina tried to convey her thoughts through a glance, but Kyril’s words contradicted her.

“That sounds great, Father!” Kyril cheered, balling his hands into fists. “Let’s change the rules!”

Kyril’s support for Feilong panicked Angelina. “Fodder! Big Brudder!”

“There’s no need to worry,” Feilong said. “We want you to be as comfortable as possible, Lina. That’s the most important thing, right?”

As Feilong nodded and Kyril grinned, Angelina slumped, forfeiting the

argument.

“Your family truly loves you, Princess Angelina,” the seamstress said. “Incidentally, I also brought other fabrics for everyday wear. Please view them at your leisure.”

The long line of fabrics all shone with magic.

“A-Are all of these silkworm threads...?” Angelina asked.

“You have a good eye, Princess Angelina. Can you tell? The plain fabrics from here to here are all woven from silkworm thread. Then, the patterned fabrics from here to here are regular and silkworm threads. None of these fabrics are lacking in magic, as former Vinkas sang while weaving them. Oh, and the white fabrics can be dyed later. They can either be tie-dyed or painted.”

As the seamstress cheerfully explained, Angelina smiled stiffly. *Only the emperor can wear such fabrics, right?* she thought. *Is it okay for me to have so many of them?*

“I’m sorry for not having these ready until now, Lina,” Feilong apologized. “The clothes I’m having made to order all contain silkworm thread. Such fabrics take time to weave.”

“N-No, ish okay,” Angelina said, slurring due to her discomposure. “Normal clothes are jusht fine!”







Despite calling them *normal*, Angelina had only received high-quality clothes worthy of a princess these days.

“Fodder,” Angelina continued. “If you keep buying me such expensive clothes, the country’ll go broke.”

The idea of an insurrection occurring because Feilong had wasted national funds on a child terrified Angelina. She wanted to live a happy life with her family in this loop.

“You’re clever, Lina, but there’s no need to worry,” Feilong said. “I’m paying from my private funds.”

Since childhood, Feilong had spent every waking hour studying and battling political enemies. As a result, he didn’t have any hobbies and didn’t know how to spend money on himself.

As Angelina sank into a daze, the seamstress delivered the finishing blow by opening a large box. Gems of various colors and embroidery thread filled its interior.

“Well then,” the seamstress said. “Let’s discuss how to decorate your outfit while I take your measurements.”

“Speaking of which, stick this on her diadem,” Feilong interjected. “Lina, reach out your hand.”

The emperor carelessly tossed a one-centimeter stone into Angelina’s hand. It was a natural pink pearl—the same color as her hair. It was also a rare gemstone only harvested from the southern sea.

“My goodness!” the seamstress exclaimed. “I’ve never seen a pink pearl with such a distinctive flame pattern before! Such gemstones are hard to come by!”

Overcome with surprise, Angelina’s hands trembled. *Should a young girl be touching this with her bare hands?* she wondered, utterly perplexed.

“Um, Fodder, I...” Angelina trailed off. Her voice quivered, and she was on the verge of tears.

“What do you think?” Feilong asked, his expression brimming with satisfaction. “It suits you perfectly, don’t you think?”

He hadn't noticed Angelina's discomfort in the slightest.

"How splendid, Princess Angelina," the seamstress chimed in. "I'll make you a dress that matches this pearl perfectly."

When the woman smiled at her, Angelina felt dizzy.

*From now on, this isn't my problem...* she thought.

In the face of her doting father's rash behavior, Angelina could do nothing but stop thinking.



**CROWN** Prince Kyril Xin Lei's ascension ceremony drew ever closer. Two weeks before the ceremony, the Vinkas began their pilgrimage. They would be carried in palanquins from Mt. Jinlong to the palace. During their journey to the capital, they would stop in villages to perform their tributary dance in various mausoleums.

The ascension ceremony would consist of a series of events over two weeks. The schedule was:

Seventh Month, 20<sup>th</sup> Day

# Solar Announcement Ceremony

The emperor visits the Heavenly Sovereign Mausoleum to announce the Crown Prince Ascension Ceremony to the gods.

Seventh Month, 21<sup>st</sup> – 22<sup>nd</sup> Days

Representatives from major domestic clans and delegations from various surrounding countries arrive at the palace.

Seventh Month, 23<sup>rd</sup> Day

# Crown Prince Proclamation Ceremony

Kyril undergoes his coming-of-age ceremony and pledges his oath to become the crown prince before the guests. Afterward, he receives a precious orb from the emperor as proof that he will someday inherit the throne. Kyril then presents the orb to a statue of the Heavenly Sovereign in the North Star Palace, and the proclamation ceremony ends.

Seventh Month, 24<sup>th</sup> Day - Eighth Month, 2<sup>nd</sup> Day

## Banquet Ceremony

A feast for the guests and a celebratory ceremony for Jinlogian residents over ten days. A festival begins within the Purple Forbidden Palace and its outer enclosure. Once the Banquet Ceremony ends, the guests leave the palace.

These were the events scheduled to take place in the palace. One month later, the Solar Audience Ceremony would take place. For this final ceremony, the crown prince's mother would visit and deliver a report to Mt. Jinlong—a sacred site of the Heavenly Sovereign Temple forbidden to men. Angelina would fulfill this role in the departed empress's stead. Despite her youth, there were no other women in the royal family.

The Solar Announcement Ceremony had ended yesterday. Thus, important people and delegations from nearby countries began arriving at the palace. Visitors from vassal nations would stay in the Canopy. There, they would enjoy a short time with their family members who'd been offered up as hostages.

"My big brother's coming to stay with my sister!" Ryuho announced happily.

Ryuho's elder sister lived in the Canopy. The Nanranese delegation had probably arrived at their manor already.

"What will countries without manors in the Canopy do?" Ryuho asked.

"Hmm," Angelina replied. "I think temporary inns have been built in the outer enclosure."

Delegates from Anda—Jinlong's sworn enemy—would visit as well. It served as proof of their reconciliation following the previous battle.

"Delegates from Anda are coming too," Angelina said, "so there'll be paper lanterns that suppress magic hanging around the outer enclosure."

"Wow, that sounds pretty!" Ryuho exclaimed. "I'd like to see that."

"Yeah, me too!"

In contrast to Angelina and Ryuho's carefree discussion, tension shrouded the palace. Never in Jinlongian history had an Andan delegation participated in an official event.

A festive spirit gripped the inner palace and the lower city of the outer enclosure. People from myriad countries had gathered. Merchants and entertainers from foreign lands took the opportunity to visit. Due to the recent mourning period, the celebratory mood had been foreign to Jinlong for three years. As such, the nation overflowed with vitality.



**EMPEROR** Feilong, Crown Prince Kyril, and Angelina sat together on a raised platform. Ryuho stood next to Angelina in his feline form. They were receiving the guests of honor who'd gathered in the palace for the ascension ceremony.

Feilong wore yellow ochre robes—the color forbidden to all except the emperor. Embroidery depicting the Golden Dragon leapt out of the yellow-tinged cloth. As a departure from usual, he also wore a black *mianguan*. The crown sported five differently colored gemstones and decorative tassels resembling a bamboo screen hung from it.

Kyril sat to Feilong's left. He also wore a *mianguan* and orange ochre robes depicting the Blue Dragon.

Palace ladies waiting in the rear whispered excitedly to each other.

"Prince Kyril's robes look like a dragon climbing towards the sun."

"This is my first time seeing a *mianguan*, but it's incredibly beautiful."

"Princess Angelina's dress is wonderful as well."

"Yes, it's so adorable. The combination of Jinlongian and Yulan designs is exquisite."

"Apparently, it's fashionable for mothers to dress their daughters in Yulan dresses in the lower city."

Angelina was in a Yulan citrus orange dress to celebrate her mother's birthplace. Her regular wardrobe consisted of similar garments. She wasn't accustomed to wearing Jinlongian robes. However, the delicate embroidery, buttons, and so forth were of Jinlongian design. A polka dot pattern imitating draconic crystal balls had been applied to the silk dress using gold and blue thread. All told, the garment was quite lovely.

“What kind of gemstone is Princess Angelina wearing on her diadem?” a palace lady asked.

“It’s a pink pearl,” another palace lady answered. “A gemstone with such a clear flame pattern is on par with a national treasure.”

“Also, the emperor himself cast powerful protective magic on the garments of both his children!”

“Their clothes were tailored using magic-amplifying silkworm thread, correct? It should rebound any ordinary amount of malice.”

“It’s obvious how much the emperor loves his children.”

Ryuhō guarded Angelina’s side in his feline form. He decided to participate in the ascension ceremony as a Flame Tiger, not a human prince. In this form, he wouldn’t have to memorize complicated speeches or etiquette. Additionally, he could stay by Angelina’s side.

Ryuhō wore a splendid, magical ribbon given to him by Nanran around his neck. Lavish gemstones were embroidered on the soft silk.

Usually, Flame Tiger cubs couldn’t speak human language. Instead, cubs relayed their feelings to those they trusted using telepathy. However, despite his youth, Ryuhō could talk in his feline form. Due to his poor judgment, Ryuhō’s family worried about him speaking as a tiger. The words of a holy beast could be perceived as prophecy or divine revelation. Careless words on Ryuhō’s part could cause trouble.

Ryuhō liked his lavish and stylish ribbon. Since he only wore ribbons when going out, he felt dressed up, which put him in high spirits. Furthermore, Angelina had tied the ribbon around his neck herself. That filled him with joy.

Delegations from various countries had gathered in the audience chamber. Jinlong possessed vast swathes of territories, so delegates from diverse lands wore richly colored garments unique to their regions.

The Nanranese crown prince appeared before the platform. Upon seeing Ryuhō sitting next to Angelina with a composed expression, the crown prince laughed softly.



The people of Ryuho's homeland preferred dazzling clothes with lavish embroidery and flamboyant colors. They wore trousers underneath their high-collar shirts, the latter of which extended to their knees. Large lengths of cloth hung from their shoulders, and they tied elaborate belts around their waists. The crown prince wore a beautiful necklace crafted from gemstones, and his golden earrings matched Ryuho's.

When the crown prince spoke, his eyes gleamed mischievously. "My sincerest thanks for choosing the Flame Tiger—our nation's holy beast—as your divine guardian."

His tanned skin and amicable smile held traces of Ryuho in his human form.

"The Flame Tiger is my best friend," Angelina replied, bowing to the crown prince. "He's always protecting me. May our nations always be allies."

Ryuho puffed out his chest with a smug grin.

"I'm very thankful and pleased to hear you call him a friend," the crown prince said. He then whispered quietly enough not to be overheard, "Good for you, Ryuho."

The Flame Tiger's exceptional ears caught those words. His brother's relieved voice caused Ryuho's chest to swell with joy, and he chuffed softly. He wanted to relay his happiness somehow.

Afterwards, the Nanranese delegation left. When Angelina saw the next delegation, her body stiffened.

"Anda..." she mumbled reflexively.

The Andan people were called fiends, and their nation's clothes were peculiar. They wore conical bamboo hats and draped cloth over their faces. When they visited foreign countries, these measures hid their fangs and the horns growing from their foreheads. Additionally, they wore black coats over their robes that were unsewn on the sides. Their black boots curved upwards at the toes, and their red skirts—worn over their robes—billowed voluminously around their ankles. Of course, they were unarmed inside the palace, but usually, they carried swords at their sides.

When Angelina recalled their blades from previous lifetimes, she trembled.

Jinlong and Anda had skirmished with each other since time immemorial. No one would call their relationship amicable. In particular, the fiends had targeted Tongfeng—Prime Minister Tomi’s homeland for many years. In Angelina’s previous lives, Feilong and Kyril were murdered due to a plot formulated by Anda and the prime minister’s family. Angelina had fallen victim to the fiends as well.

“What’s wrong?” Ryuho asked telepathically, nudging his forehead against Angelina.

After coming to her senses, Angelina petted Ryuho. His soft fur between her fingers made her sigh in relief.

“Nothing’s wrong,” she answered. “I was just startled seeing a fiend for the first time.”

“Oh, right. There are no fiends in the Canopy.”

That made sense to Ryuho. Anda didn’t send hostages to the Canopy, as they weren’t a vassal state. Therefore, their delegation would be staying in the palace’s outer enclosure.

The Andan crown prince was representing their nation. He was easily over six feet tall, his body thick with muscle. Though he wasn’t much taller than Feilong, he was about twice as wide. He was massive, even compared to his Andan attendants. He walked with an intimidating swagger, his feet stomping against the ground.

Finally, the prince took off his conical hat and cloth covering, exposing his face. Large, black eyes shone fiercely within a reddish face. He had a large, round nose and thick eyebrows. A white, two-inch protrusion—his horn—grew from his forehead. Two fangs jutted out from his mouth when he fearlessly smiled. The prince looked around the area, showing off the distinctive traits of his people. His altogether inhuman appearance caused the crowd to stir.

“Congratulations on the ascension ceremony!” he cried out in a loud, gravelly voice, causing the air in the chamber to tremble. Clearly, he sought to intimidate the crowd.

In contrast to the large Andan prince, Kyril appeared exceedingly weak.

Despite being the son of the cruel emperor, he was still young and had gentle features. At a glance, Kyril seemed like no match for the Andan prince.

As the timid civil officials trembled, Tomi cursed under his breath. Obviously, the Andan prince was attempting to intimidate Kyril, who was seeing a fiend for the first time. By doing so, he would spoil Kyril's prestige.

Meanwhile, Feilong remained impassive. Such an opponent couldn't come close to breaking his composure.

Angelina glanced at Kyril, worried he might have gone pale with fright. To the contrary, her brother was smiling. Though he looked frail, he was the son of Feilong—the cruel emperor. As a result, he'd inherited nerves of steel, for no person in this world could match his father's fearsomeness.

*I'm not soft enough to tremble over theatrical intimidation,* Kyril thought.

In response to the Andan prince's booming voice, he smiled, relaxed. "Thank you," he answered with utmost politeness.

When Kyril didn't show fear, the Andan prince's eyes widened in surprise. Tomi gave a satisfied nod. Likewise, high-ranking officials, domestic and foreign, appeared to hold Kyril in high regard. The Andan prince grinned widely, donned his conical hat once more, and finished his greeting.

Before long, the royal family received their final visitor.

"Please welcome the High Priestess Kalavinka!" the announcer cried.

As booming drums echoed throughout the chamber, a young girl in dark blue robes appeared on a palanquin. At the tender age of eight, the Kalavinka was worshiped as a living goddess of the Heavenly Sovereign Temple. Thick makeup covered her impassive, downcast face. Furthermore, the Tianshi's Protective Seal had been drawn on her forehead in blue ink. Her hair was in a tight bun, and she wore a feather headdress. She also wore a green sash over her left shoulder, a snake embroidered onto the magnificent cloth. Finally, her golden earrings and bracelets jingled as the palanquin advanced.

A large bird was perched on the Kalavinka's green sash. The bird had bright red, flamelike wings, a long tail, and a fanlike crest that shone with a golden sparkle. This divine bird was called a Garuda and never left the Kalavinka's side.

The majesty of the sight took Angelina's breath away. "Mish Kalavinka and her Garuda..." she mumbled.

Four young girls stood by the Kalavinka's side. They were priestesses known as Vinkas. Only the highest-ranking priestess bore the name of Kalavinka. In any event, the four Vinka held splendid bells used in traditional Jinlongian dances. Each time the Kalavinka's palanquin advanced, their bells rang out with a tinkling chime. A large group of daoshi also stood behind the Vinkas. All the daoshi from Mt. Jinlong were women.

Angelina couldn't take her eyes away from the grand sight. "So pretty..." she mumbled again, a sigh escaping her lips.

"You're cuter," Ryuho responded, huffing through his nose.

The Kalavinka's palanquin was lowered to the ground. Even so, she didn't step down from it. As a living goddess, the Kalavinka was restricted from moving on her own in public places. Others might interpret her every action as divination. If she fell from her palanquin, some might say, "The Heavenly Sovereign hasn't recognized the crown prince's ascension ceremony."

After greeting Feilong and Kyril, the Kalavinka addressed Angelina next. "Blood of the imperial line, thou cometh from beyond the lightning bolts of the rain clouds," she spoke in a sonorously beautiful voice. "Thou doth possess the scale of the Golden Dragon. May the blessings of Heaven be upon ye, Princess Angelina."

"Hello, Mish Kalavinka," Angelina responded with a wide grin. "I'm Angelina. You're probably tired from your long trip. If anything here isn't to your liking, please feel free to tell me."

"Lady Kalavinka, this is *Polaris* Princess Angelina," the temple elder explained. "And the Flame Tiger by her side is her divine guardian beast."

The Kalavinka's eyes widened. "Polaris Princess...?" While looking at Angelina, her brow furrowed slightly. "Purity and fortune," she concluded in a brusque tone.

These words were the Kalavinka's stock phrase, for she didn't speak her mind in front of others. *Thank you, I'm sorry*, and all other phrases were expressed

through the words “purity and fortune.”

In response, her attendants raised her palanquin again. Then, she and her party left the audience chamber.

“What was *that*?” Ryuho asked, slapping his tail on the ground. “She’s creepy.”

“It’s not her fault,” Angelina said. “The Kalavinka can’t speak carelessly in front of other people.”

Before this ceremony, Angelina had received documents about the Kalavinka from Mion, which she’d studied. She launched into an explanation.

“The Kalavinka is treated as a living goddess until she’s ten. Supposedly, a tornado will occur if she sneezes, and if she falls, the country will collapse, too. That’s why everyone makes sure she isn’t injured in public.”

“That’s weird,” Ryuho said. “The Heavenly Sovereign Temple didn’t even predict the recent landslide.”

Angelina smiled stiffly. “Foresight and divination are different things.”

She didn’t trust the Kalavinka’s divinations, and neither did Feilong. However, the people were a different matter. If the high priestess predicted a bright future, the people could live optimistically. As such, she acted with the utmost care so that her actions weren’t perceived as signs of misfortune.

*It’s a little sad,* Angelina thought.

The Kalavinka had to leave her parents while still young and live on a holy site. During the years when children most wanted to play, she couldn’t. Others even decided what words she could speak because her every action could be interpreted as divination.

As bells jingled throughout the chamber, the Kalavinka’s small back rocked back and forth atop her palanquin. The beautiful bird perched on her shoulder flapped its wings but, alas, didn’t fly.

*Have its flight feathers been cut?* Angelina wondered. *If so, neither of them is free.*

The thought broke her heart.



**THE** Kalavinka would be staying in the dignitary room within the Heavenly Sovereign Mausoleum. The occupants of the lavish room were: the Kalavinka, four Vinkas, two daoshi from the Starlight Mausoleum who served as caretakers, and one daoshi from the Heavenly Sovereign Mausoleum.

“What is the Polaris Princess?” the Kalavinka asked.

“Oh, Princess Angelina?” the Heavenly Sovereign daoshi responded cheerfully. “Last year, the Golden Dragon and the Four Divinities recognized Her Highness as the Polaris Princess within this very mausoleum.”

“And what *is* the Polaris Princess, exactly?”

“One who speaks on behalf of the gods.”

“And how is she different from we priestesses?” the Kalavinka asked, her tone displeased.

The daoshi considered this before concluding, “You’re the same.”

“Then why are our names different? Which is superior: a Vinka or the Polaris Princess?”

“...The Polaris Princess,” the daoshi replied, glancing at the group of Vinkas.

The Kalavinka scrunched up her face. “In that case, who is superior: me—the Kalavinka—or the Polaris Princess?”

“It’s not a matter of who’s superior. You’re both exalted.”

“That’s not what I asked. Well, then, allow me to rephrase the question. Which of us is closer to the gods?”

In response to her angry tone, the daoshi recoiled. “You are, High Priestess Kalavinka. However, the Polars Princess is also the daughter of the emperor.”

“Understood—you may leave,” the Kalavinka ordered.

“I implore you to remain rational, Lady Kalavinka! The Polaris Princess might become a Vinka herself.”

Those words stunned the Kalavinka, causing her to hold her breath.

...*The princess might become a Vinka?!* she shouted internally.

“I’m tired,” she said. “Please leave.”

Despite being an eight-year-old girl, the Kalavinka was a living goddess. Her physical condition could sway the empire’s future. If she boycotted the ascension ceremony, that could cause trouble for everyone. As such, the Heavenly Sovereign Temple had no choice but to obey her order.

The Kalavinka lifted the Garuda from her shoulder and lowered it onto a perch. After giving it food and water, she removed her stiff clothes. Her attendants—former Vinkas—helped to remove her heavy headdress and bracelets. Once she’d changed into simple robes, the Kalavinka returned to being a normal person rather than a high priestess.

“The princess might become a Vinka...?” she muttered to herself bitterly.

Vinkas were young girls selected from impoverished villages based on divination. At five, they received the Heavenly Sovereign Temple’s summons. Afterward, they left their families, received a harsh education, and served the gods as Vinkas until the age of ten.

At the same time, Vinkas were worshiped in mausoleums and afforded abundant lives. In villages with many children, children were often separated from their parents while still young. If a child was destined to be sold, becoming a Vinka was preferable. Even after retiring, Vinkas were respected and guaranteed jobs. Thus, girls from poor villages all dreamed of becoming Vinkas.

Also, when the temple selected a Vinka from an impoverished village, they compensated the community. Likewise, when a village produced a Vinka, believers across Jinlong would visit their mausoleum. In turn, their alms would circulate and enrich the community. That allowed poor villages to survive.

*We Vinka left our parents for the sake of our impoverished villages, the Kalavinka thought, biting her lip. Conversely, the princess has lived a carefree, spoiled life in this lush palace with her family. Now, she’s also received the title of Polaris Princess, who ranks above us priestesses? She probably received this position simply because she’s the empress’s daughter.*

“Who among us would allow this so-called Polaris Princess to become a



Vinka?!” the Kalavinka cried. “We shan’t divine her as one!”

Anger seethed in the pit of her stomach. Only a select few girls could become a Vinka at a time. If Angelina joined their ranks, another impoverished girl would go unsaved. Similarly, another village would starve.

The Garuda spread its flamelike wings from atop its perch. Its shrill cry, like a transverse flute, echoed throughout the palace.



**AUDIENCES** with the delegations had ended, and Angelina was relaxing in the Guidepost Tree Garden of the North Star Palace. The Golden Dragon had circled the bottom of the white Guidepost Tree, allowing Angelina and Ryuho to doze in his coil.

Soon, Angelina’s older brother—Crown Prince Kyril of Jinlong—appeared in the garden. He looked exhausted. As the star of the ascension ceremony, he’d been incredibly busy as of late.

“Lina!” he shouted.

After running over to his little sister, Kyril scooped her up and squeezed her in his arms. Angelina embraced her brother back just as tightly.

“Are you tired, Big Brudder?” she asked.

“Yes. I’ve been sorely lacking your presence...”

As Kyril hugged his sister, Ryuho stomped on the prince’s feet with his thick paws.

“Hey, let her down!” the Flame Tiger barked. “Let Lina down!”

Kyril played dumb. “Sorry, but I can’t understand what you’re saying.”

At first, Ryuho couldn’t speak out loud in his feline form. Recently, this had changed, but Ryuho’s family in Nanran had warned him to stay silent in front of people. After all, only a handful of the North Star Sanctuary residents knew the Flame Tiger and the Nanranese prince were the same Ryuho. For now, his family had no intention of making this information public. And so, they’d provided him with a magic ribbon to wear when he went outside. The accessory rendered him incapable of speaking aloud. As such, he wouldn’t accidentally

speaking around people unaware of the situation and cause a disturbance. Currently, Ryuho wasn't wearing the ribbon, but Kyril was teasing him.

"You liar!" he shouted. "I'm not even wearing the ribbon! I'm talking like a person!"

"Sorry, but I can't hear you," Kyril replied, teasing Ryuho. "If that's frustrating, perhaps you should turn into a person."

"Grr...!" Ryuho growled.

Kyril knew full well that Ryuho struggled to transform into a human. However, as Ryuho strained to complete his metamorphosis, Angelina came to his defense. "Stop teasing him, Big Brudder."

Kyril merely chuckled.

"Stop making fun of me!" Ryuho shouted.

And then, with a single bark, he transformed into a human. Alas, he couldn't hide his tiger ears or tail.

"Look, I did it!" he shouted. "Now, come over to me, Lina!"

When Ryuho spread out his arms, Angelina also spread out her arms in his direction. "Pick me up, Ryuho!"

Kyril scrunched up his face, but even so, he relinquished Angelina to Ryuho, as her feelings came first.

Angelina embraced Ryuho while squealing with delight. Since she was heavier than expected, Ryuho planted his feet firmly on the ground. He'd embraced her many times, but until now, he'd hardly ever picked her up. After watching Kyril scoop her up so easily, Ryuho had thought himself capable of doing the same. When Angelina rode on his feline back, she felt as light as a feather. If not for her warmth, she would have seemed nonexistent, and he always worried about her flying off somewhere.

*But she feels so heavy when I'm a human,* Ryuho thought, trying to hide his shock. *Being a tiger is so much more convenient!*

Angelina's weight caused him to stagger, and his arms shook. Even so, he gritted his teeth and bore it, as he didn't want to set Angelina down when she

was having fun.

Kyril chuckled while looking at Ryuho. “Lina,” he said. “Come over here, and I’ll lift you into the air.”

“Big Brudder!” Angelina cried, stretching her arms towards him.

Being lifted into the air thrilled Angelina. In her first life, she’d known nothing of familial love. Later, seeing people dote on Ming Ming by lifting her into the air sparked a longing in Angelina’s heart. For her, it symbolized being loved.

Even though she was mentally an adult, Angelina couldn’t resist. Since she hadn’t experienced a normal childhood in her previous lives, she enjoyed the novelty of these sorts of games. *This time, I’ll endeavor not to be abandoned or killed*, Angelina thought. Being picked up and lifted into the air allowed her to forget these fears and anxieties. Though she lacked this self-awareness, letting others spoil her confirmed her sense of belonging.

And so, Kyril took Angelina from Ryuho. While this frustrated Ryuho, he also let out a sigh of relief. If he’d stubbornly continued holding Angelina, he might have dropped her. *I’d rather give Lina to Kyril than injure her*, he thought. *Still, if I was a tiger right now, I could keep her on my back forever! I haven’t lost to Kyril at all!*

When Ryuho glared at Kyril, the prince chuckled. He lifted Angelina into the air, causing her to squeal with delight. On the other hand, Ryuho looked up at her with a sullen expression.

Eventually, Kyril set Angelina down and spread out his arms towards Ryuho. “Your turn, Ryuho.”

Ryuho’s ears twitched, his tail standing straight up. As a tiger, he was so large that no one could pick him up. Moreover, he’d only become capable of assuming his human form during the day after meeting Angelina. As a result, he, too, had little experience being lifted into the air as a human.

“Y-Yeah, no thanks,” Ryuho stammered.

Angelina smiled at him. “You should go up-up too!”

“If you say so...” Ryuho mumbled almost imperceptibly.

Kyril placed his hands beneath Ryuho's underarms. "Time to go up-up, Ryuho!"

"Stop saying up-up!" Ryuho shouted, his tail swishing back and forth in delight. Embarrassed by his happiness, his face turned red, and he pretended to be angry.

"Haha!" Kyril laughed. "You're pretty big, Ryuho. Come next year, I probably won't be able to lift you up anymore."

"Really?" Ryuho asked, his ears straightening happily. "I'm big?"

"Indeed. You're bigger and stronger than other human children. You'll probably grow bigger and stronger than me, too."

"Wow! I'm big! I'm going to be bigger than Kyril!"

Ryuho turned towards Angelina with a huge grin. Seeing him so happy coaxed a smile from her as well. "Good for you, Ryuho," she said.

When Kyril set Ryuho down, Ryuho and Angelina hugged each other, proceeding to spin around.

"Yeah, I'm gonna be big!" Ryuho cheered. "I'll be able to lift you up lots and lots!"

"That's great!" Angelina cried.

When Ryuho squeezed Angelina in his arms, she hugged him back just as tightly.

Seeing them so happy warmed Kyril's heart. *If only these days could last forever*, he thought. *After my ascension ceremony, I'll officially have an influential voice in politics. I need to make Jinlong into an empire where Lina can always smile.*

With this in mind, Kyril squared his shoulders.

At that moment, a birdsong reminiscent of a transverse flute echoed above the palace. Angelina and Kyril looked skywards, their eyes wide with surprise. Neither had ever heard this birdsong in the area before.

"What bird is that?" Angelina asked.

Having returned to his feline form, Ryuho looked up at the sky and cocked his head. “Beats me.”

“That is the song of a Garuda,” the Golden Dragon responded.

“You mean the rare bird that came with the Kalavinka?” Angelina asked. “I didn’t know it had such a beautiful voice.”

“Garudas love beautiful singing above all else,” the dragon explained. “The Kalavinka exists to soothe those divine avians with her voice.”

“They like human songs?”

“Indeed. The Kalavinka lives on Mt. Jinlong—a sacred site of the Heavenly Sovereign Temple. It’s a snowy mountain on the northern edge of the empire. Presently, only women reside on this consecrated ground. Since time immemorial, Mt. Jinlong has retained beautiful air, beautiful water, and nature untainted by humans. Rare plants and animals can thrive there, Garudas being one of them.”

“It sounds like something out of a dream,” Angelina said.

She tried to imagine living on a snowy mountain surrounded by rare, fluffy creatures. Meanwhile, the Golden Dragon closed his eyes quietly.

“So, the Kalavinka’s a really good singer?” Angelina asked.

“Yes, she’s quite skilled,” the dragon replied. “In fact, the current Kalavinka boasts the greatest singing voice in our empire’s history.”

Kyril recalled his mother. While the empress lived, the Kalavinka had visited every New Year’s and for the emperor’s birthday. On these occasions, she’d performed a song and dance. The empress had always looked forward to the arrival of the small Vinkas and showered them with affection. Since the empress had loved music, she’d taught Kyril the songs she’d learned from the priestesses. As a young boy, Kyril and his parents had occasionally sung together.

Yet after the empress’s death, the North Star Sanctuary had gone into mourning. During that time, the palace hadn’t held any elaborate festivals. Feilong had distanced himself from merrymaking, trying to forget his happy past

with his wife.

“I can’t wait to hear the singing during your celebration, Big Brudder!” Angelina exclaimed.

All the Vinkas would perform a celebratory song and dance for the ascension ceremony. The mere thought filled Angelina with excitement.

As Kyril watched his little sister overflowing with anticipation, a pang of sadness shot through his chest. *Lina has never been to or even seen a festival,* he thought. *She’s unfamiliar with merrymaking and can’t remember our mother’s face. Starting now, we’ll have to make up for everything she’s lacked.*

With this in mind, Kyril silently mussed Angelina’s hair.

In response, Angelina looked up at him curiously and cocked her head. “Big Brudder?”

“It’s nothing,” Kyril answered with a laugh.

Receiving head pats for no particular reason filled Angelina with joy. However, this also brought the Vinkas to mind. *How long has it been since their families gently patted their heads...?* she wondered, her heart aching somewhat. *And despite visiting the palace for a lively festival, they won’t be able to sightsee at their leisure. Maybe I should bring them gifts that serve as some small diversion.*

“Do you think I could become friends with the Vinkas, Big Brudder?” Angelina asked.

“Hmm,” Kyril responded. “Since the Vinkas hardly ever leave Mt. Jinlong to visit the palace, I’ll make sure you can see them. Those girls must be bored of only spending time with adults. It would probably be good for them to have an informal opportunity to play.”

Kyril then mussed Angelina’s hair again. He would do everything in his power to give his little sister what she wanted.

“Say, Lina,” Kyril spoke up. “If you ever want to become the empress, let me know, all right? I’ll trade places with you anytime.”

Angelina burst out laughing. “You’ve said that a hundred times, y’know? But I’m fine.”



She didn't want to become the empress. In her first life, her father had been betrayed, and Jinlong had fallen into ruin after the coup. Becoming empress seemed like too great of a burden to bear.

"I'm happy right now," Angelina said with a grin.

Kyril nodded quietly. *I want to continue protecting her happiness,* he thought.

## Chapter 3: Angelina and the Kalavinka

**ANGELINA** traveled down the Purple Forbidden Palace's central road on Ryuho's back. The Heavenly Sovereign Mausoleum was directly along the path from the palace gates to the North Star Sanctuary. Since the Kalavinka had taken up residence in the mausoleum, Angelina was going to meet her there with pastries baked for palace residents.

Prime Minister Tomi had already discussed this informal visit with the daoshi. "Letting the children spend time together would be good for them," both parties had agreed.

Also, the emperor had ignored Angelina until last year. Because of this, she had no friends, and she'd never experienced the typical amusements of childhood. "Starting now, everyone must give Angelina whatever she wants to the best of their abilities," Feilong had ordered.

When Angelina arrived at the mausoleum, she and Ryuho were allowed into the Kalavinka's room. The Garuda rested on a perch by the window, preening its fiery red feathers with its beak. The Kalavinka sat with her back to the Garuda, a pair of Vinkas framing her on both sides.

"Hello!" Angelina greeted everyone cheerfully.

"Purity and fortune," the Kalavinka responded with her usual phrase.

"I'm here for an informal playdate. I also brought snacks from the sanctuary, so let's eat them together."

"Purity and fortune."

When the Kalavinka responded with her stock phrase again, Angelina had no idea how to proceed.

*This is supposed to be an informal meeting, she thought. Maybe she's still nervous about being in a new place.*

“Um, we can talk to each other, y’know?” Angelina pointed out. “The daoshi said it’s okay.”

“Purity and fortune.”

The Kalavinka had no intention of speaking to Angelina. As Angelina and Ryuho exchanged glances, the latter huffed in displeasure. “What’s with this girl?” he asked telepathically.

Angelina shrank into herself. Ostensibly, the Kalavinka was responding to her, but in reality, the high priestess was ignoring her. Angelina’s chest ached, for she’d experienced this many times in her first life. Back then, she’d felt invisible each time she’d been ignored. The sadness had been unbearable. She’d even blamed herself, thinking she’d done something worthy of being neglected. “Do I even exist?” she’d wondered fearfully when that treatment had persisted. In the end, she’d even come to believe that her disappearance would make everyone happier.

Ryuho’s tail patted Angelina on the back. “I’m right here with you,” the gesture conveyed silently, his soft fur evidence of her existence. Ryuho felt even angrier at Angelina’s treatment than she did herself.

*I’m okay,* Angelina thought. *The Kalavinka is still a young child. Maybe something happened to sour her mood.* After straightening her back and letting out a deep breath, Angelina fixed a smile on her face.

Upon seeing this, the Kalavinka’s eyebrow twitched. *Why is this child not shrinking before me?* she wondered, prickling with irritation. *Is she mocking me?*

Angelina toddled over to the Kalavinka while holding the basket of sweets, showing her its contents. At Angelina’s request, *zao hua gao* had been prepared for the Kalavinka. Chestnuts and sticky jujube rice flour were inside the pastry’s flower-shaped pie crust. After trying this confection for the first time in the palace, Angelina fell in love with its scrumptious flavor and cute design.

Angelina looked at the Kalavinka, her eyes brimming with anticipation. *This should brighten her mood!*

However, the Kalavinka remained expressionless. “Purity and fortune,” she

replied coldly, not attempting to hide her lack of excitement. She'd tried zao hua gao many times, as believers often provided Vinkas with rare pastries.

*Is this no good either?* Angelina wondered, somewhat dejected. *I hadn't tried zao hua gao until recently, but maybe it's not that unusual.*

"I guess these aren't to your liking," Angelina said, a touch embarrassed. "Is there anything else you want?"

The Vinkas couldn't explore the festival at their leisure, so at the very least, Angelina wanted to bring the girls whatever they desired.

"Purity and fortune," the Kalavinka replied icily. Angelina must have sensed the rejection in the high priestess's words, for she grew visibly despondent. Seeing this lifted the Kalavinka's spirits. Yet, at the same time, the Vinkas by her side squirmed back and forth while observing Angelina.

"Um, is there anything you want?" Angelina asked, smiling at the other four Vinkas. She'd given up on speaking to the high priestess. "You can't go outside, right?"

The Vinkas fidgeted while observing Angelina.

"I came here because I want to be friends," Angelina continued. "I'd be really happy if you spoke to me normally."

The Vinkas glanced at the door. After confirming the absence of any daoshi, they broke out into smiles.

"May we ask for anything?" one of the girls asked.

Being spoken to filled Angelina with joy. "Of course!" she responded enthusiastically.

*"Hujiao bing!* Have you ever heard of it? I doubt princesses eat it very often..."

"No, no, I do know of it!"

"My mom used to make it a lot back in our village."

Angelina nodded. "What do you like as the filling?"

"We used pork in my village."

"Sounds great!"

Hujiao bing—baked buns containing various fillings—were often sold at food stalls. Since they were plebeian fare, the palace didn't serve them. However, when Angelina had worked at the Blue Ocean Bar in a previous life, they'd served hujiao bing.

Angelina turned her gaze to another Vinka. "What would you like?"

"Fresh flowers..." the girl replied. "Flowers don't really bloom on Mt. Jinlong since it's so cold."

"Oh, I see. Then I'll bring you lots of flowers!"

"I'd like to know what's popular in the capital..." another Vinka said. "Is Master Flame Tiger's ribbon common here? It's so cute!"

Angelina smiled. "It's actually from Nanran."

During Angelina and the Vinkas' amiable conversation, the Kalavinka suddenly shouted, "Purity and fortune!"

A deathly silence fell over the room. From the Kalavinka's perspective, nothing could have been more unpleasant. Despite arriving in the capital after a long journey, they couldn't explore the city at their leisure. On the other hand, Angelina could play wherever she wanted and buy them anything.

*It's so unfair!* the Kalavinka screamed internally. *We Vinkas are separated from our families and trapped on Mt. Jinlong! We can't even speak freely! We endure this for the sake of our families and our villages! Even so, this girl lives without any discomfort, surrounded by her loved ones!*

The Kalavinka couldn't suppress her irritation, as Angelina's actions seemed like boasting.

Angelina's eyes widened in surprise at the Kalavinka's unconcealed rage. Though it might have been inappropriate, she also felt relieved. After all, she'd finally seen a human side of the up-to-now impassive high priestess.

With a single flap, the Garuda spread its wings from atop its perch. As its large wings blocked the light from the window, the room plunged into darkness, and the divine avian let forth a long cry.

At that moment, someone knocked on the door.

“Is everything okay?” a daoshi called out.

Immediately, the Vinkas returned to their usual composed expressions.

Angelina stood up along with Ryuho. “I’ll come back later.”

In response, the Vinkas waved goodbye to her.

“Purity and fortune,” the Kalavinka said in farewell, adding nothing else.



“**WHERE** does she get off being so stuck up?!” Ryuho barked in a fit of anger. “Yeah, I heard she’s a living goddess or whatever, but she just looks like a little human brat to me!”

Junshi—Angelina and Ryuho’s private tutor—chuckled. Incidentally, Ryuho was still seven, making him younger than the Kalavinka.

“Well, maybe she’s had some bad experiences,” Angelina said.

“Huh?” Ryuho asked. “She’s not just selfish ’cause she’s so pampered?”

As a holy beast and a Nanranese prince, Ryuho had turned out more selfish and uninhibited than anyone else.

“I feel kinda sorry for those girls, though,” Angelina said.

Mion had instructed her to read a certain book before the ascension ceremony, which had contained a detailed description of the Vinkas. Angelina had studied the text using the mysterious wooden tag from the wicker cabinet.

“Vinkas are chosen from a group of four-year-old girls using divination,” she explained. “At five, the girls leave their villages alone to live on Mt. Jinlong, and they can’t see their families again until turning ten. I know just how sad it is to be all alone.”

Ryuho huffed through his nose. Before meeting him, Angelina had lived apart from her family. Knights, palace ladies, and her wet nurse, Marfa, had taken care of her, but they had all left in the evening. Since Ryuho met Angelina back then, recalling those days pained him even now.

“But you’re not alone anymore!” he shouted, plopping down on Angelina’s lap. “I’ll be with you forever!”

Angelina squeezed Ryuho in her arms. “Yep. I’m not lonely with you by my side, Ryuho. But those girls don’t have anyone like you. That’s why I want to help them have a little fun, y’know?”

“You’re very kind, Princess Angelina,” Junshi said.

Angelina smiled bashfully. “So anyway, do you know what villages the current Vinkas came from, Junshi?”

“I do, but why do you ask?”

“Because I want to give them stuff they remember from home, not fancy treats.”

“In that case, I’ll bring you a list of what people often eat in the Vinkas’ birthplaces and surrounding regions.”

“Thanks!”

Seeing Angelina grin from ear-to-ear warmed Junshi’s heart. When she’d first arrived in the palace, she’d been unduly mindful of other people. She hadn’t even been able to ask for her favorite sweets. Likewise, gifts had surprised her, and she’d hesitated to receive them. Though she would pick from things prepared for her, she never asked for anything herself. Considering the environment she’d been raised in, what else could anyone expect of her?

*Finally, she’s asking for things herself,* Junshi thought, patting her head. *That’s a good sign of progress.*

Angelina grinned from ear-to-ear, her cheeks puffed out like two peaches. Whenever Junshi gazed at the adorable princess, his chest swelled with satisfaction. He couldn’t resist the urge to touch her buoyant, light pink hair reminiscent of springtime mist. However, when Ryuho barked at him, Junshi’s hand shot back. He had moved unconsciously.

Despite her brilliance, Angelina still rejoiced over the most trivial matters and loved head pats. Due to her unfortunate past, she was starved of affection. Thus, Junshi knelt before the young princess and took her small hand, which had a birthmark resembling the Tianshi’s Protective Seal.

“Princess Angelina,” Junshi said. “Please tell me everything you want and wish

to do. I will spare no effort to make your dreams come true.”

A discomfited smile appeared on Angelina’s face. “...That’s a bad idea, Junshi. I’ll wind up spoiled, y’know?”

After so long, she’d finally obtained a warm and happy family. She didn’t want them to abandon her.

On the other hand, Junshi’s heart broke for Angelina. This small child shouldn’t be worrying about such things. “During childhood, you learn through experience,” he said. “Doing what you want is a form of studying, not selfishness, understand? As your tutor, I want you to study as much as you can, Princess.”

“You’re sure this is studying, not being selfish?”

“I’m positive. Whatever you desire or wish to do will circle back to knowledge. Even if something appears like play, it won’t be wasted. By doing various things and gaining an abundance of knowledge, your heart will grow substantially.”

Seeing the sincerity in Junshi’s eyes, Angelina nodded. “Okay!”

If Junshi hadn’t used studying as a pretext, she would have hesitated to ask for what she wanted. Again, his heart broke for her. As the only daughter of Emperor Feilong, she was in the position to have whatever she desired.

“You’re a wonderful girl, Princess Angelina,” Junshi said.

These few simple words caused a smile to bloom across her face.

Junshi placed his hand on Angelina’s forehead. “I offer everything I have to you, Princess Angelina.” Following this proclamation, he muttered too softly for her to hear him. “So please make up for all the happiness you lacked until now.”

As Angelina stared at her tutor with wide eyes, Ryuho’s ears twitched, and he rammed himself into Junshi.



## Chapter 4: Angelina and the Frozen Wells

**ANGELINA** was exploring the palace's outer enclosure. Since Ryuho had become her divine guardian beast, she'd been able to walk around the Purple Forbidden Palace with him at her leisure. However, a brown-haired knight accompanied her today since she was leaving the palace. This particular knight always pampered Angelina, and Ryuho—magic ribbon around his neck—accompanied them as well.

"We can finally visit the outer enclosure, Ryuho!" Angelina cried. "It's all thanks to Junshi!"

"Feilong was being pretty stubborn about giving his permission," Ryuho answered telepathically. "But c'mon, he has nothing to worry about with me here!"

"Your father is just looking out for you, Princess Angelina," the knight said. "Most palace inhabitants are bureaucrats or nobles, but commoners live in the outer enclosure. There are fewer military police officers out here, and public safety is much worse. Also, temporary inns hosting foreign visitors have been set up for the ascension ceremony. Plenty of those folks are coming and going around these parts right now. You can't blame Emperor Feilong for worrying."

"But we'll be okay with you here, right?" Angelina asked.

The knight nodded with a smile. "Indeed. But most importantly, you have the Golden Dragon's divine protection and clothes imbued with protective magic."

Angelina had promised to call the Golden Dragon if she ran into trouble. As such, Feilong had reluctantly given his permission. In any case, this was her first time leaving the palace during her third loop. More guards than usual had been posted around the outer enclosure due to the ascension ceremony.

A large cloud cast a shadow over the land. Compared to previous years, the weather was cooler and cloudier than usual despite it being the end of the seventh month.

The skirt of Angelina's vibrant red dress had been cut around the hem, forming six sharp pieces that resembled swords. The garment was woven from silkworm thread, and Feilong had cast magic on it. If anyone tried to touch Angelina with malicious intent, they would be paralyzed on the spot. No one would be able to kidnap her.

To easily ride Ryuho, the dress had a short skirt. Likewise, she wore short, lacy trousers underneath. To finish it off, she also wore an ornate coral hairpin.

"Oh, wow!" Angelina squealed. "These paper lanterns are incredible."

The knight nodded. "All of them have the Tianshi's Protective Seal and magical script to ward off sorcery inscribed on them."

Paper lanterns hung on either side of the outer enclosure's large road, swaying in the wind. Traveling merchants spread rush mats beneath the paper lanterns, where they sold diverse goods from various countries. There were food stalls as well.

Foreigners could only walk on this road with paper lanterns. To keep the capital safe during the ascension ceremony, Feilong had ordered the erection of this magical barrier. Unlike in the palace, he couldn't station numerous military police in the outer enclosure.

Witnessing the hustle and bustle of the lower city, excitement washed over Angelina. "I'm so happy! This is my first time seeing a festival!"

Those seemingly trivial words caused the knight's chest to ache. Until now, the small princess had never experienced anything resembling a celebration.

"Do you think I can find gifts for the Vinkas?" Angelina asked. "I'd love to pick some out before we go home and deliver them to the girls."

"Of course you'll find them!" the knight cried, thumping his fist against his chest. "I'm here to help!"

Angelina wanted to give one Vinka a serving of hujiao bing from the Blue Ocean Bar. In a past life, Angelina had worked there, and they had served the best hujiao bing she'd ever eaten. That said, she needed to confirm whether the Blue Ocean Bar existed this early in her life.

Unlike the palace, the outer enclosure's districts weren't neatly organized. The roads were full of twists and turns, but even so, Angelina felt right at home in the lower city. She'd lived here for a long time in a previous life.

As Angelina weaved through the lower city, the knight watched her curiously, but he didn't pry into why she seemed so at home here. The princess's tragic past was common knowledge, and he didn't want to reopen old wounds.

When Angelina arrived at the Blue Ocean Bar, she breathed a sigh of relief. The building and its location perfectly matched her memories from her previous life.

"Oh, it looks like they sell hujiao bing here!" she exclaimed.

Unfortunately, Angelina didn't see anyone resembling the proprietress from her previous life. Of course, Ming Ming hadn't been born yet, either.

After confirming the existence of the Blue Ocean Bar, Angelina went down another path in search of a certain home. In that same life, she'd eaten jujubes with Ming Ming there. Based on what Angelina had heard, jujubes grew abundantly in the Kalavinka's home village. Thus, she wanted to see if the homeowner would share his jujubes with her.

When Angelina arrived at the house, the jujube tree was still small. Only inconspicuous flowers grew from it, as jujubes weren't in season yet.

"Oh," Angelina said with a sigh of disappointment. "I should've expected this..."

Chronologically, she'd eaten jujubes from this tree over ten years in the future. Moreover, she'd always done so at the end of a scorching summer.

"What's wrong?" Ryuho asked.

"I heard that lots of jujubes grow in the Kalavinka's home village, so I wanted to pick some here," Angelina replied. "But it looks like we're too early."

"Jujubes aren't that unusual, right? We have lychees back at my place. Let's eat 'em together later."

Angelina cocked her head at this unfamiliar name. "Lychees?"

"It's a weird fruit. When you peel off the red rind, there's a slippery,

translucent flesh inside. I'm not too crazy about 'em, but Big Sis and her maidservants love 'em."

"Well then, let's stop by your manor on our way home."

During this conversation, the homeowner returned to the front of his house. Seeing a young girl and a tiger caused his eyes to widen in shock. "Wha?! Huh? A tiger? Is that the rumored divine guardian beast...? In that case, is she Princess Angelina?!" After stumbling back two steps, the panicked homeowner saluted with his hands over his chest. "Um, how did it go again? B-Blood of the imperial line, thou c-cometh..."

"Ish fine!" When Angelina attempted to stop his exaggerated greeting, she spoke too fast, causing her to slur. "There's no need for dat!"

"Wh-Why are you here?! Is there something wrong with my house?!"

Angelina smiled at the panicked homeowner. "Not at all. I was just looking at the jujube flowers."

The homeowner squinted at the tree. Jujube flowers weren't extravagant and produced a weak aroma. If he hadn't been looking for them, he wouldn't have noticed them.

"Do you like jujube flowers?" he asked.

"Well, um, I have fond memories of jujubes," Angelina replied.

The homeowner furrowed his brow. He never would've expected those words from such a young girl. A moment later, he lifted his head as if he'd suddenly remembered something. "Come to think of it, I do have candied jujubes... Um, Your Highness, would you like to take some with you?" He suddenly slumped his shoulders. "No, perhaps I shouldn't offer the princess such a lowly gift."

Angelina's eyes began to sparkle. "No, I'd love them!"

She'd received candied jujubes from this homeowner numerous times in her past life and had wonderful memories associated with them.

Before long, the homeowner returned with a crude jar filled with candied jujubes.

"Thank you so much!" Angelina cried.

When she bowed to him, the homeowner smiled. Afterward, the brown-haired knight offered him a generous tip.

“No, I couldn’t possibly take this!” the homeowner exclaimed. “These jujubes aren’t even for sale!”

“Um, in that case, you can have this instead...” Angelina said.

As she began to take off her necklace, the homeowner stopped her. “No, you’re being far too generous!”

“But I have to give you *something* in return.”

“Well then...” the homeowner began hesitantly. “If you truly wish to thank me, could you relay something to the people in power?”

“What is it?”

“Since yesterday, our wells have been freezing over.”

“Even though it’s summer?” Angelina asked.

“That’s right. Five wells have frozen over. Around these parts, we still rely on them to survive. Not having water is causing serious problems. And during such a hot summer, right in the middle of the ascension ceremony! P-Perhaps this is an inauspicious sign of some sort...?” The homeowner glanced at Angelina, worried that he might receive criticism for bringing up something inappropriate during the ascension ceremony.

Angelina smiled at him to alleviate his worries. “Frozen wells are big trouble, huh?”

*And I don’t want people casting ominous aspersions on Kyril’s ascension ceremony.*

With this thought in mind, Angelina looked at Ryuho. “Can your flames melt the ice?”

“I can melt the ice, but if we only use my power, I might burn down the well,” he replied. “Flames spread easily, so they’re difficult to use in tight spaces.”

Angelina thought she’d come up with a good idea. The flaws in her plan made her face fall. “Oh, I see...”

Her disappointment saddened Ryuho as well. He tried to come up with a good idea himself. “For now, let’s go check out the well! We might figure out something once we see it!”

Ryuho’s optimistic words lifted Angelina’s spirits. His cheerfulness was a constant source of motivation for her.

“Yeah, that’s a great idea!” Angelina cried. “You’re exactly right!” At this, she turned towards the homeowner. “Where’s the well, mishter? We wanna see what it looks like.”

The homeowner nodded fervently and explained the situation en route to their destination. “The first well to have frozen is over here. The day after the Solar Announcement Ceremony, three froze over. Today, two more froze over.”

The homeowner led them to the first site. Beyond a line of shabby houses, the road led to an open area with a well. The entire structure had frozen over, including the stonework around it.

The Andan inn had been set up near this well on the fringes of the outer enclosure. Accordingly, fiends were walking up and down the front road as well.

“As you head towards the palace from here, more wells have gradually frozen over,” the homeowner said. “So...” He then glanced at Angelina and the knight, struggling to complete his thought.

Angelina grinned at him, prompting him to continue. “So that’s why weird rumors are circulating?”

The homeowner merely gave an apologetic nod. When the knight glared at him, he trembled and averted his gaze.

In any case, a young girl riding an orange tiger had appeared in a rundown section of the lower city. Before long, locals began gathering to find out what was happening.

Angelina touched the edge of the well. Despite being summer, it was completely frozen. That didn’t even occur in winter, as the climate around the palace was warm. In other words, this was no ordinary ice.

“What do you think, Ryuho?” Angelina asked, turning her disconcerted gaze

towards him.

Ryuhō circled the well, sniffing its scent all the while. “If you help, we might be able to fix this!” he exclaimed before nuzzling Angelina’s cheek.

“How can I help?” she asked.

“By using your magic to ball up my flames into a sphere!”

“Really? That’s possible?”

“Yep! I’m about to breathe fire, so try catching it!”

When Ryuhō barked in Angelina’s direction, orange flames shot towards the tiny princess.

“Princess Angelina!” the knight bellowed.

The sudden blaze stunned him and the homeowner. The hot wind even singed the knight’s robes. Meanwhile, Angelina spread out her arms and caught the flames. Ryuhō’s magical fire wouldn’t harm her.

“Don’t worry. It’s not hot,” she assured the others. She merely felt a pleasant warmth as if she were holding Ryuhō.

“Try balling up the fire so it fits down the well,” the Flame Tiger instructed. “Should be easy enough for you.”

While looking down at Ryuhō’s flames, Angelina focused on her palms. Then, she applied pressure to the fire, squeezing it into a ball as if it were a mud pie. The flames hardened into a sphere. Though the exterior was orange, a pale blue light shone in the center.

“I did it!” Angelina cried happily.

When she showed Ryuhō the sphere, he responded with a satisfied chuff.

Under the gaze of onlookers, Angelina dropped the fiery sphere into the well. The sound of it thudding against ice echoed from the basin. Shortly after, hot steam rose from the well with a soft hiss. The ice had melted.

Next, she dropped the bucket down the well. It plopped against water. With Ryuhō pulling her, Angelina heaved the bucket out of the well, which caused both of them to fall onto their backsides. As a result, the bucket shot upwards

and knocked against the pulley. Filled to the brim with hot water, warm droplets of glittering liquid spilled from the container.

“It’s all hot water now...” Angelina noted.

Ryuhō gave her a big, wet lick on the cheek.







Cheers rose from the crowd.

“That was incredible! What just happened?!”

“Don’t you know? She’s Princess Angelina.”

“The Polaris Princess we’ve been hearing rumors about? She really does have divine power!”

“Princess Angelina melted the ice!”

The lower city residents cheered, but after another moment of rejoicing, their expressions began to cloud over.

“But what if the well freezes over again...?”

“That’s right. We still don’t know why this happened in the first place.”

*Of course, Angelina thought. Without knowing the actual cause, they won’t be able to relax. Still, I have no idea why this happened either.*

Angelina cocked her head. “So, why *did* the well freeze over?”

The crowd began whispering among themselves. “Could it have something to do with the ascension ceremony?” someone muttered.

Amidst the commotion, Ryuho sniffed the well again. “It’s gotta be magic, right? I can still smell it.”

Thanks to his sharp Flame Tiger nose, he could pick up the lingering scent of magic undetectable by normal humans.

“Magic?” Angelina repeated. “In that case, why don’t we protect the well with an amulet?”

“Yeah, let’s give it a shot. You can make one, right?” he asked.

Angelina nodded. “Sure can. Tear off this part of my dress, Ryuho!”

Angelina pulled on the hem of her skirt. On top of being made from lavish materials, her dress was woven from silkworm thread tinged with magic. Furthermore, Feilong had cast his protective magic on this specially made garment. A piece of it would serve as a more effective amulet than a normal cloth. From the waist down, the dress was cut into six sharp pieces that

resembled swords. Cutting off one of these pieces wouldn't impede her since she had an underskirt and frilly trousers underneath.

"What are you doing, Princess?!" the knight called out.

When he tried to stop Ryuho, the Flame Tiger ignored him, biting off a piece of the skirt's hem.

"I'm making an amulet," Angelina replied.

"Even so, there's no need to tear your dress, Princess."

"But this is a serious problem for everybody, right? Protecting everybody is more important than keeping my dress clean, y'know?"

When Angelina grinned at him, the knight furrowed his brow, troubled. "Could someone lend us black ink?" he called out to the crowd.

Before long, someone from a nearby house brought out ink and a brush. Angelina used it to write a magic dispersal spell on the scrap of cloth from her skirt. The black ink stood out against the red fabric. Once finished, Angelina fastened the amulet to one of the well's pillars. After turning her back on the well, she called out to the crowd, "Everything should be okay now!"

The sun appeared from a rift in the clouds, illuminating her light pink hair and causing it to sparkle radiantly. As a halo glowed around her head, water dripping from the bucket gleamed with a prismatic light.

All at once, the crowd cheered again.

"Polaris Princess!"

"Princess Angelina!"

For some reason, Ryuho donned a smug expression. He placed Angelina on his back and said, "Do you hear that, Lina? They're calling you Polaris Princess."

Angelina buried her face in his back. "Cut it out, Ryuho. You're embarrassing me."

At the same time, the knight took a deep breath and bellowed, "This is an auspicious omen!"

In response to his resounding voice, everyone turned their attention to

Angelina and Ryuho. “Th-That’s enough, Mishter Knight...” she mumbled, her face turning bright red.

“Princess Angelina melted the iced over well by her own hand,” the knight continued. “This is an auspicious omen! Nothing will stand in the way of Prince Kyril’s ascension ceremony!”

The knight’s words caused the audience to stir. “Yes, perhaps this *is* a good omen,” they muttered among themselves.

“See that, Lina?” Ryuho asked. “If you act like the Polaris Princess, we can quash all these weird rumors about Kyril.”

Angelina nodded. *If I put my heart and soul into this, I can make sure no one speaks ill of him!*

Holding her head high, Angelina donned her most relaxed smile and nodded to the crowd. Again, cheers erupted from the audience, and she waved her small hand at them.

“Polaris Princess!” someone shouted. “There are other frozen wells! Please melt them for us!”

Angelina couldn’t ignore the plight of the townspeople. She needed to melt all the wells for Kyril’s sake, too.

“Then lesh go to the next one,” she said.

*Gah! Why do I always slur at the most inopportune times?!*

After trying and failing to speak confidently, Angelina’s face turned red. Even so, the townspeople merely grinned, finding her every action adorable.

And so, Angelina rode Ryuho to each well and melted the ice. Upon thawing the fifth one, she asked, “Is this all of them?”

Though three wells had frozen yesterday, only two had today. Angelina wondered if they were missing a third one.

“That’s all of them,” someone replied. “We’re forever in your debt.”

The townspeople all thanked Angelina with relieved expressions. Afterward, she headed back to the palace from the last well she’d thawed.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if another well is frozen over...” she said to Ryuho.

Starting from the first well, the freezing phenomenon had proceeded northwards towards the palace. There being another frozen well on the way home seemed all too likely.

Ryuho sniffed the summer wind. The scents of summer grass and earth scorched by the sun prickled his nostrils. At the same time, the faint scent of a crisp winter morning mingled with the other aromas.

“...I think you’re right,” Ryuho said. “I smell magic in the air.”

“Really?”

“Yep, it’s this way!”

With Angelina on his back, Ryuho raced towards their next destination, the knight hurrying after them. Soon, they arrived at the well producing the magical scent. A chill hung in the air. No matter how cloudy the sky might have been, it was still summer. The uncanniness of the situation caused Angelina to shiver.

A single child was leaning against the half-frozen well. Though she appeared to be the same age as Ryuho in human form, her clothes were those of a young girl. She wore a long, dayflower-colored skirt over her white robes. An azalea-colored belt sash tied the ensemble together. Since Jinlongian children didn’t typically wear outfits like that, she must have belonged to one of the delegations.

The girl’s navy hair had been tied into two tails in the back, yet at the same time, her bangs hid her face. Judging from her heavy breathing, she must have been feeling unwell.

“Are you okay?” Angelina asked while rushing over to her side.

In response, the navy-haired girl lifted her head with an anguished expression and forced herself to nod. “I’m... okay...”

Contrary to her words, she struggled to move as if frozen stiff. Her face had drained of color, and her deep blue eyes were unfocused. Lastly, her lips were pale and dry.

“This kid doesn’t seem the least bit okay,” Ryuho muttered. “Why lie?”

Angelina nodded while on the verge of tears. She could guess the reason behind the lie.

*I might be able to tough this out, and I don't want to cause trouble for anyone. It's embarrassing for people to see me suffering.*

Such thoughts could spiral inside one's head, and in the end, they would simply answer, "I'm okay."

Angelina knelt before the girl and smiled at her. "It's okay now. Show me your foot." She then touched the girl's leg over her robes. The limb felt as cold as ice, causing Angelina's eyes to widen. "I need to warm you up! Ryuho, could you bark into my hands?"

"You want me to heat them up?" he asked.

"Exactly!"

When Angelina held out her hands, Ryuho followed her instructions and barked at them. His flames warmed her palms, and she placed them on the girl's shins and rubbed her legs vigorously. The protective seal on Angelina's palm glowed, and Ryuho's warmth gently seeped into the girl's skin. Nevertheless, her legs were so frozen that no small amount of rubbing would warm them up. Thus, Angelina continued borrowing Ryuho's heat to warm up her legs. Finally, the cold dissipated, and her knees began to relax.

"Cold, cold, go away, or Ryuho will eat you today!" Angelina chanted. She pretended to throw the child's coldness at Ryuho, who gobbled it up.

Smiling in relief, the girl finally stretched out her legs. "Thank you so much...!" she cried out in a nasal voice.

Angelina held out a bamboo canteen to the girl. "Take a drink of water from this. Oh, and I'm Angelina, by the way."

The girl regarded Angelina uneasily.

"The person before you is Polaris Princess Angelina, who hears the voice of the gods," the knight explained in a kind voice. "This water is safe. You may drink it without fear."

Hesitantly, the girl took the canteen and pressed it to her lips. Bewildered by

Angelina, she gulped down the water. After draining the canteen, she handed it back without a word, her bangs still covering her face.

“Are you okay now?” Angelina asked.

The girl nodded. Color had returned to her cheeks. This time, she truly seemed okay.

“What happened here?” Angelina asked.

The girl hung her head.

“Are your mommy and daddy nearby?” Angelina pressed.

The girl shook her head.

“What’s your name?”

“...Hisame.”

“How cute!”

The navy-haired girl smiled bashfully.

“You’re not from the lower city, are you?” Angelina asked, holding out her hand to Hisame. “Are you lost? Foreigners aren’t allowed to leave the paper lanterns. Did you not know that?”

When Hisame shook her head feebly, a suspicious Ryuho sniffed her. The large tiger startled Hisame; she let out a shrill gasp.

“This kid smells just like the magic around the wells!” Ryuho exclaimed.

“Wait, are you the one who froze the wells?” Angelina asked.

Hisame cradled her head and shrunk into herself. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry! It wasn’t on purpose!”

Angelina felt a heavy pressure on her chest. Hisame’s reaction reminded Angelina of herself from her past lives.

“It’s okay. I’m not angry,” Angelina said. Words of reassurance that she’d learned from Kyril naturally spilled from her lips. “But can you tell me why things turned out like this?”

“I’m sorry...” Hisame apologized again. “I was just looking for something.”



“What did you lose?”

“An amulet...”

“Did you drop it down a well?”

Hisame shook her head fervently, seeming close to tears. “I have no idea. My nasty older brother said that he threw it in the water. I’ve been searching for it since yesterday. When I accidentally froze the wells, I couldn’t thaw them, but it wasn’t on purpose.” As she spoke, icy teardrops spilled from her eyes. “Without my amulet, I can’t suppress my magic. I need it to enter the palace, but my brother said I’m too old to rely on it...”

As icy teardrops streamed down Hisame’s face, her body began to freeze again. Her magic was running out of control. The knight tensed.

“I don’t want to go to the palace, but my brother is forcing me to accompany him,” Hisame continued. “Without my amulet, I’ll be nothing but a nuisance. I’ll ruin everything!” As Hisame wailed, her tears transformed into icicles. “When I’m inside the paper lanterns, I can’t use my magic nearly as well as usual. I just wanted to look for my amulet, but I wound up freezing the wells. My chest started feeling tighter and tighter, and my legs froze stiff. I couldn’t even move them...”

“I see,” Angelina replied. “That must’ve been scary.” When she spoke, her breath froze in the air, transforming into sparkling, diamond-like dust. “Your amulet wasn’t here either?”

Hisame nodded. “At this rate, I’ll ruin everything in the palace...”

“Why don’t we look for it together?” Angelina suggested, smiling and patting Hisame’s head. “Ryuhō can melt the ice in the wells, so there’s no need to cry anymore, okay?”

When Angelina looked at Ryuhō, he donned a smug expression and barked. Just like before, they created a fiery sphere and dropped it down the well. After confirming that the ice had melted, Angelina tore off the last piece of her skirt. She then wrote a spell on the cloth and fastened it to the well.

Hisame regarded the pair as if she were staring at the sun. Despite being the smaller of the two girls, Angelina had mastery over her magic. She could even

manipulate a Flame Tiger's fire. Hisame both admired Angelina and felt pathetic.

"Mishter Dragon!" Angelina called out while looking down the thawed well. "Can you hear me?"

As Angelina's shrill cries echoed inside the well, a tremor rumbled through the basin. Suddenly, a geyser spouted from the well, and the Golden Dragon appeared from within it.

"What's wrong, Angelina?" he asked.

Startled, Hisame fell on her backside. Even the knight's eyes widened in surprise.

"You know a lot about the palace's rivers and wells, right?" Angelina asked.

"Indeed," the dragon replied.

"My new friend dropped an amulet that suppresses magic. Do you know anything about it?"

"Yes, I do," the dragon confirmed in a tone of displeasure. "Some rascalion discarded a bracelet with a red stone in the waterway surrounding the Heavenly Sovereign Mausoleum."

"...Th-That's it!" Hisame cried, her head shooting up. However, she immediately hung her head again, a look of despair on her face. "But if it's in the palace..."

"Mishter Dragon," Angelina said. "Could you take me and Hisame to where the bracelet is?"

In response, the Golden Dragon presented his back to her. "By all means."

Ryuhō placed Angelina on his back and then climbed onto the dragon.

"Child, climb atop my back as well," the dragon addressed Hisame. "Sir Knight, return to the palace and explain the situation."

Hisame hesitated, the dragon's words causing her to tremble. Of course, she'd never ridden a dragon. The prospect was terrifying. As a rather timid person, even talking to strangers scared her. In fact, this was her first time

walking around town alone. If her amulet hadn't been stolen, she probably would have spent her whole life living in the shadow of her brothers.

Nevertheless, Hisame touched the dragon, her whole body quivering. Though she'd expected him to be damp, his scales were smooth and dry. When Hisame flinched back, the dragon laughed good-naturedly. Startled, she took a step backward.

Hoping to help, Angelina climbed down from the dragon's back and took Hisame's hand. As this small but strong hand pulled her forward, Hisame held her head high, courage welling up within her.

"Why don't you sit behind Ryuho?" Angelina suggested.

Hisame did as instructed, and Angelina sat at the very back. She wrapped her arms around both Hisame's trembling body and Ryuho.

"Hey, Lina!" Ryuho barked discontentedly.

Startled, Hisame shrank into herself.

"Riding a dragon for the first time must be scary," Angelina said. "Don't worry though. With me and Ryuho here, you won't fall. The first time I rode Mishter Dragon, I wasn't scared at all, 'cause I had Ryuho with me!"

Ryuho huffed through his nose to hide his embarrassment. "Okay, I guess this kid can hold onto me..."

Hisame hugged Ryuho's back. His fur was soft and comfortable. Additionally, she felt Angelina's small, warm body on her own back. Though Hisame's body had been frozen, pleasant warmth now radiated from the bottom of her heart.

"If being in the sky scares you, bury your face in Ryuho's back!" Angelina cried. "You'll be just fine with him to hold onto!"

Hisame followed Angelina's instructions, burying her face in Ryuho's back. "So warm..."

While sandwiched between Angelina and Ryuho, something other than mere warmth enveloped Hisame's entire soul. Pleasant heat seeped into her body, slowly thawing her frozen heart.

"Ryuho's warm, isn't he?" Angelina asked.

Her voice vibrated against Hisame's back. That tickled somewhat, making Hisame feel strange.

"Well then, let's be on our way," the Golden Dragon said.

He took to the skies with terrifying momentum. Hisame squeezed her eyes shut and clung to Ryuho's back. All the while, the violent wind whipped her hair back and forth.

*This is so terrifying!* she screamed internally, clinging to Ryuho with all her might. *Why is this happening to me? It's all my brother's fault.*

Hisame had been born with ice magic. Even so, she'd been a small and timid child. Unlike her strong older brothers, she disliked conflict and couldn't handle loud noises. What's more, the smallest of triggers would cause her ice magic to run wild. As such, Hisame's worried parents had given her a bracelet with a magical red stone to suppress her magic.

Apart from Hisame, everyone in her family was large, cheerful, and energetic. As a more withdrawn person, Hisame was the opposite of her family. She could never find a place to relax in her always boisterous household. Eventually, her brothers began to worry about her.

"You're already nine!" her brothers would shout. "You'll never become a worthy adult like this!"

In Hisame's country, both boys and girls had coming-of-age ceremonies on their ninth birthdays. When a child's body began maturing around this age, he or she would be accepted as an adult. During this period, they would also change from wearing children's robes to adult robes.

Despite being nine, Hisame still hadn't undergone her coming-of-age ceremony. Her inability to control her magic was the primary reason for the delay. At the same time, she didn't want to undergo the ceremony. In fact, she'd used her inability to control her magic as an excuse to avoid the obligation. In the end, Hisame's family had grown impatient with her, as she'd never made an earnest attempt to control her magic.

"You're still Andan royalty, whatever else you may be," her brothers would say. "Your inability to control your magic is a shame upon our family. Lift your

head and act with confidence. Rather than worrying all the time, be more optimistic. Let determination burn within your chest. Everything depends on how you look at it!”

And so, Hisame’s brothers would take her to the martial arts and drum classrooms as a form of “instruction.” Each time, she would run away due to fear. No matter how often Hisame’s brothers told her to fix her pessimistic outlook, she couldn’t change so easily. When no one gave her specific instructions for how to do so, their words rang hollow.

Hisame had been brought to Jinlong as part of her “instructions in becoming an adult.” Seeing foreign countries and various other aspects of the world might help her mature, her family thought. On the other hand, she considered this entire ordeal an annoyance. She wanted to live a quiet life in her room, as she’d always done.

As she’d anticipated, the journey had been agonizing. Unfamiliar places, unfamiliar foods, and hitherto unseen sights merely inspired fear in Hisame. After arriving at the Jinlongian inn, her relief lasted only a moment, as her oldest brother had immediately thrown away her bracelet.

“You’ll never become an adult if you keep relying on that amulet,” he’d said, his indifferent laugh seemingly unmalicious. “This was the perfect opportunity to get rid of it.”

Despite being nine, Hisame couldn’t undergo her coming-of-age ceremony if she couldn’t control her magic. The time had come for her to outgrow her amulet.

*Even so, he shouldn’t have thrown it away without my consent!* Hisame thought, clinging to Ryuho’s back. *That’s just cruel!*

A wave of cold air whooshed up from her. A chill ran down Ryuho’s spine, causing him to stiffen in alarm.

“Are you scared, Hisame?” Angelina asked from behind.

Hisame gasped.

“If you’re not scared, open your eyes!” Angelina cried. She wanted to teach Hisame what the Golden Dragon had taught her. “The world is so bright!”

Emboldened, Hisame lifted her head and slowly opened her eyelids. As the cold wind stung her eyes, the Golden Dragon's scales sparkled in the sunlight.

The well-organized and beautifully maintained palace unfolded below them. The sight couldn't have been more different from the outer enclosure—the only place Hisame had explored. A wide road ran straight down the center with waterways flowing alongside it. Like the dragon's scales, the water's surface sparkled in the summer sunlight.

Hisame spotted a magnificent building with black roof tiles, red walls, and gold ornamentations. She also spotted a nine-tiered tower, which she'd never seen before. Respectively, these were the North Star Palace and the Celestial Axe Tower.

Seeing what her brother had described, Hisame cried out in delight. "Wow...!"

"Only people who have ridden on Mishter Dragon's back have seen this view," Angelina said. "You're special, Hisame!"

"I'm special...?" Hisame mumbled, savoring the words.

"Prepare for landing!" the dragon bellowed, beginning his rapid descent.

As gravity pressed down on her, Hisame's stomach dropped. When Angelina squealed in delight, Hisame echoed her without thinking.

The Golden Dragon landed in the waterway surrounding the Heavenly Sovereign Mausoleum. Water sprayed all around him, and a small rainbow appeared in the air. As he performed a turn in the water, townsfolk noticed Angelina's group on his back and pointed at them. Overcome with fear, Hisame squeezed her eyes shut.

"It should be somewhere around here," the dragon said.

After Angelina had jumped into the water, small fish swam between her legs. Since Ryuho hated water, he remained on the Golden Dragon's back.

"Do you see your amulet, Hisame?" Angelina called to her from the water.

Hisame cracked her eyes open and observed the waterway. Shadows of tiny fish swam through the clear water, and small, white flowers bloomed on the surface. Beautiful stones and coins were in the waterway from people making

wishes.

Slowly, Hisame descended from the Golden Dragon's back. The water felt lukewarm, either due to her amulet or the summer sun.

*The hem of my robe is getting wet, and being in the water with these fish is gross.* She suddenly gasped. *Even so, Angelina got into the water for my sake without hesitation.*

"Think you can find it?" Angelina asked, sticking her hand into the waterweeds. She had no qualms about dirtying her lavish dress.

Hisame stuck her hand into the water as well. When she thought about being alongside Angelina, the waterway no longer felt repulsive.

"Found it!" Hisame cried out.

After finding her bracelet, she raced over to Angelina.

"That's great!" Angelina cheered.

"Yeah, but the stone is missing..."

The red stone in the center of the bracelet had disappeared. That might have been due to the cleansing power imbued within the mausoleum's water. Unfortunately, the stone itself had suppressed Hisame's ice magic. The bracelet had lost its power as an amulet.

Angelina casually handed Hisame her ornate, coral hairpin. "Then I'll give you this."

Unaware of the missing stone's magical properties, she assumed any gem of the same color would work as a replacement. Regardless, Hisame accepted the hairpin with a grateful smile. Though not particularly magical, it radiated pleasant warmth. Hisame's chest swelled with joy despite the hairpin being useless as an amulet.

"Thank you," Hisame said.

She wouldn't reveal anything about the amulet having lost its power. After everything Angelina had done, Hisame didn't want to disappoint her.

*And anyway, it's about time I outgrew this amulet,* Hisame thought. *I'll use*

*this opportunity to work on controlling my magic by myself.*

Hisame's chest burned with conviction. Previously, everyone had hounded her about learning to control her magic. Though she'd always fled from this responsibility, she resolved to give it her all.

"Well then, I'll take you back to your lodgings," the Golden Dragon said, urging the girls to mount his back again.

"You sit behind me this time, Lina!" Ryuho barked. "I don't want this wet kid pressing up against me anymore!"

Angelina smiled wryly. "Do you mind sitting behind me this time, Hisame?"

"Not at all!" she responded.

When Angelina sat down behind Ryuho, he barked in her direction. A warm flame enveloped her, instantly drying her dress. "Thanks, Ryuho," Angelina said, hugging him and rubbing him under the chin.

While glancing at the purring Ryuho from the corner of her eye, Hisame sat down behind Angelina. As she did so, the Golden Dragon floated up into the air. Unlike the flight here, Hisame held onto Angelina, who was sitting between her and Ryuho. Angelina's buoyant, pink hair tickled Hisame's face.

*This princess is so much more courageous than me,* Hisame thought. *And yet, she's so small. How is she so strong?*

Unease stirred in Hisame's chest, and she felt pathetic.

Before long, the Golden Dragon brought them back to the well where Angelina had met Hisame. He set the children on the ground.

"Thank goodness we found your amulet!" Angelina cried, a smile on her face. "Think you'll be able to visit the palace now?"

Hisame nodded firmly. *Everything will be okay now,* she thought. *My bracelet might have lost its magical power, but this coral hairpin is special.*

"...Um, Polaris Princess!" Hisame cried out.

"You can call me Angelina. We're friends, right?"

When Angelina smiled again, Hisame flushed. "...Okay," she said with a nod.



“H-How can I be like you, Angelina? I can’t do anything by myself, and I wasn’t the slightest bit helpful.”

“I can’t do anything by myself either, y’know? I’m the same as you.”

Hisame shook her head fervently. “That’s not true at all! You thawed the well and found my amulet!”

“I thawed the well thanks to Ryuho, and we found the amulet with Mishter Dragon’s help. Like I said—I can’t do anything by myself. Same as you, Hisame.”

“...But I caused so much trouble by freezing the wells. If I had fire magic like Ryuho instead of ice magic, I could have been useful.”

“Yeah. The frozen wells *were* quite a pickle...”

When Angelina smiled for a third time, Hisame’s shoulders slumped.

“But since it’s still summer, having plenty of ice will make people happy!” Angelina exclaimed.

“You think so?”

“Yep. Whether you have flame or ice magic, what’s important is how you use it, don’tcha think?”

“How I use it...?” Hisame repeated.

“Exactly. You struggled to use magic inside the paper lanterns, right? Even so, you searched for the amulet with all your heart, despite being in an unfamiliar place. I think that’s amazing!”

Tears welled in Hisame’s eyes. She’d been desperate to find her amulet in this unfamiliar land, unable to ask her brothers for help. Moreover, she’d felt guilty for having frozen the wells unintentionally. *If I’m found out, everyone will be angry*, she’d feared. Thus, she’d raced from well to well searching for the amulet. Without it, she’d expected something even more terrible to occur.

Yet, in the end, she’d failed to find the amulet, even freezing the wells in the process. To make matters worse, she’d gotten lost in an unfamiliar place while the summer sun drained her strength. As her energy depleted, her ice magic ran wild in inverse proportion. No matter what she’d done, her actions had backfired. Nothing had gone according to plan. The more she’d acted, the more

she'd caused trouble for everyone around her.

*Maybe I should just die,* she'd thought.

Ultimately, she'd been too scared to die. At the same time, she hadn't been able to call for help either. In the midst of her suffering, Angelina had appeared. Hisame had expected to be scolded or arrested. In the worst-case scenario, she'd expected to be executed for her crimes. However, reality had proven far different. Angelina had lent her a helping hand.

Warm tears fell down Hisame's cheeks. This time, they didn't freeze.

"I'm amazed at how hard you tried all by yourself," Angelina said. "I never could've done that!"

As Hisame continued blubbering, Angelina tried to reach up to pat her on the head. When she couldn't stretch high enough, Ryuho placed her on his back.

"You can reach now, right?" the Flame Tiger asked, his tone disgruntled.

Angelina grinned at him. "Thanks, Ryuho."

"It's no big deal!"

And so, Angelina patted Hisame's head from atop Ryuho's back. Warmth spread from the princess's hand, and Hisame's heart nearly burst with joy.

*I grew scared of failure because my brothers always criticize me when I make mistakes,* Hisame thought. *Next time, I'll try a little harder. There are things even I'm capable of, after all.*

"I'll start practicing!" Hisame declared in the loudest voice she'd ever used. "I'll train hard enough to enter the palace without an amulet!"

"Yeah, I'm rooting for you!" Angelina cried.

Hearing this cheer of support, courage welled up inside Hisame.

*How strange,* she thought with a smile. *It's always so painful when my brothers wish me luck.*

"Thank you, Angelina," Hisame said.

Her relief coaxed a smile from Angelina as well. "All right then, I'll see you later!"

Angelina and Ryuho climbed on the dragon's back again. When the dragon took flight, Hisame looked up at the sky and enthusiastically waved goodbye for the first time in her life. "It really is bright..." she muttered without much thought.

Hisame tightened her grip around the coral hairpin. *So long as I have this, I should be fine.*

The Golden Dragon soared straight upwards through an azure sky crowded with dense, towering clouds. Angelina's flowing, light pink hair was the same color as the coral in Hisame's hand. As she placed the hairpin in her hair, it looked as if Angelina was dancing across the deep blue sky.

## Chapter 5: Angelina and the Banquet Ceremony

**AFTER** thawing the frozen wells, Polaris Princess Angelina appeared at the Heavenly Sovereign Mausoleum with the Golden Dragon. That dispelled the inauspicious rumors about Kyril's ascension ceremony. Per Angelina's advice, a magic-dispersing amulet was placed on every well in the outer enclosure. This gracious act was carried out in the name of the ascension ceremony.

A celebratory mood was mounting within and without the palace. Yesterday, the Crown Prince Proclamation Ceremony had ended without incident. Today, the Banquet Ceremony would begin.

For the next ten days, Jinlongian citizens would enjoy a celebration, and guests would enjoy a feast. During this, the palace and the outer enclosure would be granted consecutive holidays.

The Kalavinka's tributary dance would mark the beginning of the Banquet Ceremony. Presently, the royal family was preparing to view the dance from the balcony of the Celestial Axe Tower. Of course, Ryuho lay by Angelina's side in his feline form.

From atop the balcony, Angelina could see the sheer number of people gathered for the dance. Delegations from various countries sat in the seats prepared for them. The Andan delegation wore conical hats with cloth drapes to hide their faces. Even at a distance, their group stood out in an intimidating fashion. A single child wearing girl's robes was part of their delegation.

*So even fiends have children,* Angelina realized. For some reason, this obvious fact had never occurred to her.

"Wow, there are so many people here," Angelina said in amazement.

Kyril scanned the crowd with a somewhat tense expression. "You're right."

Everyone gathered to celebrate his ascension ceremony. While this made him happy, the sight also inspired a sense of responsibility.

When the crowd waved at them, Angelina and Kyril waved back. On the other hand, Feilong gazed down at the palace impassively.

“Lady Kalavinka!” the crowd cheered.

Everyone pointed to the stage on a pond in front of the tower. Amidst the clamor, servants carried the Kalavinka’s palanquin onto it. Atop her white robe, she wore another robe of blue silk with scattered embroideries of small birds. Wings decorated both sides of her head, and a large bird rested on her shoulder.

Four Vinkas followed behind the palanquin, clapping small hand cymbals together. Paper feathers and tail feathers were attached to their garments.

“Their clothes are imitating a Garuda,” Kyril explained.

Angelina observed the Vinkas with sparkling eyes. “So cute.”

A handful of musicians with drums and flutes walked onto the stage. At the same time, the Kalavinka’s servants lowered her palanquin, which allowed her to take the stage as well. The echoing of a gong filled the air. Afterward, the sound of flutes drifted from the stage, and the Vinkas struck their cymbals together. At last, the Kalavinka began her graceful dance, four other Vinkas accompanying her.

The crowd cried out in anticipation. “The Jialingpinqie Dance is about to start!”

The beautiful Jialingpinqie Dance recreated the joy of the heavens on Earth. The Kalavinka danced at the center of the stage, waving a fan made from a Garuda’s tail feathers.

The Vinkas circled the four corners of the stage while stomping their feet. The sprightly dance reminded Angelina of a bird flapping its wings. As vibrant feathers spun in a dizzying fashion, blue garments splashed the stage in color. Gold bracelets gleamed in the sunlight, echoing rhythmically as they struck together.

The Garuda on the Kalavinka’s shoulder spread its wings to their full extent. It appeared as though flames had risen from the girl’s back. In response, the crowd stirred again.

“The holy Garuda is flapping its wings!”

The Kalavinka donned an archaic smile similar to a deific idol. Then, she took a deep breath, and her singing voice filled the air. All at once, a hush fell over the previously murmuring crowd. Even the birds and cicadas ceased chirping as if time had stood still. Everyone listened with their full attention so as not to miss a single note—adults and children, men and women, nobles and commoners, important visitors from vassal states, and even the Andan prince.

The Vinkas’ music echoed throughout the otherwise silent area. All the while, the shadows of clouds rolled across the gently flowing water.

*Amazing*, Angelina thought, goosebumps erupting over her entire body. *The Kalavinka’s singing is amazing!*

Because the song used ancient vocabulary, children and foreign delegates probably couldn’t understand the lyrics. Nevertheless, it possessed an attractive force.

The holy Garuda sang as well. Its high-pitched, clear voice was reminiscent of a transverse flute. Angelina could imagine its serene melody piercing the sky and reaching the heavens. The harmony woven by the Garuda and the Vinkas was practically angelic. When Angelina shivered, pleasant goosebumps crawled from the tips of her toes to the top of her head.

The Vinkas sang with girlish, extremely delicate voices. Even so, their volume could rival an instrumental performance. The music overflowing from their small, juvenile bodies gave rise to longing and homesickness.

Angelina recalled the painful loops she’d repeatedly endured. She’d wanted familial love and someone to notice her. However, she gave up when they proved unobtainable. She’d hidden her expressions to prevent others from hating her. Later, she’d even suppressed her emotions, thinking she could find peace if she felt nothing. The very act of living had felt sinful, and yet, she’d been unable to choose death. Ultimately, even the tiny fragments of happiness she’d seized in her bleak existence were taken from her.

After three loops, she was currently living her fourth life. She had a father, an older brother, and even Ryuho. No one hated her, regardless of whether she got angry or cried. She even received plenty of hugs.

*Is it okay for me to be this happy?* Angelina wondered.

The final lyrics faded into the sky, and for a moment, silence fell over the area. One beat later, the crowd exploded into astonished cheers and applause. With that, the Kalavinka descended from the stage.

Angelina found herself speechless. She was overwhelmed. Ryuho gave her a big, wet lick on the cheek. Startled, Angelina looked down at him.

“Why are you crying?” he asked. “Are you sad?”

“What?” This question surprised Angelina, for she hadn’t realized she was crying. “No, I’m not sad. I’m happy...” Angelina tried to express herself but was at a loss for words.

*I’m not sad or in pain, but I’m crying...*

The realization shook Angelina. Until now, she hadn’t known such a thing was possible. Nevertheless, tears spilled down her soft, peachy cheeks, each drop glittering like a rainbow. Though her chest ached, it wasn’t painful.

When Angelina quickly tried to wipe away her tears, Ryuho licked her cheek again. “I don’t know why you’re crying, but I’ll lick your tears for you. So, blubber as much as you want.”

Angelina squeezed Ryuho’s neck in her arms. As tears continued to spill from her eyes, his fur absorbed them for her.

“Lina.”

Angelina lifted her head at the cold voice. Emperor Feilong was looking down on Ryuho with a disgruntled expression.

Angelina jumped. “F-Fodder...” she mumbled.

*Is he going to scold me for playing with Ryuho during an important ceremony?*

“Lina, come sit on Fodder’s lap,” Feilong instructed, his face a mask of impassivity.

“...Are you sure?” Angelina asked. “We’re in the middle of a ceremony, y’know? Everybody’s watching.”

“I don’t mind,” Feilong answered sourly, scooping up Angelina.

“Hey, that’s not fair!” Ryuho shouted. “I was just licking her!”

His cries didn’t reach Feilong due to his magic ribbon.

Though Ryuho kept barking to express his discontent, Feilong ignored him, silently embracing Angelina. He patted her back with an unpracticed hand to soothe her. Angelina’s sudden tears worried him. Even so, he didn’t know how to console her or what questions to ask. He’d never cried over a song, after all.

*This is what I’ve wanted since my first life,* Angelina thought, smiling slightly at Feilong’s awkwardness. *My dad is finally embracing me.*

“...Thanks, Fodder,” Angelina mumbled.

Overcome with surprise, Feilong held his breath. With a silent nod, a faint blush crept up his cheeks.

When the crowd saw Feilong embracing the princess during the ceremony, everyone sighed in relief. His moniker of *the cruel emperor* had already become a thing of the past. This marked the end of his cold-hearted, merciless reign.

Unexpected cheers rose from the crowd. “Long live Emperor Feilong! Long live Crown Prince Kyril! Long live Princess Angelina!”

The crowd’s palms spread out like flowers. Their joy resembled orange blossoms sprouting in profusion. As these flowers bathed in the scorching sunlight, they transformed into a massive, undulating wave.

Feilong gaped. He hadn’t ordered these cheers. He’d never witnessed spontaneous cries of this sort before. The scene touched Kyril’s heart as well. Feeling the crowd’s joy and expectation, he realized the weight of his responsibility. Still inside Feilong’s arms, Angelina responded to the cheers by waving. In return, even louder cries echoed across the skies of the Jinlong Empire.



**THAT** evening, a banquet took place inside the Canopy. Though the chief lady-in-waiting had taken care of the preparations, the host was Angelina—the true head of the inner court. Yet, due to her young age, she would have to leave early following introductions.



During the banquet, royal visitors from foreign nations would be treated to lavish food, which included Jinlongian delicacies. Meanwhile, civil officials would answer questions about the ceremony.

Feilong and Kyril were exchanging greetings with foreign royalty. At the same time, Angelina rode Ryuho around the venue to introduce herself. Seeing them march to and fro warmed everyone's hearts. Though a tiger with orange fur was a rare sight, he was even wearing a magnificent ribbon. Likewise, the way he demurely strode around the room was adorable. Perhaps he was proud to be carrying the young princess. Whenever Angelina appeared to introduce herself, the overjoyed guests regarded her with fond smiles.

After finishing her introductions, Angelina returned to her room. "I'm heading back now, Fodder."

In response, Feilong picked her up and whispered into her ear. "You're tired, aren't you? Get plenty of rest."

"That tickles, Fodder."

As Angelina giggled with delight, Feilong favored her with a warm expression. The eyes of foreign royals widened in surprise, unable to believe what they were seeing. They'd always considered Feilong to be a cruel and savage emperor.

"I'm trusting her with you, Ryuho," Feilong said, placing her on the tiger's back.

Ryuho huffed through his nose. "I don't need your permission to protect Lina!"

With Angelina on his back, Ryuho marched out of the banquet hall. All the while, the guests watched them leave.



"**GOOD** work today, Ryuho," Angelina said.

She rubbed his chest. A deep purr rumbled in his throat, and he nuzzled Angelina.

"You did great today, too, Lina!" Ryuho exclaimed telepathically, licking her

cheek. “You’re amazing!”

Angelina swelled with happiness. Though she’d merely done her duty, Ryuho had called her amazing. Being praised by him filled her with relief. At the same time, a sense of accomplishment gradually grew within her.

Thus, Angelina and Ryuho skipped down the hall side by side. They basked in their newfound freedom, for the overly solemn ceremonies and interactions with adults had ended for the day. Before long, however, a shadow fell over their heads, and the pair came to a halt. A stuffy, lukewarm presence had appeared behind them.

Ryuho tensed, his ears pinning back. He enfolded Angelina in his large body to protect her. Nervously, Angelina turned around to find the Andan prince standing before her. On top of his burly frame, he was tall enough that she had to look up at him, and a cloth covered his face. Angelina trembled, lost for words.

“Will you not introduce yourself to me?!” the Andan prince bellowed, flipping up his face covering. He struck a daunting pose while looking down at Angelina. As he smirked, his fangs and horn glinted in the light.

Angelina froze from fright, unable to think. She’d died at the hands of Andan soldiers in her previous lives.

“So afraid that you can’t even speak, eh?!” the prince continued bellowing, laughing exuberantly all the while. “You might be Feilong’s daughter, but you’re nothing special! Is this really the princess of Jinlong? How pathetic!”

“Shuddup!” Ryuho barked. “You’re pissing me off!”

Flames spewed from his mouth. Even so, his anger remained a mere roar, not transforming into language. Only Angelina could understand the full meaning.

The Andan prince turned his attention to Ryuho. He was spoiling for a fight, judging by the gleam in his eyes. “Impressive. You’re not a normal tiger, are you?!”

As the Andan prince extended a hand toward Angelina, Ryuho spewed flames to ward off his touch. The prince paid the fire no mind. Rather, he continued reaching towards Angelina. The smell of burnt flesh filled the corridor with a

crackling hiss.

“What incredible flames!” the prince roared. “You burned my hand!”

He laughed, seeming to find even his burnt flesh amusing. Ryuho increased the size of his flames, causing the ceiling to crackle and groan.

Gasping, Angelina threw her arms around Ryuho. “Stop it! You’re going to burn the ceiling down!”

“But Lina!” Ryuho shouted back at her.

The prince continued extending his burnt hand towards Angelina. Overcome with fear, she squeezed her eyes shut. Then, a clear voice like glass striking together echoed throughout the corridor.

“What business do you have with my sister?”

The Andan prince turned around to find Angelina’s brother—Crown Prince Kyril—standing there. After Angelina and Ryuho had left the banquet hall, Kyril noticed the Andan prince following them. As a precautionary measure, Kyril had raced after them.

Seeing Kyril, the Andan prince pulled back his hand and turned to face him properly. “Well, if it isn’t the Jinlongian crown prince himself!”

Kyril strode over to Angelina, placing himself between her and the fiend. Compared to the Andan prince, Kyril had a small and unreliable build. Regardless, he still looked up at the fiend without flinching.

“I tried to introduce myself to the princess, but she was too scared to respond!” the Andan prince bellowed. “The princess of Jinlong fears the prince of Anda, it would seem!”

In response to his boisterous laughter, Angelina shrank into herself. *As the princess, I need to act more confident in myself*, she thought. *What should I do...?*

Tears welled in her azure eyes, and she couldn’t stop herself from trembling.

“Lina did nothing wrong!” Ryuho barked. “You scared her on purpose!”

He groomed Angelina’s hair in an attempt to console her. Her reaction to

these unfair criticisms frustrated him. Unfortunately, he couldn't argue in his feline form.

"And even though I'm a guest, her little tiger burned my hand," the Andan prince added with a hearty laugh. "Is Jinlong in the mood for war?"

As the implication of this provocation dawned over Ryuho, his tail drooped. "I'm sorry, Lina. That's not what I meant to do..."

"Ryuho didn't do anything wrong, Big Brudder!" Angelina cried, clinging to the tiger with all her might. "He was just trying to protect me!"

"You exaggerate!" the Andan prince boomed. "I was just trying to shake her hand gently!"

Kyril favored Angelina with a reassuring grin. He turned towards the Andan prince and narrowed his eyes. "I won't tolerate such rudeness."

He spoke in a quiet, profoundly calm voice. It was as cold and transparent as water drifting through the deep sea.

The Andan prince blinked and looked at Kyril. For a moment, he couldn't believe what the other prince had said. "What?" he asked.

"You tried to touch the Jinlongian princess without permission," Kyril said. "I won't tolerate such rudeness."

In response to Kyril's resolute tone, the Andan prince hesitated. He'd underestimated the small human. After threatening Kyril with war, he'd expected a swift apology.

"Does such rudeness warrant burning my hand?" the Andan prince asked.

"If we weren't in the midst of a celebration, you would have been slain," Kyril responded bluntly.

The Andan prince glared down at Kyril, his blood boiling. "What?! You think you could kill me?!"

Kyril held the fiend's gaze without responding. His ice-blue eyes, like carved glaciers, were identical to his father's. Thus, his freezing glare pierced the Andan prince. While standing with his back to Angelina, he radiated an aura of the Blue Dragon ascending the heavens. The air prickled with electricity as if

heralding a bolt of lightning.

The Andan prince had seen Feilong on the battlefield. He could detect the shadow of that fierce deity within Kyril as well. A chill ran down the fiend's spine, and he took a reflexive step backward. Surprised by his own actions, he gulped audibly.

"What are you so afraid of that you must resort to intimidation?" Kyril asked.

"Why, you little!" the Andan prince thundered. "Are you implying that Anda fears Jinlong?!"

"Not at all. I asked what *you're* afraid of. However, if you would like to interpret my words as *Anda* fearing Jinlong, be my guest." Kyril donned a calm smile and continued, "But of course, you're prepared to take up arms, aren't you?"

The Andan prince's eyes widened. He might have brought up war himself, but right now, his nation didn't want conflict with Jinlong. That's why they were participating in the ascension ceremony.

As a deathly silence fell over the corridor, Kyril and the Andan prince glared at each other. Admitting he wasn't prepared to take up arms would vex the fiend. It would feel as though Anda had lost to Jinlong.

The stalemate panicked Angelina. *I don't want war to break out because of me!*

Mustering her courage, Angelina quietly approached Kyril's side and gripped his hand. *The Andan prince is scary, but I should be okay with Kyril by my side, she thought. He'll protect me.*

"Um, you wanted to shake my hand, right...?" Angelina asked. She took the Andan prince's hand while her own hand still trembled. Lip quivering, she chanted in the softest of whispers, "Pain, pain, go away, come again some other day..."

The Andan prince gaped. No one had ever recited this charm for him. He'd only seen common parents and children chanting it to one another. As such, he'd always scoffed at the charm, regarding it as a trifling consolation reserved for weaklings. However, this young girl was fighting her fear in an attempt to

heal his hand. Realizing this, the prince stared at her intently.

Where Angelina touched, the heat dissipated. Burns inflicted by Flame Tigers were more severe than usual, leaving deep wounds. That said, the Andan prince had sustained similar wounds on the battlefield. Considering such an injury to be painful would be regarded as weakness. As the prince of fiends, he'd been unable to acknowledge it, yet now, he realized something. Lack of acknowledgment didn't make the pain disappear.

Something stirred in the Andan prince's chest. This small, fragile girl showed concern for someone much larger and stronger than her. Concern for the one who had just tried to intimidate her.

"...Thank you."

Words of gratitude slipped from the Andan prince's mouth, surprising even him. When Angelina shook her head, the fiend felt ashamed of himself. Yes, she was the loathsome Jinlongian princess. At the same time, she was also a small, delicate child. As an adult, he had no business putting such a young girl on the spot.

"I'm sorry for scaring you," the Andan prince said. He nodded to Angelina, covered his face again, and returned to the banquet hall.

"Sorry, Big Brudder..." Angelina apologized, her body still quivering.

Kyril scooped up Angelina. "You have no reason to apologize," he said, patting her on the back reassuringly. "More importantly, I'm sorry for putting you in such a scary position."

Ryuhō tucked his tail between his legs. "I'm sorry too, Kyril..."

He felt pathetic. While in his feline form, he couldn't protect Angelina with words as Kyril had done. Right now, he couldn't even speak to Kyril. Instead, he let out a feeble, repentant whine, his ears flat. As Kyril took in his despondent form, he more or less understood the tiger's feelings.

"You have no reason to worry, Ryuhō!" Kyril encouraged him. "If another creep approaches Angelina, feel free to burn them to a crisp!"

Ryuhō's ears perked up. "I can do that?"

“Of course. You did a splendid job protecting Lina. Now, shall we head back to your room? I’ll escort you there.”

Kyril began walking to their room while holding Angelina. After breathing a sigh of relief, she began to nod off. Gently rocking in Kyril’s arms felt ever so pleasant.

*Kyril’s so kind, she thought. I always feel at peace in his arms.*

Exhaustion washed over her. She’d met many people and experienced a great deal today. Meanwhile, Ryuho followed along at Kyril’s feet, his mouth opening wide in a tremendous yawn.



**DURING** the ten-day banquet festival, Angelina and Ryuho played with Hisame in the outer enclosure. Hisame was wearing Angelina’s coral hairpin in her navy hair. She’d taken off her bracelet and began training to control her ice magic.

Despite being quiet, Hisame was knowledgeable and skilled at explaining things. Since Angelina had never left the palace, the stories of Hisame’s travels were wonderfully fascinating. Her bashful manner of speech only made her appear more lovely. Even Angelina’s heart skipped a beat.

“And then?” Angelina asked, eyes sparkling as she pestered Hisame to continue her stories. “What happened next?”

“...There was a big lake with lots of egrets,” Hisame answered. “Each morning, they would beat their wings and fly off somewhere, but come nightfall, they would return. During the daytime, they would eat from the rice fields.”

“What are egrets?”

“They’re big, white herons about this size.” Hisame used her hands to provide scale. “They have a lot of attitude, and they’re even pretty cheeky in front of people.”

An observant person, Hisame could describe specific matters in minute detail. Sometimes, she would draw pictures in the dirt to aid in her explanations. Angelina thoroughly enjoyed listening to her stories.

A shadow fell over them, and the two girls looked up at the sky simultaneously.

“Oh, those are egrets,” Hisame said.

“Wow!” Angelina cried. “I’ve seen those big ol’ birds in the palace waterways before!”

Angelina and Hisame continued their conversation, squealing with delight. Ryuho didn’t find it the least bit amusing. Once the Banquet Ceremony ended, Hisame would have to go home. Since Angelina wanted to spend time with her, Ryuho had no choice but to tag along. Even so, he hadn’t expected Angelina to be so absorbed in Hisame’s stories. A pang of loneliness shot through his chest when she was. Thus, he plopped his rather large rump against her back.

“Look at me, Lina...”

Ryuho hadn’t spoken through his usual telepathy. Instead, he’d whined at a frequency undetectable to the human ear.

Even so, Angelina turned in his direction. “What’s wrong, Ryuho?”

That startled Ryuho, as she shouldn’t have been able to hear him. At the same time, he could have danced with joy.

“Huh?” he asked. “I didn’t say anything.”

“Really? I felt like you called my name. Could I have been imagining things?”

“Yep.”

Angelina smiled bashfully. “I see. Maybe I just wanted you to call out to me.”

Ryuho’s ears twitched, his fluffy tail dancing back and forth ever so slightly. “Lina,” he whined at an audible frequency this time.

“You said my name this time, right?” Angelina asked, positively beaming.

“Sure did. Lina, Lina, Lina!”

Simply hearing Ryuho call her name filled Angelina with glee. When she squeezed his neck in her arms, a deep purr rumbled in his throat.

At the same time, Ryuho also regarded Hisame with a smug expression. In response, Hisame furrowed her brow. It felt as though Ryuho was showing off.



As Angelina's divine guardian beast, Ryuho was important to her. However, his strength and size scared Hisame. Worse, he could even manipulate fire. Hisame's childish ice magic wouldn't stand a chance against him.

Ryuho gave no indication that he wanted to be friends with Hisame. She hadn't touched him since riding on the Golden Dragon, and from then on, he'd maintained his distance. Despite this, he always played around with Angelina to flaunt their close friendship.

Mentally, Hisame knew it would be better for her and Ryuho to get along. As such, she decided to overcome her fear and meet him halfway.

"Would it be okay if I touched you...?" Hisame asked, extending a nervous hand towards Ryuho.

"Not in a million years!" he shouted, which translated into a threatening hiss. "If you try to touch me, I'll scratch the hell out of you!"

In response to his menacing glare, Hisame whipped her hand back. Yes, this ferocious Flame Tiger definitely scared her.

"Ryuho doesn't want you to touch him," Angelina explained. "Sorry."

When Angelina apologized as though it was her fault, Hisame's chest sank. *Angelina shouldn't have such a ferocious, disobedient tiger by her side*, she thought.

"...You're a rabid tiger in cat's clothing," she muttered under her breath.

She spoke quietly enough that Angelina couldn't hear her. On the other hand, Ryuho's keen ears picked up every word.

"What did you just say to me?!" Ryuho barked.

"Angelina, Ryuho's barking really loudly..." Hisame appealed to her with a frightened expression.

"Sorry, did that startle you?" While Angelina apologized to Hisame, she also patted Ryuho on the head. "You're big, Ryuho. Be gentle with us little kids, okay?"

"I am gentle with little kids!" Ryuho shouted. "Hisame's not that little though!"

“I know, but you still startled her.”

Ryuhō whined nervously. “Not my problem. Are you taking this kid’s side, Lina?”

“Not at all. I’m always on your side, Ryuhō. Still, it can be scary when you bark so loudly.”

“Yeah, but I hate when people other than you touch me!”

In response to Ryuhō’s complaints, Angelina’s lips curled into a bemused smile. “That’s right. You won’t even let Big Brudder or Junshi touch you.”

Ryuhō hated being touched by people while he was a tiger. Though Kyril and Junshi had patted Ryuhō in his human form, they’d never done so in his feline form. Neither of them had any interest in confronting a violently hissing Flame Tiger.

“I’m sorry, Hisame,” Angelina said. “Ryuhō says he doesn’t like being touched.”

Hearing her speak on Ryuhō’s behalf made Hisame feel lonely. “Can you understand him?”

This question startled Angelina. “Well, I feel like we can understand each other’s thoughts. Is that weird...?”

“That’s right!” Ryuhō shouted, nuzzling Angelina with his jaw. “We can understand each other’s thoughts!”

“No, it’s not weird,” Hisame replied. “I used to talk to my dolls when I was younger.”

Whenever Angelina spoke to Ryuhō, Hisame assumed she was playing make-believe, as small children were wont to do. However, their closeness sparked a twinge of jealousy in her. Hisame wanted Angelina to pay more attention to her, not some tiger who couldn’t speak.

And so, she leveled a cold smile at Ryuhō and mocked him. “Ryuhō is a Nanranese holy beast, right? If he could talk, he could tell us stories about his country. How disappointing.”

Angelina smiled awkwardly. She could almost imagine the sparks flying

between Hisame and Ryuho. She'd kept Ryuho's secret from Hisame. He could transform into a human, and if she took off his ribbon, he could even speak. Even so, being able to speak and being able to describe his travels were different matters. Ryuho disliked giving detailed explanations. What's more, he disregarded anything that didn't interest him. He had a poor memory for such details and no skill for drawing pictures.

Since Angelina couldn't explain any of this, she gave a simple reply instead. "Yeah, it is a bit disappointing."

Those words shocked Ryuho. "Lina, you think I'm disappointing?!" he whined.

"Not at all," she answered with a laugh. "Someday, I want to visit your country together, so I'll look forward to learning about it until then. When the time comes, you'll be my guide, right?"

Ryuho breathed a sigh of relief. Nevertheless, watching Angelina pester Hisame for stories of her travels still made him anxious.

*Does Lina like Hisame better than me?* he wondered. *Am I not her favorite anymore?*

Ryuho nudged his forehead against Angelina, desperate to leave his scent on her. Hisame rolled her eyes and laughed. "You might as well be spitting in the wind," her expression seemed to say.

Somewhat dejected, Ryuho whined again. "Lina, let's go home already, okay?"

Angelina patted him on the head. "Thanks for everything today, Hisame! I think we should be heading back soon."

Before Angelina could finish speaking, Ryuho placed her on his back and dashed away. As their guardian knight hurried to keep pace, Hisame waved a dainty goodbye.

"See you soon," she said.



**AFTER** returning to their room in the North Star Palace, Angelina took off Ryuho's ribbon. Immediately, he protested in an angry huff.

“Lina, that Hisame kid’s suspicious as hell!”

“What do you mean?”

“What kind of person refuses to talk about their own country? It’s weird.”

Angelina had noticed this as well. Hisame gave detailed accounts of her travels, but when the conversation changed to her country or personal life, her replies grew vague.

“If Hisame doesn’t want to talk about anything too personal, I think that’s fine,” Angelina replied.

She had secrets of her own, after all. During her past lives and even now, she’d always avoided conversations about the abuse she’d endured. Similarly, she’d never talked about her loops, as she didn’t expect anyone to believe her. In the same vein, she wouldn’t force others to talk about subjects they found uncomfortable.

“But only bad people lie!” Ryuho shouted, still in an angry huff.

“You didn’t say anything about being a Nanranese prince at first, remember?”

Ryuho groaned comically, finding himself at a loss for words. “But I mean... That was different.”

“You had your reasons, right?”

“...Yeah. Sorry.”

“I’m not angry.” Smiling, Angelina rubbed Ryuho’s forehead vigorously. “So anyway, Hisame must have reasons of her own, too, don’tcha think?”

Anger still smoldered in Ryuho’s chest. However, as Angelina’s small, soft hand continued rubbing his forehead, his eyes narrowed blissfully. In the past, he’d hidden his identity from her as well. By continuing to criticize Hisame, he would be acting blind to his own faults.

Ryuho’s shoulders slumped, a haze of unease coiling around his chest. He struggled to name this feeling.

“Thank you, Ryuho,” Angelina said.

Confused, Ryuho cocked his head.

“You’re worried about me, right?” Angelina asked.

After having his uneasiness identified, Ryuho’s chest swelled with relief. “Yeah, that’s right! I’m worried about you.”

“Thanks. That makes me happy.”

Her gentle smile coaxed a grin from Ryuho as well.

“Love you, Lina,” Ryuho whined at a frequency inaudible to humans.

Angelina lifted her head and wrapped her arms around Ryuho.

*Oh, I was right, Ryuho thought. Lina can hear me. She understands how I feel.*

“I love you, Lina, and I always will!” he cried.

When he spoke clearly, a smile bloomed across Angelina’s face. “I love you too!”

Ryuho gave Angelina a big, wet lick on the cheek, causing her to squeal with delight. Then, she pressed her nose against Ryuho’s wet muzzle.



**THE** final day of the Banquet Ceremony came. After paying their respects one last time, the delegations would return to their home countries. Since Angelina wouldn’t have another opportunity to see Hisame, they were walking around the outer enclosure festival together. Compared to the palace festival, this one was much folksier, and the stalls were easier to interact with.

The brown-haired knight pointed toward one particular stall. “Why don’t we all wear one of those?”

Many paper decorations imitating the Four Divinities hung from the stall. There were Blue Dragon horns and White Tiger ears that you tied around your head with a string. Likewise, there were Vermillion Bird wings and Black Tortoiseshells that you wore on your back. When Angelina looked around the area, she found many children wearing these decorations as they frolicked about.

“Sounds great!” Angelina cried, her eyes sparkling as she nodded emphatically. She’d never enjoyed a festival in this childish manner, after all.

“Well then, which one would you like?” the knight asked.

“I’ll have the White Tiger ears! What about you, Hisame?”

Hisame squirmed uncomfortably. “Um, I’m fine without one...”

“Okay. Which one do you want, Ryuho?” Angelina asked.

“I don’t want anything on my back!” he responded. “You won’t be able to ride me!”

“Then you get horns since you already have tiger ears!”

After hearing Angelina’s answers, the knight bought a pair of Blue Dragon horns and placed them on Ryuho. As Hisame opened her mouth and watched enviously, the knight bought two pairs of White Tiger ears. He placed the first pair on Angelina’s head. The result couldn’t have been more adorable. A pair of round, black and white ears protruded from Angelina’s buoyant, light pink hair. A deeply satisfied smile appeared on the knight’s face, forcing him to bite the inside of his cheek. If he wasn’t careful, a weird sound might escape his lips.

Finally, the knight handed the other pair of ears to Hisame. As she waved her hands about in a flustered manner, he favored her with a kind smile. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to see you and the princess with the same ears.”

In response to the knight’s considerate behavior, a sharp pressure expanded in Hisame’s chest. As a show of restraint, she hadn’t asked for ears of her own. The knight had realized this, which made her happy. After all, no one in Hisame’s family paid attention to her feelings. Her brothers would have demanded that she put on the ears.

“Thank you very much...” Hisame responded.

The sight of her still fidgeting warmed the knights’ hearts.

And so, Hisame donned her White Tiger ears.







The knight slapped his hand over his mouth. “It’s even cuter than I expected. What an adorable pair...”

When the knight let slip his earnest thoughts, Ryuho barked at him. While Hisame jumped, Angelina giggled.

“Over here, youngsters!” someone called out. The high-spirited voice belonged to a street performer spinning tops. “Come take a look at this!”

The people walking about the lower city turned to look at the large tiger and the adorable pair of children. When another small child saw Ryuho, he pestered his parents. “Mommy, Daddy, those horns are so cool! Can you buy me a pair?”

“Let’s go, Hisame!” Angelina cried, pulling her by the hand. The princess’s small, soft palm radiated heat, warming Hisame’s frozen skin.

The street performers put on a variety of different shows. One performer swallowed swords. Another regurgitated goldfish. A group of four people stood atop each other’s shoulders, and yet another performer spun plates atop a pole.

When Angelina looked up, she saw kites modeled after the Vermillion Bird circling the sky. “We have kites!” a toy vendor shouted. “High-flying kites!”

Angelina and Hisame continued holding hands like sisters while exploring the festival. Next, an amulet vendor called out to them. “I have ornamental knots that bring good fortune. Would you two sisters like different colored ones?”

Hisame came to a sudden halt. Being mistaken for sisters made her squirm with embarrassment. “Um, we’re not—” she began, but Angelina cut her off.

“Wow, so pretty!”

As Angelina examined the stall, Hisame held her tongue and nodded. Other than ornamental knots, there were also amulets crafted from crystal, agate, and other small stones. Different gems and tassels of various colors combined to form many distinct amulets.

The vendor pointed towards a rose quartz amulet. “This one matches the younger lady’s hair.” He then pointed to a lapis lazuli amulet. “And this one matches your older sister’s hair.”

Seeing as the stones were being sold in the lower city, they were small and of poor quality. Regardless, they seemed special to Hisame.

“U-Um, I’d like those...” she mumbled.

Hisame bought the amulets indicated by the vendor. “You can have this one,” she said, handing the lapis lazuli amulet to Angelina.

“Are you sure?” Angelina asked.

“Yeah. A-Am I being a nuisance...?”

“Not at all! I’m so happy!”

Angelina took the amulet cheerfully. When she asked the knight for help, he attached it to her waist. At the same time, Hisame affixed her amulet to her waist sash.

“Thank you!” Angelina cried, spinning around while grinning from ear to ear. As her skirt fanned out voluminously, her lapis lazuli amulet jingled at her waist.

For the first time, Hisame took Angelina’s hand herself. “Hey, wanna go over there next?”

When Angelina squeezed her hand back, Hisame’s chest swelled with happiness. Angelina never shook off her cold hand. For this reason, the young princess had earned a special place in Hisame’s heart.

*I usually hate loud noises and crowds,* Hisame thought. *But when I’m with Angelina, they’re so fun!*

While Hisame savored her delight, Ryuho scowled beside her. Hisame didn’t treat him as a fellow human. She didn’t even acknowledge his existence. Since Ryuho hadn’t revealed himself as a Nanranese prince, perhaps he couldn’t complain. Even so, his heart sank into gloomy discontent.

*Hisame’s hogging all of Lina’s attention!* he shouted internally. *It’s so unfair!*

Ryuho wanted to give something to Angelina and have a matching memento as well. Unfortunately, he couldn’t buy anything in his feline form.

*I want to hold hands with Lina, too!*

He wanted their human fingers to intertwine as they walked at eye level.

Unfortunately, that wasn't possible right now. Flame Tigers were strong. Ryuho could do much more as a tiger than a human, and Angelina loved his fluffiness. She could only walk around the lower city freely thanks to his protection. Yet, at the same time, he couldn't join in with the humans as a tiger.

And so, Ryuho stared at Angelina and Hisame's backs by himself. They were buying something like crepes at another stall. Eggs, vegetables, and miso were balled up into a thin dough made from wheat. An appetite-whetting aroma reached Ryuho's nostrils. Even the knight tasted the food before handing it to Angelina and Hisame.

*I'm the only one being left out,* Ryuho thought, his tail slumping.

Hisame held out her food to Angelina, allowing her to take a small bite. At that moment, Hisame turned towards Ryuho and smiled at him mockingly.

Ryuho thumped his tail against the ground. *Why, you little! You're showing off on purpose!*

"Ryuho!" Angelina called out to him, turning in his direction. "Wanna try a bite?"

After dashing over to Angelina, Ryuho gobbled down the half-eaten crepe she was holding out to him.

"What flavor would you like, Ryuho?" Angelina asked. Apparently, she was going to buy another portion for him.

"Meat, meat!" Ryuho exclaimed.

"One more with lots of meat, please," Angelina said. Soon after placing her order, she received a warm, freshly made crepe. She then blew on the crepe to cool it down and held it out to Ryuho. "All right! This one's yours."

Ryuho gobbled down half the crepe in a single bite. "The other half's for you!"

In response, Angelina smiled and ate the remainder. "Sharing food always makes it taste better."

When Ryuho licked Angelina on the cheek, Hisame furrowed her brow in displeasure.

"Yeah, that was so good!" Ryuho agreed.

His satisfied shout put a smile on Angelina's face. "Ryuhō thinks it's tasty too!"

Taking note of Angelina's merriment, a crowd of people gathered around the food stall. "This looks like a good place to eat," they whispered among themselves.

As the crowd grew larger, Angelina's group laughed with each other and left the stall. Before long, Angelina and Hisame would have to bid each other farewell. When the knight offered to escort Hisame to her inn, she stubbornly declined and raced back to her lodgings.

After dropping by the Nanranese manor in the Canopy, Angelina finally went home. The Nanranese delegation would be leaving the palace tomorrow. As such, Ryuhō would spend tonight in the manor with just his family.



**RYUHO** lay on his back in his feline form next to Shua—his older sister. For the first time in a long while, he'd eaten a heaping portion of true Nanranese food. Consequently, his stomach had swollen to twice its size. Since Angelina had returned to the North Star Palace earlier, Shua rubbed Ryuhō's engorged belly. At first, he narrowed his eyes blissfully, but all of a sudden, he shot up.

"Oh, right!" he shouted. "Listen to this, Big Sis!"

Ryuhō complained about Angelina and Hisame to Shua. "Hisame's nothing but nasty to me, but Lina's completely oblivious!"

Shua listened to her little brother with a smile on her face.

"Hey, this is no laughing matter!" he yelled.

The angrier Ryuhō grew, the more comical Shua found him. "But don't you see how absurd you're being? The princess needs friends, too."

"...Yeah, but she shouldn't be friends with Hisame! That kid holds Lina's hand to show off and snickers at me the whole time!"

"Could you be misunderstanding things?"

Ryuhō arched his back and hissed, "Like hell I am!"

Shua tried to keep a straight face, but Ryuho was so adorable that she laughed despite herself.

“Oh, and Hisame’s hiding a ton of stuff from Lina! Why is Lina so nice to some suspicious kid who’s going home tomorrow?” Ryuho whimpered. “I’m only nice to Lina, though! Why does she need other friends? I’m the only one being left out. It’s not fair...”

Shua hugged Ryuho’s head, for she could guess what brought on these feelings. Unrequited love was painful.

“I love Lina, but I’m starting to think ill of her,” Ryuho admitted. “Sometimes, I think she’s being cruel or unfair. Even though I don’t want to have these thoughts, I’m slowly turning into a worse and worse guy...”

Simply being with Angelina made Ryuho happy. Until now, he hadn’t needed anything more. He didn’t want Feilong, Kyril, or Junshi to touch her, but he hadn’t disallowed it. After all, those three protected Angelina and were essential to her happiness. Ryuho himself took pride in being useful to Angelina as well.

But Hisame was different. On top of being a weak crybaby, she relied on the younger Angelina for help. Tomorrow, she would return to her own country. Even though she couldn’t stay with Angelina forever, she still kept secrets about herself. Ryuho hated the idea of Angelina being friends with such a useless person. It made Hisame seem special, which frustrated him to no end.

Ryuho couldn’t name the emotions warring inside his chest. As someone with a strong sense of justice, the idea of his heart filling with malice scared him.

“I understand,” Shua said. “You’re not alone, Ryuho. We can all feel that way sometimes.”

“Really? I’m not the only bad guy?”

When Shua nodded, Ryuho breathed a sigh of relief. *I thought Lina would hate me if I didn’t stop being so selfish*, he’d worried.

“But as the princess steadily grows up, her world will expand just as steadily,” Shua said. “Once she starts attending school, she’ll be surrounded by friends.”

Ryuhō stiffened. Both Shua and Kyril went to school. When Angelina turned six, she would probably start attending the Jinlongian Noble Academy. Despite being seven, Ryuhō had never gone to school since he couldn't control his transformations. He couldn't hold a pen with tiger paws, and what's more, he hated studying. If being human meant attending school, he would rather not master his transformations—or so he'd thought.

"When Angelina starts going to school, you can't tell her not to get along with the other children," Shua continued. "You understand that, right?"

"Yeah, I do," Ryuhō answered. "She won't be able to make friends that way, and everyone will hate her..."

"That's right. Princess Angelina isn't being unfair by treating everyone with kindness. Understand?"

Ryuhō nodded. "Yeah, Lina's not in the wrong. So I can grin and bear it..."

When Ryuhō nuzzled his large head against Shua, she rubbed him between the ears. "That's what makes you such a good boy. I have one other question, though. What's wrong with Princess Angelina being friends with Hisame? You wouldn't be angry if I hugged her, right?"

"Yeah, but you're special!" Ryuhō huffed indignantly.

"And you wouldn't mind if the maidservants ate lychees with her, right?"

"That's different too."

Shua laughed. "In that case, who do you *not* want Angelina to be friends with?"

"I can't stop her from spending time with Feilong and Kyril... They're family, after all. You're also in the clear since I love you, Big Sis. Junshi's her teacher, so I guess he can pat her head a little. But Hisame's out of the question! It's not fair!"

As Ryuhō began hissing and spitting, Shua rubbed his forehead to calm him down. "Think deeply about why that seems unfair, okay?"

"Think deeply...?"

"Exactly. Try to remember precisely when something felt unfair."

“...Hisame walked around the festival holding Lina’s hand, even though I couldn’t.”

Images rose to Ryuho’s mind. When he recalled them laughing together while wearing matching amulets, he shook his head fervently. Even the faintest flickers of those memories were unpleasant.

“I see,” Shua said. “You didn’t like Hisame doing something you haven’t experienced yet. Is that right?”

Ryuho’s tail drooped. “Maybe. I mean, that was my first time going to a festival in the outer enclosure, too...”

To encourage her little brother, Shua rubbed his back hard enough to ruffle his fur. “But Hisame’s going home soon, right? Why don’t you and Angelina do something different together next time?”

Ryuho’s tail shot straight up. “Yeah! I’ll do just that!”

Afterward, he rolled onto his back once more. As he relaxed slovenly with his stomach facing the ceiling, Shua rubbed his belly. Of course, he would only let Angelina and his family touch his stomach.



**THE** Banquet Ceremony had ended, and today, the royal family would bid the delegations farewell. Angelina sat atop Feilong’s lap. He’d decided from the outset to hold her during the farewells.

“Can you let me down, Fodder?” Angelina asked, regarding him with upturned eyes.

“No,” Feilong answered flatly.

Unsure what else to do, Angelina had no choice but to accept his refusal. Ryuho stood behind Feilong and off to the side with a sour expression. He expressed his displeasure by casually stepping on the hem of the emperor’s robe.

Meanwhile, Kyril sighed in exasperation at the other three. Nonetheless, he focused on bidding his final farewells. The next group to arrive was the Kalavinka’s party, her Garuda perched quietly on her shoulder.

After the Banquet Ceremony, Angelina visited the Heavenly Sovereign Mausoleum with many gifts. Those included freshly baked hujiao bing, Nanranese ribbons, accessories popular in the capital, fresh flowers from various countries, and local specialties from the Vinkas' home villages. Angelina had even gifted the Kalavinka candied jujubes decorated with jujube flowers.

Though the Vinkas had been thrilled, the Kalavinka had remained cold. Angelina was disappointed, but at the same time, her reverence for the Vinkas didn't disappear. She'd always remember their beautiful singing voices.

"Purity and fortune!" the Kalavinka cried out in a refined voice. Then, she left with the sound of bells trailing after her.

Following the Nanranese delegation, the last group was the Andan delegation. The prince stomped onto the stage menacingly, his large body swaggering back and forth. Contrary to their introduction, a single child wearing the robes of a young girl appeared in their group. The same child had come to watch the Kalavinka's tributary dance.

When Ryuho caught the scent of something, his nose twitched. "Lina, look at that child," he spoke telepathically.

In response to Ryuho's urging, Angelina turned her attention to the child. She wore a conical hat, and a cloth covered her face. However, she also wore a coral hairpin in her long, navy hair. Even more telling, a rose quartz amulet hung from her waist sash.

"Is that you, Hisame?!" Angelina cried out, unable to stop herself.

"What's wrong, Lina?" Feilong asked.

"Umm... We're friends."

Hisame balled her hand into a fist. As a child, she still hadn't grown fangs or a horn. At a glance, she didn't look like a fiend, but even so, she was Andan royalty. *If Angelina finds out I'm a fiend, she'll despise me*, Hisame worried. Thus, she'd kept her identity secret the whole time.

Yet, when the time came to say farewell, she didn't want to hide the truth. Moreover, Angelina treated a Flame Tiger as a human and interacted with the lower city residents without discrimination. Hisame couldn't imagine Angelina



hating her, regardless of whether she knew the truth. Finally, she wanted Angelina to see her in the palace now that she'd been allowed to enter.

For those reasons, Hisame had asked her brothers if she could accompany them during the final farewell. That surprised them. Hisame had always been withdrawn and cowardly. They hadn't expected her to be capable of serving in the delegation. Rather, they'd brought her along simply to show her the Purple Forbidden Palace. In the end, however, Hisame's change of heart had impressed them, and they'd accepted her request.

"We're friends..." Hisame repeated, savoring each word.

*Angelina knows I'm a fiend now, but she still called us friends,* Hisame thought, tears welling in her eyes.

The Andan delegates looked at Hisame with surprise. Despite her usual timidity and less-than-fiendish demeanor, she'd become friends with the Jinlongian princess without anyone's knowledge.

"Why didn't you say anything, Hisame?!" the Andan prince bellowed jovially, clapping her on the back with his big, strong hand. "You're amazing!"

Hisame staggered, choking on her saliva. She still couldn't handle loud voices. "A-Angelina," she stammered, mustering her courage. "M-May I write you letters?" She didn't want Angelina to become a mere memory when she returned to Anda, as she'd never made a friend through her own efforts before.

"Of course!" Angelina replied, positively beaming. Due to her memories from past lives, Andan fiends had frightened her. That said, there was nothing scary about Hisame. By spending time together without any preconceived notions, she realized that fiends were no different from Jinlongian people. Having come to this realization, she waved to the Andan delegates from atop Feilong's lap.

While Kyril's eyes widened in surprise, Tomi regarded Angelina with admiration. Feilong readjusted his tight hold on her, and Ryuho slapped his tail against the stage in displeasure.

The Andan delegates stomped away from the stage. While standing at the end of the procession, Hisame turned around and bowed her head ever so lightly. "Thank you," she said in the faintest of whispers. Only Ryuho's keen

Flame Tiger ears picked up those words.



**INSIDE** the Andan carriage, Hisame's brothers hounded her with questions. Of course, all of them concerned her relationship with Angelina.

"So, you became *friends* with the Jinlongian princess!" the Andan prince spoke through bellowing laughter. "Who would've thought?"

Usually, his loud voice would have frightened Hisame, causing her to shrink into herself. Today, however, she squared her shoulders and raised her head. "Yes, we're *friends*," she answered clearly.

Until now, Hisame had always read the faces of whoever she spoke from behind her bangs, even her family. Seeing her answer so decisively surprised and thrilled the prince. She seemed like an entirely different person.

"I see!" he roared, still laughing boisterously. "That's wonderful!"

Hisame forced a polite smile onto her face.

In Anda, many people had turned their thoughts towards invading Jinlong. The fiends both admired Jinlong and viewed the empire as a threat due to its vast lands and rich culture. Thus, the Andan royal family traveled to their enemy's capital for the first time to see the heart of the empire for themselves.

Emperor Feilong was a savage man who'd committed patricide. He hadn't won the hearts of the nobles, much less the people, for he ruled through logic and might. Rumors of his cruelty abounded. If possible, the Andan royal family had hoped to obtain a foothold to collapse the empire.

"But this is quite the surprise!" the prince roared, his laughter still echoing through the carriage. "Feilong is a fierce god on the battlefield, yet he looked like a completely different person while doting on the princess!"

The princess's dress had been of a foreign design. In other words, it hadn't been an official Jinlongian garment. Feilong loved the princess with all his heart. He'd bent tradition and history to allow her to wear such an unorthodox outfit.

Despite his feeble appearance, the crown prince had been dauntless. At the same time, the princess had won the hearts of the people with her exceptional

cuteness. The palace retainers regarded the children warmly as well, indicating their desire to protect Jinlong's future. In short, there hadn't been any openings to exploit. Nevertheless, Hisame—a member of the Andan royal family—had become friends with Princess Angelina amidst these circumstances. That pleased her older brother.

“Well, I can understand why Feilong would dote on the princess!” he roared.

“Wait, did you speak with her too?” Hisame asked.

“Indeed! I spoke with the princess and the crown prince! The prince wasn't as delicate as he looked, and the princess was—hm, how should I put this? —pretty cute! It was quite interesting!”

The Andan prince laughed as he reminisced. Hisame regarded him with suspicion, for her brother judged everything based on strength. From his perspective, a small girl might as well have been nonexistent. Until now, he'd never shown an interest in such children.

*If I don't take charge of the situation, my brother might hurt Angelina,* Hisame thought.

This ominous premonition spiked her anxiety. Being the focus of her brother's attention wasn't necessarily a good thing. When he designated someone as a rival, he wouldn't stop until he'd crushed them.

The nation of Anda prized military might above all else. Larger, stronger fiends spoke with greater authority. As a result, violence was rampant, and shouting matches filled the air daily. Dealing with matters through intelligence was viewed as a symbol of weakness. Fiends would curse each other as cowards for behaving in such a manner.

Being small and weak, Hisame had to use her head to contend with her brothers. Yet, when she did, they would deride her for being pathetic and conniving. That caused her a great deal of shame.

After visiting Jinlong, Hisame learned that her brothers' attitudes weren't the norm. Angelina could hold quiet conversations. Even if someone was at fault, she didn't immediately criticize them. Learning was respected, and even small girls could be revered. Altogether, Jinlong had been an easy place for Hisame to

live.

*That's why I need to protect Angelina, she thought. I won't let my brothers overrun Jinlong! She hated the idea of Jinlong becoming identical to Anda. But first, I need to get stronger! she resolved. I'll create something of value that my brother can use!*

"I have a suggestion," Hisame said, addressing her brother. "Please allow me to study abroad in Jinlong."

The proposal surprised the Andan prince. "Are you suggesting that Anda presents Jinlong with a hostage?" he asked, narrowing his eyes suspiciously. "That won't do! It would make us seem like a vassal state!"

"If I pretend to be a hostage, it could lower their guard."

The prince furrowed his brow in slight displeasure. "Those sound like the actions of a coward!"

"Gaining entry is vital. If I can get close to Feilong, I might be able to slay him myself. Finding the best opportunity to strike is important even in warfare."

Hisame lifted her head sharply and stared into her brother's eyes. As the two held each other's gazes, an air of tension dominated the carriage. Hisame had never stood up to her brother before. Being a crybaby, she'd always fled from conflict. Yet now, she was arguing with him in an attempt to assert herself.

The Andan prince laughed heartily. "Hisame! You, of all people, intend to slay Feilong?!" Once his laughter had died down, the prince fixed Hisame with a serious look. "What's brought about the sudden change? You hate that sort of method, don't you?"

"What I want is in Jinlong, but Feilong probably won't relinquish her to me. In that case, I have no choice but to steal her."

"You mean Princess Angelina?"

"That's right."

"Based on how Feilong doted on the girl, you certainly would have no choice but to steal her! All right, let's give it a shot!"

When Hisame's brother gave his permission, she breathed a sigh of relief. At

the very least, Anda wouldn't raid Jinlong while she studied abroad in the empire. During this time, Hisame would become someone who couldn't be ignored, even in Anda. Then, she could become a mediator between the two countries.

Hisame balled her hand into a fist. "Well then, let's have my coming-of-age ceremony as soon as possible when we return."

Meeting Angelina had become her greatest treasure.

"But after your coming-of-age ceremony, you won't be able to run away from everything like you always have, Hisame!" her brother roared. "You won't be a child anymore!"

"Okay!" Hisame cried, a combative glint in her eyes.

Those eyes pleased her brother, for they gave the impression of Andan royalty. "Looks like my thinking was correct!" he bellowed, his large body shaking with satisfied laughter. "Bringing you on this journey was a great idea!"

Hisame's feelings on the matter were complicated. She disliked her brother's forcefulness. He'd dragged her to Jinlong against her will, and the lion's share of her experiences had been unpleasant. Because of this, she struggled to agree with him.

However, the time she'd spent with Angelina had been special enough to wipe away all the unpleasantness. She treasured her memories of the outer enclosure. There, she'd lived in peace without constantly recoiling in fear. For the first time in her life, Hisame had been able to act as her truest self. No one had laughed at or scolded her. Looking back on the journey, meeting Angelina had given value to all the unpleasantness.

"...Yes, it was a very nice trip," Hisame agreed.

Her brother nodded in satisfaction. "Once we get back, we'll be quite busy. We'll throw a magnificent coming-of-age ceremony to make up for its lateness! After all, we need to show off how much you've grown on this trip!"

As his large body rocked with laughter, the Andan prince clapped Hisame on the back. That caused her to choke somewhat, but she smiled stiffly at her brother.

*Angelina, I'm going to become an adult, she thought. That way, I'll be able to protect the place I love and everything else important to me. I'll come back to see you soon.*

## Chapter 6: Angelina and the Solar Audience Ceremony

**ANGELINA** was preparing for her journey to Mt. Jinlong—a holy site of the Heavenly Sovereign Temple. The last event of the Crown Prince Ascension Ceremony would be the Solar Announcement Ceremony. Usually, the crown prince’s mother would visit Mt. Jinlong to report that the ascension ceremony had been conducted without issue. This final event was a means of giving thanks.

While holding Angelina in his arms, Feilong mumbled, “Do you have to go no matter what?”

“Boys aren’t allowed on Mt. Jinlong,” Angelina chided her father. “I’m the only one who can take Mudder’s place, right?”

For the first time, Feilong regretted killing his entire family to usurp the throne. Because of his brutality, there were no women in the royal family apart from Angelina.

Personally, Feilong didn’t want to let Angelina visit one of the temple’s holy sites. Ever since the Golden Dragon had recognized her as the Polaris Princess, the daoshi had made subtle hints about wanting to adopt her as a Vinka. If she were taken to a holy site forbidden to men, Feilong wouldn’t be able to interfere.

“I’m worried about you,” Feilong admitted. “The temple is acting suspiciously.”

If Angelina became a Vinka, she would live on Mt. Jinlong from the ages of five to ten. Afterward, she would have to travel to mausoleums in various lands as a former Vinka. Feilong was still repairing their father-daughter relationship. The idea of letting her go now seemed like a poor joke.

“But I want to do everything I can to help Big Brudder!” Angelina argued.

She’d been the one to convince Feilong to allow the trip. After all, she didn’t want people complaining about Kyril’s ascension ceremony, which had already

been chock-full of irregularities. Many old noble families were still antagonistic towards Feilong's reign. Angelina couldn't bear the idea of displeasing the temple and sabotaging Kyril's ascension.

"Don't worry!" she continued with a smile. "Ryuhō will be with me! I'm just giving an offering, right?"

Men couldn't enter Mt. Jinlong, but of course, they couldn't be particular about the genders of animals. Thanks to this, Ryuhō had been allowed entry as the Polaris Princess's divine guardian beast.

After heeding Angelina's words, Feilong reluctantly decided to send her off. His decision to have Jinlong's strongest military force accompany her might have been a tad overprotective, though.

"Listen closely, Yuen," Feilong said. "If you sense anything suspicious, protect Angelina without waiting for my orders. Her safety is of the utmost importance. You have my permission to slaughter every daoshi or burn down Mt. Jinlong to protect her."

Yuen Lang was Feilong's right-hand man and most trusted confidante. Feilong had assigned Yuen to command the accompanying military force. Yuen was also Tomi's son and Junshi's father. During Angelina's previous lives, he'd conspired with Anda to betray Feilong. In the end, he'd even become the emperor of Jinlong.

In any event, Yuen didn't raise an eyebrow at Feilong's words, which could have rocked the entire nation. "Yes, sir!" he responded.

Angelina broke out in a cold sweat, listening to the conversation. Yuen had purple hair and the hulking muscles of a warrior. Despite being a man of few words, he was decisive and capable of firing off precise orders. His subordinates and Feilong trusted him with their lives. Even Angelina regarded him as a man among men.

*I don't want Yuen to betray Feilong in this loop, she thought.*

During her fourth life, her father finally recognized her, and she received a name. She wanted to continue living happily and avoid another coup at all costs.



Taking all that into consideration, Angelina looked up at Yuen. Noticing her gaze, Yuen bowed his head to her slightly. She couldn't sense Junshi or Tomi's friendliness there. He was simply showing the princess courtesy.

*Getting him to like me might be impossible, but at the very least, I don't want him to hate me...*

With that in mind, Angelina showed Yuen a toothy grin. "Th-Thanks for escorting me."

Yuen responded with a slight smile of his own. "It's my honor," he said shortly.

*Huh? Yuen looks scary, but he's surprisingly cute when he smiles!* That unexpected discovery caused Angelina's lips to tug upwards.

"Stop trying to look cool, Yuen!" Ryuho barked.

Due to the magical ribbon around his neck, his complaint didn't reach the hulking man.



**ANGELINA** and company had departed for Mt. Jinlong ten days ago.

"Lina!" Ryuho cried. "Look over here! Those birds are huge!"

Angelina looked outside the carriage, which had arrived before Mt. Jinlong. A large pair of avian statues stood atop the *shanmen*.

"Wow, that's amazing!" Angelina cried out in astonishment.

A large number of female daoshi were waiting for Angelina's group. The people carrying luggage, holding up the palanquin, and standing guard with bows were all women. It reassured Angelina to see so many strong, dignified women coming out to meet her.

Due to Mt. Jinlong's high elevation, a chill pervaded the air even during summer. The mountain had a rugged surface, its holy site lying beyond the shanmen. Yuen and his men would set up camp before the entrance to await Angelina's return.

A grandiose palanquin was placed before the shanmen. Cloths of five

different colors hung from its sides, and bells were attached to its four corners. Finally, a gold-colored statue of a Garuda stood at the center of its roof.

“Please come this way, Princess Angelina and her divine guardian beast,” a daoshi instructed.

When Angelina and Ryuho boarded the palanquin, a group of daoshi lifted it. The golden bells decorating its sides rang out sonorously.

Weather conditions on the mountain were liable to change at any moment. Currently, a damp wind blew through the air. Before the weather could take a turn for the worse, the daoshi carried the palanquin towards the peak as fast as possible.

Since boulders covered the mountain’s surface, many of the alpine plants were small and subdued. The branches of trees flowed in a single, fixed direction, perhaps due to the strong wind.

Artificial red flowers lined the side of the road to direct travelers towards the mausoleum. Due to exposure to the elements, the older flowers had faded in color. The contrast between old and vibrant flowers encouraged one to dwell upon the impermanence of the material world.

“Look, Ryuho, it’s a path of flowers!” Angelina pointed to them.

Ryuho yawned. “Yeah, but there aren’t too many real flowers.”

Mt. Jinlong differed from what Angelina had imagined. She’d pictured a warm mountain where Vinkas sang while surrounded by animals and ornamental plants. On the contrary, only the occasional cries of animals echoed within the drab scenery. The thin air due to the high elevation made it difficult to breathe. To make matters worse, the abundant fog chilled Angelina’s skin.

*This feels kind of lonely,* she thought, unconsciously leaning against Ryuho. Feeling his warm fur, she breathed a sigh of relief. *Good thing Ryuho’s with me. I probably would’ve been scared on my own.*

After noticing Angelina’s unease, Ryuho nuzzled his cheek against hers without saying anything. In response, Angelina ran her hands through his fur. That put him in a good mood. A deep purr rumbled in his throat. Watching them warmed the hearts of the daoshi.

Partway up the mountain, a large river cut across their path. Fortunately, a broad, wooden bridge spanned the river.

“Wow, there’s steam rising from the water!” Angelina cried out in surprise.

“Several natural hot springs bubble up from inside Mt. Jinlong,” a daoshi explained. “The hot water flows into the river. Our mausoleum at the peak has a spring of its own, which devotees visit to wash away the impurities of the material world. Some people even bring the water home with them, as it supposedly settles the stomach.”

“That’s amazing.”

As Angelina listened, the palanquin crossed the bridge. Before long, they arrived at the Starlight Mausoleum, which stood near the peak of Mt. Jinlong. After the daoshi led Angelina and Ryuho inside, the matriarch headed the tour. She was a stout woman with kinky, jet-black hair that she tied into a bun. She seemed much younger than the patriarch of the Heavenly Sovereign Mausoleum. Perhaps living on Mt. Jinlong required a certain level of stamina. In any case, she had suntanned skin, and her eyes shone with an ambitious sparkle.

Like the Heavenly Sovereign Mausoleum, this ceiling also boasted a depiction of the northern night sky. Gold had been embedded into the oriental blue ceiling to represent stars. Compared to the palace mausoleum, this temple was far more compact. Nevertheless, its paintings and engravings were delicate. One could feel the history radiating from this building.

“This is the Starlight Mausoleum,” the matriarch said. “According to legend, the founder of Jinlong was the Heavenly Sovereign’s son. This mountaintop is where he first manifested on Earth. He descended from the divine realm upon the back of the Golden Dragon to rule the surface. A great number of holy beasts accompanied him, including the Garuda.”

As the empire expanded, the people migrated to more comfortable places to live. Meanwhile, the Garuda stayed to protect Mt. Jinlong.

And so, the Solar Audience Ceremony began. Angelina presented the mausoleum with gold, silver, and other gemstones. She also presented them with expensive dyeing materials, such as dayflowers, safflowers, purple clams,

and Golden Dragon Tree fruit.

“Hail to Kyril Xin Lei—my older brother, son of the emperor, and blood of the imperial line,” Angelina said. “His ascension ceremony has ended without incident, and he has been declared the crown prince. May the light of the North Star guide the young dragon.”

In response to Angelina’s words, the North Star on the ceiling twinkled. Quiet voices of amazement rose from the daoshi. Until now, none of the makeshift stars had ever shone with light. That said, the glow of the North Star was an auspicious sign. Everyone who bore witness to this miracle foresaw a bright future for Kyril.

Thus, the Solar Audience Ceremony ended without incident. Afterwards, Angelina and Ryuho were shown to the Vinkas’ living quarters. The girls’ singing echoed alongside the sound of their looms. Angelina’s expensive garments—which she wore even now—had been woven here.

Raindrops pattered outside the mausoleum. Since a hot spring ran throughout the entire one-story building, it was warm despite being on a highly elevated mountain. This opulent building existed to raise the Vinkas in comfort even while separated from their families. In exchange for their loneliness and premature freedom, they were at least given luxury.

Angelina and Ryuho were led into the great hall. The Kalavinka, her subordinate Vinkas, and the daoshi had all gathered there for a welcoming banquet.

As Angelina and Ryuho took their places at the seats of honor, the Vinkas began singing and dancing. This performance differed from the one at the palace. Today, they wore light pink robes of silk gauze embroidered with swallowtail butterflies. They also wore decorative wings reminiscent of butterflies. A felt rug resembling a grassy plain was spread out on the floor beneath their bare feet.

Incense smoke wavered back and forth in the dimly lit hall. Whenever the smoke touched Angelina’s dress, it sparkled before disappearing—a most phantasmal sight.

Ryuho covered his nose and opened his mouth in a flehmen response. “This

place stinks!”

“The smoke might be too pungent for you,” Angelina said. “Maybe this will help a little.” She hung her coat on Ryuho’s muzzle.

“Yeah, only a little!” he yelled, burying his nose in Angelina’s back.

The candlelight flickered, creating somewhat eerie shadows. Unlike outside, the music reverberated against the walls. Likewise, the vibrations from the dancing drummed across the floor. Finally, the tinkling of gold bells filled the air.

Watching the beautiful Vinkas twirling around struck Angelina with a dizzy spell. *Have I been swept away into a dream world?* she wondered. The vibrations caused by dancing rocked her from her backside upwards. As a result, she could almost imagine herself dancing alongside the Vinkas. Incense smoke mingled with the precious, already thin air, causing Angelina’s still dizzy mind to go blank.

“Lina?” Ryuho asked.

However, she was so entranced by the Vinkas that she couldn’t hear him.

“Lina!” Ryuho called out again, pressing his nose into her.

Angelina jerked awake and inhaled a deep breath. The dance was so magnificent she’d forgotten to breathe. Now alert, she looked at Ryuho and smiled.

At that moment, a bolt of lightning streaked past the windows, and a violent clap of thunder followed. Ryuho embraced Angelina, who clung to him with all her might. Even so, the Vinkas didn’t stop dancing. No matter how loudly the thunder roared, they would continue their performance until its end. Despite their divine beauty, their figures also engendered a sense of vague apprehension.

When the welcome banquet ended, the thunderstorm began in earnest. Angelina had intended to descend the mountain after finishing the ceremony and attending the banquet. However, that wouldn’t be possible right now.

Angelina and Ryuho looked up at the sky absentmindedly. She was having

trouble collecting her thoughts as the music from the great hall still rang in her ears. All the while, the rain continued to pour.

“This looks like a heavy shower,” the matriarch said. “Please stay here until the rain clears up. We’ll inform the people waiting at the foot of the mountain of the situation.”

Angelina nodded. She couldn’t order the daoshi—all women—to carry the palanquin in this rain.

“We have a hot spring in this mausoleum,” the matriarch continued. “Please make yourself at home. Ladies, do you mind showing the Polaris Princess and her divine guardian beast to their room?”

By the matriarch’s orders, several daoshi led Angelina and Ryuho to their room. Incense was burning here as well. The sweet fragrance caused Angelina’s head to spin. If she inhaled the fumes for too long, she probably wouldn’t be able to think straight. To keep her head clear, she placed the incense burner outside.

A red Garuda was painted on the blue wall, and a geometrical snake was woven into the thick, luxury carpet. This magnificent room was reserved for special guests. The furniture rivaled the pieces in the North Star Palace, and decadent confections had been set out as well. Angelina finally understood why the Kalavinka hadn’t shown any interest in the palace desserts. Such delicacies weren’t uncommon here.

The clothes set out for Angelina were all extravagant garments woven from silkworm. Since Mt. Jinlong produced silkworm thread, this was their privilege. However, the designs differed from Angelina’s dress. These were the clothes of Vinkas. When Angelina changed into one such outfit, the daoshi cried out in delight.

“You look so beautiful! I could mistake you for a Vinka!”

Angelina found the outfit difficult to move in and somewhat restrictive. Yet, at the same time, the novel garments caused her heart to leap with excitement.

“This is amazing!” she squealed. “Right, Ryuho?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“If I could live here, I might never want to go home!”

Ryuhō frowned. “Wait, do you actually *want* to live here?”

If someone had offered to let Angelina live in such a wonderful room a year ago, she would have jumped at the opportunity. However, she now had a home that she wished to return to. She shook her head lightly.

“Nope!” she replied in a firm tone. “This place is amazing, but I like our home the best!”

Ryuhō let out a soft whine, nuzzling his face against Angelina. “And I like being by your side.”

In response, Angelina mussed his fur. “Yeah, I like being with you, too!”



**THE** second day of Angelina’s visit to the Starlight Mausoleum came. Though the downpour ceased in a single night, it continued raining a reasonable amount the next day. Angelina had slept beneath a soft, feather quilt. In the morning, she woke to the sound of the Vinkas’ singing. Next, she enjoyed the hot spring and an extravagant meal. In the afternoon, she played with the Vinkas she’d become friends with at the Heavenly Sovereign Mausoleum. Life on Mt. Jinlong couldn’t have been more paradisaical.

To kill time while waiting for the rain to stop, Angelina observed the daily lives of the Vinkas. Their etiquette, divination methods, and song and dance rehearsals were all novel to her.

“This is the weaving room,” a daoshi explained.

The silkworm threads worn by Angelina and others were produced on Mt. Jinlong. Because silkworms only lived on this mountain, the women raised them here and harvested their threads to weave fabrics.

“Former Vinkas sing while weaving,” the daoshi continued. “This amplifies the magic already contained within silkworm threads, creating the rarest of all textiles.”

The sounds of singing and weaving combined into a sublime harmony.

“Robes are created in their entirety here,” the daoshi concluded. “Not just the

fabric but also the dyeing and embroidery.”

Fabrics created at the Starlight Museum boasted the highest quality designs and craftsmanship. Accordingly, they were sold at a premium, regardless of whether silkworm thread had been used. The fabrics were also a source of revenue for the Heavenly Sovereign Temple.

The former Vinkas continued singing while weaving, the lyrics telling the stories of their embroideries. Beautiful fabric surrounded Angelina, and watching the women work with such joy mesmerized her.

Even better, ancient books filled the mausoleum’s library. Those texts delighted Angelina as well. They retained indigenous myths and legends differing from the history books at the North Star Palace. Altogether, the mausoleum was such an exciting place that Angelina no longer wished to return home.



**“SOMETHING’S** off here,” Ryuho said.

He was the first to grow suspicious during their third morning at the mausoleum. Though mist still shrouded the mountain, it wasn’t so thick that they couldn’t descend.

Even so, the matriarch wouldn’t allow them to leave. “It’s still too dangerous,” she said. “Those of us who live on the mountain know best. This mist is actually clouds producing heavy rainfall below. Descending would be impossible right now.”

Neither Angelina nor Ryuho could argue with her explanation. At the same time, the daoshi returning to the mausoleum from below weren’t the slightest bit wet.

“Is it not actually raining?” Angelina asked.

“Doesn’t seem to be,” Ryuho answered.

The next day, he predictably ran out of patience.

“At this rate, we won’t be able to go home until the mist clears!” he shouted.

Angelina felt uneasy. She was also worried about Yuen and the others, who



were waiting at the foot of the mountain. And so, she finally confronted the matriarch. Today marked her fifth morning at the mausoleum. Though the sky was cloudy, the chances of rain seemed low.

“We can go home today, right?” Angelina asked, a note of anxiety in her voice.

The matriarch frowned apologetically. “It’s still cloudy...”

“When will we be able to go home then?”

“Let’s see...” Here, the matriarch’s gaze shifted up and to the right in contemplation. “Shall we divine when you can descend the mountain? Perhaps there’s some meaning behind this long spell of mist.”

When the matriarch grinned at her, Angelina gulped in surprise. “What meaning could there be...?”

“Well, now, why don’t we perform a divination to be certain? You—the Polaris Princess—have been stranded at a holy site. Perhaps the Heavenly Sovereign has a message for you.” Seeing Angelina’s face stiffen, the matriarch burst into laughter. “Aha! Please excuse my little joke. I merely said that to lighten the mood since you looked so worried. In any case, the Kalavinka’s divinations are beautiful. Why don’t you come to have a look as part of your sightseeing?”

“You’re a liar!” Ryuho barked. “I hate you!”

The matriarch jumped back in alarm. “Oh my! I’m not your enemy, Master Flame Tiger. This will be an incredibly valuable lesson for the Polaris Princess. And since this mountain is forbidden to men, it will also be a great story to tell Prince Kyril, no?”

Honestly, the matriarch didn’t care what an animal had to say, but she rattled off a series of excuses nonetheless. Ryuho’s ears pinned back, and he growled at her.

“Princess!” the matriarch cried, turning to Angelina for help. “Please calm your guardian beast down!”

Angelina sighed softly. *I feel the same as Ryuho*, she thought. *I don’t like this*

*matriarch, but since I'm stranded here, I can't cause any problems.*

She'd come here as a representative of the royal family. Moreover, this was the ascension ceremony's final ritual. She wanted to finish it without incident. Thus, she hugged Ryuho's head tightly and pressed her lips against one of his round ears. "Thanks," she whispered. "Just be patient for a little while longer."

These words satisfied Ryuho, allaying his anger. "If you say so, I can keep holding out!"

When Ryuho stopped growling, the matriarch laughed foolishly, still showing some hesitation. Without giving Angelina any say in the matter, the woman led her to the divination room. Inside, the impassive Kalavinka waited for them with her Garuda perched on her shoulder. Many vases containing artificial flowers of various colors lined the wall. Also, a carpet depicting a serpent had been spread out in the middle of the room. Finally, incense smoke smoldered within the confined quarters, seeping into Angelina's change of clothes.

"Lady Kalavinka," the matriarch said. "Please divine the Polaris Princess's future."

After responding with a placid nod, the Kalavinka selected a few artificial flowers from a vase and placed them in a basket. Then, she stepped on the serpent depicted on the carpet.

The matriarch handed Angelina a flat, porcelain plate with a red Garuda depicted on it. "Carry this plate over to the Kalavinka."

As instructed, Angelina walked over to the high priestess.

"Purity and fortune," the Kalavinka mumbled, her eyes downturned.

The Garuda selected a blue flower from the Kalavinka's basket and placed it on Angelina's white plate.

"Incredible!" the matriarch cried. "I expected no less from the Polaris Princess! Receiving a blue flower from a Garuda is proof you're a Vinka!"

The Kalavinka opened her mouth to say something, but at the last moment, she swallowed back her words. "...Purity and fortune," she muttered while sighing in resignation. At the same time, the Garuda beat its wings.

“Huh?!” Angelina cried out. “But I—”

“We now know the meaning behind you being stranded here!” the matriarch interrupted. “You’re meant to take the Vinka exam!”

“I can’t become a Vinka.”

Despite Angelina’s refusal, the matriarch wouldn’t take no for an answer. “Forgive me, Polaris Princess, but that’s for the Garuda to decide. Respectfully, this matter cannot be determined by us mere mortals.”

Ryuhō took up a position between Angelina and the matriarch. “Don’t get any closer!”

As a large tiger stuck its face in front of her, the matriarch let out a shrill cry. After collecting herself, she then cleared her throat. “If you keep refusing to take the exam, the mist might not clear up.” The matriarch spoke with careful consideration, her expression grave. “That would cause serious trouble for the people waiting at the foot of the mountain.”

Angelina had planned to descend the mountain after one day. However, this morning marked her fifth day here. At this point, the soldiers’ food reserves might have been exhausted.

“Even so, I cannot force you or your guardian beast to do anything,” the matriarch continued. “This is quite the dilemma.”

When the matriarch exhaled a long, loud sigh, Angelina trembled. Though she hadn’t said it out loud, the woman’s exasperated sigh had accused Angelina of being selfish. The princess knew this. She’d heard similar sighs countless times.

*Does she think I’m a problem child...?* Angelina wondered.

Her chest ached. She didn’t want anyone to be disgusted with her. Similarly, she couldn’t bear the thought of being abandoned. Fear rooted in her past lives now caused her head to spin.

“Pull yourself together, Lina!” Ryuhō barked. “You don’t have to worry about this old hag! I’m here with you, remember?!”

Angelina gasped. *That’s right*, she thought. *What do I care if this woman doesn’t like me? Also, it seemed like the Kalavinka stopped short of saying*

*something. I don't know what's going on here exactly, but I need to fight back!*

Angelina squeezed her eyes shut for just a moment. She shook her head, inhaled a deep lungful of air, and let out a slow breath. After counting mentally to calm her racing heart, she finally lifted her head. "I'll give the mist another day to clear up," she responded, her azure eyes sparkling fiercely.

The matriarch swore under her breath. "But wouldn't you feel sorry for the soldiers if they caught a cold?"

"There's no need to worry, Mish Daoshi," Angelina said with a smile, playing up her childish speech. "Jinlongian sholdiers are very shtrong! They should be okay for one more night!"

"Even so—"

"Like I shaid, Fodder's sholdiers are very shtrong. Do you not trusht them?"

When Angelina cocked her head, the matriarch found herself at a loss for words. It felt as though the girl were asking, "Are you belittling the might of the emperor?" At the same time, it was a simple question from a young, naïve girl. Though the matriarch didn't sense any deep meaning behind the question, she still hesitated. Considering her position, she could by no means say, "No, I don't trust the emperor's soldiers."

"...I-In that case, please give the mist another day to clear up," the matriarch said.

She left the chamber.



**ONCE** Angelina and Ryuho were alone in their room, both sighed deeply at the same time.

"I don't like this place," Ryuho said, gazing out the window. "It's weird. Should I burn everything to the ground?"

Angelina smiled stiffly at this disturbing proposal. "No, that would be terrible. The Vinkas wouldn't have anywhere to go."

Ryuho slapped his tail against the floor. "That Kalavinka gives me the creeps. I don't care what happens to this place. Are you sure you're okay, Lina?"

“Everyone here only calls me the Polaris Princess...”

Angelina understood Ryuho’s anger all too well. It felt as though she were losing her individuality. The people here only wanted her for her status as the Polaris Princess. Despite valuing her title, they had no appreciation for *Angelina* herself.

To Angelina, her name represented her precious individuality. In the past, she’d simply been called *That*. She’d been of so little value that no one had given her a name. Because of this, she hadn’t found her reason for being. Receiving the name Angelina had felt like permission to exist as her own person.

Angelina was both the imperial princess and the Polaris Princess. It was natural for the daoshi to call her the latter. Yet even though she’d visited as a representative of the royal family, no one had called her *Angelina* or simply *Princess* even once. She sensed a certain stubbornness behind this decision. Despite everyone’s kind words and expressions, a sense of uneasiness bordering on threatening plagued her. She felt constricted as if a snake were slowly coiling itself around her. It was growing hard to breathe—and not solely because of the thin air.

“That old hag suddenly ordering you to take the exam is weird,” Ryuho said.

“Yeah, it doesn’t seem like she’ll take no for an answer. Hopefully, the weather clears up tomorrow. Then we’ll be able to go home, right?”

*Maybe they intend to confine me here until I take the exam, regardless of whether the rain stops,* Angelina thought. *If that happens...*

Overcome with anxiety, she hung her head.

“If it’s still misty tomorrow, you can ride on my back, and we’ll escape together!” Ryuho shouted. “If you wear lots of clothes to keep warm, you won’t catch a cold, right?”

“But if we do that, Big Brudder’s ascension ceremony might end in failure...”

That worried Angelina. If the Heavenly Sovereign Temple didn’t approve of the Solar Announcement Ceremony, they might not approve of Kyril as the crown prince.

“Feilong and Kyril won’t care about that!” Ryuho exclaimed.

Certainly, neither would scold Angelina for running away. However, she would disappoint Tomi and possibly give the hostile nobles a reason to revolt. Considering this, she wanted to ensure the ascension ceremony’s success at any cost.

Steeling herself, Angelina lifted her head. “...If we can’t go home tomorrow, I’ll take the exam.”

“You want to belong to the Garuda?” Ryuho asked, digging his forehead into Angelina’s side.

In response, she squeezed him in her arms. “No, I don’t. I won’t let that happen. So you’ll stay by my side, won’t you?”

“Yep. I’ll never let the Garuda have you!”

Ryuho gave Angelina a big, wet lick on the cheek. Afterward, they curled up like two kittens from the same litter and slept.



**THE** next morning, Mt. Jinlong was clear of rain and mist.

“See, the matriarch is a liar!” Ryuho shouted. He howled at the sky, his voice reverberating across the mountain. Startled birds beat their wings and flew away.

Later, a former Vinka brought them breakfast. The meal consisted of lavish porridge sprinkled with gold dust, freshly fried dough, and still-steaming milk tea. The gentle texture of the rice porridge warmed Angelina’s heart and body.

After she’d eaten her fill of scrumptious food, the matriarch arrived. “The recent downpour washed away the bridge spanning the river,” the woman said. “We’re currently restoring it, but since we’re all women on Mt. Jinlong, the repairs will take some time...”

“The bridge is broken?” Angelina asked for confirmation.

“Yes. I didn’t mention this before for fear of worrying you...”

Angelina suddenly felt trapped with nothing to rely upon.

*When will the bridge be repaired?* she wondered. *When will I be able to go home? What are Kyril and Father doing?*

Angelina had thought she could go home when the weather cleared. According to the matriarch, however, the bridge had been washed away. Unfortunately, Angelina had no way of confirming the truth.

“The soldiers at the foot of the mountain have set up a temporary camp while waiting for the bridge to be repaired,” the matriarch said. “We’ve sent them a letter attached to an arrow asking them to return to the capital.”

The woman’s friendly smile caused a shiver to run down Angelina’s spine.

“No way the bridge is broken,” Ryuho muttered under his breath.

Angelina nodded lightly. The mist and the bridge being washed away were just excuses to buy time. The matriarch didn’t intend to let Angelina return home until she agreed to become a Vinka.

After realizing that, Angelina steeled herself and looked the matriarch directly in the eye. “If it is the will of the Holy Garuda, I’ll take the exam.”

Her resolute tone—which sounded nothing like a young girl—caused the matriarch to hesitate. *Perhaps this is the majesty of the Polaris Princess*, she thought.

“In that case—!” the matriarch began, but Angelina cut her off.

“However, I would like Ryuho to accompany me.”

“But—”

“I promised to never leave my divine guardian’s side at the Heavenly Sovereign Mausoleum. Even if I become a Vinka, that won’t change.”

When Ryuho nestled close to Angelina, she patted his back softly.

Hearing the name the *Heavenly Sovereign Mausoleum*, the matriarch bit her lip. She couldn’t overturn a decision already made by her own order. The Starlight Mausoleum was a holy site and the empire’s oldest temple. Nevertheless, the Heavenly Sovereign Mausoleum was higher ranked and more exalted, as it belonged to the palace. The matriarch couldn’t scorn such an establishment.

“Understood,” she said. “I’ll tell the Vinkas to explain the process to you, and we’ll carry out the exam tomorrow.”

The matriarch smiled, for the Vinka exam was a mere formality. Very few girls failed at this stage. So long as Angelina took the test, the matriarch could appoint her as a Vinka. She would accomplish this no matter what. If successful, even the cruel Emperor Feilong wouldn’t be able to lay a hand on the Heavenly Sovereign Temple.

Unlike previous emperors, Feilong seemed to hold the faith in contempt. He hadn’t conducted the proper rituals for three whole years, citing the mourning period as his pretext. He’d even been reluctant to hold the recent ascension ceremony.

Furthermore, the military force accompanying Angelina for this ceremony was the largest in history. That had given everyone a glimpse of Feilong’s distrust. The matriarch suspected him of trying to destroy their entire religion someday. Therefore, she needed a trump card with which they could protect themselves.

“May I have the Kalavinka teach me?” Angelina asked, adopting a dignified tone. “As the Polaris Princess, I cannot disgrace myself.”

The matriarch nodded. “Of course. I don’t mind that in the slightest.”

At last, Angelina had become assertive about taking the exam. The matriarch smiled sinisterly. Their luxurious hospitality must have changed the young girl’s mind.



**THE** decision had been made for Angelina to receive the Kalavinka’s instruction. *Once I know the details of the exam, I can make sure I fail,* she thought. *Time to give this my all!*

And so, she headed to the Kalavinka’s room in high spirits.

“Thank you for your instruction,” Angelina said.

When she bowed her head, the Kalavinka looked at her scornfully. “Purity and fortune,” she responded as usual.

“Um, can you please tell me what I should do during the exam?”



“Purity and fortune.”

Though the Kalavinka remained unwaveringly cold, Angelina couldn't back down. “I beg of you, Mish Kalavinka. Please tell me what I should do.”

“Purity and fortune.”

“I don't want to become a Vinka.”

Angelina's words incensed the Kalavinka. Every girl who visited this mausoleum hoped to become a priestess. Each of them was fighting with all her might to save her impoverished village. By refusing to join their ranks, Angelina was denying their very reason for existence.

Furious, the Kalavinka stomped her foot on the floor. “Purity and fortune!”

Usually, she wasn't allowed to act in such a violent manner. The Kalavina's anger was said to represent the destruction of the empire. Nevertheless, she couldn't restrain herself.

As the Kalavinka attempted to leave, Angelina grabbed her arm with both hands. “There was something weird about that divination, right?” the princess asked. “It looked like you were about to say something back then. Was what the matriarch said wrong?”

The Kalavinka prickled with irritation. It was humiliating to have such a young girl see through her momentary discomposure. That said, the matriarch *had* been lying about the divination. A Vinka's fortune-telling didn't relay anything so specific in the first place. A Garuda picking the blue flower meant, “When the rain passes, the sky will clear.” This represented a poor situation taking a turn for the better. The person receiving the divination could decide how to interpret this message for themselves.

“Listen to me, Nara!” Angelina cried. “I want you to listen to me as Nara, not a Vinka!”

The Kalavinka held her breath, staring at Angelina intently. At that moment, she was no longer the high priestess. She'd returned to being a normal girl. Since becoming the Kalavinka, no one had called her Nara. Every girl who became a Vinka abandoned the name given to them as newborns. Afterward, they lived as Vinkas, not as individuals.

Hearing her name for the first time in a long while, Nara remembered the village where she'd been born. Her mother's hands had been rough, and as a migrant worker, her father often hadn't returned home. Meanwhile, her starving younger brothers had picked jujubes in the garden to fill their empty stomachs.

Angelina had given Nara candied jujubes after the Banquet Ceremony. These had been a specialty in Nara's home village. Eating them would have been too painful, so she'd placed them in a drawer with the lid still shut. Though the jujube flowers accompanying the candies had withered, she still hadn't thrown away the dead petals. Instead, she'd placed them in the same drawer as the candies.

Nara had to bite back her frustration. "Wh-Why do you know my name...?"

"I know everyone's names, not just yours."

Angelina recited the name of every Vinka while counting on her fingers. Nara stared at her, lost for words. She abandoned her name in her home village. Later, she abandoned her individuality to become a Vinka. Yet now, Angelina had reclaimed these things for her.

"I found everything in a book in the palace," Angelina explained. "The villages you were born in, the names of your parents, and so on..."

"Our names still remain in the palace...?"

Nara's name should have been forgotten when she abandoned it. The idea of it remaining in a palace text caused a wave of emotions to crash over her.

*Before becoming the Kalavinka, I was Nara, she thought. I'm still Nara.*

"Listen to me, Nara," Angelina pleaded. "I know how hard you all fought to become Vinkas. I also know how your songs fill everybody with joy. When I saw you at the festival, it was so wonderful. I admired you so much..."

Angelina couldn't express herself well. She'd never experienced such exaltation before. Likewise, she hadn't known that overwhelming beauty could move one to tears or give rise to goosebumps. None other than the Vinkas had revealed these new emotions to her. However, the harder Angelina tried to express herself, the more cliché she sounded. Her words transformed into

cheap banalities.

“So anyway, I want you to know how much I respect the Vinkas...” Angelina finished.

Nara fell silent at her words.

“But I don’t think it’s right for me to become a Vinka,” Angelina continued. “After all, if I join you here, another girl will lose her opportunity, right?”

“...What do you mean?”

“The home villages of Vinkas are revered. That helps them become wealthy, doesn’t it? And the chosen girls can live in luxury here.”

For small children, living apart from their families was painful and lonely. Even so, the girls here lacked for nothing. They slept in warm beds, ate rare delicacies, and wore beautiful robes never before seen in their villages. Even a person working for a wealthy merchant wouldn’t receive such abundance. If a girl endured five years of loneliness, she would be guaranteed honor, a luxurious lifestyle, and a job afterward. Becoming a Vinka wasn’t such a bad deal for these impoverished girls.

Nara’s eyes widened in surprise. “...You knew.”

Angelina was a young girl. As a princess by birth, she also lacked for nothing. Nara hadn’t expected her to give any thought to the poor.

“I admire the Vinkas,” Angelina responded with a nod. “I wish I had your beautiful singing voice, but the Polaris Princess shouldn’t steal that role from you. The Polaris Princess and the Vinkas should remain separate.”

These clear and decisive statements didn’t seem like the words of a young girl. As Angelina’s eyes sparkled with unyielding determination, Nara could sense that she was no mere child.

“But the daoshi think differently, don’t they?” Angelina asked. “That’s why I want you to teach me how to fail the Vinka exam.”

“How to fail the exam?” Nara repeated.

“Yep! If they realize I can’t become a Vinka, even the daoshi will give up, right?”

Angelina's toothy grin coaxed a smile from Nara as well. Suddenly embarrassed of herself, Nara averted her gaze.

"You don't want to help?" Angelina asked, cocking her head.

Nara bit her lip. Helping Angelina meant defying the will of the matriarch. When Nara had come to Mt. Jinlong as a young girl, the matriarch had loved her like a mother. In her moments of deepest forlorn, the matriarch had stayed by her side and guided her. Most of all, Nara treasured Mt. Jinlong and believed in the Heavenly Sovereign. She wasn't confident that defying the matriarch was correct.

"But..." Nara mumbled.

She then considered the matter. *If I refuse, what will become of the Vinkas?*

If Angelina became a Vinka, another girl would lose her potential spot. Until now, it had been taboo for highborn daughters to become Vinkas. The priestesses who spoke on God's behalf needed to understand noble poverty. However, if the princess became a Vinka, other noble daughters would likely imitate her. Vinkas were considered living divinities, and the Kalavinka presided over all of them. It was an honor for a girl in one's family to become a Vinka. Nobles seeking the same glory would likely start to appear.

If the Heavenly Sovereign Temple desired even more wealth, they would align themselves with nobility and accept highborn girls. One exception often sets a new precedent. Therefore, Vinkas had to treat everyone equally, never making exceptions when showing compassion.

Once the precedent was established, denying it later would be difficult. If the system were dismantled gradually, many destitute villages would lose a means of becoming wealthy. As a result, the poor would suffer, and nobles would enrich themselves. As the Kalavinka, Nara couldn't overlook this possible future.

And so, she gritted her teeth as a show of resolve. The matriarch had raised her, and she was indebted to the temple. Betraying them scared her. Even so, Nara had once been destitute herself. What kind of high priestess would she be if she abandoned people in the same position? The Kalavinka sang and danced because she had a duty to bring others joy.

After shaking her head once, Nara faced Angelina again. This time, sincerity radiated from her eyes. “I’m sorry for being nasty to you. If you became a Vinka, I feared another girl might lose her seat. I couldn’t allow a wealthy princess to steal the path to happiness from an impoverished girl.”

Angelina shook her head back and forth. Nara had her own set of circumstances. She was trying to protect the prospective Vinkas who came from destitute villages, as well as the villages themselves. Angelina understood this, and she considered Nara to be the ideal Kalavinka.

“We Vinkas endure a life without our parents to protect our impoverished villages,” Nara said. “In exchange, we receive lives of luxury. I considered it unfair for a princess with everything to steal this from us. That’s why I didn’t want to speak to you.”

As Nara hung her head, Angelina squeezed her hand. She understood the pain of living apart from one’s parents better than anyone.

“I lived apart from my fodder until recently,” Angelina said. “That’s why I don’t want to be separated from him or my big brudder ever again.”

Nara reexamined Angelina’s desperate expression. She recalled a rumor about the emperor’s daughter. Until recently, no one had ever seen her. Some people had even whispered that she’d died before becoming the princess.

Yet last year, Angelina had been placed within the line of succession despite not being of age. Suddenly, she’d been accepted into the royal family as a princess. Where had she lived until then, and why had she been kept a secret all this time? Very few people knew the answers to these questions.

*This girl is so small yet lived apart from her family, Nara thought. I can’t imagine how heavy her circumstances must have been.*

Nara recalled her early childhood. One day, she’d fallen asleep on her mother’s chest after exhausting herself from crying. She often sat on her father’s shoulders while watching the sunset. No matter the season, she’d never lacked the deep love of her parents or their warm songs. She could endure living on this snow-covered mountain because she had those memories of being loved. However, if the girl in front of her had no such memories, how painful was life for her?

Nara squeezed Angelina's hand in return.

"Please help me," the princess pleaded.







Angelina sounded as though she might buckle from the pressure. The guardian beast accompanying her bowed his head as well.

Nara nodded. “Okay then,” she said, still holding Angelina’s hand.

And so, the two girls discussed how Angelina might fail the exam.



**THE** day of the Vinka exam came. To demonstrate how dearly she wished to go home, Angelina wore her own dress, not the clothes provided for her. Worries still plagued her mind. Yes, Nara had explained every stage of the exam to help formulate a countermeasure, but that said—

*This test is way too easy!*

The exam was essentially a formality. It had been devised with passing as the goal, and very few factors could cause one to fail. Four-year-old girls selected through divination would have little difficulty passing.

*Will I be able to pull off a convincing failure?*

Angelina headed towards the exam in low spirits. The venue it took place in was very warm.

“This is the first exam,” the matriarch said. “Ask the Black Tortoise for permission to continue onwards.”

The first room belonged to a representation of one of the Four Divinities. A large tortoise waited for her beyond the door. Apart from the actual divinity, Angelina had never seen a tortoise before. For this reason, she could hardly contain her excitement.

“Wow, so cute!” she cried. “Mishter Black Tortoise! You’re so big!”

Angelina ran over to the tortoise and patted his shell. In turn, he began munching on the leaves she’d brought.

“May I ride you, Mishter Tortoise?” Angelina asked, still giddy with excitement.

Silently, the tortoise stopped munching on leaves and lowered himself onto the ground. “Hop on,” the gesture suggested.

After Angelina had climbed on his back, the tortoise moseyed forward. He circled the room leisurely to provide a fun experience. Angelina couldn't help but squeal with delight. Riding on a tortoise was an entirely different experience from riding on Ryuho.

"Polaris Princess," the matriarch said, "you've passed the first exam."

When Angelina jolted in surprise, Ryuho regarded her icily. "Weren't you supposed to fail?" he asked.

"I wasn't expecting such a big tortoise..." Angelina mumbled.

According to Nara, feeding the tortoise was the first exam. Angelina had considered acting so afraid of the creature that she couldn't feed it. However, seeing such a large tortoise for the first time had filled her with excitement, and she'd forgotten to act frightened.

"But there are still more tests, so I should be okay!" Angelina declared.

Ryuho used his teeth to pull her off the tortoise's shell and gave her a big, wet lick to disinfect her.

The next room belonged to the White Tiger. When Angelina opened the door, she found a whole clowder of gray tabbies. White tigers were rare, and raising them on Mt. Jinlong would have been impossible. As such, these gray tabbies served as substitutes.

*They're so cute...!* Angelina squealed internally.

As Angelina's heart melted, Ryuho whopped her on the rear with his tail. "Pull yourself together!" he shouted.

Again, Angelina jolted in surprise. "Eek!" she cried, holding the container of cat food over her head. "White tigers! So scary!"

"Never taken acting lessons, huh?" Ryuho quipped.

In the blink of an eye, the entire clowder had surrounded Angelina. They nuzzled against her legs, meowing for food. Cats gathered around Ryuho's paws, perhaps wanting to share his warm fluffiness. Some of the cats even began kneading his stomach.

"Hey, cut that out!" he barked. "I'm a holy Flame Tiger, you little runts, not

your mother!”

In response, the cats merely purred happily.

“I expected no less from you, Polaris Princess,” the matriarch said. “Even the White Tiger adores you.”

“N-No, I’m s-so scared,” Angelina stammered.

The matriarch laughed. “This from the girl accompanied by a Flame Tiger? What an amusing joke.”

“Yeah, good luck convincing us on that one,” Ryuho agreed.

Angelina’s shoulders slumped. “...Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

Giving up, she placed the container on the ground, allowing the cats to munch on the food.

“So cute...” she mumbled with a sigh.

Seeing so many small cats was a novel sight for Angelina. When she petted one member of the clowder, the cat rolled onto its back. Of course, she rubbed its small belly. Immediately, Ryuho knocked the cat aside and shoved his head in front of Angelina.

“I’m the cute one, Lina!” he shouted, sandwiching her hand between his two front paw pads. “Stop petting these little runts!”

He then proceeded to lick her all over, huffing angrily all the while.

“Ryuho!” Angelina squealed with delight, pressing her forehead against him. “Your tongue’s so rough!”

The third room belonged to the Blue Dragon. According to Nara, normal lizards resided in this space. She hadn’t been instructed to feed the standins this time. Rather, she would pass the test if one of them appeared from amidst the rocks. With this in mind, Angelina flung the door open with a loud bang. She planned to scare the lizards into remaining hidden.

“Oh, NO!” she cried out in her loudest voice. “Mishter Blue Dragon isn’t HERE!”

“Yeah, you’re right!” Ryuho barked in response.

“Polaris Princess, Holy Flame Beast,” the matriarch addressed them in a chiding manner. “If you remain quiet, the Blue Dragon will show his face.”

“Oh, I SEE!” Angelina responded in an even more booming voice. “Mishter Dragon might end up hating me because I’m *SO LOUD!*”

Even a single lizard showing its face could ruin everything. However, as soon as she finished speaking, the depiction of the Blue Dragon on the wall opened his eyes.

“My brethren,” he said. “Prostrate yourselves before Polaris Princess Angelina.”

As his dignified voice echoed throughout the room, droves of lizards appeared amidst the rocks and bowed to Angelina.

The matriarch then regarded her with sparkling eyes. “You never cease to amaze me, Polaris Princess!”

At the same time, Ryuho regarded her with exasperation. “So, what are we supposed to do about *this?*”

Angelina’s shoulders slumped. *Can you not take a hint, Mister Dragon...?*

The final room belonged to the Garuda, not the Vermillion Bird.

“Whatever you do, don’t pass this one, all right?” Ryuho reminded Angelina, shooting her a glance.

In answer, Angelina squared her shoulders and nodded. *I’ll fail this one if it’s the last thing I do!*

She and Ryuho entered the fourth room. Nara stood there with the Garuda perched quietly on her shoulder. To pass this test, one had to sing before the Garuda, feed it from their hand, and then pet it. That said, Angelina couldn’t sing. She’d spent many years in an environment where others had mocked or scolded her for doing so.

“However, when you stand before the Garuda, a song will naturally flow from your lips,” Nara had explained. “Since no one fails here, simply say you can’t pet the Garuda.”

After hearing that, Angelina worried she might start singing against her will.

Thus, she came to stand before the Garuda with tentative steps. The divine avian met her eye and jerked its beak, urging her to sing. However, as Angelina kept very few songs in her heart, no melody flowed from her lips. Instead, her breath hardened into lead and clogged her throat, preventing her from even speaking.

“What’s wrong?” the matriarch asked suspiciously.

Angelina had no idea how to respond.

“Please sing for us,” the matriarch prodded.

The Garuda chirped as well, flapping its wings to urge Angelina onwards.

“I can’t sing...” Angelina finally replied.

The matriarch laughed heartily in disbelief. “That can’t be true. Now, sing for us! There’s no need to feel embarrassed!”

When Angelina’s throat remained obstructed, the matriarch glared at her in displeasure. “You’re not pretending to be unable to sing in front of the Holy Garuda, are you? That would incur divine punishment. The bridge won’t be repaired, and Kyril’s ascension ceremony will end in failure.”

The mention of Kyril caused Angelina to tremble. If she alone received the Garuda’s punishment, she wouldn’t mind, but she didn’t want to destroy her brother’s future. And so, she frantically sifted through her memories. Marfa had often sung her one particular song. Since the lyrics were in Yulan, Angelina didn’t understand their meaning, but she might have been capable of singing this one song in particular.

As Angelina took several deep breaths, everyone observed her curiously. Somehow, she pushed aside the leaden atmosphere and began to sing in a barely audible whisper. Her unsteady, quavering voice recited a line of incomprehensible words. The unfamiliar scale at which she sang perplexed the daoshi as well.

All the while, Angelina’s heart beat so hard that she feared it might burst. Her chest ached with sadness and embarrassment. Why did she struggle to do something so normal? Everyone but her could sing naturally. Though she could blame everything on her abuse, she still felt pathetic. Tears welled in her eyes,

and her already trembling, nasal voice quivered even more.

Squawking, the Garuda spread its wings and covered its ears, attempting to block out all sound. “Enough already,” its entire body seemed to be expressing.

Angelina stopped singing. *Was my song so horrible that even the Garuda would reject it...?* she wondered. Though she hadn’t been confident in her singing, the rejection still shocked her.

While the daoshi were at an utter loss for words, Nara worried Angelina might be hurt. On the other hand, Ryuho just laughed.

“Wait, a bird’s ears are just two holes beside their eyes?” he asked. “I had no idea.”

His carefree comment caused Angelina to burst out laughing. Immediately, her heart felt much lighter. At the same time, the daoshi eyed her suspiciously.

*Whenever I’m about to sink into despair, Ryuho always pulls me back up,* Angelina thought, grinning from ear to ear. *Singing well isn’t important right now. I need to fail so I’m not accepted as a Vinka. This is actually a success, right?*

“U-Um... Is that where your ears are, Mish Garuda?” Angelina asked.

The Garuda bobbed its head up and down. “Songs should flow naturally from one’s lips, Polaris Princess.” The divine avian spoke telepathically in a feminine voice. “You needn’t sing if you don’t want to. I would love to hear your voice someday, but watching others force you to sing pains me. Being unable to sing isn’t your fault. The time simply isn’t right—that’s all.”

The Garuda’s words struck a chord with Angelina. Relief spread throughout her chest, and a heavy burden was lifted from her shoulders. She didn’t have to sing right now. Moreover, she wouldn’t cast a shadow on Kyril’s future.

“Um, I failed the test, right?” she asked.

The matriarch came back to herself with a jolt. “Not at all!” She shook her head fervently. “You haven’t presented the Garuda with her meal yet! The possibility remains!”

Angelina let out a deep sigh. First of all, one couldn’t be a Vinka without being

able to sing. She would be useless—a priestess in name only. It wouldn't be right for such a person to receive a Vinka's special privileges.

Regardless, the matriarch wanted to detain Angelina on Mt. Jinlong at any cost. So long as the princess remained here, Feilong wouldn't destroy the Heavenly Sovereign Temple, as he loved his daughter dearly. Thus, the matriarch forced Angelina to carry the Garuda's favorite berries. Whether or not the girl could sing, she would serve an important function by remaining on Mt. Jinlong.

Angelina remained near the entrance, refusing to move forward. "I-I'm scared..." she stammered.

The Garuda always rested on her perch or the Kalavinka's shoulder. So long as Angelina didn't approach the divine avian, she couldn't feed it.

"There's no need to fear the Garuda," the matriarch said. "She didn't fly into a rage during the festival, now did she?"

When the matriarch pushed Angelina's back softly, static electricity zapped her. Startled, she pulled her hand back.

"Mish Garuda is so big though," Angelina insisted, shaking her head back and forth.

An annoyed expression clouded the matriarch's face. "In that case, I'll carry you. If we're together, you won't be scared, right?"

"No, I'm scared!" Angelina cried, shaking her head furiously and backing away. "Don't make me do it!"

"It's okay," the matriarch reassured her. Ignoring Angelina's will, she placed her hands beneath the girl's underarms to pick her up. At that moment, Angelina's dress shone with crackling light, and a shock of electricity zapped the matriarch's hand. She had activated Feilong's protective magic.

"Wha?!" the matriarch yelped, yanking her hands back. "Was that protective magic?!" Here, she laughed foolishly, proceeding to make excuses for herself. "How strange. Such magic should only activate in response to someone with malicious intent."

After shaking her numb hands, the matriarch attempted to pick up Angelina again. In response, Ryuho growled at her. Jumping, the matriarch pulled her hands back again. At the same time, Ryuho placed his forepaws around Angelina in a protective fashion.

Still smiling foolishly, the matriarch continued making excuses for herself. “Please understand, Holy Flame Tiger. I’m not trying to harm the Polaris Prin—”

“Shut up!” Ryuho growled, his fur bristling. “Don’t touch Lina!”

The matriarch took a step backward. The sight of a Flame Tiger hissing menacingly made her heart race with fear. “If the Polaris Princess becomes the Kalavinka, then—”

“Seriously?!” Ryuho growled. “You’re trying to turn her into the Kalavinka now, not just a regular Vinka?”

The matriarch clucked her tongue softly. “This is why I can’t stand animals...” she muttered under her breath.

Ryuho’s ears twitched. However, as he prepared to roar again, Angelina raised her voice instead. “Don’t mock Ryuho! I won’t listen to anyone who makes fun of him! Get away from me!”

“But Polaris Princess—” the matriarch began.

“Get away from me!” Angelina interrupted. “Why are you ignoring me?! I already told you no!”

As tears welled in Angelina’s eyes, a pang of guilt shot through the matriarch’s chest. Nevertheless, she couldn’t back down for the sake of the Heavenly Sovereign Temple.

“Please listen to me,” the matriarch said. “The Polaris Princess *should* become the Kalavinka to aid Jinlong’s prosperity. If the royal family and the Heavenly Sovereign Temple form a strong alliance, everyone in the empire will reap the rewards. Enduring a smidge of discomfort for the people is the role of the royal family, is it not? Don’t you think you’re being a bit selfish, Polaris Princess?”

Angelina bit her lip. Nara, as well as the other Vinkas, had come here to aid the empire and their villages, pushing aside their desires to be with their



families.

*Am I being selfish?* Angelina wondered. *If I endure being a Vinka, will that make everyone else happy? In that case—*

“Shut the hell up!” Ryuho shouted, spewing a jet of flames. “What’s wrong with being selfish?! It’s Lina’s life! She should live however she wants!” Ryuho tossed Angelina on his back. “Let’s ditch this place!”

He burned down the wall and escaped the room. Seeing this, the blood drained from the faces of the matriarch and all her companions.

“Water!” the matriarch yelled. “Someone bring water to put out the fire!”

A group of daoshi and former Vinkas gathered together in a frantic attempt to quell the flames.

“A Nanranese holy beast never should have become a divine guardian!” the matriarch shrieked, stomping her foot on the ground. “What were those fools in the palace mausoleum thinking?! Do they realize what sucking up to Feilong has cost us?!” The matriarch called out to her subordinates. “That filthy beast has kidnapped the Polaris Princess! We must save her! However, be careful not to harm her either! Aim for that dreadful monster’s legs!”

In response, numerous armed daoshi gathered near the hole in the wall. As arrows zipped toward Ryuho, he halted and let forth a bellowing roar. A wall of flames jetted up between Angelina and the daoshi, separating them.

“Damn that savage beast!” the matriarch shrieked. “Someone bring water to quell the flames!”

Nara had never heard the matriarch shout with such fury. As she watched the confused mass of daoshi scrambling about, she trembled with fright. Meanwhile, the Garuda chirped from atop her shoulder. When she looked down at the divine avian, its tranquil, black eyes reminded her of the night sky over Mt. Jinlong. This silence often preceded the Garuda bursting into song. Thus, a spark of courage ignited within Nara. Princess Angelina—a young girl—was being chased by adults. Even so, she continued fighting to protect future Vinkas.

*Can I really stand here and do nothing?* Nara wondered. *Should I not act as*

well?

Finally, she balled her trembling hand into a fist. She placed the Garuda on its perch and knelt before it. “I beg of you, Holy Garuda, please lend me your strength.”

In response, the Garuda merely blinked.

“I want you to save the Polaris...” Nara hesitated. “No, I want you to save Princess Angelina!”

She wanted to rescue Angelina as Nara, not as the Kalavinka. After all, Angelina had called Nara by her real name.

After alighting onto the ground, the Garuda walked over to the burned-down wall. With its back to Nara, the divine avian then spread its wings.

“Are you returning to the heavens, Holy Garuda?” Nara asked, her stomach a pit of despair.

Multiple daoshi armed with bows and arrows were chasing an innocent young girl. Clearly, the Heavenly Sovereign Temple had gone mad. Their faith existed to help other people first and foremost. How could they seek to capture and imprison a single girl in good conscience?

Vinkas had to endure the loneliness of living apart from their families. Many of them longed to return home. Nonetheless, all had aspired to come here. None of them had been forced to take the exam like Angelina.

*Considering what the temple’s become, it wouldn’t be strange for the Garuda to abandon us,* Nara thought.

Chirping loudly, the Garuda turned its back on Nara. At that moment, it grew to the same size as the divine avian of legend. While spreading its wings, the Garuda pointed to its red back with its beak, urging Nara to climb on.

“Thank you, Holy Garuda...!” Nara cried, clinging to its warm back.

Once she’d climbed on, the Garuda took to the skies. The large, crimson bird was as sublime as the rising sun.



**RYUHO** continued descending the mountain with Angelina on his back. Due to the recent rain, most people would have difficulty finding their footing on the slushy ground. As a Flame Tiger, however, Ryuho didn't struggle in the slightest.

"What the hell is wrong with them?!" Ryuho shouted. "I won't let them make fun of you, Lina!"

Ryuho getting angry on her behalf put a smile on Angelina's face. She hugged his large, warm back with all her might. Beneath his soft fur, she could feel his solid, reassuring muscles.

*I'll be okay with Ryuho protecting me, she thought, rubbing her tears of joy into his fluffiness. He'll save me no matter what.*

"Oh, I just had a great idea!" Ryuho shouted. "Why doesn't Feilong become a Vinka? Then Kyril can be emperor!"

When Angelina pictured Feilong in Vinka robes, she couldn't help but laugh. "Only girls can become Vinkas, Ryuho. And they have to be small ones, too."

"Not my problem!"

Ryuho and Angelina descended the mountain at a steady clip. Even so, they had to stop upon reaching the river. Muddy water streamed down the mountain, blocking the road. The matriarch hadn't been lying about the broken bridge. That said, the daoshi had probably destroyed it on purpose.

Ryuho would have difficulty leaping across the bridge with Angelina on his back. If he were by himself, he could have managed one way or another. However, on the off chance that he dropped her, the situation would grow even more dire. All the while, the armed daoshi pursued them from behind.

Fortunately, Angelina's escort forces had already arrived on the other side of the river. Yuen stood at the head. He'd just been devising a means of erecting a new bridge across the river.

"Princess Angelina!" he called out upon seeing her.

"Yuen!" she called back.

Not too long ago, Yuen had received the letter sent via arrow, which had instructed him to return to the capital due to the broken bridge. After reading

it, he'd grown suspicious of the Heavenly Sovereign Temple. Without delay, he'd used the empire's fastest carrier pigeon to send a letter to Feilong. Additionally, his forces had surrounded the holy site, violating the prohibition of men to retrieve Angelina.

The daoshi leveled their arrows at the imperial forces, eyes burning with hatred. "This is Mt. Jinlong—a holy site forbidden to men!" one of them cried out. "Atone for your sins with your lives!"

"For your crime of imprisoning Princess Angelina, we shall now subjugate Mt. Jinlong!" Yuen shouted back. "But if you hand the princess over quietly, we will take our leave!"

"The Polaris Princess belongs with the Heavenly Sovereign Temple!"

Sparks flew between the two. A sudden squall blew across the crowds, and the sky darkened. When everyone looked upwards, they found Feilong riding upon the Golden Dragon. After receiving Yuen's message, he flew to Mt. Jinlong with all haste.

While bellowing with laughter, the Golden Dragon shot a bolt of lightning at the ground, seemingly as an afterthought. The daoshi panicked. Even the battle-hardened soldiers stirred with discomfort.

"You daoshi are presumptuous indeed. I am the Golden Dragon, and I've come to retrieve Princess Angelina."

In response to his thunderous voice, the daoshi trembled. Immediately, they bowed their heads and saluted with hands over their hearts.

"Angelina is the Polaris Princess!" the dragon boomed. "Those who would attempt to turn her into a priestess are fools!"

"But if the Polaris Princess became the Kalavinka, then—" the matriarch tried to argue.

"Silence, you imbecile!" the dragon interrupted her. "The Four Divinities and I have recognized her as the Polaris Princess! Would you lowly mortals dare defy us?!"

"Certainly not, but...! Sh-She could become a living goddess!"

When the matriarch refused to back down, an irritated Feilong drew the sword at his waist and raised it skywards. The scrap of cloth fastened to the handle fluttered in the wind. Angelina had given her father this protective charm one year ago.

At Feilong's signal, the imperial soldiers leveled their bows at the daoshi. When Feilong lowered his sword, they would all release their arrows. The daoshi had bows as well, but they had only served as guards on Mt. Jinlong. If this turned into a battle, the female soldiers wouldn't stand a chance against the imperial forces. Feilong would destroy the entire Heavenly Sovereign Temple to bring Angelina home. He would show mercy to no one—neither woman nor daoshi.

"Ryuhō, protect Angelina!" Feilong roared.

"What do you think I've been doing this whole time?!" Ryuhō shouted back.

He hid Angelina under his stomach and erected a wall of flames around them. Despite nocking their arrows, the daoshi still trembled before the Golden Dragon. Even so, if the imperial forces planned to trample this holy site, they couldn't back down.

"That's enough, Fodder!" Angelina cried.

Even so, Feilong began to lower his sword, his face impassive. At that moment, a high-pitched note reminiscent of a transverse flute resounded across the sky of Mt. Jinlong. Startled, Angelina poked her head out from under Ryuhō's belly. Likewise, Ryuhō and the daoshi looked up at the sky. Since Feilong and the Golden Dragon were already airborne, they merely squinted.

An enormous bird soared across the heavens, a small girl riding on its back. It was as if a young goddess were riding upon a brilliantly burning sun.

"Nara...?" Angelina mumbled.

Her jaw dropped. The sound had been the Garuda's cries. However, the divine avian had undergone a transformation. It was now large enough for a person to ride upon. While the Garuda circled the upper air, its high and clear voice rang out across the mountain. Echoing from the distant heavens, its sustained note seemed capable of reaching the stars. The anguish and doleful beauty of the

Garuda's song touched Angelina's heart.

At the same time, the Kalavinka's singing voice reverberated against the craggy surface of the mountain. By singing and dancing on an alpine mountain every day, she'd gained superhuman lung capacity, which imbued her song with even greater divinity. All the while, the Garuda harmonized with her.

As the very air sparkled, the warlike atmosphere subsided. The daoshi gaped at the Garuda. The imperial soldiers loosened their bowstrings. Before long, the divine avian descended towards the surface. After picking up Ryuho and Angelina in its talons, it placed them before Feilong on top of the Golden Dragon.

In a flash, Feilong sheathed his sword and scooped up his daughter. "Lina!" he cried, squeezing her in his arms.

"Fodder, I can't breathe..." Angelina mumbled, her face squashed against his armor.

Without delay, Feilong readjusted his hold on Angelina so that he could cradle her. "I'm sorry for coming so late, Lina."

"It's okay. I'm just glad you came at all."

Angelina wrapped her arms around her father's neck. His silver hair—frozen and covered in frost—brushed her cheek. Feilong had remained in the capital while awaiting her return. After learning about the temple's obstruction, he'd asked the Golden Dragon for assistance and flown to Mt. Jinlong. Usually, the journey would take ten days by carriage. Riding the Golden Dragon had been his only option to arrive here in one day.

Even so, the upper air was cold, and due to traveling at speeds beyond human understanding, even his eyelashes were frozen. Only Feilong could have endured such hardship.

Feilong and the Golden Dragon were hardly on good terms. Nonetheless, they'd worked together to save Angelina. When she realized this, tears of joy spilled from her eyes.







“You came too, Mishter Dragon,” Angelina said.

“Indeed,” he replied. “Though I was loathe to help Emperor Whelp, I did it for your sake. Fortune can be quite fickle.”

When the Golden Dragon laughed, Feilong clucked his tongue.

Angelina nodded. “Thanks, Mishter Dragon.”

“You needn’t thank me. Simply give me a good, long head pat another time.”

“Okay!”

“Put Lina down!” Ryuho barked, digging his forepaws into Feilong’s thighs.

“Put Lina down!”

Ignoring Ryuho, Feilong looked down at the daoshi. In response, they backed away in fright.

“As I suspected, the Heavenly Sovereign Temple needs to be—” Feilong began.

At that moment, the Garuda alighted in front of the imperial forces, interrupting him. “Purity and fortune!” the Kalavinka called out to the soldiers from atop the Garuda’s back. The soldiers’ eyes widened at her electrifying voice.

The Kalavinka turned to face the other side of the river, still astride the Garuda. “Purity and fortune!” she called again as the divine avian spread its large, red wings. Her resolute expression contrasted the discomposure of the daoshi. No one who witnessed her majesty would doubt her status as a young, living goddess. In response to the Kalavinka’s words, the daoshi dropped their bows, which clattered against the craggy surface.

According to legend, the Kalavinka had once ridden on the Garuda’s back while delivering the songs of the heavens. In recent history, however, no Garuda had ever grown large enough to carry a person on its back. The story had been considered an exaggerated myth.

Now, that myth had come to life.

The Kalavinka and Garuda standing between the crowds were a young

goddess and divine avian. No daoshi could defy their commands.

Angelina gripped Feilong's frozen hair and regarded him with upturned eyes. "Fodder..."

Nothing good would come of the temple and the imperial forces waging war. When Feilong realized this, he breathed a quiet sigh. "...You want me to forgive them?"

"The Vinkas didn't do anything wrong," Angelina replied. "If you start fighting here, what'll happen to those girls?"

*This is Feilong—the cruel emperor, Angelina thought. If he decides to destroy the Starlight Mausoleum, he'll crush every temple in the empire, not just Mt. Jinlong. When that happens, the Vinkas will have no place to go.*

As a result, the impoverished villages saved by Vinkas would remain destitute. Presently, Jinlong didn't have another system in place to take over the Heavenly Sovereign Temple's role.

When Angelina stared down at the daoshi, the women hung their heads awkwardly.

"I don't want to make the Vinkas sad," Angelina spoke to the crowd. "I don't want to see my fodder and the daoshi hurt each other either. I love the Vinkas' dancing and absolutely adore the Kalavinka's singing."

One of the daoshi knelt on the ground and bowed her head.

The Garuda turned towards Angelina and let out a long chirp. "Polaris Princess," it said telepathically. "Please listen to my request."

"Mish Garuda...?"

"I shall give you one of my tail feathers. Use it to purify this holy site, and ask your accompanying forces to retreat. Mt. Jinlong doesn't belong solely to humans. Many creatures residing here couldn't survive anywhere else. Please—I wish for you to protect this mountain."

Neither the Garudas nor the silkworms could survive outside Mt. Jinlong. With this in mind, Angelina nodded. "I am Polaris Princess Angelina!" she cried out from atop the Golden Dragon and inside the emperor's arms. "By order of the

Holy Garuda, I will relay her words to you!”

In answer, the soldiers and the daoshi all knelt before the Polaris Princess.

“The Garuda shall use her power to purify this holy site!” Angelina continued. “She asks both armies to retreat!”

Feilong clucked his tongue, his face twisting into a bitter expression. “If Lina says so, I suppose we have no other choice,” he grumbled.

Beating its wings, the Garuda took to the skies again. While soaring across the azure heavens, the divine avian’s large, red wings blocked out the sun, casting a shadow over the earth. When the Garuda performed a grand turn, its tail feathers—long and golden—drew a circle in the air. Angelina could have mistaken that ring for a second sun.

The Kalavinka began singing *Blue Skies When the Rain Passes*. Laborers often sang this song when doing ground leveling work.

As the Garuda flew in a circle above the dragon, one of her golden tail feathers fell in front of Angelina. The dragon laughed, and the divine avian chirped a song.

“Purify this tainted holy site, Polaris Princess Angelina,” the Garuda commanded her.

“How?” Angelina asked.

“Pray for the land to become pure while waving my tail feather.”

Angelina nodded and did as instructed. Pink light particles appeared from the Tianshi’s Protective Seal on her palm, traveled through the Garuda’s tail feather, and finally fell upon the earth. Within moments, the land, ravaged by rain and troop activity, bloomed again. Seeing this miracle, the daoshi felt ashamed of their outrageous behavior.

The matriarch fell to her knees and pressed her forehead against the ground. “My most sincere apologies, Polaris Princess... No, Princess Angelina!”

She’d never called Angelina by name before. Nevertheless, Angelina was both the imperial princess and the Polaris Princess. In the matriarch’s opinion, only her name—not her title—could express her unique individuality.

Angelina smiled, and Ryuho huffed smugly.

Once Feilong had ordered the army to descend the mountain, the three of them climbed off the Golden Dragon and rejoined the troops. As a young girl, Angelina wouldn't have been able to withstand traveling on the dragon for long distances at high speeds. Thus, Yuen's forces left Mt. Jinlong with the kneeling daoshi at their backs.



**AFTER** watching the imperial troops descend the mountain, Nara returned to the peak. Once inside the Starlight Mausoleum, she hugged the divine avian around the neck. "Thank you so much, Holy Garuda."

The Garuda unfurled its enormous wings and embraced Nara. The divine avian chirped, pestering the girl for a song. Nara obliged. However, she sang one of her mother's lullabies rather than a song from the Heavenly Sovereign Temple. While listening, the Garuda shrank again. Once finished, the divine avian perched on Nara's shoulder and nuzzled her cheek.

"That tickles," Nara said with a laugh.

The Garuda laughed as well.

At that moment, Nara remembered the gift she'd received from Angelina. "Would you like to eat some candied jujubes, Holy Garuda?"

*What a wonderful idea, she thought. Eating candied jujubes with the Garuda while singing songs from my home village.*

The Garuda responded with a high-pitched chirp. Unlike Angelina, Nara couldn't understand the divine avian's words. While feeling somewhat jealous of the other girl, she patted the Garuda's head.

"Well then, let's eat them together," Nara said.

The two passed through the burned-down hole in the wall. Inside her room, Nara looked up at the sky over Mt. Jinlong. White clouds traveled swiftly across the azure heavens. Summer was ending, and autumn was approaching. All the while, birds soared across a blue expanse so clear that it must have been purified.

## Chapter 7: Angelina and the Prince

**ANGELINA** had returned to her room in the North Star Palace. On this pleasant afternoon, the breeze carried the fragrant scent of tea olives. Meanwhile, the Garuda's golden tail feather continued to glow in one corner of the room. As Angelina read a book, Ryuho placed his jaw on her head in his feline form. He purred comfortably while listening to her read aloud.

A little while later, Angelina stopped. The next passage of the book contained song lyrics. For many generations, Jinlongian children had sung this song together using hand gestures. The scene even described children playing together in that manner.

Unsure what to do, Angelina glanced at Ryuho.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Well..." Angelina began, pointing at the book. "This part is a song, and I'm not sure how I should read it."

Ryuho peered down at the page as well. "Oh, you're right," he spoke through a carefree yawn, his maw opening wide. "Since you're so good at reading, I never would've thought you couldn't sing."

Angelina's shoulders slumped. Ryuho hadn't meant to be malicious, but singing and reading aloud were different things.

"I didn't know either," she said. "I'd never tried to sing before then..."

She'd never had friends of the same age to sing with like the characters in this book. Marfa—her wet nurse—had sung lullabies to her, but those songs had originated from Yule. As a young girl, Angelina hadn't been able to memorize lyrics in an unfamiliar language.

During Angelina's first life, the palace ladies had sneered at her when she'd attempted to imitate their humming. "Just looking at you is giving me secondhand embarrassment," they'd scoffed. Consequently, Angelina had

withdrawn into her shell and become incapable of singing.

Despite her multiple loops, Angelina had never recovered from the thought patterns drilled into her as a young girl. From her perspective, songs were meant solely for listening. She'd never considered singing one herself. That said, the Garuda covering its ears had still shocked Angelina. "I don't want to force you to sing," the divine avian had been trying to convey. Still, whenever she recalled the perplexed faces of the daoshi, embarrassment welled up within her. Unable to bear the shame, she covered her flushed face with her hands.

"What's wrong, Lina?" Ryuho asked.

"I'm embarrassed," she replied.

"Why?"

"Singing so poorly in front of the Garuda was humiliating, right?"

"In what way?"

Slowly, Angelina peered at Ryuho from between her fingers. The tiger cocked his head, unable to understand her.

"You weren't embarrassed that I couldn't sing?" Angelina asked.

"Why would I be embarrassed because *you* couldn't do something?"

"You really feel that way?"

Ryuho furrowed his brow. "What reason would I have to feel embarrassed? Weren't *you* the one who felt ashamed?"

"But didn't you feel humiliated being with someone as embarrassing as me?"

"Why would I? You're you, and I'm me."

"You weren't put off when I couldn't sing well?" Angelina asked in a soft, quivering voice. "Or disappointed? You didn't start to hate me...?"

Ryuho huffed angrily. "Don't doubt the way I feel!" he barked. "I love you, Lina! Even if everyone in the whole world hated you, I would still love you! Even if you hated yourself!"

As Ryuho continued huffing angrily, tears spilled from Angelina's eyes. "You're right..." she mumbled, squeezing him in her arms. "Sorry about that. And thank

you, Ryuho. I love you too.”

Ryuho gave her a big, wet lick on the cheek. “And anyway, I thought you were pretty cute back then,” he said, his mouth opening wide in raucous laughter.

“Cute?” Angelina repeated.

“Yep. You were trying so hard to do something you stink at! It was cute enough to melt my heart!”

Angelina smiled. “But what should I do about this song?”

“I’ll sing it!”

“Okay, but do you actually know this song? It looks Jinlongian.”

“Nope! But you should sing songs however you like, right?” Grinning widely, Ryuho sang in a loud voice. Despite not even knowing the pitch, he belted out the lyrics. “Black bear walking down the road! Clap, clap, clap!”

Incidentally, the words *clap, clap, clap* weren’t part of the lyrics. Ryuho was interjecting his own chant into the song.

“White bear walking from the other side!” Ryuho continued singing. “Clap, clap, clap!”

As his tail wagged like a conductor’s baton, Angelina’s body began to sway of its own accord.

“When neither bear moved out of the way...! Clap, clap, clap! They crashed together and turned into a panda! Clap, clap, clap!”

After looking at each other, Ryuho and Angelina burst out laughing.

“What a weird song!” Ryuho shouted. “That’s hilarious!”

He sang the song over and over again, having taken a liking to it. “When neither bear moved out of the way...! Clap, clap, clap! They crashed together and turned into a panda!”

“Clap, clap, clap!” Angelina interjected.

Ryuho smiled. “See, Lina, you can sing!”

“You’re right!” Angelina said with a gasp. “I did it! I just sang!”

The two threw their arms around each other while squealing with delight.

After seeing Ryuho sing so comfortably, Angelina had been encouraged to imitate him. “Songs are songs, regardless of whether you mess up the lyrics or don’t know the pitch,” he’d taught her. Making a mistake didn’t have to be embarrassing, and no one would despise her for being unable to sing. Ryuho’s lesson had freed her from the curse of her past.

“Hey, you’re pretty good, Lina!” Ryuho said with a laugh. “I’ll teach you a different song some other time, so let’s sing together then!”

Ryuho hated studying but quite liked singing and dancing. He knew plenty of songs.

“Okay!” Angelina exclaimed. “Teach me songs from your country!”

Ryuho nuzzled his forehead against her vigorously. “Leave it to me!”

Angelina’s chest swelled with joy. Once, her box of songs had been empty, but Ryuho had placed one in it for her. When she imagined the box filling little by little, giddy anticipation overcame her.

She recalled the Garuda’s words.

*“Songs should flow naturally from one’s lips, Polaris Princess. You needn’t sing if you don’t want to. I would love to hear your voice someday, but watching others force you to sing pains me. Being unable to sing isn’t your fault. The time isn’t right—that’s all.”*

*It’s just like she said,* Angelina thought.

She looked at the Garuda’s tail feather, now decorating her room. As the autumn wind caressed the golden feather, it glowed faintly, appearing to celebrate Angelina and Ryuho’s song.



**HEAVY** footsteps interrupted Angelina and Ryuho’s precious leisure time. They exchanged glances.

“Please wait, Father!” Kyril called out in the distance.

Angelina cocked her head. “What’s going on?”



The next moment, her door flew open with a bang. When Feilong entered the room, he appeared as demonic as any fiend. Ryuho's tail reflexively puffed up. The cruel emperor's bloodlust terrified even a Flame Tiger.

"Fodder?" Angelina asked.

"Lina!" he shouted. "What's your relationship with Hisame?!"

His forcefulness caused her eyes to widen. "Hisame?" she repeated timidly. "We're friends."

"Do you have a *special* relationship?!"

Angelina cocked her head again. "Um, special?"

As Feilong hounded her with questions, Kyril attempted to hold him back with both arms. "Father! You're scaring Lina, don't you see?"

"But Kyril!" Feilong bellowed.

After deciding that talking to Feilong would only complicate the situation, Angelina turned to Kyril. "What's this about Hisame, Big Brudder?"

"So you *are* friends with Hisame?" he asked.

"Yeah! Ryuho is, too!"

"Like hell I am!" Ryuho grumbled.

"I see," Kyril said. "Where did you meet Hisame?"

"In the outer enclosure during the ascension ceremony," Angelina replied. "Mishter Knight was there too."

Feilong cursed under his breath. "Useless scum. Perhaps I should execute him..."

Kyril shot his father a withering glare and turned back to Angelina. "How interesting. And what kind of child is Hisame?"

"She's like a really smart and cute older sister!"

"Erm, cute older sister...?"

"Yep! You saw her with the Andan delegation, right?" Somewhat anxious, Angelina regarded Kyril with upturned eyes as she posed her next question.

“Should I not have become friends with her?”

Since no one had told her beforehand not to speak with Andans, she hadn't given the matter any thought. Even so, the position of the imperial princess came with many constraints. As Angelina looked at her silent older brother, she grew even more anxious. Based on how Feilong had stormed into her room, perhaps she'd caused some major problem. Tears welled in her azure eyes, her heart began to race, and her hands quivered.

“I'm sh-shorry...” she mumbled. “I, um, didn't know any better...”

Watching Angelina tremble broke Kyril's heart. “No, it's okay,” he said. “You can speak to Andans, Lina.”

“But you can't be friends with Hisame!” Feilong roared.

Angelina stiffened. She was so frightened she nearly burst into tears. When a sob escaped her lips, she pressed her hands over her mouth.

Immediately, Ryuho wrapped his forepaws around her. “Don't yell at Lina!” he barked at Feilong.

Kyril shot the emperor yet another withering glare. “Father!”

“Why can't I be friends with Hisame...?” Angelina asked. “Can I not send her letters...?”

She viewed Hisame as a precious friend from another country who'd taught her a great deal.

“You think of Hisame as an older sister, correct?” Kyril asked for confirmation.

Angelina nodded. “Yep.”

Such beautiful girls shrouded in an aura of evanescence were a rarity.

“Those dastardly Andans!” Feilong roared. “They'll pay for using such underhanded tricks to deceive Lina!” He muttered under his breath with a wicked smirk on his face. “But a big sister, eh? Hmph. If that's how Lina thinks of the child, perhaps that serves them right...”

Kyril let out a soft sigh. “Listen here, Lina. Hisame has requested to come study at the Purple Forbidden Palace.”

Angelina whipped her head up. “Really?!”

“Yes. Does that make you happy?”

“Of course!”

As Angelina’s face split into a wide grin, Feilong gritted his teeth hard enough to crack a molar.

“But there’s something else I need to tell you, Lina,” Kyril said. “Hisame is actually a boy.”

“Huh?” Angelina asked. “A boy? Are you mistaking her for someone else?”

“No. Hisame is the sixth Andan prince.”

Angelina cocked her head and looked at Ryuho.

“You didn’t notice?” he asked with a deep sigh.

“Wha? You knew Hisame was a boy this whole time?” She gaped.

“Yeah. He smelled like a male.”

Angelina fell into dumbfounded silence.

*Come to think of it, Ryuho always referred to Hisame as a kid, not a girl, she realized.*

Though Angelina had mistaken Hisame for a girl this whole time, so had the people of the outer enclosure. Hisame dressed in feminine robes and wore his hair long. Likewise, he spoke in a gentle tone and had an adorable face. Angelina hadn’t seen any reason to doubt his gender.

“I see,” she said, her face falling. “Maybe I should apologize to him when we see each other again. Mistaking a boy for a girl is rude, isn’t it?”

Kyril chuckled. “I don’t think you need to worry about that.”

“Then why did you come here?” Angelina asked, cocking her head again.

Hisame being a boy or girl made no difference to her. She didn’t believe their friendship would change based on gender.

“I thought this news might surprise you,” Kyril said, “so I came to tell you about it beforehand.”

“Oh, I see. Thanks for letting me know, Big Brudder!”

Smiling quietly, Kyril patted Angelina on the head. “See, Father? There’s nothing to worry about.”

“I wasn’t worried,” Feilong replied.

“Then should we accept Hisame’s request?”

Feilong nodded reluctantly. “I suppose so...”

Considering how dearly Feilong now treasured Angelina, he no longer wanted to fight pointless battles. Instead, he wanted his daughter to live a peaceful life. Since an armistice with Anda would help facilitate this, he had no choice.

“Ryuhō,” Kyril said, looking at him seriously. “Hisame is the sixth prince of Anda. We’ll come to an official decision after deliberating with Prime Minister Tomi and the others, but, as a nation, there’s no reason for us to turn down his request. On the surface, Hisame might be studying abroad, but in reality, Anda is handing over a hostage.”

Jinlong and Anda had been at war for a long time. By welcoming an Andan prince into the Canopy, Jinlong would effectively be declaring an armistice. Furthermore, Anda had made this request, and they hadn’t demanded an exchange of hostages. These were favorable conditions for Jinlong.

Ryuhō didn’t understand what Kyril’s words implied. “Huh?” he asked, furrowing his brow.

Kyril couldn’t suppress a chuckle. The official letter from Anda had included an unofficial letter from Hisame. The young prince personally wanted to study in Jinlong and detailed his reasons with great enthusiasm—Angelina being one of them. His fondness for her had been abundantly clear. After reading this letter, Feilong and Kyril sensed that Hisame wanted to study abroad just to see Angelina.

“I won’t give him Lina as a bride,” Feilong had said, getting somewhat ahead of himself. Moments later, he’d stormed into his daughter’s room in a fit of rage.

*Isn’t it a little early to be talking about marriage?* Kyril had wondered with

some exasperation. However, with Angelina being the imperial princess, marriage proposals would start pouring in sooner or later.

*But considering how much Father loves Lina, I doubt he'll accept a political marriage, Kyril thought. If Lina does have to get married someday, it should be with someone she loves, and that person should treasure her.*

Still, if Angelina and Hisame *had* been in puppy love, Feilong wouldn't have allowed Hisame into the Canopy, regardless of whether it sparked a war. Fortunately, Angelina had viewed Hisame as an older female friend. There was no reason to forbid him from entering the Canopy.

Kyril handed Angelina a letter. "This is to you from Hisame."

Apart from the letter addressed to Feilong, Hisame had also included a letter to Angelina. While this letter was personal, it was still written by the prince of an enemy nation. As such, the contents had already been verified. The subject matter was what one might have expected from a child.

Angelina opened the letter and read Hisame's elegant handwriting.

*Dear Angelina,*

*My world has grown much brighter since meeting you. Therefore, I would like to learn about your country by your side. If I'm allowed to study abroad in Jinlong, please remain close to me. I hope we become friends with an even stronger connection than you and Ryuho.*

*Sincerely,*

*Hisame*

It was practically a love letter. Even so, Angelina took the words at face value since she'd never received anything of the sort before.

"Hisame's coming back to Jinlong!" Angelina cried. "That's so exciting! Right, Ryuho?!"

"Not at all!" Ryuho shouted, thwapping his tail against the ground. "I object! I'm putting my foot down! I'm totally against this!"

Hisame's letter sounded like a declaration of war to Ryuho. He couldn't remain calm.

As Kyril watched Angelina celebrate with sincere innocence, the prince breathed a sigh of relief. At the same time, he had mixed feelings. From his perspective, Angelina was still an adorable little girl. He didn't want her thinking about romance yet.



**AS** usual, Ryuho slipped out of Angelina's room during study time. He hadn't been able to perfectly assume his human form today. A tail sprouted from his lower back, and tiger ears popped out of his head.

He and Angelina had been about to start letter practice—Ryuho's least favorite subject. Since he spent so much time with paws, he wasn't accustomed to holding a pen. Thus, he struggled to write and didn't like reading either. He preferred having Angelina read out loud to him. To make matters worse, he hated sitting still in human form, and he had no interest in history.

When Ryuho reached adulthood, he could become a Flame Tiger or a Nanranese prince. Either way, learning about Jinlong seemed pointless. As a result, he'd gotten into the habit of always ditching class.

When Junshi spotted Ryuho, the latter tried to flee as fast as his legs would carry him.

"Have you heard about Prince Hisame, Ryuho?" Junshi asked.

Ryuho suddenly deflated. Junshi hadn't come to scold him for skipping class.

"He's going to study abroad here, right?" Ryuho asked in a huff. "He should just stay in Anda!"

Junshi's eyes twinkled with amusement. "You know that Hisame is the sixth prince of Anda, don't you?"

"Yeah, I heard that from Kyril."

Junshi lowered his voice. "Royalty often marries other royalty."

"Is that right?" Ryuho asked, puffing out his chest smugly. "I'm a prince too, y'know?"

"Yes, both you *and* Hisame are princes. That's all I wanted to say."

“Huh? You’re not gonna scold me for ditching class?”

“Nope. Well then, Ryuho, please return to Angelina’s room for snack time.”

Junshi left with a smile on his face.

*What a creepy guy,* Ryuho thought while pondering the significance of Junshi’s words. *Why would he tell me something so obvious? But come to think of it, Kyril said the same thing, didn’t he? How come?*

Ryuho scrunched up his face, straining to come up with an answer. When he thought his head might explode, his ears suddenly shot straight up. “Wait! Does this mean Angelina and Hisame could get *married?!?*”

When Ryuho recalled Hisame’s letter, a chill ran down his spine. His penmanship paled in comparison to Hisame’s beautiful handwriting. Though Hisame’s letter had been short, anyone would have considered the contents well-written. Also, he’d expressed his wholehearted desire to see Angelina again.

Since Ryuho spent most of his time with paws, penmanship wasn’t his forte. He still couldn’t write beautiful letters like Hisame.

*Lina seemed pretty happy when she got Hisame’s letter,* Ryuho thought, the memory of her delight springing to mind. *I’ve never written her a letter myself... But then again, we’re always together! There’s no reason for me to write her a letter!*

Another realization dawned on Ryuho. If Hisame began living in the Canopy, they would be on equal footing. This brought the festival back to mind. While Angelina and Hisame had walked around holding hands, Ryuho had merely watched over them in his feline form. He recalled the sadness, loneliness, and frustration of being a third wheel. The festival alone had been agonizing enough, but if Hisame moved here permanently, Ryuho would have to endure that over and over again.

*Hell no!* Ryuho shouted internally, panic seizing his chest. *Over my dead body!*

Currently, he alone served at Angelina’s side, and she’d placed her full trust in him. For this reason, Ryuho had been confident that they were each other’s best friends. Yet, once Hisame moved into the palace, how might things

change?

On the final day of the festival, Hisame acted with perfect decorum during the farewell ceremony. While Ryuho had participated as a Flame Tiger, Hisame had attended as a prince. Just as Kyril had protected Angelina from the older Andan prince, Hisame could also protect her through words, not just strength.

Ryuho imagined Angelina as an adult, bedecked in the finest garments as the imperial princess. While Ryuho stood boldly by her side in his feline form, Hisame stood by her opposite side in Jinlongian robes. As Angelina and Hisame peered down at a difficult book together, Hisame wrapped his arm around her shoulder, fangs exposed and horn growing from his forehead.

Instantly, Ryuho's ears pinned back, his tail puffing out in fright. His heart ached. He didn't want to imagine that future.

*At this rate, I won't be the most important person to Lina anymore! I remember how much fun she had listening to Hisame's stories! And what's with what he said in his letter?! "I hope we become friends with an even stronger connection than you and Ryuho!"*

"I-I'll start studying like I'm supposed to!" Ryuho shouted. "I swear! Wait for me, Junshi!"

Junshi came to a sudden halt and turned around. He nodded slowly, a gentle smile on his lips. "That's the spirit, Ryuho."

"Yeah, I'm gonna give it my all this time!"

Ryuho's tail stood straight up. Assuming a perfect human form still seemed like a distant prospect. Even so, his crimson and gold eyes burned with fiery resolve.

When Angelina saw Ryuho and Junshi returning together, she squealed with delight. "Welcome back, Ryuho! I was waiting for you!"

"You were?"

"Yep! It's boring when you're not here. Studying is a lot more fun when we're together, y'know?"

As Angelina cocked her head, Ryuho responded with a toothy grin, his tail



wagging smugly. “Then let’s study together!” he cried, his whole body swelling with joy. When he squeezed Angelina in his arms, she wrapped her hands around his back. Rather than beginning their studies, the pair embraced each other tightly. Junshi couldn’t help but chuckle as he watched them, his heart singing with happiness.

## Chapter 8: Angelina Sings at Dusk

**MARFA** walked through the North Star Sanctuary at dusk. Twilight colors dyed the formerly blue heavens. One by one, the black shadows of birds returning to their nests soared across the sky.

Suddenly, Marfa heard soft singing from the Guidepost Tree Garden. “This is a Yulan lullaby...” she muttered to herself.

Recognizing the nostalgic language of her homeland, Marfa came to a halt. She searched for the singer surreptitiously from the corridor of the sanctuary. Before long, she found Kyril cradling Angelina in his arms while singing a lullaby. As Angelina looked up at her brother, her eyes sparkled with joy. She mouthed the words that Kyril sang, giving her full concentration on memorizing the lyrics.

Meanwhile, Ryuho frolicked at Kyril’s feet in his feline form. To be precise, he was protesting Kyril’s hold of Angelina. To Marfa, however, he appeared to be playing around. This altogether normal sight caused her chest to tighten painfully. After all this time, Angelina had found happiness.

As a young girl, Angelina had lived in a rundown storage shed. Despite being the emperor’s daughter, the unfortunate princess hadn’t received proper food, clothing, or shelter. Unable to do much else, Marfa had sung this very song to Angelina on behalf of the deceased empress. It was a forgotten lullaby from the ruined country of Yule that few people could still sing. If Kyril and Angelina stopped singing it, the ephemeral lullaby would disappear from the world.

“So, Prince Kyril remembered this song...” Marfa muttered to herself again.

Pressing a hand to her trembling lips, she recalled the deceased Empress Phaenna. She’d once sung this lullaby to Kyril, simultaneously patting his head and rubbing her pregnant belly. While the song lulled children into a peaceful sleep, it also prayed for them to grow up safe and sound.

Jinlongian royalty didn’t rear their own children. When Phaenna had broken

this tradition to raise Kyril herself, she'd received a great deal of criticism from the nobility. Though Phaenna had appeared gentle and sickly, she'd stood her ground on this issue. "I will take care of my own children," she'd argued stubbornly, and Feilong had allowed her to do so.

*She was a strong mother, Marfa thought. If Kyril hadn't spent those days with her, he wouldn't have grown up so kind and honest.*

Kyril's singing suddenly halted. An impassive Feilong had come to stand in front of him. Ignoring his children's discomfiture, he took Angelina from Kyril to hold her in his arms.

"No, Fodder!" Angelina cried, defying the emperor in an impudent tone. "Big Brudder was singing to me!"

Marfa found this sight charming as well. Though Angelina had once feared her father, she'd now relaxed her guard enough to defy him.

"I can sing too," Feilong answered sullenly.

A memory sprang to Kyril's mind, causing his chest to ache. When Phaenna was still alive, she and Feilong had sung Yulan songs to Kyril together. Such memories inspired warmth, nostalgia, and bittersweet sorrow. Those distant days seemed like a dream or an illusion.

Ryuhō's eyes widened. "*You're* going to sing?"

Without answering, Feilong sang a Yulan lullaby he'd learned from Phaenna. The song spilled from his thin, seemingly frigid lips. His soft, low voice enfolded the garden, ringing out both powerfully and sweetly. Ryuhō looked up at the emperor with genuine surprise. Though the lyrics resembled what Kyril had been singing, the words differed here and there. At several intervals, the names Kyril and Lina were mixed into the lullaby. Feilong had replaced the Yulan words for *my children* with their names as he sang.

Kyril bit his lip. He was already an adult who'd undergone the Crown Prince Ascension Ceremony. He couldn't cry so easily. Nevertheless, something warm welled up from deep within his chest and began to thaw his frigid heart. The ice melted into water, longing to pour outwards.

While looking down and turning his head sideways, Kyril fought to suppress

his tears. No matter what, he didn't want his father to see him crying. As the person who would someday succeed the cruel emperor, he needed to be stronger than anyone else. Yet to Kyril's surprise, Feilong spread out his cape, covered him with it, and patted him on the head. That finally caused the tears to spill from his eyes.

Kyril had felt uneasy as of late. *I'm only needed as the successor to the throne, he'd thought. I mustn't seek Father's love as his child.* Since he knew about Angelina's unhappy upbringing, he'd considered himself blessed. He'd even convinced himself that he shouldn't wish for anything more.

*Angelina is adorable,* Kyril had thought. *It's only natural that Father would dote on her.* Though he hadn't hated or begrudged Angelina for this, he had felt lonely. Now, Feilong's singing brought back happy memories of the days Kyril had spent with his parents. However, Angelina had no such memories. For that reason, Kyril had decided to protect his little sister in their mother's stead. At the same time, he'd also convinced himself not to seek their father's love any further.

*But Father called out my name while singing Mother's song,* Kyril thought. *Not only Lina's... but also mine. Would it be okay for me to reach out my hand?*

As Kyril gripped Feilong's cloak lightly, the emperor could hear his son sniffing beneath the fabric. In response, Feilong wrapped his arm around Kyril's shoulder, pulled him close, and stopped singing.

"I'm sorry," Feilong apologized. "It must have hurt."

"Yes," Kyril replied in a nasal voice. "It did hurt."

Feilong smiled awkwardly. "Sorry for being such a bad father."

Then, he began singing the lullaby again.

"Hey, what do those lyrics mean?" Ryuho asked.

He'd asked Kyril the same question earlier, but the prince hadn't known either.

"My children are more precious to me than any gemstone," Feilong replied curtly. "Be it silver, gold, or pearls."

Angelina squeezed her arms around Feilong's neck. At the same time, Kyril rested his head against Feilong's arm beneath the cloak.

"Oh, cool!" Ryuho shouted. "I like that song! It sounds nice even when a jerk like you sings it! Keep going!"

"You still haven't learned how to speak to your betters, have you...?" Feilong asked. "Well, maybe it's good that you can't study. Keep being an idiot forever."

"The hell did you just say to me?!" Ryuho hissed. "I'm studying like a pro!"

After snorting contemptuously, Feilong resumed singing. Kyril joined in, Angelina hummed the parts she remembered, and Ryuho sang the names Kyril and Lina. All the while, flowers began budding on the Guidepost Tree one after another.

Marfa pressed down on the inner corners of her eyes. To her knowledge, Feilong had never sung a lullaby to Angelina. That made perfect sense, for only Phaenna and Kyril had ever heard the emperor sing.

Suppressing her sobs, Marfa left the corridor. If Feilong noticed her, he would probably stop singing, after all.



**HEARING** a Yulan lullaby, the birds nesting in the Guidepost Tree responded with their own songs. The autumn insects chirped melodies of love as well.

"Do you know any other Yulan songs, Fodder?" Angelina asked.

"...I do," Feilong replied.

"Can you sing them?"

"I'd like to hear them as well," Kyril added.

"Me too, me too!" Ryuho began pestering the emperor.

"If you insist," Feilong acquiesced with a slightly embarrassed laugh. However, none of the children noticed the tinge of red in his ears due to the evening glow.

The autumn sun set early, and the great white, golden star twinkled in the twilight heavens. Before long, the north star would shine upon the inky canvas of

the night sky. Down below, the evening chill caused Angelina to sneeze.

“But perhaps we should head back inside for today,” Feilong said, readjusting his hold of Angelina.



“**LINA**, Lina, Liiiiina!”

A lively atmosphere filled the North Star Palace. To practice his transformations, Ryuho had been playing in his human form often as of late. Today, he and Angelina were playing with his favorite toy, the jingling ball.

After throwing the ball skywards, Ryuho’s face scrunched up in a pouty expression. “I can’t throw as high as Feilong.”

Previously, Feilong had thrown the ball high enough for it to disappear. Attempting to catch it while predicting where it might land had been tremendous fun. Ryuho wanted to play the same game right now.

Angelina tried throwing the ball skywards as well. Of course, it didn’t fly very high. “Yeah, it *is* pretty difficult,” she said. “How do you think we can make it work better?”

Both children furrowed their brows in contemplation as they tossed the ball back and forth. The watching palace ladies found the scene charming.

“Should we have Fodder teach us some other time?” Angelina asked.

Ryuho stomped his foot on the ground. “Hell no! Absolutely not!” His hidden tail and ears both popped out of his human body. Then, his tail bobbed back and forth in anger.

“Why not?” Angelina asked.

Ryuho pursed his lips. “Well...”

He wanted to become as capable as Feilong. If something made Angelina happy, he wanted to be the best at it. Realizing how far he still had to go frustrated him.

“If you learn from someone else, you’ll get better faster,” Angelina noted.

“I know, but... I definitely don’t want Feilong to teach me! Not in a million

years! He'll just make fun of me!"

After stomping the ground again, Ryuho grabbed the ball with his tail and launched it into the air. The beautifully embroidered ball zipped through the sky, climbing higher than it ever had until now. Angelina feared that it might pierce the clouds.

"That was amazing, Ryuho!" she cried.

"Yeah, it was!"

Both children cheered in delight. Though Ryuho hadn't thrown the ball nearly as high as Feilong could, this was still the farthest he'd ever launched it. He and Angelina looked up at the sky, waiting for the ball to drop. In an attempt to catch it first, both fidgeted restlessly, trying to predict where it would land. With the ball absorbing their whole attention, Ryuho bumped his rear into Angelina's back, which caused them to fall on their backsides.

"Are you okay, Lina?!" Ryuho cried out.

"I'm fine, but what about you?!"

After confirming each other's well-being, the ball thumped against Ryuho's head. With a jingle, it then rebounded and landed in Angelina's arms. The pair looked at each other and burst out laughing.

"Yeah, this is super fun!" Ryuho shouted.

"I know, right?!"

As the laughter of two children resounded throughout the sanctuary, the palace ladies regarded the charming scene fondly.

"Next time, let's call Mishter Dragon and have him drop the ball from the sky!" Angelina exclaimed.

"Yeah, I totally agree! That sounds great!"

At that moment, the sky darkened with an ominous rumble. When the two children looked up, they found the Golden Dragon flying above them.

Angelina waved her hand at the sky. "Ah! Mishter Dragon!"

"What do you two think I am, exactly?" the dragon asked with a sigh of

exasperation.

In response to his rumbling voice, the palace ladies fell to the ground and trembled.

Angelina cocked her head. “You’re a protective deity of Jinlong, aren’t you?”

The Golden Dragon laughed heartily. “Indeed. In that case, I suppose I should protect your smile.”

After descending from the sky, he grabbed the jingling ball in his talons and began climbing the heavens again.

The palace ladies all looked upwards, their wide eyes brimming with reverence. “A true rising dragon...!” one of them shouted.

The Golden Dragon continued climbing rapidly. Finally, he seemed to disappear into the sun. Angelina and Ryuho both squinted while looking up at the bright sky.

“Mishter Dragon took our ball...” Angelina mumbled.

“And I really liked it...” Ryuho added.

When the two children exchanged glances, the Golden Dragon’s voice boomed from the sky. “Here it comes!”

Angelina and Ryuho hurriedly looked upwards again, careful not to let the sun burn their eyes. As white herons flew across the azure expanse, not a sound echoed from the sky. Both children furrowed their brows.

“Nothing’s happening,” Ryuho said.

Before long, the ball began to fall, accompanied by a thunderous roar.

“Lina!” Ryuho shouted, his tail puffing out. “Get out of the way! Don’t let it hit you!”

He tackled her out of the way to protect her from the falling ball. As a dull thud reverberated against the ground, the minuscule toy jingled once. The drop had buried it in the garden of the North Star Palace, which caused both children to break out in goosebumps.

“If that had hit us, we would’ve died...” Angelina mumbled.



“Yeah, no kidding...” Ryuho agreed.

As they stared at the ball in disbelief, smoke hissed upwards from the small crater. Undoubtedly, their precious toy had been destroyed.

“How was that, Angelina?” the Golden Dragon called out, returning to the ground in high spirits. “Pretty amusing, no? Well then, time for round two!”

Ryuho raced over to the carter, picked up the ball, and cradled it in both hands. “My jingly ball...” he murmured, turning his back on the dragon to prevent the deity from taking it. “It’s ruined...”

Angelina glared at the dragon while hugging a whimpering Ryuho. “Bad Mishter Dragon!”

“This is what you two wanted, no?” the dragon asked.

“Bad Mishter Dragon! I won’t give you head pats!”

After coiling himself around the two children, the Golden Dragon stuck his face out in front of Angelina. “You intend to threaten me by withholding head pats?”

When Angelina remained deadly serious, the dragon laughed. People often threatened others in ways that they themselves would find inconvenient.

“Then allow me to apologize,” the dragon said. “I wouldn’t want to lose your head pats.”

Angelina smiled in relief. “You’re a good boy, Mishter Dragon, sho I’ll give you lots of head pats!”

As she rubbed him between the horns, he narrowed his eyes blissfully and let forth a great yawn.

Ryuho cast a timid glance at the Golden Dragon. “You promise not to take the ball again, sir?”

“No need to worry, my boy,” the dragon replied with a laugh. “I won’t take anything precious to you.”

Ryuho’s tail shot straight up, and he bounced on his feet. “Thank goodness!”

Seeing his excitement, Angelina smiled as well. “Yeah, thank goodness!”

Both children squealed with delight, embraced each other, and spun around. When the ball fell from Ryuho's hands, it rolled upon the ground, producing a jingling sound. As the Golden Dragon's scales glittered in the afternoon light, Angelina savored her happiness inside Ryuho's arms.





## Side Story: Angelina and the Blue Ocean Bar

**ANGELINA** and company were heading to the Blue Ocean Bar for lunch. Officially, the Banquet Ceremony had ended the day before yesterday. Nevertheless, a festive spirit still lingered in the air that afternoon. As the final day of celebration, it had been declared a holiday in the outer enclosure. Since the paper lanterns hadn't yet been removed, Angelina could still visit the lower city until the end of today. As such, she'd planned to visit the bar today from the beginning.

"I want to go to the festival as a human," Ryuho had said right before departing. Accordingly, two knights were escorting them today.

Angelina was fully prepared for a day out. She'd even changed into an outfit for walking around town. The brown-haired knight and the gray-haired knight were escorting them.

"Lina, Liiina, I can't hide my ears," Ryuho said.

Until minutes ago, he'd been maintaining a perfect human form. However, just as they'd been leaving, his ears had popped out due to sheer happiness. Likewise, he couldn't hide his tail, which now drooped in a dejected manner. If he couldn't conceal his ears and tail, he couldn't visit the outer enclosure.

*Watching Lina and Hisame have so much fun at the festival made me jealous, he thought. I want to visit the outer enclosure with Lina as a human, too. Will our plan get canceled because of this?*

Panicked, Ryuho tried to hide his ears over and over again. Yet no matter how much magic he used, and no matter how many times he pushed down on them, his cute ears didn't budge. His adorable tail remained visible as well.

"I can't go out like this, can I?" Ryuho asked, glancing at Lina. Tears welled in his eyes as he pressed down his ears. "I know how much you were looking forward to this, too. Could I be more pathetic...?"

Angelina cocked her head. "You can't go out as a tiger?" She didn't see any

problem with that solution.

“No!” Ryuho shouted, tears now spilling from the outer corners of his eyes. “I want to hold your hand too! Hisame getting to hog you isn’t fair!”

Ryuho’s adorable tantrum melted Angelina’s heart. “Wait right here!” she cried before racing to her wardrobe room. She put on a headband with tiger ears matching Ryuho’s, specially made for her earlier. She also had a palace lady attach a fake tail to her lower back. Finally, she brought out the White Tiger ears and Blue Dragon horns she’d previously bought at the festival.

Grinning, Angelina handed the ears and horns to the knights. “Here you go!”

The knights were unsure how to react.

“...What’s this?” the older one asked.

“Costumes,” Angelina answered. “Can you put these on, Mishter Knights?”

In response to her adorable pestering, the brown-haired knight smiled dopily. “O-Of course!”

Without hesitation, he placed the White Tiger ears on his head. He couldn’t help but dote on Angelina. Even if she weren’t the princess, he would still follow her every order.

Yet when Angelina thrust the horns into the hands of the gray-haired knight, he scrutinized them with a perplexed expression. The idea of wearing a festival headband made for children embarrassed him. Furthermore, he was wearing the rugged fatigues of a knight. This costume would make him stick out like a sore thumb.

“You want me to wear this...?” he asked, unable to hide his discomfort.

Angelina nodded fervently. “Yep! If we all wear these, everyone will assume Ryuho’s ears are a festival headband, y’know?”

*I’m pretty clever, huh?* Angelina thought, grinning smugly. And so, the knights gave into her persuasion.

“So cute...” the younger one mumbled.

That earned him a menacing glare from Ryuho.

Reluctantly, the gray-haired knight placed the horns on his head.

“Everyone’s matching!” Angelina exclaimed with a satisfied grin.

“So cute...” the gray-haired knight mumbled as well.

“Well then, Princess, we’ll take a boat down the waterway to the outer enclosure,” the brown-haired knight said. “I’ll carry you to the pier. Is that okay?”

When the young knight spread his arms out in front of Angelina, she squealed with delight and grabbed him. That put Ryuho in a sour mood. However, since he wasn’t in his feline form today, he couldn’t let her ride on his back. *Yeah, being a tiger is way more convenient*, he thought with a sigh of resignation. At the same time, he was more afraid of water and disliked boats in his feline form. Those distressing thoughts swirled around his mind as he looked up at the knight holding Angelina.



**THE** group arrived in the outer enclosure of the Purple Forbidden Palace. Once the young knight set Angelina down, she held hands with Ryuho, their arms swinging back and forth. Passersby turned back to look at the two children, as their matching tiger ears and tails were positively adorable.

One child pointed to Ryuho’s tail and pestered his mother. “Buy that for me, Mommy!”

“I just bought you the Vermillion Bird’s wings the other day!” the mother chided him.

Just as Angelina had predicted, tiger ears and tails didn’t stick out during a festival.

Before long, children began whispering among themselves.

“Is that the imperial princess?”

“Yeah, I think so. What other girl would have guards accompanying her?”

“Look, that knight is wearing horns!”

When the children pointed at the gray-haired knight, he could hardly stand the embarrassment. Yet, in contrast to his inner feelings, he remained

impassive.

“The other one has tiger ears!” a child shouted. “White Tiger knight!”

In response, the brown-haired knight grinned and waved to the children in high spirits.

“I used to be terrified of anyone who lived in the palace,” an adult man said. “But maybe they’re not so fearsome, after all.”

“You’re right,” an adult woman replied. “Everyone’s aura has completely changed. They seem easier to approach now.”

The whispers reached the gray-haired knight’s ears. His horns were helping the people feel a sense of kinship with the knights. Previously, people fled into their homes upon seeing a knight, fearing punishment for committing some discourtesy. Outrageous rumors had created a constantly on-edge atmosphere. Now, everything was different. Rather than running and hiding, passersby watched over Angelina and Ryuho warmly.

*This is how things should be,* the gray-haired knight thought. Though the people had submitted to Feilong’s reign of terror, his governance had been twisted in some ways. And so, the gray-haired knight puffed out his chest. Moments before, he’d considered his appearance shameful, but now, he felt somewhat proud of himself.

*I owe this to Her Highness.*

As the gray-haired knight watched Angelina and Ryuho walking in front of him, the two dazzled his eyes. Both were in high spirits, pointing to various things as they talked to each other. Their orange ears and striped tails were quite adorable. Angelina wore the most extravagant dress, her glossy hair sparkling in the sunlight. Meanwhile, Ryuho’s tail stood straight up, swaying back and forth happily.

Remembering the day he’d met Angelina, the gray-haired knight’s chest tightened painfully. She’d been a young girl living in a rundown storage shed. Worse, her thin arms and legs had been poking out of her simple, white clothes. She hadn’t seemed like a princess, her skin rough and hair damaged. As tears had welled in her azure eyes, she’d pleaded to join her mother’s side.



The gray-haired knight squeezed his eyes shut. As tears threatened to spill down his cheeks, he hurriedly rubbed the back of his fist against his eyes.

“Thank goodness...” he spoke without thinking.

*I’m grateful that Her Highness didn’t have to die, he thought. From here on out, I want to help her become even happier. I want her to experience so much joy that it cancels out all the sadness of her early childhood.*

“Mister Knight!” Angelina called, waving to him from up ahead. “Mishter Blue Dragon Knight!”

The gray-haired knight started in surprise. Basking in sentimentality during work was proof that he wasn’t paying attention.

“Coming, Your Highness!” he called back.

Being a principled fellow, he roused himself and ran over to Angelina’s side.



**THE** group arrived at the Blue Ocean Bar. Before they even entered, the scent of scrumptious food wafted towards them. The fragrant aromas of cooked meat, sesame oil, carrots, and onions tickled their nostrils, whetting their appetites.

This time, Angelina planned to eat in the restaurant. Before, she’d merely bought hujiao bing to take home. Even so, she’d been planning to enjoy the restaurant at her leisure when she had the time.

The Blue Ocean Bar began serving food from noon onwards. However, as the name implied, the establishment also served alcohol.

At any rate, Angelina walked through the door of the bar with her knights in tow. “Hello!” she exclaimed.

Just as Ming Ming had taught her, she greeted everyone with a cheerful smile. Ming Ming was the young girl who’d taught Angelina how to interact with people during her first loop. She’d been the adorable salesgirl of the Blue Ocean Bar.

“Well, hello there, little miss tiger!”

The chipper man who greeted Angelina was the owner who'd taken care of her during the first loop. However, he was much younger now—still a young man helping out with the family business.

“Are you not with that splendid tiger today?” the man asked.

Ryuhō's ears drooped. Just as he'd feared, he appeared much more splendid in his feline form.

“Nope,” Angelina replied. “But I did come to have lunch with a handsome prince!”

At this, Ryuhō's ears perked up again.

The man smiled at Ryuhō. “He is indeed a handsome young prince!”

As Ryuhō puffed out his chest with a smug grin, his tail stood straight up. He was clearly in a good mood. All the while, the patrons of the bar regarded the tiny couple fondly.

“Did you like the hujiao bing?” the man asked.

“Sure did!” Angelina replied.

The people of the outer enclosure treated her in a relaxed, friendly manner despite knowing she was the imperial princess. People who'd never entered the palace didn't know aristocratic etiquette. Regardless, they were still grateful and kind to the young princess who'd thawed the frozen wells. All of that filled Angelina with happiness.

“What do you recommend today?” she asked.

The man smiled awkwardly. “What would I recommend, eh? Our food isn't anything special compared to the palace's cuisine. There's nothing I could recommend to a princess...”

In response to his nearly unintelligible mumbling, someone shouted at him from behind. “What the hell are you saying?! Everything we serve at the Blue Ocean Bar would make the emperor's mouth water! Quit dawdling and become a competent chef like your father!”

When Angelina looked towards the speaker, she found a girl who appeared rather strong-willed.

“Ah!” Angelina cried. “Miss—” She closed her mouth before finishing. The strong-willed girl was the proprietress who’d taken care of her during the first loop.

Ryuhō and the young man looked at Angelina curiously. “Huh?” Ryuhō asked. “Do you know her?”

“Oh, um, no, but she’s a very pretty lady.” When Angelina laughed, the girl’s face turned beet red.

For some reason, the young man flushed as well, and he began speaking with bashful modesty. “Well, um, she might look cute, but she’s been a cheeky little tomboy ever since she was a little girl, and—”

“Hold on!” the girl yelled. “Where do you get off talking like that?!”

When she puffed out her cheeks sullenly, everyone in the restaurant burst out laughing. The regulars who’d been drinking since noon began making sport of them.

“The husband and wife are at each other’s throats again!” someone jeered.

“Make them stop!” the girl shouted.

“I’ve told you a hundred times—we’re not married!” the young man exclaimed.

As the bar grew increasingly raucous, Angelina smiled in satisfaction. She spoke to the strong-willed girl rather than the man. “Well then, tell me what you recommend!”

The girl came to stand beside Angelina and pointed to the menu hanging from the ceiling. “First off, you have to try the stir-fried shrimp, okay? You can’t miss out on the char siu, either. Then, there’s the twice-cooked pork, and—”

“You’re just listing off the entire menu!” the young man cried out.

“Well, we’ve got one hell of a tasty menu, don’t we?!” the girl shouted back confidently.

In response, the bar broke out into an uproar.

“You’re right about that!”

“Everything here is good enough to make your mouth water!”

Angelina smiled softly. The atmosphere of the bar hadn’t changed since her first loop.

“Hey, Lina, I’m starving!” Ryuho shouted, beating his tail against the floor impatiently. “If everything’s good, ask for whatever they can whip up the fastest!”

The knights nodded in agreement.

“Okay!” Angelina exclaimed. “In that case, we’ll have whatever’s fastest and what that girl over there is eating.”

“Coming right up,” the young man responded cheerfully before returning to the kitchen.

At the same time, the strong-willed girl smiled in satisfaction and bowed her head to Angelina.

Though the young man and girl didn’t appear to be dating yet, seeing them filled Angelina with deep sentimentality. *In ten years, they’ll give birth to Ming Ming*, she thought.

As the sound of sizzling oil echoed from the kitchen, steam filled the air, carrying with it a delectable aroma. Ryuho’s nose twitched.

Once they were seated, he slumped his upper body against the table and looked up at Angelina. “Gah, I’m about to die of hunger!” he cried out, his legs bobbing under the table impatiently. “I can’t wait any longer!”

Angelina patted him on the head. “Me neither! Let’s eat ’til our stomachs explode today! You too, Mishter Knights! Let’s all have as much as we want!”

Both knights nodded, regarding Angelina fondly.

“What do you like the best, White Tiger Knight?” Angelina asked.

“I like you the best, Princess!” he replied, brimming with confidence.

The gray-haired knight swatted him on the head, causing his White Tiger ears to slip down slightly.

“Hell no!” Ryuho shouted, his upper body shooting up. “Just wait until I’m a

tiger again!”

Giggling, Angelina rephrased her question. “What’s your favorite *food*, White Tiger Knight?”

“*Lamian*! Have you ever tried it?”

Though Angelina had eaten lamian in her first loop, she hadn’t done so in this life. “No, but I’d love to try it!” she responded.

“Then let’s ask for some! Over here! We’ll have an extra order of lamian on the side!”

“What about you, Blue Dragon Knight?” Angelina asked.

“Oh, me? I don’t have any favorite foods in particu—”

“This guy loves sweets!” the brown-haired knight interrupted.

“Sweets?” Angelina repeated. “So you like figs?”

“I do,” the older knight replied.

“Then let’s have some for dessert!”

The gray-haired knight smiled. “That sounds wonderful.”

When their food arrived, the younger knight clumsily distributed the fried rice. Ryuho snatched up a plate and dug in. “So good!” he yelled at the top of his lungs.

“That’s right!” the strong-willed girl called out to them with a wide grin. “Everything we serve here will knock your socks off!”

“Yeah, it’s all so delicious!” Angelina cried.

Her smile filled the knights with a sense of contentment.

“Look, more food just arrived!” Ryuho shouted, holding out a spoonful of the new dish to Angelina’s mouth. “Open wide!”

“Mmm!” Angelina squealed. “So good!”

“Right?! It’s amazing!”

Being able to feed Angelina made Ryuho swell with satisfaction.

“Now *you* open wide, Ryuho!” Angelina exclaimed.

“Okay!”

This time, Angelina fed Ryuho. Both children seemed incredibly delighted. An air of happiness filled the entire bar.

“The princess is so cute,” the strong-willed girl muttered to herself. “I can’t wait to have a child as adorable as her...”

The surrounding adults all gaped at her. Seeing this, the gray-haired knight chuckled. He understood how she felt quite well, after all.



“**THANKS** for the meal!” Angelina’s group cheered in unison.

Afterward, they left the Blue Ocean Bar with full stomachs. While heading back to the palace, Angelina and Ryuho carried sacks of hujiao bing to distribute as souvenirs.

“There was so much more that I wanted to eat,” Angelina said.

“Same here,” Ryuho agreed. “I can’t wait to come back.”

“But once the magic-repellent lanterns are gone, we won’t be able to visit again.”

The children slumped their shoulders. There weren’t many festivals set up magic-repellent lanterns in the outer enclosure. The next one would probably be Kyril’s enthronement ceremony. Seeing the children so dejected caused both knights’ hearts to ache.

Suddenly, Ryuho turned to Angelina with a bright expression. “Wait, I just came up with a great idea! If I get strong enough, we can come here as often as we want!”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, if I get strong enough to protect you even without the lanterns, we can go wherever we want!”

“Yeah!” Angelina replied, positively beaming. “I’ll do the same! If the two of us get strong enough, nothing will stand in our way!”

“Exactly! Let’s do it!”

“Right back atcha!”

As both children fist-pumped the air, the brown-haired knight muttered to himself, “They’re so cute that I could cry...”

The gray-haired knight couldn’t help but agree. “You’re right,” he spoke softly so the children wouldn’t overhear. “But no matter how strong they become, leaving the palace will remain tricky.”

“True enough,” the brown-haired knight answered with a chuckle. “Emperor Feilong’s so smitten with Angelina that he’s become an overprotective father. But with a daughter that cute, who could blame him? Still, I’ll keep training my hardest to make their dream come true.”

“Well said. We need to get strong enough that Emperor Feilong completely trusts us with the princess!”

The two knights met each other’s eyes and nodded.



**FINALLY**, the group arrived before the palace gates.

“Come here, Princess,” the brown-haired knight said. “I’ll carry you from here on out.”

The gray-haired knight bent down and turned his back to Ryuho. “Hop on, Master Ryuho.”

During their departure, the group had traveled down the waterway by boat. However, they couldn’t use one for the return journey, as they would be traveling against the current. While the knights could have carried Angelina and Ryuho on a palanquin, they’d wanted the children to make the most of their time.

They were both exhausted and let the knights carry them without the slightest reservation. Before long, they were both nodding off. Feeling the warmth of another person while their stomachs were full was extraordinarily pleasant. Hearing the children’s whistling breaths as they slept, both knights’ chests swelled with happiness.

“She’s truly a tianshi,” the brown-haired knight said.

“Indeed she is,” the gray-haired knight replied.

“There’s no mistaking it.”

Both men shared a laugh, treasuring the small bodies warming their chest and back.

In the language of the deceased empress’s homeland, the name Angelina meant tianshi. Ironically, neither of the knights knew the meaning of her name.







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